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Pope Francis shakes the hand of a smiling white-haired man wearing a red zucchetto and a p

Pope Francis greets Iraqi Cardinal Louis Sako, patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Feb. 18, 2022. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Iraq's Chaldean Catholic Cardinal Louis Sako has left his patriarchal residence in the capital, Baghdad, relocating to a monastery in the northern Kurdistan region after the president of Iraq recently revoked a decree that formally recognized him as Chaldean patriarch in the country.

The move by Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid July 3 is seen as a usurpation of the clergyman's position as the officially recognized head of Iraq's Catholic Chaldean Church and his position and powers to administer the Chaldean religious endowment.

The action has revoked a special presidential decree of 2013 by Rashid's predecessor that granted this authority to Sako.

Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Bashar Warda explained in a statement made available to OSV News that the rationale behind the move may have resulted from requests for a similar decree from the patriarch of the Assyrian Church and the patriarch of the Old Assyrian Church, which the president denied. Rashid said the retraction of such decrees does not impact the status of any church leader in any way, according to Asia News.

"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, adding 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."

However, the Iraqi Kurdistan-based Rudaw news agency and other media reported that Rashid's revocation may be precipitated by Iraqi politics. It alleged the revocation followed a meeting between the president and Rayan al-Kildani, a leader of the Babylon Brigades, a nominally Chaldean Catholic militia in Iraq with close ties to the pro-Iran Popular Mobilization Forces (known as the Hashd al-Shaabi in Arabic) and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Observers say the political wing of the militia -- the Babylon Movement party -- claims to represent Iraq's Christian community, but has little or no Christian support and primarily represents Kildani's personal interests. Analysts also see Iran further tightening its influence over Iraqi politics.

Iraqi Christian rights activist Diya Butrus Slewa speaking to The Christian Post called the action "a political maneuver to seize the remainder of what Christians have left in Iraq and Baghdad and to expel them."

"Unfortunately, this is a blatant targeting of the Christians and a threat to their rights," Slewa said.

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"We hope the Iraqi presidency hears our people and revokes this (decision) as soon as possible, otherwise it will become an international matter and the Vatican will get involved," Slewa added.

"Personally, I believe the approach to revoking the decree was flawed," Warda said in a statement. "The President of the Republic could have convened a meeting with all the church leaders to explain the history of these decrees and his decision to retract them. Instead, the matter was played out in the media, leading the Patriarch to interpret this action as punitive," he wrote.

In a statement, Sako said he "decided to withdraw from the patriarchal residence in Baghdad … to one of the monasteries in the Kurdistan Region," due to the "deliberate and offensive" campaign by the Babylon Brigades and the revocation of the presidential decree, which he called "unprecedented" in the history of Iraq.

Warda cautioned that given "the prevailing political climate in Iraq, all occurrences carry a political subtext. … Hence, it's prudent for the President to handle this situation discreetly, liaise directly with church heads, and thwart political factions from leveraging these situations for their personal political and media gains."

In his statement, Warda further advised that a presidential visit to the cardinal "at his place of residence could serve to reinforce his previous assertions of Iraq's respect and acknowledgment for Patriarch Sako's religious, national, and international significance."

He added that "it would be beneficial if the Ministry of Justice quickly issued deeds for the religious endowments to all heads of churches, which would assure everyone that there are no plans for the state to take over these church endowments."

"These decrees have their origins in early Islamic periods," Warda said of the history of such decisions -- the caliph would traditionally issue an edict mandating the patriarch to oversee the personal status of Christianity, in accordance with the church's approved laws and customs.

"I personally see these decrees as a distinct infringement on human rights, as they treated non-Muslims as dhimmis, obliging them to pay a tax," Warda said. "The Ottomans further embraced this practice, making it a custom that persists to this day. It's noteworthy that similar decrees were issued to leaders of other religions and sects," he said.

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