

# Iraqi prelate defends attacks against Israel

By John Thavis  
Catholic News Service

ROME — Patriarch Raphael I Bidawid, the 68-year-old leader of the Iraqi Chaldean Catholic Church, spent the war's first week defending Iraq to Pope John Paul II, Vatican officials and anyone else who would listen.

"He's a gentleman who should not have been treated with insults," the prelate maintained of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, a personal friend.

Although on a "peace" mission with other Iraqi Christians, the patriarch is no pacifist. A self-described patriot, he was one of few people to defend Iraq's missile attacks against Israel, and he said the eventual use of chemical weapons by Saddam would be justified.

"It's war," he said with a shrug during an interview at an Iraqi convent on the outskirts of Rome. He was seated beneath a dated picture of a smiling Saddam, hung opposite a photo of the pope.

Patriarch Raphael's long career offers many clues to his pragmatic attitude toward war and his loyalty to Saddam. In particular, he is grateful to Iraq's secular Ba'ath Party, which has protected the rights of the minority Catholic Church in a region where Islamic fundamentalism is growing.

In between pastoral duties, the patriarch has experienced several armed conflicts close-up including World War II, Lebanon's civil war, the Kurdish uprising in Iraq, the Iran-Iraq war and, now, the Persian Gulf war.

"I've spent my whole life in or around war," he said with a chuckle.

One of 13 children in a Catholic family from Mosul, in northern Iraq near the ancient site of Nineveh, he came to Rome in 1936 to study for the priesthood. Over the next 11 years, he saw the rise of fascism, the Nazi occupation of Rome and the Allied liberation. When the young priest left Italy in 1947, he had degrees in philosophy, theology and canon law — as well as an unromantic view of warfare.

When asked recently about Iraqi atrocities in Kuwait, the patriarch replied

with a litany of cruelties he says were committed by both sides during the Italian campaign in the mid-1940s. Some American soldiers may have handed out candy and cigarettes, but others raped nuns, he claimed.

In 1957, he was elected bishop of Amadiyah, in Iraq's Kurdistan region, where local Kurds were engaged in a struggle for autonomy.

He observed that war for nine years, but had little sympathy for the rebels and no criticism for the Iraqi government for reported atrocities — including the use of poison gas on Kurdish villages.

"What kind of government would not put down an internal revolt?" he asked.

In 1966, he was transferred to head the small Chaldean community in Beirut, where over the years he saw street skirmishes turn into full-fledged civil war. Today, his voice rises when he talks about how the West allowed Syrian troops to march into Lebanon but condemned Iraq's "reclaiming" of Kuwait — proof that a double standard is being used, he said.

## War

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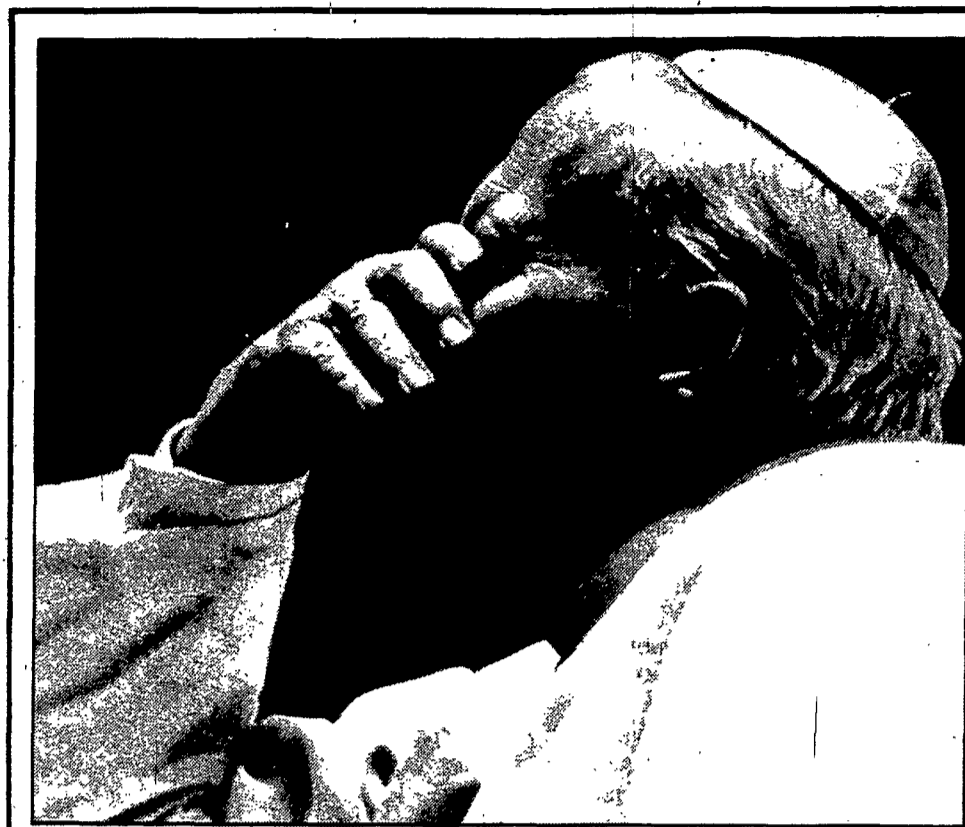
Father Boji also said Iraqi-Americans feared they were being branded as terrorists because of their ethnic background. The U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms had raided several homes in the Detroit area Jan. 16 on suspicion Iraqi-Americans were making explosive.

Detroit and surrounding communities have the largest Arab-American population in the country.

European bishops responded to the commencement of hostilities with condemnation.

In a joint statement, the French, German and Swiss bishops called it "a defeat for the community of nations in its desire to re-establish justice and peace through political means."

They also warned that the war could



AP/Wide World Photos  
**PENSIVE PONTIFF** — Pope John Paul II prays somberly during his weekly general audience at the Vatican Jan. 16. Referring to the U.S.-Iraqi confrontation in the Persian Gulf, the pope said the war is "an adventure with no return" and asked the several thousand faithful in attendance to offer special prayers for peace.

arouse racism. It could "reawaken uncontrolled animosities among peoples, among races and among followers of different religions," they said.

The statement was reported by Vatican Radio Jan. 17.

In his months of increasing tension prior to the outbreak of the Gulf war, European religious leaders generally urged negotiations over armed force.

In his letters to Bush and Saddam, dated the day before U.S., British, French, Italian, Saudi and Kuwaiti aircraft began striking Iraq, Pope John Paul urged the U.S. to pursue diplomacy and urged Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait.

He told Bush that war "is not likely" to bring an adequate solution to international problems.

The pope urged Saddam to consider the "tragic consequences" of war for his country and said he prayed the Iraqi president would "make a generous gesture which will avoid war."

Pope John Paul expressed his frustration publicly after the fighting commenced. In a speech to church officials Jan. 17, he said "I have done everything humanly possible to avert a tragedy."

Once the battle was joined, Saddam was given staunch support by Patriarch Raphael, the Chaldean Catholic leader.

The patriarch led a delegation of top-ranking Iraqi Christians to Rome to promote peace and explain the Iraqi version of the war.

In a Jan. 18 interview with Catholic News Service, Patriarch Raphael also defended Iraqi missile attacks on Israeli cities earlier that day.

"This is very, very legitimate," he said. "This entire war has been planned by Israel." In a subsequent interview, he elaborated on his defense of Saddam's tactics, praising the Iraqi leader as generous and gentlemanly.

Another Middle Eastern Catholic prelate expressed concern that the war would widen.

Latin-rite Patriarch Michel Sabbah of Jerusalem said the attacks on Israel "show that the entire region is one region, that all its problems are one."

"I hope the international community will learn a lesson from this war," said the patriarch, who is the first Arab to head the ancient see, "that it should find new and peaceful solutions to problems."

Despite the bombings near the capital of Baghdad, plans are not being made to withdraw Archbishop Marian Oles, Vatican pro-nuncio to Iraq, Vatican officials said.

"An archbishop's responsibility is to stay at his post" in troubled times, said one official after the U.S.-led coalition began massive air raids against Iraqi facilities early Jan. 17.

The decision to keep Archbishop Oles was made prior to the start of the bombing and has not changed, Vatican officials said after the bombing.

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