

Threats to Christians in Iraq and Syria

Briefing Note

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In Iraq and Syria, Christians have faced increased threats and persecution because of the on-going civil strife in both countries. The rapid military advances of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) across Syria and northern Iraq have only served to magnify this. The group is well known for its brutal violence, which is directed at Christians, Shia Muslims and other religious and ethnic minorities.

Christians in Iraq and Syria:

- Christianity is one of the major religions of the Middle East and Christians make up around 5% of the total population.¹ The largest Christian communities are in Egypt (the Arabic-speaking Copts) numbering between 6-11 million people,² followed by other sizable communities in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.
- The Christians of Iraq are considered one of the oldest surviving and continuous Christian communities in the world, dating back almost 2,000 years.³ The majority belong to branches of Syriac Christianity (including the Chaldean Catholic Church, Syriac Orthodox Church, Syriac Catholic Church, the Ancient Church of the East, and the Assyrian Church of the East), with a smaller community of Armenians and other minorities. Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Christian population has declined to between 250,000 to 300,000 people (from 0.8-1.4 million before the US invasion).⁴ The Christian population is based primarily in Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Arbil, Kirkuk and in the Assyrian towns and regions such as the Nineveh Plains in the North.⁵
- In Syria, the Christians make up around 10% of the population.⁶ The largest Christian denomination is the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch,⁷ closely followed by the Melkite Greek Catholic Church.⁸

Attacks against Christians in Iraq:

- The number of Iraqi Christians has declined considerably since the US-led invasion of the country in 2003 from 300 churches and 1.4 million Christians to 57 churches and only about 300,000 Christians today, primarily because of threats from extremist groups.⁹ The threats have increased since ISIS's occupation of northern Iraq from mid-June 2014.
- Since the ISIS occupation of northern Iraq, a number of prominent and historical Christian churches have been targeted and burnt, whilst others have been converted into regional headquarters for ISIS fighters. On July 22 2014, ISIS militants seized Mar Behnam, a 4th century monastery run by the Syriac Catholic church near the town of Qaraqosh in Northern Iraq and expelled the monks inside.¹⁰ Museums in Mosul have been ransacked and a number of ancient transcripts have gone missing.¹¹ On July 20 2014 ISIS insurgents burnt a 1,800-year-old church in Mosul.¹²
- On July 18 2014, ISIS issued a statement to the Christians living in Mosul giving them until July 19 2014 to either convert to Islam, pay Jizya (a special tax), be expelled or face "death by the sword". According to Iraqi Christian sources¹³ up to 1,200 Christian families have been forced to flee from areas where their communities have lived for almost 2,000 years.¹⁴
- A recent report by Human Rights Watch says that from July 14 2014, a number of homes in Mosul were painted with the letter Nun ن (N in Arabic) for Nasrani (the Arabic word for Christian) allowing ISIS fighters to easily identify Christian families in the city.¹⁵

Attacks against Christians in Syria:

- The Christian population of Syria has faced great persecution and threats of violence from extremist groups since the outset of the war, forcing many to flee¹⁶ and resulting in a huge humanitarian exodus from the country; in total the number of refugees (including Christians and other minorities) that have fled the country is thought to amount to 9 million people.¹⁷
- Sources inside the Syrian Orthodox Church have reported that an "ongoing ethnic cleansing of Christians" is being carried out by the Free Syrian Army in Homs, with Christians being expelled without their belongings and the confiscation of their homes.¹⁸ As a result, the Christian population of Homs has decreased from 160,000 to about 1,000.¹⁹
- Local sources reported that Christians in Qusayr, a town near Homs with a Christian population of 10,000 before the war, were given an ultimatum by armed extremist groups to leave the town.²⁰ Many refugees have reported that their male relatives were killed by the rebels.²¹ Many Christian Armenians, from both the Apostolic and Catholic churches, have been forced to flee Syria, with 7,000 emigrating to Armenia²² and 5,000 to Lebanon.²³
- Syrian churches are also being deliberately attacked and destroyed. For example, in March 2014, the Jabhat al-Nusra extremist group raided the Armenian Evangelical Holy Trinity Church and Missakian Cultural Centre located in Kessab, a mostly Armenian populated town of 1,754. The church was stripped of decorations and all artefacts were destroyed. The cross was torn off the church and replaced with a black Islamist flag.²⁴

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