

# **International Travel Report**

**Iraq (Kurdistan Region)**

**Trip to Erbil – 2025 Kurdistan National Prayer Breakfast**

**20 – 26 April 2025**

**Electorate Business**

**The Hon. Enver Erdogan MP**

## Reason for Travel

The largest Iraqi population in Victoria resides in Melbourne's northern suburbs, which I am proud to represent in the Victorian Legislative Council as the Member for Northern Metropolitan Region.

I travelled to Erbil, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, from 21 to 25 April 2025 to attend the inaugural *Kurdistan National Prayer Breakfast*. This historic gathering brought together political, faith, and civil society leaders from across the globe to engage in dialogue on religious freedom, peaceful coexistence, human rights, and reconciliation.

Held in a region of deep spiritual and historical significance, the event offered a unique opportunity to reflect on the role of faith and leadership in strengthening social harmony. The program also included heritage site visits and panel discussions focused on how governance, justice, and cultural preservation can advance peace.

My participation was driven by the multicultural makeup of the Northern Metropolitan Region, which I proudly represent in the Victorian Parliament, as well as the challenges to social cohesion experienced in my electorate. Over 80% of Victoria's 40,000-strong Iraqi community (including 26,000 individuals born in Iraq) live in Melbourne's northern suburbs. This encompasses diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds such as the vibrant Kurdish, Chaldean, Assyrian, Syriac, and Arab communities — many of whom have close ties to Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. This visit allowed me to deepen my understanding of their cultural heritage and reflect on how experiences of resilience, faith, and identity shape our shared Victorian community.

The *Kurdistan National Prayer Breakfast* is inspired by similar global gatherings that promote unity, moral leadership, and spiritual reflection in public life. The inaugural event in Erbil aimed to foster meaningful conversations around religious freedom and cultural coexistence, drawing parliamentarians, diplomats, clergy, and peacebuilders from across the globe.

Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region, is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, with a history spanning over 6,000 years. It has long served as a meeting point for civilisation, faith, and culture. Today, the broader Kurdistan Region stands as a rare example of religious tolerance and ethnic diversity in the Middle East — offering valuable insights into community resilience and peaceful coexistence. These themes are deeply relevant to many of my constituents' lived experiences.

## Objectives

- Strengthen my capacity to advocate for policies that support social cohesion, interfaith understanding, and migrant inclusion in Victoria.
- Meet with government, religious, and cultural leaders to learn from their approaches to peacebuilding and pluralism.
- Represent Victoria in an international dialogue on religious freedom, coexistence, and reconciliation.
- Visit heritage and faith sites that resonate deeply with Iraqi and Middle Eastern diaspora communities in my electorate.
- Gain deeper insight into regional conflicts in the Middle East and how they influence intercommunity relations and social harmony in Victoria.
- Build relationships with key government, religious, and community organisations that could benefit Victoria.

## Itinerary, Meetings, Events, and Engagements

### Monday 21 April 2025

#### Visit to the Kurdistan Parliament

During my visit to the Kurdistan Parliament, I met with **Mr Hewa Nasruldeen Mustafa, Deputy Chief of Divan** (the equivalent of the Deputy Clerk of the Legislative Assembly); **Dr Fawad A. Sleman, Director of the Parliament's Research Centre**; and **Dr Bryar Sherko Baban, Advisor to the Head of International Cooperation and Protocol**. Our discussions focused on parliamentary structures, legislative processes, and institutional reforms currently underway in the region.

At the end of 2024, the sixth term of the Kurdistan Parliament concluded, followed by elections held in October. The new Parliament has been reduced from 111 to 100 seats, and at the time of my visit, the region's two major parties were engaged in negotiations to form a new government. Unlike the Victorian Parliament, which operates through standing, joint, and select committees conducting public inquiries, the Kurdistan Parliament adopts

a portfolio-aligned model, with one committee corresponding to each ministerial portfolio — 19 in the previous term.

This visit provided an important opportunity to gain insight into the regional legislature, functioning within Iraq's federal system. The Kurdistan Parliament exercises domestic authority in key areas including local security, health, education, and cultural affairs, in many regards very similar to role of the state governments in Australia. The structure and approach of the institution reflect a strong emphasis on minority representation and pluralism — principles that also underpin Victoria's parliamentary democracy and multicultural governance.

### **Assyrian Church of the East**

I had the honour of meeting with **His Holiness Mar Awa III, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East**. With its origins in the early Christian communities of ancient Mesopotamia, the Assyrian Church of the East is among the world's oldest Christian denominations. It preserves the East Syriac liturgical tradition and plays a critical role in safeguarding the language, theology, and identity of Assyrian communities globally. The Cathedral in Erbil stands as both a spiritual and cultural anchor for the Church's faithful worldwide.

His Holiness, born and raised in Chicago, is the first American-born Patriarch of the Church. As a first-generation Assyrian-American, he brings a deep understanding of life in multicultural societies — a perspective that resonates with Victoria's own experience of cultural diversity. We spoke about the importance of cultural and spiritual identity in supporting successful integration, particularly for new and emerging communities.

We also discussed the role of faith-based institutions in positively engaging young people, and how culture and tradition can help them reach their full potential. His Holiness spoke warmly of his pastoral visit to Melbourne last year, including to **St Abdisho Assyrian Church of the East Cathedral** in Coolaroo, which is located in my electorate. He expressed gratitude for Australia's support of the Assyrian community, especially the establishment of two Assyrian schools in Sydney, and shared his aspiration to see an Assyrian school established in Melbourne in the near future.

### **Chaldean Catholic Church and the Maryamana Hospital**

I met with **His Excellency Archbishop Bashar Matti Warda, the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Erbil**. The Chaldean Catholic Church, an Eastern Catholic tradition in full communion with the Vatican, is the largest Christian denomination in both Kurdistan and

Iraq. It remains a vital spiritual and cultural presence, especially in its support for displaced communities, its rebuilding of institutions, and its promotion of interfaith cooperation. The Archdiocese of Erbil oversees a network of schools, clinics, and social services — a model of faith-based recovery that closely aligns with the values of Victoria’s Chaldean community.

My meeting coincided with the passing of His Holiness Pope Francis — a moment of global mourning for the Catholic Church. I offered condolences on behalf of the Victorian community, acknowledging the Pope’s legacy of compassion, humility, and moral leadership. The Archbishop and I reflected on the enduring relevance of Catholic values, including kindness, generosity, and care for the vulnerable.

Archbishop Warda had previously maintained strong ties with the Australian Catholic University, located in my electorate. In 2011, he established the Mar Qardakh International School, a bilingual English-language institution accredited by the International Baccalaureate. In 2015, he led the creation of the Catholic University in Erbil, expanding higher education access in a region still recovering from instability. In 2021, he opened the Maryamana Hospital, a Catholic healthcare institution serving the poor, displaced, and marginalised. I had the privilege of touring the hospital with the Archbishop and witnessed firsthand the training of a new generation of healthcare professionals committed to equity and service.

**Our Lady Guardian of Plants Chaldean Catholic Church** and **St George Chaldean Catholic Parish and Centre**, both located in my electorate, are part of this same Church and serve vibrant congregations.

### **Syriac Orthodox Church**

I met with **His Eminence Archbishop Mar Nicodemus Daoud Sharaf, the Syriac Orthodox Archbishop for Mosul, Kirkuk, and the Kurdistan Region**. The Syriac Orthodox Church, part of the Oriental Orthodox tradition, is known for preserving the Aramaic language — believed to be the language spoken by Jesus — and for its rich theological and liturgical heritage.

Originally based in Mosul, the Church was forced to flee following ISIS’s takeover nearly a decade ago. The Kurdistan Regional Government provided land for the Church to rebuild in Erbil, with financial support from the Hungarian Government. The new church now serves as a sanctuary for displaced families. The Archbishop and I spoke about the role of multicultural cities — like Erbil and Melbourne — in supporting community resilience. He

shared stories of his global diaspora, including many families still waiting to resettle in safe and welcoming nations like Australia.

The conversation was a powerful reminder of the importance of peace, dignity, and belonging.

In my electorate of Northern Metropolitan Region, we have two Syrian Orthodox Churches – St Aphrem Syrian Orthodox Church and Mor Yacoub Syrian Orthodox Church.

## **Tuesday 22 April 2025**

### **Meetings and Engagements**

I met with **Mr Goran Abduljabar Salman** from the **Chaldean League**, together with **Professor Kawther Najeeb Askar, Head of the Syriac Department at Salahaddin University of Erbil**. Our discussion focused on the importance of preserving indigenous cultures and languages, particularly in regions recovering from conflict and displacement. I shared insights on the Victorian Government's work in this space — including our commitment to reconciliation with First Nations peoples and broader multicultural initiatives aimed at building a fairer, more inclusive society.

We also reflected on the significance of bilingualism and language education in promoting cross-cultural understanding. Mr Salman noted that the Chaldean League has an active chapter based in my electorate and organises the annual Chaldean Akitu Festival — a vibrant cultural celebration that draws strong local participation in Victoria.

**Vic Talk** representative Mr Ayad Yokhanna, a Victorian–Iraqi multimedia organisation, joined me for these discussions. Their presence highlighted the role of diaspora-led media in facilitating cultural exchange and fostering dialogue between communities across continents.

I also met with **Dr Jaffar Ibrahim Eminki**, former **Deputy Speaker of the Kurdistan Parliament**. He spoke to me about the need to grow the relationship between Australia and Kurdistan through strengthening of trade and diplomatic ties. Dr Eminki also had great insights into Swedish political and economic systems, as he previously lived in Sweden before returning to Kurdistan.

### **Welcome Dinner and Networking Reception**

The official welcome dinner was hosted by **Minister Ano Abdoka, Minister for Transport and Communications**, and **Dr Hemin Hawrami, Former Deputy Speaker of Parliament**. Both co-chaired the event on behalf of the Kurdistan Regional Government. The evening brought together nearly 400 international guests, representing government, academia, civil society, and business from over 20 countries across the Middle East, Europe, North America, Asia, and Australia.

I had the opportunity to connect with a number of international leaders during the dinner, including **Nadine Maenza**, President of the **International Religious Freedom Secretariat** and former Chair of the **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)**. A globally recognised advocate for persecuted communities, she advises governments around the world on advancing religious freedom through public policy and diplomacy. She also served as a panellist during the following day's conference session.

I also had an engaging conversation with **Ambassador Peter Galbraith** of the United States. We discussed regional stability and his long-standing diplomatic efforts in peace-building. He is well-acquainted with Australia and played a central role in negotiating the Timor Sea Treaty, which underpinned long-term cooperation between Australia and Timor-Leste.

Later that evening, I also met with **Mr Ecevit Emre Dede**, Chairman of the Council of Faith for the **Confederation of Alevi Unions of Europe (AABK)**. The Alevi Community Centre of Melbourne, located in North Coburg in my electorate, shares the same values as the AABK and represents the majority of Victoria's Alevi population.

The dinner was a powerful platform for building international connections and reaffirming a collective commitment to pluralism, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence.

## Wednesday 23 April 2025

### National Prayer Breakfast

The day began with the **National Prayer Breakfast**, officially opened by **Prime Minister Masrour Barzani**.

The keynote address was delivered by **Cardinal Luis Rafael Sako**, who joined the event as the official representative of the Vatican, particularly poignant in light of the recent passing of His Holiness Pope Francis. The speech reflected on the Pope's enduring legacy and was

followed by a moment of interfaith unity shared among Islamic and Christian faith leaders from Iraq and the broader region — a powerful symbol of solidarity and mutual respect.

Throughout the breakfast, I met with many global delegates including **Volkmar Klein, Former Member of the Deutscher Bundestag, Yusuf Aydin, Member of the Swedish Parliament, Sviatoslav Yurash, Member of the Ukrainian Parliament, Ms Alexandra Sasha, First Deputy to Danish Parliament and Frederiksberg Council, Mr Zach Huff, Legislative Advisor to Congressman Abraham Hamadeh and Dr Mahmoud Al-Najjar, Founder & CEO of the Baghdad Vision Center.**

#### **Panel: Cultural and Religious Heritage Sites**

This session explored the urgent need to preserve religious and cultural heritage across Iraq and the wider region. Panellists addressed the threats posed by conflict and neglect, and emphasised the role that heritage plays in intergenerational identity, reconciliation, and cultural tourism. These discussions resonated strongly with Victoria's own efforts to balance urban development with heritage preservation. Panellists included **Mr Jeremy Barker**, Associate Vice-President of International Strategies at the **Religious Freedom Institute**, and **Mr Ayoob Thanoon**, President of the **Mosul Heritage Foundation**, amongst others.

#### **Panel: National-Level Institutions Protecting Religious Freedom**

This panel examined the effectiveness of formal institutions responsible for protecting religious liberty across the Middle East and North Africa. While some countries have strong legal frameworks, others lack enforceable protections. Panellists emphasised the importance of civic education, institutional integrity, and rule of law in ensuring that communities of all faiths can live freely and safely.

Speakers included **Mr Sam Brownback**, former **U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom**; **Mr Fadi Hachem**, international human rights lawyer; **Mr Riley Barnes**, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor at the **U.S. State Department**; and **Ms Nadine Maenza**.

These discussions reaffirmed the importance the reforms currently underway in Victoria. In particular, the Justice Legislation Amendment (Anti-Vilification and Social Cohesion) Act 2024 — recently passed in Victoria — aims to strengthen protections against hate and vilification and reaffirm our commitment to human rights and social harmony.

#### **Panel: Good Governance (Geneva Institute for Leadership and Public Policy)**



This session focused on ethical leadership and the role of governance in improving social outcomes for vulnerable communities. Panellists discussed how ethical leadership can shape public policy to ensure dignity, education, healthcare, and opportunity for all. These themes aligned closely with Victoria's policy agenda. The panel was led by **Eduard Heger, Former Prime Minister of Slovakia** (2021–2023), and **Henry Deneen**, President of the **Geneva Institute for Leadership and Public Policy** and CEO of **Global Hope Network International**.

## Thursday 24 April 2025

### Cultural Exploration Day Trip – Nineveh Plains and Kurdish Countryside

This full-day excursion offered a rich and immersive insight into some of the most spiritually and historically significant sites in the region. On this day, I also had the opportunity to conduct a number of television interviews including with **Rudaw and Sema TV**.

**Lalish Temple** – The sacred heart of the Yazidi faith, Lalish is known for its striking conical domes and uninterrupted ritual use. The site holds deep meaning for the Ezidi people, who have historically suffered immense persecution.

Thousands of Yazidis have arrived in Australia since the ISIS attacks in 2014, with the majority settling in New South Wales and Queensland. While at Lalish, I had the privilege of meeting **Prince Hazem Tahseen Saeed**, the Yazidi Prince in Iraq and around the world, and Head of the Yazidi Supreme Spiritual Council.

I also met with **Mr Khalid Narmo**, Mayor of **Shekhan District**, where Lalish Temple is located. He spoke of the importance of cultural preservation and regional development in fostering resilience for his community. He shared with me that the Kurdistan region has become a safe haven for the Yazidi community.

The **Nineveh Plains** have long symbolised peaceful coexistence, once home to a rich mosaic of Kurds, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Yazidis, and Shabaks. Visiting these sites served as a powerful reminder of the fragile but enduring legacy of religious minorities — many of whom have since sought refuge and opportunity in countries like Australia.

**Alqosh** – A historic Christian town home to two sacred sites:

- The **Rabban Hormizd Monastery**, founded in the 6th century, carved into the cliffs above the town, and
- The **Shrine of the Prophet Nahum**, a revered place of pilgrimage for both Christians and Jews.

I had the opportunity to meet with **Ms Laza Zara, Mayor of Alqosh** and the only female mayor in Iraq. She shared her personal connection to Australia, noting that several members of her extended family had resettled in Victoria following the ISIS attacks on the Nineveh Plains. Many of them are now proud constituents in my own electorate of Northern Metropolitan Region.

### **Dinner at the Erbil Citadel**

The day concluded with a cultural program and dinner held at the **Erbil Citadel**, a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** and one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited settlements. Its layered history — spanning Assyrian, Sumerian, Ottoman, and Kurdish civilisations — is visible in its winding streets, restored homes, and preserved landmarks. While there, I also had the chance to observe the recent restoration efforts at this historic site.

The evening featured traditional Kurdish music, storytelling, and shared hospitality. It was a fitting end to the day's cultural immersion and a powerful celebration of the values that unite us — heritage, identity, and the universal language of hospitality.

### **Friday 25 April 2025**

On the final day of the visit, there was a farewell breakfast for all delegates. I also had the opportunity to meet with **Mr Ramy Noori Syawish, former Mayor of Ankawa** and now a newly elected **Member of the Kurdistan Parliament**.

Mr Syawish shared his aspirations for **Erbil** as a thriving and attractive regional capital. He spoke about his ambition to build stronger bridges between **Kurdistan and Victoria** — particularly through people-to-people connections, cultural exchange and trade. He expressed concern about the “brain drain” of young Chaldeans from the region and a

desire to create conditions where young professionals choose to stay and contribute to Kurdistan's future.

That evening, I boarded my return flight to Melbourne following a productive and deeply meaningful visit.

## Hosts

The **Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)** hosted the 2025 *Kurdistan National Prayer Breakfast* and facilitated a comprehensive program of high-level meetings, cultural visits, and hospitality. The KRG provided logistical support, including **accommodation, local transportation, and meals**, ensuring a smooth and productive experience for all participants. Their efforts were instrumental in creating a welcoming environment for global dialogue and exchange.

## Mode and Value of Commercial Transport

Only **return airfare** was claimed. No claims were made for accommodation, local transportation, or incidental travel expenses.

## Summary of Study Areas Pursued

- Moral and ethical leadership in modern governance
- Protection of minority rights in a federal system
- Religiously and culturally diverse approaches to peacebuilding and social cohesion
- Gender justice and trauma recovery in conflict-affected regions
- Institutional frameworks for safeguarding religious freedom
- Preservation of cultural and religious heritage under threat
- Reconciliation and recognition of Indigenous peoples

These themes are directly relevant to my work in Victoria, where many communities are shaped by histories of conflict and displacement, and where our shared commitment to multiculturalism must be supported by inclusive and evidence-based policy.

## Summary of Recommendations

- **Strong legislative frameworks**, such as Victoria's anti-vilification laws, are critical to protecting individuals from racial and religious discrimination and must be championed at both state and federal levels.
- The **Australian Government** should consider establishing a **Consulate in Erbil**, to foster stronger diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties between the Kurdistan Region and Australia — particularly given that over **30 countries already maintain consular missions in Erbil**, many with smaller diaspora populations than our own. A consulate would also assist families and Australians visiting the region.
- There is a need for **stronger settlement support services** for refugees and migrants arriving from war-torn regions and conflict zones. Many communities carry the burden of intergenerational trauma and are at risk of being overrepresented in the justice system. With the right support, these individuals and families can thrive, reach their full potential and positively contribute meaningfully to the wider Australian and Victorian society.
- Victoria could explore ways to better align parliamentary committees with Ministerial portfolios.