

## IRAQ

August 3rd marks ten years since the ISIS blitzkrieg swept into northern Iraq, when terrorists sought to exterminate Yazidis, Christians, Shia Muslims and anyone who disagreed with their violent ideology. Thousands died or were disappeared, and millions of Iraqis fled their homes. While ISIS has been defeated, the future for religious minorities in Iraq is uncertain.



Seated in the Middle East in what was once ancient Mesopotamia, Iraq is home to over 46 million people of which 95-98% are Muslim. Of this, 60% of Iraq's Muslims are Shi'as and 40% Sunnis. Iraq's Christian community can trace its lineage back to the earliest days of the church, and Iraq is often referred to as the "Cradle of Christianity." However, reports indicate that fewer than 150,000 Christians remain in Iraq due to persecution.

The official religion of Iraq is Islam. The federal constitution provides individual rights for freedom of religion. However, in practice today this "freedom" looks quite different, with laws restricting (among other things) (1) the ability of conversion from Islam, (2) women from marrying non-Muslim men, and (3) non-Muslims from proselytizing. Efforts by the Iraqi parliament to amend the Personal Status Law would further erode protections.

But the biggest threat to religious freedom has come from terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIS, which have declared Muslims who do not practice their strict form of Islam as apostates worthy of death.

A decade ago the world witnessed persecution on an unimaginable level when ISIS attacked. The main victims were Yazidis, an ethnoreligious minority group whose unique tenets of faith have caused centuries of persecution. In early August 2014, ISIS abducted, raped, and murdered thousands of Yazidis in a genocidal campaign to ethnically cleanse them from Iraq.

Approximately 6,000 Yazidi women and children were sold into sexual slavery while many young boys were forced to become child soldiers. Over 5,000 Yazidis were murdered. And all of this led to mass displacement of over 400,000 Yazidis, with many still sheltering in IDP camps around northern Iraq. With an estimated 2,800 individuals still missing today, Yazidis remain excluded from legal recognition by the Iraqi Federal Government, and, as recent as 2023, social media hate speech campaigns still seek to incite violence against this population.

Other groups unique to Iraq continue their traditions, like Sabeen Mandeans and Kakais, while Iraq's ancient Jewish community hangs on by a thread. Nearly all Jewish individuals have been forced out, and Iraq even passed a law that imposes the death sentence on activities that promote normalized relations with Israel. There are also pockets of Zoroastrian communities and Baha'is, two religious groups unable to register under their professed faith. In fact, federal law now criminalizes the practice of the Baha'i faith.

Also important to understanding persecution in Iraq is the history of the Kurds, one of the world's largest stateless peoples with their own language, customs, and traditions.



The Kurds, who are religiously diverse, have long struggled for autonomy and rights. They remain an ethnic minority in Iraq as well as in Iran, Syria, and Turkey where they also face marginalization and persecution. Though Kurds make up around 15% of Iraq's total population and have declared their own regional government in northern Iraq, the Iraqi Federal Government began to implement anti-Kurdish policies decades ago and still today refuse to recognize Kurdistan's autonomy. While the Kurdish people are predominantly Sunni Muslims, smaller sects do include Christian communities.

## SCRIPTURE

Hebrews 6:18-20 (NIV)

**18** God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. **19** We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, **20** where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

## PRAYER

*Lord, as we come before you now, we ask that you would renew our strength and hope. Help us believe your words; help us to believe your promises. Remind us of your steadfast love and faithfulness. And today, Lord, we come before your throne to lift up the nation of Iraq, a nation filled with people made in your image and likeness and whom you call us to care for.*

*We ask first, Lord, that you would be with the Yazidi community today, those still in Iraq and those displaced and currently living in camps. Be near to them now Lord and stretch your hand over their situations. We pray for the families who lost loved ones in the genocide ten years ago. We pray your strength over the survivors who are living with trauma and pain. And we pray your peace over the hearts of the families whose loved ones are still missing to this day. Whether they know you or not, Lord, we ask you now to provide moments of peace, rest, and hope. Let them feel seen and sense they are not alone.*

*And Lord we also pray for the Kurdish people in northern Iraq who have long fought for independence and recognition of rights. A people who have long faced discrimination at the hands of the Iraqi federal government. Strengthen them now, Lord. Provide opportunities for their community this month, this year. Allow us as your children to remember them often and pray for your will to be done over their lives. We believe you are in control and ask you to protect the Kurdish people from all harm.*

*We also pray now for our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who remain in Iraq, unable to live out their faith in freedom and from fear of persecution. May your Holy Spirit empower them today. May your Spirit continue to protect them and guide them, giving them discernment and vision as they live in hostile environments. We know that you are able, as our High Priest, to do all things well. Be with our Christian brothers and sisters, be with those of the Baha'i and Zoroastrian faiths unable to practice their beliefs. And Lord, please be with the few remaining Jewish families in Iraq. Protect them and provide for them. Give them hope ahead. We love and trust you.*

*In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

