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## **Iraqi Archbishop calls on West to 'open eyes' to Christians' Middle East exodus**

***Chaldean Catholic Head says Christians are 'integral part of national Arab tissue'***

WWM (18.12.2013) - The Archbishop of Baghdad, Louis Raphael I Sako, has called on the West to help put an end to the "mortal exodus" of Christians from the Middle East.

Sako, who is also Patriarch of Babylon, told a conference in Rome, "Christianity and Freedom: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives", that the West must assist the Muslim nations of the Middle East in "modernising Islam's approach to religious freedom" and "convince Muslim nations that their repression and persecution of their minority Christian communities is not only harming the Christians, but is harming the societies themselves".

Sako, a keynote speaker at the conference run by the Religious Freedom Project at Georgetown University, which recently hosted the UK's Baroness Warsi, said the situation in Iraq over the past 10 years has gone from bad to worse, and that he can see similar situations unfolding in Egypt and Syria.

"In Iraq, after 10 years, we still don't have security. There are daily attacks, explosions, kidnappings and murders. The same scenario is happening in Syria and in Egypt," he said.

Sako quoted the Coptic Catholic Patriarch, Ibrahim Isaac Sidrak, who said that in the past 18 months, more than 100 Egyptian churches have been attacked. In Syria, Sako said 67 churches have been attacked and 45,000 Christians have left the country.

The Iraqi Archbishop pointed towards the rise of political Islam as one of the major opponents of the Church in the Middle East, while he said the US-led invasion of Iraq has "destroyed the country", being replaced by a period of sectarian violence.

He added that governments seem "generally incapable" of controlling the sectarian battles between Sunni and Shiite Muslims.

"Suffering became an everyday struggle for all Iraqis, but especially for Christians," he said. "Muslims are always strong enough with their tribes. They also have the advantage of living in a country ruled under Islamic orders. But Christians and other minority groups have been worn down by a worsening security situation."

Since 2003, Sako said more than 1000 Christians have been killed in Iraq (and others kidnapped and tortured), while 62 churches and monasteries have been attacked.

He added that less than half of Iraq's 1.2 million Christians in 1987 remain – "and the numbers continue dropping".

The United Nations Committee for Refugees recently stated that 850,000 Iraqi Christians have left since 2003.

Sako said the West "does not understand" the difficulties and fears of Middle Eastern Christians.

"Religious radicalism is growing and becoming very aggressive," he said. "Religious violence is on the increase across the Middle East, breaking up communities and destroying relations between peoples from different religious traditions. This violence is damaging the very fabric of Middle Eastern societies. Islamist extremists want to take advantage of the current situation (that is, the anarchy in several regions) in order to empty the Christian presence in the Middle East, as if it were an obstacle for their plans."

He called on the West to "open its eyes" to see the reality of the situations facing Christians in Iraq, Syria and Egypt.

The Archbishop echoed Pope Francis's declaration that he "would not accept" a Middle East without Christians, which Sako said would "fundamentally alter the contours of culture and society in nations such as Iraq, Syria, and Egypt" and "deal a severe blow to any hope of pluralism and democracy". Christians are "an integral part of the national Arab tissue," he said.

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## **Flight of Iraq Christians resumes amid surge in unrest**

Yahoo! News (20.11.2013) - Awshalim Benjamin is desperate to leave Iraq, where a sack of faded photographs is all that remains of the happy life he and his ancient, dwindling Christian community once knew.

The 74-year-old waits by the phone for the call that will tell him he can finally depart Baghdad to join his family in the United States -- and leave behind a 2,000-year-old community that has shrunk by more than half since the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.

The patriarch of the Iraq-based Chaldean church, due to join other Middle Eastern Christian leaders at a meeting with Pope Francis this week, has urged Christians to stay and spoken out against Western countries offering visas to the rapidly shrinking minority. But many still say they have no choice, as their tenuous optimism after a brief improvement in security starting in 2008 has been dashed by a surge in bloodshed this year.

"If my chance came, (I would leave) today," Benjamin, a retiree who cares for an ill 33-year-old daughter, said.

"When they call me (and say) come, I will leave everything and go."

It wasn't always like this. The black-and-white photographs of Benjamin show a handsome young man who played the accordion and enjoyed pole-vaulting. He had a government job, got married and had a family.

But now those days are long gone.

Christians in Iraq are rarely explicitly targeted -- as they were during the height of the country's sectarian bloodletting in 2006-2007 -- but the daily attacks and bombings have made life unbearable.

"I won't stay in such a situation," said Benjamin, sitting in his home in the south Baghdad neighbourhood of Dura, the plastic bag full of photographs on his lap.

"Three days ago, they exploded a car on the street. Such things are making us leave this place."

Before 2003 more than a million Christians lived in Iraq. Now there are around 400,000, according to Chaldean Patriarch Louis Sako, head of one of the world's oldest Christian communities.

Baghdad has seen a dramatic fall in its own Christian population, which at one point numbered 600,000.

According to Archdeacon Temathius Esha, an Assyrian priest in Dura, the neighbourhood's Christian population has all but disappeared, from around 150,000 shortly after the 2003 US-led invasion to about 2,000 now.

Though home to seven churches -- Assyrian, Chaldean and Syriac -- Dura now has only two priests.

Esha's 500-capacity St. Shmoon Church attracted just 20 people for a recent Friday service, and he said only about 150 show up for Christmas or Easter.

The priest's own family lives in the town of Ainkawa in Iraq's northern Kurdish region, which has been mostly spared from the violence plaguing the rest of the country.

"Sometimes, of course, I feel I want to leave, but it's my job to stay with our people here," the 54-year-old said.

"It is my duty to stay here, and to make them (feel), at least, that life will be OK."

But when asked if he thought the situation would improve, Esha's only response was a resigned laugh.

The flow of Christians out of the country spiked in 2010, when thousands fled after Al-Qaeda massacred 44 worshippers and two priests in a Baghdad church in October of that year, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Some 61 churches have been attacked in the decade since the US-led invasion, Sako said, with more than 1,000 Christians killed in violence, albeit not all in targeted attacks. As Baghdad's Christian community has dwindled, the Christian population of Ainkawa has expanded to the point where the once tiny village is now effectively a suburb of the nearby Kurdish regional capital Arbil.

One of Ainkawa's three churches holds eleven masses on Sundays, and authorities want to build three more, according to Chaldean Archbishop Bashar Warda.

But he says his flock has little hope of returning to their ancestral homes.

"We don't have that much time to think about the golden days and the beautiful memories that we had in Baghdad," said Warda, who grew up in the Iraqi capital.

"I would say 99 percent of those families (who moved to Ainkawa) would not think to go back again... Maybe I am too pessimistic, but the reality is this."

Sako, the Chaldean Patriarch, has urged Christians to stay in the country and criticised Western nations for offering priority visas to members of the minority.

"This is our land," Sako told AFP. "We have been here (for) 2,000 years, and we have our history, our identity."

"We are also Iraqi citizens ... and we have a role to play here."

Asked what he told Christians who want to leave, Sako said: "I am telling them, you have to be patient and also to have hope in the future."

Those words ring hollow for Benjamin.

"Let him be in our place, and live in our situation, then let him decide whether we should leave or not -- he lives in a very secure place, not like us, in the street," he said.

"There were beautiful moments in Iraq, when there was a good security situation and safety... But for now, all those beautiful days have vanished. We live in a prison."

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## **Angry Shi'ites storm Schlumberger camp at Iraq's Rumaila oilfield**

Reuters (11.11.2013) - Dozens of angry Shi'ite Muslim workers and tribesmen stormed a [Schlumberger](#) Ltd camp at one of Iraq's main oilfields and wrecked offices early on Monday after accusing a foreign security adviser of insulting their religion, police and employees at the field said.

Oil officials and workers at the [Schlumberger](#) drilling site in Rumaila North said the problem started when a security adviser they identified as British asked Iraqi workers to take down a flag and banners depicting a figure revered by Shi'ites.

Schlumberger was not immediately available for comment late on Monday.

According to workers and officials, when the workers refused to remove the banners, the security adviser went to do so himself and tore one portraying Imam Hussein, whose death more than 1,000 years ago is currently being commemorated by Shi'ites across the world in rituals known as Ashura.

In the ensuing row, the security adviser pulled out a gun and fired several shots, wounding an Iraqi worker and drawing dozens of people from a nearby village to join the workers in storming the Schlumberger drilling camp.

Officials of the state-run Southern Oil Company said production from the field was not affected by the incident, but oil officials said Schlumberger had suspended its operations in response, not only in Rumaila but at the other oilfields in Basra province.

"We received an order from the main administration to stop work until further notice," said an Iraqi engineer working at a Schlumberger project in Zubair oilfield in the south.

The protestors smashed up offices and severely beat the foreign security adviser, oil officials and workers said. A photograph taken by a worker at the scene showed a man with blood streaming down his face. He said it was the adviser. Security officials said the man was taken to hospital with serious injuries.

Police and the army intervened to restore order and expelled the protesters from the site.

"We advised the British security contractor to step back and leave this issue as it is very sensitive for the workers, but instead ... he went himself and removed the banners and tore one of Imam Hussein," said an Iraqi worker, who witnessed the incident.

"Workers were provoked and squabbled with the British guy, but he suddenly pulled out a pistol and started shooting, and wounded one Iraqi worker," the man said.

On Saturday, an Egyptian worker hired by [Baker Hughes Inc](#) to work at a drilling rig in Rumaila removed and tore a flag also depicting a holy Shi'ite figure, prompting Iraqi authorities to terminate his residency and expel him from the country, oil officials said.

The workhorse of Iraq's oil industry, Rumaila is operated by BP with [China National Petroleum Corp \(CNPC\)](#) [CNPET.UL}. It has estimated reserves of 17 billion barrels and currently produces around 1.4 million bpd, more than a third of Iraq's total output of over 3 million bpd.

"The workers and villagers went on a rampage. It was a fatal mistake from the foreign security guy to provoke local workers," said an oil ministry official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "When you operate in a mainly Shi'ite community you have to respect their traditions and norms: it's the A B C of how to work in any environment."

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## **Iraq bombings kill over 60 people amid Eid festivities; most violent Ramadan since 2007**

The Christian Post (11.08.2013) - A series of bombings targeting mostly at Shiite neighborhoods killed over 60 people and wounded hundreds across Iraq on Saturday amid Eid celebrations at the end of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, raising fears of a return to Shia-Sunni violence which brought the nation to the edge of civil war six years ago.

Saturday's deadliest attack occurred when a suicide bomber drove his explosive-laden car into a residential area in the town of Tuz Khormato, about 130 miles north of Baghdad, killing eight people and wounding dozens, The Associated Press quoted Mayor Shalal Abdool as saying.

In the Baghdad's south-eastern suburbs of Jisr Diyala, another car bomb killed seven people near an outdoor market, police said.

Explosions that seemed coordinated, occurring within an hour of each other, targeted mostly Shiite areas in and around Baghdad, the central city of Karbala, the southern city of Nasiriyah and the northern city of Kirkuk.

Saturday recorded the highest single-day death toll since July 20, when a series of attacks killed 71 people.

Iraq has witnessed heightened sectarian violence following a deadly crackdown by government forces on a Sunni protest camp in April. The Sunni insurgency is reportedly led by Al Qaeda's Iraq affiliate.

At least 1,000 people were killed and over 2,300 injured across the country in July, according to the United Nations, which also said July recorded the highest monthly death toll in five years. Also, this year's Ramadan turned out to be the most violent since 2007.

Iraqi officials say insurgents are now targeting crowded areas to kill as many people as possible.

"We haven't seen such numbers in more than five years, when the blind rage of the sectarian strife that inflicted such deep wounds on this country was finally abating," the acting UN representative for Iraq, Gyorgy Busztin, said recently.

Around 75 percent of the Iraqi population is Arab. Over 95 percent of all Iraqis are Muslim – 65 percent Shia and 35 percent Sunni. Iraq's politics had largely been dominated by the Arab Sunnis until the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, following which the federal government of Iraq has been governed by Shiite parties led by the Islamic Dawa Party.

Christians and churches have also come under attack in Iraq, which had 300 churches and 1.4 million Christians in 2003. Now, only 57 churches and about half a million Christians remain with members of the minority fleeing attacks. Patriarch Louis Sako of the Chaldean Church told Mideast Christian News in March that the remaining 57 churches also continue to be targeted.

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## **Church attacked, Christian-owned shops targeted in bombings**

Barnabas Fund (08.07.2013) - "The attacks on Christians continue and the world remains totally silent. It's as if we've been swallowed up by the night." These are the words of a Christian in Iraq following bomb attacks at five churches in Kirkuk in the space of just one month.

Since the Gulf War of 1990-1 Iraqi Christians have increasingly been targeted by Muslim extremists, and after the US-led invasion of 2003 there was a huge surge in anti-Christian threats, kidnappings and murders. Much of the violence has been centred on church buildings and church leaders, a clear message to the Christians that they are being persecuted because of their faith. Many Christians have received messages telling them to convert to Islam, leave or be killed.

Although the anti-government insurgency that fuelled the violence has been brought under some sort of control, attacks on Christians have continued. Hundreds of thousands

have fled their homes, mostly to other countries, reducing the Christian population to around a quarter of the size it was in 1990.

Iraqi Christians are now running out of safe havens, both in their homeland and in other countries. With Syria's descent into the chaos of civil war, and the potential destabilising of both Lebanon and Jordan following the "Arab Spring", many of those who fled Iraq to escape anti-Christian violence face the prospect of these countries falling into Islamist hands. But Iraq itself remains desperately dangerous for them.

Many Christians took refuge in the relatively stable autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan to the north, but they struggle to find work to support themselves. Furthermore, anti-Christian violence is beginning to occur even in this region. Some Christian businesses have been torched, and a young Christian man was kidnapped and held for ransom in a chilling echo of numerous incidents elsewhere in Iraq.

Meanwhile the anti-Christian bloodshed rages on in the major cities. In just a few days in 2012, the body of a Christian photographer was found riddled with bullets in Mosul, and two guards were killed when a bomb exploded near a church in Baghdad. Those responsible for such incidents are rarely prosecuted. Christians also suffer significant discrimination, marginalisation and injustice.

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## **9 killed, 53 wounded in attacks against mosques in Southern Iraq**

CRJ English (21.05.2013) - At least nine people were killed and 53 others wounded in bombing attacks against two Shiite mosques in Iraq's southern city of Hilla on Monday, a police source said.

A suicide bomber wearing explosive vest blew himself up at Al- Wardiyah mosque in Hilla, some 100 km south of the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, and about five minutes later a bomb exploded in the nearby Al-Galagh mosque, the source told Xinhua on condition of anonymity.

The two attacks targeted worshipers in the Shiite mosques and some of the wounded people were in critical conditions, he added.

No group has so far claimed responsibility for the deadly attacks, but the al-Qaida front in Iraq, in most cases, were responsible for such massive attacks in the country, raising fears that the terrorist group and other militia could return to widespread violence.

Earlier on Monday, a series of car bombs and shootings mainly targeting Shiite areas across Iraq killed at least 61 people, including several Iranian pilgrims, and wounded some 200, apparently in an attempt to stir up sectarian strife among Iraqis.

Monday's violence came amid escalation of sectarian tension between the Sunni and Shiite communities, which has been at its highest level since the U.S. troops pulled out from the country at the end of 2011. For five months, Sunni Muslims have been protesting against the Shiite-led government in Sunni provinces and the Sunni districts in Baghdad.

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## **Keep the faith in Iraq**

***The new leader of the largest Church in Iraq has told his dwindling faithful to stop emigrating, warning them that Christianity in the Middle East risks becoming "a distant memory"***

Aid to the Church in Need, Thursday, March 7, 2013 - Speaking Wednesday, 6th March, at his installation as Chaldean Patriarch of Baghdad, Louis Raphael I Sako said Christians in Iraq should overcome their fears and work together to build a new future.

Raphael I, whose election as head of the Eastern-rite Catholic Church was confirmed by Benedict XVI on February 1st, called for a dialogue "of peaceful coexistence" with Muslim leaders at a time of increasing concern about extremism and violence.

In his address, a copy of which he sent to Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), the patriarch, 64, stressed the need to work for unity with Orthodox Christians in regions marked by ecumenical tensions in recent years.

In comments aimed specifically at Christians present at the service in Baghdad's St. Joseph's Cathedral, the patriarch said: "Why are you so afraid today?"

"Do not withdraw or emigrate in time of great pressure. This is your country and your land."

"If emigration continues God forbid, there will be no more Christians in the Middle East. [The Church] will be no more than a distant memory."

The patriarch's comments, given on the eve of the 10th anniversary of the Iraq War and the overthrow of President Saddam Hussein, come after a decade of massive emigration of Christians from the country.

In 1987, Christians in Iraq totaled 1.4 million according to the last census, but now there could be fewer than 250,000, with the greatest decline in numbers taking place after 2003.

Since 2003, fundamentalism and a breakdown in law and order have shaken the Church to its foundations.

More than 700 Christians had been killed (including 17 priests) in religious and politically motivated attacks and 71 churches attacked: 44 in Baghdad and 19 in Mosul.

The biggest crisis of confidence for Christians came after the October 31st, 2010, attack on Baghdad's Our Lady of Salvation Syrian Cathedral during Sunday evening Mass, when 45 people were killed (including two priests) and 100 were injured in a four-hour siege.

Asking Christians to draw a line under the past, Patriarch Raphael told them: "These past years have been full of events and dangers and still the shadow of fear, anxiety and death is hanging over our people."

He told his faithful: "Change your view of yourselves and your identity."

"Look deeper into the reality we face today and understand the importance of your presence and witness."

"Live together and build a future for yourselves in your country."

Patriarch Raphael, who was Archbishop of Kirkuk (2003-13) after being rector of St. Peter's Seminary, Baghdad, stressed the need for "renewal."

He said: "... The world around us has changed and we must change. The Church should change."

"So we will renew our liturgy, our method of religious instruction and update our ecclesiastical structures with courage and clarity according to the Second Vatican Council."

"This renewal is aimed at helping the faithful's understanding and participation in the Christian way of life and their attachment to Christ and his Church."

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## **What future for Iraq's last Christians?**

***Iraq's most senior Catholic leader has said that security is urgently needed to stem the tide of Christians continuing to flee the country***

Aid to the Church in Need (27.02.2013) - Assessing the situation for Christians in Iraq, Patriarch Raphael I Sako of the Chaldean Church told Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) that Christians are continuing to leave for a number of reasons, but the key factor is the lack of security.

The patriarch, who was elected on January 31st, said, "They are leaving the country because there is no stability. Another reason is the rise of fundamentalism."

"Christians have lost their trust in the future. They are disappointed."

Patriarch Raphael added that "security and freedom" were the most important issues for the survival of the Church in Iraq.

"When they feel secure, free and equal with the others, they will stay, otherwise they will leave."

According to Church sources, Christians in Iraq have plummeted from 1.4 million in 1987 to perhaps fewer than 250,000 today.

Many Christians who fled the south have not stayed in the north either because they have been unable to find jobs or housing or because they have been reluctant to settle in a region that continues to experience sporadic acts of violence.

Politically motivated bomb attacks in Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu last month left at least 30 people dead and more than 200 wounded.

The leader of Iraq's Chaldeans said, "Security is also needed for non-Christians, but they are the majority and normally they belong to tribes, giving them more protection."

Even in the north, Christians have been targeted by Islamists, although events such as the mass torching of Christian-owned businesses in Zakho in December 2011 are rare.

Patriarch Raphael said, "Fundamentalism does not accept Christians... Extremists think that the reason for their predicament is the West, i.e. Christians."

He added, "The whole situation is bad. There is tension between the government and the opposition, also between the central government and the Kurdish regional government."

"Everyone is waiting for an improvement. We hope for a real reconciliation between the partners."

Patriarch Raphael said that Christians are important in helping to provide cohesion in an unstable region.

Speaking to Catholic media agency AsiaNews earlier this month, he said, "The Pope appealed to me so that we remain, as in the past, a bridge for all, between Christians and Muslims and between Iraqi citizens."

"Among other things, I brought the greetings of two imams, a Shiite and a Sunni, and he was pleasantly surprised and thanked them."

The new Chaldean leader described to ACN how Pope Benedict XVI welcomed him: "He said: 'My congratulations and my prayers. I am happy that the fathers of the synod were united. I hope you can stimulate the dialogue in your country.'"

In conclusion, the patriarch asked all the benefactors of Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) to keep Iraq's Christians in their prayers.

He said, "Please pray for the unity of churches and Christian politicians, that we can work together as one team and devise a concrete strategy to keep Christians in their homes and hoping."

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## **We have betrayed Iraqi Christians twice**

***On the 10th anniversary of the Iraq War Mardean Isaac says western states are forcing Iraqi Christians to return home***

Catholic Herald (18.03.2013) - The travails Iraq has undergone in the decade since the invasion in 2003 have largely played out among, and between, the country's major ethno-religious groups: Sunni and Shia Arabs, and Kurds. But Iraq's Christians have suffered disproportionately since the fall of Saddam. Their numbers have fallen from at least 800,000 on the eve of the war to fewer than 400,000 today. Those who have been displaced internally continue to struggle to find a future in Iraq or Iraqi Kurdistan, and those who have fled the country have encountered little support from their western host countries.

Iraqi Christians are culturally and linguistically distinct from other Iraqi communities. They are ethnically Assyrian: non-Arab, non-Kurdish peoples who trace their heritage to the ancient Assyrian empire. They speak a colloquial dialect of Aramaic, though the majority of the liturgy and literature of the Iraqi churches is in Syriac, the classical form of middle Aramaic which produced a wealth of seminal Eastern Christian texts.

Persecuted extensively under the Baathist regime because of their ethnicity, the war and its aftermath exposed Iraqi Assyrians to the horrors of violence and criminality unleashed

by Islamist groups, who subjected Christians to an extensive campaign of kidnapping, ransom and murder. As Iraq descended into civil war, Christians – having no militias or security forces of their own, and unprotected by a national security apparatus heavily tied to the sectarian gangs involved in the conflict – were cleansed from their neighbourhoods, either killed or intimidated with threats of murder. The most extreme culmination of the campaign came on October 31 2010, when an al-Qaeda affiliate calling itself the “Islamic State of Iraq” stormed the Our Lady of Salvation church in Baghdad during evening Mass, killing almost 60 people and injuring 80 more in the worst single attack on Iraqi Christians since 2003. Church bombings have become a habitual occurrence in Iraq: 72 have been attacked since 2004.

Thousands of internally displaced Christians fled from urban centres to stay with relatives or to attempt to establish themselves among Christian communities elsewhere in Iraq. Iraqi Kurdistan has been a prominent destination. The autonomous region has been spared the upheaval the rest of the country has gone through since 2003, and the consequent security and stability, coupled with Kurdistan’s considerable oil reserves, have attracted economic investment and development. But the incoming Christians have been largely unable to make lives for themselves there. The journalist Matteo Fagotto interviewed some of them on his recent trip to Iraq. He found a community “who don’t feel they have a future in their own country”, struggling to find employment and housing.

The gravity of the problems faced by Christians in Kurdistan is reflected in the work of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). They have noted that the number of displaced families in Kurdistan has been dropping starkly, as they seek to move to neighbouring countries or the West. In a recent publication of the IOM, details emerge of exorbitant house prices, rising with the demand incurred by the large numbers of new arrivals, and difficulties with finding employment and schooling.

Resilient and dignified nations, whose tribes have long inhabited the same lands, Kurds and Assyrians have had a complex history, which has witnessed both camaraderie and betrayal. Many Assyrian militias fought alongside Kurdish ones against Saddam, and Assyrian villages and churches were destroyed in the Anfal campaign. Today, however, Assyrians and Kurds find themselves on very different ends of Iraqi politics. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the ruling body of Kurdistan, has expanded its authority and territory of jurisdiction since the war, while Assyrian politics remains ineffectual.

The Kurdish theft of Assyrian land, which began under the auspices of the no-fly zone, has continued unabated. In late 2011, a group of Kurds rioted unimpeded in Zakho, a northern Iraqi town, burning down defenceless Christian shops and homes. The KRG, which has been criticised heavily for arbitrary detention and freedom of speech and assembly violations, has intimidated Christian voters and political leaders seeking to assert the rights of Christians in northern Iraq, such as Bassim Bello, the governor of Tel Kippe, a largely Christian area in the Nineveh province. Bello and others wish to establish – under terms of ethnic self-determination according to demographics in the Iraqi constitution – a semi-autonomous governorate in the province in order to provide a safe haven for minorities.

The Nineveh region is a crucible of Assyrian civilisation and the only one in Iraq composed primarily of minorities, Christians around half of them. The KRG flooded the area with militiamen in the aftermath of the invasion, securing a presence in the territories, which belong to Iraq proper, and continues to refuse to allow minorities to train their own security forces to replace the occupying Kurdish forces. Bids in parliament for a referendum over control of the region have been vetoed by the Kurdish government, which hopes that an exodus of minorities and a continuing influx of Kurds to

the area will swing the vote, and the control over oil and gas that will accompany it, their way.

The Assyrian-Swedish journalist Nuri Kino recently wrote a report on the horrors faced by the Iraqi Christians who fled violence in their own country for Syria, where anti-Christian violence has become increasingly common. He told me that while many are returning to Iraq, the Nineveh Plains in particular – almost all those who fled their homes in Baghdad have since had them occupied, and have no legal recourse to reclaiming prior residences – their focus is on migration to the West. But western states have been sending large numbers of refugees back in recent years: even Sweden, once the European country most receptive to those fleeing Iraq, has deported hundreds of Christian families in the past few years, back to peril, if not doom. So the extirpation of Assyrian Christians from their ancient lands continues: from old homes to new ones and back again, finding repose in none.

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## **Mgr Sako: torn and violent, Iraq is in an "Arab winter" for Christians and Muslims**

***The archbishop of Kirkuk slams the use of religion for "political purposes" and the danger of sectarian division of the country. Ten years after the fall of Saddam, the situation is worse and people are "disheartened". He calls on the Church and the next patriarch to be sources of unity, dialogue and a guarantee for the Christian presence in the Middle East.***

AsiaNews (11.01.2013) - In Iraq, religion plays an essential role but is used for "political purposes". Following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, a "sectarian mindset" has set in, pushing communal identity over national unity, this according to Mgr Louis Sako, who spoke to *AsiaNews* in a long interview about the recent history of Iraq, the Middle East and his country's Christians.

Almost ten years have passed since the country was invaded (March 2003) and its old strongman overthrown. Sadly, democracy, equal rights and freedom are "dreams" and people are "disheartened", said the archbishop of Kirkuk, in northern Iraq, a key battleground between the central government and Kurdish separatists over oil.

The Christian community has been touched by violence in recent days. On Monday, [a Christian woman was killed during a robbery](#), her throat cut. The next day, [a car bomb killed a Christian medical student on his last year of studies](#).

Both events are connected to the country's tense situation, with Sunnis and Shias divided by religion and Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen vying for power. For Muslim intellectuals and Christians, this is an "Arab winter," the prelate said.

A new patriarch ([to be elected in late January in Rome](#)) will be a key figure, "father and pastor," Mgr Sako said, with important tasks to fulfil and reforms to implement.

Mgr Sako's interview with *AsiaNews* follows:

***Your Excellency, two Christians were recently killed in Mosul. The current situation reminds us of the dark period in 2004-2006. How are things now?***

Iraq is home to various ethnic, religious and linguistic groups: Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Christians, Sunni and Shia Muslims.

This has been a constant headache for Iraqi leaders who appear powerless to solve the country's problems. After various referendums and elections, handing out positions has led to bickering among them.

Protests, demonstrations and rallies are up. Threats and violence have created an institutional vacuum filled by criminal groups and extremists and this has made matters worse.

At present, no solution appears to be at hand. In fact, political and ethnic divisions seem to be getting worse. Sunni Arabs accuse Shias and Kurds of violating their rights. Turkmen appear marginalised by everyone. Christians feel persecuted.

***Ten years since Saddam Hussein's fall, the country seems worse off, even for Christians. Will things get better?***

The current government has spent the past ten months trying to get its act together, and had not yet done it. The cabinet wants to do something, but others do not want to help it. A tribal mindset prevails in which everyone wants to be the chief (sheikh). A power struggle is taking place, without any clear goal. Change must come through dialogue and talks, not violence and disorder.

Religion here plays a crucial role and is used for political reasons. Secular political leaders go to the mosque, wear the traditional dress and recite the verses of the Qur'an. Laws, institutions and the constitution are seen in different ways and are a source of conflict.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, sectarianism and confessional divisions drove Shias, Sunnis, Christians, Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen apart. One's identity was more important than that of the nation. Brother was against brother.

Our fear is that the country might be divided into enclaves. President Jalal Talabani's illness and the influence of other countries in the region are making matters worse. Each group wants to impose its own agenda without taking into account the interests of others. In the countries of the Arab spring, democracy and freedom appear like a dream that will take a long time to realise. We are really disheartened!

***How are rulers responding to the people?***

Given the situation, ordinary Iraqis and leaders are disheartened. Starting on the path of reconciliation, of exchange towards forgiveness, is not possible.

The mindset that pushes towards vengeance is stronger than the law and legalities. Political and community leaders have no overall plan for the country's development. Regional conflicts, power struggles and a strong political Islam mean that open and pluralistic political life, in which everyone is truly equal, is improbable.

***Meanwhile the danger of Iraq's division grows. As one of the country's "glue", what role can Christians play?***

Partition remains a strong possibility, one that is getting stronger given the situation in Syria and Egypt. Independent political leaders do not exist. Religious and ethnic parties pursue their own interests and autonomy. The situation has been complicated by the militias.

Christians are dwindling in numbers as the exodus continues for various reasons. The Church does nothing and Christian political parties have failed in helping Christians remain, despite the possibility of making their voice heard, influence and build bridges with the other components of the nation because of their high educational levels.

Neither the Church nor Christian politicians have a real vision, a clear and detailed plan or concrete answers. Increasingly, Christians are dejected as is the rest of the population. We are disheartened! Religious freedom is not equally protected. There is a state religion in Iraq and around the region; the others are "tolerated" in the worst sense of the term.

***Oil, a valuable good, causes conflict rather being a collective good...***

Iraq is not only rich in oil but also in water, land, and could attract tourists. Under the old regime, money went to buy weapons. Now the nation is poor and the public good is not respected. People are tired and a general malaise has enfeebled the nation.

***Where is Iraq in the Mideast context? What is left of the Arab spring?***

The US and Western plans for the Middle East explain the situation, I think. The goal of these plans is to divide us along ethnic and religious lines. And the countries of the region are driving this project in accordance with their own specific interests.

In Syria, where it is a question of life and death, the conflict is between Sunnis and Alawis. Sadly, the West is making matters worse rather than helping. By backing the opposition, it is preventing a political solution involving all the parties to the conflict. Christians and Muslim intellectuals are in an "Arab winter", not the much vaunted spring!

***Your Excellency, how is the Church of Iraq preparing for the election of a new patriarch? What will the future have in store for you in light of the Synod and Benedict XVI'S Ecclesia in Medio oriente?***

We, clergy and faithful, are praying for a patriarch that is father and pastor to everyone, Christians and non Christians. We want a man who is open and ecumenical; someone who knows how to engage in dialogue, courageous and capable of doing the right thing, like liturgical, pastoral and spiritual reforms to train the clergy.

We want someone who unites and does not divide; someone who brings together and does not drive apart; someone who knows the country's situation and politics in the centre and in Kurdistan, someone who is aware of the challenges.

We want someone who will seek real solutions with all men of good will, someone who will work with other Middle Eastern Churches and fulfil the Apostolic Exhortation '*The Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness*' for a better future for all.

The Holy See has a crucial role to play in all this, especially in ensuring that Christians can stay in their own country and keep their place. Card Leonardo Sandri's visit to Iraq and Egypt is part of this. As for us, we are waiting confident in the Holy Spirit.

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## **Car bomb kills 17 Shiite pilgrims in Iraq**

AFP (03.01.2013) - A car bomb killed 17 worshippers south of Baghdad on Thursday as pilgrims from around the world thronged Iraq's shrine city of Karbala to finish commemorations for a revered figure in Shiite Islam.

The attack came despite a massive security operation mounted to safeguard the millions of Shiite Muslims travelling to and from Karbala for the conclusion of Arbaeen mourning rituals. No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack in a car park in the town of Musayyib used mainly for vehicles transporting pilgrims, but Sunni militants often try to target Shiites during commemoration rituals in a bid to incite sectarian bloodshed.

The 5:00 pm (1400 GMT) blast killed 17 people and wounded 47, a police officer and a doctor said, the second deadly attack in recent days in Musayyib, which lies about half way along the main route linking Baghdad and Karbala. Seven people were killed in Musayyib on December 31, apparently because they were Shiites. Among the dead in Thursday's attack were five women and four children, the medic said, adding that the toll could rise because many of the wounded were badly hurt.

The threat of attack had spurred authorities to deploy 35,000 soldiers and police to Karbala, including 2,500 policewomen, in the run-up to and the climax of Arbaeen. Huge crowds flooded the city's streets as sad songs blared from loudspeakers and black flags flew alongside pictures of Imam Hussein and his half-brother Imam Abbas, revered figures in Shiite Islam who are buried in Karbala. Provincial governor Amal al-Din al-Har said some 18 million pilgrims passed through Karbala, 110 kilometres (70 miles) south of Baghdad, by the end of the commemorations on Thursday afternoon, many walking for days from across Iraq. Among the worshippers were around 750,000 from 30 different countries, leaving all of the city's 700 hotels with 100 percent occupancy, the governor said.

Arbaeen marks 40 days after the Ashura anniversary commemorating the killing of Imam Hussein by the armies of the caliph Yazid in 680 AD.

"We are defying terrorism, and we are following the example of Karbala in sacrifice and redemption," said Mohammed Swadi, 40, adding that he had walked for 12 days from the southern port city of Basra for the occasion.

"This is not much when it comes to expressing our love for Imam Hussein."

Another pilgrim said she had walked for three days from the central city of Hilla to attend Arbaeen in Karbala, to pray for a medical cure. "I have a skin disease that doctors could not treat, and I vowed to attend the pilgrimage walking on foot and ask Allah with the name of Hussein to cure me," said the 35-year-old who gave her name as Umm Ali, or mother of Ali.

The seventh century battle near Karbala is at the heart of the historical division between Islam's Sunni and Shiite sects, a split that fuelled sectarian violence between the majority Shiite and minority Sunni communities after the US-led invasion of 2003.

Shiites make up around 15 percent of Muslims worldwide. They are the majority population in Iraq, Iran and Bahrain and form significant communities in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Pakistan, India and Saudi Arabia.

Now-executed dictator Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime barred the vast majority of Ashura and Arbaeen commemorations.

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