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## Iraq: Country Dossier

December 2019



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2020

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017	Total Score WWL 2016
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	92	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	94	93	89	88
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.5	9.4	92	91	91	91	87
4	Libya	15.3	15.5	15.8	16.0	16.4	11.3	90	87	86	78	79
5	Pakistan	14.0	13.9	15.0	14.9	13.7	16.7	88	87	86	88	87
6	Eritrea	14.5	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	10.9	87	86	86	82	89
7	Sudan	14.2	14.6	14.5	15.7	16.1	10.4	85	87	87	87	84
8	Yemen	16.6	16.4	16.4	16.7	16.7	2.6	85	86	85	85	78
9	Iran	14.1	14.3	14.1	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	85	85	85	83
10	India	12.9	13.0	13.5	15.0	13.5	14.8	83	83	81	73	68
11	Syria	13.5	14.2	13.0	13.9	14.4	12.6	82	82	76	86	87
12	Nigeria	12.2	11.9	13.5	12.8	13.0	16.7	80	80	77	78	78
13	Saudi Arabia	15.1	14.9	14.1	15.5	16.5	2.4	79	77	79	76	76
14	Maldives	15.4	15.6	14.0	15.9	16.6	0.7	78	78	78	76	76
15	Iraq	14.0	14.6	13.9	14.5	13.6	5.6	76	79	86	86	90
16	Egypt	12.1	13.1	10.7	13.2	10.5	16.1	76	76	70	65	64
17	Algeria	13.5	14.3	10.4	12.8	13.2	9.3	73	70	58	58	56
18	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	3.0	73	74	73	71	70
19	Myanmar	11.8	11.9	13.5	12.5	12.2	10.7	73	71	65	62	62
20	Laos	12.8	9.9	14.1	14.4	14.9	5.6	72	71	67	64	58
21	Vietnam	12.3	8.5	12.9	13.6	14.5	9.8	72	70	69	71	66
22	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.2	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.9	70	69	68	67	66
23	China	11.6	8.4	11.6	12.8	15.1	10.2	70	65	57	57	57
24	Mauritania	13.9	14.0	13.0	13.7	13.4	0.2	68	67	57	55	50
25	Central African Republic	10.1	9.1	13.1	9.8	10.2	15.6	68	70	61	58	59
26	Morocco	12.4	13.3	10.8	11.7	14.1	4.1	66	63	51	49	47
27	Qatar	13.6	13.4	10.8	12.2	14.1	2.2	66	62	63	66	65
28	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	10.2	9.4	11.8	15.6	66	48	-	-	-
29	Mali	9.2	8.2	12.8	10.0	11.7	13.7	66	68	59	59	55
30	Sri Lanka	11.5	9.0	11.0	10.9	9.6	13.1	65	58	57	55	53
31	Tajikistan	13.9	12.3	11.9	12.4	13.1	1.1	65	65	65	58	58
32	Nepal	12.4	10.8	9.9	12.1	12.2	7.0	64	64	64	53	53
33	Jordan	13.1	14.1	10.7	11.7	12.5	1.7	64	65	66	63	59

34	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.3	10.8	12.3	5.4	64	63	62	61	58
35	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	10.7	12.4	14.0	1.7	64	63	63	56	55
36	Turkey	12.6	11.8	10.7	13.3	11.3	3.7	63	66	62	57	55
37	Brunei	13.8	14.3	10.7	10.3	13.5	0.6	63	63	64	64	61
38	Bangladesh	11.1	9.9	12.7	11.1	8.9	9.3	63	58	58	63	57
39	Ethiopia	10.0	9.2	10.6	10.8	10.4	11.9	63	65	62	64	67
40	Malaysia	12.1	14.6	12.7	12.0	9.6	1.5	62	60	65	60	58
41	Colombia	8.9	7.8	11.9	9.8	8.9	15.0	62	58	56	53	55
42	Oman	12.7	13.1	10.0	11.5	12.7	2.0	62	59	57	53	53
43	Kuwait	13.2	13.1	9.9	11.5	13.4	0.7	62	60	61	57	56
44	Kenya	11.7	10.5	10.9	8.3	10.9	9.1	61	61	62	68	68
45	Bhutan	12.8	10.9	11.8	11.6	13.9	0.0	61	64	62	61	56
46	Russian Federation	12.2	8.3	10.7	10.4	12.1	6.9	60	60	51	46	48
47	United Arab Emirates	12.9	13.0	9.5	11.1	12.6	1.1	60	58	58	55	55
48	Cameroon	8.8	7.2	11.6	7.0	10.4	15.0	60	54	38	-	45
49	Indonesia	10.9	11.1	11.6	10.2	9.5	6.5	60	65	59	55	55
50	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.1	9.3	60	52	45	47	53
51	Palestinian Territories	12.2	13.0	9.2	10.2	11.9	3.1	60	57	60	64	62
52	Mexico	8.4	6.8	12.2	10.6	10.0	11.5	60	61	59	57	56
53	Azerbaijan	13.0	10.0	9.3	11.1	12.4	1.5	57	57	57	52	57
54	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.9	13.9	0.9	57	56	56	56	56
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.1	9.4	11.9	1.1	57	56	54	48	46
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.2	56	56	56	57	58
57	Democratic Republic of the Congo	5.6	6.7	10.6	7.4	10.4	15.6	56	55	33	-	53
58	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.9	56	48	40	-	51
59	Bahrain	12.1	12.3	9.1	10.1	10.5	0.9	55	55	57	54	54
60	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	7.0	55	52	53	59	57
61	Cuba	9.6	5.6	9.5	11.8	12.0	3.5	52	49	49	47	42
62	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	13.0	48	47	46	53	45
63	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.7	48	43	-	-	-
64	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	3.7	45	46	-	-	-
65	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.6	44	44	-	-	-
66	Mozambique	6.9	4.6	7.1	5.2	8.0	11.7	43	43	-	-	-
67	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.1	43	43	-	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	8.7	10.4	6.7	43	42	-	-	-
69	Venezuela	3.8	4.4	10.6	9.3	9.5	4.8	42	41	34	-	-
70	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.5	42	43	-	-	-
71	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	7.2	42	41	-	-	-

72	Nicaragua	5.8	4.2	8.5	9.8	9.0	4.1	41	41	-	-	-
73	Togo	8.6	6.7	8.5	7.1	8.4	1.1	41	42	-	-	-

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## Brief note on 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). The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. The WWL 2020 reporting period was 1 November 2018 - 31 October 2019.

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 2020: Persecution summary / Iraq

## Brief country details

Pop 2019	Christians	Chr%
Iraq		
40,412,000	202,000	0.5

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

World Watch List Iraq	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2020	76	15
WWL 2019	79	13
WWL 2018	86	8
WWL 2017	86	7
WWL 2016	90	2

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2016-2020 reporting periods.

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

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 persecution, 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. Even Christians in the Iraqi Kurdish Region (IKR) have reportedly removed crosses from their cars so as not to attract unwanted attention. 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. Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal churches in Bagdad and Basra are also seriously affected by persecution from radical Islamic groups and non-Christian leaders, and regularly experience discrimination from the authorities. 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.

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 attending Evangelical churches.

## Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period

- Three Christian converts from Islam were killed for faith-related reasons in the WWL 2020 reporting period. For security reasons, no further details can be given.
- On two separate occasions, Shiite militants intimidated Christians in Bartella and Qaraqosh in December 2018, by firing weapons into the air outside churches. The militants threatened Syriac Catholic priest Benham Benoka and put a gun to his head. Local authorities or police did not come to help and his efforts to have an investigation started were in vain ([Middle East Concern](#)).
- Two elderly Christian ladies were violently assaulted in their home in Bartella in May 2019. The mother (89) and daughter (69) had to be hospitalized and jewellery including other valuables were stolen. Two suspects of Shabak ethnicity were arrested. As [Middle East Concern](#) reports: "Christians view the incident as part of a systematic campaign against Christians which aims to change the area's demographic composition."

## External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution summary

- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: Middle East Concern - <https://www.meconcern.org/2019/01/16/iraq-christians-facing-intimidation/>
- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: Middle East Concern - <https://www.meconcern.org/2019/08/08/iraq-intimidation-of-nineveh-plain-christians/>



# WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / Iraq

## Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14542954>.

## 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. Its last strongman, Saddam Hussein, was toppled by a US-led military campaign in 2003. In the power vacuum that ensued, sectarian violence flared up particularly between Sunni and Shiite Muslims; 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 the persecution of Iraqi Christians. A stream of refugees started leaving the country, which was further escalated by 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 majority Christian towns close to Mosul, like Qaraqosh. In December 2017 Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared Iraqi forces had defeated IS and driven it from Iraqi territory. However, the IS influence remains in the region. In September 2017 Iraqi troops pushed back Kurdish forces in the north to stop the government of the Iraqi Kurdish Region (IKR) planning to establish an independent Kurdistan. After Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr won a majority in the parliamentary elections in May 2018, he chose Adel Abdul Mahdi as prime minister in October 2018. One year later, nationwide mass protests against corruption, unemployment and Iran's influence in many major cities led to the resignation of Mahdi and fresh elections which are expected to take place in early 2020.

## Political and legal landscape

Iraq is divided into two parts, a semi-autonomous Kurdish region in the north (Iraqi Kurdish Region), 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 18 provinces/governorates, from these 18 provinces only five have an official population of Christians. 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 which leads to a vicious cycle that is hard to escape. The most vulnerable victims are Christians and other minorities.

[EIU](#) classifies Iraq as a 'hybrid regime' and reports that the political landscape will remain fragile because of the fragmented nature of the ruling coalition.

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 Shias, Sunnis, Kurds, and other minorities (such as Christians, Turkmens, and Yazidiz).

The political representation of Christians is very low (1-3%) and they are distributed over 10 different parties. Islamist political parties have made their entry into Iraqi politics – both Shiite and Sunni - and constitute the majority in parliament. Several Shiite parties have warm relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran and consequently Iran’s influence is strong. Iran’s support in the battle against IS is another important factor. As a result, Iraq is becoming increasingly Islamic and the Baghdad government is putting pressure on the Kurdish government to act likewise. Christians, in particular those with a Muslim background, have reported that they are being monitored by Iranian secret services.

According to the [Fragile State Index 2019](#) (FSI), political indicators show an overall improvement, despite a decreasing trend in the availability of public services.

Christians characterize the political situation in Iraq currently as fraught. Major factors include: The failed attempt at Kurdish independence through a referendum in September 2017, the defeat of IS in Iraq in December 2017, corruption, a deeply fractured polity along sectarian lines and the need to reconstruct a nation destroyed by war against IS militants. Local Christians report that the enforcement of Islamic laws is on the rise. There is an atmosphere of instability and major demonstrations have taken place against the current government.

## Religious landscape

Iraq is an ethnically diverse nation with a Muslim population of 97.5% according to WCD 2019 estimates. 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 these 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.

Local Christians report that Christians are a small minority and there is a lot of political disagreement between the different Christian denominations and political parties. Although there has been a geographical defeat of IS, the ideology 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.

Religious Context: Iraq	Numbers	%
Christians	202,000	0.5
Muslim	39,412,000	97.5
Hindu	4,700	0.0
Buddhist	350	0.0
Ethnoreligionist	0	0.0
Jewish	20	0.0

Bahai	2,000	0.0
Atheist	71,400	0.2
Agnostic	207,000	0.5
Other	512,560	1.3

*Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019). OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.*

According to WCD 2019 estimates, the population consists of over 39.4 million Muslims, of which 55-60% are Shiites and 40% are Sunnis, whereas less than 1% are Yazidis, according to the [CIA World Factbook](#). Christians make up approximately 0.5% of the population.

## Economic landscape

Iraq is classified by the World Bank in the Upper Middle Income category. HDI notes Iraqi literacy as low at 43.7% and the employment rate is equally low at 42.7%. GNI is 17,789.

There is widespread dissatisfaction with the lack of public services supplying water and electricity, for instance, and there is high unemployment. Corruption is one of the major factors that is hampering the country's economic progress. Economic indicators show an overall improvement, with the Iraqi oil sector still providing substantial incomes for the country. 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, with many children having learning disorders and being in a permanent state of fear. The question is how this will work out for Iraq's future. Several analysts have established that trauma is a significant contributing factor for radicalization. This does not bode well for Iraq's large youth bulge.

Local Christians report that because of the KRG budget conflict with the central government of Iraq, government salaries have been delayed. Revenues are low due to low oil prices. Corruption in the public and private sectors carries very high risks for business investments. 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 who live 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 the short-term, the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) (EIU) expects IS to remain a terrorist threat, but foresees an improvement of economic conditions in 2021-2024 if oil prices increase, although Iraq's economy will continue to be vulnerable to price shocks.

## Social and cultural landscape

Society in Iraq continues to be conservative, tribal and driven by ethnic conflict. In general, Iraqi society is becoming more fragmented and Islamized. Christians feel betrayed by their Muslim neighbors and as the Christian population dwindles, so do their freedoms. Christians and their way of life used to be tolerated more in Iraq, but local Christians report increasing pressure in society. This includes more monitoring, the closing of shops during Ramadan and pressure on Christian women to veil themselves. In 2015, posters appeared on government office-buildings and even on churches encouraging Christian women to veil themselves 'as this is what Mary did'.

Christian IDPs in Kurdistan have difficulties integrating due to the language barrier. There is also a lack of knowledge about social, political, religious and economic issues. Many IDPs return to their villages and cities after four years displacement and are faced with very limited access to community life as the social fabric of society has been destroyed. This affects the mind-set and brings depression especially for youth and women, impacting the capacity to improve community life and strengthen social cohesion.

HDI rates life expectancy in Iraq at 70 years with 11 expected years of education. [Statistica.com](https://www.statista.com) expects Iraq's population to "grow steadily, adding an estimation of ten million inhabitants from 2013 to 2021. This increase is mainly due to the high fertility rate, as well as improved infrastructure and health care. The average [life expectancy](#) has been increasing slightly over the past years."

## Technological landscape

The rate of Internet users and penetration in 2019 is relatively low in Iraq: 48% according to the [2019 Arab Youth Survey](#). The percentage of active social media users and penetration is slightly lower at 47%. Otherwise, the rate of mobile subscriptions is comparatively high: 96%. The percentage of mobile social media users and penetration is 45%.

In a reaction to political unrest, the Iraqi government has limited Internet access. Freedom House mentions the following example in the [2019 Report on Freedom in the World](#): "In July 2018, the government reacted to protests in Basra by shutting down the Internet in a number of regions for several days, followed by a targeted restriction of access to social media platforms including WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook. The move was intended to curb the protests and staunch online criticism of the government."

Freedom of expression in Iraq, including via the Internet, is again under pressure in 2019 as the Iraqi parliament is discussing a new cyber-crime law. According to [Reporters Without Borders](#), this law 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".

Local Christians report that the increased use of mobile phones and Internet leads to a decreased level of social life, creates problems in the area of moral issues and has affected the level of education in general.

## Security situation

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. Militias such as al-Hashd al-Sha'bi (the Popular Mobilization forces loyal to Iran) are a factor of insecurity and instability for all categories of Christian communities and a dangerous source of persecution for converts. They constitute a group of some forty different militias of various sizes (nominally) under the control of the central government, some of which are very radicalized.

[Human Rights watch](#) reports that "although IS lost control of territory in Iraq, it continued to carry out attacks on civilians and security installations during 2018. Key human rights challenges in the post-IS phase include fair trials for IS suspects that allow for victim participation, protection of families of suspected IS members from collective punishment, free movement of the displaced, cessation of forced returns and displacements, and accountability for abuses by anti-IS forces. Authorities across Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region, continue to limit free speech, harass and arrest journalists, as well as resort to excessive use of force against protesters."

Despite the fact that major incidents did not occur during the past few months, large-scale terrorist attacks still could occur. Small-scale attacks continue to be carried out and are basically aimed at [minorities or governmental forces](#). In an attempt to restrict the number of armed militia, [Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi signed a decree](#) to integrate the Hashd al-Shaabi factions into the national army. His primary reason was to prevent security control being carried out by multiple entities (and not by the state alone) and secondly to ensure the rights of the various factions in Iraq. Both reasons enhance the stability in Iraq. However, there is also a third (more hidden) reason: The Hashd al Shaabi factions have ties with Iran and are therefore currently limited by US sanctions. Integration into the Iraqi security forces neatly prevents them from being affected by the sanctions.

The security situation in Iraqi Kurdistan regarding attacks by radical Islamic groups remains unchanged. Islamist "sleeping" cells could conduct an attack on ethnic minorities or government forces and other state representatives at any time. The major player in the current situation however is [Turkey](#). In 2019, it was reported that Turkey had conducted an increasing number of airstrikes and direct attacks on Kurdish positions in northern Iraq. In response to this, a variety of Kurdish militias have emerged to fight off the "Turkish invasion". It is unclear what support these militias receive from the Kurdish government or from the local population.

## Trends analysis

### **1. Sectarian violence and corruption are hampering progress and democracy**

Iraq was only given national status early in the 20th century, but was built on the ancient powerful kingdoms of Babylonia and Assyria. The ethnically and religiously diverse nation is suffering from sectarian violence and corruption which are the main factors hampering progress and the process of democracy. Closely related is the problem of impunity, which greatly affects the position of Iraq's Christians, and the rise of radical Islamic groups which do not tolerate any other religion than a strict and violent form of Islam. Although the general situation in Iraq remains far from stable, there are hopeful developments as IS was territorially defeated in December 2017, allowing many Christians to return to a number of villages.

### **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 worst persecution the Church in Iraq had ever experienced. Even during earlier waves of persecution, the Nineveh plains were never fully emptied of Christians as was the case starting in 2014. The defeat of IS should bring an improvement for the situation of Christians in Iraq. However, only when Christian IDPs successfully return to their former hometowns and cities can any improvement in their situation take root. Land disputes make it very difficult for the majority of them to return to their homelands in the Nineveh plains. Iran-backed Shabak militias, Kurds, Arabs and others continue to occupy or expropriate lands of 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 face continued high levels of persecution and leave Iraq. Many among the Christian youth in particular are prepared to leave if the opportunity arises due to lack of security, 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 KRG. This affects Christians as much as the Kurds targeted by the Turkish army. [Online media](#) reported in August 2019 that 10 Christian villages had to be evacuated because of repeated Turkish air raids. These attacks might not be singling out Christians but they have yet another destructive effect on the community. Symbolic political steps, such as the introduction of Christmas as a national holiday in December 2018, were opposed by religious authorities, such as the Grand Mufti of Baghdad who said in a sermon that Christian holidays like Christmas are impermissible for Muslims and that those who celebrate them believe Christian doctrine.

### **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 that now IS is considered defeated, the persecution of Christians in the country will be ignored or dismissed as a secondary issue.

As this dossier shows, Christian persecution is 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 plain are possibly an indication of more persecution coming in the future, especially if the government continues to be weak and impunity rampant.

## External Links - WWL 2020: Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14542954>. - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14542954>
- Political and legal landscape: EIU - <http://country.eiu.com/Iraq>
- Political and legal landscape: Fragile State Index 2019 - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/2019/04/07/fragile-states-index-2019-annual-report/>
- Religious landscape: CIA World Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>
- Economic landscape: Economist Intelligence Unit - <http://country.eiu.com/Iraq>
- Social and cultural landscape: Statistica.com - <https://www.statista.com/topics/2375/iraq/>
- Social and cultural landscape: life expectancy - <https://www.statista.com/statistics/326817/life-expectancy-at-birth-in-iraq/>
- Technological landscape: 2019 Arab Youth Survey - [https://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/about\\_the\\_survey.html](https://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/about_the_survey.html)
- Technological landscape: 2019 Report on Freedom in the World - <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/iraq>
- Technological landscape: Reporters Without Borders - <https://rsf.org/en/iraq>
- Security situation: Human Rights watch - <https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/iraq>
- Security situation: minorities or governmental forces - <https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/3-iraqis-including-policemen-wounded-in-bomb-attack-armed-clashes-in-diyala/>
- Security situation: Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi signed a decree - <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/030720192>
- Security situation: Turkey - [https://twitter.com/NRT\\_English/status/1146059968027615232](https://twitter.com/NRT_English/status/1146059968027615232)
- Trends analysis: Online media - <https://www.assistnews.net/christian-villages-bombed-and-evacuated/>



## WWL 2020: 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 Christianity spread in its Syriac linguistic and cultural form and became the Church of Iraq, especially after its formalization in 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 sources, 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 would 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 by the London Jewish Society in 1820. Presbyterian missionaries came to Iraq in 1836 and built a church in Mosul in 1840. Samuel Zwemer and his team of 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 the Turkish regime murdered over 250,000 Christians. 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 ouster 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 dwindled considerably. The Church in Iraq now consists mainly of three distinct groups: The majority are Catholics (Western and Eastern) followed by the Orthodox and Protestant communities, as shown in the table under "Church spectrum today".

## Church spectrum today

Church networks: Iraq	Christians	%
Orthodox	69,300	34.3
Catholic	113,000	55.9
Protestant	10,100	5.0
Independent	71,500	35.4
Unaffiliated	7,300	3.6
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-69,700	-34.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>201,500</b>	<b>99.8</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	16,300	8.1
Renewalist movement	44,700	22.1

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

*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: Believers 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.*

# WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics / Iraq

## Reporting period

1 November 2018 – 31 October 2019

## Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 76 points, Iraq ranked 15 in WWL 2020.

The score for Iraq went down from 79 points in WWL 2019 to 76 points and moved from rank 13 to 15. The average score for pressure remained at the same extreme level of 14.1 points. However, the score for violence went down from 8.1 to 5.6 points, due mainly to fewer reports of Christians being killed and fewer reports of churches being attacked. The current score for violence is still high and IS influence in the local population is still evident. Christians continue to be physically or mentally harmed, threatened and sexually harassed. Acts of violence against non-convert Christians were mostly committed by Islamic militants (mostly Shabak), whereas converts from Islam especially faced violence from their (extended) families. Although some Christian families have returned to their homes, the emigration of Christians is continuing due to fear and lack of hope for a good future.

## Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Iraq	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Clan and ethnic antagonism	CEA	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 (Strong):

Radical Islamic groups seek a religious cleansing of Iraq and aim to make the country purely Islamic. After the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the situation deteriorated rapidly, with anti-Western (and as such, anti-Christian) sentiments causing considerable levels of violence by Islamic militants and insurgent groups. This situation has been aggravated by government impunity and lawlessness. Moreover, radical Islamic groups increased in number in northern and western regions, under the influence of the civil war in Syria.

Due to the influence of Islamic militants, Islamic awareness has become 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 Shiite parties have warm relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran and in particular Christian converts with a Muslim background have been reporting for some time that they are 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 governs daily life and Islamic leaders (especially Shia) continue to influence social, religious and political life through their teaching, political stance and tribal leadership. This is then reflected in social norms and practices that affect all people of Iraq and becomes a measure for non-Muslims too. The social control of women is increasing and even Christian women in Baghdad and Basra have been forced to veil themselves in order to move safely outside of their homes.

**Clan and ethnic antagonism (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). Belonging to a tribe is very often more important than obeying government law. Age-old norms and values exert a controlling influence on tribal society. Where this tribalism is mixed with Islam, it will especially affect Christians with a Muslim background. A convert's tribal background may cause difficulties for other Christians and deter them from giving help. Tribal groups have influence within (and sometimes over) government authorities in some areas.

**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 disadvantaging Christians in the areas of finding jobs and registering Christian companies but are also taking 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 the 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, whereby the perpetrators are influential tribal leaders, 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 feelings of great insecurity. These two reasons are among the main causes for Iraqi Christian emigration and for the depletion of the Christian community in Iraq.

**Dictatorial Paranoia (Strong):**

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 local Christians. Religious and political Christian leaders continue to renounce the fraudulent or forced appropriation of Christian owned property. Finally, Christians in 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 but by parties that did not give priority to issues that are important for Christian communities. Also in 2019 this continued to be an issue raised by Christian leaders.

### 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 traditional Catholic churches refuse to allow Protestant Christians to bury their dead in Catholic cemeteries. 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 be known to refuse to hold weddings for members who have been visiting Evangelical churches. Families and community often disassociate themselves from such cross-denominational converts.

## Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Iraq	IO	RN	CEA	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	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 for targeting Christians belonging to historical Christian communities for abduction and killing. Some militias are a particularly dangerous source of persecution to converts. (See 'Security situation' above)
- **Extended family (Very strong):** There is very strong persecution from extended family who put serious pressure on Christians with a Muslim background to get them to return to Islam, and this sometimes includes attempts to kill them. Converts also fear physical harm and torture, 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):** 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, the line between who is radical and who is not becomes blurred. 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 (fixed to church buildings in the GOI area) telling Christian women to wear the *hijab*.
- **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.
- **Political parties (Strong):** In the parliamentary elections of May 2018, 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, also ethnic, paramilitary and tribal groups have at times formed parties that have had exclusivist agendas.

- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Another source of persecution 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 recent past, ordinary 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 (Source: [International Religious Freedom Report 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 and ethnic antagonism:**

- **Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Strong):** Ethnicity remains a factor of persecution within the IKR and elsewhere in Iraq. After re-conquering territory from IS, the Kurds and Iranian-backed militias, including the Shabak, a Shia ethnic minority, have pressured Christians into selling their property or have hindered Christians from returning to their towns or villages. By expropriating Christians they have contributed to the expulsion of Christians from Iraq.
- **Extended family (Strong), Ethnic leaders (Strong) and non-Christian religious leaders (Medium):** *Clan and ethnic antagonism* 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' the law. Drivers of this engine are particularly families of converts and tribal, ethnic or Islamic leaders.
- **Political parties (Medium):** 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 also at government level. Kurdish authorities and citizens have been involved in the so-called demographic engineering policies or 'Kurdification' of the Nineveh plains and other parts of the IKR. This planned and targeted effort to buy or confiscate Christian-owned land puts the identity of historic Christian enclaves/villages at risk and is another step towards the removal of the Christian minority from Iraq.

### 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, normal 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 the persecution of Christians. Christians in IKR have complained about the alleged exploitation of the electoral law in the 2018 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.
- **Violent religious groups, ethnic leaders (Strong) and revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Strong):** Other drivers that will do anything to stay in or increase 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 Khorazan.

### Drivers of Christian denominational protectionism:

- **Religious leaders of other churches (Strong):** At a lower level of persecution, 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 - 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):** Violent religious groups, government officials and criminal groups have been involved in corruption and crime to exploit Christians. 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. Drivers of this engine are mostly people in or close to political power and Shia militia backed by Iran. The kidnapping of Christians - which has decreased - 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 were also involved in the seizure of more than 30,000 Christian properties in Baghdad and other areas, in defiance of promises by the prime minister's office to investigate the appropriations.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** Some citizens have become complicit in the process of appropriation of Christian properties by buying and moving into them. 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.

## Geographical hotspots of persecution

Iraq consists of 18 provinces/governorates, of which only five have an official population of Christians. Christians have left all other governorates, apart from small groups of converts with a Muslim background.

Most of the Christians in Iraq are concentrated in the provinces of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). There is also a Christian concentration in the province/governorate of Nineveh. The Nineveh plains are among the so-called disputed areas, between the KRG and the GOI. After the Iraqi Kurdistan referendum, September 2017, most of Nineveh plains returned to the control of the government of Iraq (GOI). Some Christians are resident in Baghdad and Basra. Converts to Christianity can be found in all provinces of Iraq. Persecution against converts is stronger in Arab than in Kurdish areas.

## 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.

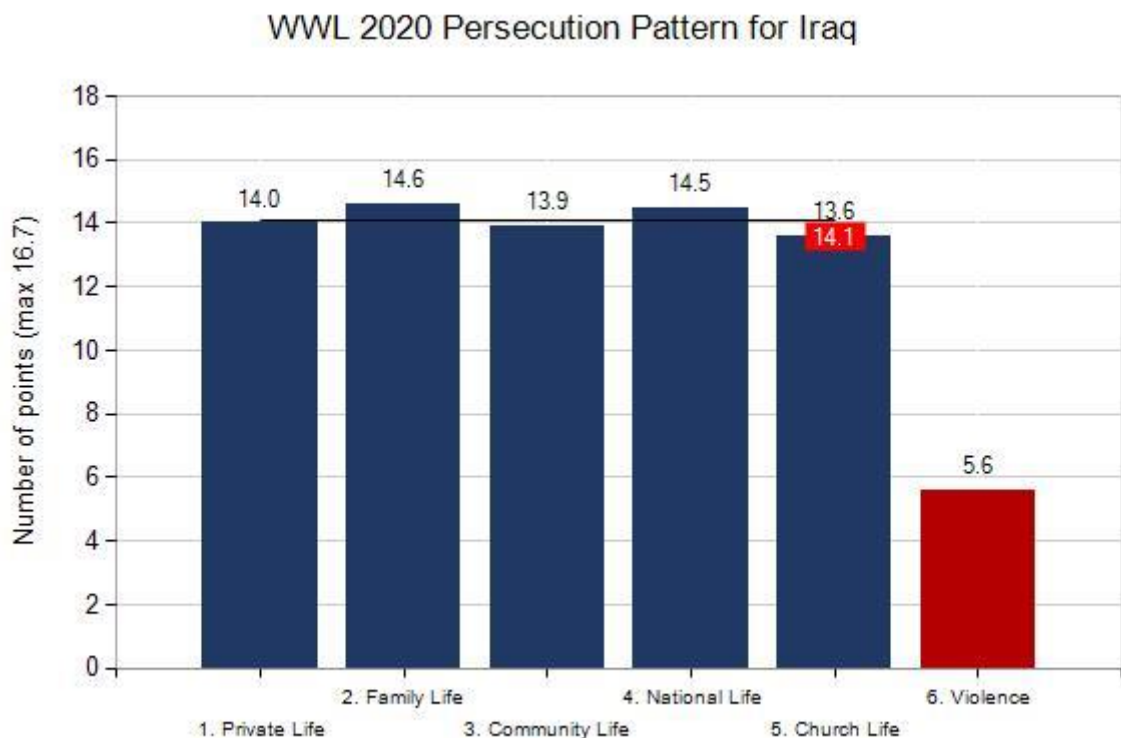
**Historical Christian communities:** Churches such as the Assyrian Orthodox Church, the Chaldean Catholic or Syrian Catholic Church and the Armenian Church are all seriously affected by persecution from radical Islamic movements and non-Christian religious leaders. They also face discrimination from 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. Even Christians in the IKR 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 or cross-denominational converts from a Historical Christian community background who now worship with non-traditional Christian communities. Converts from Islam experience most pressure from (extended) family and often keep their new faith a secret as they risk being threatened by their family members, tribal leaders and society around them. Changing church (e.g. from an Orthodox to an Evangelical congregation) is also often punished by refusing rights or losing employment. A bishop refused to perform marriages for members of his Orthodox church who had been attending Evangelical churches.



**Non-traditional Christian communities:** Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal churches in Bagdad and Basra, are also seriously affected by persecution 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. 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.

## The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2020 Persecution pattern for Iraq shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Iraq continues to score at an extreme level (14.1), exactly the same as in the WWL 2019 reporting period. Extreme levels of pressure are recorded in every *sphere of life*, except for *Church life* where the level is very high and almost extreme with a score of 13.6. This is typical for a situation in which there are many different persecution engines acting.
- Pressure from *Islamic oppression* affects all five *spheres of life* especially for converts. *Clan and ethnic antagonism* (blended with *Islamic oppression*) is most prevalent in the *Family* and *Private spheres of life*. *Organized corruption and crime* is mostly expressed 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 is still very high (5.6 points), though falling from 8.1 in WWL 2019. The decrease is mainly explained by there being fewer reports of Christians being killed and fewer reports of churches being attacked.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, details are shown from four of the highest scoring block questions, with those items scoring highest listed first. 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 0 – 4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

### Private sphere:

- ***It has been risky for Christians to discuss their faith with those other than immediate family members (extended family, others) (Block 1.8 / Score: 4 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.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.) (Block 1.4 / Score: 3.5 points):*** As a convert from Islam, revealing your faith via social media can be very dangerous. Revealing your faith in writing non-convert Christians is generally not very problematic; however, posting messages inviting others to join the Christian faith are. After centuries of recurring religious persecution and successive waves of violence through neighbors and foreigners alike, members of traditional churches tend to refrain from this for fear of hostility. The non-traditional church communities, although more vocal about their beliefs and active in evangelization, risk provoking serious Muslim opposition.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols (Block 1.5/ Score: 3.5 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.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians (Block 1.9/ Score: 3.5 points):*** It is especially risky for converts from Islam to meet with other Christians as this could lead to their new faith being revealed. This is true for the entire country with levels of tension depending on where converts live. In more tolerant IKR and homogenous Christian villages in the Nineveh plains this would be less risky than in very conservative Islamic areas.

*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 active act of proselytism and treason. Pressure in this sphere of life was particularly high in central and southern Iraq and a lesser extent in the IKR.*

**Family sphere:**

- ***Christian spouses of non-Christians have been excluded from the right or opportunity to claim custody of the children in divorce cases (Block 2.12 / Score: 4 points):*** Converts cannot marry non-Muslims. In cases of divorce, Islamic personal-status law will apply affecting the custody of children, inheritance, burial, etc..
- ***Babies and children of Christians have automatically been registered under the state or majority religion (Block 2.1/ Score: 3.5 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 has born a child as result of the 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.
- ***Registering the birth, wedding, death, etc. of Christians has been hindered or made impossible (Block 2.2/ Score: 3.5 points):*** This is impossible for Christians with an Islamic background, since authorities will continue to consider them Muslim. As a result, the marriage of a former Muslim to a non-Muslim will not be recognized. His/her children will be treated as Muslims, with implication on 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 appeared in front of a court to declare their conversion to Islam. All legal and social records are then amended by the said court. Finally, unregistered non-traditional Christian communities are not able to register weddings or deaths of their members.
- ***Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education (Block 2.8/ Score: 3.5 points):*** This is especially true for children whose parents have an Islamic background since they are considered Muslims and will be obliged to receive Islamic religion education 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) should have regular Islamic classes and exams have to be taken. Failing these exams means failing to move up in grades. Also, the national educational curriculum is geared towards Islam - this goes beyond Religious Education and influences, for instance, lessons on history.

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 south 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 head scarf 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 its International Report on Religious Freedom for 2015.

#### Community sphere:

- 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.) (Block 3.1 / Score: 3.5 points):** Discrimination of Christians is pervasive in Iraq. The lack of accountability through the civil war and numerous militias that are not controlled by the central government leave persecutors unpunished. Discrimination takes place on 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 head scarf. Additionally, the curriculum for elementary school students contains elements with inaccurate and offensive statements that incite hatred and division; Christian women are particularly affected by statements such as unveiled women being described as 'sick'.
- Christians have been under threat of abduction and/or forced marriage? (Block 3.3 / Score: 3.5 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.
- Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education) (Block 3.9 / Score: 3.5 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 'subordinate' mentality towards Christians by 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 syllabus, 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 complained that some Muslim university professors (intentionally) set exams during Christian festivals (Christmas and Easter). Finally, Assyrian schools have indicated that they face neglect and discrimination, not receiving the full funding they are entitled to or the textbooks they need.

- ***Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons (Block 3.10 / Score: 3.5 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 this is even worse: 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 enterprises.

#### National sphere:

- ***The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Block 4.1/ Score: 4 points):*** Although the Constitution acknowledges basic human rights and religious freedoms 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 does not allow, neither recognizes, the conversion from Islam to other religions or beliefs. The ID law stipulates that if a person converts to Islam, all his/her children are considered Muslims, including his/her children from earlier marriages. According to personal-status law, in a marriage where one of the spouses is a Muslim, the right of divorce, child-custody and inheritance goes almost automatically to the Muslim party.
- ***Christians have been barred from public office, or has promotion been hindered for faith-related reasons (Block 4.6 / Score: 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 in IKR have complained about the alleged exploitation of the electoral law in the 2018 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.

- **Christians have been subject to smear campaigns or hate-speech (Block 4.11 / Score: 3.75 points):** According to local Christians, non-Christian religious leaders and clergy regularly incite their followers against Christians for instance in sermons in mosques throughout Iraq. This can also directly lead to violence against Christians. Christians have also been regularly subjected to hate-speech and smear campaigns on national TV stations and online by radical Islamic groups.
- **Christians have accused in court been deprived of equal treatment (Block 4.15 / Score: 3.5 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.
- **Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished (Block 4.14/ Score: 3.5 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 family. The central government does not exert control over militias, particularly in the Nineveh plains. 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 Christians homes and Christian properties being seized (official figures estimate that this is the case for 78% of all properties belonging to Christians who left the country), the number of those who have been brought to justice is nominal.

#### Church sphere:

- **Work among youth in particular has been restricted (Block 5.6 / Score: 4 points):** Youth work is only allowed inside church buildings; also youth camps and other events should 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 youth. 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.
- **Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts (Block 5.7 / Score: 4 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 fellow Kurds. Regardless of the relatively greater freedom in the IKR, they are still closely watched and potentially at risk.)
- **5.20 Has it been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution? (Block 5.20 / Score: 4 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.

- **Activities of churches have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed (Block 5.1 / Score: 3.75 points):** Known activities of fellowships composed of Christians with an Islamic background would most certainly be monitored, hindered and disrupted - though there are some minor exceptions in the IKR. Regardless of the relatively greater freedom in the IKR, converts are still closely watched. Christian life in parts of the Nineveh plains has died out: Mosul, Tel Keefe and other places were once home to vibrant Christian communities, but this is no longer the case. The vast majority of churches are still in ruins and government support to rebuild the Christian presence in the Nineveh plains is lacking. Several churches are reportedly being monitored, especially the newer denominations.

## Violence

*The following table is based on reported cases as much as possible. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (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 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure.*

Iraq	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2020	01 Nov 2018 - 31 Oct 2019	3	24	3	1	11
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	5	68	14	3	10
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	3	104	3	10	6000

*Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.*

For the WL 2020 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** Three Christians were killed for faith related reasons. As this concerns converts to Christianity, no further details can be given for security reasons.
- **Christians attacked:** This includes sexual harassment, which is a serious problem in Iraq (also see "gender profile of persecution", quoting a report that showed 77% of women reported sexual harassment). Christian women are additionally vulnerable due to current levels of impunity, the lack of protection and the general attitude in Islamic society that Christian women are open to advances. Shabak militias or affiliates are known to have sexually harassed Christians. Also, many Christian women in Baghdad are known to be suffering from this. It is very hard to obtain verified information, however, considering the taboo this topic carries. The score of 10 in the table above is a very low estimate. Furthermore, there was one reported case of forced marriage. Young converts to Christianity are likely to be married off to a conservative Muslim once their new faith is discovered. This number is also likely to be higher in reality. In total, there were 13 registered cases of Christians who were either physically or mentally abused. Two elderly women, a mother and daughter were beaten by Shabak militia and had their belongings stolen in Bartella - a previously majority Christian town - in May 2019. Local Christian leaders understand this to be part of a strategy to intimidate Christians and induce them to emigrate. There were also several cases of converts to Christianity who were physically harmed or received death-threats.
- **Christians arrested:** There were three registered cases of Christians being arrested for faith-related reasons. For security reasons, no further details can be given.
- **Churches attacked:** This category includes closure, confiscation or forced relocation of churches. One house-church had to move to another location after the owner of the property put the rent up considerably higher since he discovered that the property was being used as a meeting place for converts to Christianity.
- **Christian houses/shops attacked:** In recent years, thousands of Christian-owned houses were looted or confiscated. Considering the current corrupt state of the country, including the role impunity plays, this is a problem which has not yet ended. Again, the score of 10 - a very low estimate - was taken to cover this and includes a burglary attack on a Christian home in Bartella in May 2019, which local Christians believe was meant to intimidate Christians and 'encourage' them to leave the area. Added to this number of ten, was one attack on a Christian-owned shop by militia in Baghdad in the summer of 2019.

## 5 Year trends

### Chart 1:

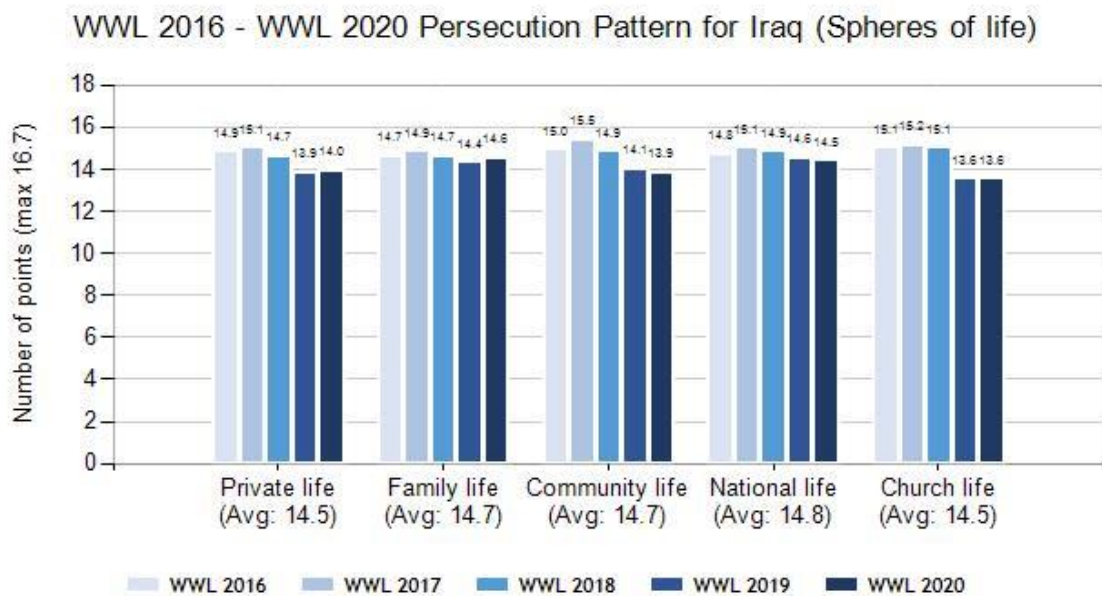
The average pressure over all 5 WWL reporting periods has been at an extreme level and would appear to be leveling off at just over 14 points. The overall decrease in pressure since WWL 2017 (which was the reporting period when IS was at its maximum territorial power) reflects the territorial defeat and expulsion of the radical Islamic group.



WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern history: Iraq	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2020	14.1
2019	14.1
2018	14.9
2017	15.2
2016	14.9

**Chart 2:**

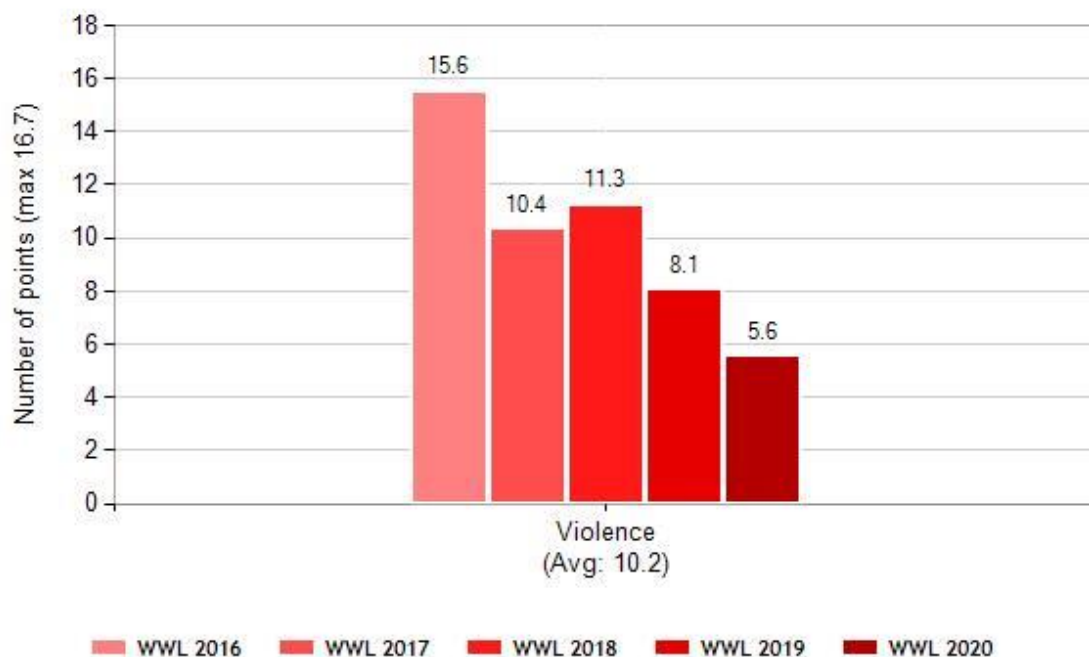
The chart below shows that the pressure in all *spheres of life* has been diminishing since WWL 2017 but is still at an extreme level (except for *church life*, where the level is at the top end of 'very high'). For most *spheres of life* the level of pressure in WWL 2019 - WWL 2020 is comparable to that of a few years prior to IS expansion in Iraq (not shown in this table). The territorial defeat and expulsion of IS has particularly caused a reduction of pressure in *church life*.



**Chart 3:**

Over the last five WWL reporting periods, the trend for violence against Christians shows a significant decrease; indeed, there has been a ten point reduction when comparing the scores for WWL 2016 and WWL 2020. In particular the territorial defeat and expulsion of IS has contributed to this reduction.

## WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern for Iraq (Violence)



## Gender profile of persecution

## Female Pressure Points:

- ***Denied custody of children***
- ***Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse***
- ***Denied inheritance or possessions***
- ***Economic harassment via work/job/business***
- ***Enforced religious dress code***
- ***Forced divorce***
- ***Forced marriage***
- ***Incarceration by family***
- ***Violence – death***
- ***Violence – physical***
- ***Violence - sexual***

After years of violence, an uncertain peace has come to Iraq, where the “[fear of violence](#) is receding much more slowly than the reality”, only to be interrupted by recurring [violent protests](#). During the war against IS, IS was known for its atrocious treatment of women, especially using those from religious minorities for sexual enslavement and sex trafficking. In 2015, the Iraqi Media Women Forum revealed results of its national survey on sexual harassment, noting that 77% of women surveyed reported harassment, and 91% of harassed women said that local traditions and customs prevented them from seeking justice through the legal system. In some areas, Christian women and girls are now wearing veils for their own safety. Unveiled women in Baghdad and Basra are likely to be harassed, pelted with stones, kidnapped or killed.

For Christian women this is compounded by the fact there is general impunity for violations against Christians, be it stealing property, kidnapping, sexual abuse or corruption. Often, when the perpetrator has higher connections and higher status, they will win the case, especially under the tribal justice system which can override national justice.

Female converts from Islam are most vulnerable to persecution for their faith. However, other Christian females also face inequality, e.g. if their husbands convert to Islam. In the case of female converts, pressure comes most often from the wider family. A convert risks abuse in the form of house arrest, sexual harassment, rape and even death, if her faith is revealed. Due to social stigma and retribution against both the victim and perpetrator, victims of sexual crimes do not usually report them to authorities. Since rape in Iraq is not prosecuted if the rapist marries the woman he violated, in order to restore the family honor, women (including Christians) could be forced to marry their attacker.

When married to a Muslim husband, a female convert risks abuse and death threats from her husband or his family, which cause some to flee. Converts can be locked inside their homes by their families, especially girls. They are also faced with travel restrictions. Travel bans can be imposed by the authorities but also by family, for instance to prevent the female convert from leaving the country. If this ban is violated, a court case can be started for “travelling without permission”.

Female converts from Islam cannot officially marry male Christians, as the Iraqi state still considers them Muslims. Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslims. Female converts are also under the threat of forced divorce. The attitude of the spouse’s family is crucial in this issue.

On a community level, in state schools, Christian girls are seen as weaker and are often ridiculed for their faith. They are reportedly under pressure to convert to Islam and their grades can be impacted if they openly challenge concepts which contradict their Christian faith.

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

#### **Male Pressure Points:**

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

Christian men are at risk of being targets for various forms of violence; particularly former Muslims are in a very vulnerable position and struggle to sustain their families. Job discrimination affects men belonging to all WWL categories of Christian communities, especially those working in the public sector. Christians in central and south Iraq have been put under pressure to leave their jobs, especially if they are working for foreign organizations or are employed at higher levels of society (e.g. government companies). In the north, Christians often struggle to get employment and allegedly feel vulnerable and prone to exploitation at their workplaces. In this mostly traditional and tribal Iraqi society, men are often the primary breadwinners for their families and losing their jobs can have a considerable effect on Christian families. The consequences of this can be far-reaching for their families, who apart from being left without income, often face emotional trauma if the man flees or is killed.

This problem affects Christians with a Muslim background even more so. Furthermore, in a culture where retaining honor is everything, Christian converts are at risk of being ejected from their families or other forms of persecution at their hands, including violent death. A convert's family could also face mockery and pressure from the husband's Muslim family. Also, men from a non-Muslim Christian background risk being killed for their faith, the perpetrators being mostly violent Islamic militants.

These factors greatly increase the already strong motivations 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.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

[Other religious minorities](#) facing persecution in Iraq are Yazidis, Kakai, Sabaeen-Mandaeans Bahai and Jews. Especially Yazidis are known to have suffered atrocities under IS and 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". Nearly 3,000 Yazidi women and girls are currently still [missing](#) and presumably remain in captivity.

Whereas the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion for Christians, Yazidis and Sabean-Mandaeans, it does not explicitly protect adherents of other religions or atheists. The practice of two streams of religion are prohibited by law: Bahai faith and Wahhabi Sunni Islam. Considered apostates of Islam, Bahai face higher persecution than most Christians, with the exception of converts to Christianity. Practicing the Bahai faith can be punished by law with 10 years' imprisonment.

According to the penal code, Jews are not allowed to hold government jobs (e.g. in state enterprises) or join the army. Widespread discrimination against Jews makes them avoid public self-identification for fear of provoking violence.

Example of persecution:

According to the [International Religious Freedom Report for 2017](#), IS targeted Shiite pilgrims and pilgrimage sites. On 14 September 2017, one such bombing in Nasariyah in south Iraq killed at least 80 Shiites.

## Future outlook for the church

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

- **Islamic oppression:** Based on [EIU's](#) forecast, the threat of the Persecution engine *Islamic oppression* is not expected to diminish significantly in the short-term. IS ideology is still very much alive and is not limited to geographical territory. In an effort to prove they are still relevant, IS continues to execute and inspire attacks in the West, Middle East and elsewhere. Meanwhile, thousands of fleeing IS militants have "disappeared" into the civilian population of the Nineveh plains – adding to feelings of insecurity for religious minorities such as Christians. IS militants are regrouping and it is reported that there are many sleeper cells; in August 2018 it was estimated that there were probably [17,000 IS militants](#) still in Iraq. There have been some attacks on villages and there is fear that more will happen in the near future. 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 central government decided to bring "Popular Mobilization Units" (PMU militias, particularly 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 be successful. If this situation 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, Islamic awareness is reportedly awakening.

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. 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 and ethnic antagonism:** After the defeat of IS and the withdrawal of *peshmerga* troops from Kirkuk, Iraqi parliamentary elections in May 2018 represented an attempt to reduce ethnic and sectarian conflicts. However, the loss of a common enemy and the subsequent power vacuum are likely to continue to increase divisions between tribal and sectarian groups, making the influence of the persecution engine *Clan and ethnic antagonism* stronger. Pressure will thereby increase on all Christians, including those in Kurdish areas - but particularly on those from a Muslim background, who suffer most where this engine is strong.
- **Dictatorial paranoia:** Amidst 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 always been seen as agents of the West. Moreover certain PMU militias are accused of receiving arms from Iran and allowing a headquarters of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in areas under their control which could turn Iraq into a potential conflict zone for possible military confrontation between Iraq 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:** Nationwide mass protests against corruption, unemployment and Iran's influence that broke out in many cities in October 2019, led to the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi and early elections which are expected to take place in early 2020. Christian representatives in the 2018 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. In the event of a nationwide power-struggle *Organized corruption and crime* is likely to flourish.
- **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 "new" churches however remains complex and some reports point to a recent increase in tension. The need to cooperate still exists but the increased fragmentation along tribal lines (and survival sentiments) 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 - WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: Shia and Sunni Muslims to move into traditionally Christians areas - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/IRAQ-2018-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>
- Drivers of persecution: International Religious Freedom Report 2018 - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/IRAQ-2018-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life : eligibility for government benefits - <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom//index.htm#wrapper>
- Gender profile of persecution: fear of violence - <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/iraq-danger-recovery-isis-war-us-syria-jihadis-a8422571.html>
- Gender profile of persecution: violent protests - <http://https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50584123>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Other religious minorities - <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Unrepresented Nations and People's Organization - <https://unpo.org/article/20889>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: missing - <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/yazidi-isis-sex-slavery-amar-foundation/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: International Religious Freedom Report for 2017 - <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>
- Future outlook for the church: EIU's - <http://country.eiu.com/Iraq>
- Future outlook for the church: 17,000 IS militants - <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-fighters-iraq-syria-un-report-jihadis-raqqa-iraq-a8492736.html>

## Additional reports and articles

### WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

- **WWR Analysis – GENDER SPECIFIC RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION**  
[IRAQ – Compound structural vulnerabilities facing Christian women – 2018](#)
- **Middle East Research: 2016 – 2017**  
[Iraq and Syria – The enduring relevance of the church in the Middle East: December 2017](#)  
[Understanding the recent movements of Christians leaving Syria and Iraq: June 2017](#)  
[The role and contribution of Christians in Syria and Iraq – Summary report – April 2016](#)  
[Future role and contribution of Christians in Syria and Iraq – April 2016](#)  
[Historic Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq – March 2016](#)  
[Current Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq – February 2016](#)

### World Watch Monitor news articles

Articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/iraq>.

### Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Iraq> (password: freedom).

### External Links - Additional reports and articles

- WWR in-depth reports: IRAQ – Compound structural vulnerabilities facing Christian women – 2018 - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/IRAQ-Compound-structural-vulnerabilities-facing-Christian-women-2018-FINAL-WITH-PREFACE.pdf>
- WWR in-depth reports: Iraq and Syria – The enduring relevance of the church in the Middle East: December 2017 - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Iraq-and-Syria-The-enduring-relevance-of-the-church-in-the-Middle-East.pdf>
- WWR in-depth reports: Understanding the recent movements of Christians leaving Syria and Iraq: June 2017 - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Understanding-the-recent-movements-of-Christians-leaving-Syria-and-Iraq.-Hope-for-the-Middle-East.pdf>
- WWR in-depth reports: The role and contribution of Christians in Syria and Iraq – Summary report – April 2016 - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/The-role-and-contribution-of-Christians-in-Syria-and-Iraq-Summary-report-April-2016.pdf>



- WWR in-depth reports: Future role and contribution of Christians in Syria and Iraq – April 2016 - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Future-role-and-contribution-of-Christians-in-Syria-and-Iraq-April-2016.pdf>
- WWR in-depth reports: Historic Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq – March 2016 - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Historic-Relevance-of-the-Church-in-Syria-and-Iraq-March-2016.pdf>
- WWR in-depth reports: Current Relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq – February 2016 - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Current-Relevance-of-the-Church-in-Syria-and-Iraq-February-2016.pdf>