

World Watch Research

Iraq:

# Background Information

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sweden@od.org | 019-31 05 00 | [www.open-doors.se](http://www.open-doors.se)

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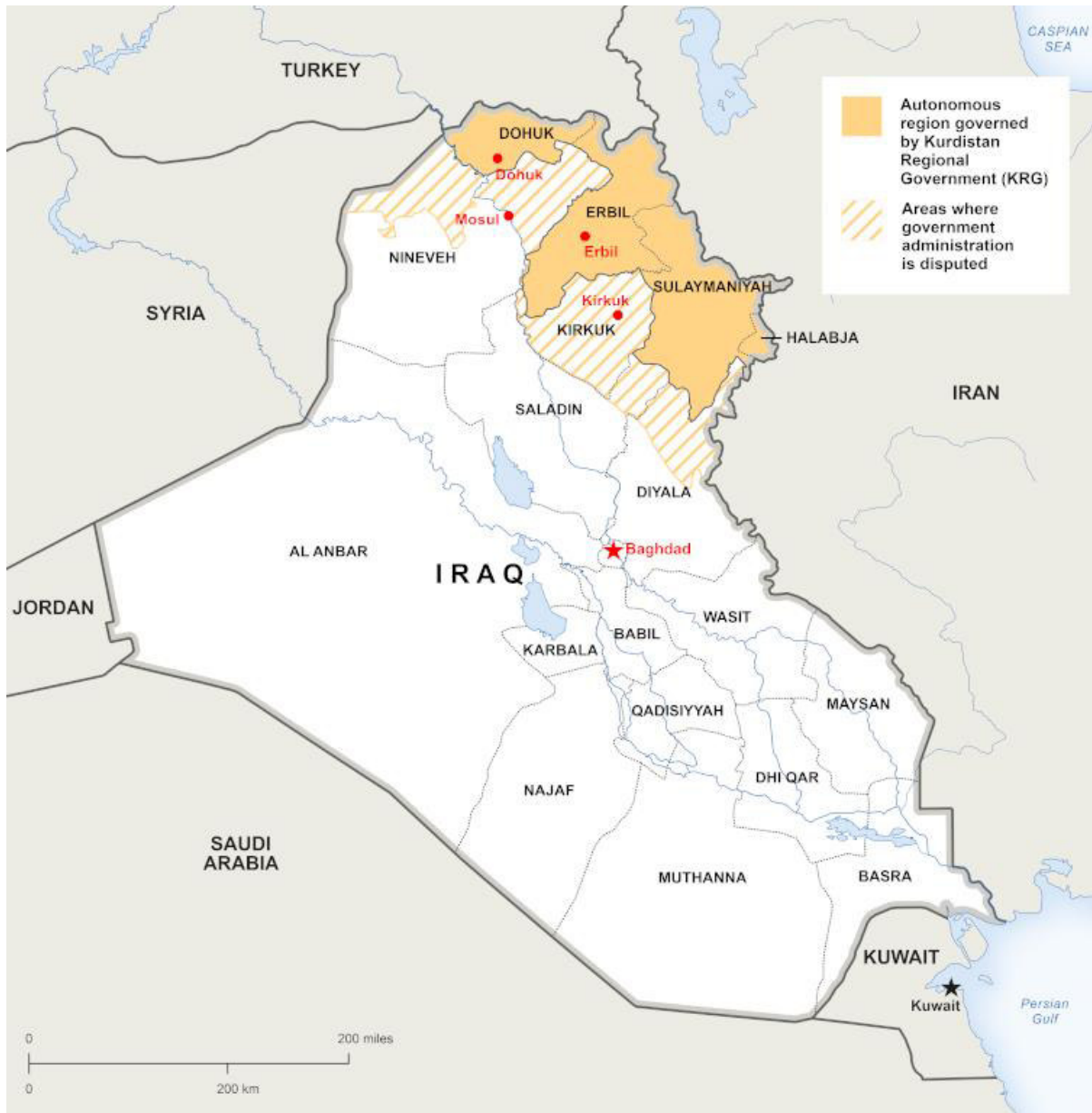
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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



Iraq: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
46,524,000	187,000	0.4

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

## Recent history

Until the end of World War I, Iraq was part of the Ottoman Empire. Britain occupied the territory in 1917. In 1932 Iraq became an independent kingdom and in 1958 an independent Republic. It has been governed by several authoritarian leaders. In the period 1979 - 2003, Iraq's president was Saddam Hussein, whose Sunni-led party dominated the Shia Muslim majority. Ethnic tensions have also been

common in Iraq through the centuries and especially the large Kurdish presence (in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Iran and Russia) has been subject to sectarian violence. After the 2003 US-led invasion and the subsequent power vacuum, sectarian violence flared up particularly between Sunni and Shiite Muslims again and Christians were caught in the crossfire.

After the Gulf War (1990-1991) and the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003, anti-Western and radical Islamic sentiments increased, which contributed to religious freedom violations against Iraqi Christians. A stream of refugees started leaving the country, which escalated with the advent of the Islamic State group (IS) and the establishment of its self-proclaimed caliphate in June 2014. After large parts of IS territory were reconquered in 2016, Christians started to return to the liberated and previously Christian-majority towns close to Mosul, such as Qaraqosh. In December 2017, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced that Iraqi forces had defeated IS and driven the group from Iraqi territory. However, IS influence remains in the region.

In September 2017, the Kurdish regional government held a referendum on independence. This prompted Iraqi forces to push back Kurdish forces in the north and regain control of the region's borders. The Iraqi security forces and their allies also managed to recapture all areas occupied by Kurdish forces since 2014. This led to the resignation of Kurdish regional President Massoud Barzani, who was succeeded in June 2019 by his cousin Nechirvan Barzani of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP).

After Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr won a majority in the Iraqi parliamentary elections in May 2018, he chose Adel Abdul Mahdi as prime minister in October 2018. One year later, nationwide protests against corruption, unemployment and Iran's influence in many major cities left hundreds of protesters dead and led to the resignation of Mahdi. In May 2020, former head of the National Intelligence Service, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, was appointed prime minister and his cabinet was approved. Meanwhile protests continued, especially after al-Kadhimi announced reforms to tackle acute economic conditions in June. In July 2020, tensions between the US and Iraqi governments on the one side and Iranian-backed militias on the other intensified.

Since the territorial defeat of IS, the main source of pressure on Iraqi Christians has been from Shiite militias backed by Iran. However, IS has also attacked civilians, infrastructure and security forces in the period 2020-2023. In the Kurdistan region, Turkey continued its attacks allegedly targeting the members of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) but also hitting majority Christian villages. In Turkey's biggest operation in the region since 2015, Christian villages were bombed in June 2020 and May 2021 causing many Christians to flee. In the last months of 2022, Iran also stepped up its attacks on the Kurdish area, targeting the PKK. In September 2022, Iranian bombs fell close to a Christian village.

In the October 2021 parliamentary election with a record low turnout, Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's party was one of the main winners, while pro-Iranian Shia parties lost seats. According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2021 Iraq](#)): "Some religious and ethnic minority leaders, mostly Christians and to a lesser degree, Sabeen-Mandeans, Shabak, and Faili Kurds, expressed dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the October 10 parliamentary election, saying powerful political parties encouraged nonminority voters to back candidates for the minority-quota seats, thereby outvoting 'legitimate' candidates." In November 2021, there were violent protests against the election results in Baghdad and Prime Minister al-Kadhimi survived an assassination attempt. In addition, there was a months-long political

deadlock as the leading nationalist Sadrist faction ruled out forming a coalition government with pro-Iranian parties. In June 2022, all 73 members of the Sadrist group decided to resign, after which the vacant seats were awarded to the parties with the next highest numbers of votes. This meant that their rivals, the pro-Iranian Shia parties, then became the largest bloc in parliament. In October 2022, Abdul Latif Rashid was elected president who appointed Mohammad Shia al-Sudani - a longtime ally of Iran - as prime minister to lead the pro-Iranian government.

In March 2023, a new draft electoral law was passed which "reintroduces voting along party lists, turns each governorate into single electoral constituency, and raises minimum age for candidates to 30, which marks a major setback for emerging parties and reform-minded independent candidates" ([CrisisWatch Iraq](#), March 2023 last accessed 1 June 2023). Christians fear that the new system favors the major political parties at the expense of independent candidates; in addition, the seats traditionally allocated to ethnic and religious minorities – Christians have five in parliament – will be allocated by the big winning parties. In response, church leaders of various denominations in Iraq are threatening to call on their constituencies to boycott the December 2023 provincial elections if the representation of Christians and the protection of their interests are not guaranteed.

In June and July 2023, Quran burnings took place in Sweden and Denmark, which put pressure on ties with these countries and led to the expulsion of the Swedish ambassador and the withdrawal of the Iraqi ambassador to Sweden. During demonstrations against the Quran burnings, the Swedish embassy in Baghdad was looted and the headquarters of the Danish Refugee Council in Basra Governorate were set on fire. Also in July, President Rashid revoked a special decree granted to the head of the Chaldean Church, sparking protests among the Christian community.

After months of informal truce, Iranian-backed armed groups stepped up their attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria in response to the Israeli-Hamas war that began in October 2023. In January 2024, a drone attack by an Iraqi militia killed three US soldiers in Jordan. The US responded with deadly air-strikes. Iranian-backed armed groups in Iraq also launched drone and missile attacks on Israeli cities, but were ineffective. A major escalation involved [a cruise missile intercepted by Israel on 30 May 2024](#) (Times of Israel, 30 May 2024). Throughout 2023 and 2024, fighting between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the north continued, killing dozens on both sides. Islamic State (IS) maintained a low-level insurgency, killing several Iraqi soldiers.

In Iraq's first provincial elections in a decade, held on 18 December 2023, the Shiite Coordination Framework (CF) won the most seats. Minorities such as Christians fear that the increased influence of the more conservative and pro-Iranian factions within the Coordination Framework will weaken their position and rights.

In February 2024, the Iraqi Supreme Court ruled that the 11 quota seats for religious and ethnic minorities (Turkmen, Christians and Armenians) in the IKR parliament were unconstitutional and should be abolished. The court issued a new ruling in May 2024, allocating 5 seats to minorities, divided between the provinces of Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Duhok (See below: *Political and legal landscape*). Subsequently, the Independent High Electoral Commission of Iraq proposed 5 September 2024 as the new date for the parliamentary elections in the IKR.

## Political and legal landscape

In the [Democracy Index \(EIU 2023 Iraq\)](#), the Iraqi government continues to be listed as 'authoritarian'. It was first labelled as such in the 2019 index based on "the violent unrest that unfolded in October [2019] against corruption and unemployment".

Iraq is divided into two parts, a semi-autonomous Kurdish region in the north (Iraqi Kurdish Region - IKR), officially governed by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) based in Erbil, and a large Arab part, controlled by the Iraqi Government in Baghdad. Iraq consists of 19 provinces/governorates, of which only five have an officially listed population of Christians (Nineveh, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Dohuk and northern Kirkuk). Christians have left all other governorates, apart from small groups of converts with a Muslim background. Corruption pervades all levels of government and society. The weak and divided government only strengthens widespread impunity. In this context, religious minorities - including Christians - are most vulnerable.

Sectarian conflicts are being fought both in parliament by political representatives and in the streets by militias. The political system developed under US guidance allocates a proportional percentage of Iraqi Senate seats to the nation's Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds and other minorities (such as Christians, Turkmen, and Yezidis). The political representation of Christians is very low (1.5%) and they are distributed over different parties. Until early 2024, both the Council of Representatives of the Government of Iraq as well as the Iraqi Kurdish Parliament, reserved five seats for Christians. In February 2024, the Iraqi Supreme Court ruled that the 11 quota seats for religious and ethnic minorities (Turkmen, Christians, and Armenians) in the Kurdish parliament were unconstitutional and should be abolished. In protest, Christian political parties announced their intention to boycott the upcoming parliamentary elections in the IKR. After the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region and senior KDP member Masrour Barzani filed a lawsuit challenging the decision to abolish the minority quota, the court issued a new ruling in May 2024, allocating 5 seats to minorities, divided between the provinces of Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, and Duhok. This means that there now remains a total of three quota seats for Christians in the IKR parliament.

However, several Christian leaders believe that this quota system is anyway flawed: It "will continue not to favor adequate political representation of the Christian components, because in its current form it makes possible electoral manipulation operations which in recent years have already allowed the major parties to have those seats assigned to their own emissaries" ([Agenzia Fides](#), 30 July 2021).

While Saddam Hussein's Iraq was secular, now Islamist political parties have entered into Iraqi politics with Shiite and Sunni parties constituting the majority in parliament. Some Shiite parties have warm relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran and Christians in Iraq report that the country is becoming increasingly Islamic. Christians, in particular those with a Muslim background, have reported that they are being monitored by Iranian secret services.

The [Iraqi Constitution of 2005](#) establishes Islam as the state religion of Iraq, Islamic law as a source of legislation, and provides that no law may contravene either Islamic tenets, the principles of democracy or rights outlined in the Constitution. The Constitution upholds freedom from religious (as well as political and intellectual) coercion and requires the government to maintain the sanctity of religious sites, including Christian sites. Under applicable Islamic law, Muslims are effectively prohibited from changing their religion and according to Iraq's Civil Status Law, all children under the age of 18 must

also convert to Islam if a parent converts to Islam or if one of the parents is considered Muslim, even if the child is the result of rape. There is a significant number of Christians in Iraq who have lived their entire lives as Christians but are unable to raise a Christian family because they are officially registered as Muslim due to the conversion of one of their parents. For example, the Civil Status Law prohibits women who are registered as Muslim from marrying non-Muslims, and Christians will not want their daughters to marry men who are registered as Muslim, partly because the children from such marriages will automatically be registered as Muslim.

Christians in the country characterize the current political situation in Iraq as unstable. Major factors for this instability include the following:

- Widespread corruption;
- A nation split along sectarian lines;
- Violent actions by Shia militias and IS;
- The need to reconstruct the areas destroyed by IS;
- Tensions with Iran;
- Attacks by Turkey and Iran on IKR territory.

### **Gender perspective**

A further vulnerable group within Iraq's legal and political landscape is women. Despite international pressure and protests to repeal Iraq's [rape-marriage law](#), there is no legislation against marital rape (MSU ILR, 10 March 2023). Furthermore, rapists can be exonerated if their victims consent to marriage ([Article 398 of the Penal Code](#)). Child marriage also remains high, with 28% of girls married by the age of 18 ([Girls not Brides Iraq](#), accessed 24 June 2024). Within the context of marriage, women may face further pressure, such as restrictions on their freedom of movement. A lack of legislation that specifically outlaws domestic violence further endangers women. While the Kurdistan region has a 2011 law on [domestic violence](#) (EKRK, Act 8), few protections exist in Baghdad-controlled territory; recent attempts to pass corresponding legislation have stalled and incidents of domestic violence remain widespread ([HRW 2023 Iraq country chapter](#)). According to [Georgetown's GIWPS Iraq profile](#), accessed 24 June 2024), Iraq records the highest rate of intimate partner violence, at 45.3%. Victims of sexual crimes, including female Christians, are particularly hesitant to come forward due to social stigma and the risk of being forced to marry their attacker.

## Religious landscape

Iraq: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	187,000	0.4
Muslim	45,371,000	97.5
Hindu	5,800	0.0
Buddhist	440	0.0
Ethnic religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	22	0.0
Bahai	2,400	0.0
Atheist	85,500	0.2
Agnostic	223,000	0.5
Other	648,630	1.4
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Iraq is an ethnically diverse nation with a Muslim population of 97.5% according to WCD 2024 estimates. The population consists of over 42 million Muslims, of which 61-64% are Shiites and 29-34% are Sunnis, according to the [World Factbook Iraq](#) (accessed 24 June 2024). Christians make up approximately 0.4% of the population.

Although there has been a geographical defeat of IS forces, the ideology and influence of IS is still strong. Sectarian polarization is on the rise. However, some Muslims are disillusioned with Islam and have become more open to explore the Christian faith.

Of the Arab population, Shiite Muslims form the majority. The Kurds in the north are mainly Sunni. It was only after the League of Nations decision in 1920 that the different ethnic groups were first brought together into a modern state system. The different leaders that have come to power since then have fueled mistrust and conflict according to the principle of ‘divide and rule’. The current sectarian violence in Iraq is rooted mainly in the competition for power in the post-Saddam Hussein Iraq.

Symbolic political steps, such as the attempt at introducing [Christmas as a national holiday](#) in December 2018 (CNN, 25 December 2018), were opposed by Islamic authorities. The Grand Mufti of Baghdad, for instance, said in a sermon that Christian holidays like Christmas were impermissible for Muslims and that those who celebrate them, believe Christian doctrine. However, in December 2020



- as a gesture of goodwill before the visit of Pope Francis in March 2021 - the Iraqi government finally accepted Christmas as an official public holiday.

## Economic landscape

According to [World Bank Iraq](#) data and overview (accessed 24 June 2024):

- Iraq belongs in the 'Upper Middle Income' category.
- **GDP:** "The economy is gradually recovering from the oil and COVID-19 shocks of 2020. Real GDP is estimated to have edged up by 1.3% in 2021, after a sharp contraction of 11.3% in 2020."
- **Unemployment:** 15.56% (December 2023), compared to 15.32% in December 2022. This is higher than the long term average of 11.11%.
- **Oil:** "Iraq is one of the most oil-dependent countries in the world. Over the last decade, oil revenues have accounted for more than 99% of exports, 85% of the government's budget, and 42% of gross domestic product (GDP). This excessive dependence on oil exposes the country to macroeconomic volatility, while budget rigidities restrict fiscal space and any opportunity for countercyclical policy."
- **Risks:** "Iraq's economic outlook remains subject to significant risks. The recent geopolitical tensions related to the war in Ukraine highlight risks for Iraq's economy. While any further oil price hikes would improve Iraq's fiscal balance, rising food prices and disruption to agriculture imports will exacerbate pre-existing poverty trends and increase food security risks. The conflict also poses risks to Iraq's crude oil production if operations of Russian oil companies in Iraq are impacted by international sanctions on Russia."

There is widespread dissatisfaction with the lack of public services (for instance, the supply of water and electricity) and there is high unemployment. Corruption is also one of the major factors that is hampering the country's economic progress. Corruption in the public and private sectors carries very high risks for business investments. Moreover, many citizens are traumatized after years of suffering under Saddam Hussein's regime, the Iran-Iraq war, Gulf wars, sanctions, the US-led invasion and the sectarian violence (including atrocities committed by IS militants). The impact of this on the population - and especially on children - is disastrous. Many children have developed learning disorders and display other consequences of trauma. All of these factors have led to previously middle-class Christians now struggling to survive economically. In addition, the Christian population was disproportionately hard-hit by displacement from Mosul and the Nineveh plain and has high numbers of IDPs or returnees now living in poverty. The fragile security situation - together with IS's continued presence and numerous small-scale attacks - has hampered economic recovery and badly needed development, which would help overcome sectarian and ethnic violence.

### Gender perspective

In general, women are among the most economically vulnerable population in Iraq. Whilst the original 1959 Personal Status Law granted women equal inheritance rights to men, Sharia rules of inheritance were later applied, whereby daughters typically receive half the share that sons receive (Personal Status Law 1959: Art 89). Considering these economic vulnerabilities, Christian women depend heavily on their husbands and families. This is reflected in labor force participation rates; as of 2022, 70% of men over 15 were in the workforce, compared to just 11.5% of women ([World Bank Gender Data](#),

2023). The emigration of Christian men, in part due to job discrimination and exploitation, has placed pressure on their dependent families and church communities.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Iraq](#) (accessed 24 June 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Arab (75-80%), Kurds (15-20%) and 5% other ethnic groups (includes Turkmen, Yezidi, Shabak, Kaka'i, Bedouin, Romani, Assyrian, Circassian, Sabaeen-Mandaean, Persian). According to in-country experts, the Armenian and Chaldean communities should be mentioned here as well which are both ethnic and religious groups.
- **Main languages:** Arabic and Kurdish are official languages. The following languages are official in areas where native speakers of these languages are the majority: Turkmen (a Turkish dialect) and Syriac (Neo-Aramaic).
- **Urban population:** 71.6% of total population (2023)

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report](#) Iraq, accessed 24 June 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a HDI score of 0.67 Iraq ranks 134 out of 204 countries and falls in the 'Medium Human Development' category.
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 71.34 years
- **Gender inequality Index (GII):** With a score of 0.558, Iraq ranks 145 out of 170 countries.
- **Education:** The expected number of years of schooling is 12.2, whereas the mean years of schooling is 6.81 (2022). The mean number is 5.65 for girls, compared to 12.77 for boys (2022).
- **Literacy rate:** 85.6 % (ages 15 and older; CIA World Factbook, 2017). There is a gap between the literacy rates for men and women: male: 91.2%; female: 79.9% (2017).

According to the [UN Refugee Agency](#) (last accessed 6 June 2024):

- **IDPs/Refugees:** Almost 1.14 million Iraqis continue to be internally displaced and 5 million IDPs have returned and over 250.000 refugees fled to Iraq from neighboring countries.
- **Humanitarian situation:** "3 million Iraqis are in need of humanitarian assistance and protection, while some 1 million people are in acute need of assistance."

Society in Iraq continues to be conservative, tribal and driven by ethnic conflict. In general, Iraqi society is becoming more fragmented and Islamized. Especially in areas where IS had been in control, Christians report that they feel betrayed by their Muslim neighbors. As the Christian population dwindles, so do their freedoms. Christians and their way of life used to be more or less tolerated in Iraq, but the Christian community now reports increasing pressure from society. This includes more monitoring, the closing of shops during Ramadan and pressure on Christian women to veil themselves. Back in 2015 a campaign was started with [posters](#) appearing on government office-buildings (and even on churches) encouraging Christian women to veil themselves "as this is what Mary did" (World Watch Monitor, 18 December 2015). During 2021, there were several "veil-wearing campaigns" in Kurdistan, where girls were encouraged to cover their heads and several thousand young women announced that they would voluntarily wear a headscarf.

Many Christian IDPs in Kurdistan have experienced difficulties in integrating due to the language barrier. Christians have reported exploitation at the workplace and housing market, including having

to pay higher rent than non-Christians. Many IDPs have returned to their villages and cities after years of displacement and are faced with very limited access to community life as the social fabric of society has been destroyed. This has been a cause of depression, especially among the youth and women, impacting their capacity to improve community life and strengthen social cohesion.

### Gender perspective

[Islamic] socio-cultural norms continue to dominate Iraqi society and women are explicitly restricted from becoming head of the household or head of the family (Civil Status Law, 1972, Art 17, 19). According to the [November 2019 CEDAW Periodic review](#) (Page 5/15): "The Committee is concerned at the persistence of discriminatory stereotypes about the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and in society, which perpetuate the subordination of women to men and are exacerbated by the sectarian and religious divisions in the State party."

Both male and female converts face extreme pressure in Iraqi culture where retaining honor means everything. Christian men who convert from Islam risk being thrown out of their homes by their families, or even killed for their faith, usually by militant Islamists. Female converts on the other hand risk being forcibly married, put under house arrest or divorced. In light of the pervading honor-shame culture, women and girls are expected to uphold sexual purity; should they be sexually assaulted because of their faith, shame will fall on the whole family. In northern Iraq, there are approximately 500 [honor killings](#) every year (Middle East Policy Council, 2022). A [report](#) by Al-Monitor suggests that the police find it difficult to intervene as no laws specifically address such instances of domestic violence (Al-Monitor, 19 February 2023).

### Technological landscape

According to DataReportal [Digital 2024: Iraq](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date: January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 78.7% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 69.4% of the total population
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 100.0% of the total population

According to [Napoleon Cat](#), as of May 2024, the majority of Facebook users are men - 67% - and people aged 25 to 34 were the largest user group.

Freedom of expression in Iraq, including via the Internet, came under pressure in 2019 when the Iraqi parliament studied proposals for a new cyber-crime law. According to Reporters Without Borders ([World Press Freedom 2024 Iraq](#)), the bill which "keeps being resubmitted provides for prison sentences (including life imprisonment) for online posts that endanger 'the independence, unity or integrity of the country, or its economic, political, military or security interests'. The media watchdog is especially concerned about the vagueness of this wording which is 'liable to discourage the emergence of a really free and independent press'."

Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2023](#) overview for Iraq states:

- "Internet freedom in Iraq, including the Kurdistan region, is limited. While internet speeds and access have improved due to recent infrastructural investments, Iraq still has some of the region's weakest telecommunications networks and highest costs. During the coverage period, authorities launched a crackdown on social media users. Legislation that could increase government-ordered

ensorship and increase criminal penalties for a wide swath of online speech was also proposed. Security forces routinely arrest internet users, and physical attacks against journalists, activists, and social media users due to their online activity are common. These violations, which have created an environment of fear, have forced many Iraqis to self-censor. Others, particularly reporters, have left the country."

### Gender perspective

According to Georgetown's [Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20](#), there has been a major expansion in women's cell-phone usage in recent years, which is helping to reduce a gender gap in technology. While it ranks as the fifth worst country on the 2021/22 index, 100% of women in Iraq report using a cell phone (GIWPS 2021 Iraq profile, p.20). The Christian community in Iraq has reported that the increased use of mobile phones and the Internet leads to a decreased level of social life, creates problems in the area of moral issues and has affected the level of education in general.

### Security situation

Numerous crises have shaken Iraq and produced heavy storm-clouds: Increased tension between the USA and Iran, the failure of the political elite in Baghdad to address protesters' concerns have all brought the country to the brink of collapse and have contributed to the massive frustration felt by the youth, who feel alienated and have no future prospects. There is a lack of foreign investment, widespread insecurity and a likely continuation of protests.

Violent Islamic extremist groups like the Islamic State group (IS) and Iranian-backed Shia militias like Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Popular Mobilization Units, are known for targeting Iraqi Christians and other religious minorities, with some 32,000 Christians living in areas controlled by these militias. Since 2020, these Shia militias have stepped up attacks on civilians, security forces, and US assets in retaliation for the killing of General Soleimani, while also trying to drive out US troops by attacking supply convoys using drones and other means. Iran-backed proxy groups in the country have significantly escalated their attacks on US military interests in the country since the war between Israel and Hamas began on 7 October 2023. These attacks are likely to continue for as long as the Israel-Hamas conflict lasts. With the USA seriously considering the withdrawal of its troops from Iraq, many Iraqis fear that their country will become "[a new battleground](#)" between Iran-backed militias and IS (Foreign Policy, 6 April 2020).

Adding to the sense of insecurity, many Christians are experiencing ongoing land disputes and lack of access to their former homes, which has led to many Christians feeling they no longer have any future in the country. The youth in particular are increasingly hoping to emigrate to the West, arguing that the lack of career possibilities and physical and financial security does not leave them any choice but to live in exile.

Turkey is currently a major destabilizing force in northern Iraq through its military incursions against the PKK Kurdish militant group, which directly threaten the safety and livelihoods of Christian communities in the region. Turkish airstrikes have repeatedly struck Christian villages, churches, agricultural land and have induced mass evacuations, such as 10 villages evacuated in August 2019 and the bombardment of areas around Zakho in June 2020 that killed civilians. Turkey's military operations in this part of Iraqi Kurdistan have continued unabated from 2021 through 2024, causing widespread displacement and preventing Christians from returning to their homes.

As long as these developments are not addressed and solved, Iraq will remain in a precarious situation. This is obviously to the detriment of all religious minorities and poses a threat to the very survival of the Church in Iraq.

### Gender perspective

Within this context, the security of women remains under particular threat. According to [Georgetown's 2021/22 Women, Peace and Security Index](#) (p.27), there were numerous incidents of conflict-related violence in Iraq. The [home](#) remains one of the most dangerous places for women in Iraq (Al-Monitor, 19 February 2023), and converts from Islam to Christianity, especially female converts, are at risk of severe persecution from their relatives ([Asia News, 3 September 2022](#)).

### Christian origins

Christians have been living in the region since the earliest days of the Christian Church. According to tradition, the Christian faith was brought to Mesopotamia by the Apostle Thomas on his way to India. During the 1st century AD in Edessa (today Urfa in south-east Turkey) Syriac churches were established. This branch of Christianity spread in its Syriac linguistic and cultural form and became the Church of Iraq, especially after its formalization at the Council of Ctesiphon (south of Baghdad) in 410 AD. At that council, the Syriac churches met to adopt the Nestorian brand of Christianity. The Roman Empire and its churches had declared Nestorianism a heresy at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD.

In the south, Arabic Christianity developed fast. The Arabic Kingdom of Hira had a bishop in 410 AD. This Arabic bishop and a significant part of the population accepted the Nestorian faith, as did the last king, al-Nu'man (580-602 AD). Nestorians became the main Christian influence from the 5th century on until the Arab invasions began in the 7th/8th century, crippling church life as Islam began to take root. According to Islamic tradition from later centuries, Muslim armies already 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, but this only lasted until the Mongol ruler Ghazan Mahmud (1295-1304) became a Muslim. During these 50 years of freedom, Roman Catholics came in the early 14th century, when Rome sent Dominican and Franciscan friars to proselytize the Chaldeans, Eastern Orthodox and Muslims.

In 1552, Roman Catholic mission bore fruit when the abbot of a Nestorian monastery in northern Iraq visited Rome and was installed as a Catholic bishop. He installed five more bishops in northern Iraq, but in 1675 this Church returned to the Nestorian Church. In 1830, another effort by Rome proved to have more lasting impact; many Nestorians joined the Uniate Chaldean-Catholic Church.

Protestant missionaries, on the other hand, did not arrive until the 19th century. Missionary societies embracing the principles of William Carey first came to the country in 1815 (starting with the Anglican Church Missionary Society). Another Protestant mission in Iraq was the London Jewish Society (arriving in 1820). Presbyterian missionaries came to Iraq in 1836 and built a church in Mosul in 1840. Samuel Zwemer and his team from the Reformed Church in America entered Basra in 1889. However, in general, Protestant Christianity failed to get firmly established in Iraq.

By the beginning of the 20th century, an estimated 30% of the population of what is now Iraq was Christian. The original Nestorian Church in Iraq was strong in the north, with Erbil as its center, but in World War I they lost over half of their members due to the Ottoman genocide when over 250,000

Christians died at the hands of the Turkish regime. This meant that in some areas one-third of the Christian community had perished.

Under the League of Nations, the Mesopotamian region became a mandate of Great Britain, which united the three dominate regions (Mosul, Basra and Baghdad) into a single nation, known today as Iraq. Shortly after Britain granted Iraq its independence in 1932, the Christian population fell to less than 8%.The number of Christians in Iraq further decreased as a result of sectarian violence following the Gulf wars and the US-led invasion in the 1990s and beginning of the 21st century. By the time of the ousting of Saddam Hussein in 2003, there were still over a million Christians in Iraq. Due to the civil war, and the brutal rule of radical Islamic IS in northern Iraq, those numbers have since dwindled considerably.

### Church spectrum today

Iraq: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	57,300	30.6
Catholic	92,200	49.3
Protestant	10,000	5.3
Independent	73,400	39.3
Unaffiliated	13,400	7.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-59,400	-31.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>186,900</b>	<b>99.9</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	15,200	8.1
Pentecostal-Charismatic	38,100	20.4

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

According to the [US State Department IRFR 2023 Iraq](#): The majority of Iraq's Christians (approximately 67%) are "Chaldean Catholics (an eastern rite of the Roman Catholic Church), and nearly 20 percent are members of the Assyrian Church of the East. ... The remainder are Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, Anglican, and other Protestants and evangelical Christians."

Most Christians in Iraq are concentrated in the IKR provinces. There is also a Christian concentration in Nineveh province. The Nineveh plains are among the so-called disputed areas between the Kurdistan

Regional Government (KRG) and the Government of Iraq (GOI). After the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan in September 2017, most of the plains of Nineveh came back under the control of the Iraqi government. Very few Christians (non-converts) are left in Baghdad and only small numbers in Basra. Converts to Christianity can be found in all provinces of Iraq.

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

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

## External Links

- Recent history: IRFR 2021 Iraq - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/IRAQ-2021-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>
- Recent history: (CrisisWatch Iraq - [https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/database?location\[\]=87](https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/database?location[]=87)
- Recent history: a cruise missile intercepted by Israel on 30 May 2024 - <https://www.timesofisrael.com/cruise-missile-apparently-fired-from-iraq-shot-down-over-northern-israel-idf/>
- Political and legal landscape: Democracy Index (EIU 2023 Iraq) - <https://country.eiu.com/iraq>
- Political and legal landscape: Agenzia Fides - [http://www.fides.org/en/news/70598-ASIA\\_IRAQ\\_Political\\_party\\_of\\_Christians\\_announces\\_the\\_boycott\\_of\\_the\\_next\\_parliamentary\\_elections](http://www.fides.org/en/news/70598-ASIA_IRAQ_Political_party_of_Christians_announces_the_boycott_of_the_next_parliamentary_elections)
- Political and legal landscape: Iraqi Constitution of 2005 - [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq\\_2005.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en)
- Political and legal landscape: rape-marriage law - <https://www.msuilr.org/new-blog/2023/3/20/a-call-to-repeal-iraqs-rape-marriage-law>
- Political and legal landscape: Article 398 of the Penal Code - <https://www.refworld.org/docid/452524304.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Girls not Brides Iraq - <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/iraq/>
- Political and legal landscape: domestic violence - [http://www.ekrg.org/files/pdf/combat\\_domestic\\_violence\\_english.pdf](http://www.ekrg.org/files/pdf/combat_domestic_violence_english.pdf)
- Political and legal landscape: HRW 2023 Iraq country chapter - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/iraq>
- Political and legal landscape: Georgetown's GIWPS Iraq profile - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/iraq/>
- Religious landscape description: World Factbook Iraq - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iraq/summaries/#people-and-society>
- Religious landscape description: Christmas as a national holiday - <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/25/world/iraq-christmas-holiday/index.html>
- Economic landscape: World Bank Iraq - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iraq/overview>
- Economic landscape: World Bank Gender Data - <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/iraq>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook Iraq - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iraq/>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP Human Development Report - <https://data.undp.org/countries-and-territories/IRQ>
- Social and cultural landscape: UN Refugee Agency - <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/iraq-situation>
- Social and cultural landscape: posters - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2015/12/christian-women-in-baghdad-face-intimidation-to-veil/>

- Social and cultural landscape: November 2019 CEDAW Periodic review - <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n19/363/33/pdf/n1936333.pdf?token=Ubu4ZFBLYY8xxnuFSo&fe=true>
- Social and cultural landscape: honor killings - <https://mepc.org/commentary/honor-killing-tibali#:~:text=Honor%20Killings%20in%20Iraq%3A>
- Social and cultural landscape: report - <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/02/honor-killings-iraq-rekindle-efforts-criminalize-domestic-violence>
- Technological landscape: Digital 2024: Iraq - <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-iraq>
- Technological landscape: Napoleon Cat - <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-iraq/2024/05/>
- Technological landscape: World Press Freedom 2024 Iraq - <https://rsf.org/en/country/iraq>
- Technological landscape: Freedom on the Net 2023 - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/iraq/freedom-net/2023>
- Technological landscape: Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20 - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>
- Security situation: a new battleground - <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/06/iraq-islamic-state-comeback-coronavirus-us-withdrawal/>
- Security situation: Georgetown's 2021/22 Women, Peace and Security Index - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/WPS-Index-2021.pdf>
- Security situation: home - <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/02/honor-killings-iraq-rekindle-efforts-criminalize-domestic-violence>
- Security situation: Asia News, 3 September 2022 - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Maria,-20,-killed-in-Erbil-by-relatives-for-converting-to-Christianity-55319.html>
- Church spectrum today - additional information: US State Department IRFR 2023 Iraq - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iraq/>