

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

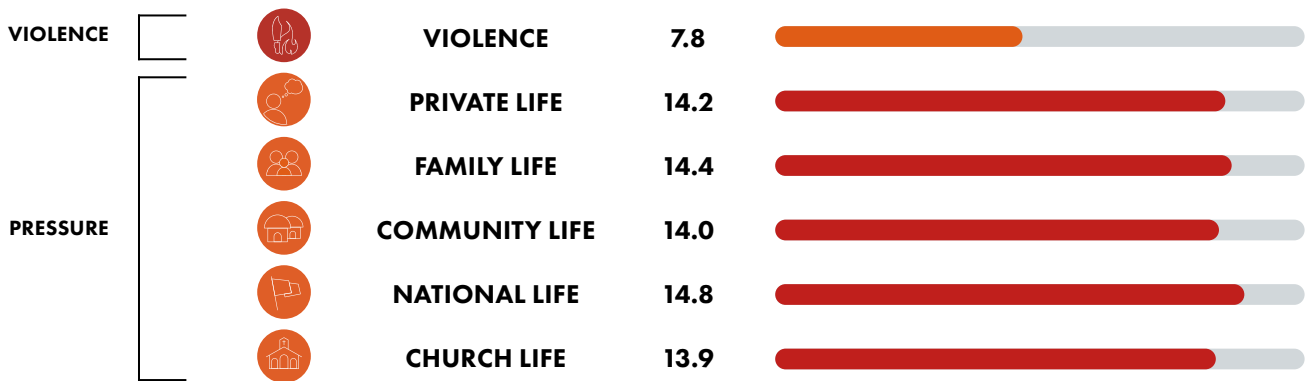
## SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

# IRAQ

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**16**



### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

## Key findings

The main source of the pressure on Iraqi Christians following the territorial loss of Islamic State (IS) has been the Shia militias backed by Iran. However, IS has continued its attacks against civilians, infrastructure and security forces right into 2023. Both Turkey and Iran also continued airstrikes and - in Turkey's case - ground operations in various areas of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) allegedly targeting members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In recent years, these attacks hit predominantly Christian villages as well, causing severe damage to civilian property and forcing many Christians to flee. The historical churches (Assyrian Church of the East, Syrian Orthodox Church, Syrian Catholic Church, Chaldean Catholic Church and Armenian Orthodox Church) are seriously affected by violence, intolerance and discrimination, especially from militant Islamic groups and non-Christian leaders. They also face discrimination from government authorities. Evangelical churches in Baghdad and Basra are also targets of violence by radical Islamic groups and non-Christian leaders, and face discrimination by the authorities. Christians with a Muslim background experience most pressure from family members and often keep their faith a secret. They risk losing inheritance rights and the right or means to marry. Leaving Islam can even be risky in the more moderate Islamic IKR. Changing church affiliation (e.g., by moving from an Orthodox to an Evangelical congregation) is often punished by the refusal of rights. Leaders of Orthodox and Catholic churches have been known to refuse to perform marriages for members attending Evangelical churches.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

Prime Minister Mohammed  
Shia al-Sudani

### POPULATION

43,171,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

154,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary Republic



## Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	154,000	0.4
Muslims	42,157,000	97.7
Others	551,450	1.3
Agnostics	223,000	0.5

Source<sup>2</sup>

After the 2003 US-led invasion, toppling of dictator Saddam Hussein and subsequent power vacuum, sectarian violence flared up, particularly between Sunni and Shiite Muslims and Christians were caught in the crossfire. 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, the then-Prime Minister declared Iraqi forces had driven IS from Iraqi territory. However, IS has continued to attack civilians, infrastructure and security forces in 2020-2023.

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

part, controlled by the Iraqi Government in Baghdad. Iraq consists of 19 provinces/governorates, of which only five have an officially listed population of Christians (Nineveh, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Dohuk and northern Kirkuk). Christians have left all other governorates, apart from a small group of converts with a Muslim background.

[The majority of Iraq's Christians](#) are Chaldean Catholics; almost 20% are members of the Assyrian Church of the East. There are approximately 2000 registered members of Evangelical churches in the IKR.

Since the territorial defeat of IS, the main source of pressure on Iraqi Christians has been from Shiite militias backed by Iran. In the Kurdistan region, Turkey continued its attacks, allegedly targeting members of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) but also hitting majority Christian villages. In the last months of 2022, Iran also stepped up its attacks on the Kurdish area, targeting the PKK.

The [Iraqi Constitution of 2005](#) establishes Islam as the state religion of Iraq. 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 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 political representation of Christians is very low (1.5%).

<sup>1</sup> Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

<sup>2</sup> Others include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian. Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

## How the situation varies by region

Most Christians in Iraq live in the north of the country, in Kurdistan. Few Christians are left in Baghdad and Basra. The situation is particularly difficult for Christians in the south and center of the country. Christians have left most of the provinces, except for a small group of converts with a Muslim background. Violations against converts, especially in the form of Islamic and clan oppression, are more prevalent in Arab areas compared to Kurdish regions.

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

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

### Historical Christian communities

Churches such as the Assyrian Orthodox Church, the Chaldean Catholic or Syrian Catholic Church and the Armenian Church are all seriously affected by violations by 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 checkpoints, universities, workplaces or government buildings.

### Converts to Christianity

This category consists of Christians from a Muslim background or cross-denominational converts from a historical Christian community background who now worship in non-traditional Christian communities. Converts from Islam experience the most pressure from their (extended) family. They often keep their new faith a secret, as they risk being threatened by their family members, tribal leaders and society. Changing church (from an Orthodox to an Evangelical congregation, for example) is also often punished by refusing rights or losing employment.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal churches in Baghdad and Basra are seriously affected by violations from radical Islamic movements and non-Christian leaders, including discrimination from the authorities. Outspoken Christians have regularly become targets in central and southern Iraq. Blasphemy laws can be used against them if they are suspected of carrying out outreach among Muslims. For Evangelicals, there is no legal framework for setting up a Bible school or for recruiting and registering organizations from outside Iraq to support this.





## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression

Christians in Iraq experience Islamic oppression from Sunni and Shia Muslims irrespective of their ethnicity (Kurdish, Iranian, and Arab). The influence of Islamic militants has made Islamic consciousness a new factor in the country, including in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR). Several Shia parties have close relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran and Christian converts with a Muslim background, in particular, have reported being monitored by Iranian secret services in areas close to the Iranian border. Islamic dogma and rhetoric rule daily life, and Islamic leaders (especially Shiites) continue to influence social, religious and political life. Social control of women is on the rise, and even Christian women in Baghdad and Basra are forced to cover up in order to move around safely outside their homes.

### Clan oppression

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

### Dictatorial paranoia

Successive Iraqi central governments have aimed to stay in power whatever the cost, leading to failure to support a pluralistic society where religious minorities feel welcome. Christians in the IKR have complained about the alleged exploitation of the electoral law in the 2018 parliamentary elections, when Kurdish and Shia parties took the five quota seats reserved for Christians on the National Council and put forward Christian candidates that were not chosen by Christian parties. Government officials at all levels are reported to threaten Christians and 'encourage' them to emigrate.

### Organized corruption and crime

Corruption is rampant across Iraq, and Christians are exploited in this way. In many majority

Islamic areas, Christians can often only sell their houses for 60% of their value. Land belonging to Christians has been seized and at least 70% of the properties left behind by Christians fleeing the country have been illegally seized by organized criminal groups, especially in Baghdad.

### Christian denominational protectionism

There are 14 recognized Christian denominations. If a new denomination applies for registration, the officially recognized churches are asked to approve. Regularly, 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. 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. Bishops of historical church communities have also been known to refuse to hold weddings for members who have been visiting Evangelical churches.



## How are men and women differently affected?

### Women

Single Christian girls have been reportedly “lured” by Muslim men, who force them into Iraqi society. In some areas, Christian women choose to wear veils for their own safety, as unveiled women may be harassed or even stoned. There is general impunity for violations against Christians, be it kidnapping, rape or sexual abuse, with the associated shame and consequences pressuring women to stay silent. Converts from Islam are vulnerable to house arrest, beatings, sexual harassment and even “honor” killings. Single converts may be forcibly married and cannot legally marry male Christians.

#### Female typical pressure points:

- Denied the legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Targeted seduction
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

### Men

Christians often struggle to find employment and reportedly feel vulnerable to exploitation in workplaces. As men are often the primary family providers, job loss can have a considerable effect. Converts from a Muslim background are particularly vulnerable to violations. In a culture that prizes honor, they risk being ejected from their families, threatened or killed. These factors increase the already strong motivations for emigration. Pastors are also persecuted; while there were no known instances of abductions or killings of leaders in the past reporting period, it remains a threat.

#### Male typical pressure points:

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

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	16	79
2023	18	76
2022	14	78
2021	11	82
2020	15	76

*Iraq's rise in points was due mainly to a sharp increase in the violence score, from 4.6 points in WWL 2023 to 7.8 points in WWL 2024. Four Christians were killed for their faith, one church was closed and there was a minor increase in the number of detained Christians. Finally, there appears to be less tolerance than previously towards converts with a Muslim background in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.*



## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Four Christians were killed for faith-related reasons during the WWL2024 reporting period. For security reasons no further details can be shared at this point.
- Confiscation and seizure of Christian lands and other properties in both the Kurdish region as well as the rest of Iraq continued. Reports include document tampering and forgery against Christian properties in Iraq. According to research, the perpetrators also include Iraqi politicians.
- Many Christian families are still leaving Iraq due to the instability of the security situation in their areas; partly because of the presence of militias in the Nineveh Plain. Their disadvantaged position as a vulnerable minority plays a major role in this. Among them are several MBBs who travel abroad for reasons directly related to their faith.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated	Christians forced to flee their countries
2024	4	35	10*	100*
2023	1	10*	100*	100*

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

### Private life

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

### Family life

Female converts to Christianity from Islam are not recognized as Christian and cannot legally marry non-Muslim men. This issue has been exacerbated by those who were forced to convert to Islam by IS militants, including Christians who are now considered Muslims. They had to appear in court to declare their conversion to Islam, and all legal and social records were then amended. According to Article 26 of the 2015 National Identity Card Law, children under 18 with one Muslim parent will be registered as Muslim, even if the child was born as a result of a non-Muslim woman being raped by a Muslim man. In divorce cases, custody will likely go to the Muslim parent. Children considered Muslim are

obliged to receive Islamic religious education. By law, all schools (including Christian ones) must give regular Islamic classes with exams; failing these exams means failing to move up in grades.

### Community life

Christian women are pressured to cover their heads in Baghdad, Basra and even sometimes in the north. Christian students have complained that some Muslim university professors intentionally set exams during Christian festivals. Assyrian schools have claimed they are discriminated against and do not receive the full funding they are entitled to. Education is Islam-centered and some official teaching syllabus in governmental schools and universities defines Christians as infidels and enemies and incite jihad against them. The online application for a national identity card requests information about a person's religion, and the data chip on the card still contains data on religion. This has resulted in discrimination against Christians in employment. Christians hold some senior positions in the national parliament and government, but are generally under-represented in both. Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background are likely to lose their jobs as soon as their new faith becomes known.

### **National life**

According to its constitution, Iraq is an Islamic country, and no laws can be issued that are contrary to Islam. The law allows conversion to Islam, but does not permit or recognize conversion from Islam to other religions or beliefs. According to personal status law, in a marriage where one spouse is Muslim, the right to divorce, child custody and inheritance goes almost automatically to the Muslim spouse. In general, Christians are not allowed to reach the highest ranks in certain institutions, such as the armed forces. They have sometimes been challenged to become Muslim in order to receive promotion. Christians are regularly subjected to smear campaigns online, on national TV stations and by radical Islamic groups. Most of the perpetrators of crimes against Christians are not held accountable. The central

government cannot control militias, particularly in the Nineveh Plains. In spite of the large number of Christian properties being seized (an estimated 78% of all properties belonging to Christians who left the country), the number of those brought to justice is nominal.

### **Church life**

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

## **International obligations & rights violated**

### **Iraq has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:**

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

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

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



## Situation of other religious minorities

Other religious minorities facing persecution, discrimination and intolerance in Iraq are Yezidis, Sunnis, Kakai, Sabaeen-Mandaeans, Bahai, Zoroastrians and Jews. The Yezidi community in particular has faced severe atrocities by IS, with more Yezidi women and girls becoming sex slaves and more Yezidis being killed compared to Christians. Although the Yezidi Survivors Law passed in March 2021 grants special rights to survivors, such as compensation and rehabilitation, its full implementation is still pending. The Sunni community has also reported human rights violations, including forced expulsion by government-affiliated Shia militias and discrimination through the process of de-Baathification.

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

### Open Doors in Iraq

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

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





### About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

*Some of the photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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