

World
Watch
Research

Iraq: Full Country Dossier

December 2022



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Contents

Introduction	3
World Watch List 2023	3
Copyright note.....	4
Sources and definitions.....	4
WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Iraq	5
Brief country details	5
Map of country.....	5
Dominant persecution engines and drivers	6
Brief description of the persecution situation	6
Summary of international obligations and rights violations.....	7
Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period	8
Specific examples of positive developments	8
External Links - Situation in brief	8
WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Iraq	9
Links for general background information.....	9
Recent history	9
Political and legal landscape	11
Religious landscape	12
Economic landscape.....	13
Social and cultural landscape	15
Technological landscape	16
Security situation	17
Trends analysis	18
External Links - Keys to understanding	20
WWL 2023: Church information / Iraq	21
Christian origins.....	21
Church spectrum today.....	22
Areas where Christians face most difficulties	23
Christian communities and how they are affected	23
WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Iraq	24
Reporting period	24
Position on the World Watch List	24
Persecution engines	24

Drivers of persecution 27

The Persecution pattern..... 32

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life 33

Violence..... 39

5 Year trends 42

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female 43

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male 45

Persecution of other religious minorities..... 46

Future outlook..... 47

External Links - Persecution Dynamics..... 49

Further useful reports.....50



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Introduction

World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

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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 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- 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 including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

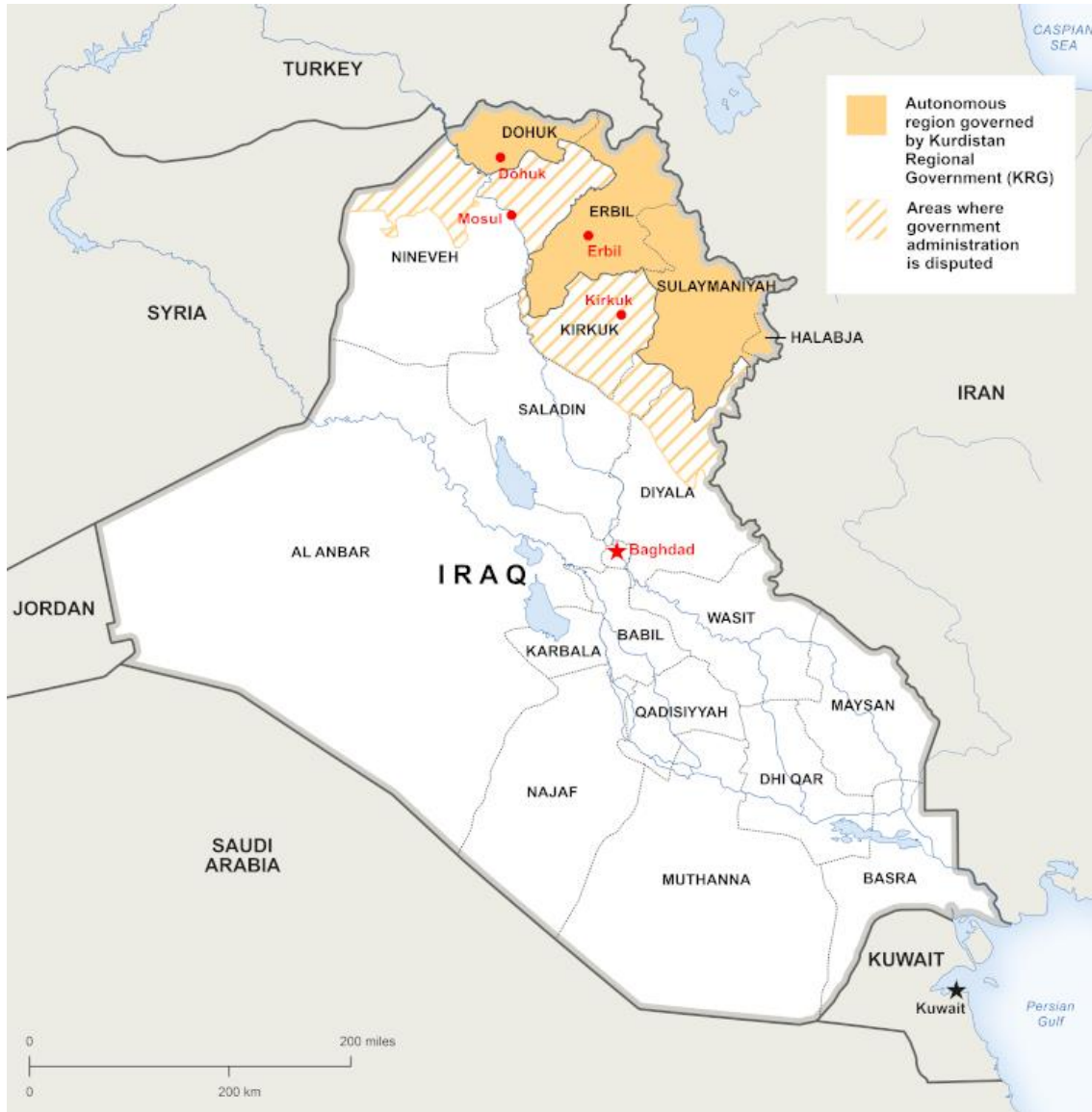
WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Iraq

Brief country details

Iraq: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
42,165,000	164,000	0.4

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

Map of country



Iraq: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	76	18
WWL 2022	78	14
WWL 2021	82	11
WWL 2020	76	15
WWL 2019	79	13

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

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 continued its attacks against civilians, infrastructure and security forces in 2021 and 2022. 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). 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 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 government buildings.

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. Changing church affiliation (e.g. by moving from an Orthodox to an Evangelical congregation) is also often punished by 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.

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

- **Missing Christians - No specific date:** About 62 Christians are missing under a "context of persecution". For most, their disappearance is related to IS activity and dates back to the time of their territorial control.
- **November 2021:** An improvised explosive device was thrown at the Christian family house of an alcohol merchant, causing material losses.
- **March 2022:** A female Kurdish convert was murdered in March 2022, weeks after she announced her new faith on social media and was preparing for baptism.
- **Over the WWL 2023 reporting period:** At least 43 Christians were physically and/or mentally abused because of their faith, most of them converts from Islam.

Specific examples of positive developments

- **October 2021:** "In October, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani declared Ankawa, the Christian suburb of Erbil, a district, giving its residents more authority in their local affairs" (USCIRF 2022)
- **November 2021:** "On November 24, in a speech during Christmas Eve Mass at Saint Joseph Church in Baghdad, Prime Minister Kadhimi encouraged Christians to remain in the country and those who had left to return, stating, 'We cannot imagine the Iraqi identity without Christians and other components'. President Barham Salih wished the Christian community a Merry Christmas via Twitter, affirming his support for Christians who have suffered from the impact of extremism and terrorism. Salih said the country needed to take a serious stand to establish 'a capable state and good governance that upholds the principles of citizenship and protects rights and peaceful coexistence'. COR Speaker Mohammed al-Halbusi sent his best wishes to Christians and hoped for peace and prosperity for the country." (IRFR 2021)
- **May 2022:** At a second conference hosted by the United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, "the United Nations Investigative Team to promote accountability for crimes committed by Da'esh/ISIL in Iraq (UNITAD)" and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), over 40 religious leaders in Iraq renewed their commitment to supporting IS-victims and bringing accountability and justice for crimes committed against them ([UNITAD](#), 19 May 2022).

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: UNITAD - <https://www.unitad.un.org/Second%20High-Level%20Conference>

WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Iraq

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2021/22 country report – covering 154 countries	AI country report 2021/22 (pp.201-205)	https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf	7 June 2022
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14542954	7 June 2022
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/IRQ	7 June 2022
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iraq/	7 June 2022
Crisis24 country report (Garda World) – covering 193 countries	Crisis24 country report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/iraq	7 June 2022
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 – covering 167 countries	EIU 2021 (p.15)	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf	7 June 2022
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2022	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	3 August 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Iraq not included	Democracy Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom Index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2022	https://freedomhouse.org/country/iraq/freedom-world/2022	7 June 2022
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2021 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/country/iraq/freedom-net/2021	7 June 2022
Human Rights Watch World Report 2022 (country chapter) – covering 100+ countries	HRW 2022 country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/iraq	7 June 2022
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2022	https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#iq	7 June 2022
Middle East Concern – covering 24 countries	MEC country profile	https://meconcern.org/countries/iraq/	3 August 2022
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2022	https://rsf.org/en/iraq	7 June 2022
Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2021	https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/iraq	7 June 2022
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (country profile) – covering 189 countries	HDI profile	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/IRQ	8 June 2022
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom (country profile)	IRFR 2021	https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iraq/	7 June 2022
USCIRF 2022 country reports – covering 15 CPC / 12 SWL	USCIRF 2021	https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/2022%20Iraq.pdf	7 June 2022
World Bank country overview – covering 178 countries	World Bank overview 2022	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iraq/overview#1	7 June 2022
World Bank country profile data – covering 222 countries	World Bank profile (2020 data)	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&id=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=IRQ	7 June 2022
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 – covering 147 countries (divided per region)	Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 (pp.12-13)	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/65cf93926fdb3ea23b72f277fc249a72-0500042021/related/mpo-mena.pdf	7 June 2022

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 also stepped up its attacks on civilians, infrastructure and security forces in 2020-2022. In the Kurdistan region, Turkey continued its attacks allegedly targeting the members of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) but also hitting majority Christian villages. Local residents have been suffering from this for several years but Turkey's attacks have now been intensifying. 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. Turkey continued its military operations later in 2021. 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): "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.

Meanwhile, marginalized groups continue to [protest](#) (The National News, 15 May 2022). There is uncertainty among Christians about the future and no expectation that the outcome of the 2021 elections (with the following resignations in June 2022) will lead to any improvement in their situation.

Political and legal landscape

In the Democracy Index (EIU 2021), 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 Kurdistan Region - IKR), officially governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) based in Erbil, and a large Arab part, controlled by the Iraqi Government in Baghdad. Iraq consists of 18 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.

A further vulnerable group within Iraq's legal and political landscape is women. [Despite international pressure and protests](#) (Global Citizen, 26 June 2019), Iraqi laws permit marital rape and the exoneration of rapists who marry their victim ([Article 398 of the Penal Code](#)). Child marriage also remains high, with [24% of girls](#) married by the age of 18 (Girls not Brides/Iraq, accessed 16 August 2022). 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 remained stalled and incidents of domestic violence remain widespread (HRW 2022 country chapter). According to [Georgetown's 2021/22 Women, Peace and Security Index](#) (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.

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, Turkmen, and Yazidis). 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.

Religious landscape

Iraq: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	164,000	0.4
Muslim	41,143,000	97.6
Hindu	5,100	0.0
Buddhist	380	0.0
Ethno-religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	20	0.0
Bahai	2,100	0.0

Atheist	76,000	0.2
Agnostic	212,000	0.5
Other	562,220	1.3
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

Iraq is an ethnically diverse nation with a Muslim population of 97.6% according to WCD 2022 estimates. The population consists of over 41 million Muslims, of which 64-69% are Shiites and 29-34% are Sunnis, according to the CIA Factbook. 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 profile 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.

In general, women are the most economically vulnerable. 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; according to Index Mundi, as of 2020 [48% of males](#) over 15 were in the workforce, compared to just [11% of women](#). According to Georgetown's 2021/22 Women, Peace and Security Index, the female labor force participation is [on the decline](#) (p.34).

The emigration of Christian men, in part due to job discrimination and exploitation, has placed pressure on their dependent families and church communities. It is encouraging to note, however, that financial inclusion has [risen](#) for women in Iraq in recent years (Georgetown, 2020, p.20).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the CIA Factbook:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Arab (75-80%), Kurds (15-20%) and 5% other ethnic groups (includes Turkmen, Yezidi, Shabak, Kaka'i, Bedouin, Romani, Circassian, Sabaeen-Mandaean, 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), Syriac (Neo-Aramaic) and Armenian.
- **Urban population:** 71.4% of total population (2022)

According to the UN Global Human Development Indicators (HDI profile):

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a HDI score of 0.674 Iraq ranks 123 out of 189 countries and falls in the 'Medium Human Development' category. From 1990 to 2019, Iraq's HDI value rose from 0.560 to 0.674, a 20.4% increase.
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 70.6 years
- **Gender inequality Index (GII):** With a score of 0.577, Iraq ranks 146 out of 162 countries.
- **Education:** The expected number of years of schooling is 11.3, whereas the mean years of schooling is 7.3. The mean number is 6.0 for girls, compared to 8.6 for boys.
- **Literacy rate:** 85.6 % (ages 15 and older)
- **IDPs/Refugees:** According to the [UN Refugee Agency](#) (last accessed 30 June 2022), almost 1.2 million Iraqis continue to be internally displaced and over 250.000 refugees fled to Iraq from neighboring countries, especially Syria. "90 percent of the displaced population have not been able to return home for over 3 years, and 70 percent have been displaced for more than 5 years. While IDP returnees consistently outnumber those who are internally displaced, many struggle to reintegrate and still require humanitarian assistance."
- **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." ([UN Refugee Agency](#), last accessed 30 June 2022).

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.

Christian IDPs in Kurdistan experience difficulties in integrating due to the language barrier. There is also a general lack of knowledge about social, political, religious and economic issues. 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.

Another factor which is likely to significantly influence social cohesion are the regulations connected to COVID-19. According to a report by the [UNDP](#) in August 2020, "the pandemic will considerably strain social cohesion, widening existing fault lines and creating new ones." Also, problems in student retention, learning and nutrition are all likely consequences of the suspension of classes and feeding programs in schools.

Patriarchal and Islamic 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 is everything. Christian men who converted 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.

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2022):

- **Internet usage:** 71.9% penetration - survey date: January 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 71.9% penetration – survey date: January 2022. According to [Napoleon Cat](#), there are twice as many male users of Facebook compared to female users (as of July 2022).

According to the World Bank profile:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 93.2 per 100 people (2020 estimate)

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. 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.

Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2021 report and Global Freedom Index 2022 show that online activities face various forms of control:

- "Iraq's media environment appears lively and diverse, but there are few politically independent news sources. In recent years, social media, which was once dominated by alternative and independent voices, has been utilized by progovernment forces, and particularly, Iran-backed militias, to spread incitement, fake news, and explicit threats against activists. Journalists who do not self-censor can also face legal repercussions. Media outlets face restrictions and obstruction in response to their coverage."
- "Social media posts on controversial topics sometimes result in retribution. Certain topics, including corruption and, to a somewhat lesser extent, criticism of Iran, are considered to be off limits and at times prompt arrest, docking of salaries, torture, and criminal lawsuits. Social media users and bloggers have faced defamation suits for criticizing corruption and misgovernance."
- "Activists describe a climate of fear that has led them to self-censor what they post on social media or say in discussions on the mobile phone app, Clubhouse."
- "In February 2021, a court in KDP-controlled Erbil sentenced three journalists and two activists to six years in prison for criticizing authorities on social media. KRG Prime Minister Barzani (a KDP leader) claimed without evidence in a news conference that the detainees were not journalists but spies, which may have influenced the judge's decision to convict them of 'destabilizing the security' in the region."

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 2022), 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'."

Security situation

Numerous crises have shaken Iraq and produced heavy storm-clouds: Collapsing oil revenues (although oil prices began to rise again from the second half of 2021 onwards), increased tension between the USA and Iran, the failure of the political elite in Baghdad to address protesters' concerns and the spread of COVID-19 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 radical-

ized. 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 [killing](#) 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 weekly attacking convoys transporting supplies to bases, often using UAVs (drones).

With the USA speeding up 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). Added to this are - for many Christians - 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, 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.

Within this context, the security of women remains under particular threat. According to [Georgetown's 2021/22 Women, Peace and Security Index](#) (p.27) there were numerous incidents of conflict-related violence.

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 re-

mains far from stable, there are hopeful developments after IS was territorially defeated in December 2017, allowing many 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. The defeat of IS should bring improvement to the situation of Christians in Iraq. However, only when Christian IDPs successfully return to their former home-towns and cities can any improvement in their situation take root. 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: protest - <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/2022/05/15/new-ruling-by-iraqs-supreme-court-further-shackles-government/>
- Political and legal landscape: Despite international pressure and protests - <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/un-women-marital-rape-laws/>
- Political and legal landscape: Article 398 of the Penal Code - <https://www.refworld.org/docid/452524304.html>
- Political and legal landscape: 24% of girls - <https://atlas.girlsnotbrides.org/map/iraq/>
- Political and legal landscape: - <https://atlas.girlsnotbrides.org/map/iraq/>
- Political and legal landscape: domestic violence - http://www.ekrg.org/files/pdf/combat_domestic_violence_english.pdf
- Political and legal landscape: Georgetown's 2021/22 Women, Peace and Security Index - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/WPS-Index-2021.pdf>
- 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
- 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: 48% of males - <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/iraq/labor-force-participation-rate#SL.TLF.ACTI.1524.MA.ZS>
- Economic landscape: 11% of women - <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/iraq/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS>
- Economic landscape: on the decline - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/WPS-Index-2021.pdf>
- Economic landscape: risen - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: UN Refugee Agency - <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/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: UNDP - https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNDP_IQ_Impact_of_the_Oil_Crisis_and_COVID_19_on_Iraq_Fragility.pdf
- Social and cultural landscape: 2019 CEDAW Periodic review - https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/IRQ/CO/7%20&Lang=En
- Technological landscape: Napoleon Cat - <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-iraq/2022/07/>
- 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>
- Security situation: a new battleground - <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/06/iraq-islamic-state-comeback-coronavirus-us-withdrawal/>
- Security situation: Turkey - <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/07/turkey-iraq-kurds-fear-pkk-operations-lead-turkish-presence.html>
- Security situation: Online media - <https://www.assistnews.net/christian-villages-bombed-and-evacuated/>
- Security situation: bombed - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Kurdish-bishop:-Christians-flee-Turkish-bombing,-'our-fear-is-great'-50406.html>
- Security situation: Georgetown's 2021/22 Women, Peace and Security Index - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/WPS-Index-2021.pdf>

WWL 2023: 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	51,100	31.2
Catholic	91,500	55.8
Protestant	10,000	6.1
Independent	70,100	42.7
Unaffiliated	5,000	3.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-63,500	-38.7
Total	164,200	100.1
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	13,300	8.1
Renewalist movement	35,700	21.8

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

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 2021): 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. There are approximately 2,000 registered members of evangelical Christian churches in the IKR, while an unknown number, mostly converts from Islam, practice secretly."

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 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 more frequent in Arab than Kurdish areas. For a long time, the atmosphere in Kurdish areas has 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 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Iraq

Reporting period

1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

Position on the World Watch List

Iraq: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	76	18
WWL 2022	78	14
WWL 2021	82	11
WWL 2020	76	15
WWL 2019	79	13

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

The score for Iraq went down from 78 points in WWL 2022 to 76 points in WWL 2023. The score for pressure did not change much and remains at the same extreme level. The score for violence decreased from 6.9 to 4.6 points, due to fewer reports of high-scoring incidents such as churches being closed or attacked. However, the situation for Christians in Iraq has not improved significantly: In northern Iraq, for instance, church services have not been able to take place for over a year due to Turkish bombings. In the WWL 2023 reporting period there were still dozens of Christians missing (in a persecution context), physically abused and/or forced to leave their homes. One Christian was killed for her faith. In addition, there were many reports of damage to or confiscation of the homes and businesses of Christians.

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, 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 can 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: [IRFR 2019](#)). 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 Yezidi 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: [IRFR 2018](#)). 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 Yazidi 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 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.

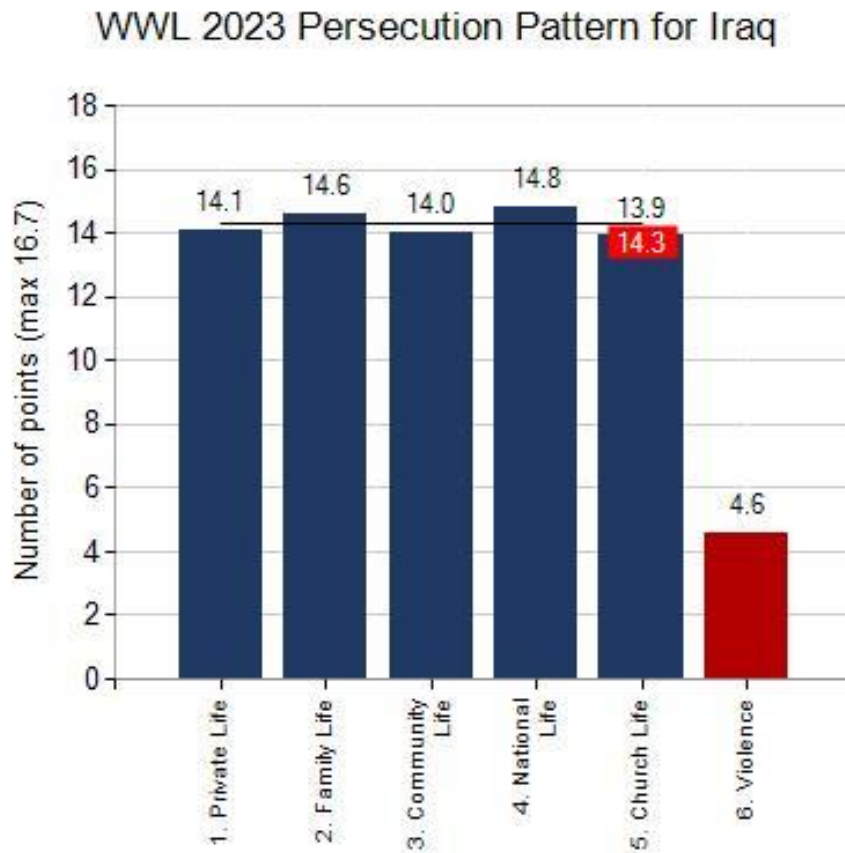
Drivers of Organized corruption and crime

- ***Violent religious groups, political parties, 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 Kefe 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.
- ***Ethnic leaders:*** Kurdish landowners have also illegally expropriated land, farms and other properties belonging to many Christian families in the IKR (and disputed areas) in recent years. The illegal expropriations were carried out by Kurdish countrymen, who operated separately or in coordination with other members of the tribe. This includes a clan that is known for taking the land of Christians by force.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2023 Persecution pattern for Iraq shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Iraq continues to score at an extreme level (14.3 points), the same as in the WWL 2022 reporting period. 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 decreased from very high (6.9 points) in WWL 2022 to the high level of 4.6 points in WWL 2023, a decrease of 2.3 points. The decrease is mainly explained by fewer high-scoring incidents occurring such as churches closed/attacked. However, just as in WWL 2022, a Christian was killed for faith-related reasons.

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 2023 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 their 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 asked 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 child remain undocumented, affecting their eligibility for government benefits", as the US State Department mentions in IRFR 2021.

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) leaves 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. Additionally, the curriculum for elementary school students contains elements with inaccurate and offensive statements that incite hatred towards Christians and division; Christian women are particularly affected by statements such as those referring to unveiled women as being 'sick'.

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 woman 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 be-

liefs. 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 5 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. For further discussion (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at:
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

4. 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.

5. The symbol "x" in the table: This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

Iraq: Violence Block question	WWL 2023	WWL 2022
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	1	1
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	3
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	1	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?	0	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	63	31
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?	0	10 *
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	10 *	29
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?	100 *	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?	100 *	100 *
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	100 *	100 *
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	100 *	10 *

Disclaimer: In the chaotic circumstances of (civil) war or during attacks by hostile powers, it is often not clear whether incidents are religiously motivated or not. Incidents where Christians were harmed or Christian owned property was damaged in fighting between government and rebel forces which could be considered "collateral damage" were generally not included. Motives for attacks are mixed but this does not necessarily rule out anti-Christian motivation. For WWL analysis, cases have only been included i) where it was clear to perpetrators in advance that Christian civilians would be affected (e.g. where a majority Christian town was attacked); and ii) where the local Christian community believed that those responsible were acting out of specific anti-Christian motivation through their adherence to anti-Christian ideology (for instance IS or other violent Islamic militants).

In the case of the Turkish military offensive in the north of Iraq, the following considerations apply: It was known in advance that predominantly Christian villages were being targeted. Also, there is an element of Islamist ideology: Referring to Turkey's military operation in the region, [Erdogan stated in a speech in August 2020](#) that the "Turkish army of Islam" is not occupying areas but "bringing justice of Allah" and taking what is their right in the area since their civilization is "one of conquest" (Memri TV, 26 August 2020). Finally there is a strong sense among the affected Christian population in the area, of whom many are descendants of those who escaped the Turkish genocide of 1915, that they are once again the target of a full-scale attack on their community.

- **Christians killed:** A Kurdish female convert from Islam to Christianity was found murdered in northern Iraq on 7 March 2022. A few weeks earlier, she had announced on social media that she had become a Christian. It seems that she was preparing for baptism and that both her uncle and brother were involved in the murder.
- **Christians abducted:** According to IRFR 2021, about 62 Christians remained missing at the end of 2021, mostly related to the time of domination by IS. In addition, there was at least one recent case of kidnapping of a convert under persecution circumstances; he has since been released.
- **Christians physically or mentally abused:** There were reports of at least 43 Christians physically (or mentally) abused for their faith, most of whom were converts from Islam.
- **Christian homes, properties, shops or businesses attacked or confiscated:** As of November 2021, there were 55 confiscations of property belonging to Christians according to a high-level commission set up by the KRG Council of Ministers in 2020 to resolve outstanding land disputes related to Christian communities (IRFR 2021). Other sources confirm that the confiscation of land and property owned by Christians is still ongoing, for example by Kurdish officials or influential families in northern Iraq. In southern Iraq, an attack on the home of a Christian who sells alcohol damaged his car at the end of November 2021. Finally, in northern Iraq (Dohuk province), Turkish attacks targeting alleged PKK bases often caused serious damage to citizens and property in many areas and villages, including Christian areas and villages.
- **Christians forced to leave their homes:** According to the Assyrian Catholic Church in Mosul, 30 Christian families left Nineveh plains in July 2022 alone. As reported by KirKukNow on 30 July 2022: "'The first reason is the [marginalization](#) of Christians and Iraqi communities in general, with economic challenges and lack of job opportunities, as well as lack of compensation for the victims', a member of the Assyrian Catholic anonymously said. 'The presence of various militia checkpoints in the Nineveh plains and attempts to change the demographics of Christian areas is another reason why Christians are not feeling safe and secure', said the member of the Syrian Catholic Church in Mosul, without naming anyone involved in trying to change the demographics of the region."

Concerning the 30 Christian families leaving the Nineveh plains in July 2022: An Iraqi Christian family has an average of five members, which means that approximately 150 Christians left in that single month. In general, according to a country expert, roughly 10 Christian families leave the country every month. Thus, it seems plausible to calculate that, throughout Iraq over a period of one year, hundreds of Christians have been leaving their

homes. This means that some 600 Christians have probably left Iraq in the WWL 2023 reporting period. In addition, there were several Christian converts from Islam who fled the country because of their faith.

5 Year trends

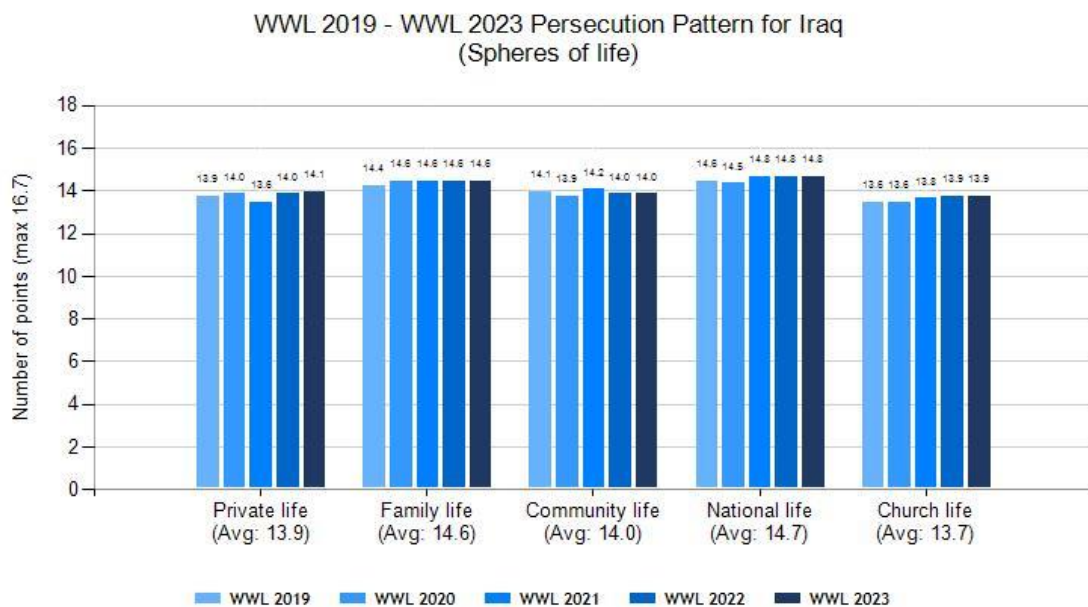
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Iraq: WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern history		Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023		14.3
2022		14.3
2021		14.2
2020		14.1
2019		14.1

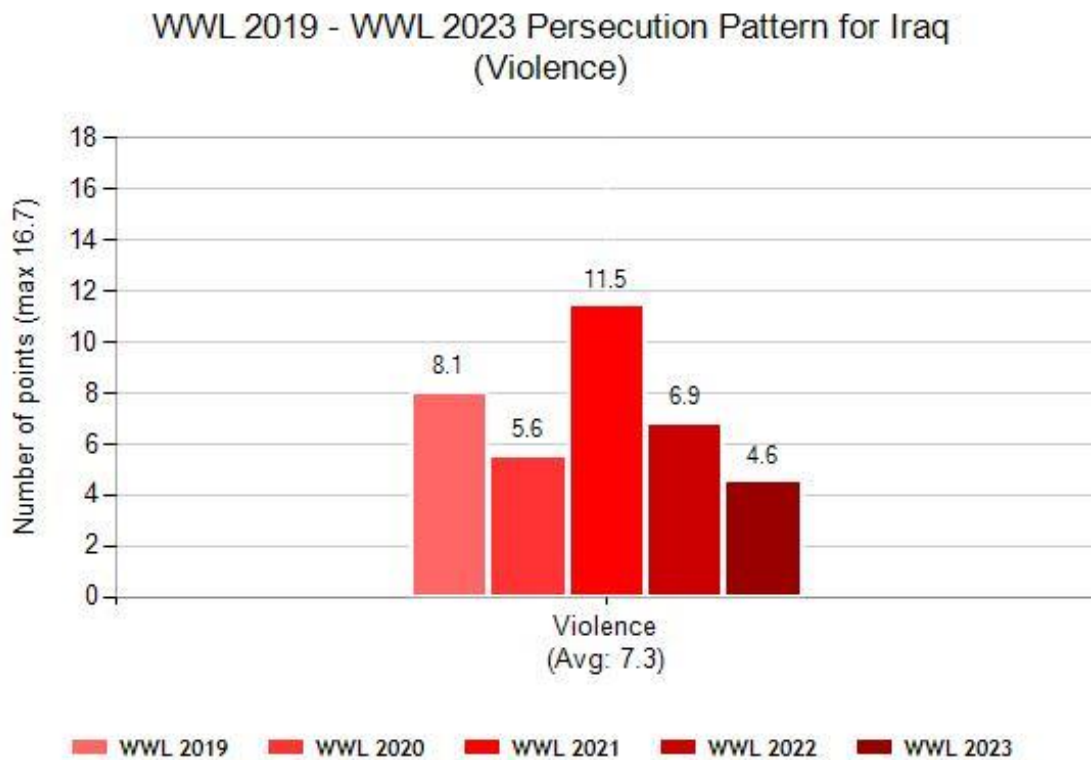
The average pressure over all 5 WWL reporting periods has been stable at an extreme level, remaining within the range 14.1-14.3 points.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The chart above shows that pressure in all *spheres of life* has been fairly stable at an extreme level for five years. 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 2019 and WWL 2020 reporting periods, violence against Christians showed a significant decrease, reflecting the territorial defeat and expulsion of IS. In WWL 2021, a sharp increase in violence was observed, mainly due to the closure of a significant number of churches and an increase in the number of kidnapped Christians. In WWL 2022 and WWL 2023, there was a decrease in the violence score again, in particular because fewer Christians were killed (WWL 2022) and fewer churches were attacked (WWL 2022, WWL 2023). In the reporting periods WWL 2021-WWL2023, Turkish attacks in northern Iraq were one of the factors contributing to the violence score.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse; Forced marriage
Security	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. Concerning the WWL 2023 reporting period, a country expert stated: “Christian girls in Iraq, especially teenagers, are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment by their Muslim neighbors.” They are also reportedly vulnerable to sexual harassment from Shiite militias ([USDS, May 2021](#)). In some areas, Christian women and girls choose to wear veils (as Islamic women do) for their own safety.

Female converts from Islam are most vulnerable to violations of their fundamental rights for their faith. Pressure comes most often from the wider family. A convert risks abuse in the form of house arrest, beatings, sexual harassment, rape and even being killed to restore family 'honor' ([Al-Jazeera, 8 March 2021](#)).

A female convert might also be divorced by her husband and lose custody of her children; while both male and female converts risk being divorced by their Muslim spouse, Iraqi divorce laws make women more vulnerable as they have fewer legal rights. If single, a female convert may be forcibly married to a conservative Muslim. The attitude of the spouse’s family is crucial in this issue. Further adding challenges, female converts from Islam cannot officially marry male Christians, as the Iraqi state still considers them to be Muslims; Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslims.

Single Christian girls without a convert background have also been reportedly 'lured' by Muslim men, who then harass them and coerce them into marriage. Within the wider community, Christian women are viewed as being women and girls who are loose and free. Women have reported that they have suffered sexual harassment and vulgar threats because of this perception, including in the workplace. A country expert commented on the severity of risks facing female Christians: “Families may fear for their daughters safety and feel encouraged to emigrate to protect them.”

In conclusion, Christian women – especially converts from Islam - suffer from unequal treatment in all sectors of society.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government
Security	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 often experience exploitation at their workplaces. Christian business owners also face discrimination, 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 is everything, they risk being ejected from their families, threatened or killed. They may also be pressured into marrying a Muslim girl in an attempt to restore him to Islam. 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. Further weakening the church, priests and Christian leaders (the majority of whom are men) remain vulnerable to kidnappings and killings, particularly in the Nineveh plains region. While there were no known instances of abductions or killings of church leaders in the WWL 2023 reporting period, it remains a constant threat, particularly if they are considered to be speaking out against political leaders or militias.

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 are Yazidis, Sunni's, Kakai (also known as Yarsani), Sabaeen-Mandaeans, Bahai, Zoroastrians and Jews. According to USCIRF 2022, many of them have been displaced and continue to struggle to return, even years after IS' territorial defeat. This is true of nearly a million Sunni Arab Muslims, more than 200,000 Yazidis and smaller numbers of Kakais, Turkmen and others. Renewed attacks by IS have revived fear among religious and ethnic minorities which prevented them from returning and rebuilding their homes.

Especially Yazidis are known to have suffered atrocities under IS: More Yazidi than Christian women and girls were taken as sex slaves by IS. Also, more Yazidis than Christians were murdered by IS. The [Unrepresented Nations and People's Organization](#) (UNPO) reported on 7 June 2018 that in "August 2014, around 3,100 Yazidis were killed in the Mount Sinjar area while 6,800 were kidnapped to become sex slaves or fighters". Of these more than 6,000 Yazidis, only a few hundred have been reunited with their families according to [USCIRF 2021](#), which added that "Iraq's inability to address this atrocity continued to perpetuate collective trauma throughout the Yazidi community."

In 2021 - seven years after the IS genocide - around 3,000 Yazidi women, girls and boys were still missing and many of them would still be trafficked for sex, labor or terrorism. The Iraqi parliament passed new regulations in September 2021 on the Yazidi Survivors Law passed in March 2021, which grants special rights to survivors of IS-abuse from the Yazidi community and other religious minorities, which provides for compensation for damages as well as their rehabilitation and integration into society. However, according to Amnesty International more needs to be done to help all survivors, "including by specifically providing [reparations for children](#) who were born as a result of sexual violence by IS members during captivity" (AI, 2 November 2021). The government also reportedly continued to demand that female Yazidi prisoners of IS register these children as Muslims and convert to Islam themselves in order to obtain identification cards, passports and other government services - in part because the Yazidi community did not consider these children to be Yazidi." (IRFR 2021). Meanwhile there has been little progress in bringing the perpetrators of the Yazidi abuses to justice or to assist the minority in resettling in Sinjar and other former habitats in Iraq, in spite of Yazidi leaders' demands.

The Turkish air strikes in the Sinjar region and the presence of several militias and their checkpoints have further worsened the situation for Yazidis and make it very difficult to rebuild their lives after the IS atrocities. Turkey has been targeting the Sinjar region since 2017, including a series of airstrikes and other military operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in northern Iraq in 2020 - 2022. 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."

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021): In August 2021: "Turkish airstrikes targeted a public medical facility in Sinjar District used by Yazidi fighters affiliated with the PKK, a group also known as the People's Protection Units or YBS, reportedly killing and wounding many Yazidi civilians".

Not only the continued Turkish air strikes on alleged PKK positions posed a threat and impediment to internally displaced persons from minority religious groups such as Christians and Yazidis, but this is also true for the presence of armed members of the PKK and Popular Mobilization Forces in Sinjar and the Nineveh plains. In addition, the Yazidi community in Sinjar reported in January and May 2021 that "the PKK had kidnapped hundreds of Yazidi children to recruit and subject to ideological 'brainwashing' in the years since ISIS was defeated in Sinjar in 2015. It was unclear how many of the kidnappings occurred during the year." (IRFR 2021)

Representatives of the Sunni community also report violations of their human rights. For example, according to [USCIRF 2021](#), leading Sunnis from Diyala Province and Baghdad mentioned that in 2020 government-affiliated Shia militias were forcibly expelling Sunnis in order to bring about demographic change. Also, the process of 'de-Baathification', "which was adopted to remove Baath party officials from the government post-2003 and has since remained a fixture in Iraqi law, continued to provide a basis for discrimination against Sunni Muslims."

Militias operating under the Popular Mobilization Forces umbrella also regularly targeted Sunni Arab Muslims, accusing them of links to IS. At checkpoints, they harassed them and made it difficult for them to return to the areas once controlled by IS. A similar approach was used by these militias against other religious minorities such as Yazidis, Kakais and others. According to USCIRF 2022, the Iraqi government did not interfere with these militias.

Whereas the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion for Christians, Yazidis and Sabean Mandaean, it does not explicitly protect adherents of other religions or atheists, including Bahai, Jehovah's Witnesses, humanists, Kakai and others. The Bahai faith and Wahhabi Sunni Islam are even banned by law: Considered apostates of Islam, adherents of Bahai face higher pressure than most Christians, with the exception of converts to Christianity. Practicing the Bahai faith can be punished by law with 10 years' 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 are not allowed to hold government jobs (e.g. in state enterprises) or join the army, according to the penal code. Widespread discrimination against the few Jews left in Iraq makes them avoid public self-identification for fear of provoking violence.

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 radical Islamic militant groups is not expected to diminish significantly in the short-term: "The Islamic State remains operational in Iraq, primarily in in Kirkuk, Salaheddin, and Diyala provinces given security limitations along the borders of Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. Tactics include IED attacks against security personnel, sabotage of electricity pylons, arson of agricultural land, and kidnap and extortion of local citizens. While the United States maintains a residual military presence for counter-terrorism operations, Iran-aligned factions will continue targeting US government assets and supply vehicles through rocket and unmanned

aerial vehicle attacks, including at Erbil and Baghdad airports."

Since Christians are often considered to be an extension of the USA or the West in general, this increased risk of attacks, extortion and kidnappings can also affect them. Therefore, Christians in Iraq are concerned that the 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. Meanwhile, thousands of IS militants have 'disappeared' into the civilian population of the Nineveh plains – adding to feelings of insecurity for religious minorities such as Christians. There are also al-Qaeda remnants, Shiite militias and other militant Islamic groups emerging.

In an attempt to gain control over its own territory, the Baghdad government decided to bring "Popular Mobilization Units" (PMU militias, for instance the majority Shiite Shabak 30 brigade) under its control through integration into the regular army. There was fierce opposition which led to fighting between the army and the militias. Shabak militias have accused Christians of supporting this step. Until now, the government's move does not seem to have been successful. If the fighting continues, there is a risk of it spilling over into a wider conflict that could also affect Christians. 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.

Also 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. At the juridical level, Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities are concerned about the suggested changes to the legislation ruling the Federal Court of Iraq. As a result of these proposed changes, four judges would be added, all scholars of Islamic jurisprudence who have voting powers. Since the Federal Court plays an important role in interpreting the Constitution and federal laws, Iraq's civil movements consider these proposals to be signs of a further Islamization of the country. 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 like 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. 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 one of the main reasons 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 affects 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 have 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 - <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>
- Violence / Block 6 - commentary: Erdogan stated in a speech in August 2020 - <https://www.memri.org/tv/turkish-president-erdogan-conquest-region-allahs-justice-do-not-test-courage-capabilities-patience>
- Violence / Block 6 - commentary: marginalization - <https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/68560>

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: USDS, May 2021 - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iraq/>
- 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: Unrepresented Nations and People's Organization - <https://unpo.org/article/20889>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: USCIRF 2021 - <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/Iraq%20Chapter%20AR2021.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: reparations for children - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/11/iraq-yezidi-reparations-law-progress-welcome-but-more-must-be-done-to-assist-survivors/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: USCIRF 2021 - <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/Iraq%20Chapter%20AR2021.pdf>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the new Research & Reports page of the website [od.org](https://www.od.org). As in earlier years, they are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

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