

# Blunting the Militia Campaign Against Iraq's Christian Leaders

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## Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Militia Spotlight \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight)

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## A U.S.-sanctioned, Iran-backed militia leader aims to sideline the country's Chaldean Patriarch and take over billions of dollars' worth of Christian property.

On July 12, Iraqi president Abdul Latif Rashid repealed Decree 147, Baghdad's 2013 executive order recognizing the appointment of Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako as head (Patriarch) of the Chaldean Catholic Church "in Iraq and the world" and assigning him responsibility "for the assets of the Church." A day later, the Karkh district court reportedly issued a summons to the Patriarch over media comments he made about Rayan al-Kildani, a [U.S.-sanctioned human rights abuser \(https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm735\)](https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm735) who formed the 50th Brigade of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (aka [Kataib Babiliyoun \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-babiliyoun-50th-pmf-brigade\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-babiliyoun-50th-pmf-brigade)). The Patriarch then withdrew to a monastery in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), much like past Christian leaders were compelled to do during times of persecution.

U.S. ambassador Alina Romanowski quickly protested the government's actions and was summonsed for censure by

Rashid's office. She is taking a brave stand against such continued abuses and **power grabs** (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/iran/iraq-quietly-falling-apart>) by Iran-backed militias and will need strong backing from the White House, State Department, and Congress. Kildani must not be allowed to continue smearing and weakening the Patriarch and asserting himself as the leader of Iraq's Christians—a role that would place billions of dollars' worth of Christian properties at his disposal.

## A Campaign to Erode Interfaith Tolerance

**D**ecree 147 is part of a longstanding symbolic tradition of interfaith tolerance in Iraq, with roots in the early Islamic period that continued through the Ottoman Empire into the modern era. In the past, the Caliph of Baghdad would issue an edict that gave each new Patriarch temporal power over the Christian population, permitting him to oversee matters of personal status in accordance with church law and tasking him with collecting tributes for the treasury as the caliph's representative. Similar decrees were issued to leaders of other religions and sects (e.g., the Syriac Catholic Church, Yazidis, Sabeen-Mandaeans).

This month's repeal of the decree spurred condemnations from across the interfaith spectrum. The office of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's top Shia religious authority, reached out to Sako on July 15 and expressed "dismay" over how the cardinal had been treated, while the Sunni-led Association of Muslim Scholars in Baghdad opposed the move against him. And on July 22, five of Iraq's Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian political parties took the **unprecedented step** (<https://www.zowaa.org/%d8%a8%d9%84%d8%a7%d8%ba/>) of uniting under one list for upcoming elections, driven in part by Kildani's ongoing campaign and the manipulation of Christian quota seats (see below).

Kildani has sought to dominate Iraq's Christian community **for some time now** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/nineveh-plains-christians-defend-against-babiliyoun-militia>), but numerous factors show he has no claim to such status:

- **Fake Christian voter base.** Although Kildani controls four of the five quota seats allocated to Christians in the national parliament, his movement did not win these seats because of support from the Christian community. According to the authors' close examination of electoral data from 2018 and 2021, his candidates received thousands of votes from heavily Shia provinces that have only tiny Christian communities due to decades of displacement.
- **Pattern of corrupting and coopting Christian leaders.** After repeated overtures, Kildani eventually succeeded in convincing former Syriac Catholic archbishop Youhanna Boutros Moshe to stop resisting Kataib Babiliyoun's plans for establishing a base of power in the Hamdaniya district. As a result, Iraq's last Christian militia regiment, the Nineveh Plains Protection Units, was recently forced under Babiliyoun's banner.
- **Siding with Iran and its proxies.** Kildani supports an Iran-backed militia narrative that is completely foreign to Iraq's Christian community. He has long **been close to** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/normalizing-security-nineveh-plains>) top U.S.-designated terrorists, from the late Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis to current militia leader Qais al-Khazali. He has also allowed militia forces to loot Christian monasteries in the Nineveh Plains, among other abuses.

Unsurprisingly, Kildani and his supporters have been roundly rejected by Christian communities in Iraq and globally. At the Vatican, Pope Francis has refused to grant audiences to him and members of his circle (e.g., Minister of Migration and Displacement Evan Faeq Jabro). And as far back as 2017, Sako's Patriarchate **asserted** (<https://saint-adday.com/?p=16448>) that Kildani "does not represent Christians in any way. His unfortunate statements aim to create abhorrent sectarian strife."

## Kildani's Mammoth Land Grab

**K**ildani's ultimate objective is to become the sole decisionmaker regarding property that Iraqi Christians have left

behind after two decades of being persecuted, killed, or forced to flee their homes. Toward this end, he is trying to intimidate the seventy-five-year-old Sako into exile and retirement so he can coopt the Patriarch's successor. With the Christian community's political and security pillars weakened, the church is the only remaining Iraqi institution that can defend their interests.

The property in question is spread over Iraq but concentrated in Baghdad and Nineveh, with a total value in the billions. Of the two million Christians who lived in Iraq before the 2003 war, only 5-6 percent remain, and various reports (<https://arij.net/investigations/Christian-real-estate-Iraq-en/>) have extensively documented the illegal—and ongoing—confiscation of their lands and other property. Kildani's circle and Kataib Babiliyoun are viewed as the main perpetrators in forging documents to facilitate the sale of such property in Baghdad. And when Christians in the diaspora attempt to legally claim what was stolen from them, militias often threaten the lawyers acting on their behalf.

## Implications for U.S. Policy

**T**his issue has broader implications for U.S. security interests in Iraq beyond the important goal of protecting Christian leaders. Accordingly, Washington needs to act—and urge Baghdad to act as well. The following steps are most crucial in the near term:

- **Keep appealing to President Rashid.** His repeal of Decree 147 came just one day after he met with Kildani. President Rashid is an old friend of the United States and will not be happy to hear that Washington increasingly believes he and his party—the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan—are turning alarmingly toward Iran and its host of proxy militias and human rights abusers. He is clearly concerned about reputational damage, as he showed when he tried to downplay the repeal's significance (<https://ina.iq/eng/27617-rashid-to-the-charge-daffairs-of-the-vatican-embassy-the-withdrawal-of-the-decree-came-to-correct-a-constitutional-situation.html>). Moreover, he has not repealed similar decrees protecting other religions and sects, underlining that this was a targeted action in which Kildani—essentially an institutional nobody in the broader scope of Iraq's national government—told the country's president what to do. Rashid cannot avoid responsibility for this action; Washington should urge him to undo the damage. Helping Sako return to Baghdad safely and visiting him at his residence there would be a good start, since this would reinforce the government's acknowledgment of the Patriarch's religious, national, and international significance.
- **End vote-rigging of minority quota seats.** The United States should quietly encourage Iraqi leaders to ensure that election laws include a closed quota, where only members of that community can vote for the quota seats allocated to them. For instance, the Christian Endowment could issue special voting cards to prevent manipulation of their seat allocations. This issue has much wider national implications because Kildani and his Kurdish partners will likely try to dominate Christian quota seats in the KRI's next parliamentary elections in late 2023-early 2024, potentially foreshadowing similar tactics in future federal elections.
- **Leverage the U.S. religious freedom report.** When the annual State Department Report on International Religious Freedom is compiled later this year for release in May 2024, it should reflect whether the Iraqi government is appropriately protecting its Christian community. If Baghdad fails in this regard, Congress should alter its provision of foreign assistance accordingly.
- **Create a more stable base for minority religious authorities.** Iraq's parliament should be encouraged to formalize the authority of Christian religious leaders in the federal constitution so that executive actions like Decree 147 can no longer be used as leverage against them. The Ministry of Justice could quickly issue endowment deeds to the heads of all Iraqi churches, thereby reassuring everyone that the state has no plans to take over lands or properties belonging to the community.
- **Encourage Iraq's judiciary to act on legal cases against Kildani.** The Patriarch is being taken to court by Kildani, and

the judiciary is rapidly processing the case, yet attempts to bring Kildani to court over allegedly libelous comments he made about Sako have resulted in no action. This suggests that Supreme Judicial Council head Faeq Zaidan and the wider judiciary are serving militia interests and not the law. Washington should urge Zaidan to end this practice.

- **Investigate Kildani's broader network.** U.S. sanctions authorities should take a closer look at the role his circle has played in facilitating militia abuses. Those who merit particular scrutiny include his brother-in-law Nawfal Bahaa (who runs his operations in Qaraqosh) along with three of Kildani's blood brothers: Osama (the commander of Kataib Babiliyoun), Aswan (a member of parliament), and Sarmad (the former deputy minister of migration).

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