

Rayan al-Kildani Faces Election Backlash in the Months After Wedding Hall Fire

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Brief Analysis

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

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Popular anger against this self-claimed "Christian leader" has grown since the tragic September fire in the Nineveh Plains region, casting a shadow over his election hopes.

On September 26, a wedding hall fire in the Iraqi Christian town of Qaraqosh, capital of the Hamdaniya district in the Nineveh Plains, killed 134 people and set in motion an intensified struggle for control of the area. Angry local Christians believe that the owner of the wedding hall is an affiliate of U.S.-sanctioned human rights abuser Rayan al-Kildani (https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm735) and his brother Osama al-Kildani, the founder and present commander of [Kataib Babiliyoun \(/node/18006\)](#) (KB), the 50th Brigade of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). At the same time, authorities have attempted to replace district administrator Issam Behnam and six other Christian officials—a move that locals see as the Kildani brothers' bid to exploit the tragedy, excuse those truly responsible for the fire, and sideline their Christian opponents. PMF militias in the neighboring Tal Kayf district have used similar tactics to purge local Christians and replace them with Muslim officials.

Kildani and his fake-Christian militia—largely manned by southern Iraqi Muslims—may now face the same type of mass public anger that followed a previous public safety disaster, the 2019 Mosul ferry sinking. The wedding fire attracted national attention, with mourners from across the country coming to Qaraqosh to participate in mass funerals and related ceremonies, including the prime minister and the president. Various incidents from the mourning period highlight the extent of Christian frustration and refutation of KB:

- When KB-affiliated Evan Faeq Jabro, Iraq's minister of migration and displacement, tried to visit the site of the fire on September 29, she was **kicked out** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPyO0bJtIc>) by crowds **yelling** (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=335294412207435>) "traitor!" (Figure 1). In another notable incident on November 18, she was denied a meeting with Pope Francis for the second time this year when she visited Rome alongside Iraq's president. Rayan al-Kildani likewise **faked** ([/node/18302](#)) a meeting with the Pope earlier this year.
- During a mourning ceremony on September 30, residents of Qaraqosh would not allow Rayan al-Kildani or KB-affiliated parliamentarian Duraid Jamil Eshoo to enter the event site, leading to a repugnant verbal altercation. Kildani threatened to attack a



Figure 1: Kataib Babiliyoun affiliate Evan Faeq Jabro, Iraq's minister of migration and displacement, is driven out of Qaraqosh by Christian locals on September 29, 2023.

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church if he was denied entry to a related funeral, while Duraid declared, “If 100 died now, we’ll make them 200 next time, and we’ll break the bishop’s crozier on his head,” referring to the traditional staff carried by Archbishop Younan Hanno. The event was recorded on video, but authorities confiscated evidence of Kildani's statements.

- Christian anger has also been directed at the Syriac Catholic archbishop of Baghdad, Yousif Abba, who is known to be coopted by KB. When he arrived late to one of the funeral masses held in October, residents of Qaraqosh—who are traditionally deferential and respectful to clerical authorities—led chants of “traitor” in an unprecedented public show of anger. This incident was recorded on video as well, and the footage has reportedly been safeguarded from confiscation.

These instances of public anger from a traditionally quietist community—and in the face of violent intimidation no less—highlight the level of desperation that local Christians have felt amid the wedding tragedy and KB's efforts to both marginalize legitimate clergy (most notably Cardinal Louis Sako) and seize Christian properties. On November 28, Iraqi churches declared that they would not hold Christmas festivities due to the Qaraqosh fire and the Gaza war. Christians are also preparing a boycott of the December provincial elections. When Kildani's party wins the Christian seat on the Nineveh provincial council—a near-inevitability given the Christian boycott and rampant KB vote buying—local communities will have to hope that foreign commentators take note of the election's non-representative results. ❖

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