



26 May 2016

Statement by the Assyrian Confederation of Europe:

## **Heads of churches must stop acting as political figures**

The Assyrian Confederation of Europe is concerned by recent statements made by Mar Louis Sako, Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, concerning Assyrian security forces in Iraq.

In a widely quoted interview with the Vatican Radio on May 20<sup>th</sup>, Patriarch Sako stated his opposition to the existence of an Assyrian military force in the Nineveh Plain.

There is broad agreement between Assyrian organisations in Iraq and the diaspora that Assyrians must actively participate in the military campaign to liberate the Nineveh plain and secure the area after the liberation. The Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU), which is tasked with that mandate, is officially recognised and supported by the Iraqi government, in direct contradiction to the Patriarch's claims.

The importance of Assyrian-led forces was made abundantly clear when the Kurdish Peshmerga disarmed then abandoned the Assyrians of the Nineveh Plain to genocide at the hands of ISIS. Mar Sako's urging of the United States to support the Peshmerga instead of Assyrian forces is a clear illustration of how utterly at odds his ideas are with the real needs of Assyrians in Iraq. Assyrian-led military participation is essential if displaced Assyrians are to return to Nineveh, as Patriarch Sako claims that he wishes them to.

We find Mar Sako's description of the Assyrians participating in the liberation and defence of Nineveh, many of whom are Chaldean Catholics, as "simple people in desperate need of a salary" particularly distasteful. The NPU is a legitimate military expression of the desire of Assyrians to fight for their homeland. It is not a "sectarian militia", as Mar Sako alleges, and aims to fight alongside other legitimate forces and contribute to the survival of a multi-ethnic Iraq. The NPU has already participated successfully in battles against ISIS and is set to play an increasingly important role in the Nineveh Plain.

Patriarch Sako has on several occasions expressed a desire to separate religion from state in Iraq. It is therefore embarrassingly inconsistent of him to continue to interfere in the political affairs of his people. We urge Louis Sako not to confuse his role as a religious figure with that of a political leader, just as political and secular leaders refrain from passing comment on theology or ecclesiastical affairs.

The Assyrian Confederation of Europe, which is made up of national federations supported by tens of thousands of Assyrians, including Assyrians from the Chaldean church, calls upon the international community:

To support the Nineveh Plain Protection Units with arms, training and other resources;

To disregard political statements made by religious figures within our nation, as they are not democratically elected by the people and do not represent the Assyrian people politically.