

WorldNetDaily

## Iraqi government sponsors Christmas celebration

Picture of Jesus floats overhead while official declares Iraqis 'all Christian'

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Christians, the first people of Iraq, have faced persecution, threats, assassination and mass extermination in recent years. But to celebrate Christmas 2008, the government formally recognized the Christian faith by sponsoring a Baghdad city-center party featuring a huge poster of Jesus suspended by a balloon and an artist creating oil paintings representing Jesus.

According to a report from CNN, the agency's correspondent was told by Interior Ministry spokesman Abdul Karim Khalaf, "All Iraqis are Christian today!"

Ken Joseph Jr. of [the Assyrian Christians](#) told WND walking through the streets of Washington, D.C., provides a visitor with no link between the decorations and festivities of the holiday time and the birth of Jesus.

*(Story continues below)*

Yet in Baghdad, "the government sponsored a special Christmas celebration for the Christians. The main focus was the huge picture of Jesus," he said.

"It's ironic that this was part of our whole struggle. We have fantastic support from the Iraqi side. They love the Christians," he said.

At Hot Air, Ed Morrissey wrote, "Can anyone imagine this celebration taking place with government support in any other Arab nation — even those normally described as 'moderate'? Not only does this celebration include the standard secular imagery of Santa Claus, they actually put a picture of Jesus Christ on a hot-air balloon. That's a big deal in a Muslim nation, where they object strenuously (and often violently) to iconography. Suggesting that Iraqis are 'all Christians' on any day would get a Muslim fired or worse anyplace else in the region."

He continued, "This is what victory looks like. Iraq has settled into what Condoleezza Rice called a 'multi-confessional' society, one that has begun to promote a religious tolerance that is unlike anything seen in that region in decades, if not centuries or ever."

The CNN report said the celebration featured tables loaded with cookies and cakes, with Santa balloons hanging from trees.

It was held at a public park in eastern Baghdad and included a Christmas tree and military band, which played martial music instead of Christmas carols, the report said.

Khalaf told the CNN correspondent Iraq lost thousands of people to sectarian and ethnic violence.

"Now that we have crossed that hurdle and destroyed the incubators of terrorism," he told the network,

"and the security situation is good, we have to go back and strengthen community ties."

The report cited the presence of Father Saad Sirop Hanna, a Chaldean Christian priest. He recalled the 28 days he was held by kidnappers in 2006, because of his Christianity.

"We are just attesting that things are changing in Baghdad, slowly, but we hope that this change actually is real. We will wait for the future to tell us the truth about this," he said.

Baghdad is not the only Iraqi city to celebrate, either. According to AsiaNews, Christians in Kirkuk are awaiting a return of midnight Mass, an institution banished during years of conflict and violence.

The report said while the event hasn't yet been returned to the traditional midnight hour – it's held these days at 5:30 in the afternoon – the assembly itself is a promise to the Christian community.

Joseph said the Christian community in Iraq dates to the same time period the apostles were spreading their faith. In fact, he said, the people of the original Assyrian Christian community were among the first to send missionaries to other nations.

To this day, many Assyrian Christians still speak Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus. They are also the people of ancient Nineveh, the city visited by the biblical prophet Jonah that lies today near the modern city of Mosul, Iraq.