

Despite deportations, Iraqi Christians in Michigan are backing Trump

Opposition to abortion and perception of advocacy for Christian 'religious freedom' drives Trump support in Chaldean community



Weam Namou, executive director of Chaldean Cultural Center, says community's story is one of survival (MEE/Ali Harb)

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In spite of a deportation campaign that targeted Iraqi Christians during President Donald Trump's first term, ripping families apart and sparking outrage and confusion, the majority of Michigan's Chaldean community appears to be sticking by its support for the incumbent.

Chaldean activists cite Trump's opposition to abortion, lower taxes and embrace of "religious freedom" for Christians as the main drivers for his support among Chaldeans.

Sam Yono, a Chaldean community advocate, said the majority of Iraqi Christians are pro-Trump because of their "conservative values and family norms and morals".

"This is a guy who has stood up for the faith - no matter what religion you belong to," Yono, a veteran activist who has served on multiple advocacy groups, told MEE.

The consistent support for Trump may have seemed unthinkable two years ago at the height of the deportation campaign.

The case of Jimmy Aldaoud

Last year, Jimmy Aldaoud, crouched on a sidewalk in front of a shuttered store in Baghdad, looked into the camera and complained that he had been deported from Michigan to a country he had never visited.

"I don't understand the language. I'm sleeping in the street," Aldaoud said, looking exhausted and disheveled in a [video](#) that was posted on social media.

'Many people also support the president on the economy because the vast majority of Chaldeans are entrepreneurs'

- Martin Manna, Chaldean Chamber of Commerce

"I'm diabetic. I take insulin shots. I've been throwing up, sleeping in the street, trying to find something to eat. I've got nothing over here."

A few days later, he was found dead.

Aldaoud, 41 at the time of his death, had lived in Michigan since he was six months old. He had struggled with mental illness throughout his life - ailments that prompted minor run-ins with the law, which in turn caused him to lose his legal status before applying for US citizenship.

He and other deported Chaldeans had been living in the US for years, also shielded by Baghdad's refusal to accept deportees sent from America.

Then Trump came to power. Shortly after taking office in 2017, the president cut a deal with Baghdad that removed Iraq from a travel ban on several Muslim-majority countries in exchange for the Iraqi government agreeing to start taking deportees.

As a result, immigration authorities began rounding up hundreds of Iraqis across the country, including dozens of Chaldeans in Michigan. Aldaoud's case appeared to confirm the fears that deporting Iraqi Christians to Iraq was akin to a "death sentence".

Fast forward to 2020, the president is reaching out to Michigan's Iraqi Christians and seeking their votes - and according to community advocates most Chaldeans are backing Trump.

'Man of peace'

Yono described the president as a "man of peace", praising the recent normalisation deals between Israel and Arab countries.

"We are calling more than anything for a peaceful resolution between Israel and Palestine, so we'd have a peaceful Middle East, so we can go back and visit our homeland regardless of where we come from."

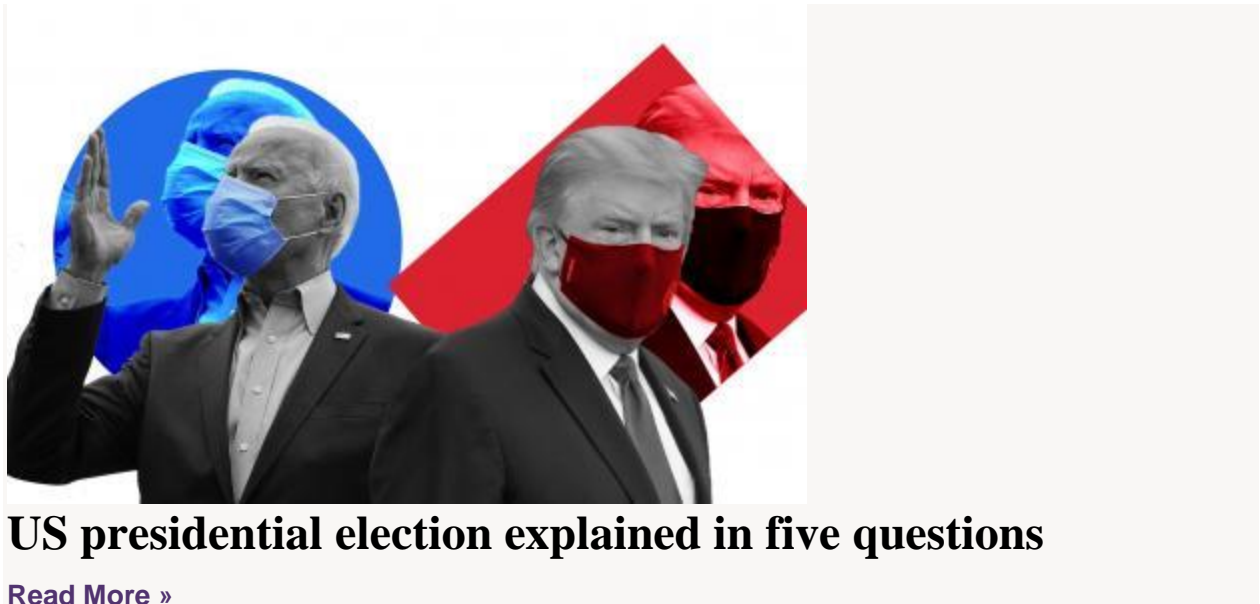
Iraqi Christians faced systematic attacks from armed groups after the 2003 US-led invasion, with the Islamic State (IS) group displacing thousands of people and targeting churches across the country.

IS captured swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria in 2014, declaring a "caliphate" in which they enforced a brutal interpretation of Islamic law, destroyed churches and launched and inspired attacks around the world.

Many Chaldeans hold the administration of then-President Barack Obama, with Joe Biden serving as vice president, responsible for the rise of IS.

"We are sick and tired of what happened with the previous administration - bringing Daesh into our villages, into our homeland in northern Iraq," Yono said, using an Arabic acronym for IS.

Chaldeans and Assyrians are Iraqi Christians native to northern Iraq. The Chaldeans are Catholic, but the Assyrians, as a religious sect, follow the Eastern Orthodox Church.



Most Chaldean advocates in Michigan do not consider themselves Arab, but rather as a distinct ethnic group. Some community members identify as Assyrian ethnically and Chaldean Catholic religiously.

While they speak a version of Aramaic, most Iraqi-born Chaldeans also speak Arabic, which they also use for written announcements. In the northern Detroit suburb of Sterling Heights, home to a large Iraqi-Christian community, for example, businesses owned by Iraqi Christians display Arabic signs.

According to the [Chalean Chamber of Commerce](#), Michigan is home to 160,000 Iraqi Christians - one of the largest Chaldean/Assyrian communities in the world.

In the previous election cycle, Trump won the state by fewer than 11,000 votes. That thin margin highlighted the importance of minority voting blocs, including Chaldeans who had favoured the Republican candidate.

Early in 2020, Trump promised to protect the state's "wonderful" Chaldean community, but it is not clear how and if that promise has translated into policy.

Community advocates note that the campaign of arrests had stopped, possibly because everyone at risk has already been detained with cases pending in court. Meanwhile, immigration judges are still looking at the appeals of those whose status is being challenged on a case-to-case basis.

Yono said he is "confident" that the issue of deportations will be addressed in Trump's second term.

"The president promised, he promised, mentioning the word 'Chaldean' and that he will be finding a resolution to this issue."

Embracing Trump

Martin Manna, president of the Chaldean American Chamber of Commerce and Chaldean Community Foundation, said Iraqi Christians, like all Americans, are looking at the economy and health care as their top issues this election.

But they also have their own priorities, including the protection of Christians in Iraq and the broader Middle East as well as immigration policy.

Manna lauded the Trump campaign's specific outreach to Iraqi Christians.

"Donald Trump Jr recently met with the community; Eric Trump just last week met with the community. I personally met with Vice President Pence more than once, so they're really involved and engaged in the community," he told MEE.



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"And most of the discussions have been around what transpired as far as the deportations and how we could change their policy on immigration and deportation."

Democrats are also pushing for the Iraqi Christian vote. Earlier this month, the Biden campaign launched a [Chaldean advisory council](#) in Michigan with prominent activists and lawyers from the community.

But according to Manna, Democrats will not have an easy time making inroads with Chaldean voters. He said Iraqi Christians felt frustrated by Obama's inability to prioritise religious freedom at home and abroad.

"For that reason, I think many people gravitated towards Donald Trump. Now we're seeing an excellent policy from our perspective as it relates to religious freedom and protecting minorities in the Middle East and the work that they've been doing," Manna said.

"Many people also support the president on the economy because the vast majority of Chaldeans are entrepreneurs."

Manna said the community also leans Republican because of conservative values, including opposition to abortion. "We are Catholic first; you know. it's all about faith and family within the community."

In a letter to Iraqi Christians early in October, Chaldean Bishop Francis Kalabat urged participation in the election and warned against backing candidates who support women's right to get an abortion.

"In good conscience, we cannot support candidates who do not view human life as sacred. We stand against candidates who support unjust wars, torture, the killing of innocent civilians, terrorism, abortion, infanticide, and assisted suicide," [Kalabat wrote](#).

Ranna Abro, a teacher and humanitarian worker, said that Iraqi Christians had "experienced unspeakable horrors" in their homeland under the administrations of Barack Obama and George W Bush, calling for "effective action" to protect religious minorities.

"Today, what remains of our community in Iraq faces threats from all directions," Abro told MEE. "As Middle Easterners, we know that talk is cheap... Every single time that other people fight in Iraq, Syria or Turkey, it's our community that becomes marginalised. Our interest in foreign policy is survival."

Trump's outreach

Weam Namou, executive director of the Chaldean Cultural Center, which is home to a museum that celebrates Iraqi Christians' history both in Iraq and the United States, said the community is largely pro-Trump for a myriad of domestic and foreign policy positions.

Echoing Manna, she cited the perception that Trump was better for Christians in the Middle East, as well as on issues including abortion and the economy. Many Iraqi Christians, Namou added, favour the president's restrictions on Muslim immigration to the US.

"There have been many [Chaldeans], especially since 2014, that automatically associate Islam with extremism," she told MEE.

Namou added that Trump's specific outreach efforts to Chaldeans are effective. She explained that as a Christian Middle Eastern minority, many in the community feel left out of the Democratic push in support of Muslims against Trump's rhetoric.



'We don't have much of a choice': Florida's Muslim voters disenfranchised by both parties

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She said as a "minority within a minority within a minority", Chaldeans sometimes "feel lost" in the political discourse, so they are excited to be acknowledged by Trump.

"When the president of the United States comes along, and he is saying our name and repeating it and then sending his son and having him meet with our leaders, all of these are strategic moves. He's really trying to push, knowing the value of Michigan."

Most recently, Trump endorsed Iraqi Christian Republican candidate [Eric Esshaki](#), nodding to his Chaldean heritage in a [Twitter post](#) that was shared by many Chaldean-focused social media with cheerful comments.

Namou said while the Chaldeans came together to push against the deportation campaign, the president's immigration policies did not "sway them on a large scale from supporting Trump", other than perhaps the families directly affected by the crackdown.

The Chaldean/Assyrian story is one of survival, Namou added. Despite their numbers' dwindling in Iraq, they have persevered and built a vibrant community in Michigan.

The Chaldean museum displays ancient artifacts - some replicas and a few originals - from Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilisation. A painting of a lion-like mythical creature from Babylon's Ishtar gate hangs over the museum's entrance.

Exhibits also walk visitors through Iraqi Christians' journey to the US, where they were attracted to Michigan by the auto industry and the existing Arab community at the turn of the past century, before starting to open their own grocery stores across the state.

Chaldean-Muslim relations

Still, the election highlights the schism between Chaldeans and Muslims in Michigan. In neighbouring Dearborn, Arab Americans who are largely Muslim have overwhelmingly favoured Democrats in recent elections, and are expected to vote for Biden in the presidential race.

In 2014, Chaldean activists [led the opposition](#) against a new mosque in Sterling Heights. And this year, as in 2016, Chaldeans are backing Trump, who has espoused anti-Muslim rhetoric.

"We don't ever condone that type of behaviour by the president, nor would we ever support rhetoric against any group, including Muslims," he told MEE. "We've lived side by side for how many hundreds of years? But it goes both ways."

Manna said despite support for Trump, Chaldeans enjoy good relations with their Arab and Muslim neighbours. Still, he added that it's important to understand that Christians have been "victimised by Muslims in Iraq".

'The Chaldeans are working hard, and the Muslim community is working hard; and they're both working in different directions'
- Weam Namou, Chaldean Cultural Center

Manna said he is always calling for dialogue between the largely Muslim Arab community in Michigan and Chaldeans; moreover, Iraqi Americans of all faiths often work together on their common issues.

"I think there are instigators in both communities, and it's very upsetting. But by far the overwhelming majority of Arabs and Chaldeans in this region get along; they respect each other."

Namou, who is also a published author and currently [writing](#) about the election, said Muslims and Chaldeans in Michigan are two voting blocs acting like counterweights to each other.

"The Chaldeans are working hard, and the Muslim community is working hard; and they're both working in different directions," she told MEE. "Even though they're not against each other, they're totally against each other's candidates."

For his part, Yono faulted Arab and Muslim advocates for taking an antagonistic stance against Trump, calling on them to engage the administration, saying that both

Arabs and Chaldeans had worked jointly with previous presidents to advance the agendas of their communities.

"This president, his door is wide open to anyone and everyone," Yono said. "He's said he loves the Muslims. But then again whether it's a Muslim or a Christian or a Chaldean, you need to come to the United States in a legal fashion - not to come in here and cause problems, not to come in here and be illegal and be a burden on the government."

'Community within a community'

With early voting already underway, Democrats are still not giving up on the Chaldean vote.

Courtney Gabbara, a lawyer who sits on Biden's Chaldean advisory council, said Iraqi Christian Democrats are building a "community within a community".

While she acknowledged that the majority of Iraqi Christians support Trump, she said it was surprising how many Chaldeans support Biden.

The advisory council was started by local activists before it was recognised by the Biden campaign.

"It inspired us - regardless of what happens - to build off of this momentum, and continue to reach out to Chaldean and Assyrian Democrats not just in Michigan but across the country," Gabbara said.

'I don't know a single Chaldean person who would ever tolerate the kinds of behaviour our current president demonstrates in real life'

- Courtney Gabbara, Biden Chaldean advisory council

She added that many Chaldeans favour Trump for his socially conservative stances as well as the notion that Republican policies are better for small businesses. But she expressed bewilderment at the fact that the president's immigration policies have not turned more Iraqi Christians against him.

"All of our families were vulnerable during that sweep in some way, shape or form," she said.

"You would think that something like this would have felt like a stab in the back for community members who voted for Trump; you would have thought that they would feel betrayed or abandoned."

A consistent topic that many devout Christian Trump supporters cite to push back against criticism of his administration is his opposition to abortion.

Gabbara said while abortion is a difficult subject to approach, Catholicism preaches love and forgiveness.

"How can we make decisions for people who are struggling with real difficult life choices; nobody gets an abortion for fun," she said.

'They would just be so ashamed'

Gabbara also noted that Christian faith stresses broader values of compassion that are in contradiction with everything that Trump stands for.

"I don't know a single Chaldean person who would ever tolerate the kinds of behaviour our current president demonstrates in real life," Gabbara said. "If it was

their son or their daughter behaving like that in front of them or in public, they would just be so ashamed and embarrassed."

Over the years, Trump has [bragged](#) about grabbing women's genitals, [rebuked immigrants](#) and [people of colour](#), [paid off](#) a porn star to conceal an alleged affair, mocked a reporter's [disability](#) and vowed to impose a [ban on all Muslims](#) entering the United States.

The advisory council has been using social media and hosting virtual events to reach out to voters.



Jimmy Aldaoud's death confirms worst fears about Trump's deportations

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On 21 October, the campaign held a webinar titled "Chaldean/Assyrian American Women GOTV Rally" where Iraqi Christian activists addressed issues that matter to the community with top Democratic officials in Michigan, including Governor Gretchen Whitmer.

At the event, Congresswoman Haley Stevens said a Biden administration would lean on the Chaldean community for "leadership and advice" when it comes to

entrepreneurship, all while providing more access to capital for small-business owners.

"The business entrepreneurship coming out of this region in southeastern Michigan is really what's going to push us out of some of this economic choppiness," she said.

For her part, Congresswoman Brenda Lawrence, who represents parts of Detroit and its northern suburbs addressed a question on abortion.

"I was blessed by God to have two pregnancies, which resulted in two beautiful children," she said. "But I was never a victim of rape; I was never a victim of incest; I never had to look my husband in the eye and say: 'It's my life or the baby.' But if I or any woman had those situations, I feel strongly that she should have the right to make that decision."

Some Chaldeans are also pushing back against the perception that Republican policies are better for the economy.

Longing for stability

Nabil Nona, who owns an insurance company that also provides translation and immigration services, stressed the importance of political and social "stability" to achieve a healthy economy.

He said Trump's presidency has caused turmoil across the country that has affected the Chaldean community and its businesses.

"The key to a successful economy is stability," Nona told MEE. "You can't have a great stock market one day; then it crashes the next day. And then the third day, you don't know what's going on with immigration; the fourth day, you don't know if we are going to war with North Korea or Iran."



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Nona also cited the effects of Trump's handling of the coronavirus on the country and the community. "Then we have to deal with a pandemic that has cost more than 200,000 American lives in less than 8 months because it was mishandled by the current administration. These are some of the things people were and are experiencing and they're unfortunate."

He added that many in the Chaldean community may be drawn to Trump's showmanship, but his chaotic approach to policy has not benefited anyone - the least of all Iraqi-Christian immigrants who have faced a deportation campaign over the past three years.

"Biden is a good candidate to bring back stability," Nano said. "And then we can actually just go on with our lives without wondering what's going to happen next."

Asked whether his views, which appear to be at odds with most of his fellow Chaldeans, have caused issues in his personal relationships, Nona said the extreme political polarisation has not spared any community.

"This has caused friction in every single family. You can't have a civil discussion anymore," Nona said.

"There are brothers who are against each other now because one supports Trump and one doesn't. It didn't used to be like this. There was always mutual respect where we could disagree but didn't have to hate each other; we didn't have to threaten each other."

"Trump comes into power, and he is just hating on everyone who opposes him, and in turn his supporters do the same."