



IRAQ

Overview

- Iraq has a population of approximately 40 million, an estimated two thirds Shi'a Muslim and one third Sunni Muslim. Christians and other minorities make up less than five percent.
- Fifteen to twenty percent of the population is ethnically Kurdish, largely based in three northern provinces that form the autonomous region governed by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).

Christian Communities

The largest Christian community is the Chaldean Catholic Church, followed by the Assyrian Church of the East. Other recognised churches include the Syrian Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Armenian Catholic, Anglican and other Protestant denominations. Analysts suggest that the overall number of Christians in Iraq has dropped by more than half since 2003, primarily due to accelerated levels of emigration.

Legal Context

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion, Islamic law as a source of legislation, and provides that no law may contravene either Islamic tenets nor the principles of democracy or rights outlined in the constitution. The constitution upholds freedom from religious (as well as political and intellectual) coercion and requires the government to maintain the sanctity of religious sites including Christian sites. Recognised religious groups are permitted free exercise of worship and are given freedom to govern most personal status issues according to their own rites through a religious tribunal system. Within the Council of Representatives, five seats are reserved for Christians; the Iraqi Kurdish Parliament also reserves five seats for Christians.

Pressure Points

Under applicable Islamic law, Muslims are effectively prohibited from changing their religion, and women registered as Muslim are not permitted to marry non-Muslims. In October 2015, draft legislation was approved in Parliament to provide that where a husband or wife converts to Islam, any children of the couple are automatically also considered to be Muslim, prompting widespread objections by non-Muslim leaders. Although this legislation has yet to be ratified, it is already applied in practice.

The advance and military offensive of Daesh (so-called 'Islamic State') in June 2014 led to mass displacement, including of Christians whose heartlands of Mosul and the Nineveh Plain area were overrun. Christians in these areas were presented with an ultimatum to convert to Islam, pay a subjugation tax (jizya), flee or be killed. In late 2016 the area was 'liberated' and by mid-2019 it was estimated that around 40% of displaced Christians had returned to some of their hometowns.

However, enormous reconstruction challenges, together with increased political marginalisation and new security fears as Shi'a militias have grown in prominence and strength, discourages further returns. Some Christian leaders discern a growing campaign, especially by Shi'a factions such as Al Hashd Al-Sha'bi, to drive Christians from Iraq by appropriating Christian-owned land and eroding the political representation of Christians. Some estimate that more than 70% of properties belonging to Christians in Baghdad and Basra have been seized following the widespread emigration of Christians since 2003. The KRG region has remained relatively stable, despite heightened tension following the independence referendum of October 2017 and has afforded the greatest security for Christians.

Throughout Iraq there is strong family and societal pressure against those who choose to leave Islam. In extreme cases those who leave Islam can face violent responses from family members.

Case Studies

Christians in Bartella, once a predominantly Christian town in the Nineveh Plains, east of Mosul, are facing growing intimidation and threats from ethnically Shabak militias.

Bartella was among the towns from which thousands of Christians were forced to flee in August 2014 as Daesh (Islamic State) violently seized control of the area. In late 2016 the area was 'liberated' from Daesh control. While some towns have seen significant numbers of Christian returnees, comparatively few have returned to Bartella due to ongoing security fears.

Bartella has long had a Shabak minority (Shi'a Muslim) which now seems to be seeking to extend its control through a campaign of violence and intimidation. A Shabak militia, Popular Mobilisation Unit Brigade 30, controls Bartella and the

surrounding area. Popular Mobilisation Units are state-sanctioned militias that contributed significantly to the area's liberation from Daesh.

On May 13, 2019, two elderly Christians, a mother (89) and daughter (69), were violently assaulted in their home. Jewellery and other valuables were stolen and both women were hospitalised. The police arrested two suspects. Christians view the incident as part of a systematic campaign against Christians which aims to change the area's demographic composition.

Although there are legal protections against the sale of land from one ethnic community to another, religious and political Christian leaders increasingly complain that properties of Christians have been fraudulently or forcibly appropriated. They also note a rapid growth in the establishment of Islamic institutions in Bartella and nearby towns.

In July 2019 Iraq's Prime Minister ordered the integration of the Popular Mobilisation Units into Iraq's regular army. Members of Brigade 30 rejected this order. National army and police personnel withdrew after being attacked. High-ranking Shabak leaders have accused Christians of collusion with the Prime Minister in making this order, which will weaken the Shabak's current level of autonomy. Shabak leaders have used highly threatening language and have promised "rivers of blood" if they are forced to cede areas currently under their control.

Prayer Points

Please pray:

- That the leaders of the church in Iraq would know the Lord's peace, wisdom and guidance in the face of ongoing pressures
- That Iraqi Christians would stand strong and be bold in facing continued intimidations and threats
- For more tolerance in the Iraqi society, and an end to the intimidations and infringement on Christian villages, creating an atmosphere that would encourage Christians to return to their villages
- For the Iraqi authorities' efforts to implement the rule of law
- For Iraqi society to become more tolerant, that intimidation and exploitation of Christians would cease.

Information compiled by:

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