

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
14

Iraq



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).¹ Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

Key findings

The main focus of the pressure on Iraqi Christians following the territorial loss of Islamic State (IS) has been the Shia militias backed by Iran. However, in the first half of 2020, IS also stepped up its attacks on civilians, infrastructure and security forces. In several areas of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), Turkey continued its air strikes and ground operations, reportedly targeting members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In June 2020, as well as May 2021, Christian villages were bombed in Turkey's largest

¹World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

operation in the area since 2015, forcing many Christians to flee. Christians were not protected by the local government. The historical churches (Assyrian Church of the East, Syrian Orthodox Church, Syrian Catholic Church, Chaldean Catholic Church and Armenian Orthodox Church) are seriously affected by violence, intolerance and discrimination, especially from militant Islamic groups and non-Christian leaders. They also face discrimination from government authorities. Several years ago, the Catholic seminary in Baghdad had to move to the IKR following threats of kidnapping and attacks by Islamic militants. Evangelical churches in Baghdad and Basra are also targets of violence by radical Islamic groups and non-Christian leaders, and face discrimination by the authorities. Christians with a Muslim background experience most pressure from family members and often keep their faith a secret. They risk losing inheritance rights and the right or means to marry. Leaving Islam can even be risky in the more moderate Islamic IKR. Changing church affiliation (e.g. by moving from an Orthodox to an Evangelical congregation) is often punished by refusal of rights. For instance, the right to inheritance, the means to marry or the right to bury their dead in traditional Christian cemeteries may be denied. Leaders of Orthodox and Catholic churches have been known to refuse to perform marriages for members attending Evangelical churches.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Barham Salih

POPULATION

42,612,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

166,000 (0.4%)²

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary Republic



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	166,000	0.4
Muslims	41,630,000	97.7
Agnostics	221,000	0.5
Others	512,990	1.2

OTHERS include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Source³

Authoritarian leader Saddam Hussein was toppled in 2003 by a US-led military campaign. In the ensuing power vacuum, sectarian violence flared up, particularly between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Christians were

caught in the crossfire. Anti-Western and radical Islamic sentiments increased following the 2003 Anglo-American invasion, which contributed to religious freedom violations against Iraqi Christians. A stream of refugees started leaving the country, exacerbated by the proclamation of an Islamic State caliphate in June 2014. After large parts of IS territory were reconquered in 2016, Christians started to return to the liberated, previously majority-Christian towns close to Mosul, such as Qaraqosh. In December 2017, the then-Prime Minister declared Iraqi forces had driven IS from Iraqi territory. However, IS influence remains in the region.

Mustafa al-Kadhimi became Prime Minister in May 2020 following nationwide mass protests against corruption, unemployment and Iran's growing influence,

²Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

³Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

which left hundreds dead. The political representation of Christians is very low (1-3%). Several Shiite parties have warm relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Baghdad government is putting pressure on the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to become increasingly Islamic. Islam is the [state religion](#) and no law may contravene Islamic tenets. There is an atmosphere of instability and fragility, given the sectarian conflict fought in parliament and in the streets. Though Iraq is an ethnically and religiously diverse nation, society is becoming more fragmented and Islamized. As the Christian population dwindles, so do their freedoms. This includes more monitoring, the closing of shops during Ramadan and pressure on Christian women to veil themselves. Internally displaced people (IDPs) in Kurdistan have difficulties integrating due to the language barrier. Many citizens are traumatized after years of war and violence and there is a high prevalence of learning disorders among children. Around 18% of the population are in need of humanitarian help and more than 3.3 million Iraqis have been internally displaced since 2014.

The Iraqi government has placed limits on internet access in order to curb criticism and protests. The Freedom House 2021 report shows that online activities face forms of control such as retribution for social media posts on controversial topics, defamation law suits and arrests. There are more than 40 militias of different sizes which contribute to insecurity for all Christians and violations against converts from Islam to Christianity. The major player in the current situation in Iraqi Kurdistan is Turkey.

Of the Arab population, Shiite Muslims form the majority. The Kurds in the north are mainly Sunni. 64-69% of Iraq's Muslims are Shiites and 29-34% are Sunnis. Mistrust between them and competition for power in a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq have fueled sectarian violence. [The majority](#) of Iraq's Christians are Chaldean Catholics; almost 20% are members of the Assyrian Church of the East. There are approximately 2,000 registered members of Evangelical churches in the IKR. Symbolic political steps, such as the introduction of [Christmas as a national holiday](#) in December 2018, were opposed by Islamic authorities including the Grand Mufti of Baghdad, who said in a sermon that Christian holidays like Christmas are impermissible for Muslims to celebrate.

How the situation varies by region

Most Christians in Iraq live in the north of the country, in Kurdistan. Few Christians are left in Baghdad

and Basra. The situation is particularly difficult for Christians in the south and center of the country. 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 stronger in Arab than Kurdish areas.

Who is affected?

[Communities of expatriate Christians](#)

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

[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, workplace or government buildings. Most Christians in the IKR usually portray Christian symbols without any problems.

[Converts to Christianity](#)

This category consists of Christians from a Muslim background or cross-denominational converts from a historical Christian community background who now worship with non-traditional Christian communities. 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. Changing church (from an Orthodox to an Evangelical congregation, for example) is also often punished by refusing rights or losing employment.

[Non-traditional Christian communities](#)

Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal churches in Bagdad and Basra are seriously affected by violations from radical Islamic movements and non-Christian leaders, including discrimination from the authorities. Outspoken Christians have regularly become targets in central and southern Iraq. Blasphemy laws can be used against them 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 outside Iraq to support this.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

Christians in Iraq experience Islamic oppression from Sunni and Shia Muslims irrespective of their ethnicity (Kurdish, Iranian, and Arab). 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 reported being monitored by Iranian secret services in areas close to the Iranian border. In general, Iraqi society is becoming more Islamic; Islamic dogma and rhetoric rule daily life, and Islamic leaders (especially Shiites) continue to influence social, religious and political life. This is reflected in social norms and practices affecting everyone in Iraq, and becomes a benchmark for non-Muslims. 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:

Iraqi society remains very tribal, especially in areas disrupted by sectarian violence (mostly in territory previously controlled by IS). Where this tribalism is mixed with Islam, it will especially affect Christians with a Muslim background. Ethnic and tribal groups have at times formed parties that have had exclusivist agendas. Christians are an easy target. Compliance with the tribes' age-old customs and traditions is often more important than adherence to government law, as tribes are usually above the law.

Dictatorial paranoia:

Successive Iraqi central governments have aimed to stay in power whatever the cost, leading to failure to support a pluralistic society where religious minorities feel welcome. Christians in the IKR have complained about the alleged exploitation of the electoral law in the 2018 parliamentary elections, when Kurdish and Shia 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. Government officials at all levels are reported to threaten Christians and 'encourage' them to emigrate.

Organized corruption and crime:

Corruption is rampant across Iraq and Christians are exploited in this way. In many majority Islamic areas, Christians can often only sell their houses at 60% of the value. Land belonging to Christians has been seized and at least 70% of properties left behind by Christians fleeing the country have been illegally seized by organized criminal groups, especially in Baghdad. The COVID-19 crisis has further exacerbated this state of chaos and corruption.

Christian denominational protectionism:

If a new denomination applies for recognition, the officially recognized churches are asked to approve. Often, historical churches strongly object to registering non-traditional Protestant groups and prevent their church members from visiting newer churches. Some traditional Catholic churches refuse Protestant Christians from burying their dead in Catholic cemeteries. This is a problem for Protestant Christians because there are currently no non-traditional Christian cemeteries available. Bishops of historical church communities have been known to refuse to hold weddings for members who have been visiting Evangelical churches. In southern and central regions of Iraq, Christians who leave a historical church to join a non-traditional group can face threats and opposition, including loss of employment, inheritance or the means to marry. Churches of different denominations were more open to cooperation when IS still had a territorial presence in Iraq. However, there is more division between the 14 state-recognized denominations today.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Christian women regularly suffer from unequal treatment in Iraqi society. In some areas, Christian women choose to wear veils for their own safety, as unveiled women may be harassed or even pelted with stones. There is general impunity for violations against Christians, be it kidnapping, rape or sexual abuse. Converts from Islam are vulnerable to house arrest, beatings, sexual harassment and 'honor' killings. Single converts may be forcibly married to a Muslim. Single Christian girls have also been reportedly 'lured' by Muslim men, who force them to convert and enter marriage.

- Denied custody of children
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Targeted seduction
- Violence - death

- Violence - physical
- Violence - sexual

MEN

Christians often struggle to find employment and allegedly feel vulnerable to exploitation at their workplaces. As men are often the primary breadwinners for their families, job loss can have a considerable effect on Christian families. Converts from a Muslim background are particularly vulnerable to violations. In a culture that prizes honor, they risk being ejected from their families, threatened or killed. These factors increase the already strong motivations for emigration. Priests are sometimes targeted if they speak out against armed groups, or occasionally kidnapped by jihadists, further weakening the church.

- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Forced out of home/expulsion
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence - death
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	14	78.11
2021	11	82.48
2020	15	76.12
2019	13	78.77
2018	8	85.59

Iraq's four-point drop in score from WWL 2021 to WWL 2022 was mainly due to a decrease in reported violent incidents. The difference appears so large because there were fewer reports for high-scoring incidents, such as Christians killed, churches closed/attacked and Christians arrested. In contrast, there were more reports of other incidents involving fewer points, such as Christians being abducted, forcibly married, and attacks/confiscation of Christian shops or businesses (including agricultural land).



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Iranian-backed militias abducted approximately 30 Christians in the town of Bartella, in Ninewah Province. Some of the abductees were beaten.
- Houses and other properties in mostly Christian villages were damaged due to Turkish bombing campaigns (such as in Miska and Jalak/Chalki) in **May 2021**, as well as an unknown number of acres burned in **July 2021**. Two church buildings were damaged as a result of Turkish bombardments in northern Iraq. Furthermore, Iranian-backed militias attacked and damaged Christian buildings in the town of Bartella, Ninewah.
- At least 11 Christian-owned alcohol shops across Baghdad were firebombed at the end of 2020. Properties were also confiscated (such as farmland serving as a source of income). For example, 750,000 m2 of land was taken from Christians in Ainkawa (Erbil). In addition, at the end of **April 2021**, approximately 1,000 dunams of agricultural land belonging to local farmers was seized by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) authorities. A commission that registered the seizure of Christian property recorded 55 cases in Dohuk alone. Finally, in **November 2020**, the ISF seized many Christian homes in Ninewa Province (Talayf District), repurposing them as military barracks without compensating the involved Christians.

WWL Year	Christians abducted	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated	Christians' business property damaged or confiscated
2022	31	29	100	100
2021	4	10	100	2

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see [here](#) for full results. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.

Private life

Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background are in danger if they reveal their faith or meet with other Christians. They would be accused of apostasy and treason. In general, Christians who talk to non-Christians about their faith risk allegations of proselytization and possible harassment and violence. Indigenous Christians may wear and display Christian symbols except if they are living in very conservative Islamic communities.

Family life

Female converts to Christianity from Islam are not recognized as Christian and cannot legally marry non-Muslim men. This issue has been exacerbated by those who were forced to convert to Islam by IS militants, including Christians who are now considered Muslims. They had to appear in court to declare their conversion to Islam, and all legal and social records were then amended. 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 child was born as a result of a non-Muslim woman being raped by a

Muslim man. In divorce cases, custody will likely go to the Muslim parent. Children considered Muslim are obliged to receive Islamic religious education. By law, all schools (including Christian ones) must give regular Islamic classes with exams; failing these exams means failing to move up in grades.

Community life

Christian women are pressurized to cover their heads in Baghdad, Basra and even sometimes in the north. The elementary school curriculum describes unveiled women as 'sick', which incites hatred and division. Christian students have complained that some Muslim university professors intentionally set exams during Christian festivals. Assyrian schools have claimed they are discriminated against and do not receive the full funding they are entitled to. Education is Islam-centred and does not consider the contributions of 'other' communities to Iraq's history. This engenders a subordinate mentality towards Muslims. Some of the official teaching syllabus, in governmental schools and universities, even define Christians as infidels and enemies and incite jihad against them. The online application for a national identity card requests the

information of the person's religion and the data chip on the card still contains data on religion. This has resulted in discrimination against Christians in employment. Christians hold some senior positions in the national parliament and government but are generally under-represented in both. Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background are likely to lose their job as soon as their new faith becomes known.

National life

According to its constitution, Iraq is an Islamic country, and no laws can be issued which are contrary to Islam. The law allows conversion to Islam, but does not permit nor recognize conversion from Islam to other religions or beliefs. According to personal status law, in a marriage where one spouse is Muslim, the right of divorce, child custody and inheritance goes almost automatically to the Muslim spouse. In general, Christians are not allowed to reach the highest ranks in certain institutions, such as the armed forces. They have sometimes been challenged to become Muslim in order to receive promotion. Christians are regularly subjected to hate speech and smear campaigns online, on national TV stations and by radical Islamic groups. Most of the perpetrators of crimes against Christians are not held accountable. The central government cannot control militias, particularly in the Nineveh Plains. In spite of the large number of Christian properties being seized (an estimated 78% of all properties belonging to Christians who left the country), the number of those brought to justice is nominal.

Church life

Youth work is only allowed inside church buildings and involving Christian youth. It is not possible for Christian converts with an Islamic background to be integrated into their local church, except in some Kurdish churches in the IKR. For security reasons, they often leave their home town and move to the anonymity of a large city or leave the country. Church monitoring is reported mainly by the newer denominations.



International obligations & rights violated

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)

Situation of other religious minorities

Other religious minorities facing persecution, discrimination and intolerance in Iraq are Yazidis, Sunnis, Kakai, Sabaeen-Mandaeans, Bahai, Zoroastrians and Jews. Yazidis in particular have suffered horrendous atrocities, initially under IS and now by Turkey which has conducted a series of air strikes in the Yazidi Sinjar region.



Open Doors in Iraq

In cooperation with local partners and churches, Open Doors is supporting the church in Iraq through the following activities:

- Presence ministry
- Training (trauma training, =biblical training, training church leaders and Muslim-background believers)
- Bible and Christian literature distribution and supporting Kurdish translations
- Socio-economic development projects (such as microloans for IDPs)
- Structural aid (such as church repairs/equipment and church activities)
- Crisis relief (rebuilding houses and churches north Iraq)
- Prayer support

About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology, as well as the complete WWL 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
