News



Louis Sako, patriarch of Iraq's Chaldean Catholic Church, speaks during an interview with The Associated Press in Baghdad, Iraq, April 21, 2025. (AP/Hadi Mizban, File)

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The patriarch of one of the most important Christian churches in the Middle East retired on Tuesday, setting the stage for new leadership as war engulfs the region.

Iraqi Cardinal Louis Sako of the Chaldean Catholic Church said he had asked to retire to pursue "prayer, writing, and simple service," and that Pope Leo XIV granted his request on the day he had proposed.

Sako, 76, who had occasionally clashed with Iraq's political leaders, said in a statement that he freely offered his resignation and was leaving "of my own will."

The Chaldean Catholic Church is one of the nearly two dozen Eastern Rite churches that are in full communion with Rome. It is one of the four that claim links to the ancient Church of the East, located in Mesopotamia, and is today prevalent in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon, as well as in the diaspora.

Sako led the ancient church through the traumatic years of the rise of the Islamic State group in Iraq that devastated the Christian community. His retirement paves the way for a successor to lead the church at a time of new conflict in the region, the U.S.-Israeli war in Iran, that has spilled over into Iraq.

Iran-backed militias in Iraq have launched dozens of attacks targeting U.S. bases, energy facilities, and other targets in the country.

"I led the Chaldean Church under extremely difficult circumstances and amid great challenges. I preserved the unity of its institutions and spared no effort in defending it and the rights of Iraqis and Christians, taking positions and maintaining a presence both inside and outside the country," Sako said in a statement on the patriarch's website.

He said that "in these difficult times" he hoped that his successor will possess "solid theological culture, courage, and wisdom — someone who believes in renewal, openness, and dialogue, and who also has a sense of humor. I will respect him and

never interfere in his work."

In July 2023, Sako withdrew from his headquarters in Baghdad and went into self-imposed exile in the Kurdish regional capital for nine months after Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid revoked a decree recognizing his position as patriarch of the Chaldeans.

The Iraqi president downplayed his revocation of Sako's recognition as bureaucratic housekeeping, claiming it did not diminish the patriarch's legal or religious status, but Sako called it an affront to the church.

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At the time of his departure, Sako blamed a campaign against him by Rayan al-Kildani, a fellow Chaldean Christian who is head of the Bablyon Movement political party and founder of a militia called the Babylon Brigades that fought against IS and still patrols much of the Nineveh plains.

He returned to Baghdad in April 2024 after receiving a formal invitation from Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani.

Iraq's Christian population has dwindled after decades of war and the rise of extremist groups including the Islamic State in the security vacuum that followed the 2003 U.S.-led invasion to unseat the country's former strongman leader, Saddam Hussein.

The number of Christians in Iraq today is estimated at 150,000, compared with 1.5 million in 2003. Iraq's total population is more than 40 million.

A 2021 visit by Pope Francis, which Sako helped organize, provided a glimmer of hope that quickly faded. Many of the Christian villages destroyed as IS rampaged across the country remain in ruins, their former inhabitants scattered.

Sako told The Associated Press in an interview in 2023 that he saw it as part of his mandate to protect the rights of Christians.

"Of course, no one defends Christians other than the church," he said.