

# Iraqi Christians vow to stay—despite bombs: Church and state in Iraq

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Syrian Catholic Archbishop Basilios Georges Casmoussa of Mosul, Iraq, had been speaking in Bangkok, Thailand, on a mid-October day to a global gathering of Catholic media specialists about religious coexistence —despite bombings in August that struck five Iraqi churches, killing at least 12 with dozens more wounded. On the next day of the conference, participants learned that five churches in Baghdad were bombed and damaged seriously on October 16.

“There is no alternative to dialogue in a civilized, pluralistic society,” Casmoussa had said on October 15. “And religions should play an essential role in this area,” he added, saying that the heritage of religious diversity of Iraq had created a richness and dynamism.

Fortunately, no one was injured or killed in the recent attacks. But Casmoussa told Catholic News Service that he believed the groups carrying out such attacks hope to speed an exodus of Christians from the beleaguered nation. “Their strategy is to create fear among the Christians and push them out of Iraq.”

Some Iraqi church leaders contend they are determined to remain in the country. However, recent surveys indicate that many Iraqis want Islamic religious ideals employed in a new, elected government. Seeing that trend and worried about pushing for an Islamic-influenced government, Bush administration officials are reported to be suggesting strategy to U.S.-friendly political groups in Iraq on how they might counter religious candidates.

Meanwhile, reacting to the mid-October bombings, the Vatican expressed new concern about the fate of Iraqi Christian communities, who make up a few hundred thousand of the country’s 25 million people. As many as 40,000 Christians, by one estimate, are said to have left Iraq since the invasion by the U.S. and its allies in February of 2003.

Following the latest blasts, the Vatican's missionary news agency, Fides, published a dossier of information asking: "What future lies ahead for Christians in Iraq if this massacre continues?" The agency reported that leaders of the main Christian communities in Iraq—Chaldean, Assyrian, Latin-rite, Syrian, Armenian, Greek Orthodox and others—had condemned attacks on Christian or Muslim places of worship aimed at breaking a tradition of peaceful coexistence between believers of both faiths.

"Christians and Muslims have lived here side by side for more than 1,400, years and they intend to continue," the leaders vowed, saying they would not be intimidated. "We will not leave our country, we will stay here and help to build an Iraq of peace, freedom democracy and tolerance."

The Association of Muslim Scholars, a Sunni clerical group, condemned the attacks. "Islam doesn't support the ongoing terrorism," said association member Sheik Abdul Sattar Abdul-Jabbar.

The *Washington Post* has reported that a new poll, whose results were only partially made public, shows a significant percentage of Iraqis backing leaders from explicitly Islamic parties or groups when elections are held in January. The poll, financed by the U.S. government, was conducted by the Washington-based International Republican Institute (IRI), a nonprofit organization that receives federal grants to survey public opinion in Iraq.

The poll consisted of 2,000 face-to-face interviews conducted in late September and early October by an Iraqi polling firm. Pollsters interviewed Iraqis from various ethnic and religious groups.

Just over half of those surveyed agreed with the statement, "Religion and government should respect each other by not impeding on the rights, roles and responsibilities of the other," while an additional 37 percent said, "Religion has a special role to play in the government." Some 68 percent of those who said religion has a role to play in government identified that role as one in which "government officials . . . publicly embrace and employ religion in carrying out their duties."

In results not made public by IRI, the *Post* reported October 22 that the poll showed Abdel Aziz Hakim, who leads the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, garnering 80 percent name recognition among Iraqis and 51 percent support for his presence in a new government.

According to the *Post*, 47 percent favored U.S.-backed interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi for a seat in the new parliament, and only 13 percent said they thought Allawi has been “very effective” since taking office, down from 30 percent in July. Forty-six percent backed rebel Shi’ite cleric Moqtada Sadr for a seat. Citing anonymous sources, the newspaper said that “within the Bush administration, a victory by Iraq’s religious parties is viewed as the worst-case scenario.” -*Ecumenical News Service and Religion News Service*