



Persecuted and Forgotten? A report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2013-2015

IRAQ – Country Profile and Incident reports

Population 32.6 million

Religions

Muslims 98% **Christians** 1% **Others** 1% **Christian Population** 260,000

Speaking at the House of Lords in February 2015, Chaldean Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil, northern Iraq, said: **“For many long centuries we the Christians of Iraq have experienced many long hardships and persecutions but what we have now experienced are the worst acts of genocide in our homeland. We are facing the extinction of Christianity as a religion in Iraq.”**

2014 was a catastrophic year for Christians who were driven out of their ancient heartlands in the north as part of a wave of violence by Daesh (ISIS). A country where Christianity’s roots reportedly date back as far as the first century was falling prey to militant groups increasingly hostile to the faithful. The fall of Iraq’s President Saddam Hussein by the US-led military campaign in 2003, created a political, social and religious vacuum exploited by Jihadi militia groups, who in turn capitalised on growing Sunni resentment at the allegedly pro-Shia policies of Nouri al-Maliki, who became Prime Minister in 2006. Christians had mainly suffered intimidation after Saddam’s fall, but attacks became increasingly violent, climaxing with the 31st October 2010 attack on Baghdad’s Syriac Catholic Cathedral, in which 52 were killed. Government statements of intent to defend the country’s Christians and rebuild their places of worship rang hollow for many of the faithful. A mass emigration in the face of opposition from Church leaders who begged their people to stay, highlighted the historical significance of the country’s Christian community rich in biblical heritage. But while many Christians left of their own volition, others were forced out. On 10th June 2014, Daesh took Mosul. July saw what the Chaldean Archbishop of Mosul described as the end of nearly 1,900 years of continued Christian presence in the city. Christian homes were marked with the Arabic letter ‘**ن**’ for ‘Nazarene’, a word which means ‘Christians’ and the faithful were told to leave, convert, or pay the Islamic *Jizya* tax. But this was changed and Christians were subsequently told to convert or “there is nothing for [you] but the sword”. When they reached the edge of the city, those leaving were forced to hand over their possessions. Thousands of Christians took refuge in the neighbouring Nineveh Plains, only to come under attack for a second time. On the night of 6–7th August, Daesh forces captured 13 Christian towns and villages in Nineveh as well as others occupied by other minority faith communities. Narrowly escaping with their lives, 125,000 Christians fled into the night. They sought sanctuary both in the Kurdish capital Erbil, and due north in Dohuk. Christian organisations supplied emergency aid to provide the displaced with food, shelter and medicine. By mid-2015, statistics regarding Christian emigration from Iraq painted a picture unimaginable less than a generation before. Christians, who numbered 1.4 million at the last census taken under Saddam, were now reported to be less than 275,000. Church leaders

reported that within six months of arriving in Kurdistan, up to 25 percent of internal refugees had fled abroad. Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil told ACN: "If Iraqi Christians were each given a visa, they would leave but they would leave with tears in their eyes. They feel that the country of their birth no longer loves them."

September 2013 A suicide bomb exploded outside the home of a Christian politician in Rafigayn, Kirkuk province and injured 19 people. Politician Emad Youhanna was not hurt in the blast but three of his children were wounded. It was reported that the suicide bomber targeted Mr Youhanna's property in an attempt to intimidate the Christian community.^{.56}

December 2013 Three separate attacks on Christmas Day targeting Christians in Baghdad killed at least 37 people. Two bombs were detonated at an outdoor market at the heart of the Christian community in Athorien and killed 11 people, injuring 21. The third attack was a car bomb, which exploded near a church in the neighbourhood of southern Dora, reportedly killing 26 people and wounding a further 38. The attacks were condemned by the US Embassy in Baghdad which said: **"The Christian community in Iraq has suffered deliberate and senseless targeting by terrorists for many years, as have many other innocent Iraqis"**.^{.57}

July 2014 A Muslim university professor was assassinated for speaking out against Christian persecution. Professor Mahmoud Al-Asali of the University of Mosul, was killed by Daesh militants after objecting to the group's brutal anti-Christian behaviour which he saw as contrary to Islamic teachings.^{.58}

August 2014 As more than 100,000 Christians fled for safety, and as Islamist extremists destroyed religious items and removed crosses from churches in northern Iraq Chaldean Patriarch Louis Sako told Aid to the Church in Need that he feared for the future of Christianity in Iraq. "If the situation does not change, the whole world should take responsibility [for] a slow genocide of an entire component of Iraqi society and its age-old culture. ISIS tries to erase all traces." Patriarch Sako feared Daesh (ISIS) could eradicate Christianity along with other religious minorities from the Middle East.^{.59}

September 2014 Daesh destroyed a seventh century church in Tikrit, considered to be one of the oldest and the most famous in the area. Militants used explosives to demolish the Assyrian Green Church, which was first built in 700 AD, continuing their devastation of religious shrines in the provinces of Kirkuk, Nineveh and Salahuddin. The church contained the remains of its founder and his successors, Mar Dinkha II, and Daniel, Thomas, Basilious III and John II.^{.60}

September 2014 Schools in Mosul with Christian affiliations were forced to change their names and stop teaching Christian religious education following Daesh (ISIS)'s rise to power in the city. Many of the educational institutions, such as St Thomas' School, have had links to Christianity since the eighteenth century.^{.61}

December 2014 Churches in Mosul were reportedly used as prisons and torture chambers for Christians according to a witness. Christian resident Abu Aasi claimed the churches were taken over and militants destroyed "all the crosses and statues of Mary".^{.62}

April 2015 A historical Christian library was saved from Daesh militants after monks hid the books in a nearby town. The library was rushed from the monastery in northern Iraq to the Kurdish city of Dohuk as militants advanced on the building.⁶³

May 2015 Reports suggest Daesh burned an 80 year-old Assyrian Christian woman to death in Karamlesh on the Nineveh Plains for not following *Shari'a* law.⁶⁴

July 2015 In Baghdad four Christians were abducted and two of them, Qais Abd Shaya and Safer Hann Sony, were killed despite their families paying the ransom demanded by their kidnappers. According to the Patriarchate of the Chaldean Church, Christians in the capital have also had their homes and goods seized, and been sent threatening phone messages telling them to leave their jobs.⁶⁵

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