

Photos: Pope Francis Arrives In Iraq, Marking The Nation's First Papal Visit

Topline: Pope Francis arrived in Baghdad on Friday—the first ever papal visit to Iraq—despite the Covid pandemic and ongoing violence in a country with a dwindling Christian population.



ROME, ITALY - MARCH 05: Pope Francis waves as he departs for his trip to Iraq from Leonardo Da Vinci airport on March 05, 2021 in Rome, Italy. Pope Francis will start the historic first ever papal visit to Iraq. In his first foreign trip since the start of the pandemic Pope Francis will visit Baghdad, Najaf, Erbil and the cities of Qaraqosh and Mosul, which were heavily destroyed by ISIS. Although the trip is seen as an act of solidarity, the Vatican has been forced to defend the decision to go ahead with the papal visit amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, as Iraq is currently seeing a spike in infection rates as it faces a deadly second wave of the virus. (Photo by Franco Origlia/Getty Images)

KEY FACTS

Pope Francis, 84, arrived in Baghdad at 2 pm local time, along with his security detail, aides and about 75 journalists, for the three-day trip.

To protect the pontiff, the Iraq government has deployed thousands of security personnel, a few days after the al-Asad airbase in western Iraq which hosts U.S. and coalition troops was targeted by at least 10 rocket attacks by Iran-backed militias.

The Pope has not travelled outside Italy since November 2019, when he visited Thailand and Japan.

Francis will also visit Erbil in the autonomous northern region of Iraqi Kurdistan, which has suffered rocket attacks recently.



BAGHDAD, IRAQ - MARCH 05: Pope Francis (C) is welcomed by Iraqi President Barham Salih (R) with an official ceremony at Presidential Palace in Baghdad, Iraq on March 05, 2021. (Photo by Murtadha Al Sudani/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)



BAGHDAD, IRAQ - MARCH 05: Pope Francis (L) is welcomed by Iraqi President Barham Salih (R) with an official ceremony at Presidential Palace in Baghdad, Iraq on March 05, 2021. (Photo by Murtadha Al Sudani/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)



BAGHDAD, IRAQ - MARCH 05: Pope Francis is welcomed by Iraqi President Barham Salih with an official ceremony at Presidential Palace in Baghdad, Iraq on March 05, 2021. (Photo by Murtadha Al Sudani/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)



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CRUCIAL QUOTE

“This is an emblematic trip and it is a duty towards a land [Iraq] that has been martyred for so many years,” Francis said.

KEY BACKGROUND

Iraq’s president Barham Salih originally invited Francis to visit in July 2019 in hopes that it would help heal the country after decades of violence. Francis is expected to visit four cities in Iraq, including the southern city of Najaf, the holiest city for Shi’ites, and the northern city of Mosul, a former stronghold of the Sunni Muslim Islamic State militant group. He will perform mass at a church in Baghdad and meet senior Shi’ite Muslim cleric, 90-year-old Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, an influential figure in Iraq’s Shi’ite community who rarely meets with foreign dignitaries. Francis will also visit Ur, near the Euphrates River, the birthplace of the prophet Abraham, the patriarch of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. While Iraq has witnessed some degree of security since the defeat of the Islamic State caliphate in 2017, rocket attacks by militia groups linked to Iran still target U.S. forces in the country. Moreover, Islamic State militants have not completely disappeared — in January, the Sunni militant group is believed to have carried out suicide bomb attacks in central Baghdad, killing 32 people and injuring 100. On Friday, the U.S. Embassy in Iraq warned American citizens in the country: “Attacks may occur with little or no warning, impacting airports, tourist locations, transportation hubs, markets/shopping malls, and local government facilities.”

TANGENT

Christians in Iraq have faced violence from Islamic militants - in 2010 a massacre at a Syrian Catholic church in Baghdad killed more than 50 people. The

country's ancient Christian community, one of the oldest in the world, is now estimated to number about 250,000, down from a peak of 1.5 million people during the final years of Saddam Hussein's regime. Many Christians fled Iraq after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion removed Saddam. Subsequently, thousands of Christians were displaced when Islamic State militants took control of northern Iraq in 2014, destroying many churches.

SURPRISING FACT

While Francis is the first pope to officially visit Iraq, previous planned papal trips to the country - by John Paul II and Benedict XVI - were cancelled due to fears of violence.

CHIEF CRITICS

While Francis received a Covid vaccine in mid-January (and his staff has been inoculated), there are concerns about the Pope's visit during the pandemic, noting his appearance could attract large crowds in a country where access to vaccines are difficult. The Pope's predecessor, Benedict XVI, expressed his concerns about Francis making the trip now, telling Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera the journey to Iraq might be "dangerous." The Vatican has responded that Francis will practice social distancing in Iraq and maintain safety standards. On Tuesday, Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni told reporters: "No more than a few hundred people, [socially] distanced" will gather to see the Pope at a given time in Iraq.

Source:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/palashghosh/2021/03/05/photos-pope-francis-arrives-in-iraq-marking-the-nations-first-papal-visit/?sh=48a91d27231f>

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