



NGO Open Letter to the Holy See on the Visit of Pope Francis to Iraq

H.E. Cardinal Pietro Parolin
 Palazzo Apostolico Vaticano
 Secretary of State of the Holy See
 00120 Via del Pellegrino
 Citta del Vaticano

4 March 2021

Your Eminence,

As members of Iraqi civil society and international NGOs, we welcome the apostolic visit by His Holiness Pope Francis to Iraq in March 2021. At this critical moment in the country's history, the visit represents an important opportunity to promote peace and tolerance by bringing together ethno-religious communities and inspiring collective action to prevent further atrocities of the kind that has caused so much suffering for generations.

Over many centuries the rich tapestry of ethno-religious communities in the region has been woven in largely peaceful conditions, but in more recent times minority groups have faced increasing levels of persecution and violent attacks based on religious beliefs. Ongoing genocides have forced communities to flee their ancestral homelands, unravelling the ties that bind people together in this cradle of civilisation.

The misuse of Sharia Law led to the institutionalized marginalization of non-Muslim minorities in Iraq, exacerbated by Saddam Hussein's attempts to change the demography of the Iraqi state. The 2003 US-led intervention severely destabilized inter-communal relations, resulting in state collapse, sectarian warfare, and the proliferation of extremist ideologies and armed groups. The Christian population has been reduced to a mere 300,000 today. Other minority communities such as Yazidis, Sabeen-Mandaeans, Turkmen, Kak'ais, and Shabaks have faced existential threats in recent years.

From August 2014, the terrorist group Da'esh, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), exploited the lack of religious freedoms to launch a genocidal campaign against ethno-religious minorities in Iraq. The targeted violence sought to erase the presence of religious minorities in Iraq altogether, and particularly of the Yazidis, decried by ISIS as devil-worshippers. ISIS executed those who refused religious conversion, and destroyed countless shrines, churches, temples, and other cultural sites.

The threat of future atrocities from Da'esh remains clear and present despite the terrorist group's territorial defeat. We continue to see hate speech against minorities promulgated by extremist clerics across Iraq, and intolerance remains deep-rooted because of a lack of education on other religions and human rights. Recent demographic changes in the Nineveh plains have been accompanied by the increased presence of militia groups in the region. The inadequacy of basic services and infrastructure alongside the ongoing security threat leaves communities with a sense of hopelessness and despair.

We welcome the efforts already taken to safeguard religious freedom in Iraq, such as the Interfaith Statement on the Victims of ISIL endorsed by religious leaders from the Christian, Sunni, Shia, and Yazidi communities, and supported by UNITAD and the UN Office on Genocide Prevention. However, without justice and accountability for past atrocities, religious communities will continue to face persecution and the threat of repeated violence.

The visit of His Holiness Pope Francis to Iraq is an ideal opportunity to promote cooperation and unity of purpose among the Government of Iraq, the Kurdish Regional Government, religious leaders, and the wider international

community in order to comprehensively address the needs of affected communities. We recommend that these stakeholders take the following steps:

- 1) To provide reparations for survivors of the genocide by Da'esh and adopt legislation that delivers justice for victims.
- 2) To put in place security and political arrangements that will protect ethno-religious communities in their historical homelands from future atrocities and demographic changes. In addition to reconstructing destroyed areas in Sinjar, Tel Afar and the Nineveh Plains, basic services and livelihood opportunities must be provided to encourage communities to return to their homes.
- 3) To provide psychosocial therapy support for survivors, particularly women and children, to assist in social reintegration.
- 4) To change laws that affect the religion and dignity of religious minorities, such as Article 26 of the unified national card Law No. 3 of 2016.
- 5) To promote religious education across Iraq by means of cultural events and activities that inform the population about minority communities; integrate education about religious minorities in the Iraqi school curriculum to combat misinformation.
- 6) For the United Nations to facilitate a follow-up conference to broaden the endorsement for the Interfaith Statement by other religious communities.

Sincerely,

The Undersigned:

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| 1. Air Bridge Iraq - Luftbrücke Irak | 29. Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies |
| 2. American Islamic Congress | 30. Mosaic Middle East |
| 3. Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect | 31. Nadia's Initiative |
| 4. Assyrian Policy Institute | 32. Observer Human Rights Center |
| 5. CAPNI Organization | 33. PAX |
| 6. Center for Justice and Accountability | 34. Project Abraham |
| 7. Civil Development Organization | 35. Religious Freedom Institute |
| 8. Coalition for Genocide Response | 36. Refcemi |
| 9. CSW | 37. Shlomo Organization for Documentation |
| 10. Darfur Women Action Group | 38. Springs of Hope Foundation |
| 11. EMMA Organization for Human Development | 39. Soteria International |
| 12. European Federation for Freedom or Belief | 40. TAJDID Iraq Foundation for Economic Development |
| 13. European Interreligious Forum for Religious Freedom | 41. Tuly NGO for Turkmen Affairs |
| 14. Ezidi Organization for Documentation | 42. Turkmen Rescue Foundation |
| 15. Eziden Weltweit e. V. | 43. World Federalist Movement/Institute for Global Policy |
| 16. Freedom House | 44. Voice of Ezidis |
| 17. Free Yezidi Foundation | 45. Yazda |
| 18. Genocide Watch | 46. Yazidi Legal Network |
| 19. Hammurabi Human Rights Organization | |
| 20. Harikar | |
| 21. Hawar.help | |
| 22. International Christian Foundation for Democracy | |
| 23. International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect | |
| 24. Iraqi Institution for Development | |
| 25. Jiyan Foundation for Human Rights | |
| 26. Joint Help for Kurdistan | |
| 27. Masarat | |
| 28. Middle East Concern | |