

# Iraqi bishops reject annexing Christian areas by Kurds

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Iraqi bishops have urged their hard-pressed Christian communities to reject moves to annex their areas to the Kurdish autonomous regions.

The bishops made the statement following a meeting with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in which they expressed their fears for the fate of Christian existence in Iraq particularly in the northern city of Mosul and its suburbs.

The Province of Nineveh, of which Mosul is the capital, currently includes the largest remaining concentration of Christians in Iraq whose numbers have dwindled drastically since the 2003 U.S. invasion.

Asked whether they would prefer Christians to be part of the semi-independent Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq, Bishop Shlemoun Wardooni, the second highest ranking Christian cleric in Iraq, said:

“We do not want to be part of this (Kurdish enclave). We always want to be continuously associated with the central government. We want to live amid our brethren all over the country.”

The comments are a blow to Kurdish moves to add the string of strategically situated Christian villages in the Nineveh plateau to their region.

The Kurds have occupied most of Christian areas and have deployed their militias inside Mosul.

Reports say more than half of Christians living in Mosul have fled in the past few weeks, some going to Syria and some seeking refuge in the remaining Christian monasteries and villages east and north of the city.

It is not clear who is behind the latest campaign of intimidation in which at least 14 Christians have been killed.

In their rush to flee, families have left behind almost everything including personal belongings.

The government has vindicated al-Qaeda and other anti-U.S. groups.

Maliki has blamed what he described as “a political plan aimed at exploiting the Christians.”

Analysts say Maliki was referring to Kurds who openly consider Christians and their areas as part of their territory.

The Kurds have denied the accusations.

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