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Chaldean Patriarch Louis Sako greets parishioners after a mass following his return from nine months of self-imposed exile in northern Iraq's Kurdish region, in Baghdad, Iraq, Friday April 12, 2024. (AP/Ali Jabar)

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Baghdad — April 12, 2024

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A prominent Iraqi Christian religious leader who left Baghdad amid a political dispute last year returned to the capital this week at the invitation of the country's prime minister after nine months of self-imposed exile in northern Iraq's Kurdish region.

Cardinal Louis Sako was welcomed warmly by a church packed with members of the country's Christian minority as he led his first mass in Baghdad on Friday after returning the day before.

Sako had withdrawn from his headquarters in Baghdad to the Kurdish regional capital, Irbil, last July after Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid revoked a decree recognizing his position as patriarch of the Chaldeans, Iraq's largest Christian denomination and one of the Catholic Church's eastern rites.

The Iraqi president downplayed his revocation of Sako's recognition as bureaucratic housekeeping, claiming it did not diminish the patriarch's legal or religious status, but Sako called it an affront to the church and said he would not return to Baghdad until his recognition was reinstated.

His departure added to the feeling of helplessness among many Iraqi Christians, who often feel politically sidelined and who had been targeted violently first by al-Qaida and then by the Islamic State militant group. A 2021 visit by Pope Francis provided a glimmer of hope that quickly faded. Many of the Christian villages destroyed as IS rampaged across the country remain in ruins, their former inhabitants scattered.

The number of Christians in Iraq today is estimated at 150,000, compared with 1.5 million in 2003. Iraq's total population is more than 40 million.

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At the time of his departure, Sako blamed a campaign against him by Rayan al-Kildani, a fellow Chaldean Christian who is head of the Babylon Movement political party and founder of a militia called the Babylon Brigades that fought against IS and

still patrols much of the Nineveh plains. The group is affiliated with the Popular Mobilization Forces, a collection of primarily Shiite, Iran-backed militias.

Sako accused al-Kildani of angling to take over Christian endowments and properties, which Al-Kildani denied while making similar allegations about Sako.

Sako said Friday that Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani had formally invited him to return. He thanked al-Sudani for the overture and for his "intention to solve the problem in an appropriate manner and restore dignity to the Chaldean Church" and said God had given him "strength and wisdom all through this difficult period."

Iraqi Christians "do not accept being a source of tensions," Sako said. Rather, "Christians, who have become a numerical minority, should be a source of light, love and comprehensive brotherhood, as taught by Jesus Christ," he said.

The patriarch said he would return to Irbil to settle some logistical matters before returning permanently to Baghdad.

Al-Sudani's office said in a statement that in a meeting with Sako upon his return Thursday, he had expressed "the importance of his presence and role, stressing the government's keenness to consolidate the principle of coexistence and brotherhood across the spectrum of Iraqi society."