

Popular Iraqi Shia leader seeks to redress abuse done to Christians

Muqtada al-Sadr creates special committee where Christians can send their ownership documents pertaining to property illegally expropriated in recent years



A follower of Iraqi Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr holds a picture of him during a mass Friday prayer and rally at the al-Tahrir square in central Baghdad, Iraq, 27 November 2020. (Photo by EPA/AHMED JALIL/MaxPPP)

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Muqtada al-Sadr, an Iraqi Shia cleric, politician, militia leader and one of the most powerful political figures in Iraq, has ordered the creation of a special committee to verify information and complaints regarding cases of illegally dispossessing Christians of their properties in various regions of the Muslim country.

The head of the Sadrist political group enjoys much popularity that has given him a strong presence in almost every Iraqi parliament since 2003, allowing him to maneuver through Iraqi politics and push through reforms and eliminate corruption.

Muqtada al-Sadr issued a statement in the first few days of 2021, naming members of the committee, as well as e-mail addresses and WhatsApp accounts to which the Christians can send their ownership documents pertaining to property illegally expropriated in recent years by people or groups.

The intention of the Shiite leader is to restore justice and end violations of the property rights of the "Christian brothers", including those for which members of the Shiite movement led by Muqtada al-Sadr were responsible, FIDES reported.

People are urged to report cases of illegal expropriations suffered also by Christians who have left the country in recent years.

A delegation from Muqtada al-Sadr and led by Sheikh Salah al-Obaidi visited Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, the Chaldean Patriarch of Babylon, January 3 to offer their greetings for the Christmas season, and also a copy of the document with which the Shiite politician set up the committee.

Cardinal Sako thanked Muqtada al-Sadr for the initiative aimed at putting an end to injustices suffered by local Christian and underlined the importance of ensuring the common good above sectarian interest.

While Muqtada al-Sadr has often demanded the rights of Christians to their homes and properties be respected in the wake of much being illegally expropriated from families in Baghdad, Kirkuk and other Iraqi regions, this is a concrete step to redress the issue.

His move comes ahead of the now scheduled visit of Pope Francis to the Middle Eastern nation of Iraq in March.

Francis, who will be the first pope to visit Iraq, will during the four days of travel visit Baghdad, the plain of Ur, linked to the memory of Abraham, the city of Erbil, as well as Mosul and Qaraqosh in the plain of Nineveh.

Muqtada al-Sadr's initiative is also seen as putting a halt to the number of Christians in Iraq have dwindling drastically in the past two decades.

In 2003, before a US-led coalition invaded to depose Saddam Hussein, there were around 1 to 1.4 million Christians in Iraq.

A drawn-out war and the 2014-2017 occupation of the Plain of Nineveh by the so-called Islamic State reduced their number to between 3-400,000.

The Nineveh Plains were once inhabited mainly by Chaldean, Syrian and Assyrian Christians. Only 45% of the original Christian community has since returned to the Nineveh Plains.

There were 102,000 Christians living there in 2014. But their number has dwindled to 36,000 and is expected to plummet even further by 2024 due to political instability and lack of security, as well as family and economic reasons.

Islamic State occupied the Nineveh Plains for two years but was gradually driven out beginning in 2016. Now various militias, often linked to foreign powers, have taken over much of the area.

Iraq's president and prime minister have often invited Christians who have fled the country to return and help rebuild the nation.

But the international Catholic charity, Aid to the Church in Need, says the main reasons why Christians are leaving the country of over 38 million people are because of political instability and lack of security, as well as family and economic reasons.