

Christmas Trees Make a Comeback in Iraq

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As the black flag of terrorism is torn down block-by-block in Mosul and town-by-town in the northern provinces of Iraq, the Christmas trees are going up. A Muslim businessman and the city of Baghdad have reportedly come together to install Iraq's tallest Christmas tree, and brightly decorated trees are also noticeable throughout the newly liberated areas of the Nineveh Plain and across

Kurdistan.

To Yassir Saad—the entrepreneur who funded the record-setting tree in Baghdad—the Christmas tree is a statement of unity with Christians and all minorities in Iraq. Saad said on Thursday that this initiative aims at “joining our Christian brothers in their holiday celebrations and helping Iraqis forget their anguish, especially the war in Mosul,” where Iraqi forces are battling the Islamic State.



The 85-foot-tall artificial tree, which has a diameter of 33 feet (10 meters), was erected in the center of an amusement park in the Iraqi capital. Saad said that the initiative cost approximately \$24,000.

“Many families in Iraq celebrate Christmas—like my wife’s family,” said Editor Ali Sada, a Shia native of Karbala who edits Daesh Daily from his home in Washington, D.C. “My wife is Sunni from Baghdad, but her family is from Mosul originally. They used to have Christmas trees in their house when she was a child. This is not a religious thing, as you know. It’s a community thing.”

According to Ernie Audino, a retired brigadier general who was embedded with the Peshmerga for a year in 2006, “Christmas trees and decorations are proudly displayed throughout the Kurdish region. During my trip to Erbil, Dahuk, Soran, Slemani and across Kurdistan, almost all the way to the Iranian border in mid-December of this year, I saw Christmas decorations everywhere I went. In Erbil, for example, I stayed at a hotel with a decorated 25 foot-tree indoors.”

“That many Kurds have gleefully adopted the Christmas tree should not be taken as an expression of a preference for one religious group over another. It’s not. Rather, it’s a reverence for life and humanity regardless of chosen faith,” Audino wrote in an op-ed for The Washington Times.

“Assyrian Christians in Syria make a point of putting up their Christmas trees and house decorations in the neighborhoods they control in Al-Hasakah, Al-Qamishli and the villages of the Khabur Valley in northeastern Syria,” said Restore Nineveh Now Director of Operations Jeff Gardner, who made the trip to northern Syria and northern Iraq just before Christmas last year. The region has been a war zone for five years, and is only a few dozen miles from the Islamic State’s capital in Raqqa. “Even in war-torn Syria, the Assyrian Christians make the streets and homes look festive,” Gardner said.

But there is a dark side belied by the bright lights of Christmas trees in Al-Hasakah, Syria and Erbil in Kurdistan. In Syria, the Assyrian Christian community and other Christian groups who once made up 10 percent of Syria's population are hunkered down in a state of siege. "The YPG Kurds, who are aligned with the PKK [the Kurdistan Workers Party], a recognized terrorist group, have declared a new country in northeastern Syria, which they call Rojava," Gardner said. "Within the bounds of this new country are all of the traditional Assyrian lands. The YPG [acronym for the Syrian Kurds' defense force] are much better armed than the Assyrian Christians, and they dictate such things as what will be allowed in schools, what checkpoints are allowed, and so forth. In fact, they lord it over the Assyrian Christians."



In Iraq, the Christian minority—which is predominately aligned with the Catholic Church, but includes many who adhere to other denominations—is struggling to recover the homes and lands that were seized by Islamic State terrorists in June 2014. Perhaps 250,000 Assyrian Christians in Iraq are still hunkered down in crowded internally displaced persons' camps surrounding Erbil and Dohuk, whereas hundreds of thousands of others have found shelter in Jordan, Syria or Turkey. The ISIS terrorists used the Christian churches in the Nineveh Plain as weapon storage depots, and Christian homes were looted and damaged.

Yonadam Kanna, the secretary-general of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, visited Christian churches liberated in Bartella in late October and reported that virtually every home will need at least \$20,000 of repair and renovation before it can again be livable. The displaced Iraqi Christians face the same grim challenge as the millions of other IDPs in Iraq: Even if their homes are still habitable, it may take months or years for the local governments to restore electricity, potable water, sanitation and reliable security from terrorists.

Iraqi Christians—nearly all who were driven out of their homeland on Aug. 6, 2014—left valuable legal documents behind, including birth certificates, diplomas, professional licenses and property deeds. Because of the Iraqi bureaucracy, Iraqis have great difficulty establishing legal rights without these documents, many of which were housed in governorate offices in ISIS-controlled Mosul.

Compounding the problem is the fact that many of their abandoned properties have been claimed by Iraqi Kurds. "The Kurdish Regional Government has been very aggressive about putting laws on the books allowing Kurds to lay claim to abandoned houses and properties," Gardner said. "Most of them are internally displaced persons, not refugees. IDPs don't have recourse to the rights that the United Nations reserves for refugees."

Chaldean Patriarch Louis Sako said on Thursday that Iraqi Christians should remain in their lands in Iraq, and he reportedly asked the Iraqi government to establish a real civil state that provides peace for all of its people.

"I agree with Patriarch Sako," Sada wrote in an email to The Philos Project. "Why would Christian Iraqis leave their homeland because of Wahhabis coming from the outside? And many Christians don't want to leave Iraq, either. Christmas season in Iraq is beautiful. This is the Iraq I love. Peaceful people from all sects living together."

No one knows how long Iraq will need to fight its way out of the nightmare of war, but those on the anti-terrorist side of the fight agree that the Christmas tree is a symbol of hope.