
THE POPE AND TRUMP DISCUSS PROTECTION OF CHRISTIANS IN IRAQ

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ERBIL, Kurdistan Region □ Among the topics discussed by Catholic leader Pope Francis and US President Donald Trump was the persecution and protection of dwindling minority communities in the Middle East like that of the Christians.

A Vatican statement highlighted that Trump and Pope Francis made "particular reference to the situation in the Middle East and the protection of Christian communities."

Minority communities like Shabaks, Yezidis, Christians, Kakais were largely displaced in places like Baghdad, the northern Iraqi province of Nineveh, and northern Syria as ISIS swept across the Middle East in 2014.

"The discussions then enabled an exchange of views on various themes relating to international affairs and the promotion of peace in the world through political negotiation and interreligious dialogue," read Vatican statement.

Prior to the rise of ISIS in 2014, there were about 400,000 Christians in Iraq of various Chaldean, Assyrian, Syriacs and Armenian sects. Now there are about 200,000 who are sheltered in the Kurdistan Region with about that many having sought refuge abroad.

Radical ideologies, extremist lectures, wars and massacres especially against our Yezidi and Christian brothers and sisters have not affected this culture, Kurdish Nechirvan Barzani Prime Minister said in December 2016. But it has caused hesitation, fear, a deep wound and pain and posed a serious threat to the culture of coexistence in Kurdistan and Iraq.

Interfaith leaders in the Kurdistan Region have participated in various coexistence forums; however, minority leaders have said that often the platitudes don't leave the room.

We have a serious task ahead of us. In this time of threats and terrorism this spirit of tolerance and coexistence has to be strengthened, Barzani previously added.

More than 100 churches and monasteries in Mosul alone have been demolished by ISIS militants since 2014. Elsewhere in the country, there was the 2010 October attack on the Syrian Church in Baghdad that killed over 50 people, including many worshipers.

The White House readout of the meeting stated the two leaders discussed how religious communities can combat human suffering in crisis regions, such as Syria, Libya, and ISIS-controlled territory

The situation is complicated by the presence of rival forces protecting Christian towns and villages.

Some areas, including Alqosh, Bashiqa, Tal Squf, and Batnaya, are under the protection of Nineveh Plains Protection Forces supported by the Peshmerga. But in Tel Kef, Hamdaniya and other places, Babylon Units, associated with the Hashd al-Shaabi forces, are in control.

It is my desire that you become an olive tree to construct peace, the Pope, not referencing any one conflict, told Trump, according to The Associated Press.

"We can use peace," Trump replied

According to 1987 Iraqi census, 1.4 million Christians lived in Iraq primarily in the Nineveh Plains, Baghdad, and some Kurdish cities. But many have since migrated to the West or places like Lebanon after years of persecution and economic hardship.

Kaynak/Source: