



An insight into the Papal visit in Iraq: Expectations and outcomes

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Pope Francis' visit to Iraq from 5th to 8th March was significant and highly symbolic. It included the capital Baghdad, the cities of Najaf and Ur as well as various cities in Iraqi Kurdistan. Throughout this trip, the Pope tried to support the Christians of Iraq by making their suffering from the war and their current hardships widely known. He called for the protection of the Christian communities by the government and promoted a dialogue for peaceful coexistence among various religious communities.¹

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Pope Francis held talks with Iraq's president Barham Salih and the Prime Minister, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, who looked forward to his visit. Both John Paul II and Benedict XVI had been invited to visit the country, yet the conflicts in the region made it difficult. In 2019, the defeat of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the relative stability in the region made this visit eventually possible. Iraq's political elite viewed the Papal visit as an endorsement of their efforts to project an image of stabilised, united, and multicultural nation, which has emerged successfully after a long-lasting war and sectarian conflict. Neither an attack by Iran-backed militias aimed at Iraqi stationed US troops, nor the increase in new coronavirus cases hindered its course.² The visit helped Al-Kadhimi to stabilise his government. Al-Kadhimi was appointed Prime minister in May 2020 after a series of protests supporting a reformed political system, freed from corruption and away from the influence of USA and Iran. In his speech, Kadhimi asked all parties to work towards the success of early elections. Addressing an international audience, the Iraqi prime minister stated that the Papal visit brought the country back to the international spotlight and made it a nucleus of stability and peace in the country.³

Nevertheless, Iraqi Christians' predicament was the main preoccupation of Pope's visit in the country. Christians have a very long history in the region. The number of the Christian population in the country in 2002 was estimated between 800,000 and 1.4 million. The American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Iraqi insurgency from 2011 to 2013 and the rise and fall of ISIS, affected significantly the Christian communities. As a result, in 2019 the Christians of Iraq were estimated between 200,000 and 250,000. ⁴The Shia political elite exercises significant control over the militias of "The Popular Mobilization Forces". It was these militias that contributed to freeing Christians from ISIS. However, the same militias often block Christians from returning to their homeland, contrary to the wish of the Iraqi government.⁵ Although the Iraqi state has made progress in reaching out to the Christians, declaring, for example, Christmas as an official holiday, much remains to be done. Some Christians argue that there is discrimination in favor of Muslims whether it is regarding job opportunities in the public sector or on matters of mixed marriages and mixed parentage. Furthermore, Christian businesses, particularly in Baghdad are common targets of vandalism. On the political level, Christian leaders supported the anti-government protests of 2019. It is in this complicated framework that the Pope's visit offered new opportunities for solving the problems associated with their coexistence.⁶

On the second day of his visit, Pope Francis travelled to the city of Najaf and met the Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Al-Husaymi Al-Sistani. Pope met Sistani in an effort to open dialogue with Iraq's religious and spiritual leaders and to achieve one of his main strategic goals, the protection of the local Christian communities by creating the right conditions. Since 2003 the Ayatollah has called Iraqis to protect minorities. In 2014, he had sheltered Christians and Yazidi from the north and urged them to form armed groups and defend the nation.⁷

Nevertheless, the current high level of insecurity and further adverse circumstances, particularly in the northern part the country, contributed to the constant decrease of the Christian population. The third day of the Papal visit to Iraq included gestures of high symbolism as well. Pope Francis travelled to Iraqi Kurdistan (Kurdistan Regional Government- KRG), where he visited the cities of Erbil and Mosul, and the Nineveh Plains. The vast majority of Iraqi Christians live in Nineveh Plains in Iraqi Kurdistan. There are at least 200.000 out of the 250.000 remaining Christians in Iraq. It is estimated that 67 percent of the Christians are Chaldean Catholics and 20 percent adhere to the Assyrian Church of the East; the rest are Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, Anglican, and other Protestants.⁸ The law 5/2015 of the regional government ensures the "Protection of the Components [Minorities] of Kurdistan", so long as they accept the Kurdish identity. This law has created tensions within the local Christian minorities. Namely, those promoting the Assyrian identity, like the Assyrian Patriotic Party, openly oppose it. Whereas other Christians, like the Chaldeans, cooperate. Chaldeans have a clear connection with the Holy See as an Oriental Catholic church, yet they maintain a relative autonomy. Despite their huge problems, the Christians in KRG remain disunited, facing a dilemma regarding whom they will follow: KRG or Baghdad.

The Kurdish authorities equally welcomed Pope Francis, whose visit boosted the morale of the local Christian population and elevated their status in the regional power game.⁹ Pope Francis visited Qaragosh, a predominantly Assyrian Christian town in Nineveh Plains that was captured by ISIS in 2014. Even though the city is now controlled by Kurdish and Assyrian militias, Peshmerga-KRG and Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU), local Christians are still decreasing in numbers; in fact, within only three months in 2019, their number declined from 24,000 to 21,000. The Papal visit in Qaragosh was a statement that the city is now safe and secure for the return of the Christians that fled. In his meetings with Christian leaders in Erbil and Qaragosh in northern Iraq, he condemned a “murderous indifference” toward Christians in the Middle East. His message is an effort to encourage the population to return to their homes and rebuild the city. Whether this is enough, it remains to be seen.¹⁰

Pope Francis tried also to support spiritually the Iraqi Christian communities. Christian crowds, followed him in many places. In a ceremony in “Our Lady of Salvation” Church in Baghdad, Pope Francis had a dialogue with the heads of the Chaldeans Church in Iraq: Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, the Patriarch of Babylon and the Head of Chaldeans Catholic Church. The Pope repeatedly maintained that the Christians can contribute to the reconstruction of the country and must be helped to reconstruct their communities. In response, the Iraqi Prime Minister reaffirmed the seriousness of the government in tackling the problems of the Christian communities and assisting them in all possible manners. Members of the communities pointed out that any assistance would not be fruitful unless Baghdad reined in the armed militias, which threaten their safety. Speaking on behalf of Chaldeans, Cardinal Louis Raphael I Sako stated that “Christians are proud of their Iraqi identity and they feel more reassured” by the policies of both the regional and the federal government.¹¹

In conclusion, the 2021 Papal visit to Iraq is no doubt a historical event and was perceived as such by both the Middle East Christians and the international community. President Biden was among those praising the visit. The Pope managed to attract international attention to Iraqi Christians in an effort to improve their lives. It is noteworthy that there are reports of about 23,000 Christians returning to Iraq since the Pope’s visit.¹² Yet, the question remains whether Christian communities will manage to recover, rehabilitate, and live peacefully and securely in Iraq.

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