

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

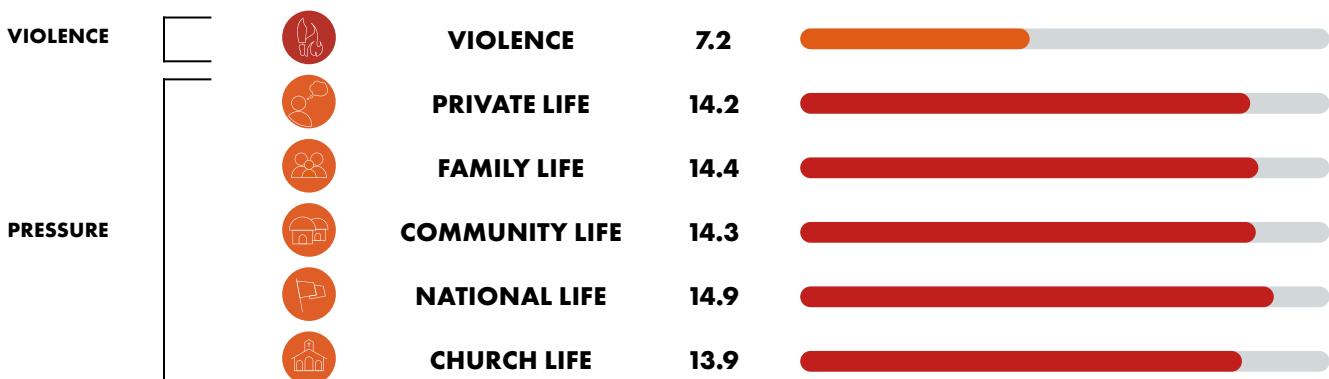
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
18

IRAQ



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



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

Key findings

The main pressure on Iraqi Christians comes from Iranian-backed Shiite militias, including a Christian militia, the Babylon movement, that claims to represent them but is largely controlled by Shia forces, which has removed most Christian mayors and exploit election laws. In addition, Turkish and Iranian military operations in Iraqi Kurdistan, targeting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), have severely damaged Christian villages, causing many to flee. In April 2025, an attack was carried out by an Islamic State supporter during an Assyrian New Year parade, injuring two Christians. In addition, Christian civilians in Iraq repeatedly report expropriation of property by influential political, economic and social groups, a problem that the government has struggled to resolve for over two decades. Both historical and evangelical churches face threats of violence, intolerance, and discrimination, especially from militant Islamist groups and non-Christian leaders. They also experience discrimination from government agencies. Christians who convert from Islam experience family and social pressure and risk violence and loss of rights.

Quick facts

LEADER

Prime Minister Mohammed
Shia al-Sudani

POPULATION

47,550,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

187,000 (Open Doors estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary Republic



Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	187,000	0.4
Muslims	46,375,000	97.5
Agnostics/Atheists	315,500	0.7
Others	672,500	1.4
	Total	100%

Source¹

After the 2003 US-led invasion and the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraq plunged into sectarian violence, with Christians often caught in the crossfire. The situation worsened with the rise of the Islamic State (IS) and its self-declared caliphate in 2014, triggering a mass exodus of Christians. Some began returning to liberated areas, such as Qaraqosh, after IS territory was largely reclaimed by 2016. By December 2017, IS was declared defeated in Iraq.

Iraq is split between the semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdish Region (IKR) in the north, officially led by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) based in Erbil and a large Arab part governed by the central Iraqi government in Baghdad. Christians are now mainly concentrated in five northern provinces: Nineveh, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Dohuk, and northern Kirkuk. Most Iraqi Christians are Chaldean Catholics, followed by the Assyrian Church of the East. Around 2,000 Evangelicals are registered in the IKR.

Iraq's constitution defines Islam as the state religion,

effectively prohibiting conversion from Islam. Minor children of a parent who converts to Islam are automatically registered as Muslim, often without their knowledge. In 2024, a Kurdistan court ordered a Christian woman and her children, raised as Christians, to convert to Islam because her mother had previously converted and remarried a Muslim. As a registered Muslim, her marriage to her Christian husband is invalid under Islamic law.

Since IS's territorial defeat, Iran-backed Shiite militias have become the main source of pressure on Christians, particularly amid increased regional tensions following the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023. In the IKR, Turkish and Iranian military operations targeting the PKK have also affected Christian villages, leading to displacement and hampering resettlement.

Christians face severely limited political representation, holding just 1.5% of seats. In 2024, the Iraqi Supreme Court reduced reserved minority seats in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) parliament from 11 to 5, slashing Christian representation from 6 to 3. In February 2025, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians called for special voting rights and militia withdrawal to ensure their representation and safety in the Nineveh Plains. Despite calls for electoral reform, Christian political parties continue to struggle to gain seats, which are often co-opted by larger political actors such as the Babylon Movement, an Iran-backed militia claiming Christian representation but largely controlled by Shia forces.

¹ Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025 – adapted to incorporate OD-estimate

How the situation varies by region

Most Christians in Iraq live in the northern provinces of Nineveh, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Dohuk, and northern Kirkuk. Christian populations in central and southern regions, in particular Baghdad and Basra, have sharply declined, leaving only small communities, often converts from Islam.

Violations against converts, especially through Islamic and clan oppression, are more common in Arab areas than in Kurdish regions. Kurdish areas have usually been more tolerant of non-Muslims, and Christians in the KRG still enjoy more freedom than in other parts of Iraq. However, growing conservative Islamic influence is increasing pressure, especially on converts.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

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

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Churches like the Assyrian Orthodox, Chaldean and Syrian Catholic and Armenian face serious violations from radical Islamist groups and non-Christian leaders, plus government discrimination. In central and southern Iraq, Christians often hide symbols like the cross to avoid harassment at checkpoints, universities, workplaces or government buildings.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

This group includes converts from Islam and cross-denominational converts worshiping outside traditional churches. Converts face strong family and societal pressure, often hiding their faith. Switching churches, like Orthodox to Evangelical, can result in loss of rights or employment.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Evangelical, Baptist, and Pentecostal churches in Baghdad and Basra face serious violations by radical groups and discrimination by authorities. Outspoken Christians are at risk of being targeted, blasphemy laws are used when evangelism is suspected, and evangelical churches lack a legal framework for Bible schools.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION

Christians in Iraq face oppression from Sunni and Shia Muslims across ethnic lines. The influence of Islamist militants has increased Islamic awareness across Iraq, including in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR). Christian converts near Iran report monitoring by Iranian secret services. Shiite leaders heavily influence social and political life. Converts face family pressure, sometimes violent, to return to Islam. Social control of women is rising, with Christian women in Baghdad and Basra often cover for safety.

CLAN OPPRESSION

Iraqi society is highly tribal, especially in former IS areas, mainly impacting Christians with Muslim backgrounds. Tribal customs usually outweigh government law, with tribes acting above it.

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Successive Iraqi central governments have prioritized power over pluralism, sidelining religious minorities. In the 2018 and 2024 elections, Kurdish and Shia parties filled Christian quota seats with their own candidates. In 2024, the Supreme Court cut Christian KRG parliament seats from 6 to 3. Officials at various levels have also reportedly pressured Christians to emigrate.

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

Corruption is widespread in Iraq, and Christians are frequently exploited. In many Muslim-majority areas Christians can sell property at only 60% of its value. Criminal groups, especially in Baghdad, have illegally seized at least 70% of properties left behind by fleeing Christians.

CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONAL PROTECTIONISM

Historical church leaders regularly block the registration of non-traditional Protestant groups and oppose members attending their services. Church changers may face threats from family and tribal leaders. In some cases, bishops refuse weddings for those attending Evangelical churches, especially in southern and central regions.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

In some parts of Iraq, Christian women and girls wear veils for safety, as being unveiled can lead to harassment or violence. There is general impunity for violations against Christians, be it kidnapping, rape or sexual abuse. Converts from Islam are vulnerable to house arrest, beatings, forced marriage, sexual harassment and even “honor” killings. In January 2025, parliament passed a law permitting religious authorities to determine personal status matters, effectively allowing girls as young as nine to be married. This move has been criticized for potentially legalizing child rape and undermining the rights of young girls ([The Guardian, 22 January 2025](#)). Christian girls may also be “lured” by Muslim men, who then harass and coerce them into marriage.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Targeted seduction
- Violence – death
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

MEN

Christian men, especially those from Muslim backgrounds, frequently encounter job discrimination, particularly in the public sector. They can face pressure to leave their positions, struggle to secure employment or face exploitation in the workplace. As men are often the primary family providers, job losses impact the wider family. Converts from a Muslim background are particularly vulnerable to violations. In a culture that prizes honor, they risk being rejected from their families, threatened or killed. Christian men, regardless of their background, also may face threats from violent Islamist militants. These dangers contribute to a strong motivation for emigration, which not only impacts individual families but also weakens local churches by depleting potential leadership.

Male typical pressure points:

- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence – death
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	18	79
2025	17	78
2024	16	79
2023	18	76
2022	14	78

The score for Iraq increased by one point from 78 points in WWL 2025 to 79 points in WWL 2026, driven mainly by a rise in the violence score from 6.1 to 7.2 points. The pressure score remained nearly unchanged, increasing by only 0.2 points. The uptick in violent incidents was particularly notable in killings and arrests: three Christians were killed for faith-related reasons and at least ten were arrested.

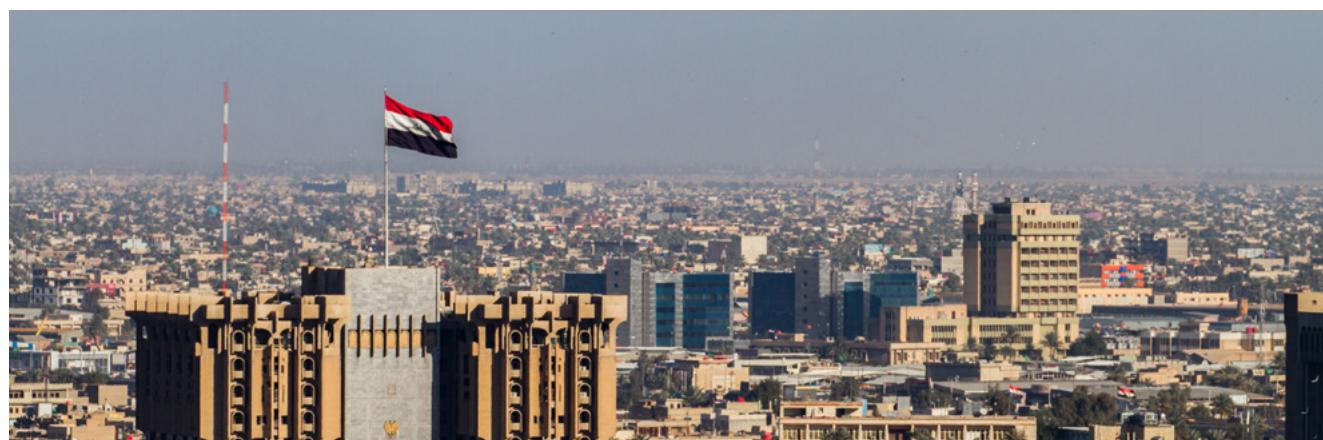
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Examples of violence in the reporting period

- 1 April 2025:** A Syrian IS-inspired attacker struck an Assyrian Christian Akitu procession in Duhok's Kurdish region with an axe, injuring two Christians and an officer. Influenced by extremist propaganda, he targeted Christians, shouting “Islamic State” during the assault.
- Three converts from Islam to Christianity were killed during the current reporting period.
- At least ten Christians were arrested for faith-related reasons.

WWL Year	Christians detained	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated
2026	10*	3	1	10*
2025	5	1	2	10*

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period – for full results see the violence section of the country's corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*.*



PRIVATE LIFE

Religious freedom in the private sphere is severely restricted for Christians, especially converts from Islam who face harassment, violence and death threats, often forcing many to keep their faith secret. Iraqi law does not recognize conversion, leaving converts officially Muslim and vulnerable. Publicly displaying Christian symbols or discussing faith risks hostility and violence. Indigenous Christians experience fewer restrictions but avoid Christian expressions or displaying Christian symbols in majority Islamic areas. Converts bear the greatest personal and social pressures due to legal, familial and societal risks.

FAMILY LIFE

Under Sharia-based family law, marriages between converts and indigenous Christians are not recognized, and their children are automatically registered as Muslims, hindering Christian upbringing. Children under 18 with one Muslim parent must be registered as Muslims, even in cases of children born from rape by a Muslim man. In divorces involving converts and Muslims, custody usually favors the Muslim parent. Children considered Muslims are obliged to receive Islamic religious education. In Iraq, all schools, including Christian ones, must provide Islamic education with exams.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Christians in Iraq face widespread discrimination in daily life, education and employment, including in the Kurdish region. Christian women face pressure to veil, especially in Baghdad and Basra, and female converts risk violence or forced marriage. The education

system promotes Islamic values and sometimes glorifies violent jihad and martyrdom. Christian schools face underfunding and students report exams during Christian holidays. Job discrimination is common, particularly for converts, who risk dismissal if their faith is revealed. Even qualified Christians struggle to reach senior roles.

NATIONAL LIFE

Although Iraq's Constitution guarantees religious freedom, several laws restrict Christian rights, including recognizing Iraq as an Islamic state and not allowing conversion from Islam. Personal-status laws favor Muslims in divorce and inheritance cases. Christians face barriers to top positions. Electoral laws have been exploited to fill Christian quota seats with preferred candidates. Militias operate with impunity and crimes against Christians often go unpunished. Many Christians, especially converts from Islam, fear expressing views publicly due to violence risks. Illegal seizure of Christian properties remains widespread.

CHURCH LIFE

Christian converts often cannot join churches in their hometowns due to security risks and usually relocate to larger cities or abroad. Churches integrating converts risk closure or attacks, except some Kurdish churches in the IKR, where converts are still closely monitored. Christian leaders face threats if they publicly criticize powerful religious or political figures responsible for persecution. Church activities and youth work are heavily restricted, allowed only within church premises, with no outreach to Muslims.



International obligations & rights violated

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

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

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

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

Situation of other religious minorities

In Iraq, various religious minorities face persecution, including Yazidis, Sunnis, Kakai, Sabaeans-Mandaeans, Baha'i, Zoroastrians and Jews. Yazidis have suffered severe atrocities by ISIS; the Yazidi Survivors Law (2021) has not been fully implemented. Sunnis report forced expulsions and discrimination. The constitution protects some minorities, but Baha'i are outside IKR. The few remaining Jews face job and service bans, causing discrimination and fear of public identity.



Open Doors in Iraq

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

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



ABOUT THIS DOSSIER

- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.

Some photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.