

Reverberations of pope's Iraq visit felt after Francis is gone

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Pope Francis's recent trip to Iraq will undoubtedly have a lasting impact on the country in ways that only time will tell, however, in the immediate aftermath, a few significant developments can already be seen.

According to some observers, even before the historic March 5-8 trip took place, the first-ever papal visit to Iraq was having an impact on country at the highest levels.

In December the Iraqi Parliament voted unanimously to declare Christmas an annual national holiday. Previously, Christians had been given the day of Dec. 25 off, but it was not considered a holiday for the rest of the population in the Muslim-majority nation.

At the time, the move was hailed as a down-payment on the pope's visit, which despite a swath of obstacles such as the coronavirus pandemic, the pope's sciatica, rocket attacks and other potential security threats, took place with what most would describe as overwhelming success.

On Monday, the day of Pope Francis's departure, the Iraqi government made another important move some are also crediting to the pope's visit when President Barham Salih ratified a law benefitting Yazidi survivors of the 2014-2017 ISIS genocide.

After years of delay, so-called "Yazidi survivor law" was passed by Iraq's parliament March 1, and ratified by Salih on March 8, which is also International Women's Day.

During his March 7 visit to Mosul, Pope Francis presided over a memorial ceremony for victims of war, terrorism, and violence, specifically calling attention to the suffering that countless women and girls faced when they were sold as property by ISIS militants.

In his speech, Francis thanked "all the mothers and women of this country, women of courage who continue to give life, despite the wrongs and hurts," asking that women "be respected and protected. May they be shown respect and provided with opportunities."

In remarks during an Iraqi Parliamentary Assembly on International Women's Day, Salih said he had "the honor of approving the law of Yazidi survivors in justice for their suffering and the suffering of all Iraqi components due to terrorist brutality."

“The enforcement of this law is a must-have national responsibility in the context of the fairness of victims,” he said, and praised Iraqi women who have contributed to fighting terrorism, saying, numerous women have “stood with arms and many of them were martyred as an example of which we are proud of in sacrifice and heroism.”

Initially written to offer restitution exclusively to Yazidi women who were kidnapped by ISIS, the version of the law passed Monday also applies to both men and women belonging to other ethnic and religious minorities, including Turkmen, Shabak, and Christians, as well as Yazidi men who survived mass ISIS killings.

According to Iraqi Kurdish news site *Rudaw*, as part of the legislation ISIS survivors are guaranteed job opportunities, as they are being allocated 2 percent of employment opportunities in Iraq’s public sector with a fixed income and a portion of land.

Under the new law, August 3 will be considered a day of commemoration of the crimes committed against the Yazidis.

This law marks the Iraqi government’s first legal recognition of the Yazidi genocide. Previously, the term “genocide” had only been used by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

On Twitter, Salih praised the law as “an important step to help survivors of atrocities by ISIS against Yezidis, Christians and Turkomen. Justice, restitution are crucial to ensure such horrendous crimes never happen again.”

Several Yazidi activists also praised the move, including Murad Ismael, who called the ratification of the law “is one important step toward justice.”

Nadia Murad, a Yazidi woman who survived ISIS captivity and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018, said via Twitter that the passage of the Yazidi survivor bill “is an important first step in acknowledging the gender-based trauma of sexual violence & need for tangible redress.”

“Implementation of the law will need to be focused comprehensively supporting & sustainably reintegrating survivors,” she said.

On his return flight from Iraq to Rome, Pope Francis told journalists traveling on board that he was inspired to visit the country after reading Murad’s book, “The Last Girl,” which recounts the story of her time in ISIS captivity.

Regardless of the significant steps that have been taken in Iraq surrounding the papal trip, some have voiced fear that now that the pope is gone, attacks will increase.

Also on Monday, after the pope had already left, one person died in an explosion near the al-Aimmah bridge in Baghdad, which left three others in critical condition.

Iraq's Security Media Cell said the explosion was caused by a hand grenade that detonated in a garbage dump near the bridge. Earlier that day, three members of a terrorist cell believed to be planning suicide attacks were reportedly arrested.

Prior to the pope's visit, several rocket attacks were conducted targeting United States operations in Iraq, with some falling in civilian areas. Many on the ground believe these attacks will continue, and fear there could be an escalation of violence.

However, for Iraq's Christian community, most are still on "cloud nine," celebrating a visit they never thought would happen.

Images such as that of Father Roni Momika, more commonly known among the international press as "the dancing priest," leading faithful during song and dance ahead of the pope's arrival are still being shared widely on social media as a reminder of the joy that is still palpable for Iraq's Christian community.

In a statement after Pope Francis's return from Iraq, the United Arab Emirates' Higher Committee of Human Fraternity called the visit "an important moment for the world and a true promotion of the values advocated by the document on human fraternity."

The committee was established in August 2019 as a means of implementing the human fraternity document signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Egypt's prestigious Al-Azhar mosque, Ahmed el-Tayeb, during the pope's visit to Abu Dhabi in February 2019.

In the statement, Cardinal Ayuso Guixot, who was part of the pope's delegation to Iraq and who serves as president of the Vatican Council for Interreligious Dialogue and is a member of the committee, said the pope's aim with the visit is to "promote cultural dialogue and a culture of convergence and inclusiveness so that everyone in our society can enjoy peace in his life regardless of his race, culture or religion."

Professor Mohamed al-Mahasawi, president of Al-Azhar University and who is also a committee member, said the pope's visit provided healing "for the wounds of the Iraqi

people after years of wars and destruction,” and was a call to tolerance, and citizenship, and peaceful coexistence “between all Iraqis and all peoples of the region.”

“It is the best response to the calls for hatred and extremism that took the lives of many and displaced millions of innocent people,” al-Mahasawi said.

Similarly, Judge Mohamed Abdelsalam, secretary general of the committee, said the papal visit shed light on the Iraq’s rich religious and cultural diversity, and showed how could this diversity can “be a way for achieving peace and cohesion among communities.”

“It also carried a powerful message that the whole world should support the victims of wars and extremism, not to abandon them under any circumstances,” he said, adding that the committee would launch a study evaluating the results of the papal visit in order to develop future projects for the benefit “of all Iraqis.”