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Video Message of the Holy Father Francis on the occasion of his upcoming Apostolic Journey in Iraq (5-8 March 2021)

The following is the text of the video message from the Holy Father Francis to the people of Iraq for his upcoming Apostolic Journey, to take place from 5 to 8 March 2021:

Video Message of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters in Iraq, *assalam lakum!* (*Peace be with you!*)

In a few days, I will be at last in your midst! I have greatly desired to meet you, to see your faces and to visit your country, an ancient and outstanding cradle of civilization. I am coming as a pilgrim, as a *penitent pilgrim*, to implore from the Lord forgiveness and reconciliation after years of war and terrorism, to beg from God the consolation of hearts and the healing of wounds. I am coming among you also as a *pilgrim of peace*, to repeat the words: *You are all brothers and sisters*" (Mt 23:8). Yes, I am coming as a pilgrim of peace, seeking fraternity and prompted by the desire to pray together and to walk together, also with our brothers and sisters of other religious traditions, in the steps of Father Abraham, who joins in one family Muslims, Jews and Christians.

My dear Christian brothers and sisters, who have testified to your faith in Christ amid harsh sufferings: I cannot wait to see you. I am honoured to encounter a *Church of martyrs*: thank you for your witness! May the many, all too many, martyrs that you have known help all of us to persevere with the humble strength born of love. You still have before your eyes the picture of homes destroyed and churches profaned, and in your hearts you still bear the hurt of affections left behind and dwellings abandoned. I want to bring you the affectionate caress of the whole Church, which is close to you and to the war-torn Middle East, and encourages you to keep moving forward. Let us not allow the terrible sufferings you have experienced, sufferings that grieve me deeply, to gain the upper hand. Let us not lose heart before the spread of evil. The ancient sources of wisdom of your lands point us elsewhere. They invite us to do as Abraham did. Even though he left everything behind, he never lost hope (cf. *Rom 4:18*). Trusting in God, he became the father of descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven. Dear brothers and sisters, let us look to the stars above. For there is our promise.

Dear brothers and sisters, I have often thought of you over these years, you have who have greatly suffered, yet were never overwhelmed. Of you Christians and Muslims, of you peoples, like the Yazidi, who have suffered so greatly; brothers and sisters all. Now I am coming to your land, a land blessed yet wounded, as a *pilgrim of hope*. In your midst, from Nineveh, there resounded the prophecy of Jonah, who halted destruction and brought new hope, God's hope. May we be infected by this hope, which inspires us to rebuild and begin anew. In these trying times of pandemic, let us help one another to strengthen fraternity and build together a future of peace. Together, brothers and sisters of every religious tradition. From here, thousands of years ago, Abraham began his journey. Today it is up to us to carry on that journey, in the same spirit, pursuing together the paths of peace! Upon all of you, then, I invoke the peace and the blessing of the Most High. And I ask all of you to do as Abraham did: to walk in hope and never stop looking to the stars above. I ask all of you too, please, to accompany me with your prayers. *Shukran! (Thank you!)*
