

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

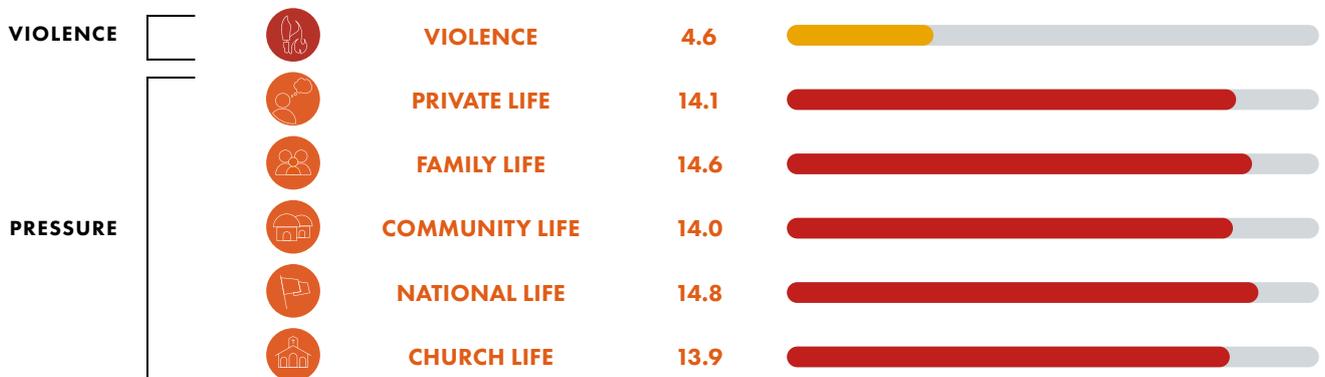
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
18

Iraq



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



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

Key findings

The main focus of the pressure on Iraqi Christians following the territorial loss of Islamic State (IS) has been the Shia militias backed by Iran. However, in the first half of 2020, IS also stepped up its attacks on civilians, infrastructure and security forces. In several areas of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), Turkey continued its air strikes and ground operations, reportedly targeting members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In June 2020, as well as May 2021, Christian villages were bombed in Turkey's largest operation in the area since 2015, forcing some Christians to flee. Christians were not protected by the local government. The historical churches (Assyrian Church of the East, Syrian Orthodox Church, Syrian Catholic Church, Chaldean Catholic Church and Armenian Orthodox Church) are seriously affected by

violence, intolerance and discrimination, especially from militant Islamic groups and non-Christian leaders. They also face discrimination from government authorities. Several years ago, the Catholic seminary in Baghdad had to move to the IKR following threats of kidnapping and attacks by Islamic militants. Evangelical churches in Baghdad and Basra are also targets of violence by radical Islamic groups and non-Christian leaders, and face discrimination by the authorities. Christians with a Muslim background experience most pressure from family members and often keep their faith a secret. They risk losing inheritance rights and the right or means to marry. Leaving Islam can even be risky in the more moderate Islamic IKR. Changing church affiliation (e.g. by moving from an Orthodox to an Evangelical congregation) is often punished by refusal of rights. 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

42,165,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

164,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary Republic



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	164,000	0.4
Muslims	41,143,000	97.6
Agnostics	212,000	0.5
Others	562,220	1.3

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

Source²

Authoritarian leader Saddam Hussein was toppled in 2003 by a US-led military campaign. In the ensuing power vacuum, sectarian violence flared up, particularly between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Christians were caught in the crossfire. Anti-Western and radical Islamic sentiments increased following the 2003 Anglo-American invasion, which contributed to

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

The political representation of Christians is very low (1-3%). Several Shiite parties have warm relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Baghdad government is puts pressure on the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to become increasingly Islamic. Islam is the state religion and no law may contravene Islamic tenets. There is an atmosphere of instability and fragility, given the sectarian conflict fought in parliament and on the streets. Though Iraq is an

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

² Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

ethnically and religiously diverse nation, society is becoming more fragmented and Islamized. As the Christian population dwindles, so do their freedoms. This includes more monitoring, the closing of shops during Ramadan and pressure on Christian women to veil themselves. There are more than 40 militias of different sizes, which contribute to insecurity for all Christians and violations against converts from Islam to Christianity. The major player in the current situation in Iraqi Kurdistan is Turkey. In 2022, Turkey continued its military operations in northern Iraq, preventing Christians from returning to their villages.

The majority of Iraq's Christians are Chaldean Catholics; almost 20% are members of the Assyrian Church of the East. There are approximately 2,000 registered members of Evangelical churches in the IKR. Symbolic political steps, such as the introduction of Christmas as a national holiday in December 2018, were opposed by Islamic authorities including the Grand Mufti of Baghdad, who said in a sermon that Muslims were not permitted to celebrate Christian holidays like Christmas.

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 small groups of converts with a Muslim background. Violations against converts, particularly in the form of Islamic and clan oppression, tend to be stronger in Arab than Kurdish areas.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

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

Historical Christian communities

Churches such as the Assyrian Orthodox Church, the Chaldean Catholic or Syrian Catholic Church and the Armenian Church are all seriously affected by violations 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. It is not uncommon for Christians in the IKR to depict Christian symbols without any problems.

Converts to Christianity

This category consists of Christians from a Muslim background or cross-denominational converts from a historical Christian community background who now worship in non-traditional Christian communities. Converts from Islam experience 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) in the north. In the Iraqi and Kurdish governments, the role of Islam is increasing due to regional developments. Several Shia parties have close relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Christian converts with a Muslim background, in particular, have reported being monitored by Iranian secret services in areas close to the Iranian border. In general, Iraqi society is becoming more Islamic. Islamic dogma and rhetoric rule daily life, and Islamic leaders (especially Shiites) continue to influence social, religious and political life. This is reflected in social norms and practices affecting everyone in Iraq, and becomes a benchmark for non-Muslims. Social control of women is on the rise, and even Christian women in Baghdad and Basra are forced to cover up in order to move around safely outside their homes.

Clan oppression:

Iraqi society remains very tribal, especially in areas disrupted by sectarian violence (mostly in territory previously controlled by IS). Where this tribalism is mixed with Islam, it will especially affect Christians with a Muslim background. Ethnic and tribal groups have at times formed parties that have had exclusivist agendas.

Christians are an easy target. Compliance with the tribes' age-old customs and traditions is often more important than adherence to government law, as tribes are usually above the law.

Dictatorial paranoia:

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

Organized corruption and crime:

Corruption is rampant across Iraq, and Christians are exploited in this way. In many majority-Islamic areas, Christians can often only sell their houses for 60% of its 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. The COVID-19 crisis has further exacerbated this state of chaos and corruption.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

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

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

- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

MEN

Christians often struggle to find employment and allegedly 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. Church leaders are also persecuted; while there were no known instances of abductions or killings of leaders in the past reporting period, it remains a possibility.

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

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	18	76
2022	14	78
2021	11	82
2020	15	76
2019	13	79

Iraq's score is down two points compared to WWL 2022. The main reason for this was fewer reported incidents involving violence. Overall pressure for Christians remains high. Many face physical abuse, are forced from their homes, have their properties damaged or confiscated, and dozens are still missing in situations that are faith-related.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **March 2022:** A female Kurdish convert was murdered weeks after she announced her new faith on social media and was preparing for baptism.
- About 62 Christians are missing under a “context of persecution”. For most, their disappearance is related to IS and dates back to the time of their rule.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Christians abducted	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians forced to flee their countries
2023	1	63	10*	100*
2022	1	31	10*	10*

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 pressurized 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 hardly considers the contributions of ‘other’ communities to Iraq’s history. This engenders a mentality of Christians being subordinate to Muslims. Some of the official teaching syllabus, in governmental schools and universities, even define Christians as infidels and enemies and incite jihad against them. The online application for a national identity card requests the information of the person’s religion, and the data chip on the card still contains data on religion. This has resulted in discrimination against Christians in employment. Christians hold some senior positions in the national parliament and government, but are generally under-represented in both. Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background are likely to lose their 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 nor recognize conversion from Islam to other religions or beliefs. According to personal status law, in a marriage where one spouse is Muslim, the right 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 hate speech and smear campaigns online, on national TV stations and by radical Islamic groups. Most of the perpetrators of crimes against Christians are not held accountable. The central government cannot control militias, particularly in the Nineveh Plains. In spite of the large number of Christian properties being seized (an estimated 78% of all properties belonging to Christians who left the country), the number of those brought to justice is nominal.

Church life

Youth work is only allowed inside church buildings and involves Christian youth. It is not possible for Christian converts with an Islamic background to be integrated into their local church, except in some Kurdish churches in the IKR. For security reasons, they often leave their 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 in the following international treaties:

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

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

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

Situation of other religious minorities

Other religious minorities facing persecution, discrimination and intolerance in Iraq are Yazidis, Sunnis, Kakai, Sabaeen-Mandaeans, Baha'i, Zoroastrians and Jews. Yazidis in particular have suffered horrendous atrocities, initially under IS and now by Turkey, which has conducted a series of air strikes in the Yazidi Sinjar region. In 2021, seven years after the IS genocide, around 3,000 Yazidi women, girls and boys were still missing and many of them may have been trafficked for sex, labor or terrorism.



Open Doors in Iraq

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

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

About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
