News



Pope Francis walks next to Chaldean Patriarch Louis Sako of Baghdad, right, as he arrives to celebrate Mass at the Chaldean Catholic Cathedral of St. Joseph in Baghdad March 6, 2021. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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After Pope Francis prayed on Christmas Day for Syrian Christians facing uncertainty amid the country's regime change, the leader of the Catholic Church in neighboring Iraq said the toppling of the regime left Christians in the region feeling "tense."

"There is a bit of fear among the people, and one wonders what consequences this change may have in Iraq," Cardinal Louis Sako, the Iraq-based patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, said in an interview with Vatican News published Dec. 25.

The primary rebel force that led the lightning offensive against the regime of President Bashar Assad is the Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group, which had ties to al-Qaida. But the leader of the transitional Syrian government — Mohammad al-Bashir — has promised to respect the rights "of all people and all sects in Syria."

However, hundreds of demonstrators took to the streets of Damascus Dec. 24 to protest against anti-Christian sentiment following the burning of a Christmas tree in central Syria. A religious leader from HTS published a video in which he said those who burned the tree were "not Syrians" and would be punished.

Approximately 1.5 million Christians were estimated to live in Syria in 2011, though in 2022 that figure fell to about 300,000 due to persecution and the effects of the Syrian Civil War. More than 120 Christian places of worship have been destroyed in the country since 2012.

"The leaders of the armed opposition that have taken control of the country talk about a civil regime, of a new Syria respectful of human rights and of a government

that will see the participation of all political and social components," Sako said in the interview. "Let us hope they are sincere."

As many as 100,000 Christians were similarly driven out of Iraq when the Islamic State seized control of large parts of the country in 2014, but the cardinal said about 60% of Christians returned to Iraq after the Islamic State was toppled in 2017.

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Francis visited Iraq in 2021 preaching a message of forgiveness and hope to the Christian community.

What is needed is the ability to forgive, but also the courage not to give up," the pope said in Qaraqosh, the largest Christian town in Iraq. "I know that this is very difficult, but we believe that God can bring peace to this land."

Still, Sako said, today in Iraq "there are no conditions for lasting security and stability to live in freedom and with respect for rights."

Yet he said that the "interreligious ties are very much alive" in Iraq.

"We have worked to defeat hatred; the problem is not the religious leaders but the politicians," he said. "Religions must make their contribution by eliminating division and fragmentation within themselves."

Sako said that harmony among religious groups is threatened when religion "becomes a political instrument and not a free, loving relationship with God."

"Therefore, I always ask to separate religion from the state; they are two different realities," he said. "Religion is for individuals and the state is for everyone; the state should not have a religion."