



## Iraq: Country Dossier

January 2019



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

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# World Watch List 2019

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017	Total Score WWL 2016	Total Score WWL 2015
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.9	94	94	92	92	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	93	89	88	81
3	Somalia	16.3	16.7	16.6	16.5	16.4	8.9	91	91	91	87	90
4	Libya	15.3	15.0	15.1	16.0	16.3	9.6	87	86	78	79	76
5	Pakistan	14.3	14.1	13.9	15.0	13.2	16.7	87	86	88	87	79
6	Sudan	14.7	15.0	14.6	15.6	16.1	10.6	87	87	87	84	80
7	Eritrea	14.7	14.9	15.8	16.0	15.2	9.4	86	86	82	89	79
8	Yemen	16.6	16.3	16.4	16.7	16.7	3.1	86	85	85	78	73
9	Iran	14.0	14.3	14.3	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	85	85	83	80
10	India	12.9	13.0	13.5	14.8	13.2	15.2	83	81	73	68	62
11	Syria	13.6	14.0	13.1	13.8	14.2	13.0	82	76	86	87	83
12	Nigeria	12.3	11.8	13.4	12.9	12.9	16.7	80	77	78	78	78
13	Iraq	13.9	14.4	14.1	14.6	13.6	8.1	79	86	86	90	86
14	Maldives	15.2	15.5	13.5	15.9	16.7	1.1	78	78	76	76	78
15	Saudi Arabia	15.1	13.6	14.0	15.3	16.5	2.4	77	79	76	76	77
16	Egypt	11.7	13.2	10.7	13.2	11.0	15.9	76	70	65	64	61
17	Uzbekistan	15.4	12.9	13.9	12.3	15.9	3.1	74	73	71	70	69
18	Myanmar	11.4	11.8	13.3	12.1	11.8	11.1	71	65	62	62	60
19	Laos	13.0	9.1	14.2	14.7	14.9	4.6	71	67	64	58	58
20	Vietnam	12.7	8.2	12.7	13.5	14.2	9.1	70	69	71	66	68
21	Central Africa Republic	10.2	9.7	11.9	10.6	11.1	16.1	70	61	58	59	67
22	Algeria	13.1	14.2	10.1	11.8	12.7	7.6	70	58	58	56	55
23	Turkmenistan	14.6	10.8	13.8	13.3	15.1	1.3	69	68	67	66	63
24	Mali	11.4	10.1	11.5	9.2	9.9	15.4	68	59	59	55	52
25	Mauritania	13.9	14.0	12.2	13.0	13.3	0.6	67	57	55	-	50
26	Turkey	12.4	11.1	10.7	13.2	10.9	7.2	66	62	57	55	52
27	China	10.4	8.0	10.3	11.8	14.5	10.0	65	57	57	57	57
28	Ethiopia	10.0	10.0	10.3	10.8	10.4	13.5	65	62	64	67	61
29	Tajikistan	13.8	11.9	11.6	12.1	12.9	2.4	65	65	58	58	50
30	Indonesia	10.6	11.1	11.3	10.2	9.3	12.0	65	59	55	55	50
31	Jordan	13.0	13.1	11.8	11.5	12.2	3.0	65	66	63	59	56
32	Nepal	12.4	11.4	10.6	10.9	11.9	7.0	64	64	-	-	-
33	Bhutan	12.9	11.1	12.3	12.4	14.0	0.9	64	62	61	56	56
34	Kazakhstan	13.2	10.8	10.3	12.2	13.5	3.1	63	63	56	55	51
35	Morocco	12.2	13.3	9.6	12.0	14.4	1.5	63	51	49	47	47
36	Brunei	13.4	14.3	10.5	10.3	13.4	0.7	63	64	64	61	58
37	Tunisia	12.1	13.2	10.7	11.2	12.0	3.3	63	62	61	58	55
38	Qatar	13.0	12.6	10.3	11.0	14.1	1.1	62	63	66	65	64
39	Mexico	8.3	7.5	12.2	10.2	9.7	13.5	61	59	57	56	55
40	Kenya	11.7	10.6	10.1	8.3	11.5	8.3	61	62	68	68	63
41	Russian Federation	12.5	8.4	10.7	10.4	12.0	5.7	60	51	46	48	45
42	Malaysia	11.8	14.2	12.1	11.7	8.6	1.5	60	65	60	58	55
43	Kuwait	13.2	12.2	10.1	10.5	12.2	1.5	60	61	57	56	49
44	Oman	12.9	12.5	9.8	9.6	12.8	1.7	59	57	53	53	55
45	United Arab Emirates	12.8	12.0	9.1	10.5	12.2	1.9	58	58	55	55	49
46	Sri Lanka	11.0	8.3	10.5	11.5	10.0	7.0	58	57	55	-	51
47	Colombia	7.9	7.6	11.8	9.4	8.5	12.6	58	56	53	55	55
48	Bangladesh	11.0	9.1	11.6	10.5	7.8	7.8	58	58	63	57	51
49	Palestinian Territories	11.4	12.3	9.0	10.6	11.8	2.4	57	60	64	62	58
50	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.3	11.1	12.4	1.5	57	57	-	57	50
51	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.9	13.9	0.4	56	-	56	56	56
52	Kyrgyzstan	12.7	9.9	10.9	9.2	11.9	1.9	56	-	-	-	-
53	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.0	56	56	57	58	60
54	Democratic Republic of the Congo	5.6	6.7	9.3	7.4	10.3	16.1	55	-	-	-	-
55	Bahrain	11.9	12.2	8.6	10.2	10.2	1.5	55	57	54	54	-
56	Cameroon	9.9	7.3	10.0	7.8	7.5	11.3	54	-	-	-	-
57	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.8	4.8	52	-	59	57	56
58	Niger	11.5	9.7	8.1	8.1	10.0	4.8	52	-	-	53	-
59	Cuba	8.8	4.4	9.1	10.5	11.8	3.9	49	-	-	-	-
60	Chad	11.5	8.2	9.0	8.0	8.7	3.0	48	-	-	-	-
61	Burkina Faso	9.0	8.0	8.8	6.6	7.9	7.2	48	-	-	-	-
62	Uganda	11.4	8.0	7.7	6.9	9.6	3.7	47	-	-	-	-
63	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	5.0	46	-	-	-	-
64	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.5	5.8	8.0	15.0	44	-	-	-	-
65	Mozambique	6.7	4.3	6.0	6.9	6.0	13.3	43	-	-	-	-
66	Gambia	7.7	8.2	8.2	8.3	8.8	1.9	43	-	-	-	-
67	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.7	8.2	5.5	6.4	4.3	43	-	-	-	-
68	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	3.3	43	-	-	-	-
69	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.1	8.7	10.4	6.1	42	-	-	-	-
70	Togo	8.8	6.7	8.5	7.1	8.4	2.0	42	-	-	-	-
71	Venezuela	3.3	3.8	10.5	9.0	8.8	5.9	41	-	-	-	-
72	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	6.7	41	-	-	-	-
73	Nicaragua	2.3	3.6	6.4	8.9	7.9	11.9	41	-	-	-	-

# Iraq – Country Dossier January 2019

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## Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). Further news and analysis is supplied by World Watch Monitor and WWR staff.

World Watch List Iraq	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	79	13
WWL 2018	86	8
WWL 2017	86	7
WWL 2016	90	2
WWL 2015	86	3

*Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.*

**Please note:** 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”.

## WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Iraq

### Link for general background information

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

### Recent country 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 finally a republic in 1958, but was led 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 this 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 its territory. However it remains a terrorist threat. 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. The May 2018 parliamentary elections were won by Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. He and Mr al-Abadi have agreed to cooperate and form a new government.

### The religious landscape

Iraq is an ethnically diverse nation with an almost 99% Muslim population. 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 three groups were first brought together into a modern state system. The different leaders that came to power since then have fueled mistrust and conflict between the three groups according to the principle of 'divide and rule'. The current sectarian violence in Iraq is rooted mainly in the competition for power and prominence in the post-Saddam Hussein Iraq.

In general, Iraqi society is becoming Islamized. Christians and their way of life used to be tolerated more in Iraq, but increasingly social pressure has been applied to the Christian portion of the population. This has been especially true during the rise of power and influence of IS in Iraq. As such, alcohol is restricted and in some areas banned. Shops where alcohol is sold have been regular targets for bombings, and several owners have been killed in the past. During Ramadan all such shops are closed throughout the whole of Iraq. There is an increase in the social control of women, the wearing of the headscarf and observance of Ramadan. Even Christian women in Baghdad are under pressure to veil themselves in order to move safely outside of their homes. (Open Doors contacts say women feel afraid they will be harassed if they do not cover up. Also, in 2015 posters appeared on government office buildings and even on churches encouraging Christian women to veil themselves 'as this is what Mary did'.) The situation had been even worse in the area where IS had declared a caliphate, where all women were obliged to cover themselves fully by wearing a niqab. However, this is no longer the case since all areas that had been under IS control have been back under government control since the end of 2017.

## The political landscape

An article in Al-Jazeera from 22 April 2016 gives an [overview](#): “To inaugurate a break from Saddam Hussein’s Arab Sunni-minority rule of Iraq, a political system developed under US tutelage where after each Iraqi election the new government would be ‘inclusive’ of all of the nation’s communities. This notion of inclusivity led to a quasi-mathematical equation where each new Iraq cabinet allocated a proportional percentage of positions to the nation’s Shias, Sunnis, Kurds, and other minorities, such as Christians, Turkmens, and Yazidis.” The political representation of Christians is very low (1-3%) and as they are scattered over 10 parties their significance is often irrelevant. 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 is epidemic in 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.

Prohibited under Saddam Hussein, Islamist political parties – both Shiite and Sunni - have made their entry into Iraqi politics and even constitute the majority in parliament. Sectarian conflicts are being fought both in parliament by political representatives and in the streets by militias. 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 turning more Islamic and is even 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. Some of the factors politicians having to deal with are: i) The failed attempt at Kurdish independence through a referendum in September 2017; ii) the defeat of IS in Iraq in December 2017; iii) an improving economy (mainly owing to rising prices of crude oil); iv) corruption; v) a deeply fractured polity along sectarian lines; and vi) the need to reconstruct a nation destroyed by war against IS militants.

## The socio-economic 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. Kurds and Arabs have their own languages and culture. Apart from oil fields in Basra (in the south close to Kuwait and Iran), most of Iraq’s oil resources are found near Kirkuk and Mosul, the border areas between the Kurdish region and Arab Iraq, which are amongst the most violent places in Iraq.

There is major social dissatisfaction as a result of a chronic lack of social services (water, electricity) and massive unemployment. Corruption is one of the major factors that is hampering the country’s progress and the process of democracy. Moreover, almost every individual in Iraq is traumatized after years of suffering under Saddam Hussein’s regime, the Iran-Iraq war, Gulf wars, sanctions, the US-led invasion and the succeeding 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 one of the factors for radicalization. This does not bode well for Iraq’s large youth bulge.

## Concluding remarks

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 more and more Christians to return to a number of villages. However experts warn that IS still poses a threat and that war could erupt between Shiite forces and the Kurds as they no longer have a common enemy to fight.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Iraq

1. The political landscape: overview - <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/04/sadr-challenge-iraq-sectarian-politics-160421072216275.html>



## WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

### How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
39,340,000	225,000	0.6

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

### How did Christians get there?

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. Nestorians became the main Christian influence from the 5th century on until the Islamic invasions (beginning in 7th/8th century) crippled Church life.

Roman Catholics came in the early 14th century, when Rome sent Dominican and Franciscan friars to proselytize the Chaldeans, Eastern Orthodox and Muslims. 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).

By the beginning of the 20th century, Christians made up no less than 30% of the population. However, by the end of the 1st World War, the Turkish regime had [murdered over 250,000 Christians in Iraq](#), which 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 successfully 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. The Church in Iraq now consists mainly of three distinct groups: the Catholics (Western and Eastern), which are the majority, followed by the Orthodox and finally the Protestants.

### What church networks exist today?

Church networks: Iraq	Christians	%
Orthodox	80,500	35.8
Catholic	128,000	56.9
Protestant	15,900	7.1
Independent	74,800	33.2
Unaffiliated	10,600	4.7
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-85,100	-37.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>224,700</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	27,900	12.4
Renewalist movement	57,000	25.3

*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.*

*Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)*

Historical churches make up 95% of all churches in Iraq, most of these belonging to the Chaldean Catholic, Syrian Catholic or Assyrian Church of the East. There is also an Armenian church in Iraq. The first Evangelical church in the Middle East was established more than 100 years ago in the city of Nineveh (Mosul) and many different Evangelical churches were built in Kurdistan, but also in Baghdad and Basra.

From 1990 - 2003, many Christians left the North of Iraq due to violence from Islamic movements and the civil war among Kurds. Due to the sectarian civil war which followed in the wake of the US led invasion in 2003, large numbers of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) arrived in the north. As a consequence, several Evangelical denominations opened churches in the north and are growing in number. The Kurdish Church was officially recognized by the Kurdish Regional Authority in 2004 and there are several small groups and home fellowships in the north among Kurdish Christians with a Muslim background. In the south, the pressure is very high on Arab-speaking Christians with a Muslim background and they have to live as secret believers. They are estimated to be only a few hundred in number.

As a result of the civil war, Christians have been on the move to escape the fighting. Baghdad historically had a large population of Christians. As a result of severe anti-Christian violence, (e.g. church attacks, kidnappings, killings, robberies, rapes and threats by Islamic militants) large numbers have either fled abroad or the north. The main influx of Christians has been into the Nineveh Plain or into the Kurdish autonomous region. In the desperate search for security and safety, many families have moved several times already. Christians in the Kurdish region grew very nervous when IS militants were fighting so close to its borders, and this caused large numbers of Christians to consider emigration. However, many were encouraged to stay by the news of the recapture of several Christian towns close to Mosul in October 2016, the official liberation of Mosul in July 2017 and the defeat of IS in December 2017.

## Religious context

Religious Context: Iraq	Numbers	%
Christians	225,000	0.6
Muslim	38,746,000	98.5
Hindu	4,600	0.0
Buddhist	350	0.0
Ethnoreligionist	0	0.0
Jewish	22	0.0
Bahai	2,000	0.0
Atheist	69,900	0.2
Agnostic	199,000	0.5
Other	93,040	0.2

*OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.*

*Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)*

According to WCD statistics over 98% of the population are Muslim and less than 0.6% are Christians. Of all Muslims, 55-60% are Shiites and 40% are Sunnis, whereas less than 1% are Yazidis, according to the [CIA World Factbook](#). The majority of the population is composed of Arabs (75-80%), ethnic minorities are Kurdish (15-20%), Turkmen, Assyrian, Shabak and other (5%).

## Notes on the current situation

Most Christians are living in the northern Kurdish region, but since 2017 many Christian and other IDPs have started to return to their original homes. There is still a long way to go, not only in restoration of homes and churches but also in rebuilding trust, particularly where Christians lived with Muslims. Some of the atrocities committed over the last months are only now becoming known, as was shown by the discovery of a mass grave with remains of 40 Christians in Mosul in March 2018. The victims had been kidnapped from the region according to an article published on 2 March 2018 on the Iraqi News website.

According to Father Salar Kajo of the Churches' Nineveh Reconstruction Committee (NRC), whose purpose is to rebuild nine Christian towns and villages, there is a serious risk that displaced Christians will leave Iraq unless more is done to enable them to go back to their homes. According to the NRC more than 37,000 Christians have returned over the last 12 months but Father Kajo is particularly concerned about those who are still displaced in northern Iraq. An article by Zenit, published on 20 March 2018, states that "around 120,000 Christians were driven from their homes by Daesh [IS] in summer 2014, Father Kajo stressed that Christians were keen to restart their old lives: "We want to return, to recover our dignity and to work and live as we did before Daesh. This is our land, this is our identity."

Christians state that the lack of security and stability are the main reasons for the migration of Christians. Security is perceived by Christians as the ability to maintain a Christian identity (which is directly connected to land ownership and living in Christian enclaves, ancestral lands, in which Christians lived since the second century AD), the ability to apply self-protection and self-administration in Christian areas, and the ability to live free of Islamic cultural and religious dominance. This relationship between the ownership of land and a Christian identity is a key to understanding the plight of Christians in Iraq and is unique in the Middle East.

Hopefully, the law signed by US President Donald Trump in December 2018, in the "Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act, which seeks to ensure [US aid reaches Christian and Yazidi genocide victims](#)", will support them in staying in their home country. The financial aid amounts to \$55 million and "[will address the needs of vulnerable religious and ethnic minority communities](#)" in the Nineveh Province.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

1. How did Christians get there?: murdered over 250,000 Christians in Iraq - <http://www.leben.us/volume-2-volume-2-issue-1/182-the-mission-to-iraq>
2. Religious context: CIA World Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>
3. Notes on the current situation: US aid reaches Christian and Yazidi genocide victims - <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/trump-signs-law-to-aid-christians-in-iraq-syria-85304>

4. Notes on the current situation: will address the needs of vulnerable religious and ethnic minority communities - <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/jan-8-2018-continued-us-assistance-to-better-meet-the-needs-of-minorities-in-iraq>

## WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

In WWL 2019 the score for Iraq went down from 86 points in WWL 2018 to 79 points and moved from rank 8 to 13.

### What type of persecution dominates?

- **Islamic oppression:** Radical Islamic groups aim to make the country purely Islamic. Anti-Western (and as such, anti-Christian) sentiments have caused considerable levels of violence.
- **Ethnic antagonism:** Tribe and clan are paramount and put pressure especially on Christian converts but also on Christians of other (non-Arab) ethnic backgrounds.
- **Organized corruption and crime:** Abductions, ransoms and illegal possession of Christian houses are widespread. Corruption is normal at all levels of society.
- **Dictatorial Paranoia:** Political leaders have a strong focus on remaining in power which leads to failure of pluralistic society.

### Who is driving persecution?

Violent religious groups such as Islamic State (IS) are known for targeting religious minorities through kidnappings and killings. Although IS has lost its territory in Iraq, its ideology is still influential and large numbers of IS militants are said to have faded into the general population. Another source of violent persecution of Christians are Shia militias backed by Iran. Further persecution occurs through Islamic leaders at any level, mostly in the form of hate speech in mosques. Government officials at all levels are reported to threaten Christians and 'encourage' them to emigrate. By failing to promote a pluralistic society, political parties also contribute to the persecution of Christians. Clan leaders, extended family and 'normal citizens' use pressure and violence against converts to Christianity to get them to return to Islam. On a lower level of persecution, leaders of Historic churches have sometimes thwarted the official recognition of new Christian denominations and hindered them in other ways as well. Finally criminal networks with financial and religious motives are known to have kidnapped Christians.

### What it results in

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 fanatical Islamic movements 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 the cross from their cars 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 fanatical Islamic movements 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 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 (e.g. from an Orthodox to an Evangelical congregation) is also often punished by refusing rights, such as losing jobs. Leaders of Orthodox and Catholic churches have been known to refuse to perform marriages for members attending Evangelical churches.

## Violence

The following table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures.

Iraq	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
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.*

## Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

- Five Christians were killed for faith-related reasons in the WWL 2019 reporting period. A family of three Christians (Christian doctor, his wife and mother) were [stabbed to death](#) in a robbery attack in their home in Baghdad on 8 March 2018. In the same month, another Christian was shot dead in the capital in front of his house. At first sight the attack may seem purely criminal, however the local Christian community and national political leaders interpreted the killings as being anti-Christian targeting. In the Middle East motivations are often mixed. Finally, a convert to Christianity was killed by his father-in-law after becoming aware of his conversion in September 2018.
- Over a dozen Christians were arrested and detained while evangelizing. For security reasons no further details can be given.
- Approximately 48 Christians were still missing within a persecution context: 60 Christians were missing, many of them women from Qaraqosh who were taken by IS militants. In total only 12 returned. Christian women in Qaraqosh were sexually harassed and assaulted by Shia militias who have been based in the area after the liberation of the town. Several Christians, including converts, were either physically harmed or faced death threats.
- Three churches or Christian buildings including cemeteries were attacked. In late November 2017 a Christian cemetery was vandalized and a Christian school looted in the village of Inshke, near Dohuk in IKR. In July 2018, an intelligence force of the Iraqi army raided the Christian Center of St. Gorgis Church in the Christian town of Bartella under false pretences.

- Several Christian-owned houses were looted or confiscated. According to a report by Independent Catholic News published on 18 November 2018, "[at least 350 homes belonging to Christians who fled IS have been illegally occupied](#) by new residents, taking advantage of their absence and using false legal documents, which make their recovery very difficult." It is very hard to know when exactly these homes were occupied, but this has obviously happened a. lot. Also, Christian-owned lands have been damaged by Kurds for 15 years in Nav Kandala. In total more than 750 acres have been affected in this way since 2003.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

1. Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: stabbed to death - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/03/iraq-christian-doctor-and-family-stabbed-to-death-in-baghdad/>
2. Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: 350 homes belonging to Christians who fled IS have been illegally occupied - <https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/36018>

## WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

### Position on World Watch List (WWL)

In WWL 2019 the score for Iraq went down from 86 points in WWL 2018 to 79 points and moved from rank 8 to 13. Both Iraq's score for pressure and violence decreased with the territorial defeat of IS. However this does not mean all is well: IS ideology is not dead and has influenced the local population. The number of Christians killed slightly increased and Christians continue to be physically or mentally harmed, threatened and sexually harassed. Acts of violence against Christians (non-converts) were mostly committed by Islamic militants, whereas converts from Islam mostly 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
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Strong
Denominational protectionism	DPR	Strong
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 (long version).*

#### **Islamic oppression (Strong):**

Radical Islamic groups desire a religious cleansing of Iraq and aim to make the country purely Islamic. Since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the situation has continuously been deteriorating, with anti-Western (and as such, anti-Christian) sentiments causing considerable levels of violence by Islamic militants and insurgent groups. This situation is aggravated by government impunity and lawlessness. Moreover, radical Islamic groups have increased in number in northern and western regions, under the influence of the civil war in Syria. In June 2014 IS proclaimed a caliphate in large parts of north and west Iraq including the region under its control in Syria. It implemented strict Islamic rules and was responsible for most of the violence against Christians in Iraq. By the end of 2017, most of the areas held by IS were dismantled and atrocities committed by IS were revealed. The territorial defeat of IS has removed an important source of threat, though large numbers of IS militants are said to have 'disappeared' into the general population, posing a threat to religious minorities.

New Islamist groups have emerged, like 'Khorazan, a group allegedly composed of former members of al-Qaeda. Under 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 seems to be turning more Islamic. Islamic dogma and rhetoric governs the daily life and Islamic leaders (specially Shia) continue to influence social, religious and political life through their teachings, political stance and leadership (tribal) decisions. 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.

### **Ethnic antagonism (Strong):**

Iraqi society is still very tribal, especially where areas are fractured following sectarian tensions and violence (mostly the ex-IS controlled parts). 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. If a convert's tribal background is known, it may cause difficulties for other Christians and deter them from helping him/her. Tribal groups have influence within (and sometimes over) government authorities in some areas.

Also, the word 'Christian' in Iraq is not so much understood in terms of 'faith' but rather in terms of ethnicity. Traditional/historical Christians are of a different ethnic origin (Assyrians, Chaldean, Syriac, Armenians etc.) than Muslims. The majority of Muslims (Shia and Sunna) are described as 'Arabs' and have strong nomadic tribal sets of norms, which are presented as the standard for all society. Because of the divisions in Iraqi society, tribes continue to be the main focus of belonging/affiliation. In this sense, those who are not 'Arabs' are automatically viewed as different, treated as such and deprived of some of their rights (i.e. they suffer discrimination and persecution). However, this is less intensive in urban areas than in rural societies.

### **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. 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 lands of Christians; in the GOI area, at least 70% of the properties of Christians who fled 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 like 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. The new government of Iraq which was elected in May 2018 is Shia-orientated, but at present it is too soon to predict its future course. In the North however, there have been recent reports (June 2018) of the Kurdish authorities confiscating 'Assyrian' land.

### Denominational protectionism (Strong):

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/recognition, the officially recognized churches are asked to approve the application. Often, they strongly object to registering 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 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 churches have also been 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	EA	DPR	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	-	STRONG	STRONG	-	-	STRONG	STRONG
Government officials	Strong	-	Very weak	Weak	-	-	Strong	Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	Strong	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	-	Medium	-	-	-	Weak	Medium
Religious leaders of other churches	Very weak	-	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	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	Strong	Weak
Organized crime cartels or networks	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

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 (long version).

**Drivers of Islamic oppression:**

Christians in Iraq suffer from Islamic oppression from both Sunni and Shiites (i.e. from Kurds, Iranians and Arabs). Pressure can come from government officials, Islamic leaders, ethnic group leaders, violent religious groups, citizens, family, political parties, paramilitary and organized criminal groups.

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. Violent religious groups such as IS and other radical groups (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 Christians belonging to historical Christian communities and a dangerous source of persecution to converts. They constitute a group of some forty different militias of various sizes (nominally) under the control of the GOI, some of which are very radicalized.

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 then reflected in: i) discriminating policies, laws and administration practices against Christians, and ii) continual hate-speech by Muslim leaders alienating Christians. Christians are called infidels, making them subject for a wide range of severe persecution. This can be seen in (a) hate-speech in mosques and offensive statements such as "It is necessary to fight the Christians until they surrender and convert to Islam or pay tribute". Government officials are also known to have made similar statements; (b) poster campaigns asking Muslims to boycott Christmas festivals, not to wish Christians well at Christmas and not to use Christmas decorations; (c) poster campaigns on church buildings (in the GOI area only) requiring Christian women to wear the *hijab* covering, with the slogan: "The Virgin Mary wore hijab, why don't you?".

In the parliamentary elections of May 2018, a Shia political group and Kurdish parties manipulated the election to deprive Christians of their 'quota seats'. There are five seats, which are reserved for Christians in the national parliament. 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.

Ordinary citizens collaborated with IS or became part of militias that persecuted Christians, for instance in Mosul. Finally in both areas of Iraq, there is very strong persecution mostly by clan leaders, extended family and normal citizens who put serious pressure on Christians with a Muslim background to get them to return to Islam, and this sometimes includes attempts at killing 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.

**Drivers of Ethnic antagonism:**

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 have attempted numerous times to expropriate Christians and as such have contributed to the expulsion of Christians from Iraq.

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. Also certain other ethnic minorities (especially Shabak - a Shia ethnic minority known to be supported by Iran) and Iranian backed militias have pressured Christians into selling their property or have hindered Christians from returning to their towns or villages. *Ethnic antagonism* also concerns the imposition of age-old norms and values shaped in 'tribal' context and is often blended with *Islamic oppression*. In this case, the drivers are particularly families of converts and tribal, ethnic or Islamic leaders.

#### **Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:**

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. Other drivers that will do anything to stay in or increase their power are ethnic group leaders (e.g. Kurdish leaders) and violent religious groups like IS, al-Qaeda and Khorazan.

#### **Drivers of Denominational protectionism:**

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.

#### **Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:**

Violent religious groups, paramilitary groups, government officials, criminal groups and normal citizens have been involved in corruption and crime to exploit Christians. Government officials connected to criminal groups take advantage of their work and 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 in recent months - also often comes in the form of organized crime, having both financial and religious motives.

## **Context**

Christians have a long history in Iraq. Iraq's second biggest city Mosul – since mid-2017 liberated from IS militants - is the current name of the former city Nineveh, from the biblical book of Jonah. There was a long tradition of Christians living in Iraqi cities like Baghdad, Mosul and Basra. Before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraq was home to one of the largest Christian communities of the Middle East. Christians have lived here for two millennia but are currently on the verge of extinction. Over the last years, Iraq has suffered from structural uncertainty, conflict and instability. One of the all-time lows

was when large areas of north and west Iraq became part of IS's self-proclaimed caliphate in June 2014. The Iraqi government is incapable of enforcing the rule of law and of providing a minimum of security. Corruption levels are soaring and sectarian violence does not seem to stop.

Iraq is divided into two parts, the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in the north, officially governed by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) based in Erbil, and the large remaining Arab part, mostly controlled by the Iraqi Government in Baghdad. Kurds and Arabs have their own separate languages and culture. Most of Iraq's oil resources are found near Kirkuk and Mosul, the border areas between the Kurdish region and Arab Iraq, and these have long been among the most violent places in Iraq. Christians are caught here in the crossfire of two different battles - one for a Kurdish autonomous country and one for a religious cleansing of Iraq by Islamic militants (including IS) who wish to make the country purely Islamic. On the other hand, there have also been glimmers of hope: By the end of 2017, all areas that had been under IS control were now back under government control and the war against IS was declared over. Also, cooperation between pastors with a Muslim background in some places in the north has been increasing. Historical Christian communities and organizations have been reaching out to refugees from IS-controlled areas in Iraq and Syria by distributing blankets and toys. Churches in Erbil and Dohuk were also able to bring full-scale humanitarian aid to thousands of IDP families.

Despite the defeat of IS, the situation for Christians in the country is still difficult. The war has inevitably created a very complex situation with Christians also directly involved in the fighting. Shia groups also formed militias which have been both a source of protection and persecution for Christians.

## 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.

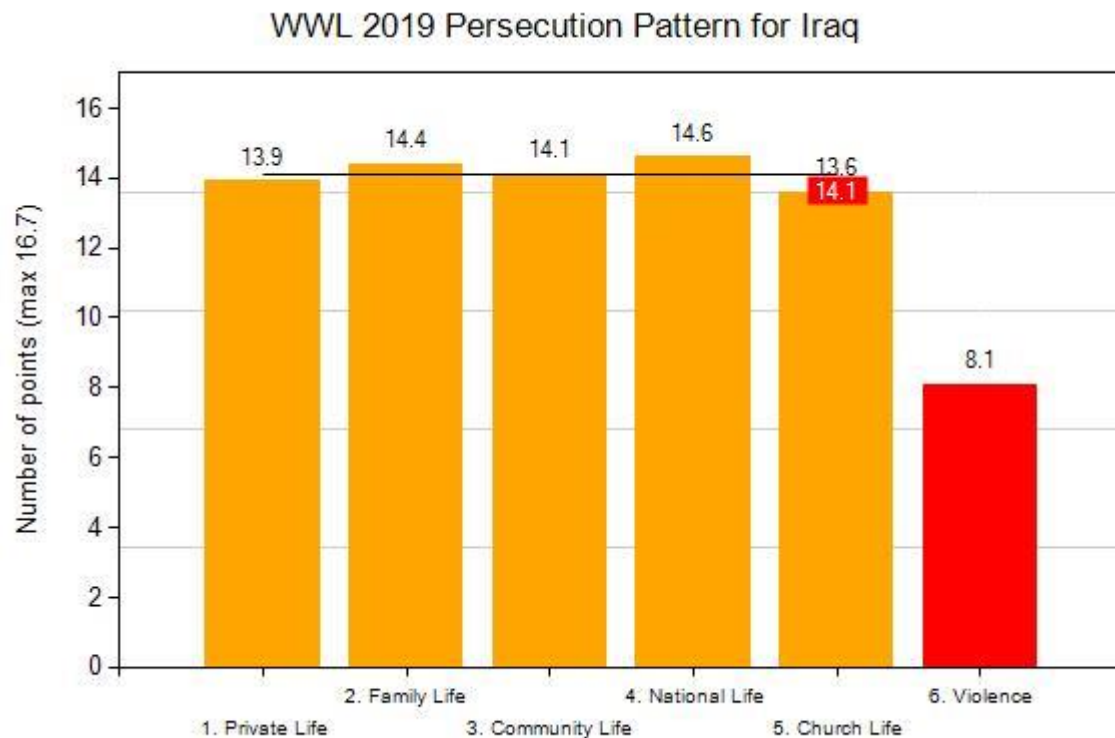
**Historical Christian communities:** Churches such as the Assyrian Orthodox Church, the Chaldean Catholic or Syrian Catholic Church and the Armenian Church are all seriously affected by persecution from radical Islamic movements and non-Christian religious leaders. They also face discrimination from 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, workplace or government buildings. Even Christians in the IKR have reportedly removed the cross 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 Baghdad 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 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.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for Iraq shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Iraq continues to score at an extreme level (14.1), in spite of decreasing from 14.9 in the WWL 2018 reporting period. Extreme levels of pressure are recorded in every *sphere of life*, except for *Church life*. 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.
- *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*.
- *Denominational protectionism* particularly affects the *Church, Family* and *Private spheres of life*.
- The level of violence against Christians is still very high (8.1 points), though falling from 11.3 in WWL 2018. The decrease is explained by a lower number of reported violent incidents. Less churches or Christian buildings were attacked, less abductions took place and a slightly lower number of Christians were forced to leave their homes.

### Private sphere:

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 was high especially in central and southern Iraq and is true to a lesser extent in the IKR. After years of religious persecution and successive waves of violence through neighbors and foreigners alike, members of Historic Christian communities also tend to refrain from forms of personal expressions about their faith for fear of hostility. The non-traditional church communities are more vocal about their faith and active in evangelization and risk attracting violence from the Muslim population. The display of religious symbols, especially outside the IKR, comes with risk of harassment, abduction and violence.

#### **Family sphere:**

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 2017.

#### **Community sphere:**

Also in their community, it is too risky for converts from Islam to be open about their faith. If their faith is known, they will – in the best of circumstances - face discrimination. But it can be as good as a death-warrant in the central and southern regions of Iraq (and even sometimes in the IKR, including Mosul and the Nineveh plain). Christian women of all Christian categories 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. In the IKR, Christians are increasingly under pressure from the local Muslim population who accuse them of taking their jobs. In an effort to alienate Christians, there was a poster-campaign to boycott Christmas celebrations, in some cities in the IKR. Posters with the slogan 'Not My Feast' appeared in the streets before Christmas, calling upon Muslims to boycott the Christian holiday, to refrain from hanging Christmas decorations and not to wish Christians well at Christmas. In past years, the same campaign could be observed in some Shia-dominated cities in the south of Iraq. Finally, Afram Yakoub, a board member of the Assyrian Confederation in Europe, was quoted in an article published by [World Watch Monitor](#) on 4 April 2018 stating that Assyrian Christians face "neglect and discrimination on a daily basis, from education and employment to the judicial system. Assyrians don't get government jobs; Assyrian schools never receive the full funding they are entitled to or the textbooks they need; the water and electricity supply is weaker for the Assyrian community; foreign aid that is pouring into Northern Iraq is not handled by Christians and is somehow directed to non-Assyrians."

**National sphere:**

*Sharia* is the primary source of law, which forbids the conversion of Muslims to other religions. As such, Christians with a Muslim background will be discriminated against in their interaction at a national level if their new faith is known. It is not possible to have their religion changed on their ID cards and their children are also automatically registered as Muslims. The ongoing Islamization of society in the entire country, including in the IKR, could also be seen in the implementation of laws on religious registration in 2015, and in the ban on the sale of alcohol in October 2016. The latter was followed by an attack on two Christian owned shops selling alcohol just before Christmas 2016, in which at least three Christians died and two were injured.

The registration law forces non-Muslim children to become Muslim if the male parent converts to Islam or if their mother marries a Muslim. The law was passed in spite of protests from religious minorities. In the Kurdish region in north Iraq, there are attempts to “kurdicize” society by land being sold to Kurdish Muslims or Yazidis in some predominantly Christian areas and towns. This “demographic reversal process” has been going on for years in several majority Christian areas in the Kurdish region. In a more recent development, Shiites are also trying to change the demographics in the Nineveh plain, where a school was opened in Bartella sub-district, donated by Iran and named “Emma Khomayni”, after the Islamic Republic’s first spiritual leader.

**Church sphere:**

In areas under the control of IS militants, churches and monasteries were either demolished or used for other purposes (jails, Islamic centers, stables). Christians who returned to their villages have started renovating church buildings. A disturbing development in central and southern Iraq is the lack of priests or church members in some churches – due to emigration as a result of the lack of safety for church leaders. This has led to some church buildings being put up for sale. Though not a nationwide phenomenon, church leaders like pastors and priests are still being targeted and killed by Islamic militants to set an example and scare others, especially in Baghdad.

**Violence:**

It needs to be remembered that many incidents go unreported.

Five Christians were killed in incidents that were considered anti-Christian targeting by the local Christian community. Over a dozen Christians were arrested and detained while evangelizing. Furthermore about 48 Christians are still missing within a persecution context. We received reports of sexual harassment of Christian women by Shia militias. In addition, several Christians, including converts, were either physically harmed or faced death threats. Three churches or Christian buildings including cemeteries were attacked. Several Christian-owned houses were also looted or confiscated. Finally, Christian-owned lands have been damaged by Kurds.

For a summary of the statistics on violence and examples, please see the Short and Simple Persecution Profile section above.

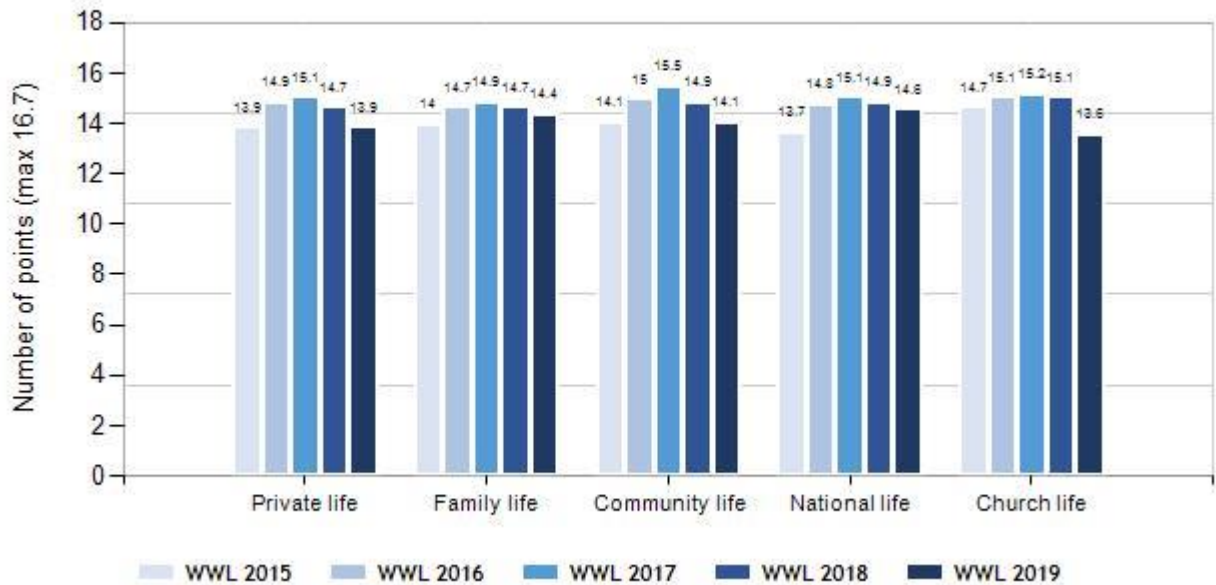
## 5 Year trends

The pressure in all *spheres of life* has been diminishing since WWL 2017 (chart 1) but is still at an extreme level. For most *spheres of life* the squeeze level of WWL2019 is comparable to that of WWL 2015, which marked the beginning of IS expansion in Iraq. Also, the average pressure (chart 2) is currently exactly the same as in WWL 2015: 4.1. The slight overall decrease in pressure since WWL



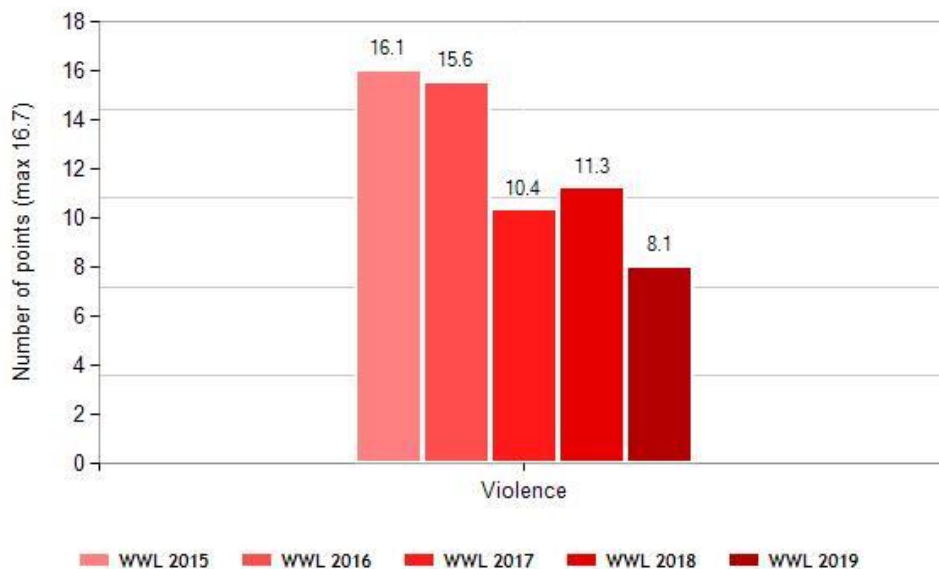
2017 (which was the reporting period when IS was at its maximum territorial power) reflects the territorial defeat and expulsion of the radical Islamic group. As a result, pressure has particularly declined in *church life*. Finally the trend for violence against Christians shows a gradual decline from extremely high to still very high in WWL2019 (see chart 3).

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Iraq (Spheres of life)



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Iraq	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	14.1
2018	14.9
2017	15.2
2016	14.9
2015	14.1

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Iraq (Violence)



## Gender specific persecution

### Female:

Of all WWL categories of Christian communities, female converts from Islam are particularly 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 side of the (wider) family. When she still lives with her family, a convert risks abuse in the form of house-arrest, sexual harassment, rape and even death, if her faith is revealed. Female converts from Islam cannot officially marry male Christians, as the Iraqi state still considers them Muslims and Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslims. 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. 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 are also under the threat of forced divorce. The attitude of the spouse’s family is crucial in this issue.

IS is known for its inferior treatment of women, especially those from religious minorities. Since establishing its so-called caliphate in parts of Iraq and Syria in June 2014, IS abducted and forced large numbers of Yazidi but also several Christian women into marriages with IS-fighters. They suffered sexual enslavement and sex trafficking. Though their numbers have decreased, Yazidi and Christian women who are still missing could very well continue to be facing sexual abuse at present. 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.

On the whole, Iraqi society is characterized by widespread lawlessness. 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. The higher connections and higher status of the Muslim perpetrator means they will always win the case, especially under the tribal justice system which can override national justice. On a community level, in state schools, Christian girls are seen as weaker and often ridiculed for their faith, according to one country researcher. 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:

Christian men reportedly face discrimination at work and education in Iraq. 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 exploitation at their workplaces, according to one country researcher. In the 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. This problem affects Christians with a Muslim background in all sectors of society; if their faith is known they will face serious problems finding and keeping employment.

Male converts with a Muslim background can face persecution from their families, including violent death. Also men from a non-Muslim Christian background risk being killed for their faith, the

perpetrators being mostly radical Islamic militants. 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. A convert's family could face also mockery and pressure from the husband's Muslim family. The loss of Christian men not only affects their direct families, but also the local church which consequently finds itself confronted with a lack of potential leadership. Overall, Christian men - particularly former Muslims - are in a very vulnerable position and struggle to sustain their families.

## 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, especially women and girls who were taken as sex slaves. 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 Yezidi 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. 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 violence.

Example of persecution: According to the [International Religious Freedom Report for 2017](#), IS has 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

**The political outlook:** The [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) (EIU) expects Islamic State to remain a terrorist threat, in spite of its territorial defeat. 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. The EIU foresees an improvement of economic conditions with higher oil prices, although Iraq's economy will continue to be vulnerable to price shocks.

### **The outlook for Christians - 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 considerably in the short run. IS ideology is still very much alive and not limited to geography. In an effort to prove they are still relevant, IS continues to execute and inspire attacks in the West and in the Middle East. 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. Also, IS is not the only driver of this Persecution engine. There are al-Qaeda remnants, Shiite militias and other militant Islamic groups emerging, such as the Khorasan group which is composed of former al-Qaeda members and said to be even more brutal than IS. Pressure also comes from Shiite leaders and government officials, making offensive public statements against Christians. Meanwhile in the IKR in the north, Islamic awareness is reportedly awakening. Also in politics and social life, the stress of the role of Islam remains strong and this confines and isolates Christians within narrow socio-political spaces. 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.

- *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. Nevertheless, 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 *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 these 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. The threat that the next war would be between Shiite forces and the Kurds was especially serious after the referendum for Kurdish cessation in September 2017 but after the parliamentary elections there seem to have been less tensions between Kurds and Shiites. However, the risk of an eruption of possible conflict has not gone altogether. 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*: In the event of a wide-scale power-struggle *Organized corruption and crime* is likely to flourish. Corruption is rampant in both IKR and Baghdad governments. It is a sign of hope that election winner Shia cleric al-Sadr has indicated that he wants to fight corruption, but corruption is deeply rooted in Iraqi society and there is a long road ahead. Christian representatives in the elections were put under pressure by Shia and Kurdish parties to serve their interests. 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.
- *Denominational protectionism*: It is hard to say how the persecution engine *Denominational protectionism* will develop. In the recent past, Christians of many different denominations have worked together 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. According to short term expectations, the need to cooperate will continue to exist, though increased fragmentation along tribal lines and survival sentiments could also work out in the opposite direction. Frequently, *Denominational protectionism* is just one factor in the wider debate surrounding the future for Christians in the country and their socio-political and national identity.

**Conclusion:** 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 home-towns and cities can any improvement in their situation take root. If the central government is unable to guarantee

their safe return, they may face continued high levels of persecution and leave Iraq. Also, it is important to keep the spot-light on this new phase of state-building in Iraq. The risk is that now that IS is considered defeated, the persecution of Christians in the country will be ignored or dismissed as a secondary issue. As the above shows, Christian persecution is rooted in many factors and it has not just been a product of terrorism. Also, the demographic changes going on in the Nineveh plain are possibly an indication of more persecution coming, especially if the government continues to be weak and impunity rampant.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

1. Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: "have the child remain undocumented, affecting their eligibility for government benefits" - <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>
2. Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: World Watch Monitor - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/04/iraqs-assyrian-christians-persecution-and-resurgence/>
3. Persecution of other religious minorities: Other religious minorities - <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>
4. Persecution of other religious minorities: Unrepresented Nations and People's Organization - <https://unpo.org/article/20889>
5. Persecution of other religious minorities: missing - <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/yazidi-isis-sex-slavery-amar-foundation/>
6. Persecution of other religious minorities: International Religious Freedom Report for 2017 - <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>
7. Future outlook: Economist Intelligence Unit - <http://country.eiu.com/Iraq>

## 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 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](#)

### Open Doors article(s) from the region

A selection of articles is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

At the time of publication there were no items specifically for Iraq.

### World Watch Monitor news articles

Up-to-date 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

1. 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>
2. 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>

3. 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>
4. 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>
5. 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>
6. 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>
7. 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>