

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website.

20 January 2014

IRQ104716.E

Iraq: Situation of Christians in the north, the Kurdistan region, and Baghdad, including incidents of violence and displacement; government protection (2010-2013)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Christian Population in Iraq

Sources indicate that the majority of Iraq's Christians belong to the Chaldean Church (Portes ouvertes France [2013]; IILHR May 2013, 9; US 20 May 2013, 2), which the US Department of State describes as "an eastern rite of the Catholic Church" (ibid.). Sources variously describe the Iraqi Christian population as including:

- Assyrian Orthodox (ibid. Apr. 2013, 88), or Assyrians of the Church of the East (Portes ouvertes France [2013]; US 20 May 2013, 2), which one source describes as being orthodox (Portes ouvertes France [2013]);
- Armenians (ibid.; IILHR May 2013, 9), including Catholics and Orthodox (US 2013, 88);
- Syrian Catholics (MRG 2010, 5; US Apr. 2013, 88);
- Syrian Orthodox (ibid.; MRG 2010, 5);
- Nestorian Catholics (ibid.);
- Anglicans and other Protestants (US 20 May 2013, 2); and
- approximately 5,000 evangelical Christians (ibid.).

Between 2010 and 2013, local community leaders gave various estimates of the number of Christians in Iraq: fewer than 400,000 (Al-Hayat 21 Aug. 2013); approximately 500,000 (US Apr. 2013, 88); 700,000 (UN Jan. 2011, 42); and between 400,000 and 850,000 (US 20 May 2013, 2). Sources indicate that the Christian population has significantly decreased, from about 1.4 million in 1987 (IILHR May 2013, 7, note 203), or from 1.2 million in the early 1990s (Portes ouvertes France [2013]). Over half of Iraqi Christians are believed to have fled the country since the beginning of the war in Iraq in 2003 (*The New York Times* 30 Dec. 2010; Human Rights Watch 23 Feb. 2010; Al-Hayat 21 Aug. 2013).

According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the traditional homeland of Iraqi Christians is in the north of Iraq, particularly the Nineveh [also spelled Ninawa] plains area of Nineveh governorate (US Apr. 2013, 89). A report published by the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) explains that the Nineveh plains are "a loosely defined area north and west of Mosul usually understood to comprise the districts of al-Hamdaniya, al-Shikhan and Tilkaif where Christians, Shabak, Yezidi and Kurds make up the majority of the population" (UN Jan. 2011, 41, note 126). Sources also indicate that there are Christian communities in Kirkuk and Mosul [northern Iraq], Basra [southern Iraq; also spelled Bosra], and Baghdad (IILHR May 2013, 77; Portes ouvertes France 19 Oct. 2011). Christians also live in the three governorates of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region - Dahuk, Erbil [also Irbil], and Sulaimaniya [also Sulaymaniyah] (IILHR May 2013, 78; UN Jan. 2011, 43). The Institute for International Law and Human Rights (IILHR), an NGO based in Washington, DC, and Brussels that supports the development of human rights and the rule of law in states in the early stages of democracy (May 2013, 24), estimates that one-third of the Christians in

Iraq are located in the Kurdistan Region (May 2013, 78). The *Toronto Star* estimates that there are approximately 160,000 Christians living in Kurdistan (2 Feb. 2013).

1.1 Internal Displacement

Sources indicate that thousands of Christians have left Iraq proper for Kurdistan, especially since an October 2010 attack on a Baghdad church (*The New York Times* 30 Dec. 2010; Portes ouvertes France [2013]). According to Portes ouvertes France, a member organization of the Open Doors international network, which supports Christian communities [translation] "that lack religious freedom" in over 60 countries (Portes ouvertes France n.d.), large numbers of Christians continue to flee from Baghdad, Basra, Kirkuk, and Mosul to Kurdistan (ibid. 19 Oct. 2011), where they are considered internally displaced persons (IDPs) (ibid. [2013]).

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that approximately 683 Christian families, or 4,098 people, were displaced from Mosul during a single week in February 2010, after a series of attacks on and murders of Christians by unknown armed groups (UN 28 Feb. 2010). UNHCR recorded a total of 866 Christian families who left Mosul in the lead-up to the 7 March 2010 elections, due to anti-Christian violence or the threat of violence (ibid. 2011, 42). UNAMI indicates that large numbers of Christians were reported to be leaving Mosul for the Nineveh plains (ibid.).

In 2013, IILHR reported an "exponential increase of Christians and other minorities moving to northern Iraq" (May 2013, 78). The *Toronto Star* estimates that there are 35,000 Christian IDPs in Kurdistan (2 Feb. 2013).

UNAMI reported in June 2013 that there were 400 Christian families in Basra and that the numbers had been "steadily" decreasing (22).

2. Overview of Situation

Article 2 of the Constitution of Iraq establishes Islam as the official religion of the State and the foundation of Iraqi law (Iraq 2005, Art. 2). Article 2 also "guarantees the full religious rights to freedom of religious belief and practice of all individuals such as Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaean Sabaeans" (ibid.).

In 2013, Open Doors International's World Watch List, which is a list of the 50 countries in the world in which "religious persecution" of Christians is the "worst" (Open Doors n.d.), ranked Iraq fourth among the countries in which Christians face the most "persecution" (Portes ouvertes France [2013]).

Sources indicate that Iraqi Christians have been targeted by attacks since the beginning of the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 (MRG 2010, 6; *The New York Times* 30 Dec. 2010; Human Rights Watch Nov. 2009, 31). Iraqi Christians are reportedly targeted by armed groups for their perceived alliance or association with the West (IILHR May 2013, 79; Human Rights Watch Nov. 2009, 31). However, Human Rights Watch notes that organized criminals sometimes pretend to be anti-Christian jihadists even if they have "a real motive of extortion and thievery" (ibid.). Similarly, the IILHR reports that armed groups that target Christians for murder and kidnapping [for ideological reasons] may also rob them for profit (May 2013, 79). Additionally, *AsiaNews* writes that Christians in northern Iraq are murdered and kidnapped "for the purpose of extortion" and have also been "caught in the crossfire between Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds vying for power and control of the area's rich oil resources" (7 Jan. 2013).

A 2010 survey conducted by Minority Rights Group International (MRG), which included 76 Chaldo-Assyrian respondents from Mosul, Dohuk, Kirkuk and Baghdad (MRG 2010, 11), found that 90 percent of Chaldo-Assyrians had experienced "continued threats" motivated by ethnic or religious animosity (ibid., 14). Approximately 50 percent felt that their religious sites were secure (ibid., 16), and approximately 60 percent felt free to participate in their religious activities (ibid., 17).

3. Incidents of Violence

3.1 Incidents of Violence in 2010

According to the Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights (MoHR), 83 Christians were killed and 188 were injured in 2010 due to "ethnic violence" (UN Jan. 2011, 41). The Hammurabi Human Rights Organization (HHRO), an Iraqi non-profit, non-sectarian and non-political NGO based in Baghdad with branches across the country (n.d.), documented the killings of 92 Christians in the same year (2011, 12). According to UNAMI, there were "dozens" of attacks against Christians, mostly involving IEDs [improvised explosive devices] and small arms fire in Mosul and the Nineveh plains, as well as "[constant] ... anonymous threats" made against Christians by phone or letter (UN Jan. 2011, 41).

Sources reported various incidents of violence against Christians in 2010, including the following:

- In February 2010, at least eight Christians were killed in Mosul in attacks that were believed to be politically motivated (Human Rights Watch 23 Feb. 2010; World Watch Monitor 5 Mar. 2010). The victims included a Christian man and his two sons who were killed in their home (ibid.; Human Rights Watch 23 Feb. 2010). According to UNAMI, Christian leaders believed that the attacks were meant to prevent Christians from voting in the 5 March 2010 parliamentary elections (UN Jan. 2011, 42).
- In May 2010, buses carrying Christian students to the University of Mosul were targeted in a bomb attack that killed at least one bystander (World Watch Monitor 5 May 2010; AFP 2 May 2010; UN Jan. 2011, 41). One source indicates that 100 of the students were injured (ibid.); another reported that 160 people were injured, including 50 students (World Watch Monitor 5 May 2010). The Christian news source World Watch Monitor reports that the three buses belonged to the Syrian Catholic Bishopric, which ran a bus service to transport 1,000 Christian students, primarily IDPs, to the university from neighbouring towns (ibid.). It also reports that the convoy had been under escort by two Iraqi army cars (ibid.).
- In October 2010, armed "extremists" stormed Our Lady of Salvation (Sayidat al-Nejat) Catholic Church in Baghdad, taking at least 120 people hostage (UN Jan. 2011, 42; Reuters 1 Nov. 2010; *The Majalla* 24 Sept. 2013). Sources indicate that the Islamic State of Iraq, an "extremist group affiliated with al-Qaeda," claimed responsibility (*New York Times* 30 Dec. 2010; UN 4 Nov. 2010). UNAMI reports that 41 civilians inside the church were killed, along with 7 police officers and 5 passers-by (ibid. Jan. 2011, 42). MRG indicates that 56 Christians and 2 priests were killed (Sept. 2013, 202).
- On 30 December 2010, Christian homes in Baghdad were targeted by bombs that killed two people and wounded at least thirteen others (UN Jan. 2011, 41; *The New York Times* 30 Dec. 2010). According to the *New York Times*, the attack involved ten different bombs and all the victims were Christians (ibid.).

3.2 Incidents of Violence in 2011

The Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights reported that 14 Christians were killed in "targeted acts" in 2011 (UN May 2012, 30). The HHRO documented the murder of 13 Christians in Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, and Basra, as well as the kidnapping of 6 Christians in Kirkuk and 1 in Erbil (HHRO 2011, 14). Sources also report attacks against churches in Kirkuk (ibid., 15; MRG June 2012) as well as Baghdad and Dohuk (HHRO 2011, 15).

Various sources report a series of attacks against Christian and Yezidi businesses in Dohuk governorate [Kurdistan Region] in December 2011 (MRG June 2012; UN May 2012, 32; US 20 May 2013, 7). According to the US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012*, between 300 and 1,000 rioters burned and destroyed dozens of businesses belonging to Christians and Yezidis (ibid.). The HHRO indicates that "hundreds of extremist Kurds" destroyed over 40 buildings in the attacks (2011, 19). For its part, UNAMI notes that the riots were "an expression of outrage toward establishments promoting practices perceived not to be in conformity with Islam" (UN May 2012, 32).

3.3 Incidents of Violence in 2012

The USCIRF's report on the events of 2012 states that there were no large-scale violent attacks against religious minorities causing death or injuries (US Apr. 2013, 89). The USCIRF received reports of two murders and two kidnappings of Christians in 2012 (ibid.). However, the *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012* indicates that, according to an unnamed local human rights organization, there were five killings, five kidnappings, twelve assassination attempts, and seventeen other attacks against Christians in the country (20 May 2013, 14). UNAMI reports the killing of a community leader and a kidnapping, both taking place in Kirkuk (UN June 2013, 21).

In September 2012, the Chaldean Catholic Sacred Heart Cathedral was targeted by a bomb attack, but there were no casualties (US Apr. 2013, 89; MRG Sept. 2013, 202). The US Department of State indicates, nevertheless, that extensive damage to the church rendered it unusable (US 20 May 2013, 10). The same source reports that there were three other church attacks in 2012 (ibid.).

The USCIRF, citing a report from Open Doors, indicates that 20 Christian families in Mosul received threatening letters demanding that they leave their homes (ibid. Apr. 2013, 89). MRG corroborates this report (Sept. 2013, 202). According to the US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012*, a militant group known as the Brigade of the Straight Path ordered Christians in Mosul to leave or be killed; in response, the government provided temporary additional security in Christian neighbourhoods (US 19 Apr. 2013, 47).

3.4 Incidents of Violence in 2013

In January 2013, a Chaldean school teacher was killed in Mosul, having had her throat cut (*AsiaNews.it* 7 Jan. 2013; US Apr. 2013, 89). In April 2013, Open Doors reported that its field workers in Iraq had received documents and threats declaring that Islamists want to drive out the Christians and make Iraq a Muslim-only country (24 Apr. 2013).

In September 2013, a bomb exploded at the home of a Christian politician in Rafidayn [also spelled Rafidayn] in the province of Kirkuk (*AsiaNews.it* 23 Sept. 2013; World Watch Monitor 22 Oct. 2013). The Christian news source *AsiaNews.it* indicates that 50 people were wounded and that the authorities attributed the attack to Islamist parties who oppose the policies of the leader of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) (23 Sept. 2013). World Watch Monitor reports that 19 people were injured, including three of the politician's children (22 Oct. 2013). The same source suggests that this attack, in addition to several bombings by al-Qaeda in Erbil that had taken place in recent months, is evidence that northern Iraq is "no longer safe for Christians" (World Watch Monitor 22 Oct. 2013).

On Christmas Day, a bomb exploded outside a Catholic church in Baghdad after a Christmas service (Reuters 25 Dec. 2013; *The Christian Post* 26 Dec. 2013). Reuters reported that at least 34 people were killed (25 Dec. 2013). Other media sources indicated that at least 38 people were killed, and at least 52 were wounded in the church explosion and in a separate bombing of a marketplace in a Christian neighbourhood on the same day (*The Christian Post* 26 Dec. 2013; Al Jazeera 26 Dec. 2013).

4. Treatment of Christians by the Authorities, Including Protection

According to the US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012*, the Council of Iraqi Christian Church Leaders is a quasi-governmental group with representatives from the 14 officially recognized churches (US 20 May 2013, 5). The Council requires all Christian groups to register with it (*ibid.*). The Iraqi parliament has five seats reserved for Christian representatives from Baghdad, Nineveh, Kirkuk, Erbil, and Dahuk (*ibid.*, 4; UN Jan. 2011, 40).

The US Department of State indicates that the government manages three waqfs [religious endowments] through the prime minister's office, including one for Christians and other religious minorities (US 20 May 2013, 5). The waqfs provide government funding for the upkeep and protection of religious facilities (*ibid.*).

According to UNAMI, in reaction to the anti-Christian violence in 2010, the Iraqi parliament created a parliamentary committee to make recommendations to the government to improve the protection of minorities (Jan. 2011, 41). Information on the implementation of the committee's recommendations could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The IILHR indicates that the government of Iraq made "important efforts" to protect churches and other religious sites in 2011 (May 2013, 80). The HHRO similarly states that the government "exerted great efforts" to protect churches by erecting concrete barriers and by stationing guards around them (HHRO 2011, 7). The organization notes that, nevertheless, eight churches in Kirkuk and Baghdad were attacked in 2011 (*ibid.*). The US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012* also indicates that the government increased protection of churches during Easter and Christmas (US 20 May 2013, 9). The same report states that, according to the Ministry of Human Rights, security forces escorted 1,300 Christian students from al-Hamdaniya to their schools in Mosul every day and increased night patrols in Christian areas of Mosul (*ibid.*, 11). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012*, there were reports of "government abuses of religious freedom, including arrests and detentions, as well as reports of restrictions and discriminations based on religion" (*ibid.*, 6). The USCIRF reports that, in September 2012, Iraqi security forces raided alcohol-serving businesses in Baghdad owned by minorities, assaulting customers and staff and damaging property (*ibid.* Apr. 2013, 91). The *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012* concludes, nevertheless, that the government respected the religious freedom of "the vast majority of citizens" (*ibid.* 20 May 2013, 6).

Three people were sentenced to death and one person was sentenced to 20 years in prison for their involvement in the October 2010 attack on Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad (MRG June 2012, 201; US 2013, 89). The USCIRF reports that the three were executed in February 2012 (*ibid.*). MRG writes that the sentences broke from "a tradition of almost complete impunity for large-scale attacks on Iraqi minority communities" (2012, 201). The USCIRF similarly found that, with the exception of the sentences for the church

attack, the government "made little progress" in its investigation and prosecution of "religiously motivated" crimes against minorities (US Apr. 2013, 89).

According to the HHRO, the government has so far been unable to provide "broad and comprehensive" protection to religious minorities by reforming policies and institutional framework, as well as by addressing "weak" political representation, lack of criminal justice, employment "discrimination," and "weak" accountability and punishment mechanisms (2011, 26). A 2013 article published by the *Majalla*, a London-based magazine that belongs to the Saudi Research and Publishing Company and covers political affairs in the Arab World (7 Mar. 2011), affirmed that the government of Iraq has proclaimed its support for the Christian community but "has failed to offer any real protection" (24 Sept. 2013). Similarly, MRG writes in its 2013 annual report that minority communities do not have their own militias and do not get "the necessary protection from the authorities" (Sept. 2013, 201).

4.1 Northern Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan

The USCIRF notes that religious minorities, including Chaldo-Assyrians and other Christians face "official discrimination, marginalization, and neglect," especially in the parts of northern Iraq the control of which is disputed by the Iraqi government and the KRG (US Apr. 2013, 85).

According to UNAMI, the KRG "actively moved to protect" the hundreds of internally displaced Christians who fled to Kurdistan after the October 2010 Baghdad church attacks (UN Jan. 2011, 42). It notes, however, that because of resource constraints, many Christians reportedly found it difficult to legalize their residence status and to access social security entitlements, employment, and education (ibid.). The KRG has also reportedly allowed Christian students from other parts of Iraq to transfer to schools in Kurdistan (ibid. May 2012, 32).

Quoting the archbishop of the Armenian Church of America, the US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012* indicates that the KRG welcomed newly arrived Christians and that Christians were "'comfortable'" in the Kurdistan Region (US 20 May 2013, 11). The same report indicates that there have been reports of government abuses of religious freedom but that the KRG generally respects religious freedom (ibid., 6). It also reports that the KRG provided compensation to the Chaldeans, Syriacs and Yezidis whose properties were destroyed in the December 2011 riots in Dahuk, after finding that the provincial security forces and administrators had been "'negligent'" in failing to contain the violence (ibid., 7).

5. Access to Housing, Employment, Education, Health Care and Other Services

The HHRO reports that many Christians have had their homes and properties controlled or "forcibly" occupied by others in certain districts of Baghdad and Mosul (2011, 8). IILHR also states that, according to Christian community leaders, properties were confiscated from Christians in northern Iraq and Baghdad in 2011 and 2012 (IILHR May 2013, 81-82). Owners reportedly did not receive market value for their properties and did not have the right of appeal (ibid.). Similarly, sources indicate that some Christians were forced to sell their homes at low prices (HHRO 2011, 8; MRG Sept. 2013, 202), under pressure from "militants," according to MRG (ibid.). The *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012* indicates that the Iraqi government and the KRG "unreasonably delayed" the restitution of land confiscated from Christians and churches under the previous regime (US 20 May 2013, 7).

MRG's 2010 survey of minorities found that approximately 54 percent of Chaldo-Assyrians reported religious discrimination when accessing health services, and 65 percent reported religious discrimination in employment in state institutions (MRG 2010, 25, 26). MRG also found in a 2011 survey that minorities in Iraq reported "considerable problems" in accessing employment, health care, and education (ibid. 2012, 200). Sources report that, in some schools, Christian students were not allowed to be excused from Islamic lessons (IILHR May 2013, 81; HHRO 2011, 7). The US Department of State also identifies religious discrimination in education as a problem (20 May 2013, 13).

Sources indicate that some Christian women are pressured to wear a hijab (ibid.; IILHR May 2013, 81). According to IILHR, women are particularly pressured in Mosul and in conservative areas of Baghdad, but the pressure is reportedly "neither uniform nor systematic" (ibid.). The HHRO explains that "harassment" over wearing a hijab depends entirely on the city, district, or work department, and women face "direct pressures" in some places and no pressure in others (2011, 8). Two female government employees were reportedly forced to transfer to a different office because they refused to wear the hijab (US 20 May 2013, 13; HHRO 2011, 8).

Portes ouvertes France indicates that, in Kurdistan Region, Christian IDPs face high unemployment rates, poor housing, difficulty accessing education, particularly at the university level, and difficulty accessing health care and monthly food rations, because of [translation] "administrative problems and discrimination" by Kurdish officials ([2013]). Similarly, the *Toronto Star* writes in a 2013 article that Christians who have fled to

Kurdistan are "[h]ampered by a lack of economic opportunity, linguistic and cultural barriers, and ... no proper political protection" (2 Feb. 2013). The *Majalla* reports that rental prices doubled in 2010 and 2011 in the towns of Erbil and Anikwa in Kurdistan, where many Christian IDPs are located, and that many Christians are being housed in churches and monasteries because they cannot afford to rent their own accommodations (24 Feb. 2013).

IILHR also reports that some Christians are pressured to study the Kurdish language in schools in the north (May 2013, 81). According to the *Majalla*, Christian students have difficulty integrating into Kurdish schools because of differences in school curricula as well as the Arabic-Kurdish language barrier (24 Sept. 2013).

In contrast to the above, citing the archbishop of the Armenian Church of America, the US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012* indicates that the KRG was building Christian churches, schools, and community centres for Christian IDPs (20 May 2013, 11).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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