



# OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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## United Nations Human Rights Council- Universal Periodic Review

### Universal Periodic Review – Iraq

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The Advocacy Department of Open Doors International submits this analysis of religious freedom in Iraq as a contribution to the Universal Periodic Review of UN member-state Iraq.

In Iraq serious violations of the right to religious freedom exist, because of terrorism against minority groups and religious cleansing. Evangelical Christians in particular are severely limited in their ability to exercise their faith because of government regulations. Christians are not free to gather a group of believers and register their group officially. This means that many churches are not permitted to legally wed or bury their members. Secondly individuals in Iraq are not free to choose or change their religion.

#### Religious demography

After the second Gulf War, 1991, there were approximately 850,000 Christians in Iraq. In 2003 when the third Gulf war started, the amount decreased to 550,000 Christians. Since the US and the UK invasion and the ensuing terrorist activities, there has been an exodus of Christians leaving the country and the amount of Christians now remaining in Iraq is further decreased to approximately 385,000.

Of the 385,000 Christians estimated to be living in Iraq at the moment at least 115,000 have fled their homes and businesses as a result of warfare, unrest and religious cleansing. They are now considered refugees inside Iraq or IDP's (Internally Displaced Person). This group naturally struggles with a high unemployment rate, but also struggles to officially register and thus is often not able to receive medical care, use educational facilities or benefit from state assistance programs. These Christian IDP's live mostly in the area between Mosul and the Turkish border on the Ninewa plain and close to the Kurdish Autonomous Region.

The Christians in Iraq mainly belong to the Chaldean Catholic church, the Assyrian church of the East and there is also a small group of Evangelical churches. There are only a few Muslim converts to Christianity living in Iraq.

#### Political and legal context

The country today is largely divided into two parts: the Kurdish Autonomous Region controlled by the Kurdish regional government and the Arab area controlled by the Iraqi government in Bagdad. The Arab areas of Iraq continue to be plagued by unrest and many Christians living in the areas in and above Bagdad as well as in and around Mosul are affected. The Kurdish Autonomous Region has not seen the same number of violent attacks



and bombings and this is considered a safe haven for many Christians, who have fled to this area. However the border restrictions at times have made it difficult for Christian Arabs to be admitted to the Kurdish Region.

The largest threat to Christians in Iraq is the on-going attack of Christian churches, business and facilities. The situation in some areas of the country has deteriorated so badly that many Christian individuals have been threatened, robbed, raped and kidnapped. Our assessment is that attacks against Christians are popular because Christians form a soft target often being affluent, known for not using violence and not connected to any of the major Iraqi tribes. Because there is a clear motif behind the threats to Christian individuals and facilities we conclude that these are not random incidents but in essence a form of religious cleansing.

Our contacts report that 2005/6 there was a large amount of unrest in the country, but reported incidents were not recorded as specifically targeted against Christians. In 2007 violence ebbed in the country as a whole. But in 2008 we have reported 72 cases of Christians suffering severe injuries due to targeted incidents of violence, 5 reported cases of kidnapping, 29 murders related to religious cleansing and a total of 2,351 Christian families that have fled their homes

As a direct result of the murder of the high ranking Chaldean Catholic archbishop Paulus Faraj Raho of Mosul in March 2008 we saw a sharp increase in IDP's as also poor Christians started fleeing to the North and to neighbouring countries. In October that year, more than 15,000 Iraqi Christians were driven out of the northern city of Mosul after 13 local Iraqi Christians were killed within four weeks, including three within 24 hours.

During the first half year of 2009 the situation stabilized with only 17 reported incidents of targeted killings against Christians and a total of 32 reported wounded. However, after the US Forces pulled out from Iraqi cities on June 30 there has been a sharp increase in terroristic activity. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July it started with 7 bombs in front of 7 different churches in Bagdad. Many Christians have lost hope of things ever improving and again there has been an increase of people leaving the capital.

As a result of these challenges a large group of Assyrian Christians have concluded that the Iraqi government is not sufficiently committed to protecting its Christian minority. At the same time the Kurdish Regional Government has been careful in allowing Assyrians to enter into their area. Many Assyrian Christians see the creation of an Assyrian State in the North of Iraq as their only hope. Assyrian spokespeople are seriously lobbying all over the Western world to this effect. Both the Kurdish Regional Government and the Iraqi Government perceive the nationalistic aims of the Assyrian Christians as a threat to their own status.

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#### Freedom of religion or belief

Christians in Iraq are facing many forms of persecution that are not uncommon in the Middle East. As a minority group they are often discriminated against and are not able to claim protection when their rights are infringed upon. This suffering is heightened in Iraq because Christians are often also targets of terroristic activity.

Kinds of oppression and persecution, which we have recorded and documented in **Iraq**:



1. Intimidation and threat letters that request families to leave a particular area, if they want to spare their own lives.
2. Children are intimidated and tortured as a means of pressuring families into leaving their family homes and businesses.
3. Kidnapping of male family members.
4. Kidnapping and raping of female family members, often as a means to intimidate Christian families and to force the woman to marry Muslims and thus become Muslims themselves.
5. Targeted killing of family members through the use of car-bombs, urging families to leave the area.
6. Killing of church leaders as a means to instill fear in the Christian community as a whole.
7. Pressure on families to convert to Islam.

The problems for Christians in the Kurdish Autonomous Area are not as severe in nature. They face the same challenges as all IDP's coming from the Iraq area. However because most of the IDP's are Christians and because all of them were forced to leave because of their faith, their plight can be also be described in terms of religious persecution.

Kinds of problems that Christians face in the **Kurdish Autonomous Region**:

1. Certificates and diplomas obtained by IDP's are not accepted. This immediately disqualifies many highly educated Christian Arabs from obtaining employment.
2. Christians often struggle with providing adequate Arabic language schooling for their children. Government schools in the Kurdish Autonomous Regions admit IDP children, however all education is given in the Kurdish languages. Local Christian schools use the Assyrian language, which the IDP children do not speak.

The situation in Iraq regarding religious freedom is that the Iraqi Constitution which includes the words "Islam is the official religion of the State" causes there to be a near total lack of religious freedom. William Warda, Chairman of the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization emphasizes: "Most people outside Iraq are not aware of the simple fact that it is against the law and the punishment can be death for the most basic human freedom – the freedom to change one's religion." While Christians are tolerated in Iraq the freedom of religion is limited because a Muslim is not allowed to change his religion into Christianity but a Christian is allowed to change his religion into Islam. Therefore religious discrimination is officially sanctioned in Iraq. However, in practice these official rules are not observed very strictly and related cases are tolerated until now.

People in the Kurdish Autonomous Region who leave Islam, also called apostates, cannot change their religion on their ID cards. This is causing serious problems especially to those who have children. Their children cannot be registered as Christians as their parents are still considered to be Muslim, at least on paper. Therefore the authorities can revoke the parent's custody rights for not bringing up their offspring as good Muslims. Similar problems occur regarding marriage law and burial rights.

Furthermore at this point only the Assyrian and Chaldean churches are recognized in Iraq. There is no procedure in place to legitimize new protestant or evangelical churches. It would



be an important step forward in achieving more freedom of religion if Evangelical churches could be able to obtain official papers and registration, allowing them to erect buildings, to bury their dead, and to marry their members.

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#### World Watch List position

The situation of religious cleansing by terrorists in Iraq resulted in the complete country being ranked in Open Doors World Watch List identifying it as the 16<sup>th</sup> on a list of nations worldwide violating religious freedom for Christian believers<sup>1</sup>.

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#### Detention situations

Open Doors has not recorded any case of excessive violence against Christians in detention, which could be attributed to their religion.

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#### Women and Orphans

The consequence of the large number of violent incidents targeting Christians created a large amount of traumatized survivors. Because of the tight family structure in the Middle East men not only provide the income for the family, but are seen as the protectors of their women and children. This means that the violence against Christian men has resulted in a large number of women and orphans who not only have experienced bodies in the streets, killed friends, flying body parts on the way to school, blood everywhere on television but who are also left vulnerable to on-going discrimination.

### Recommendations

#### Open Doors International

1. urges the government of Iraq to protect the Christians, their children and their property, especially in Mosul and Bagdad. By making this a strategic priority the Iraqi government can show they are willing to stop the religious cleansing by terror in their country.
2. urges the government of Iraq and the Kurdish Regional Government to legalize the possibility of religion change on identity papers for all religions.
3. urges the government of Iraq and the Kurdish regional government to give legal status to Evangelical churches so that they may legally establish churches and freely practice their religion.
4. urges the Kurdish regional government to accept the diplomas of all IDP's so that Christian professionals can find employment and sustain their families.

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<sup>1</sup> The Open Doors World Watch List is compiled from a specially-designed questionnaire of 50 questions covering various aspects of religious freedom. A point value is assigned depending on how each question is answered. The total number of points per country determines its position on the World Watch List. The questions differentiate between the legal, official status of Christians and the actual situation of individual Christians. Attention is paid to the role of the church in society and to factors that may obstruct the freedom of religion in a country.



5. urges the Kurdish regional government to make it possible that all Iraqi Christian children receive appropriate education and that all qualified candidates have access to university level education within the Kurdish area.
6. urges the Kurdish regional government to build extra schools and provide extra school busses to make it possible for all the Christian children to go to schools.