

Pope Francis' visit brings Iraqi Kurdistan's safe-haven status into sharp focus

Sat, 2021-03-06 23:26

IRBIL / MEXICO CITY: On a recent morning, as Sahar Ayoub gently turned the pages of her Bible, she contemplated the trauma that her family experienced when Daesh militants seized the northern town of Qaraqosh in the Nineveh governorate almost seven years ago.

She and her husband Ameer Bahnam were forced to flee with their three children when the extremist group launched its campaign of extermination against Iraq's ethno-religious minorities in 2014.

Seated in her living room in Ankawa, a Christian-majority neighborhood in Irbil, Ayoub, 50, expressed hope that Pope Francis' visit to the main city of Iraqi Kurdistan on Sunday would offer her community the recognition she felt it had long deserved.

"Before, Christians in Iraq used to be valued and treated with consideration, no different from other Iraqis," she told Arab News. "But that changed after 2003 when the new governments created sectarian divisions in the country between Muslims and Christians, and between Shiites and Sunnis.

"We are not free in Iraq as Christians. We can be judged for our rituals and what we wear. There is no freedom of religion for us in Iraq."



Nashwan Hanna gives a sermon at Mar Elia Chaldean Catholic Church in the Christian-majority neighborhood of Ankawa, Irbil. (Kareem Botane)

Bahnam, 57, said his family moved to the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region with the intention of eventually leaving for Europe. But after settling in Ankawa to take stock of the situation, they found something they had long hoped for – acceptance.

“I feel equal and safe here in Kurdistan,” Bahnam said. “As a Christian there is freedom of religion.

“Christians in Iraq do not have full rights. We face oppression and we don’t feel comfortable practicing our rituals freely. But not in Kurdistan. In other parts of Iraq, we feel we are strangers and something is missing.”

After his meeting on Saturday in Najaf with Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, the spiritual leader of Iraq’s Shiites, Pope Francis was scheduled to travel north to the Kurdistan region. Iraq’s religious minorities, free-speech advocates and political dissidents have long sought sanctuary here from persecution and violence in their home regions.

IRAQ ITINERARY OF POPE FRANCIS



7 MARCH

SUNDAY MORNING:

(Flight from Baghdad to Erbil)

1. Erbil Airport – meeting with religious and civil authorities of the Autonomous Region of Iraq Kurdistan

(Helicopter from Erbil to Mosul)

2. Hosh Al-Bieaa (Church Square) in Mosul – Prayer of suffrage for the victims of war with Daesh

(Helicopter from Mosul to Qaraqosh)

3. Church of Immaculate Conception in the Christian city of Qaraqosh – meeting the community at the restored church, which was badly damaged by Daesh

(Transfer from Qaraqosh to Erbil)

SUNDAY AFTERNOON:

4. Franso Hariri Stadium in Erbil – homily to Christian community

(Flight from Erbil to Baghdad)

8 MARCH

MONDAY MORNING:

5. Baghdad International Airport – Farewell ceremony

ARAB NEWS

Francis was scheduled to hold Mass on Sunday evening before a crowd of 10,000 at Erbil's Franso Hariri stadium, capped below venue capacity to allow for social distancing. For security reasons, Francis would be meeting with the general public during his entire visit on just this one occasion.

Kurds make up a significant proportion of Iraq's 40 million-strong population. However, the lack of recent census data makes it difficult to

ascertain the precise number of Kurds in the northern provinces of Irbil, Sulaimani, Duhok and Halabja that make up the lush and mountainous region.

Although relations between Irbil and Baghdad have long been rocky, coming to a head in late 2017 when the Kurds held a non-binding referendum on independence, Kurdish is recognized as Iraq's second official language alongside Arabic, and all three of Iraq's post-2003 presidents have been Kurds.

The Kurds carved out their self-administered region in 1991 under the patronage and air cover of the US-led coalition, which intervened at the tail end of the Gulf War to prevent Saddam Hussein from exacting his revenge on the Kurds for daring to rebel.

Having already suffered the cruelties of Saddam's Anfal campaign and the infamous chemical attack on Halabja in 1988, the Kurdish people had little doubt that Saddam intended to wipe out them unless the West took notice.

THE NUMBER

1.5m

*** Christian population of Iraq in 2003.**

Although corruption and tribalism continue to mar political life in Kurdistan, the region, with its own parliament and presidency, battle-hardened Peshmerga security forces and culture of tolerance, compares favorably with federal Iraq, blighted by endemic sectarian violence and unrest.

It came as no surprise perhaps when a people touched by genocide readily opened their doors to the persecuted minorities of the Nineveh plains when Daesh stormed northern Iraq and took over Mosul in the summer of 2014.

Hundreds of thousands of Christians, Yazidis, Shabaks, Kakais and other minorities, alongside many thousands of refugees from neighboring Syria, poured through the Peshmerga's checkpoints in search of safety.

Humanitarian aid agencies quickly arrived to accommodate the displaced in sprawling camps, while many Christians among them headed for Ankawa. Those with the means continued on to Europe and beyond.



Ameer Habib Bahnam and his wife Sahar Ayoub say they feel safe to practice their faith in Kurdistan. (Kareem Botane)

“I have applied for a visa to move to France, but until now I have had no news because of all that’s going on with the coronavirus,” said Ameer. “We wanted to go to France as my kids are scared to go back to our home in Qaraqosh. They are traumatized by what happened to us when Daesh came.”

Elaborating on the traumatic experiences, Sahar said: “Daesh burned and stole what was inside our house. After the liberation of Qaraqosh, we went there to check our house. Since then, we don’t want to go back. It’s not safe there now.”

“If I met the pope, I would tell him he has to find a solution for the Christians of Iraq. We don’t have any rights here and I would ask him to get me out of the country. I don’t want to stay here. Either that, or he can make my town safe and assure my rights.”

Sahar and Ameer are not alone. Many Christian families have simply given up on the idea of leading a secure life in Iraq.

“Life for Christians in Iraq is all about living through war, without a future,” Juliana Nusrat, 28, told Arab News.

“I wish to meet the pope and tell him what we are going through. I want to tell him to take me out of Iraq. I lost my hope in Iraq. I don’t want to have more children in Iraq. There is no future here. I want my daughter to have a future outside Iraq.”



A memorial outside Mar Elia Chaldean Catholic Church in Ankawa, Irbil, commemorates the Iraqi Christians killed by Daesh in 2014. (Robert Edwards)

She and her husband, Gazwan Zuhair, 39, also came to Ankawa in 2014, escaping Daesh's conquest of Mosul. "We left our house and everything we had behind and took only our IDs," said Gazwan. "When the war was over, we went to see our house in Mosul. All our belongings were gone."

Gazwan lost his job at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the couple and their young daughter have struggled to get by, they have found a modicum of security in the Kurdistan region.

"We feel comfortable in Kurdistan. I can't find a job here, but it's safe," he said.

"Kurdistan and the Kurds treat the Christians well and we feel safe here, but in the rest of the country, we are oppressed, especially in Mosul, where Christians were being threatened and blackmailed.

"As a Christian, I want to leave the country. Iraq does not offer me rights or work. Why should I stay? Maybe my life will be better in another country."



Gazwan Zuhair, who lost his job at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, says he and his family feel a modicum of security in Kurdistan. (Kareem Botane)

The flight of Iraq's Christians to the West is a major concern for church leaders of all sects – Syro-Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and Chaldean alike.

Since the US-led invasion in 2003, the Christian population of Iraq had fallen from around 1.5 million to around 350,000-450,000 in 2014. With many now choosing exile abroad, their numbers have dwindled further.

“As a church, we do not encourage Christians to leave the country and leave their church to emigrate abroad,” Father Nashwan Hanna, 53, a priest at Ankawa's Mar Elia Chaldean Catholic Church, told Arab News.

“We are an essential component of Kurdistan and Iraq. It is our home. We want to live in peace in our country and respect others and be respected.

“This visit, which will take the pope around Iraq, encourages us to stay. Our roots run deep in this land and this visit will encourage us to stay.”



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Pope Francis' visit provides moral support to Christians of Iraq's Qaraqosh
IT HAPPENED: Pope Francis meets Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani

[Lebanon's caretaker PM warns of chaos as currency plunges](#)

Author:

By [FAY ABUELGASIM](#) | AP

ID:

1615048968826928900

Sat, 2021-03-06 16:36

BEIRUT: Lebanon's caretaker prime minister warned Saturday that the country

was quickly headed toward chaos and appealed to politicians to put aside differences in order form a new government that can attract desperately needed foreign assistance.

Hassan Diab threatened to suspend his duties if that would increase pressure for a new Cabinet to be formed.

He spoke in a terse address to the nation as the currency continued its rapid collapse against the dollar, trading at one point at 10,500 Lebanese pounds on the black market for the first time in its history. Angry protesters have blocked streets and highways across the country with burning tires for days, as the pound slid to record new lows.

The crash in the local currency has resulted in a sharp increase in prices as well as delays in the arrival of fuel shipments, leading to more extended power cuts around the country, in some areas reaching more than 12 hours a day. The crisis has driven nearly half the population of the small country of 6 million into poverty, wiped out savings and slashed consumer purchasing power.

Small groups of protesters blocked roads again in several areas Friday, setting fire to tires and pieces of furniture.

"The dollar is 10,500 (pounds) and everyone has four or five children on their neck, including their parents. They (corrupt politicians) need to feed us," cried one protester.

"They vaccinated themselves from corona but they opened the country so that people could die," he added, referring to a group of lawmakers who inoculated themselves in parliament last month without prior approval. a move that led the World Bank to consider suspending its financing of vaccines in Lebanon. Another protester who identified himself only by his first name, Ali, said he was frustrated that other Lebanese were still sitting at home.

"Where are the Lebanese people? The dollar is now 10,500 (pounds) and it will reach to 15, or 20 (thousand). Why are we in homes? We have to go down!"

Diab, who resigned in the wake of the massive August 4 explosion at Beirut port, suggested he might stop working in his role.

"If it helps to form a government, I am prepared to resort to that option even though it goes against my principles," he said.

In October, former Prime Minister Saad Hariri was named to form a new Cabinet but five months later, disagreements between him and President Michel Aoun on the shape of the Cabinet has stood in the way of a new government's formation.

Lebanon has also been in desperate need of foreign currency, but international donors have said they will only help the country financially if major reforms are implemented to fight widespread corruption, which has brought the nation to the brink of bankruptcy.

"What are you waiting for, more collapse? More suffering? Chaos?" Diab said, chiding senior politicians without naming them for grandstanding on the shape and size of the government while the country slides further into the abyss.

"What will having one minister more or less (in the cabinet) do if the entire country collapses," he asked.

"Lebanon is in grave danger and the Lebanese are paying the price."



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Lebanon's roads blocked with burning tires over economic, political crisis
Lebanon's president wants investigation into currency crash

[Pope Francis' visit provides moral support to Christians of Iraq's Qaraqosh](#)

Sat, 2021-03-06 20:32

QARAQOSH / IRBIL / MEXICO CITY: On a recent afternoon, Salah Hadi applied a coat of cement on a large ceramic tile and carefully pressed it into place. The 51-year-old's home in the northern Iraqi town of Qaraqosh is still blackened with soot after Daesh militants set it ablaze in 2014. But with long ancestral ties to the town, Hadi is determined to repair the damage.

“I came back to Qaraqosh in 2017 after the war was over,” Hadi told Arab News as he stepped back to check that the new tiles were level. “The town was full of rubble and destruction. There were war remnants. Most of the houses were burned.”

The arrival of Pope Francis has offered the Nineveh governorate’s Christian population a keen sense of spiritual renewal, but also a moment for sad reflection on its traumatic recent experiences.

“The Daesh period was a time of pain and hardship,” said Hadi. “Every community in Iraq was hurt by Daesh’s attack. What happened during the time of Daesh was hard, but it has to be told.”



Nawyiy Al-Qisitawmana, the priest at St. John the Baptist Syriac Catholic Church in Qaraqosh, says Daesh’s attack could have been avoided had the government protected them. (Mahamad Ameen Abdul Al-Jawad)

On Aug. 6-7, 2014, Daesh militants stormed Qaraqosh, expelling the town’s 45,000 Christians, tearing down crosses, burning ancient manuscripts and desecrating its precious religious architecture, including the Church of the Immaculate Conception, which Daesh turned into a firing range.

A month earlier, the militants had seized control of nearby Mosul and declared it the de-facto capital of their self-styled caliphate. Daesh went on to capture the ancestral homes of Iraq’s vulnerable ethno-religious minorities, including the Yazidi homeland of Sinjar.

Those unable to escape the group’s lightning advance were either forced to convert to its warped interpretation of Islam or put to death. Others were

sold into slavery.

**IRAQ ITINERARY
OF POPE FRANCIS**



**HOSH
AL-BIEAA**

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ARAB NEWS

Since the US-led invasion in 2003, the Christian population of Iraq had fallen from around 1.5 million to around 350,000-450,000 in 2014. With many now choosing exile abroad, their numbers have dwindled further.

With his wife and three children in tow, Hadi fled the onslaught to the

nearby city of Irbil, capital of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region of Iraq. After a brief stay with family, they moved to a makeshift displacement camp at a local church in Ankawa, a Christian neighborhood in the north of the city.

“Some families were late to leave. Daesh took them to Mosul,” Hadi said. “We thought it would last only a few days and we would be back in our home. But it was much longer.”

Hadi’s neighbor, Sharabil Noah, also fled to Irbil to escape the Daesh invasion. There he and his family rented a house until they felt it was safe enough to return.

“We didn’t take our belongings when we left. We thought it would be only a few days and we would be back home,” the 52-year-old told Arab News, a large cross hanging on the living room wall above his head.

“When we came back, the town was destroyed. It was a ghost town full of stray dogs. There was no water, no electricity, no infrastructure. All of it was gone.”



Salah Hadi is determined to rebuild his home in the town where his family has lived for generations. (Mahamad Ameen Abdul Al-Jawad)

Although he has struggled to find work, Noah is determined to rebuild his life in Qaraqosh. “This is the land of our ancestors. We will not leave it,” he said.

There is a deep sense of bitterness among many of Iraq’s Christians who

believe the government in Baghdad had neglected them, allowed sectarian hatreds to fester, and abandoned them to their fate at the hands of Daesh.

“What happened in 2014 could have been avoided had there been real protection from the government,” Father Nawyiyl Al-Qisitawmana, the priest at St. John the Baptist Syriac Catholic Church in Qaraqosh, told Arab News. A large mural of Francis takes pride of place in the church’s cavernous, sky-blue nave.

“Iraqis have for many years suffered from wars, especially in the period of Al-Qaeda and Daesh. Muslims, Christians, Yazidis and Sabeans are all oppressed in Iraq,” the 70-year-old said.

“With the pope’s visit, the world’s attention will be directed at Iraq. The world will know what occurred in Iraq when the pope visits the places that were destroyed by Daesh.

“The world will feel the suffering of the Iraqis. This visit will bring hope for all Iraqis, not only Christians. The pope is visiting the Iraqi people to encourage them to stay in Iraq and to live in peace and freedom.”



Sharabi Noah, who is determined to rebuild his life in Qaraqosh. (Mahamad Ameen Abdul Al-Jawad)

Francis was due to arrive in Irbil on Sunday before making his way by helicopter to Mosul. There he was scheduled to pray in the Square of the Four Churches – Syro-Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and Chaldean – to honor the victims of Daesh and the savage battle to retake the city.

Before returning to Irbil, to hold Mass at Franso Hariri stadium, Francis was

expected to make a stop in Qaraqosh. Well in advance of his visit, the streets were adorned with banners welcoming him.

“A visit by the pope is always big for any country, but here it’s more special,” Joseph Hanna, who is part of the local committee that will receive the pope, told Arab News.

“It is not only about reconstruction. The pope’s visit to the Christian areas represents moral support to the people and it’s a big reassurance to confirm life is beginning to come back.”

Hanna, 45, was especially pleased to see Francis visit Najaf to meet with Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, spiritual leader of Iraq’s Shiite Muslims – the first face-to-face meeting between a Catholic pontiff and a Shiite ayatollah. “In my opinion, it’s a great message of peace and coexistence,” he said.

Indeed, a show of solidarity from Al-Sistani now might give persecuted Christians a measure of protection from Iraq’s marauding Shiite militias that have terrorized Christian families and prevented many of them from returning home.



A member of the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU), a small Christian militia charged with protecting the predominantly Christian Iraqi town of Qaraqosh, returns back to his uncle’s house in the town in 2017. (AFP/File Photo)

Noah wants security guarantees to prevent further persecution. “I would like to have international protection for us here that can assure the Christians that they can stay here, where their rights will be given and the Christians

who left are allowed to return,” he said.

“The pope’s visit raises the spirits of Christians in Iraq and tells them there are people who care for them out there. I hope this visit will strengthen relations between the communities here.”

With help from aid agencies, life is gradually returning to normal in Qaraqosh. Hadi, for one, is confident better times lie ahead. “It is sad what has happened to Iraq,” he said as he scooped up more cement using a trowel to install another tile. “We have to stand together and be united in this country, so we can rebuild it over again.”

There is a palpable sense that the time of sectarian conflicts that have plagued Iraq since 2003 has passed and that the country can only move forward if it embraces its multi-confessional identity.

“Daesh feels like a far-off memory that is long gone now,” Hadi said, dusting off his hands. “We forgot about them. It’s over.”



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Pope Francis' visit brings Iraqi Kurdistan's safe-haven status into sharp focus
Pope Francis delivers impassioned plea for peace as historic Iraq visit gets underway

[Charities: History will 'judge' UK over Yemen aid cuts](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-03-06 15:42

LONDON: Over 100 charities have written to the UK government criticizing its decision to cut aid to Yemen.

In a letter to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the charities say the decision to reduce vital funds to the war-torn country is a "misjudgement" that will "destroy the UK's global reputation as a country that steps up to help those most in need."

Earlier this week, it emerged that the government proposed to reduce the UK's aid budget to Yemen, currently in the grip of famine and war, to £87 million (\$120.4 million) this year, down from £164 million in 2019-2020.

The British government is thought to believe that the public will support the move as part of cost-cutting measures in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

But the letter – signed by Oxfam, Christian Aid, Save the Children and Care International, among others – suggested that such a view would change rapidly once the true scale of the damage done by reducing aid became apparent.

"History will not judge this nation kindly if the government chooses to step away from the people in Yemen," it added.

Danny Sriskandarajah, CEO of Oxfam GB, told the BBC: "Aid cuts are a false economy that will remove a vital lifeline from millions of people in Yemen and beyond, who can't feed their families, have lost their homes, and whose lives are threatened by conflict and COVID-19."

Kevin Watkins, CEO of Save the Children, told The Times: "We are looking at the near collapse of UK help for children trapped in the world's worst war zones, just as a second wave of the pandemic bears down on many of them." The UK's decision, he said, will have "devastating real-life consequences."

British MPs have criticized the plan to cut aid to Yemen, which has suffered from a decade-long conflict leaving more than 20 million people reliant on foreign aid.

Conservative MP Andrew Mitchell described the decision as “unconscionable,” with Labour MP Lisa Nandy saying the UK is “abandoning our moral obligations.”

A government spokesman said: “The seismic impact of the pandemic on the UK economy has forced us to take tough but necessary decisions, including temporarily reducing the overall amount we spend on aid.”

He added: “We remain a world-leading aid donor and we will spend more than £10 billion this year to fight poverty, tackle climate change and improve global health.”



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UK to slash aid to poorest countries: Leaked report Saudi aid agency continues projects in Yemen, Jordan

[UK to slash aid to poorest countries:](#)

Leaked report

Author:

Sat, 2021-03-06 15:28

LONDON: The UK government is planning to cut its aid programs to some of the world's poorest countries by as much as two thirds between 2021 and 2022, according to a leaked Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) report.

Those hardest hit by the cuts include Lebanon, which could see a reduction in aid spending of as much as 88 percent, Syria (67 percent, Libya (63 percent), Somalia (60 percent) and South Sudan (59 percent).

Earlier this week, it was revealed that the UK government is considering cutting aid spending in Yemen by 59 percent, meaning a drop to £87 million (\$120.4 million) from £164 million pledged last year – a move that drew condemnation from British MPs across the political spectrum, and from UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

Kevin Watkins, CEO of Save the Children, told The Times: “We are looking at the near collapse of UK help for children trapped in the world's worst war zones, just as a second wave of the pandemic bears down on many of them.”

The leaked document, obtained by Open Democracy, details suggestions of how the UK might reduce its legal target spend on foreign aid from 0.7 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) to 0.5 percent this year. Over the next two years, the budget will be reduced from £15 billion to just over £9 billion.

The FCO told The Guardian that savings will have to be found across government spending due to the “seismic impact of the pandemic on the UK economy,” which will mean “temporarily reducing the amount we spend on aid.” No final decisions, it added, have yet been made.

After the scale of the cuts to Yemen's portion of UK foreign aid became apparent, former International Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell described the government's plans as “unconscionable.”

Guterres said cuts to Yemeni aid would represent a “death sentence” for people across the country.

FCO Minister James Cleverly suggested that the government might try to amend the law pegging foreign aid spending to GDP without putting it to a vote in Parliament – a move that could be subject to judicial review over its legality.

Mitchell told the UK House of Commons: “The foreign secretary assured Parliament that he would protect seven strategic priorities from cuts, including humanitarian relief. He also told the select committee he would reply to the former solicitor general's determination that cuts would be unlawful without a change to legislation.”

Mitchell added: “Nothing like what is being suggested here should be

considered until Parliament has given its express consent, which I rather doubt will be forthcoming.”

The government has also been warned by four former UK prime ministers – Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Theresa May – that cutting aid budgets to the most vulnerable nations amid the pandemic would do untold harm to Britain’s reputation.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson is thought to believe that the British public want to see belt-tightening across government expenditure to assist with the country’s economic recovery.

David Miliband, a former FCO minister and current president of the International Rescue Committee, said: “Make no mistake – as the UK abandons its commitment to 0.7 percent (of GDP), it is simultaneously undermining its global reputation.”

He added: “The phrase ‘global Britain’ rings hollow. As the UK prepares to host the G7, the reduction of assistance to Yemen is a stark warning of what is to come as the government delivers on widespread cuts across the entire UK aid portfolio.”

A letter sent to Johnson by a group of over 100 charities – including Oxfam, Save the Children and Christian Aid – called the cuts a “misjudgement” by the government.

“History will not judge this nation kindly if the government chooses to step away from the people in Yemen and thus destroy the UK’s global reputation as a country that steps up to help those most in need,” the letter said.



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UK slammed for 'unconscionable' Yemen aid cut UK pledges \$64m in emergency aid amid UN warning of 'unimaginable' need