



Christian Genocide In Iraq: The Patriarch's Plea

Once again, Christians are fleeing Iraq. But this time, it's not because they are under attack from the jihadi extremists who have terrorized their communities for the past fourteen years. It's not even because of ISIS, which physically occupied the Nineveh Plain until just recently.

It's because they have lost hope that they can ever trust their neighbors again.

"The situation for Christians is catastrophic," the Patriarch of the [Chaldean Church in Babylon](#), Archbishop Louis Sako, told me during a recent trip to northern Iraq.

According to the [Hammurabi Human Rights Organizations](#), nearly half of the 120,000 Christian refugees who fled the Nineveh Plain to the camps controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government when ISIS attacked in June 2014 have now left the country for good.

"Emigration actually *increased* after the liberation," said Louis Markos, a town councilman from Baghdeda (also known as Qaraqosh), the regional capitol of the Assyrian homeland in the Nineveh Plain, about 20 miles southeast of Mosul. "When people went back and saw their houses ransacked, burned, or destroyed, they lost heart. They had waited for three years for their nightmare to end. It never did."

While the U.S. government has earmarked more than \$100 million in reconstruction funds to help restore vital infrastructure to the Christian and Yezidi areas in northern Iraq, so far local residents see only devastation.

"We haven't seen a dollar of U.S. reconstruction funds," the Patriarch told me. "Nothing has come."

A U.S. official involved in the funding, which Vice President Mike Pence pledged personally to the Patriarch when he visited the White House in May, told me the money has been sent to U.S. AID in Erbil and to the United Nations. "It's to be spent on restoring water and electricity in the Nineveh Plain," he said. "But if there are no people, they can't spend it."

"It's a chicken and egg problem, I admit," he added. "No people, no power. No power and water, no people."

The Patriarch insisted that Christians return home, despite the devastation. "If we don't rebuild, others will come to occupy our villages and towns," he said. "Already, they are putting pressure on Christians to prevent them from returning home."

Checkpoints manned separately by Kurdish Democratic Party peshmerga fighters and Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) militias make it difficult for families to return. "At each of these checkpoints, we often wait up to two hours," Markos told me. "Two weeks ago, I was turned back."

The KDP and the PMF have established a military Line of Control, effectively dividing the Assyrian Christian and Yazidi Nineveh Plain into two separate zones.



Towns that used to be just a ten minute drive from each other are now walled off from one another, requiring hours to reach crossing points manned by the warring militias.

The Kurds have been hardening their side of the border, to the north, by erecting concrete barriers and blockhouses, U.S. officials told me. While Baghdad and Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish Regional Government, both insist that the military line is just a temporary separation, Assyrian Christian leaders fear it will become permanent, leaving them hopelessly divided.

Making matters worse, the Kurdish Democratic Party of KRG president Massoud Barzani has deposed prominent Assyrian Christian mayors in the Nineveh Plain in recent weeks, first in [al Qosh](#) and more recently in [Tel Kaif](#), replacing them with Christian members of the KDP.

The move was so unpopular that protestors rattled the normally congenial KRG envoy to Washington, Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, at [a recent event](#) at the U.S. Institute for Peace, calling on the KDP to “get out” of the Nineveh Plain.

“The Nineveh Plain is not a “disputed area,” as some are claiming,” the Patriarch reminded me. “The Kurds and the Shia want to occupy the areas they liberated. They have no right to this.”

Restoring trust among the many ethnic and religious communities of Northern Iraq will not be a simple task. The U.S. Institute of Peace has been holding workshops in the Nineveh Plain for many years in an effort to build bridges between mutually suspicious communities, some of them shut down by the KDP.

“We Christians are the meat in the sandwich between the Arabs and the Kurds,” the recently deposed Mayor of Tel Keif, Bassam Bello, told me six years ago during an earlier trip to the region.

When ISIS seized control of the area in June 2014, it was Sunni Arabs who ate the sandwich. Today, the Christians are being nibbled at both ends by Kurdish and Shiite Arab militias.

“Our goal is to make the Nineveh Plain a magnet for Reconstruction,” Yohanna Yousef Towaya, a local businessman who works with the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization, told me. “We are looking for private partners and NGOs to help us rebuild houses so émigrés will return.”

A big task, but an imperative one. Without reconstruction in the Nineveh Plain, there will be no more Christians in Iraq in a few years.

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