News

A light-skinned man wears a mitre, glasses, and red and white vestments and carries a gold c

Cardinal Louis Sako, the Iraq-based patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, celebrates a liturgy in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Feb. 4, 2013. Sako said Sept. 19, 2023, he would like more Vatican support for him working to regain formal recognition as the Chaldean patriarch in the country. Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid revoked his title July 3. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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Iraq's Chaldean Catholic Cardinal Louis Sako said he would like more Vatican support as he tries to regain formal recognition as the Chaldean patriarch in the country.

Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid revoked his title July 3, which has been viewed as a usurpation of the clergyman's position as the officially recognized head of Iraq's Catholic Chaldean Church as well of his position and powers to administer the Chaldean religious endowment, including church properties.

Both the cardinal and media in Iraq say the action was likely instigated by Rayan al-Kildani, a leader of a nominally Chaldean Catholic militia in Iraq, the Babylon Brigades, closely tied to Iran. Its political wing holds four seats in parliament out of

five reserved for Christian candidates.

Al-Kildani was sanctioned in 2019 by the U.S. Treasury Department for alleged human rights abuses. Critics accuse al-Kildani of seeking control of Chaldean Church assets, which Sako oversees.

Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Bashar Warda of Irbil explained in a statement made available to OSV News in July that "withdrawing the republican decree does not prejudice the religious or legal status of Cardinal Louis Sako, as he is appointed by the Apostolic See." Warda's statement said that the patriarch continues to enjoy "the respect and appreciation of the presidency of the Republic as Patriarch of the Chaldean Church in Iraq and the world."

Christian and Muslim religious authorities, politicians, tribal chiefs and private citizens in Iraq as well as Catholic leaders abroad have condemned the move and support Sako.

"I want the Vatican also to take a strong position," Sako told an online press conference Sept. 19, organized by the Paris-based L'Oeuvre d'Orient, a Catholic group aiding Eastern Christian communities for over a century.

He spoke from Irbil, the capital of Iraq's northern Kurdistan region, where he has gone "in protest over the decree" made in Baghdad.

"We need to resolve this problem and defend this very old church," Sako said, referring to the ancient Chaldean Catholic Church, believed to have been founded by Jesus Christ's apostle Thomas in Iraq.

"We need to help it and show solidarity and proximity. Honestly, I'm very sad and disappointed about the church. This small church is a universal church. It's not separate," the cardinal said, a reminder that Chaldean Catholics are in full communion with the Holy See and the rest of the Catholic Church.

"We've paid a heavy price for our faith and to remain here (in Iraq) and to continue to speak up about the Christian faith very bravely," he underscored. Iraqi Christians have faced threats, persecution, land confiscation and even death following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 as well as sectarian attacks by the so-called Islamic State militants and Iran-backed Shiite militias in recent years.

The majority of Iraq's Christians belong to the Chaldean Catholic Church. Christians in the country once numbered around 1.5 million, but their numbers have dwindled to some 150,000 according to the 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom by the U.S. Department of State.

"We (the church) need to fight the important causes. I'm expecting moral support. We don't have a militia or army to defend us. Even a letter or a declaration to say that this is not right, this is not true. We need to respect the church," said Sako, who was instrumental in organizing Pope Francis' historic visit to conflict-ridden Iraq in March 2021, with the aim of mending bridges between Iraq's diverse religious communities.

"The pope came, the pope changed the population's mentality, but he did not change the mentality of the political class, unfortunately. We need to change our political culture and mentality," the cardinal said.

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Sako has long urged the government for equal citizen rights for all of Iraq's mosaic of religious and ethnic communities. He also has advocated for Christians and others, when possible, to remain in their countries. "The history of Christians who have left Iraq has made us very weak," he told reporters.

"We have a moral duty on behalf of these countries to change the situation, where there is persecution, discrimination, where people are treated differently based on their religion, nationality, ethnicity, gender, etc. These countries must also learn to respect human rights," he said, of the broader context of increasing waves of migrants and refugees worldwide.

"When a family leaves Iraq, it breaks my heart," he said. "I understand their decision, but it is a great loss for our country. If an individual wants to leave because they are under threat, I understand that. But there is mass immigration. We need to help these countries build state(s) with rule of law."

Sako, who never used the name of militia leader Rayan al-Kildani during the press conference, simply referring to him as "he," recalled a photo apparently staged by al-Kildani at a general audience with Francis in Rome which al-Kildani tried to present as evidence of a private papal audience. The cardinal called it a bid to

"make propaganda for themselves."

"There was a very brief note to say that the pope did not see him privately," Sako commented, referring to a Sept. 12 communique to journalists, in which Matteo Bruni, Vatican's spokesman, is quoted as responding to journalists' questions that "His Holiness Pope Francis greeted some of the people present, as is customary" during the Sept. 6 audience. "Among them was a group of Iraqis, which included Mr. Rayan Al-Kildani, with whom some brief words were exchanged."

"He said hello to him with others present, but I do not think that's enough," the patriarch said.

Analyst Michael Knights of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy explained that "only in the Christian community has there been an organized peaceful resistance against the use of an Iran-backed militia to basically take over that minority community."

"That's partly because the Christian community in Iraq has more of an external force from the global diaspora and the Vatican than any other of the Iraqi micro-minorities. It's the only thing that is holding Rayan al-Kildani back," he told OSV News.

Knights commended the Vatican for not falling into a trap al-Kildani tried to make with his photo op with the pope.

"It was important to see the way the Vatican responded. They put out the press release in English, Arabic and Italian. They made sure that they covered all their bases because they don't want al-Kildani to claim that he has been given an audience with the pope knowing who he is," Knights said.

"The pope had no idea who he was," he stressed, adding that "al-Kildani is constantly trying to show that he has a credible claim to the leadership of Christian community inside Iraq, but he doesn't."

That kind of validation is exactly what the Iran-backed militias in Iraq require if they are going to take the property of the Christian community in Iraq, Knights explained.

"That absolutely mustn't happen because if they ever have the possibility of returning Christians to Iraq in large numbers, they can't have all of the property of that community looted. Otherwise then, they'll never come back," he continued.

"They need somewhere to live. It's their historic homeland. It's one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. What the Iran-backed militias want to do is basically destroy the basis of that community, its homes, everything."

For Sako, the situation has made him "worried." "I'm ready to resign," he said.