

World
Watch
Research

Iraq: Full Country Dossier

January 2024



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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Introduction

World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

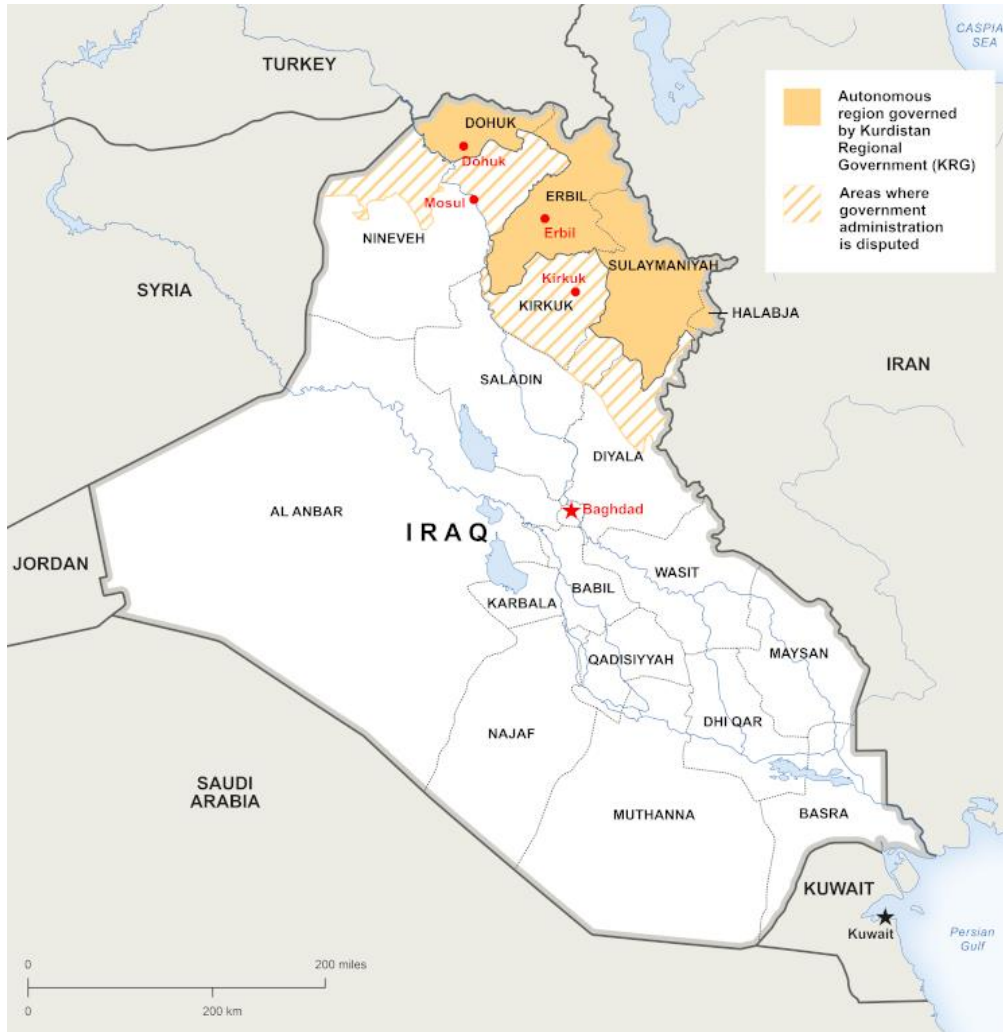
WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Iraq

Brief country details

Iraq: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
43,171,000	154,000	0.4

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Map of country



Iraq: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	79	16
WWL 2023	76	18
WWL 2022	78	14
WWL 2021	82	11
WWL 2020	76	15

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Iraq:	
Main persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Violent religious groups, One's own (extended) family, Political parties, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Organized crime cartels or networks
Clan oppression	Ethnic group leaders, One's own (extended) family, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Political parties, Non-Christian religious leaders
Organized corruption and crime	Government officials, Violent religious groups, Organized crime cartels or networks, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Political parties
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Violent religious groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Political parties, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups
Christian denominational protectionism	Religious leaders of other churches, One's own (extended) family

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

The main focus of pressure on Iraqi Christians following the territorial losses by the Islamic State group (IS) has been the Shia militias backed by Iran. However, IS has continued its attacks against civilians, infrastructure and security forces right into 2023. Both Turkey and Iran also continued airstrikes and - in Turkey's case - ground operations in various areas of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) allegedly targeting members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In recent years, these attacks hit predominantly Christian villages as well, causing severe damage to civilian property and forcing many Christians to flee, leading to the emptying of these communities. Christians have still not recovered from the displacement and emigration caused by IS and are now barely able to cope with new displacement. According to a local expert, the main Turkish target is the PKK, but Christians are a 'soft' target to attack and perpetrators can easily get away with it. Although Christians are not the main target, the attacks make them particularly vulnerable. In addition, they have reportedly received no protection from the local government.

The Assyrian Church of the East, the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Syrian Catholic Church, the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Armenian Orthodox Church are all seriously affected by intolerance, discrimination and persecution, issuing especially from militant Islamic groups and non-Christian leaders. They also face discrimination from government authorities. In central and southern Iraq, Christians often do not publicly display Christian symbols (such as a cross) as this can lead to harassment or discrimination at check-points, universities, work places and govern-

ment buildings.

Pressure on Christians in Iraq increased after pages of the Quran were publicly burned in Sweden and Denmark last summer (June & July 2023). One of the most important developments of 2023 was the intensification of the conflict between Chaldean Catholic Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako and Babylon Brigade militia leader Ryaan al-Kaldani, a nominal Chaldean, who has close ties to Iran. The cause of the conflict is the activities of The Babylon Brigade - a militia composed mainly of Shia Muslims - operating under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) and widely seen as close to Iran. The brigade has been involved in the detention and seizure of individuals, and has been a source of tension and dispute within Iraq's largest Christian community. On 3 July 2023, Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid sided with the Christian militia leader by revoking a special presidential decree recognizing Patriarch Sako as head of the Chaldean Church and sole administrator of its assets. This decision caused much fear and uncertainty among Christians. Subsequently, after being pressured and receiving threatening messages from Iranian-backed militias in Iraq, the Chaldean Catholic Church stated that Patriarch Sako moved the Church's headquarters from Baghdad to the Kurdish KRG in July 2023. The rivalry between al-Kaldani and Cardinal Sako threatens to lead to open political conflict within the Chaldean community.

Already several years ago, the Catholic seminary was no longer able to operate in Baghdad as a result of threats of kidnapping and attacks by Islamic militants and was forced to move to the IKR (Asia News, 1 April 2007). Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal churches in Bagdad and Basra are also seriously affected by violence from radical Islamic groups and non-Christian leaders, and regularly experience discrimination from the authorities. Outspoken Christians have frequently become targets in central and southern Iraq. Blasphemy laws can be used against them too if they are suspected of carrying out outreach among Muslims.

Christians with a Muslim background experience most pressure from (extended) family and often keep their faith a secret as they risk being threatened by family members, clan leaders and the society around them. Converts risk losing inheritance rights and the right or means to marry. To openly leave Islam leads to difficult situations throughout the country, but can also be risky in the more moderate Islamic IKR. In 2023, pressure on Christians in Iraqi Kurdistan increased further as two Christian converts from Islam were accused of blasphemy after posting online messages on social media. One of them was sentenced to prison, the other had to leave the country for his safety while a case against him was pending. The two cases were widely publicized online, leading to incitement of hatred against Christians in the region. Apart from that, several Christians were killed for their involvement in Christian activities/ministry. Changing church affiliation (e.g. by moving from an Orthodox to an Evangelical congregation) most often has less serious consequences, such as refusing rights and losing jobs. Leaders of Orthodox and Catholic churches have been known to refuse to perform marriages for members who have been attending Evangelical churches.

Important to mention here - although it may not be directly linked to Christian persecution - is the devastating fire at a Christian wedding in northern Iraq in September 2023 that claimed the lives of at least 133 people and injured more than 100 others. According to the official report, the fire could have been caused by 'gross negligence' and a lack of safety measures, but several

Christians on the spot believe they are victims of a political power play. Regardless of which claim is true, the incident has had a profound impact and raises grave concerns for the current and future safety and protection of the Christian community in Iraq.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Iraq has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR)
2. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR)
3. [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) (CAT)
4. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)
5. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)

Iraq is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian converts from Islam are killed because of their new faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- The law prohibits conversion from Islam (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian converts lose custody of their children and inheritance rights (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Children of Christian converts are registered as Muslims and forced to receive Islamic education (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christian female converts are forcibly married to Muslim men (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **Christians killed:** Four Christians were killed for faith-related reasons during the WWL 2024 reporting period. For security reasons no further details can be shared at this point.
- **Christian-owned property attacked:** Confiscation and seizure of Christian-owned land and other property in both the Kurdish region as well as in the rest of Iraq continued in WWL 2024. Reports include the use of document-tampering and forgery to take over Christian property. According to research, the perpetrators also include Iraqi politicians.
- **Christians leaving:** Many Christian families are still leaving Iraq due to the instability of the security situation in their areas; partly because of the presence of militias in the Nineveh Plain. Their disadvantaged position as a vulnerable minority plays a major role in this. Among the number leaving are several converts from Islam, travelling abroad for reasons directly related to their faith.

Specific examples of positive developments

- **January 2023:** On 27 January 2023, American evangelical pastor Franklin Graham laid the [foundation stone of the Evangelical Christian Union Church](#) in the Ankawa neighborhood of Erbil. In 2022, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) had already inaugurated a new church in the same district.

- **April 2023:** Iraq's government launched [a television channel](#) called Al-Syriania to preserve the Syriac language, which has been spoken by Christians in Iraq and neighboring Syria for over 2,000 years. The channel aims to keep the language alive by offering a range of programming. The Syriac language has faced decline due to decades of conflict, migration, and the dominance of Arabic.

External Links - Situation in brief

- Brief description of the persecution situation: forced to move - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Theological-university-and-seminary-leave-unsafe-Baghdad-and-head-north-8150.html>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of positive developments: foundation stone of the Evangelical Christian Union Church - <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/30554-Kurdistan-is-a-place-of-coexistence--Franklin-Graham>
- Specific examples of positive developments: a television channel - <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/31555-Iraq%27s-Christians-fight-to-save-threatened-ancient-language>

WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Iraq

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 Iraq report	AI Iraq 2022	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/iraq/report-iraq/	28 June 2023
BBC News Iraq profile - updated 24 February 2023	BBC Iraq profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14542954	28 June 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 Iraq report	BTI Iraq 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/IRQ	28 June 2023
CIA World Factbook Iraq - updated 14 June 2023	World Factbook Iraq	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iraq/	28 June 2023
Crisis24 Iraq report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Iraq report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/iraq	28 June 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2022	EIU Democracy Index 2022 - MENA pp.60-63	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-R1Q-438/images/DI-final-version-report.pdf	28 June 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Iraq	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	28 June 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Iraq not included	Democracy Index 2023	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Iraq	https://freedomhouse.org/country/iraq/freedom-world/2023	28 June 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2023 Iraq	https://freedomhouse.org/country/iraq/freedom-net/2023	15 January 2024
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Iraq profile	https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/iraq/	28 June 2023
Girls Not Brides Iraq report	Girls Not Brides Iraq	https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/iraq/	28 June 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Iraq country chapter	HRW 2023 Iraq country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/iraq	28 June 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 Iraq	https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#iq	28 June 2023
Middle East Concern Iraq country profile	MEC Iraq profile	https://www.meconcern.org/countries/iraq/	28 June 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Iraq	https://rsf.org/en/iraq	28 June 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Iraq	https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/iraq	28 June 2023
UNDP: Human Development Report Iraq	UNDP HDR Iraq	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/IRQ	28 June 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Iraq	IRFR 2022 Iraq	https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iraq/	28 June 2023
USCIRF 2023 country reports – covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL	USCIRF 2023 Iraq SWL	https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Iraq.pdf	28 June 2023
World Bank Iraq data 2021	World Bank Iraq data	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=IRQ	28 June 2023
World Bank Iraq overview – updated 1 June 2023	World Bank Iraq overview	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iraq/overview	28 June 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Iraq - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Iraq	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/65cd93926fdb3ea23b72f277fc249a72-0500042021/related/mpo-iraq.pdf	28 June 2023

Recent history

Until the end of World War I, Iraq was part of the Ottoman Empire. Britain occupied the territory in 1917. In 1932 Iraq became an independent kingdom and in 1958 an independent Republic. It has been governed by several authoritarian leaders. In the period 1979 - 2003, Iraq's president was Saddam Hussein, whose Sunni-led party dominated the Shia Muslim majority. Ethnic tensions have also been common in Iraq through the centuries and especially the large Kurdish presence (in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Iran and Russia) has been subject to sectarian violence. After the 2003 US-led invasion and the subsequent power vacuum, sectarian violence flared up particularly between Sunni and Shiite Muslims again and Christians were caught in the crossfire.

After the Gulf War (1990-1991) and the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003, anti-Western and radical Islamic sentiments increased, which contributed to religious freedom violations against Iraqi Christians. A stream of refugees started leaving the country, which escalated with the advent of the Islamic State group (IS) and the establishment of its self-proclaimed caliphate in June 2014. After large parts of IS territory were reconquered in 2016, Christians started to return to the liberated and previously Christian-majority towns close to Mosul, such as Qaraqosh. In December 2017, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced that Iraqi forces had defeated IS and driven the group from Iraqi territory. However, IS influence remains in the region.

In September 2017, the Kurdish regional government held a referendum on independence. This prompted Iraqi forces to push back Kurdish forces in the north and regain control of the region's borders. The Iraqi security forces and their allies also managed to recapture all areas occupied by Kurdish forces since 2014. This led to the resignation of Kurdish regional President Massoud Barzani, who was succeeded in June 2019 by his cousin Nechirvan Barzani of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP).

After Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr won a majority in the Iraqi parliamentary elections in May 2018, he chose Adel Abdul Mahdi as prime minister in October 2018. One year later, nationwide protests against corruption, unemployment and Iran's influence in many major cities left hundreds of protesters dead and led to the resignation of Mahdi. In May 2020, former head of the National Intelligence Service, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, was appointed prime minister and his cabinet was approved. Meanwhile protests continued, especially after al-Kadhimi announced reforms to tackle acute economic conditions in June. In July 2020, tensions between the US and Iraqi governments on the one side and Iranian-backed militias on the other intensified.

Since the territorial defeat of IS, the main source of pressure on Iraqi Christians has been from Shiite militias backed by Iran. However, IS has also attacked civilians, infrastructure and security forces in the period 2020-2023. In the Kurdistan region, Turkey continued its attacks allegedly targeting the members of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) but also hitting majority Christian villages. In Turkey's biggest operation in the region since 2015, Christian villages were bombed in June 2020 and May 2021 causing many Christians to flee. In the last months of 2022, Iran also stepped up its attacks on the Kurdish area, targeting the PKK. In September 2022, Iranian bombs fell close to a Christian village.

In the October 2021 parliamentary election with a record low turnout, Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's party was one of the main winners, while pro-Iranian Shia parties lost seats. According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2021 Iraq](#)): "Some religious and ethnic minority leaders, mostly Christians and to a lesser degree, Sabean-Mandeans, Shabak, and Faili Kurds, expressed dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the October 10 parliamentary election, saying powerful political parties encouraged nonminority voters to back candidates for the minority-quota seats, thereby outvoting 'legitimate' candidates." In November 2021, there were violent protests against the election results in Baghdad and Prime Minister al-Kadhimi survived an assassination attempt. In addition, there was a months-long political deadlock as the leading nationalist Sadrist faction ruled out forming a coalition government with pro-Iranian parties. In June 2022, all 73 members of the Sadrist group decided to resign, after which the vacant seats were awarded to the parties with the next highest numbers of votes. This meant that their rivals, the pro-Iranian Shia parties, then became the largest bloc in parliament. In October 2022, Abdul Latif Rashid was elected president who appointed Mohammad Shia al-Sudani - a longtime ally of Iran - as prime minister to lead the pro-Iranian government.

In March 2023, a new draft electoral law was passed which "reintroduces voting along party lists, turns each governorate into single electoral constituency, and raises minimum age for candidates to 30, which marks a major setback for emerging parties and reform-minded independent candidates" ([Crisis Watch Iraq, March 2023](#), last accessed 1 June 2023). Christians fear that the new system favors the major political parties at the expense of independent candidates; in addition, the seats traditionally allocated to ethnic and religious minorities – Christians have five in parliament – will be allocated by the big winning parties. In response, church leaders of various denominations in Iraq are threatening to call on their constituencies to boycott the December 2023 provincial elections if the representation of Christians and the protection of their interests are not guaranteed.

In June and July 2023, Quran burnings took place in Sweden and Denmark, which put pressure on ties with these countries and led to the expulsion of the Swedish ambassador and the withdrawal of the Iraqi ambassador to Sweden. During demonstrations against the Quran burnings, the Swedish embassy in Baghdad was looted and the headquarters of the Danish Refugee Council in Basra Governorate were set on fire. Also in July, President Rashid revoked a special decree granted to the head of the Chaldean Church, sparking protests among the Christian community. After months of informal truce, Iranian-backed armed groups stepped up their attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria in response to the Israeli-Hamas war that began in October 2023. The US responded with deadly air-strikes. Throughout 2023, fighting between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the north continued, and Islamic State (IS) maintained a low-level insurgency.

Political and legal landscape

In the Democracy Index (EIU 2022 Iraq), the Iraqi government continues to be listed as 'authoritarian'. It was first labelled as such in the 2019 index based on "the violent unrest that unfolded in October [2019] against corruption and unemployment".

Iraq is divided into two parts, a semi-autonomous Kurdish region in the north (Iraqi Kurdish Region - IKR), officially governed by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) based in Erbil, and

a large Arab part, controlled by the Iraqi Government in Baghdad. Iraq consists of 19 provinces/governorates, of which only five have an officially listed population of Christians (Nineveh, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Dohuk and northern Kirkuk). Christians have left all other governorates, apart from small groups of converts with a Muslim background. Corruption pervades all levels of government and society. The weak and divided government only strengthens widespread impunity. In this context, religious minorities - including Christians - are most vulnerable.

Sectarian conflicts are being fought both in parliament by political representatives and in the streets by militias. The political system developed under US guidance allocates a proportional percentage of Iraqi Senate seats to the nation's Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds and other minorities (such as Christians, Turkmens, and Yezidis). The political representation of Christians is very low (1.5%) and they are distributed over different parties. Both the Council of Representatives of the Government of Iraq as well as the Iraqi Kurdish Parliament, reserve five seats for Christians. Several Christian leaders believe that this quota system "will continue not to favor adequate political representation of the Christian components, because in its current form it makes possible electoral manipulation operations which in recent years have already allowed the major parties to have those seats assigned to their own emissaries" ([Agenzia Fides](#), 30 July 2021).

While Saddam Hussein's Iraq was secular, now Islamist political parties have entered into Iraqi politics with Shiite and Sunni parties constituting the majority in parliament. Some Shiite parties have warm relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran and Christians in Iraq report that the country is becoming increasingly Islamic. Christians, in particular those with a Muslim background, have reported that they are being monitored by Iranian secret services.

The [Iraqi Constitution of 2005](#) establishes Islam as the state religion of Iraq, Islamic law as a source of legislation, and provides that no law may contravene either Islamic tenets, the principles of democracy or rights outlined in the Constitution. The Constitution upholds freedom from religious (as well as political and intellectual) coercion and requires the government to maintain the sanctity of religious sites, including Christian sites. Under applicable Islamic law, Muslims are effectively prohibited from changing their religion, and women registered as Muslim are not permitted to marry non-Muslims.

Christians in the country characterize the current political situation in Iraq as unstable. Major factors for this instability include the following:

- Widespread corruption;
- A nation split along sectarian lines;
- Violent actions by Shia militias and IS;
- The need to reconstruct the areas destroyed by IS;
- Tensions with Iran;
- Attacks by Turkey and Iran on IKR territory.

Gender perspective

A further vulnerable group within Iraq's legal and political landscape is women. Despite international pressure and protests to repeal Iraq's [rape-marriage law](#), there is no legislation against marital rape (MSU ILR, 10 March 2023). Furthermore, rapists can be exonerated if their victims consent to marriage ([Article 398 of the Penal Code](#)). Child marriage also remains high, with 28% of girls married by the age of 18 (Girls not Brides Iraq). Within the context of marriage, women may face further pressure, such as restrictions on their freedom of movement. A lack of legislation that specifically outlaws domestic violence further endangers women. While the Kurdistan region has a 2011 law on [domestic violence](#) (Act 8), few protections exist in Baghdad-controlled territory; recent attempts to pass corresponding legislation have stalled and incidents of domestic violence remain widespread (HRW 2023 Iraq country chapter). According to Georgetown's 2021/22 Women, Peace and Security Index (GIWPS 2021 Iraq profile, p.19), Iraq records the highest rate of intimate partner violence, at 45%. Victims of sexual crimes, including female Christians, are particularly hesitant to come forward due to social stigma and the risk of being forced to marry their attacker.

Religious landscape

Iraq: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	154,000	0.4
Muslim	42,157,000	97.7
Hindu	5,200	0.0
Buddhist	380	0.0
Ethno-religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	20	0.0
Bahai	2,100	0.0
Atheist	77,300	0.2
Agnostic	223,000	0.5
Other	551,450	1.3
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Iraq is an ethnically diverse nation with a Muslim population of 97.7% according to WCD 2023 estimates. The population consists of over 42 million Muslims, of which 64-69% are Shiites and 29-34% are Sunnis, according to the World Factbook Iraq. Christians make up approximately 0.4% of the population.

Although there has been a geographical defeat of IS forces, the ideology and influence of IS is still strong. Sectarian polarization is on the rise. However, some Muslims are disillusioned with Islam and have become more open to explore the Christian faith.

Of the Arab population, Shiite Muslims form the majority. The Kurds in the north are mainly Sunni. It was only after the League of Nations decision in 1920 that the different ethnic groups were first brought together into a modern state system. The different leaders that have come to power since then have fueled mistrust and conflict according to the principle of 'divide and rule'. The current sectarian violence in Iraq is rooted mainly in the competition for power in the post-Saddam Hussein Iraq.

Symbolic political steps, such as the attempt at introducing [Christmas as a national holiday](#) in December 2018 (CNN, 25 December 2018), were opposed by Islamic authorities. The Grand Mufti of Baghdad, for instance, said in a sermon that Christian holidays like Christmas were impermissible for Muslims and that those who celebrate them, believe Christian doctrine. However, in December 2020 - as a gesture of goodwill before the visit of Pope Francis in March 2021 - the Iraqi government finally accepted Christmas as an official public holiday.

Economic landscape

According to the World Bank Iraq data and overview :

- Iraq belongs in the 'Upper Middle Income' category.
- **GDP:** "The economy is gradually recovering from the oil and COVID-19 shocks of 2020. Real GDP is estimated to have edged up by 1.3% in 2021, after a sharp contraction of 11.3% in 2020."
- **GNI per capita:** 9,400 (USD) (2020)
- **Unemployment:** 14.2% (modeled International [Labour Organization](#) estimate, 2021). "As of January 2021, in a country of 40.2 million, Iraq's unemployment rate was more than 10 percentage points higher than its pre-COVID-19 level of 12.7 percentage points. Unemployment among the displaced, returnees, women jobseekers, pre-pandemic self-employed and informal workers remains elevated."
- "Iraq is one of the most oil-dependent countries in the world. Over the last decade, oil revenues have accounted for more than 99% of exports, 85% of the government's budget, and 42% of gross domestic product (GDP). This excessive dependence on oil exposes the country to macroeconomic volatility, while budget rigidities restrict fiscal space and any opportunity for countercyclical policy."
- "While Iraq's economic conditions are gradually improving as international oil markets recover, this recovery is fraught by major risks posed by structural bottlenecks. Risks include public investment management constraints that have impacted public service delivery, the slow clearance of arrears (especially those related to public wages) and large exposure of state-owned banks and the central bank to the sovereign. These fragilities are aggravated by fragile political conditions, a weak healthcare system and rampant corruption that continue to trigger unrest across the country."
- "Iraq's economic outlook remains subject to significant risks. The recent geopolitical tensions related to the war in Ukraine highlight risks for Iraq's economy. While any further

oil price hikes would improve Iraq's fiscal balance, rising food prices and disruption to agriculture imports will exacerbate pre-existing poverty trends and increase food security risks. The conflict also poses risks to Iraq's crude oil production if operations of Russian oil companies in Iraq are impacted by international sanctions on Russia."

There is widespread dissatisfaction with the lack of public services (for instance, the supply of water and electricity) and there is high unemployment. Corruption is also one of the major factors that is hampering the country's economic progress. Corruption in the public and private sectors carries very high risks for business investments. Moreover, many citizens are traumatized after years of suffering under Saddam Hussein's regime, the Iran-Iraq war, Gulf wars, sanctions, the US-led invasion and the sectarian violence (including atrocities committed by IS militants). The impact of this on the population - and especially on children - is disastrous. Many children have developed learning disorders and display other consequences of trauma. All of these factors have led to previously middle-class Christians now struggling to survive economically. In addition, the Christian population was disproportionately hard-hit by displacement from Mosul and the Nineveh plain and has high numbers of IDPs or returnees now living in poverty. The fragile security situation - together with IS's continued presence and numerous small-scale attacks - has hampered economic recovery and badly needed development, which would help overcome sectarian and ethnic violence.

Gender perspective

In general, women are among the most economically vulnerable population in Iraq. Whilst the original 1959 Personal Status Law granted women equal inheritance rights to men, Sharia rules of inheritance were later applied, whereby daughters typically receive half the share that sons receive (Personal Status Law 1959: Art 89). Considering these economic vulnerabilities, Christian women depend heavily on their husbands and families. This is reflected in labor force participation rates; as of 2022, 70% of men over 15 were in the workforce, compared to just 11.5% of women ([World Bank Gender Data](#), 2023). The emigration of Christian men, in part due to job discrimination and exploitation, has placed pressure on their dependent families and church communities.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the World Factbook Iraq:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Arab (75-80%), Kurds (15-20%) and 5% other ethnic groups (includes Turkmen, Yezidi, Shabak, Kaka'i, Bedouin, Romani, Circassian, Sabaeen-Mandaeen, Persian). According to in-country experts, the Assyrian, Armenian and Chaldean communities should be mentioned here which are both ethnic and religious groups.
- **Main languages:** Arabic and Kurdish are official languages. The following languages are official in areas where native speakers of these languages are the majority: Turkmen (a Turkish dialect) and Syriac (Neo-Aramaic).
- **Urban population:** 71.6% of total population (2023)

According to the UNDP Human Development Report (UNDP HDR Iraq):

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a HDI score of 0.686 Iraq ranks 121 out of 191 countries and falls in the 'Medium Human Development' category. From 1990 to 2021, Iraq's HDI value rose from 0.528 to 0.686, an change of 29.9 percent.
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 70.4 years
- **Gender inequality Index (GII):** With a score of 0.558, Iraq ranks 145 out of 170 countries.
- **Education:** The expected number of years of schooling is 12.1, whereas the mean years of schooling is 7.9. The mean number is 7.3 for girls, compared to 8.4 for boys.
- **Literacy rate:** 85.6 % (ages 15 and older; CIA Factbook)

According to the [UN Refugee Agency](#) (last accessed 1 June 2023):

- **IDPs/Refugees:** Almost 1.2 million Iraqis continue to be internally displaced and over 250.000 refugees fled to Iraq from neighboring countries.
- **Humanitarian situation:** "4.1 million Iraqis are in need of humanitarian assistance and protection, while some 2.4 million people are in acute need of assistance."

Society in Iraq continues to be conservative, tribal and driven by ethnic conflict. In general, Iraqi society is becoming more fragmented and Islamized. Especially in areas where IS had been in control, Christians report that they feel betrayed by their Muslim neighbors. As the Christian population dwindles, so do their freedoms. Christians and their way of life used to be more or less tolerated in Iraq, but the Christian community now reports increasing pressure from society. This includes more monitoring, the closing of shops during Ramadan and pressure on Christian women to veil themselves. Back in 2015 a campaign was started with [posters](#) appearing on government office-buildings (and even on churches) encouraging Christian women to veil themselves "as this is what Mary did" (World Watch Monitor, 18 December 2015). During 2021, there were several "veil-carrying campaigns" in Kurdistan, where girls were encouraged to cover their heads and several thousand young women announced that they would voluntarily wear a headscarf.

Many Christian IDPs in Kurdistan have experienced difficulties in integrating due to the language barrier. Christians have reported exploitation at the workplace and housing market, including having to pay higher rent than non-Christians. Many IDPs have returned to their villages and cities after years of displacement and are faced with very limited access to community life as the social fabric of society has been destroyed. This has been a cause of depression, especially among the youth and women, impacting their capacity to improve community life and strengthen social cohesion.

Gender perspective

[Islamic] socio-cultural norms continue to dominate Iraqi society and women are explicitly restricted from becoming head of the household or head of the family (Civil Status Law, 1972, Art 17, 19). According to a 2019 CEDAW Periodic review: "The Committee is concerned at the persistence of discriminatory stereotypes about the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and in society, which perpetuate the subordination of women to men and are exacerbated by the sectarian and religious divisions in the State party."

Both male and female converts face extreme pressure in Iraqi culture where retaining honor means everything. Christian men who convert from Islam risk being thrown out of their homes by their families, or even killed for their faith, usually by militant Islamists. Female converts on the other hand risk being forcibly married, put under house arrest or divorced. In light of the pervading honor-shame culture, women and girls are expected to uphold sexual purity; should they be sexually assaulted because of their faith, shame will fall on the whole family. In northern Iraq, there are approximately 500 [honor killings](#) every year (Middle East Policy Council, 2022). A [report](#) by Al-Monitor suggests that the police find it difficult to intervene as no laws specifically address such instances of domestic violence (Al-Monitor, 19 February 2023).

Technological landscape

- **Internet usage:** 74.9% penetration - survey date: early 2023 ([Datareportal](#))
- **Facebook usage:** 67.7% penetration – survey date: May 2023. According to [Napoleon Cat](#), as of May 2023, the majority of Facebook users are men - 67% - and people aged 18 to 24 were the largest user group.

According to the World Bank Iraq data:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 94 per 100 people (2021 estimate)

Freedom of expression in Iraq, including via the Internet, came under pressure in 2019 when the Iraqi parliament studied proposals for a new cyber-crime law. According to Reporters Without Borders (World Press Freedom 2023 Iraq), the bill which "keeps being resubmitted provides for prison sentences (including life imprisonment) for online posts that endanger 'the independence, unity or integrity of the country, or its economic, political, military or security interests'. The media watchdog is especially concerned about the vagueness of this wording which is 'liable to discourage the emergence of a really free and independent press'."

Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 overview for Iraq states:

- "Internet freedom in Iraq, including the Kurdistan region, is limited. While internet speeds and access have improved due to recent infrastructural investments, Iraq still has some of the region's weakest telecommunications networks and highest costs. During the coverage period, authorities launched a crackdown on social media users. Legislation that could increase government-ordered censorship and increase criminal penalties for a wide swath of online speech was also proposed. Security forces routinely arrest internet users, and physical attacks against journalists, activists, and social media users due to their online activity are common. These violations, which have created an environment of fear, have forced many Iraqis to self-censor. Others, particularly reporters, have left the country."

Gender perspective

According to Georgetown's [Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20](#), there has been a major expansion in women's cell-phone usage in recent years, which is helping to reduce a gender gap in technology. While it ranks as the fifth worst country on the 2021/22 index, 100% of women in Iraq report using a cell phone (GIWPS 2021Iraq profile, p.20). The Christian community in Iraq has reported that the increased use of mobile phones and the Internet leads to a decreased level

of social life, creates problems in the area of moral issues and has affected the level of education in general.

Security situation

Numerous crises have shaken Iraq and produced heavy storm-clouds: Increased tension between the USA and Iran, the failure of the political elite in Baghdad to address protesters' concerns have all brought the country to the brink of collapse and have contributed to the massive frustration felt by the youth, who feel alienated and have no future prospects. There is a lack of foreign investment, widespread insecurity and a likely continuation of protests.

Violent Islamic groups such as IS and others (including Shia militants and militias loyal to Iran such as *Asaib Ahl al-Haq* and the Mehdi Army) are known for targeting Christians and other religious minorities through kidnappings and killings. The presence of such militias as *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* (Popular Mobilization Units - PMU - loyal to Iran) are increasing insecurity and instability for all categories of Christian communities and are a dangerous source of violations against converts from Islam to Christianity. There are some forty different militias of various sizes (nominally) under the control of the central government, some of which are very radicalized. In the Nineveh Plains some 32,000 Christians are having to live in areas controlled by Iran-backed PMU. Since 2020, Shia militias and IS have stepped up attacks on civilians, security forces and infrastructure; Shia militias also attacked US assets in revenge for the killings of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad in January 2020 (BBC News, 3 January 2020). In addition, Iran-affiliated militias are trying to drive US troops out of Iraq by attacking convoys transporting supplies to bases, often using UAVs (drones).

With the USA seriously considering the withdrawal of its troops from Iraq, many Iraqis fear that their country will become “a new battleground” between Iran-backed militias and IS (Foreign Policy, 6 April 2020). However, as of January 2024, US troops look likely to stay put for the time-being, despite the Iraqi Prime Minister urging the USA to make a quick exit (Breaking Defense, 10 January 2024).

Adding to the sense of insecurity, many Christians are experiencing ongoing land disputes and lack of access to their former homes, which has led to many Christians feeling they no longer have any future in the country. The youth in particular are increasingly hoping to emigrate to the West, arguing that the lack of career possibilities and physical and financial security does not leave them any choice but to live in exile.

The major player in the current situation in Iraqi Kurdistan however is Turkey (Al-Monitor, 22 July 2020). Turkey's incursions into northern Iraq to fight against the PKK add to the instability of northern Iraq and directly threatens the safety of Christians living in the area, causing many to flee. Online media reported in August 2019 that 10 Christian villages had to be evacuated because of repeated Turkish air raids (Assist News Services, 4 August 2019). On 20 and 21 June 2020, the area surrounding Zakho in Dohuk district of the Kurdistan Region was a main target. According to an interview with the regional Chaldean archbishop in a report published by Asia News on 22 June 2020, Christian villages were bombed by Turkish aircraft, causing many Christians to flee and find refuge in houses and churches in Zakho. Five Kurdish civilians and a Turkish soldier were killed; there were also some minor injuries among Christians. A Christian

cemetery in Zakho was hit as well. In 2021 Turkish bombing raids on northern Iraq continued: In May 2021 Christian properties such as houses and two churches were damaged and an unknown number of hectares of crops were destroyed by fire in July 2021. Also in 2022 and 2023, Turkey continued its military operations in northern Iraq, preventing Christians from returning to their villages.

As long as these developments are not addressed and solved, Iraq will remain in a precarious situation. This is obviously to the detriment of all religious minorities and poses a threat to the very survival of the Church in Iraq.

Gender perspective

Within this context, the security of women remains under particular threat. According to Georgetown's 2021/22 Women, Peace and Security Index (GWPSI 2022 Iraq profile, p.27) there were numerous incidents of conflict-related violence. The [home](#) remains one of the most dangerous places for women in Iraq (Al-Monitor, 19 February 2023), and converts from Islam to Christianity, especially female converts, are at risk of severe persecution from their relatives ([Asia News, 3 September 2022](#)).

Trends analysis

1) Sectarian violence and corruption are hampering progress and democracy

Iraq was only given national status early in the 20th century, but was built on the ancient powerful kingdoms of Babylonia and Assyria. The ethnically and religiously diverse nation is suffering from sectarian violence and corruption which are the main factors hampering progress and the process of democracy. Closely related is the problem of impunity, which greatly affects the position of Iraq's Christians, and the rise of radical Islamic groups which do not tolerate any other religion than a strict and violent form of Islam. Although the general situation in Iraq remains far from stable, there are hopeful developments after IS was territorially defeated in December 2017, allowing Christians to return to a number of villages. However, since 2019, IS and Shia militias have stepped up their attacks on the population, security forces and infrastructure, and this is discouraging Christians from feeling at home and safe in Iraq. According to a church leader, Christians feel that the country is becoming more conservative in general, making it difficult for Christians - and even secular Muslims - to live there. Even in the IKR, which is known for a certain tolerance of religious minorities, especially compared to the rest of Iraq, the situation for Kurdish Christians (of Muslim background) seems to be getting more difficult.

2) The central government continues to be unable to guarantee the safe return of Christian IDPs

Many church leaders have said that living under the terror of IS and being driven away from their homes was the most severe persecution the Church in Iraq had experienced in recent times. Even during earlier waves of persecution, discrimination and intolerance, the Nineveh plains were never fully emptied of Christians as was the case starting in 2014. It was expected that the defeat of IS would improve the situation of Christians in Iraq. However, only when

Christian IDPs successfully return to their former homes and cities can any improvement in their situation take root and the majority of Christian IDPs are still not resettled. Land disputes are making it very difficult for the majority of them to return. Iranian-backed militias, Kurds, Arabs and others continue to occupy or expropriate land previously belonging to minorities in the Nineveh plains, in a competition to gain control of the once multi-ethnic region. Christians are in the weakest position because of their now small numbers and lack of external support.

The central government does little to ameliorate the situation and ignores pleas from community representatives. If the central government continues to be unable to guarantee the safe return of Christian IDPs, they may continue to face severe violations of their basic rights and leave Iraq. Many among the Christian youth in particular are prepared to leave if the opportunity arises due to the lack of security, future prospects and financial stability. Added to this are the attacks by Turkish forces in northern Iraq to drive away the PKK from its border with the IKR. This affects Christians as much as the Kurds targeted by the Turkish army. These attacks might not be singling out Christians but they serve as yet another destructive level of pressure on the community.

3) There is danger that the Christian situation may well become 'a secondary issue'

It is important to keep the spot-light on this new phase of state-building in Iraq. The danger is, now that IS is considered defeated, that the levels of pressure and violence targeting the Christian community will be ignored or dismissed as a secondary issue. As this dossier shows, religious freedom violations against Christians are rooted in many factors and it has not just been a product of radical Islamic attacks. Also, the demographic changes going on in the Nineveh plains are possibly an indication of more oppression to come in the future, especially if the government continues to be weak and impunity widespread.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: IRFR 2021 Iraq - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/IRAQ-2021-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>
- Recent history: Crisis Watch Iraq, March 2023 - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/database?location%5b%5d=87>
- Political and legal landscape: Agenzia Fides - http://www.fides.org/en/news/70598-ASIA_IRAQ_Political_party_of_Christians_announces_the_boycott_of_the_next_parliamentary_elections
- Political and legal landscape: Iraqi Constitution of 2005 - https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en
- Political and legal landscape: rape-marriage law - <https://www.msuilr.org/new-blog/2023/3/20/a-call-to-repeal-iraqs-rape-marriage-law>
- Political and legal landscape: Article 398 of the Penal Code - <https://www.refworld.org/docid/452524304.html>
- Political and legal landscape: domestic violence - http://www.ekrg.org/files/pdf/combat_domestic_violence_english.pdf
- Religious landscape description: Christmas as a national holiday - <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/25/world/iraq-christmas-holiday/index.html>
- Economic landscape: Labour Organization - <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=IQ>
- Economic landscape: World Bank Gender Data - <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/iraq>
- Social and cultural landscape: UN Refugee Agency - <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/iraq/>
- Social and cultural landscape: posters - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2015/12/christian-women-in-baghdad-face-intimidation-to-veil/>

- Social and cultural landscape: honor killings - <https://mepc.org/commentary/honor-killing-tiba-ali#:~:text=Honor%20Killings%20in%20Iraq%3A>
- Social and cultural landscape: report - https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/02/honor-killings-iraq-rekindle-efforts-criminalize-domestic-violence?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=daily%2022123%20February%2021%202023%20401&utm_content=daily%2022123%20February%2021%202023%20401+CID_47c2da3a02a387d429493557c885df48&utm_source=campmgr&utm_term=Honor%20killings%20in%20Iraq%20rekindle%20efforts%20to%20criminalize%20domestic%20violence#:~:text=Brig.%20Gen.%20Atiyah%20said%20the%20fact%20that%20Iraq%20does%20not%20have%20a%20law%20dealing%20specifically%20with%20domestic%20violence%20creates%20problems%20for%20the%20police%20as%20well.%C2%A0%C2%A0
- Technological landscape: Datareportal - <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-iraq>
- Technological landscape: Napoleon Cat - <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-iraq/2023/05/>
- Technological landscape: Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20 - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>
- Security situation: killing - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-50979463>
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WWL 2024: Church information / Iraq

Christian origins

Christians have been living in the region since the earliest days of the Christian Church. According to tradition, the Christian faith was brought to Mesopotamia by the Apostle Thomas on his way to India. During the 1st century AD in Edessa (today Urfa in south-east Turkey) Syriac churches were established. This branch of Christianity spread in its Syriac linguistic and cultural form and became the Church of Iraq, especially after its formalization at the Council of Ctesiphon (south of Baghdad) in 410 AD. At that council, the Syriac churches met to adopt the Nestorian brand of Christianity. The Roman Empire and its churches had declared Nestorianism a heresy at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD.

In the south, Arabic Christianity developed fast. The Arabic Kingdom of Hira had a bishop in 410 AD. This Arabic bishop and a significant part of the population accepted the Nestorian faith,

as did the last king, al-Nu'man (580-602 AD). Nestorians became the main Christian influence from the 5th century on until the Islamic invasions began in the 7th/8th century, crippling Church life.

According to Islamic tradition, Muslim armies occupied the area of Iraq in 633 AD. About three centuries later, the Church had become a minority due to Islamization. The Mongol take-over of Iraq (1258) brought great freedom to the Nestorian Church. This only lasted until the Mongol ruler Ghazan Mahmud (1295-1304) became a Muslim. During these 50 years of freedom, Roman Catholics came in the early 14th century, when Rome sent Dominican and Franciscan friars to proselytize the Chaldeans, Eastern Orthodox and Muslims.

In 1552, Roman Catholic mission bore fruit when the abbot of a Nestorian monastery in northern Iraq visited Rome and was installed as a Catholic bishop. He installed five more bishops in northern Iraq, but in 1675 this Church returned to the Nestorian Church. In 1830, another effort by Rome proved to have more lasting impact; many Nestorians joined the Uniate Chaldean-Catholic Church.

Protestant missionaries, on the other hand, did not arrive until the 19th century. Missionary societies embracing the principles of William Carey first came to the country in 1815 (starting with the Anglican Church Missionary Society). Another Protestant mission in Iraq was the London Jewish Society (arriving in 1820). Presbyterian missionaries came to Iraq in 1836 and built a church in Mosul in 1840. Samuel Zwemer and his team from the Reformed Church in America entered Basra in 1889. However, in general, Protestant Christianity failed to get firmly established in Iraq.

By the beginning of the 20th century, an estimated 30% of the population of what is now Iraq was Christian. The original Nestorian Church in Iraq was strong in the north, with Erbil as its center, but in World War I they lost over half of their members due to the Ottoman genocide when over 250,000 Christians died at the hands of the Turkish regime. This meant that in some areas one-third of the Christian community had perished.

Under the League of Nations, the Mesopotamian region became a mandate of Great Britain, which united the three dominate regions (Mosul, Basra and Baghdad) into a single nation, known today as Iraq. Shortly after Britain granted Iraq its independence in 1932, the Christian population fell to less than 8%. The number of Christians in Iraq further decreased as a result of sectarian violence following the Gulf wars and the US-led invasion in the 1990s and beginning of the 21st century. By the time of the ousting of Saddam Hussein in 2003, there were still over a million Christians in Iraq. Due to the civil war, and the brutal rule of IS in northern Iraq, those numbers have since dwindled considerably.

Church spectrum today

Iraq: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	47,100	30.6
Catholic	87,600	56.9
Protestant	10,000	6.5
Independent	70,100	45.5
Unaffiliated	5,000	3.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-65,600	-42.6
Total	154,200	100.1
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	12,100	7.9
Renewalist movement	33,700	21.9

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Iraq): The majority of Iraq's Christians (approximately 67%) are "Chaldean Catholics (an eastern rite of the Roman Catholic Church), and nearly 20 percent are members of the Assyrian Church of the East. The remainder are Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, Anglican, and other Protestants and evangelical Christians."

Most Christians in Iraq are concentrated in the IKR provinces. There is also a Christian concentration in Nineveh province. The Nineveh plains are among the so-called disputed areas between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Government of Iraq (GOI). After the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan in September 2017, most of the plains of Nineveh came back under the control of the Iraqi government. Very few Christians (non-converts) are left in Baghdad and only small numbers in Basra. Converts to Christianity can be found in all provinces of Iraq.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Most Christians in Iraq live in the north of the country, especially in the following provinces: Nineveh, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Dohuk and northern Kirkuk. Few Christians are left in Baghdad and Basra. The situation is particularly difficult for Christians in the south and center of the coun-

try. Christians have left most of the provinces there, with the exception of small groups of converts with a Muslim background.

Violations against converts - particularly in the form of *Islamic* and *Clan oppression* - tend to be more frequent in Arab than Kurdish areas. For a long time, the atmosphere in Kurdish areas had been more tolerant of non-Muslims. However, according to a country expert, that tolerance is now decreasing with the growing influence of conservative Islam, which is mainly reflected in increased pressure being exerted on converts from Islam.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians: Expatriate Christians have not been counted as a separate category according to WWL Methodology as they do not usually function as an involuntarily isolated group in Iraq.

Historical Christian communities: Churches such as the Assyrian Orthodox Church, the Chaldean Catholic or Syrian Catholic Church and the Armenian Church are all seriously affected by violations from radical Islamic movements and non-Christian religious leaders. They also face discrimination from government authorities. In central and southern Iraq, Christians often do not publicly display Christian symbols like a cross as this can lead to harassment or discrimination at check-points, university, work-place or government buildings. Most of the Christians in the IKR usually display Christian symbols without any problems, although in rare cases some have reportedly removed the crosses from their cars so as not to attract unwanted attention.

Converts: This category consists of Christians from a Muslim background. Converts from Islam experience most pressure from (extended) family and often keep their new faith a secret as they risk being threatened by their family members, tribal leaders and society around them.

Non-traditional Christian communities: Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal churches in Bagdad and Basra, are also seriously affected by violations from radical Islamic movements and non-Christian leaders, including discrimination from the authorities. To some extent, Evangelical Christians are also affected by opposition from (extended) family - especially where they previously belonged to a Historical Christian community. Outspoken Christians have regularly become targets in central and southern Iraq. Blasphemy laws can be used against them too if they are suspected of carrying out outreach among Muslims. For Evangelicals there is no legal framework for setting up a Bible school or for recruiting and registering organizations from the outside to support them in this.

WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Iraq

Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

Position on the World Watch List

Iraq: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	79	16
WWL 2023	76	18
WWL 2022	78	14
WWL 2021	82	11
WWL 2020	76	15

The score for Iraq increased from 76 points in WWL 2023 to 79 points in WWL 2024. The score for pressure remained at the same extreme level. The score for violence increased considerably from 4.6 to 7.8 points, due to four Christians being killed for their faith as well as there being an increase in arrests. There appears to be less tolerance than previously towards Christian converts from Islam in the north, where the Kurdistan Regional Government manages affairs.

Persecution engines

Iraq: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Strong
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Medium
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Strong

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Islamic oppression (Very strong)

Christians in Iraq experience *Islamic oppression* from Sunni and Shia Muslims irrespective of their ethnicity (Kurdish, Iranian, and Arab). Considering the high level of conservatism and strong collaboration of Sunni elements with Islamist insurgents, the line between who is an extremist and who is not, is somewhat blurred. The influence of Islamic militants has made Islamic consciousness a new factor in the country, including in the IKR in the north. In the Iraqi and Kurdish governments, the role of Islam is increasing due to regional developments. Several Shia parties have close relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Christian converts with a Muslim background in particular have for some time reported being monitored by Iranian secret service agents in areas close to the Iranian border. In general, Iraqi society is becoming more Islamic: Islamic dogma and rhetoric dominate daily life, and Islamic leaders (especially Shiites) continue to influence social, religious and political life. This is then reflected in social norms and practices that affect all people in Iraq and becomes a benchmark for non-Muslims as well. Social control of women is on the rise and even Christian women in Baghdad and Basra are forced to cover up in order to move around safely outside their homes.

Clan oppression (Strong)

Iraqi society is still very tribal, especially where areas have been disrupted by sectarian tensions and violence (mostly in territory previously controlled by IS). Tribes in Iraq have a very strong influence and impose their age-old customs and traditions on society. Compliance with this is often more important than adherence to government law, as tribes are usually above the law. Where this tribalism is mixed with Islam, it will mainly affect Christians with a Muslim background. A convert's tribal background - especially where it concerns a prominent tribe - can cause problems for other Christians and keep them from giving support to the convert. In some areas, tribal groups have influence within (and sometimes even over) the government.

Organized corruption and crime (Strong)

Corruption is deeply rooted in Iraqi society, right up to the highest levels and plays an important role in the persecution of Christians in Iraq both in the area controlled by the Government of Iraq (GOI) and in the IKR. Drivers of this engine are specifically putting Christians at a disadvantage when it comes to finding jobs and registering Christian companies; they are also known to take over properties belonging to Christians. In many majority Islamic areas, Christians can often only sell their houses at 60% of the price. Other examples are: i) The seizure of land belonging to Christians; in the GOI area, at least 70% of properties left behind by Christians fleeing the country have been illegally seized by organized criminal groups, which include very influential politicians and religious leaders. Similar phenomena can be observed in the IKR, where the perpetrators are influential tribal leaders who are affiliated with the ruling clan. The vulnerable position of religious minorities such as Christians is being exploited. ii) The killing and kidnapping of Christians; since 2003 this has occurred in waves, causing great concern over the insecurity they are forced to live with. These two reasons are among the main causes for Iraqi Christian emigration and for the depletion of the Christian community in Iraq. The COVID-19 crisis has further exacerbated this state of chaos and corruption.

Dictatorial Paranoia (Strong)

This engine is blended with *Islamic oppression*. The aim of staying in power whatever the cost has been a key issue in central Iraqi government and is fed by the patronage system, corruption and nepotism. This focus leads to failure in supporting a pluralistic society in which Christians (and other minorities) would feel truly welcome. In the north, there were reports in June 2018 of the Kurdish authorities confiscating 'Assyrian' land. Also, elements within the central government in Baghdad have attempted to arrange a longstanding, systematic campaign of demographic change of minority areas by facilitating land and housing for "Shia and Sunni Muslims to move into traditionally Christians areas", according to Christians in the region. Religious and political Christian leaders continue to renounce the fraudulent and forced appropriation of Christian-owned property. Finally, as in the 2018 parliamentary elections, Christians complained about the alleged exploitation of the electoral law in the 2021 parliamentary elections, when Kurdish and Shia Arab parties took the five quota seats reserved for Christians on the National Council and put forward Christian candidates that were not chosen by Christian parties but by parties that did not give priority to issues that were important to Christian communities and were not politically loyal to them.

Christian denominational protectionism (Medium)

Christian denominational protectionism was weaker when IS still had a territorial presence in Iraq and churches of many different denominations were more inclined to cooperate with each other. In Iraq, there are fourteen Christian denominations recognized by the state authorities, two of which are Protestant. If a new denomination applies for registration, the officially recognized churches are asked to approve the application. Often, they strongly object to registering non-traditional Protestant groups. Historical churches often try to prevent members of their congregations from visiting the newer church groups. Some Catholic churches refuse to allow Protestant Christians to bury their dead in Catholic cemeteries. As there are no non-traditional Christian cemeteries, this constitutes a hindrance. In southern and central regions of Iraq, Christians who have moved from a Historical church community to join a non-traditional Christian group can face threats and opposition from family members, tribal leaders and society around them. These threats include the risk of losing employment, inheritance or the means to marry. Bishops of Historical church communities have also been known to refuse to hold weddings for members who have been visiting Evangelical churches. Families and community sometimes disassociate themselves from such 'cross-denominational converts'.

Drivers of persecution

Iraq: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	-	-	STRONG	MEDIUM	-	-	STRONG	STRONG
Government officials	Strong	-	-	Very weak	Weak	-	-	Strong	Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	Strong	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	Weak	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	Weak	Strong	-	-	Very weak	-
Violent religious groups	Very strong	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	Strong	Strong
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	-	-	Weak	Weak	-	-	Strong	Medium
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	-	-	Strong	Medium	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Strong	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	Strong	Medium
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Strong	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	Strong	Weak
Organized crime cartels or networks	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Islamic oppression

- Violent religious groups (Very strong):** Violent religious groups such as IS and Shia militants are known to target Christians for kidnapping and murder. Whereas IS is still actively present in the areas of Khanaqin, Kirkuk and Mosul where they target minorities, Shia militias have now become one of the greatest sources of persecution against Christians. Militias have been known to expropriate Christians' land and are a particularly dangerous source of serious religious freedom violations against converts. (see above: *Security situation*). Examples of Shia militias (mostly affiliated with Iran and linked to Iraqi political parties) are: The Badr Corps, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades, the Army of The Mukhtar, the Brigade of Abi Fadl al-Abbas, Badr Affiliate of Iran (considered a terrorist

group by the USA) and Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army.

- **Extended family (Very strong):** Relatives are known to put severe pressure on Christians with a Muslim background to get them to return to Islam, and this sometimes includes attempts to kill them. Converts can face physical harm and abuse, detention, being disowned and expelled from the family home, being ostracized from clan, family and community, forced divorce (especially targeting women), forced marriage with a radical Muslim (especially targeting women) and loss of custody of children.
- **Government officials (Strong):** Some government officials (such as Bartalla District judge) are said to have tried to encourage demographic change by offering land and housing to Shia and Sunni Muslims in the historically Christian areas of the Nineveh plains, e.g. in Diyala and Babil provinces, including Jurf al-Sakhar district. Local authorities in some regions continued to verbally harass and restrict religious activities, according to representatives of minority religious communities. (Source: US State Department [IRFR 2019 Iraq](#)). Government officials have been responsible for anti-Christian poster campaigns, e.g. telling Muslims to boycott Christmas festivals, not to wish Christians well at Christmas and not to use Christmas decorations; or (through posters fixed to church buildings in the GOI area) telling Christian women to wear the hijab. Government officials who belong to radical Islamic groups can make it very difficult for Christians to complete all necessary paper work. Considering the high level of conservatism and strong collaboration of Sunni elements with Islamist insurgents, it is often unclear who is radical and who is not. Government officials are known to have arrested Christians with an Islamic background and have been involved in violent incidents against them.
- **Ethnic leaders (Strong):** If the new faith of converts from Islam to Christianity becomes known, ethnic leaders are very likely to put strong pressure on them to renounce their new faith. Some tribal elders have agreed to converts being killed. Finally there were reports of serious pressure by Yazidi leaders against converts to Christianity.
- **Political parties (Strong):** In the parliamentary elections of May 2018 and October 2021, a Shia political group and Kurdish parties manipulated the election to deprive Christians of their five 'quota seats'. In the past, some Shia political parties proposed laws, which discriminate against Christians, i.e. the new national ID law. This law stipulates that the children of a spouse who converts to Islam, will be automatically considered Muslim. Apart from Islamic political parties, ethnic, paramilitary and tribal groups have also at times formed parties that have had exclusivist agendas. Most of the Shiite militias mentioned above are connected to political parties or more specifically political leaders, such as Muqtada al-Sadr. Reportedly, Nouri al-Maliki, vice-president of Iraq from 2016 to 2018 and secretary-general of the Islamic Dawa party, is a major supporter of armed Shiite groups.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Another source of persecution, discrimination and intolerance are radical Islamic leaders, both Shia and Sunni, who directly influence politics and other aspects of life in Iraq. Their influence is reflected in i) discriminating policies, laws and administration practices against Christians, and ii) the very common use of hate-speech by Muslim leaders alienating Christians.
- **Normal citizens (Strong):** In the highly conservative Iraqi society, many Muslims view Christians as infidels and sometimes as 'crusaders' or as part of a 'Western plan'. In this context, the Evangelical community is sometimes viewed as promoting a Zionist program. Christians of a Muslim background tend to be seen as unbelievers who deserve death for

leaving Islam. Speeches by Islamic radicals in the IKR have sometimes led to protests or mobs destroying churches and shops which sell alcohol. Shops selling alcohol in Baghdad are also sometimes targeted. Since Muslims are not allowed to drink alcohol (according to their religious laws), the owners of these shops are often Christians or Yezidis. In previous years, Muslim citizens collaborated with IS or became part of militias that persecuted Christians - for instance in Mosul. This has greatly harmed the levels of trust Christians now have for neighbors and others in their communities. Normal citizens in all areas of Iraq have also put pressure on Christians with a Muslim background to make them return to Islam.

- **Organized crime cartels or networks (Medium):** Apart from political parties and some militia groups, criminal networks have also been involved in the confiscation of more than 30,000 Christian properties in Baghdad and other areas. This has taken place with impunity in spite of commitments by the Prime Minister's office to launch inquiries into the seizures (Source: US State Department [IRFR 2018](#) Iraq). Mafia-like groups are joining forces with real estate offices and confiscating Christian-owned properties by falsifying documents with relative impunity. In some cases, the Christian owners or tenants were threatened directly, which made them leave their homes.

Drivers of Clan oppression

- **Extended family (Strong), Ethnic leaders (Strong) and non-Christian religious leaders (Medium):** *Clan oppression* concerns the imposition of age-old norms and values shaped in 'tribal' context and is often blended with *Islamic oppression*. Belonging to and obeying a tribe is commonly seen as being more important than obeying national laws. Drivers of this engine are particularly families of converts and tribal, ethnic or Islamic leaders.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Iraqi political parties in general have contributed to reviving and strengthening tribalism in various ways. In some areas there are clans whose impact exceeds the influence of a particular party. If someone who violates another's rights belongs to this clan, no one can do anything to assert justice. In these cases, where the perpetrator belongs to the ruling group, Christians are a soft and easy target. Ethnic and tribal groups have at times formed parties that have had exclusivist agendas. Tribal pressures can especially affect converts to Christianity: If a convert's tribal background is known, this can seriously discourage other Christians from helping him or her due to the influence tribal groups have even at government level.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Political parties, government officials and normal citizens (Strong):** Government officials at all levels are reported to threaten Christians and 'encourage' them to emigrate. Also, citizens in the north have reportedly made remarks in public, questioning why Christians are still in Iraq. By failing to promote a pluralistic society, political parties also contribute to freedom of religion violations against Christians. Christians have complained about the alleged exploitation of the electoral law in the 2018 and 2021 parliamentary elections, when Kurdish and Shia parties took the quota seats reserved for Christians on the National Council and put forward their own Christian candidates. Religious, ethnic, paramilitary, and tribal groups have at times formed parties that have had exclusivist agendas. The same holds true for the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMU), an Iraqi umbrella organization funded

by the state, comprising some 40 militias, mainly Shia Muslim groups, but also Sunni Muslim, Christian and Yezidi groups, some of which form political arms to their military groups. Shiite and Sunni political parties are the biggest threat to Christians, whereas the pressure coming from nationalist parties (e.g. Kurdish) is lower. Sources said some government officials were trying to bring about demographic change by providing land and housing for Shia and Sunni Muslims to relocate to traditionally Christian areas in the Nineveh plains and Sunni areas in Diyala and Babil provinces. According to a source in the region, prominent members of Kurdish parties or persons loyal to them have been responsible for stealing money, property, land and factories belonging to Christians in the IKR. The relationship between Kurds and Assyrians is ambivalent. In some cases Assyrian nationalists say that Kurdish parties are trying to dominate their villages and region. But at the same time, Kurds have supported Christians, for instance by allowing new churches to be established.

- ***Violent religious groups, ethnic leaders (Strong) and revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Strong)***: Other drivers that will do virtually anything to strengthen their power are ethnic group leaders (e.g. Kurdish leaders) ethnic militias (e.g. the Shabak) and violent religious groups like IS, al-Qaeda and the Khorazan group. For example, Shabak and other minority groups have prevented Christians from returning to their villages and have de facto expropriated them in many places.

Drivers of Christian denominational protectionism

- ***Religious leaders of other churches (Strong)***: At a lower level of pressure, leaders of Historic churches have sometimes thwarted the official recognition of new Christian denominations. In one case, a Catholic leader used his influence to motivate the police to harass a Protestant pastor who was active in a traditionally Catholic village. The pastor and his team were detained on false accusations and the pastor was forced to leave the village. Some Catholic churches in IKR prevent Protestant Christians from burying their dead in Christian cemeteries. In Baghdad, Protestant denominations which are not (yet) recognized by the central government, have to make a payment to be able to bury their dead. The land is provided by the State and the cemetery is administered by the one Protestant denomination in Baghdad. In the IKR government, the Department for Christian Affairs is dominated by the Chaldean (Catholic) Church which influences and hinders some administrative practices.
- ***Extended family (Medium)***: Family members who change church affiliation - often this concerns leaving a historical church denomination for a newer, non-traditional one - are often frowned upon by other family members. Pressure is likely to be exerted to stimulate return to the traditional church.

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime

- ***Violent religious groups, government officials, organized crime cartels or networks (Strong)***: Government officials connected to criminal groups take advantage of their authority and falsify documents. Criminal groups link up with real estate offices and commit fraud to get hold of Christian-owned properties - mostly belonging to Christians who have fled. This has been going on for years and is still continuing in Baghdad. Members of military

forces are also known to have stolen factories that belonged to Christians in the south of Kirkuk Province. Even in the north of Iraq, most often cases of Christian property theft remain unresolved and without restoration of the rights of the owners. In central and southern Iraq, Christians are exposed to the threats of armed groups who force them to leave their country and flee for their lives. Other examples are Tel Keife and Bartella in the Nineveh plains region. The former is completely free of Christians (despite being a Christian-majority city prior to 2014) and the latter has become majority Shabak (Shia) despite being predominantly Christian before IS came. In both cases, militias created facts on the ground and maintained their position through the monopoly of violence. Minorities regularly complain about this situation and the impunity of 'the occupiers'. Yazidis, Christians, and local and international NGOs reported that members of the People's Mobilization Force (PMF) continued to engage in verbal harassment and physical abuse, at checkpoints as well as in the cities and surrounding areas which are controlled by PMF in the Nineveh plains region. According to Christians in the region, the PMF dominated Nineveh Province trade routes, forced merchants to pay bribes and controlled real estate in Christian areas" ([IRFR 2019](#)). In general drivers of this engine are mostly people in or close to political power or Shia militia backed by Iran. The kidnapping of Christians also often comes in the form of organized crime, having both financial and religious motives.

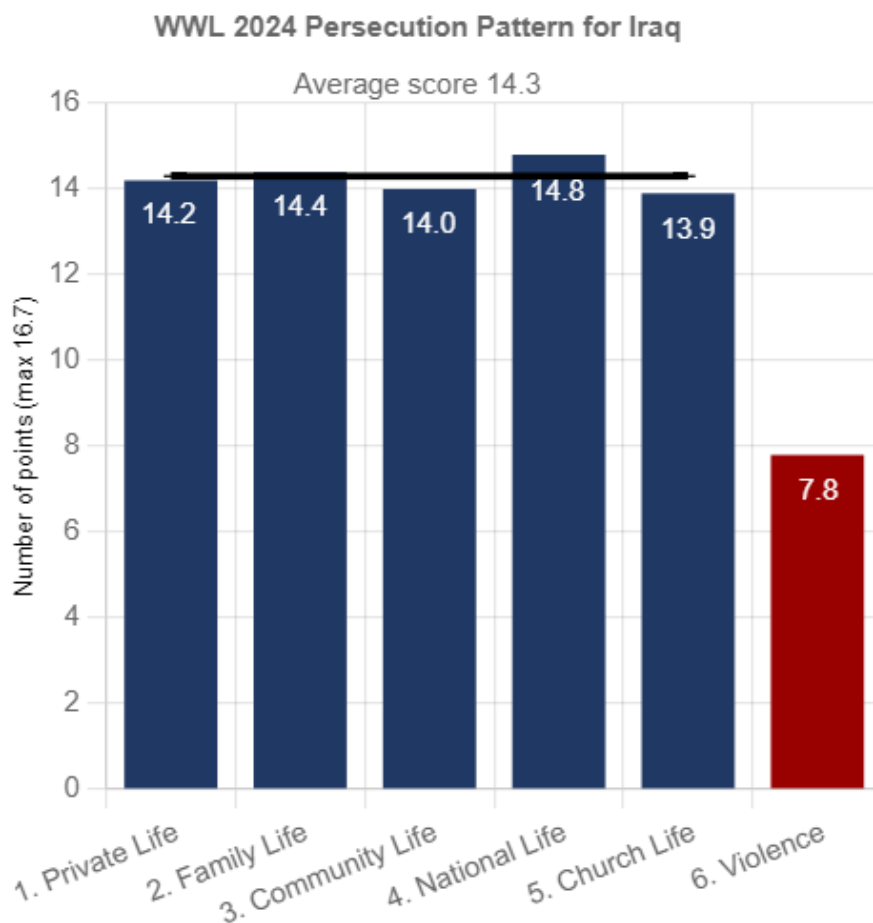
- **Political parties (Medium):** Apart from criminal networks and some militia groups, political parties have also been involved in the seizure of more than 30,000 Christian properties in Baghdad and other areas, in defiance of promises made by the Prime Minister's office to investigate the appropriations.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** Some citizens have become complicit in this process of appropriation of Christian properties by buying and moving into them. Individuals have also confiscated land from Christian villages and started building on it, despite the fact that the Christians have official papers which prove they are the owners. This is happening in various cities in the IKR, Nineveh plains, Mosul and Baghdad. Finally, Christians and other non-Muslims have reported corruption, nepotism and uneven application of the rule of law in employment which negatively affected the economic situation of non-Muslim communities and was one of the reasons for them to emigrate.

The Persecution pattern

The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Iraq shows (see chart below):

- The average pressure on Christians in Iraq remained at the extreme level of 14.3 points, the same as in the WWL 2022 and WWL 2023 reporting periods. Extreme levels of pressure are recorded in every *sphere of life*, which is typical for a situation in which there are many different persecution engines operating.
- Pressure from *Islamic oppression* affects all five *spheres of life* especially for converts. *Clan oppression* (blended with *Islamic oppression*) is most prevalent in the *Family* and *Private spheres of life*. *Organized corruption and crime* is mostly reflected in the *Community* and *National spheres of life*. *Christian denominational protectionism* particularly affects the *Church, Family* and *Private spheres of life*.

- The level of violence against Christians increased from high (4.6 points) in WWL 2023 to the very high level of 7.8 points in WWL 2024, an increase of 3.2 points. The increase is mainly explained by a higher number of Christians killed and arrested.



Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.75 points)

For converts from Islam, it is very risky to discuss Christian faith with extended family and others. Historical churches had experienced in the course of the centuries that they could not engage in discussions about faith outside their community or any activity that could be considered evangelization. For other Christian communities, talking to non-Christians about their faith always comes with the risk of alleged proselytization and subsequent harassment and possible violence.

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.50 points)

Iraqi law does not allow a Muslim to convert to another faith. As such, it is not possible for former Muslims to change their religion on identity cards. Converts will therefore still be officially registered as a Muslim (which would also apply to any children born to converts). Aside from significant social pressure, the greatest pressure comes from a convert's family which may issue death threats, place them under house arrest and carry out beatings and other forms of violence. Many have had to flee as a result. That is why many Christians with a Muslim background keep their faith secret.

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.50 points)

In a country heavily affected by sectarian violence (and even genocide in the past), the display of religious symbols comes with the risk of harassment, abduction and violence. This holds especially true for central and south Iraq, but also in some parts of the Nineveh plains such as Mosul. Indigenous Christians (not converts) wear and display Christian symbols and images in their private and public life except where they are living in very conservative Islamic communities. For converts from Islam, this would reveal their faith and is therefore very risky in the entire country, both in public and private life.

Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (3.50 points)

Converts from both Islamic and Yezidi backgrounds cannot talk to their families about their conversion for fear of social hostility and violence. Murders to restore family honor are still practiced in Iraq and can especially affect converts from Islam. Additionally, they may be beaten and expelled from home by their non-Christian family.

Block 1: Additional information

Of all Christians, it is converts who are the most restricted in their personal practice of faith. Converts cannot talk about their faith or possess Christian materials in a Muslim environment because they would face hostility and violence. In addition to being an 'apostate', talking about the Christian faith is viewed as an act of proselytism and betrayal. Pressure in this sphere of life was particularly high in central and southern Iraq and, to a lesser extent, in the IKR.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.12: Christian spouses of non-Christians have been excluded from the right or opportunity to claim custody of the children in divorce cases. (4.00 points)

Under Iraqi family law, which is based on Sharia law, custody of children generally goes to the Muslim parent. Children of converts are officially considered to be Muslims and, according to Sharia, a non-Muslim parent cannot raise a Muslim child. If the husband is a Christian, he will be required to give custody to the mother so that the children can be raised in accordance with Islamic law. If the mother is a Christian, she may also be allowed to take custody up to a certain age, but it is most likely that custody of the children will go to the Muslim parent, as most of the

judges are Muslim.

Block 2.1: Babies and children of Christians have automatically been registered under the state or majority religion. (3.50 points)

According to Article 26 of the 2015 National Identity Card Law, children under 18 with one Muslim parent will be registered as Muslim, even if the non-Muslim mother was raped by a Muslim man and the child is the result of sexual assault. Once registered as Muslim, they cannot change their religion back to Christian. In some cases, this has led to the emigration of converts from Islam and other Christians. Christians with an Islamic background face the same issue, since they cannot change their religion, their children will automatically be registered as Muslim.

Block 2.2: Registering the birth, wedding, death, etc. of Christians has been hindered or made impossible. (3.50 points)

This is impossible for Christians with an Islamic background, since the authorities will continue to consider them Muslim. As a result, the marriage of a former Muslim to a non-Muslim will not be recognized. Their children will be treated as Muslims in all aspects of their legal and social life. This issue has been exacerbated by those who were forced to convert to Islam by IS militants, including Christians who are now considered Muslims, because they had to appear in front of a court to declare their conversion to Islam. Finally, unregistered non-traditional Christian communities are not able to register weddings or deaths of their members.

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.50 points)

This is especially true for children whose parents have an Islamic background since they are considered Muslims and will be obliged to attend Islamic religious classes at all levels of education. To a lesser extent this can also affect indigenous Christians, particularly in majority Islamic areas under the Iraqi central government and in very conservative Islamic environments (e.g. Mosul). Pressure either from teachers or fellow students can play a considerable role here. In the entire country, by law, all schools (including Christian based ones) are required to hold regular Islamic classes and exams. Failing these exams means failing to move up in grades. Also, the national curriculum is geared towards Islam - this goes beyond classes for religious education and influences, for instance, lessons on history.

Block 2: Additional information

Converts from Islam often have to hide their Christian faith from their Islamic families due to the shame this brings to the family. They run the risk of otherwise being threatened and abandoned. Though under less pressure than converts, Christian families from other categories of Christians are restricted in several ways. In central and southern Iraq, children of Christian families who attend state schools are often discriminated against. Apart from getting lower grades than Muslim children, they are required to attend Quran lessons and are not allowed to explain their faith even when asked. Christian parents are careful what they share about their faith with their children. If the children were to talk about their faith in school – especially during Islamic classes – the family could face accusations of blasphemy. Christian children who refuse to attend Islamic

classes are often bullied and pressured into becoming Muslims. Also, Islamic dress can be forced on Christians in school. Some Christian girls have had to wear a headscarf at the university of Mosul. Converts were forced to either register their child as a Muslim or "have the children remain undocumented by federal authorities, thereby denying them the ability to legally convert from Islam. They said that remaining undocumented affected the family's eligibility for government benefits, such as school enrollment and ration card allocation for basic food items, which are determined by family size," as the US State Department mentions in IRFR 2022 Iraq.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (3.50 points)

Discrimination of Christians is pervasive in Iraq. The lack of accountability (caused by the civil war and numerous militias that are not controlled by the central government) has left persecutors unpunished. Discrimination takes place on a daily basis in Iraq, even in the IKR. Discrimination based on dress codes, crosses in cars etc. is commonplace. Christian women of all Christian communities are put under pressure to wear a head-covering in Baghdad and Basra. Even in the north of the country (Dohuk, Zakho and some areas of Erbil) there is a growing social pressure on Christian women to wear a headscarf.

Block 3.3: Christians have been under threat of abduction and/or forced marriage. (3.50 points)

Christian women from an Islamic background risk their lives if their new faith is known and they could be forced to marry a Muslim. There is a widespread fear of rape and other forms of violence among women from all Christian communities which could lead them to be married to the rapist, a situation which is supported by law: Rape in Iraq is not prosecuted if the rapist marries the women he violated, in order to restore the family honor. As such, women (including Christians) could be forced to marry their attacker.

Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.50 points)

The main disadvantage which Christians face in education is the Islamic focus of the religious education syllabus and the overall disregard of the contribution of 'other' communities to the history of Iraq. This engenders a mentality of Christians being subordinate to Muslims and causes Christians and other non-Muslim communities not to be considered an inherent, indigenous part of Iraq's history and culture. Some of the official teaching materials, in governmental schools and universities, even define Christians as infidels and enemies and incite *jihad* against them. Also, there are reportedly few Christians obtaining scholarships or higher positions within the education system and universities. Christian students have complained that some Muslim university professors (intentionally) set exams during Christian festivals (Christmas and Easter). Finally, Assyrian schools have reported that they face neglect and discrimination, not receiving the full funding they are entitled to or the textbooks they need.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

Since a person's religion is stated on their ID card, it is easy to discriminate against Christians in the public sector. Christians, even those who are highly qualified, are not getting equal opportunities for employment or reaching higher positions. Although Christians hold senior positions in the national parliament and central government, they feel generally under-represented in government appointments and elected positions and particularly in public sector jobs (especially at provincial and local levels) which limits minorities' access to government-provided economic opportunities.

For Christians from an Islamic background the situation is far more difficult: They are likely to lose their job as soon as their new faith gets known (for instance, by not fasting during Ramadan). In such cases, they will not receive any official documentation or letter of recommendation, thus making it very hard for them to find another position, especially with larger firms.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points)

Although the Constitution acknowledges basic human rights and religious freedom and Iraq is a signatory of all treaties and agreements relating to human rights, a number of laws go against the principles which guarantee the religious freedom of Christians. For instance: The constitutional acknowledgment that Iraq is an Islamic country and that no laws can be issued which are contrary to Islam or Islamic principles. Iraqi laws allow conversion from other faiths to Islam, but it neither allows nor recognizes the conversion from Islam to other religions or beliefs. The ID law stipulates that if a person converts to Islam, all his/her children are considered Muslims, including his/her children from earlier marriages. According to personal-status law, in a marriage where one of the spouses is a Muslim, the right of divorce, child-custody and inheritance goes almost automatically to the Muslim party.

Block 4.6: Christians have been barred from public office, or has promotion been hindered for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)

Representatives of Christians communities regularly complain that they are under-represented in the public sector, particularly at provincial and local levels. Christians have complained about the alleged exploitation of the electoral law in the 2018 and 2021 parliamentary elections, when Kurdish and Shiite parties took the quota seats reserved for Christians on the National Council and put forward their own Christian candidates. Generally speaking, as in most of the rest of the Middle East, Christians are not allowed to reach the highest ranks in certain institutions, such as the armed forces. Sometimes Christians have been challenged to become Muslim in order to receive promotion.

Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (3.75 points)

Most of the perpetrators of crimes against Christians are not held accountable. Christians from an Islamic background are even more vulnerable in this respect, especially where it concerns 'honor crimes' by their family. The central government does not exert control over militias, particularly in the Nineveh plains region. Cases of expropriation, destruction, abduction and murder in the IS and post-IS period have not been prosecuted.

In spite of the great number of Christian homes and Christian property being seized, the number of those who have been brought to justice is nominal. As reported by ICN on 9 June 2015: "In an interview with Al-Mada TV station, Mohammed al-Rubai, a member of Baghdad's municipal council, said: 'Almost [70 per cent of Baghdad's Christian homes](#) have been illegally seized. These houses belonged to Christians who fled from Baghdad, seeking refuge from violent attacks targeting them and their homes. The title deed documents have been falsified and the new title deeds have been lodged with the real estate registry. Many properties had been given illegally to other Iraqi citizens. Thus, it is possible that both parties [the original and new owners] can possess legally registered title deeds to the same property. The area's most affected where in the al-Wahda neighborhood of Baghdad.'"

Block 4.15: Christians accused in court have been deprived of equal treatment. (3.75 points)

Christians face the same degree of discrimination in Iraqi courts as they do in public life and politics. They risk being treated as second class citizens, unless they have personal contact to people in high levels of government.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.7: Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts. (4.00 points)

It would not be possible to integrate Christians with an Islamic background in a church located in the town or city where the converts originate from. Most of the time, converts have to leave their home-town for security reasons and find Christians in the anonymity of a large city - or leave the country for good. If it is known that a church integrates converts, it will become a target and might be closed. (The exception is in the IKR where some Kurdish churches have been able to integrate Kurdish converts. Regardless of the relatively greater freedom in the IKR, they are still closely watched and potentially at risk.)

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (4.00 points)

It is generally difficult for churches or Christian organizations to speak out publicly against those who persecute Christians, except when this concerns crimes committed by IS. In Iraq, instigators of major acts of persecution are usually high-ranking religious and political leaders with considerable influence and military power. Christian leaders are very careful in how they formulate criticism and accusations. Christian leaders who have been more vocal in this respect have received threats to remain silent. Some people who have criticized the government, its militias or its political parties have been killed.

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (3.50 points)

It is generally difficult for churches or Christian organizations to speak out publicly against those who persecute Christians, except when this concerns crimes committed by IS. In Iraq, instigators of major acts of persecution are usually high-ranking religious and political leaders with considerable influence and military power. Christian leaders are very careful in how they formulate criticism and accusations. Christian leaders who have been more vocal in this respect have received threats to remain silent. Some people who have criticized the government, its militias or its political parties have been killed.

Block 5.6: Work among youth in particular has been restricted. (3.50 points)

Youth work is only allowed inside church buildings; also, youth camps and other events can only take place inside the walls of a church compound and are not permitted outside. Church youth work can only be focused on Christian youth; no youth work is possible among the majority Muslim population. Unauthorized Christian communities that meet in a house or shop may face problems from the local police as a result of social pressure and Muslim neighbors who do not want to have these gatherings near their homes.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*

- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

3. The use of symbolic numbers: *In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

Iraq: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	4	1
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	1	0
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	3	1
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	2	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	10 *	63
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	10 *	10 *
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	2	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	35	10 *
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	10 *	100 *
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	10 *	100 *
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	22	100 *
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	100 *	100

In the WWL 2024 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** Four Christians were killed for their involvement in Christian activities/ ministry. For security reasons no further details can be shared.
- **Church closed:** A church in IKR was reportedly forced to stop using its buildings for worship and to reduce public activities amid accusations of blasphemy against its leader. Sectarian tensions increased after Islamic fundamentalists republished his comments on social media comparing the lives of Jesus and the Prophet of Islam. This sparked strong reactions among Muslims, increasing pressure on Christians in general.
- **Christians physically or mentally abused:** There were reports of at least 35 Christians physically (or mentally) abused for their faith, most of whom were converts from Islam.
- **Christians detained:** several Christian converts from Islam were detained for Christian activities.
- **Christians forced to marry:** At least two converts to Christianity were reportedly forced to marry.
- **Christian homes, properties, shops or businesses attacked or confiscated:** Confiscation and seizure of Christian lands and other properties in both the Kurdish region as well as the rest of Iraq continued. Reports included document-tampering and forgery concerning Christian properties in Iraq. According to research, the perpetrators also included Iraqi politicians.
- **Christians forced to leave their homes:** Many Christian families are still leaving Iraq due to the instability of the security situation in their areas; partly because of the presence of militias in the Nineveh plains. Their disadvantaged position as a vulnerable minority plays a major role in this. Among them were several Christians of Muslim background who went abroad for reasons directly related to their faith.

5 Year trends

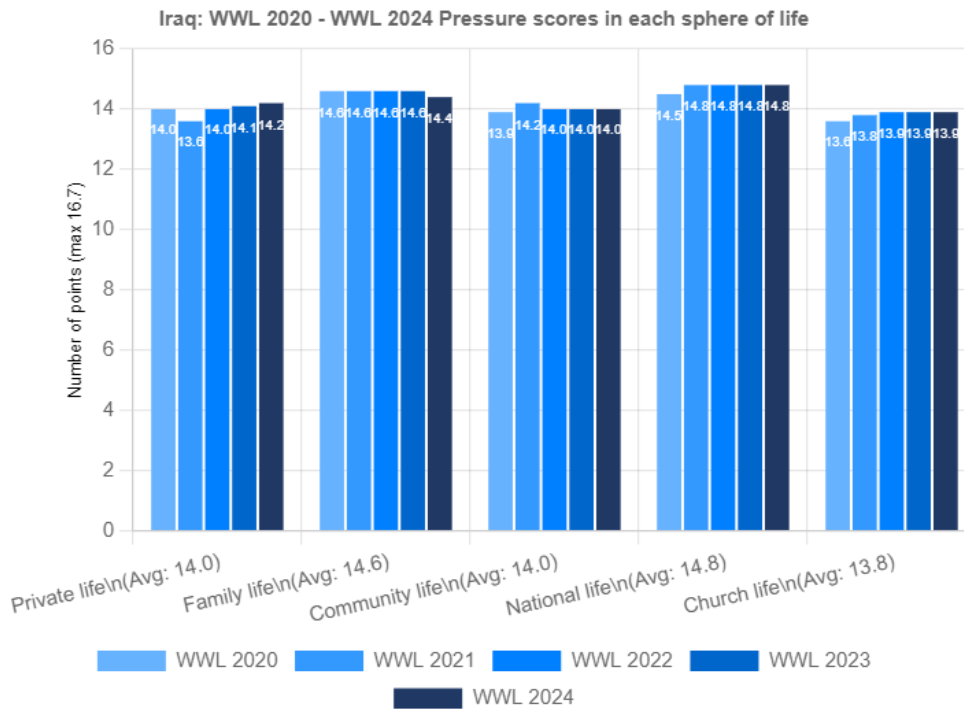
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Iraq: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	14.3
2023	14.3
2022	14.3
2021	14.2
2020	14.1

The average pressure over all 5 WWL reporting periods has been stable at an extreme level, remaining within the range 14.1-14.3 points.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The graph above shows that pressure in all *spheres of life* has been fairly stable at an extreme level for the last five reporting periods. The fact that *Family Life* and *National Life* score so high is characteristic of a situation where *Islamic oppression, Clan oppression, Dictatorial paranoia* as well as *Organized corruption and crime* are the predominant persecution engines.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



In the WWL 2020, WWL 2022 and WWL 2023 reporting periods, violence against Christians showed a significant decrease. In WWL 2021, a sharp increase in violence was observed, mainly due to the closure of a significant number of churches after predominantly Christian villages were vacated as a result of the Turkish attacks in the north. The decrease in WWL 2022 and WWL 2023 was mainly because fewer Christians were killed (WWL 2022) and fewer churches were attacked (WWL 2022, WWL 2023).

In the reporting periods WWL 2021-WWL 2023, Turkish attacks in northern Iraq were one of the factors contributing to the violence score. Although Turkish attacks continued in the north in WWL 2024, there were no reports of major damage to predominantly Christian villages. However, there were several incidents of violence, particularly against converts from Islam to Christianity.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse; Forced marriage
Security	Abduction; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Targeted Seduction; Violence – death; Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Enforced religious dress code; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Following years of atrocious treatment of women from religious minorities during the war against IS, survivors of sexual enslavement who returned to their families carry the shadows of their trauma, as they work to reestablish their lives. Women remain unprotected from gender-based violence and due to social stigma associated with sexual violence, victims often choose to remain silent. Rape victims – who can be forced to marry their rapist under Iraqi law – often choose not to report incidents of assault to avoid such a fate. A country expert explains “there is a widespread fear among women...as rape in Iraq will not be prosecuted if the rapist marries the woman he has violated. To restore family honor, women, including Christians, may be forced to marry their attacker”. If the rapist is a Muslim, the child born out of rape will be registered as Muslim as well, regardless of the mother’s faith.

Within the wider community, Christian women are often viewed as being loose and free. Women have reported that they have suffered sexual harassment and vulgar threats because of this perception, including in the workplace. There are ongoing reports that Christian Iraqi girls, especially teenagers, are at heightened risk of harassment, verbal and sexual abuse when travelling by public transport, because their faith is clearly visible. A country expert shared that “it is socially acceptable to harass women on the street who do not conform to dress codes”. As

a result, in some areas, Christian women and girls must wear veils (as Islamic women do) for their own safety.

Female converts from Islam are vulnerable to violations of their fundamental rights for their faith. A country expert explained: “Kurdish/Iraq society is a male controlled environment. When a female might become a Christian, things will likely turn out very bad for her, and she might be abused, locked up, and even killed”. Pressure comes most often from the wider family. A convert risks house arrest, beatings, sexual harassment, abduction and even being killed to restore the “honor” to the family ([Al-Jazeera, 8 March 2021](#)). If single, a female convert may be forcibly married to a conservative Muslim. Further adding challenges, female converts from Islam cannot officially marry male Christians, as the Iraqi state still considers them to be Muslim; Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslims.

Whilst not reported in this WWL 2024 reporting period, there remains a live risk that Christian girls without a convert background may be “lured” by Muslim men, who then harass them and coerce them into marriage. There have been reports in the past of even married Christians being targeted for seduction in such a way. A country expert summarizes: Overall, living in Iraq, “girls face social constraints and expectations that can make living out their faith particularly challenging”. Christian women – especially converts from Islam - suffer from unequal treatment in all sectors of Iraqi society.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Economic harassment via fines
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government; Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Security	Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – death
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

Christian men face various forms of pressure in Iraq. In particular, job discrimination affects men belonging to all WWL categories of Christian communities, especially those working in the public sector. Christians in central and southern Iraq have been put under pressure to leave their jobs, especially if they are working for foreign organizations or are employed at higher levels of society (e.g. government companies). In the north, Christians often struggle to get employment and allegedly feel vulnerable and prone to exploitation at their workplaces. Christian business owners also face discrimination, including closure, boycott and attacks on their business, causing many to emigrate. In this mostly traditional and tribal Iraqi society, men are often the primary breadwinners for their families and losing their jobs or income can have a considerable

effect on Christian families.

Male converts from a Muslim background are particularly vulnerable to violations. In a culture where retaining honor means everything, they risk being ejected from their families, threatened or killed. Men from Christian background also risk being killed for their faith, the perpetrators being mostly violent Islamic militants. These factors greatly increase the already strong motivation for emigration; the loss of Christian men not only affects their direct families, but also the local churches which consequently find themselves confronted with a lack of potential leadership.

There have been several incidents of the movement of priests being prevented, blocking them from delivering services to parishioners. Travelling through checkpoints is risky for Christians, who are often stopped or harassed. Further weakening the Church, priests and Christian leaders (the majority of whom are men) remain vulnerable to imprisonment, kidnappings and killings, particularly in the Nineveh plains region. A country expert shared that it is “very dangerous for pastors and priests these days”. This may particularly be if they are considered to be speaking out against political leaders or militias, and (according to another expert) is “a common method used by Shiite militants to target Christians in Iraq”. There is not only direct harm and distress to the individual who is kidnapped, but also ransom demands which impose severe financial pressure on their families. Further, a country expert observes how churches and church leaders (typically male) are targeted: “Before it was more a matter of evident and fierce act of violence by terrorist groups, now is becoming more subtle and tacitly understood as a general state of the affairs in a country severely hit by years of conflict.”

Persecution of other religious minorities

Other religious minorities facing persecution, discrimination and intolerance in Iraq include: Yazidis, Sunnis, Kakai, Sabaeen-Mandaeans, Bahai, Zoroastrians, Shabak, and Jews. According to USCIRF 2023 Iraq, many of these minority groups have been displaced and continue to struggle to return and rebuild their homes, even after the defeat of IS. The recurrent Turkish airstrikes and attacks by IS have further instilled fear among these communities, hindering their ability to rebuild and return.

The Yazidi community

Yazidis in particular have faced severe atrocities by IS, with more Yazidi women and girls becoming sex slaves and more Yazidis being killed compared to Christians. Although the Yazidi Survivors Law passed in March 2021 grants special rights to survivors, such as compensation and rehabilitation, its full implementation is still pending. Amnesty International has called for additional support in November 2021, including specific reparations for children born as a result of sexual violence during captivity. Yazidi women who gave birth under IS captivity are reportedly still required to register their children as Muslims and convert to Islam for official documents, leading to difficulties in obtaining civil documentation and increased vulnerability for the children, while some Yazidis rejected these children, resulting in social exclusion for the survivors.

The Turkish airstrikes in the Sinjar region, along with the presence of militias and checkpoints, have further exacerbated the situation for Yazidis, making it difficult for them to rebuild their lives. According to USCIRF 2022: "These operations disproportionately impacted ethnic and religious minority groups, particularly Yazidis, in Sinjar and Dohok, impeding their ability to resettle in their original communities and to worship safely. The Turkish government reportedly made little effort to minimize or avoid civilian casualties." The presence of armed members of the PKK and Popular Mobilization Forces has also posed a threat to internally displaced persons from minority religious groups.

The Sunni community

Sunni Muslims have also reported human rights violations, including forced expulsion by government-affiliated Shia militias and discrimination through the process of de-Baathification. Militias under the Popular Mobilization Forces have targeted Sunni Arab Muslims, accusing them of links to IS and making it challenging for them to return to their areas of origin. The Iraqi government has not intervened in the actions of these militias.

Other faith communities

While the Iraqi Constitution guarantees freedom of religion for Christians, Yazidis, and Sabean Mandaeans, it does not explicitly protect adherents of other religions or atheists. Certain religions, such as the Bahai faith and Wahhabi Sunni Islam, are banned by law, and practicing the Bahai faith can lead to imprisonment. However this ban is not enforced in the IKR where the Bahai faith is recognized as a religion. Also in other parts of the country this law is generally not applied. Finally, Jews also face restrictions, including being barred from government jobs and military service, resulting in widespread discrimination and reluctance to publicly identify as Jewish.

Examples of incidents of persecution

IRFR 2022 Iraq:

- "In April [2022], the Yazidi community in Sinjar District reported that the PKK had kidnapped hundreds of Yazidi children from Sinjar and the al-Hol camp in Syria and subjected them to ideological 'brainwashing' since the group had assumed control of parts of the area in 2015, with the aim of recruiting them."

USCIRF 2023 Iraq:

- A military operation by Iraqi forces against Yazidi fighters in May displaced at least 3,000 Yazidi civilians "— already traumatized by recent displacement and by recurrent Turkish airstrikes — in their 'largest exodus' since the 2014 genocide".
- In 2022 it was reported that at least 2,763 Yazidi women and girls kidnapped by IS in Sinjar were still missing.
- "In February, the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court further limited the political representation of Yazidis, Shabaks, and Feyli Kurds, forcing those minorities to campaign within the already severely circumscribed Christian and Mandaean components."

- In May 2022 the Iraqi Parliament passed a law criminalizing attempts to normalize relations with Israel.

[Middle East Institute, 5 July 2023:](#)

- "In April 2023, Yazidis became the target of a campaign of hate speech and false accusations, which included rhetoric that condoned the crimes committed against them by IS. The proliferation of hate speech on social media started after Yazidis were wrongly accused of burning a mosque in Sinjar district² during a peaceful demonstration against the return of families suspected of being affiliated with IS."

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Islamic oppression

Based on Crisis24's country report, the threat of the Persecution engine *Islamic oppression* from the side of violent Islamic militants is not expected to diminish significantly in the short-term:

- "There is an extreme risk of terrorism and IS remains a threat throughout Iraq, primarily in western provinces; however, attacks in major cities including Baghdad remain possible. ... Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), government officials, security installations, public areas and religious events are repeatedly targeted in suicide and car bomb attacks. ... Geopolitical tensions remain elevated after the US staged an airstrike that killed Iran's top security and intelligence commander, Major General Qassem Suleimani, in Baghdad on January 3, 2020. The attack resulted in increased anti-US sentiment, and it is likely Iran-backed Shiite groups will continue to target US military and diplomatic interests in the country in retaliation."

Since Christians are often considered to be an extension of the USA or the West in general, this increased risk of attacks, extortion as well as kidnappings can also affect them. Therefore, Christians in Iraq are concerned that any future absence of US troops will make minority communities more vulnerable to attacks by IS. IS ideology is still very much alive and is not limited to geographical territory. There are also al-Qaeda remnants, Shiite militias and other militant Islamic groups emerging. Pressure also comes from Shiite leaders and government officials who sometimes make offensive public statements against Christians. Meanwhile in the IKR in the north, the focus on Islamic identity is reportedly increasing.

Since October 2023, a new threat emerged in the form of continued attacks by Iraqi militias on US positions in the country during the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. Islamic sentiment has increased also as a result of the Quran burnings in the summer of 2023 in Sweden and Denmark, as well as the accusation against two Christians of Muslim background posting messages on social media deemed to be insulting Islam. In politics and in society in general, the emphasis on the role of Islam is strong and this confines Christians within narrow socio-political limits.

In the longer term, Christians in the country are concerned about the effects of the Iraqi Islamic Party's Islamic awareness and education campaigns. They are especially afraid of the effect on

the next generation, as this group is well trained and supported to study the law and be appointed to the courts. As far as youth is concerned, IS children in camps in Mosul are also a concern: Years later, these children will form an entire generation raised in IS principles, values and mindset. Consequently, *Islamic oppression* is expected to continue to be a threat to Iraq's Christians, leading to high levels of fear and encouraging them to emigrate.

Clan oppression

The loss of IS as a common enemy as well as the declining influence of the USA and the subsequent power vacuum are all factors which are likely to increase divisions between tribal and sectarian groups, making the impact of the persecution engine *Clan oppression* stronger. Pressure is thereby likely to increase on all categories of Christian communities, including those in Kurdish areas - but particularly on converts from a Muslim background, who suffer most where this engine is strong.

Dictatorial paranoia

Amid the increased tensions between different population groups, Christians face the risk of being caught between clashing parties, leading to Christians relocating to safer areas. They could also be pulled along or used in the political power-struggle, a development which will cause the persecution engine *Dictatorial paranoia* to grow in influence. In 2023, this was evident in the escalating conflict between Chaldean Catholic Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako and the also Chaldean militia leader of the Babylon Brigade, Ryaan al-Kaldani, associated with Iran. This led Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid to withdraw special recognition for Cardinal Sako, causing fear and prompting the Chaldean Catholic Church to move its headquarters to the Kurdish KRG in July 2023.

Iran's influence in Iraq - also through state-sponsored Shiite militias could lead to repercussions for Iraqi Christians who have often been perceived as agents of the West. Moreover, certain PMU militias are accused of receiving arms from Iran and of allowing a headquarters of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps to be set up in areas under their control. This could turn Iraq into a potential conflict zone for possible future military confrontation between Iran and the USA. The persecution engine *Dictatorial paranoia* is also evident where the central Iraqi government fails to support a pluralistic society in which religious minorities such as Christians would be truly welcome.

Organized corruption and crime

Christians cite financial and administrative corruption as a major reason for wanting to emigrate. Christian representatives in the 2018 and 2021 parliamentary elections were put under pressure by Shia and Kurdish parties to serve their interests. Corruption is deeply rooted in Iraqi society and rampant in both IKR and Baghdad governments and there is a long road ahead for this ever to change. If economic and political instability continues, organized corruption and crime is likely to thrive. Given the after-effects of the COVID-19 crisis, no early improvement in the economic situation is to be expected, meaning that Christians and other minorities are likely to suffer even more from this engine in the near future.

Christian denominational protectionism

It is hard to say how this persecution engine will develop. In the recent past, Christians of many different denominations worked together well, especially in the area of relief aid. The relationship between Historical Christian communities and non-traditional Christian communities however remains complex and some reports point to a recent increase in tension. The need to cooperate still exists but factors such as the increased fragmentation along tribal lines and churches in many areas fighting for survival, could also work against this. Frequently, *Christian denominational protectionism* is just one factor in the wider debate surrounding the future of Christians in the country and their socio-political and national identity.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Drivers of persecution description: IRFR 2019 Iraq - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iraq/>
- Drivers of persecution description: IRFR 2018 - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/IRAQ-2018-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>
- Drivers of persecution description: IRFR 2019 - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iraq/>
- Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (3.75 points): 70 per cent of Baghdad's Christian homes - <https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/27645>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Al-Jazeera, 8 March 2021 - <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/3/8/as-if-she-had-never-existed-the-graveyards-for-murdered-women>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Middle East Institute, 5 July 2023 - <https://www.mei.edu/publications/addressing-challenges-tolerance-and-religious-diversity-iraq>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Iraq>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.