

Life after ISIS: New challenges to Christianity in Iraq

Results from ACN's survey of Christians
in the liberated Nineveh Plains



June 2020



Aid to the
Church in Need

ACN INTERNATIONAL

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Aid to the Church in Need International (ACN)

Who is ACN?

Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), also known as *Kirche in Not* / *Ostpriesterhilfe*, is an international Catholic pastoral aid organization. It aims to help Christians in need wherever they are repressed or persecuted and therefore prevented from living according to their faith.

Each year ACN funds over 6,000 projects in more than 150 countries around world, helping to support the Church in its mission, and bringing hope and solidarity to millions of people. Due to its global structure, Aid to the Church in Need can quickly identify needs and respond promptly with aid projects. This is enabled by an efficient framework that keeps bureaucracy to a minimum while thoroughly verifying and approving projects for our project partners. Aid to the Church in Need's General Secretariat and Project Headquarters is in Königstein, Germany. With 23 national offices ACN supports the work of priests, catechists, seminarians and sisters. Aid to the Church in Need's mission are:

- to advance the Christian religion by supporting and promoting the Church, especially in countries where Christians are suffering persecution or discrimination;
- to further the other charitable work of the Church by providing practical assistance and pastoral care for persons in need, especially those who are living in, or are refugees from, such countries.

Aid to the Church in Need's work around the world covers the following areas:

- provision of catechetical material and books
- broadcasting the Faith
- help with church buildings
- support for the training of seminarians
- grants for the formation of religious and catechists
- subsidies for priests through grants and Mass stipends
- emergency aid to refugees
- provision of transport for those involved in the Church's mission.

Aid to the Church in Need is a Pontifical Foundation. Previously the organisation had been a Universal Public Association, whose revised decrees were approved by the Congregation of the Clergy on 10 December 1997 (Decree No.97003166, Vatican City). In December 2011, Pope Benedict XVI had elevated the international organisation Aid to the Church in Need to the status of Pontifical Foundation. At the same time, the Holy Father appointed the Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, to the position of President of the Foundation.

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ACN thanks other individuals whose advice and leadership has facilitated not only our work in Iraq, but provided a indispensable service to minorities in the Nineveh Plains: Antoine, Amir, Fr. Charbel, Sr. Clara, Fadi, Guillaume, Fr. George, Joseph, Julien, Fr. Salar, Fr. Behnam, Loys, Sr. Luma, Fr. Majeed, Matty, Sr. Nazik, Fr. Noel, Rami, Rami, Samir, Sandro, Bishop Nizar, Fr. Jacob, and Zaid.

To protect the identity of sources, all quotes have been uniformly anonymized.

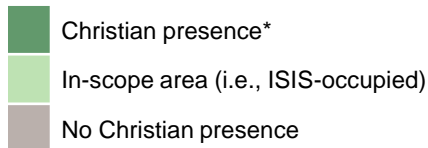
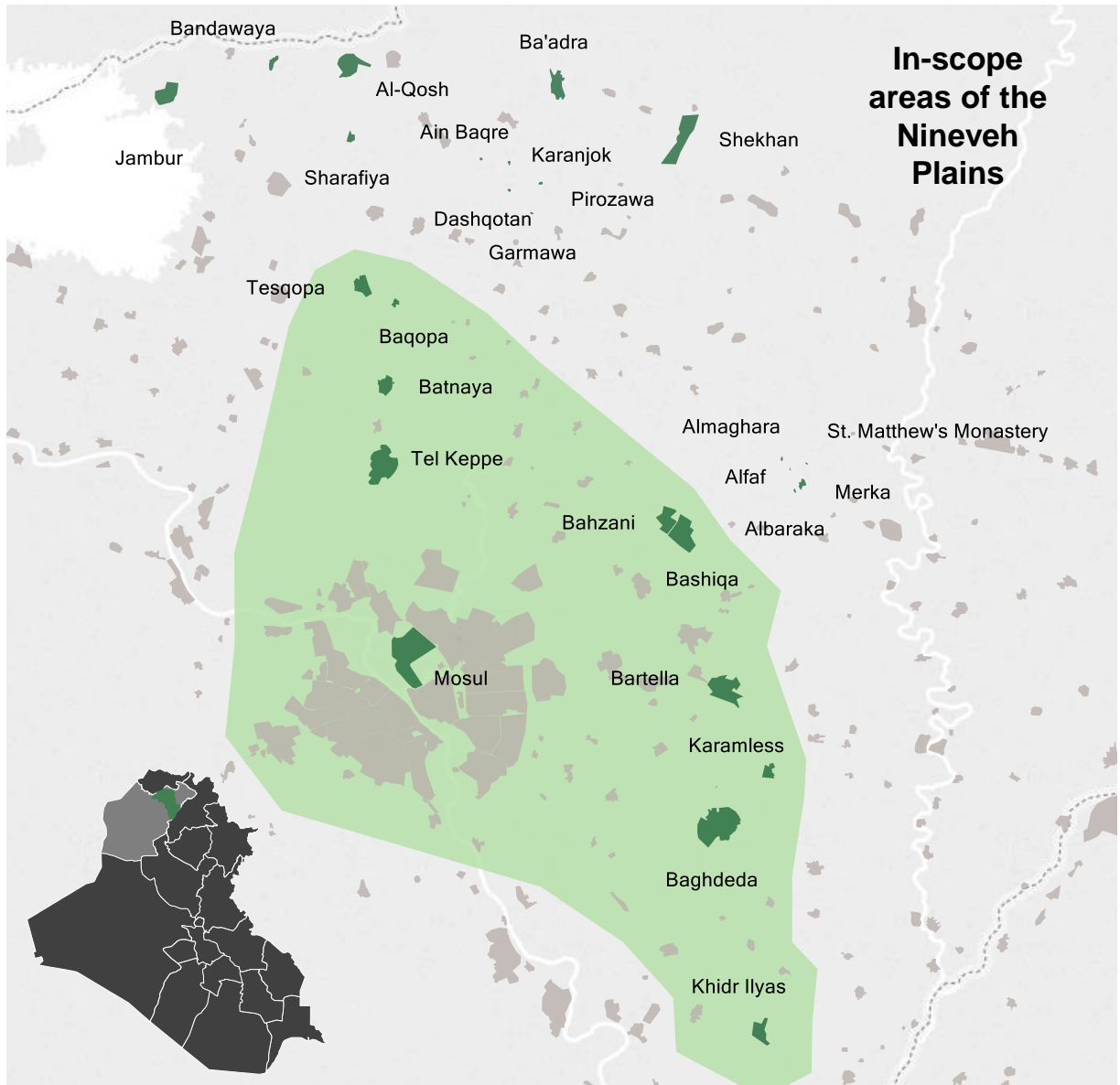
Founded in 1947 as a Catholic aid organization for war refugees and recognized as a papal foundation since 2011, ACN is dedicated to the service of Christians around the world, through information, prayer, and action, wherever they are persecuted or oppressed or suffering material need. ACN supports every year an average of 5000 projects in close to 150 countries, thanks to private donations, as the foundation receives no public funding.

Every effort has been made to ensure that the highest possible editorial standards have been met in the production of this report. However, in presenting the report, Aid to the Church in Need acknowledges that it could not independently verify all information contained therein without exception. Views or opinions expressed are not necessarily those of Aid to the Church in Need but of those involved in compiling the various documents contained in the report. This report includes reports of fears and beliefs held by Iraqi Christians that are difficult or impossible to corroborate, due to the security situation in the Nineveh Plains.

Cover photo: An Iraqi Christian with a beheaded statue of Jesus in Karamless, Iraq.

Note on scope

Scope of survey is ISIS-occupied, Christian-inhabited locations



Location	Alternative name
Baghdeda	Qaraqosh; Bakhdida; Al-Hamdaniya
Karamless	Karemlash
Tel Keppe	Tel Kaif; Tel Kef
Baqopa	Baqofa; Bakofa
Tesqopa	Teleskuf; Telesquf

*At least one Christian, with ready access to a functioning place of worship

Christians at risk of eradication

Fr. Andrzej Halemba PhD

Head of Asia Department
ACN International

When ISIS was militarily defeated in Iraq in 2017, the Catholic charity and pontifical foundation Aid to the Church in Need was among several organizations that assisted the many Christians who wished to return to their liberated, but heavily damaged, towns and villages in the Nineveh Plains. In the years since, complex post-war challenges in the region have caused a substantial proportion of Christians to consider emigration. To understand this phenomenon, ACN has conducted detailed population surveys in the past years to comprehend attitudes towards emigration among Christians.

Although the difficult political, security and economic environment makes emigration a legitimate choice, there are Christians who want to stay in their homeland. Owing to the fast-moving situation in Nineveh, carrying out population surveys regularly has been essential to gauging the popular response to the unfolding challenges that people face and thereby updating the appropriate response. For this reason, we launched ACN's survey, which is the focus of this paper "Life after ISIS: New challenges threatening the survival of Christianity in Iraq's Nineveh Plains". With the present survey, ACN intends to address current challenges that affect emigration attitudes to assist Christians, who were victims of dramatic persecution and even genocide, in the best possible way. In so doing, the survey will help define the charity's aid strategy for the future.

The "Life after ISIS" survey was carried out in 2019 and before discussing its content, some context is needed. In the summer of 2014, Christians found themselves in a hopeless situation after fleeing the advances of ISIS towards Mosul and the Nineveh Plains. ACN reacted immediately, and through emergency relief efforts, the charity was able to help secure the immediate survival of 11,800 internally displaced families. To sustain the Christian population, ACN undertook one of its greatest long-term emergency relief commitments: between 2014 and 2017, ACN provided €34.5 million in aid projects in Iraq, supporting Christian families with essential food and sanitary needs, temporary housing (i.e., caravans and rent subsidies), eight caravan schools, and medical care.



According to an ACN survey carried out in November 2016, only 3.3% of Christians from the Nineveh Plains held any hope of returning due to the security concerns and lack of housing. The latter was a clear sign that the emergency aid alone was not enough. For that reason, in early 2017 ACN launched a modern-day Marshall Plan to tackle the mammoth task of rebuilding the devastated Christian homes in the Nineveh Plains. The plan aimed at restoring dignity, through housing repairs and restoration, and offering employment opportunities. All local Churches showed solidarity and united behind the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee (NRC), a body set up to coordinate the reconstruction process. These developments were marked by an immediate and significant increase in optimism; a second ACN population survey conducted in March 2017, showed that 41% of IDP families now wanted to return to their towns and villages in Nineveh. A further 46% said they were prepared to consider returning.

Preface

Any consideration of not only emergency relief but the long-term rehabilitation support required to secure the return of Iraqi Christians to their homes, would not have been possible without the generous response of ACN benefactors. ACN, through the administration of the NRC (consult: www.nrciraq.org), provided €6.5 million for the reconstruction of 2,860 houses in six towns and villages in the Nineveh Plains. This represents nearly 35% of the total 8,166 damaged and destroyed houses that have been repaired as of April 2020. The number of houses registered for renovation was 14,828 in total. Almost 45% of the families forced to flee the Nineveh Plains are now back in their homes, representing 9,030 families from the 20,152 who fled.

Parallel to this direct aid, ACN's Public Affairs department advocated at the level of the United Nations, EU institutions, EU member states, and the US government, seeking to draw attention to the targeted extermination by Daesh (ISIS) of Christians and other minorities in Iraq. In February 2016, based on a document prepared by this department, a successful resolution at the European Parliament recognized the genocide of Christians and other minorities in Iraq. After this, the same document was expanded and presented to the US State Department where there too a recognition of genocide was passed.

Governments around the world have also recognized the need to maintain the plurality of Iraqi society, and ACN advocacy efforts have helped encourage and advise international funding, mainly from the governments of Hungary, Germany, Austria, Poland, and the US. The reconstruction efforts continue – and need to be expanded – as the number of families, in the immediate region, who would like to return is estimated at more than 2,000.

Despite the positive developments, there have been anecdotal reports of families wishing to emigrate, a concern that ACN deemed worthy of deeper analysis. In response, ACN commissioned this survey “Life after ISIS: New challenges threatening the survival of Christianity in Iraq’s Nineveh Plains”. Carried out in 2019, this population survey of Christians in the liberated Nineveh Plains addresses their current situation and takes a temperature of public attitudes, hopes, and fears. This study, prepared by Xavier Bisits, ACN’s researcher, provides much-needed insight into the causes and consequences of Christian emigration. The research combines secondary data with primary source material, including interviews, publicly available reports, and a labor-intensive, stratified sampling survey. Wide-ranging and yet precisely focused around the key question of attitudes to migration, the research draws on sample surveys from which can be extrapolated findings with an application reaching across the broad spectrum of Christians in Nineveh.

“Life after ISIS” reveals that current and ongoing challenges, such as security threats, economic issues, reconstruction difficulties, and religious discrimination, are still pushing families to emigrate. The principal concern of security - rather than economic or family reasons - is the primary driver of emigration. Christians who have returned to their homes still feel unsafe, and substantially more insecure than other groups in the region mostly because of the violent activity of local militias. Disputes between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government over certain Christian-majority areas have also hindered infrastructure reconstruction provoking further insecurity.

Although economic concerns, especially employment, are paramount in some areas, it is impossible to decouple these from security considerations. These key factors need to be addressed to tackle the physical and economic insecurity that forces populations to move. If the tendency to emigrate is not stemmed, it will place, in turn, even greater pressure on Christians remaining in Iraq by reducing their critical mass and thus creating a less hospitable environment. “Life after ISIS” warns that anticipated emigration could reduce the Christian population in the region to 23,000 within four years – down 80% from the pre-jihadist invasion in 2014. This would move the Christian community from the category of “vulnerable” to the critical category of “endangered with extinction”.

The findings of “Life after ISIS” make clear that restoring the stability of the Christian community in this post-conflict region is only possible with a concerted effort focusing on security, education, long-term economic opportunities, and reconstruction. In the recent Iraq context, marked by sectarianism, conflict, and the repeated brutalization of civil society, the Church remains a central pillar in the social structure, providing a sense of belonging, mutual help and support. With state structures and welfare support breaking down, Christian communities fill the gap, offering social opportunities, education at all levels including kindergartens and universities, cultural activities, and social services. For this reason, Church infrastructure is essential for strengthening security and countering the demographic displacement of Christians. Were the key factor of security to change in a favorable direction, attitudes would also change radically as the people have an underlying familial commitment to their ancestral lands. Christians choosing to emigrate only leave “with tears in their eyes” to ensure their security and basic needs – homes, jobs, and schooling for their children.

Preface

In this context, ACN is shifting towards a new stage in its modern-day Marshall Plan for the Iraqi Christians. The central objective is to rebuild the infrastructure of Church-run facilities across the Christian towns and villages of the Nineveh Plains. Of the 363 Church facilities designated for reconstruction or repair (34 totally destroyed, 132 burnt, 197 partially damaged), only 46 are specifically designated for religious use as churches and chapels. The remaining 87% have a social or welfare support function including parish halls, which serve as community centers for pastoral and social activities, education facilities, orphanages, residential care homes, clinics, as well as homes, such as convents for those who service these centers (religious serving as teachers, clinicians, psycho-social support professionals, etc.). As of 2020, ACN has supported the reconstruction of 47 Church properties, including 10 churches or chapels.

ACN's historical presence and long-standing support to Iraq, the extent of relationships the charity has built up across so many sections of society and the breadth of its experience means the organization is well placed to respond to the social, as well as religious, needs of the people. Also, ACN will continue supporting the Church in its core mission through funding pastoral activities, Christian media, the formation of Christian leaders, and subsistence of the clergy and religious congregations.

Most of the research carried out on Christianity in Iraq has concentrated on their experience of crisis. ACN's surveys, however, continue to reveal the Iraqi Christians have a resilience not only to survive but, given more favorable conditions, to emerge from the margins to serve as an important instrument in the rebuilding of a peaceful, pluralistic, and healthy society. Building on the experience of ACN's project work in Iraq to date – especially in the immediate aftermath of the 2014 ISIS invasion – the charity's forthcoming aid program in rebuilding the physical spaces encouraging the Christian presence seeks, in turn, to encourage the special vocation of Christians to further the human "living together".

From the first indicators of Christian persecution in 2011 until the end of 2019, the charity, through the generosity of its benefactors, has provided €46.5 million to keep the Christian presence in Iraq and particularly the Nineveh Plains. At the same time, following the call from bishops and other senior clergy in the region, ACN advocates that more partners and those with greater financial resources come forward to meet the current needs of communities in the Nineveh Plains at an appropriately expanded level.

Specifically, this collaborative approach would promote and, where possible, enable:

- The return of those internally displaced or refugee Christians to their respective ancestral communities from which they were expelled during the ISIS invasion of 2014-17.
- The presence of permanent representation of Christians in national and local government to secure the legal protection of Christians and other minorities and the defense of their fundamental human rights, especially the right to equal citizenship.
- The growth of a thriving Christian minority, achieved by funding and supporting education with an emphasis on vocational training and economic development, including both rural-based farming and urban opportunities, especially small business and self-employment.
- The continuation of advocacy efforts aimed at securing further financial aid from international government and non-governmental organizations supporting the presence of Christians and other minorities in the Nineveh Plains.
- The creation of a high-level political strategy involving all levels of government and international bodies to assure the plurality, and future stability, of society in Iraq, as above mentioned.

Conclusion

Amid warnings that Christianity in Iraq "is perilously close to extinction", as stressed in 2019 by Iraq's Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil,¹ the "Life after ISIS" survey conducted by Xavier Bisits for ACN brings the full weight of professional research to conclude that without immediate concerted action the presence of the Christians in the region of the Nineveh Plains and environs will be eradicated. While the outlook is unavoidably grim, because Christians feel they have reached a tipping point concerning the viability of their presence in the region, the research also points to strategies of containment and even large-scale renewal, plans, and initiatives that are not only feasible but sustainable given regional, national and international cooperation. Many and varied though these strategies are, what they all have in common is urgency.

Never should future generations say of us: we did too little, too late.

1) Frank Gardner, 'Iraq's Christians 'close to extinction'', BBC News, 23/05/19

Introduction

Iraqi Christians have their roots in the ancient Assyrian Empire

The overwhelming majority of Christians in the Nineveh Plains, as is the case in the rest of Iraq, belong to the Syriac (54%), Chaldean (35%), or Assyrian (2%) ethnic groups. Some Christians promote a separatist identity for Chaldeans or Syriacs, while others promote the unity of these three groups; for example, the Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian Popular Council promotes the unity of these three groups.

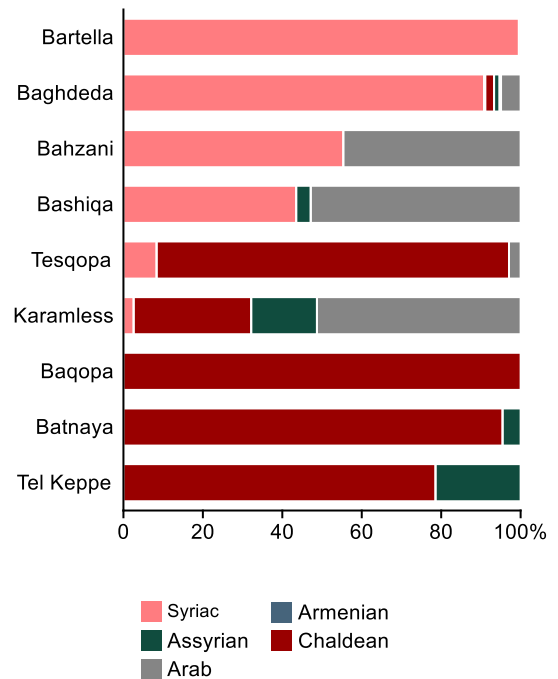
In ACN's 2019 survey of Christians, a small minority of Christians, 9%, self-identified as Arab. These responses came almost exclusively from Arabic speakers. Our survey also identified small numbers of Armenian (0.2%) and Kurdish (0.2%) Christians.

Religious switching is highly unusual, with only 7% indicating they had grown up in another religion; in this survey, all such respondents had converted from another Christian denomination. These respondents were disproportionately likely to be women, reflecting a tradition of assuming the husband's religion in a mixed-denomination marriage. Anecdotal evidence suggests isolated covert conversions from Yezidism or Islam, although our survey found no evidence of this.

Christians are overwhelmingly the descendants of the original tribal inhabitants of the Assyrian Empire, a civilization that lasted from the 25th century BC until the 7th century BC. At times, the capital of this civilization was Nineveh, a city whose ruins lie on the eastern bank of what is now Mosul.

The Assyrian homeland includes parts of northern Iraq, south-eastern Turkey, north-eastern Syria, and north-western Iran. Today, the heaviest concentration of this population is in the Nineveh Plains, the focus of this report.

Ethnic self-description



Nimrud, an Assyrian city in the Nineveh Plains, was systematically destroyed by ISIS using bulldozers and explosives.

Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey

Introduction

Most Christians speak Surith, a descendant of Aramaic

The lines between language, nationality, and religion are often blurred. Often, Christians will claim that their language – or indeed ethnicity – is “Christian”.

Today, nine in ten Christians speak Surith, also known as Western Neo-Aramaic. In some circles, Christians refer to this language as “Syriac”, “Chaldean”, or “Aramaic”. Functionally, these refer to the same dialect, although there are slight differences in vocabulary from one town to another. Baghdeda, a market town, is more influenced by Arabic than Christian towns nestled in mountains to the north. In some almost exclusively Christian towns, the language is not only used in family settings but as the language of choice on the street and in business. In formal settings, such as homilies in Church or written documents, Arabic is preferred.

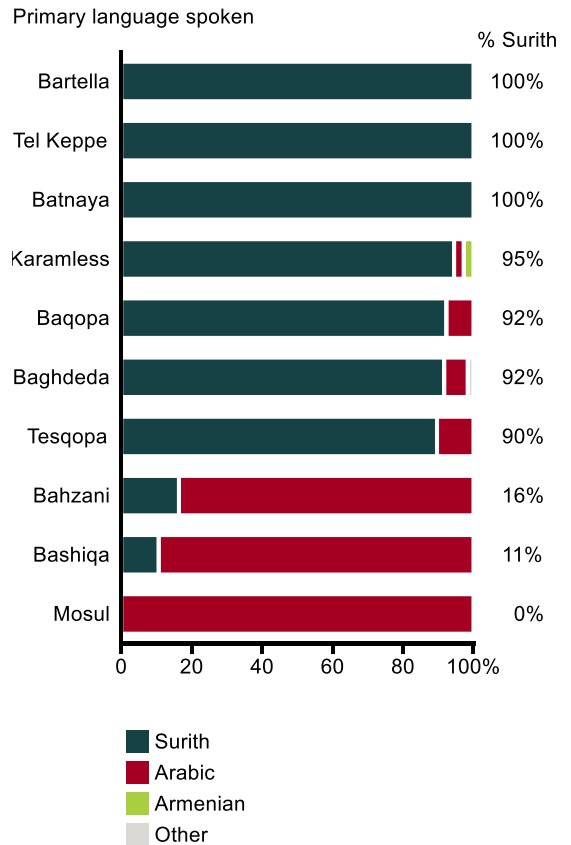
In addition to the informal dialect of Surith, some Christians also learn formal “Syriac” or “Chaldean”, the literary and ancient variants of the modern dialects. Each have their own script and are used by the priest during most masses. In Bahzani, Bashiqa, and Mosul, most Christians and Yezidis have lost their native tongue and speak Arabic as their first language.

Due to the Christian exodus from Iraq, the future of Surith is threatened, as it is difficult for the children of emigrants to retain the language. Some other Iraqi versions of Neo-Aramaic, including those spoken by Jews and Mandaeans, are almost extinct.



A copy of the Gospel written in Syriac.

Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey



Local Christians are proud of Surith, and frequently remind visitors that it evolved from the Palestinian dialect spoken by Jesus. Imperial Aramaic was adopted by the Assyrian Empire and retained currency for several centuries, gradually falling into disuse with the Arab conquest. Many Christians claim that Arabic is descended from Aramaic, which shares a common ancestor, Central Semitic.

“Learning Syriac is important because it’s the language of Jesus.”

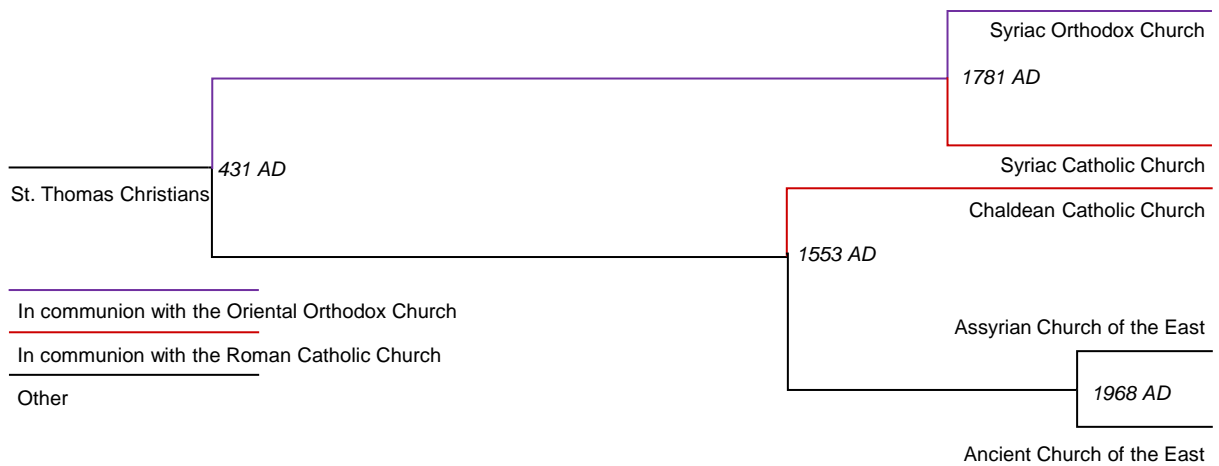
Bartella resident

“The Arabs say their language came first. In fact, their language comes from ours. All of Iraq used to be Christian before the Arabs took over.”

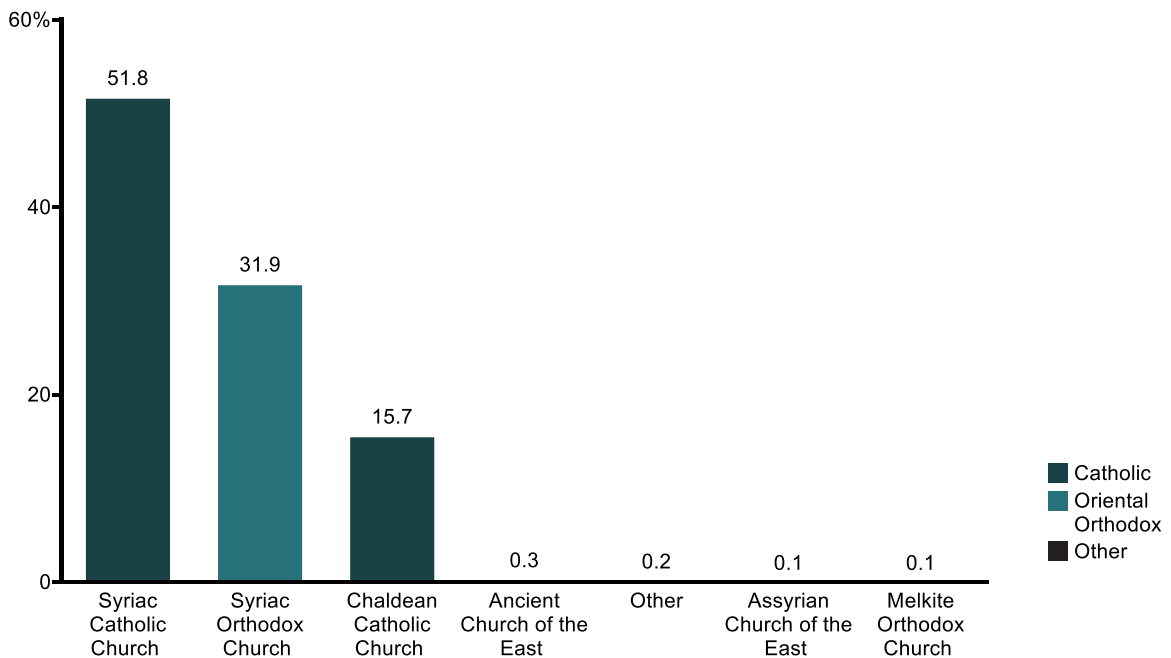
Baghdeda resident

Introduction

Christians tend to be either Catholic or Orthodox



Denomination



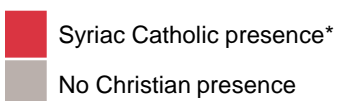
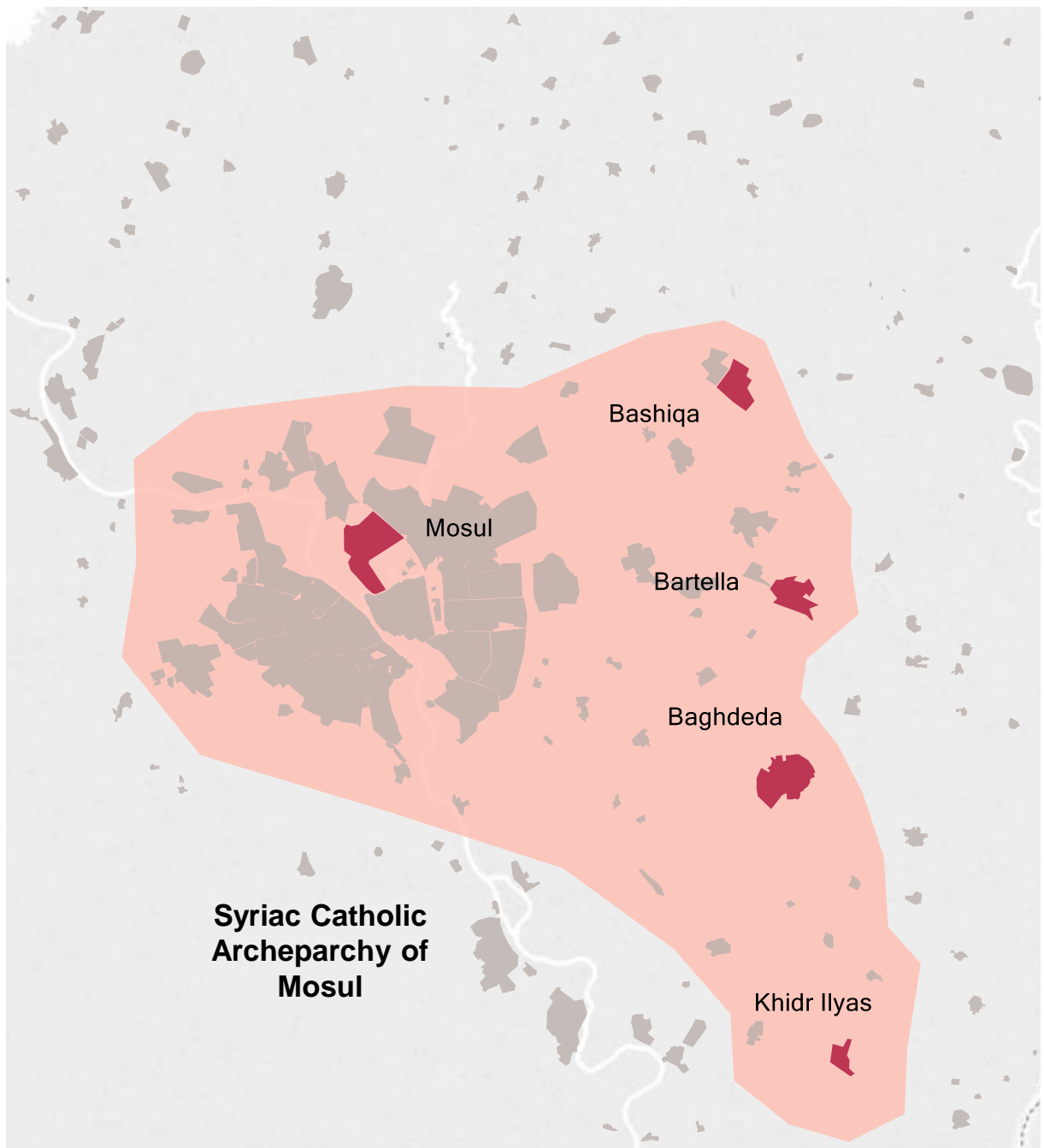
Iraq's Christian community dates back to the first century when early missionaries evangelized parts of the region. Christianity in Iraq pre-dates both Islam, which began in the seventh century, and the Arab Conquest. The inhabitants of this region first converted to Christianity in the first century AD, after being evangelized by the Apostle Thomas, who was on his way to India. Other disciples, including St. Adday, were influential in evangelizing the region. Nevertheless, Christianity did not become the official religion of Assyria until the fourth century AD, when a king was converted to Christianity by St. Matthew the Hermit, following the principle *cuius regio, eius religio*.

The religious composition of Christians in the Nineveh Plains today reflects doctrinal disputes that are centuries old, although all groups trace themselves back to the evangelical activities of St. Thomas.

Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey

Introduction

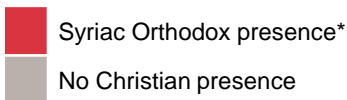
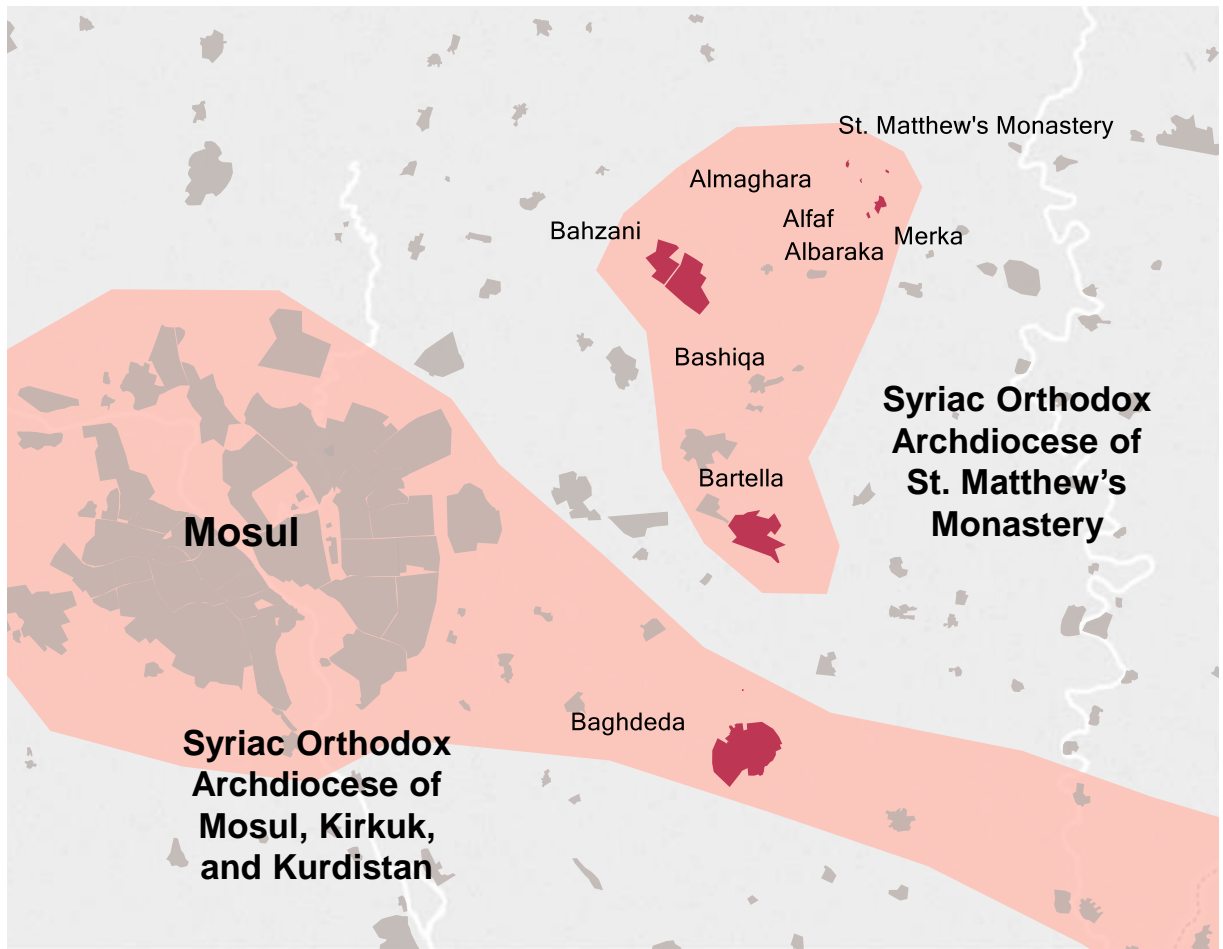
The Syriac Catholic Church has one diocese in the Nineveh Plains



*At least one person, with ready access to a functioning place of worship

Introduction

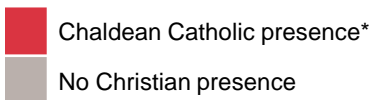
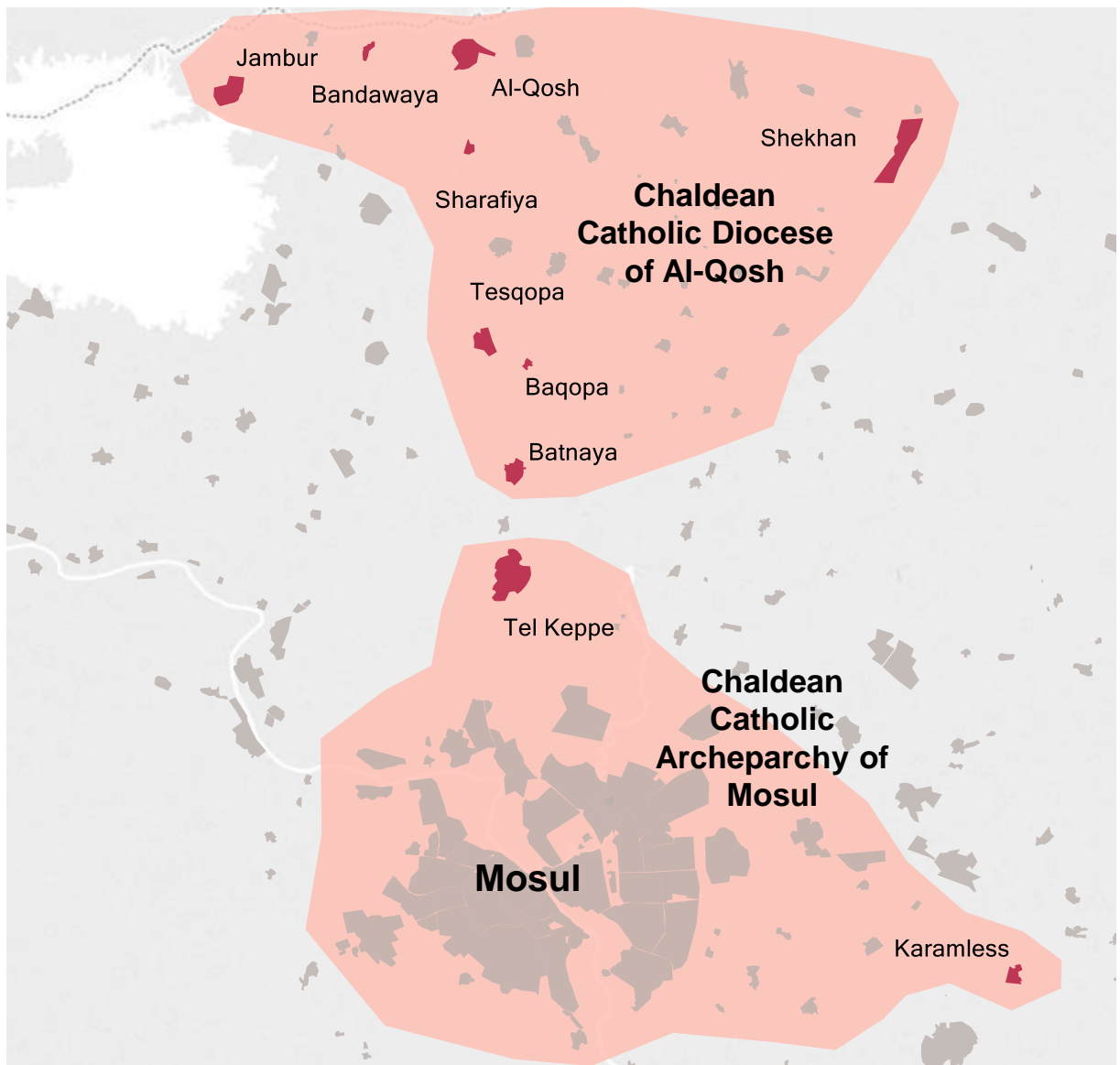
The Syriac Orthodox Church has two dioceses



*At least one person, with ready access to a functioning place of worship

Introduction

The Chaldean Catholic Church has two dioceses



*At least one person, with ready access to a functioning place of worship

Introduction

Even before 2014, many Christians had been displaced

Under Saddam Hussein's regime, Christians had relatively greater freedom to move internally within Iraq to non-Christian cities for work or study. Before 2003, some Christians from the Nineveh Plains migrated to Baghdad or Mosul, in relative security. In both cities, there were large Christian populations before 2003.

After a series of attacks on Christians in Mosul and Baghdad, many Christians returned to the ancient homes of their ancestors. Attacks included 36 church bombings in 2006, the 2008 assassination of the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Mosul, and the 2010 bombing of a Syriac Catholic church in Baghdad, which killed 58 people. Of the 102,000 Christians living in ISIS-affected parts of the Nineveh Plains in 2014, 13% of them had been previously displaced from Baghdad, Mosul, Sinjar, Basra, or Baquba, due to ISIS's predecessors.

In ACN's survey, 36% of respondents said they had already been impacted by militant groups in the period between 2003 and 2013; this was particularly common for respondents who prior to ISIS were living in Mosul (78%), Kirkuk (63%), Tel Kepe (55%), and Batnaya (50%).

A selection of write-in responses by survey respondents reveals more specifics around the impacts of these groups.

- **Baghdad**
 - "My brother was martyred in 2003, another brother was kidnapped in 2005, and my father disappeared in 2007."
 - "I was displaced to Mosul in 2010."
 - "I was displaced to Baghdeda in 2010."
 - "My mother was killed by terrorists in 2004."
 - "In 2012, they beat my son in Baghdad and threatened him."
- **Baghdeda**
 - "After 2013, blocks of land were taken from us."
 - "ISIS kidnapped my sister."*
 - "In 2013, ISIS tried to kill my father."
 - "My family members and brothers were threatened with kidnapping and tribute payments, so they emigrated in 2007."
- **Karamless**
 - "While studying at the University of Mosul, there were always attacks against Christians, especially in 2010."
 - "My uncle was killed and kidnapped by terrorist groups."

Childhood

January 1st 2003

January 1st 2014



*Refers to either ISI or ISIS after it was created in 2013
Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey

Introduction

In nearby Mosul, persecution was particularly extreme

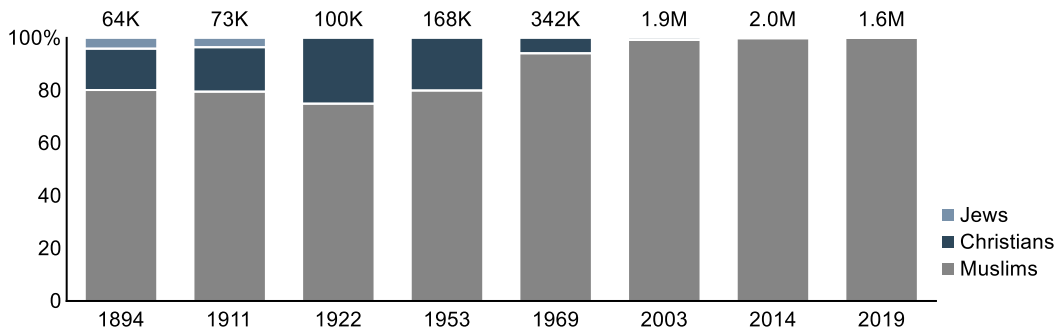
Around 5% of displaced Christians in the Nineveh Plains originally came from Mosul, which, with 45 churches and monasteries, had previously been a center of Iraqi Christianity, built around the site of Nineveh, an historic capital of Assyrian civilization.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the Christian population declined a little, although its share of the population of the city fell dramatically with the massive influx of Sunni Arabs migrating from Western Iraq. After 2003, militant groups began to control sections of the city; while 15,000 Christians had lived in Mosul in 2003, occupying several neighborhoods, Christians began to flee after a concerted campaign of intimidation. A large portion of these, especially the Syriac Catholics, moved to Baghdad, whose population reached a height of 55,000 in 2014. When ISIS took over Mosul in 2014, approximately 3,000 Christians were in the city, most of whom fled.

Respondents who previously lived in Mosul described the situation as follows:

- “Our sisters and mothers were forced to wear headscarves and Islamic clothing under compulsion.”
- “Al-Qaeda threatened us, and took money from us.”
- “My father was killed in 2007 by Al-Qaeda, and they took our belongings.”
- “In 2004, my brother was killed by terrorists, and in 2008, my wife was killed, alongside her brother and mother.”
- “In 2010, university facilities were bombed.”
- “The Islamic State of Iraq threatened us on April 14, 2006, and we have evidence of it.”
- “We were threatened with kidnapping and murder in Mosul in 2005.”
- “In 2013, an accountant of our family died after a threat.”

Religious breakdown of the city of Mosul



Christian % 15.72% 16.88% 25.00% 20.00% 5.85% 0.81% 0.15% 0.00%

Source: Encyclopedia Britannica; The Old Social Classes of Iraq; The Ghebers of Hebron; Catholic Hierarchy; UN; Gulf2000; interviews; 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey



A note delivered to a Syriac Catholic living in Mosul in the mid-2000s, by Jamaat Ansar al-Sunna, a Sunni terrorist group. It tells the recipient, whose name it lists, that it has decided to impose an Islamic punishment fixed by God, and they must call the number listed below. Upon calling the number, he was asked to deliver a sum of money. After this occurred multiple times, he moved to Bartella. (August 2019.)

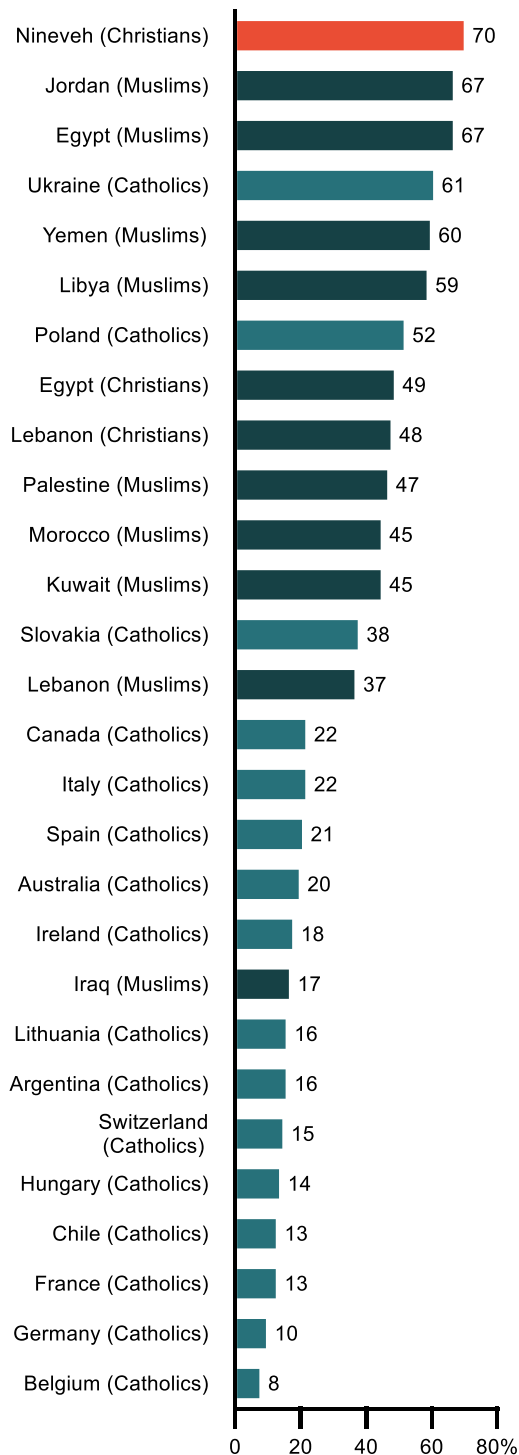
“In Mosul, during the past month, **three churches have been bombed**, killing a baby and wounding 40 other people. Last week, a Christian man in Mosul was shot dead as he walked down a street.”

The New York Times (2009)

Introduction

Christians in the Nineveh Plains are more religious than other Iraqis

Share of people attending religious services once a week or more



A religious image of Mary in a grocery store in Baghdeda (2019).

Religious practice in the Nineveh Plains is unusually high, relative both to Christians in Iraq and Christians in other countries. 70% of Christians claim to attend religious services once a week or more, while only 4% describe themselves as non-religious.

Social and cultural life is built around the Church, with civic and municipal organizations piling in comparison to Church-affiliated groups. With state structures and welfare support breaking down, Christian communities fill the gap, offering social opportunities, education at all levels, cultural activities, and social services.

For example, in Baghdeda:

- **Education:** The St. Paul center is the primary home for after-school activities, including tutoring, theatre, and music.
- **Reconstruction:** The Church Supreme Board of Reconstruction leads reconstruction efforts in the town. All organizations wishing to support reconstruction, including secular NGOs, work through this body.
- **Cultural events:** Almost all large-scale events (e.g., concerts and lectures) are hosted in churches such as St. Behnam and Sarah or St. Ephrem.

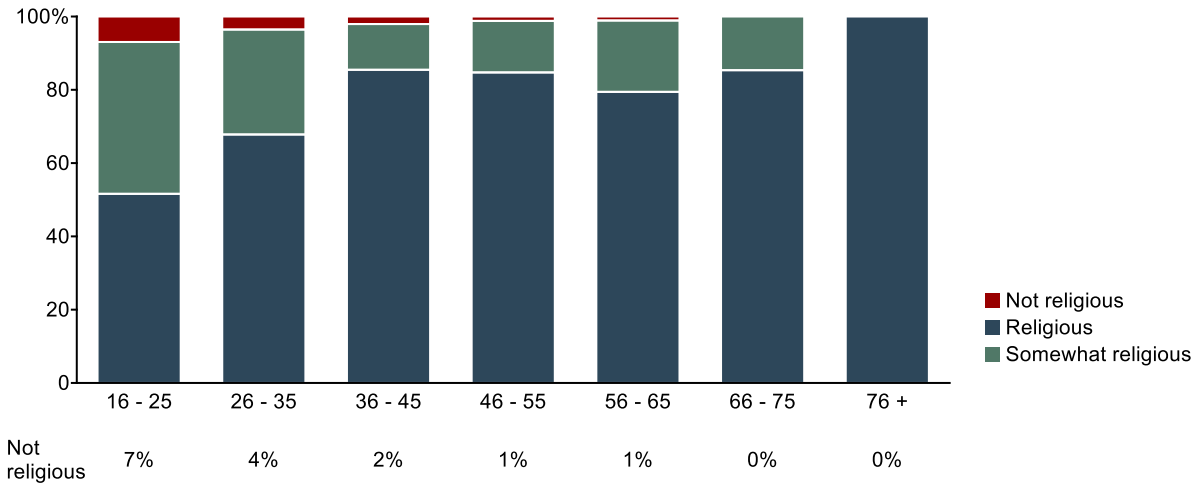
It is not uncommon, including among young people, to see phone backgrounds set to pictures of Jesus, Mary, or popular saints, such as the Lebanese monk St. Charbel. Shops, homes, and cars almost universally display religious icons making it clear that the owner is a Christian.

Introduction

There is a slight trend toward secularization among young people

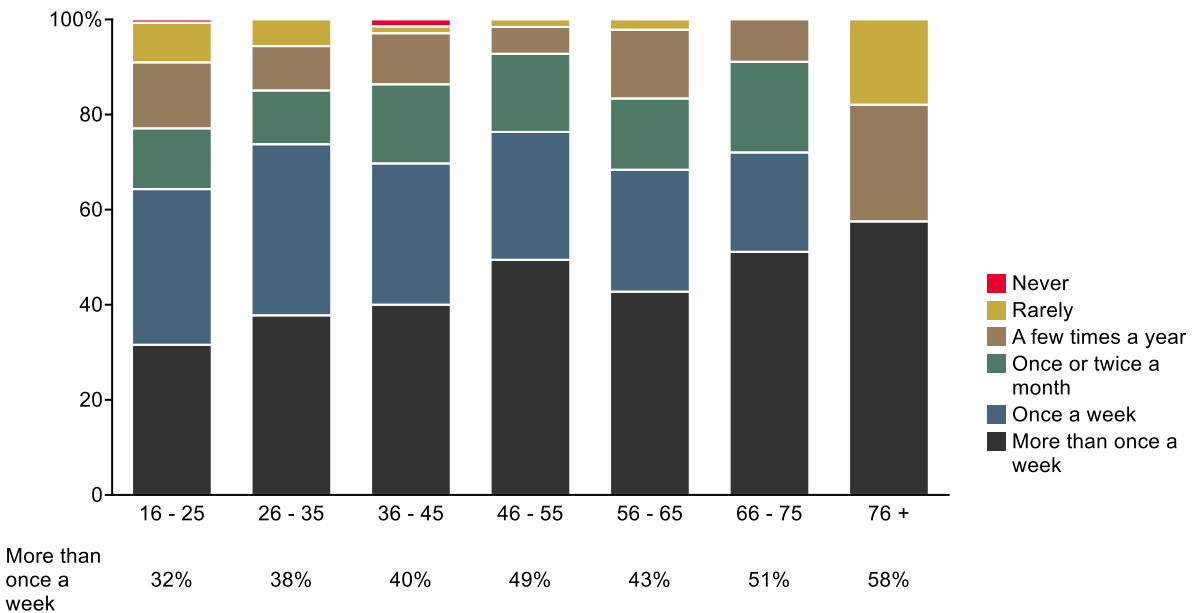
Young people below the age of 35 are more likely than other groups to identify as somewhat religious, rather than religious per se. This is particularly pronounced in the 16 to 25 age group, in which 7% identify as non-religious.

Religiosity, by age



Across all age groups, a large section of the population claims to frequent a church more than once a week for a religious service. While smaller numbers of young people attend religious services more than once a week, these numbers are still well above the norm for young people in countries of similar economic development.

Religious observance, by age



Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey

Introduction

Religious observance has decreased slightly in the wake of ISIS



An ordination of 20-30 junior deacons, aged five to ten, at a Syriac Catholic Church in Baghdeda. (November 2019.)

Displaced Christians from the Nineveh Plains overwhelmingly describe themselves as religious, underscoring the strength of the local Church. This pattern is likely exacerbated by the fact that Christians in the Nineveh Plains exist in rural or semi-rural settings, which in most countries are correlated with a higher level of religiosity.

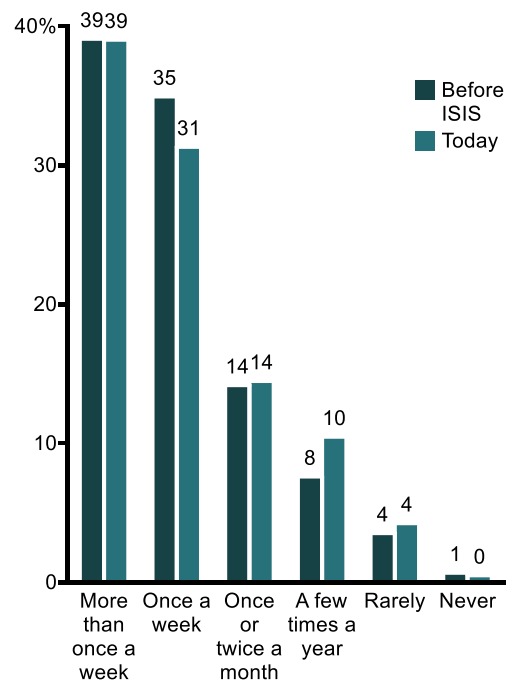
In most locations, religious observance remains similar to before ISIS, although the share of respondents indicating that they attend a religious service at least once a week has declined from 74% to only 70%.

Christians speak in varying terms of the effect of ISIS on their faith; while some stress that it has increased their closeness to the Christian message of persecution, others feel hopeless and confused.

“Some members of ISIS threatened to kill us ... Now, my faith is stronger, because my prayers were answered and my family was saved.”

Baghdeda resident

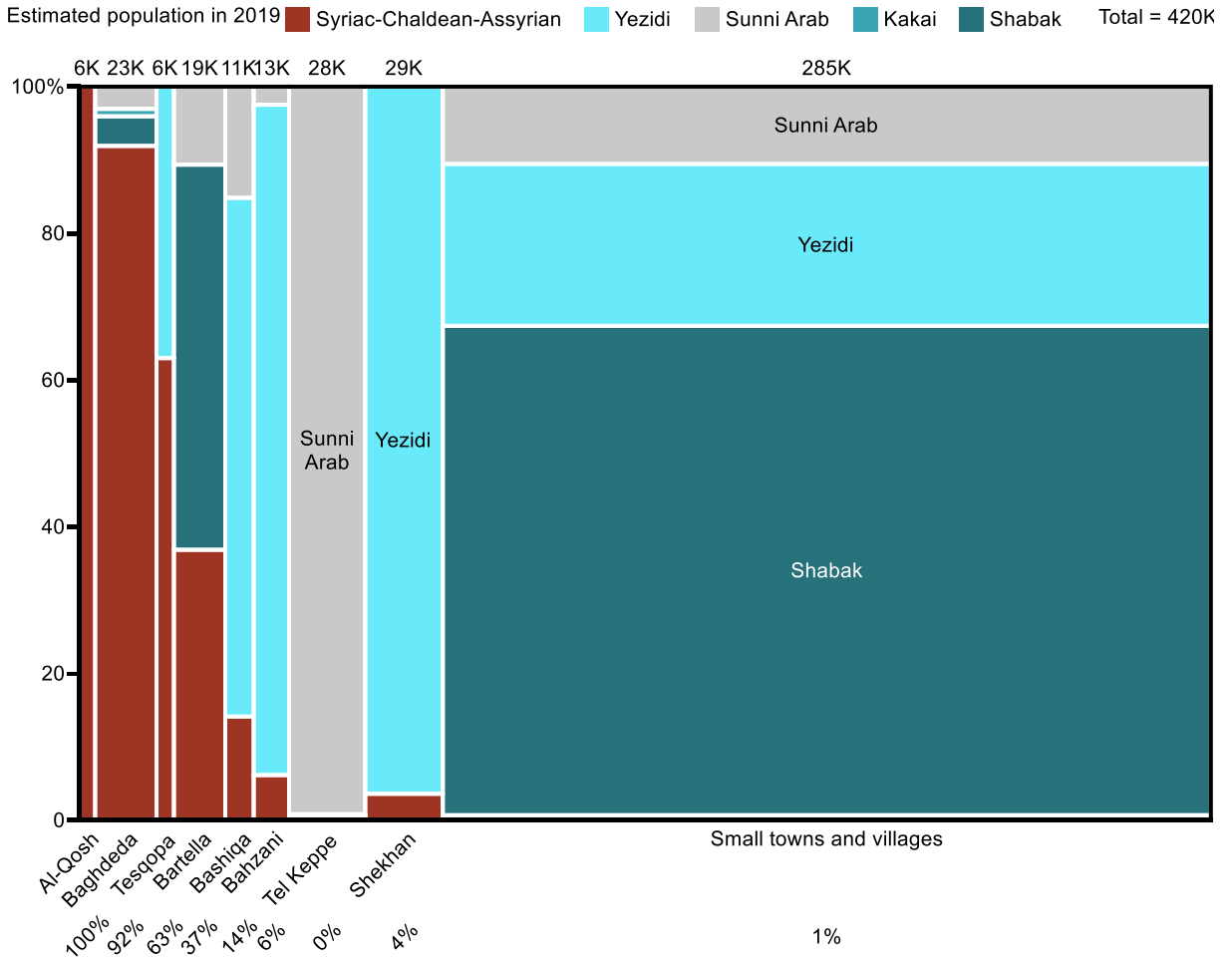
Attendance at religious services



Note: Bar totals in chart do not fully align due to decimals
Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey

Introduction

Christians share their towns with other minorities



The above figures are based on triangulating several sources, including ACN's Returnee Survey, the Samaritan's Purse 2018 IDP Survey, interviews, and other publicly available information. Information on non-Christian populations should be treated as directional. These figures exclude IDP camps located in the Nineveh Plains (e.g., Hasan Shami Camp).

Although it is said that Christians used to form a plurality in the Nineveh Plains, this is clearly no longer the case. Christians likely form approximately 10% of the population today.

The main minority groups with whom Christians share their towns are as follows:

- **Shabak (~48%):** The Shabak are a group of disputed origins, who historically adhered to a syncretic indigenous religion, but are increasingly mainstream Shiite Muslims. Some Kurds view them as part of the broader Kurdish identity.
- **Yezidis (~27%):** The Yezidis, like Christians, are an ancient population whose religion combines elements of Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity. They speak Kurdish but assert a distinct identity.
- **Sunni Arabs (~15%):** While some Sunni Arabs have a long history in the region, some settled in the region as part of Saddam Hussein's Arabization program in the 1970s and 1980s.

Note: Other towns included in square pie chart include Batnaya, Baqopa, and Karamless; Mosul excluded
 Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey; Samaritan's Purse; interviews; UN; WFP; Tearfund; Minority Rights Group

ISIS's conquest of the Nineveh Plains

ISIS captured Mosul and the Nineveh Plains in 2014



A Christian mechanic in Raqqa appears in an ISIS propaganda video in 2015, claiming not to have experienced any harm at the hands of ISIS, after having paid a tribute levied on non-Muslims.

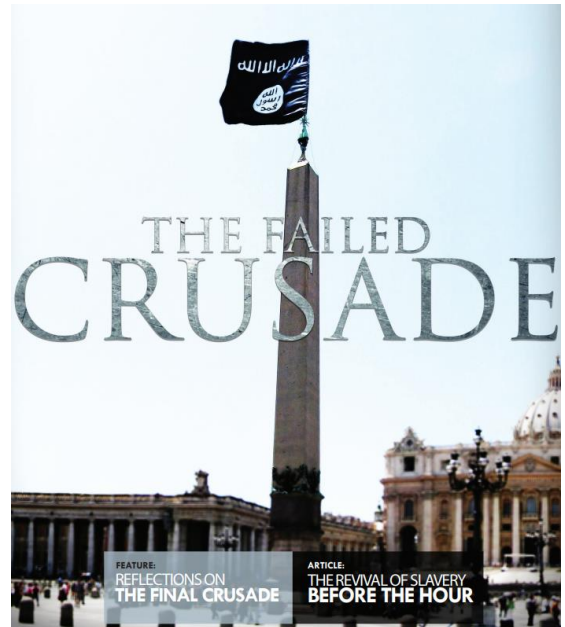
ISIS, a religiously motivated Islamist terrorist group, had been steadily consolidating power in Sunni-dominated Western Iraq in the chaos after the American invasion of Iraq.

On June 9th 2014, the group overran Mosul, the largest city in northern Iraq. In a matter of hours, more than 500,000 people fled the city, including ~3,000 Christians, many of whom resettled in Baghdad. The following month, the group's leader declared a caliphate in the historic Al-Nouri mosque in the city of Mosul. He proclaimed himself the Caliph Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. "I am not better than you or more virtuous than you." Al-Baghdadi said in his declaration. "If you see me on the right path, help me. If you see me on the wrong path, advise me and halt me. And obey me as far as I obey God."

Christians living in claimed ISIS territory were not an irritant, but critical to the group's conception of its brand of caliphate. In particular, the group made pains to show they were treating Christians as *dhimmi*, i.e., "protected people"; traditionally, Christians, as "People of the Book", qualify for protection in a caliphate, provided they pay a tax.

In a video released by its media department in April 2015, ISIS explained its approach to Christians living within its territory: in its Syrian province, Christians had, supposedly, submitted to its protection. In the province of Nineveh, meanwhile, Christians refused to cooperate, giving ISIS the right to violate the traditional protection offered to Christians: "When those in Mosul refused, they had no protection, neither for their blood nor for their wealth." In this way, ISIS revealed its criminal identity and justified its genocidal treatment of Christians.

Source: The Clarion Project



In its September 2014 edition, the English-language ISIS magazine Dabiq published an article, "The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour", providing religious justifications for the enslavement of Yazidis. The cover photo depicted the ISIS flag in St. Peter's Square.

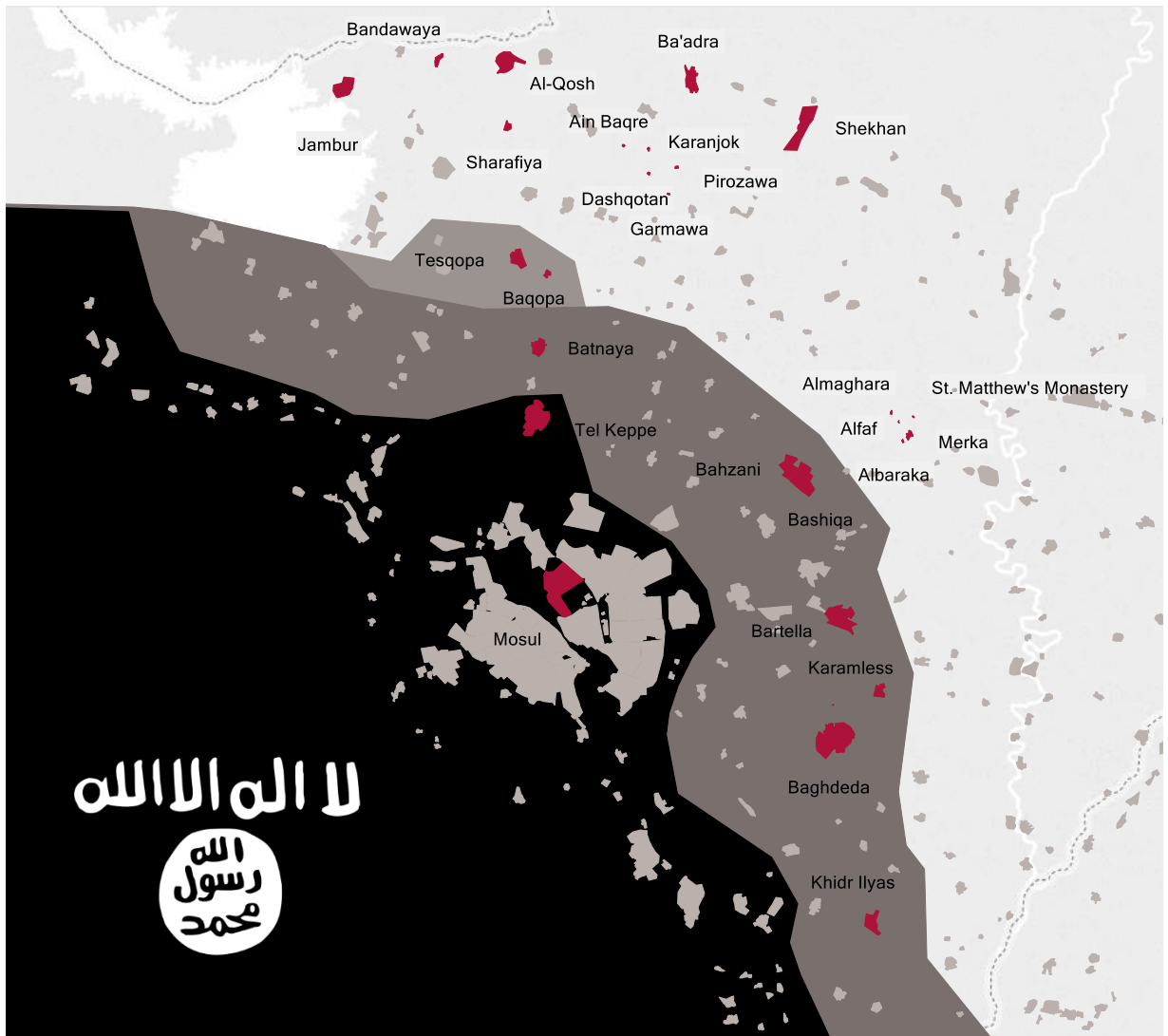
After occupying Mosul, the group advanced to occupy several towns in the Nineveh Plains. On August 7th 2014, ISIS overran Baghdad, the largest Christian city in the Nineveh Plains, and the Christian villages of Bartella and Karamless. In this way, an operation of ethnic cleansing began.

"So the media began spreading its lies on the subject of the Christians of Mosul, turning a blind eye to two important issues. The first is that the **Christians of Mosul themselves chose their own end. The Islamic State called them to come and meet in order to determine their end. But they refused to attend. So they chose neither Islam nor peace ... **When those in Mosul refused, they had no protection, neither for their blood nor for their wealth.**"**

ISIS propaganda video (2015)

ISIS's conquest of the Nineveh Plains

Several large Christian towns were occupied by ISIS



*At least one person, with ready access to a functioning place of worship

ISIS's conquest of the Nineveh Plains

A small number of Christians, around 7%, could not escape

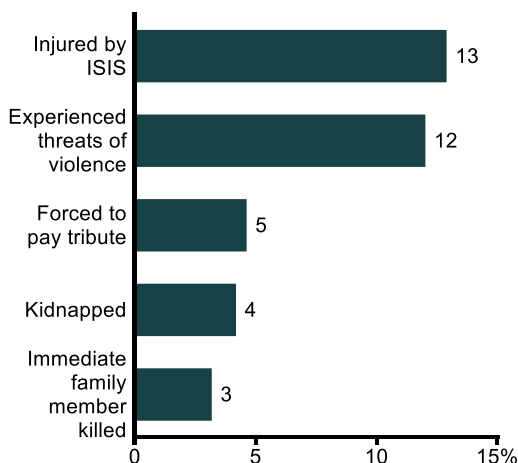
Christians in Mosul were initially dismissed from government offices and forced to pay a tax exclusive to them, *jizya*. On July 17th 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Caliph, declared Christians would have two days to “leave the borders of the Islamic Caliphate ... We offer them three choices: Islam, the *dhimma* contract – involving payment of *jizya*; if they refuse this they will have nothing but the sword.” Although most Christians were able to flee before ISIS’s arrival, a small proportion was unable to leave beforehand, especially those in Mosul and Tel Keppe.

In other locations in the Nineveh Plains, many Christians who were unable to escape were eventually moved to Mosul, or in some cases to Syria as the caliphate expanded. Some Christians who remained in Baghdeda were boarded onto minibusses on the pretext of being given a medical check and moved to Mosul. In the early stages, some Christians were permitted to leave voluntarily after refusing multiple times to convert to Islam.

Although previously ISIS had demanded the few remaining Christian locals in its territory either convert to Islam, pay a yearly tax of \$200, or face death by the sword, this offer officially expired on July 19th 2014, before ISIS took over Baghdeda. Still, many ISIS militants demanded payment of the tax from Christians remaining in the Nineveh Plains and there appears to be some inconsistency around ISIS’s actual policy towards Christians.

Those who were not killed managed to escape through fake identities or the involvement of sympathetic Sunni Arabs who escorted them past checkpoints.

Share of displaced Christians indicating that they or an imr family member were impacted by ISIS



Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey; ACN UK interview (2015)



Footage from an ISIS propaganda video. (2015.)

The figures from ACN’s survey have several limitations:

- Given the low rate of return to Mosul, it excludes several thousand Mosul residents who were subject to the most immediate threats
- It was not possible to independently corroborate these claimed impacts
- These figures fail to take into account survivor bias, i.e., the impossibility of collecting data from murdered individuals or the difficulty of collecting data from traumatized individuals not willing to complete this survey
- Some respondents may be including indirect rather than direct ISIS impacts (i.e., deaths as a result of trauma, coalition airstrikes, or lack of medicine)

“My mother died as a result of oppression when ISIS arrived.”

Baghdeda resident

“We were displaced under compulsion of paying tribute or converting to Islam.”

Baghdeda resident

“They destroyed our memories and expelled us from our homes, without letting us take any clothes or keepsakes.”

Mosul resident

ISIS's conquest of the Nineveh Plains

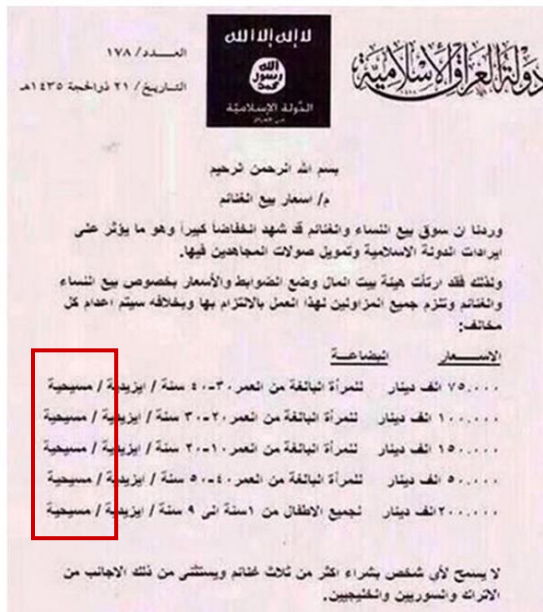
Some experienced execution, slavery, and forced conversion

On October 16th 2014, ISIS issued a price list for captured Christian and Yazidi women and children; minorities who were unable to escape were often raped, and sold to multiple families, often moving to Syria as the caliphate's territory diminished.

Several documented accounts indicate that many Christian women and girls were delivered into the same system that rounded up, classified, and sold Yazidi women and girls. Nevertheless, the campaign to enslave Christians was not nearly as systematic as the campaign to enslave Yazidis.

The practice of slavery was not incidental, but a deliberate campaign endorsed by ISIS's sharia scholars. Interviews with Yazidi victims of sexual slavery revealed that their tormentors would pray before and after raping their victim, and internal documents from ISIS demonstrated that the group developed a sophisticated theology around the permissibility of these acts.

Some Christians calling their phone landline in Baghdeda found Yazidis at the end of the phone. This circumstantial evidence suggests that ISIS settled some Yazidi slaves in the town, although these claims are difficult to corroborate.



In October 2014, ISIS issued a price list for Christian and Yazidi slaves. A child under nine was priced at 200,000 Iraqi dinars, or \$169. The section in red reads "Christian".

"The ISIS warriors found my necklace with a cross, a sign that I am a Christian. The jihadists beat me and I had to study the Qur'an for a month. I was hit whenever I could not answer their questions the way they wanted me to, and my mother was stung with long needles."

Bartella resident

"My son was abducted by terrorist gangs for 15 days, and a ransom of 25M IQD (~\$20K) was paid after torturing my son and forcing him to change his religion ... My husband's cousin, who had a grocery shop, was murdered."

Mosul resident

"I remember that all those who came used to asked us to enter Islam and threatened us with slaughter, especially the non-Iraqi Arabs, such as Tunisians and Saudis, who would call us infidel polytheists ... Every day, we would go up to the roof and look at the churches and pray with a burning heart asking for mercy from the Lord to save us from these demons."

Baghdeda resident

"My father didn't want to leave when everyone else did, as we are poor ... From the first day until the last, ISIS wanted us to become Muslim. If you accepted, they would give you a small book allowing you to travel. None of the 11 people in my family accepted, and neither did our neighbors. They always asked us to pay the religious tax, but we told them every time we wanted to leave. They stole our car and belongings, and moved us to another house after my father was arrested."

Baghdeda resident

"They forced us to have sex with them. We resisted and begged them, but in vain ... Eight terrorists raped me, marrying and divorcing us in each time."

Mosul resident

ISIS's conquest of the Nineveh Plains

Meanwhile, other Christians fled mostly to autonomous Kurdistan

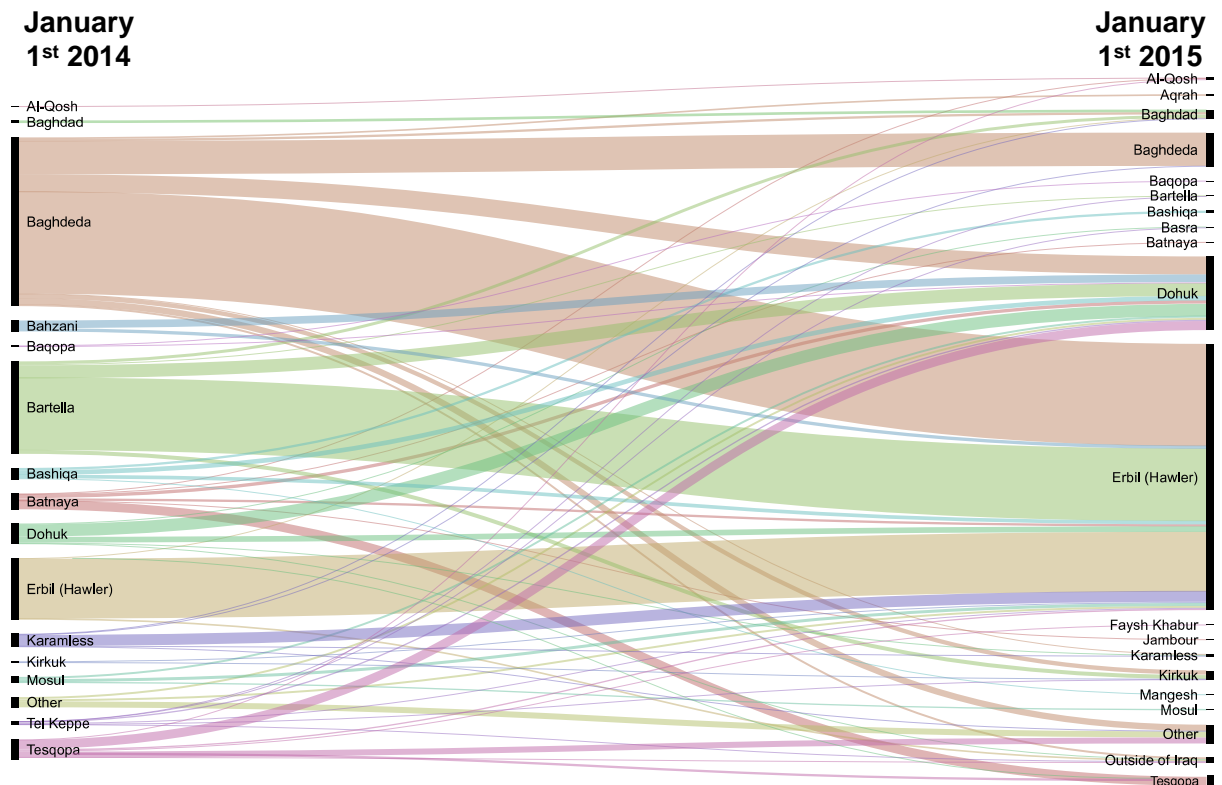
Christians who were able to flee in advance of ISIS moved to the autonomous Kurdistan region, principally to the towns of Erbil (~58%) and Dohuk (~16%); in Erbil, refugees were mostly Christian and Arab, while in Dohuk, a majority were Yezidi. Others fled to smaller towns and villages: Al-Qosh, Aqrah, Faysh Khabur, Jambour, and Mangesh.

On the night of August 6th 2014, all inhabitants fled Baghdeda, the largest Christian town, due to advancing ISIS militants, as the Kurdish Peshmerga unexpectedly withdrew. The city was subject to heavy mortar shelling; two children and a thirty-year-old woman died. Otherwise, most inhabitants fled to Kurdistan, before ISIS finally captured the town at 4:30 AM on August 7th 2014. Many were forced to walk to Erbil, carrying limited possessions; the Kurdish suspected Islamist infiltration, which is why they prohibited the use of cars. Those arriving in Kurdistan spent days sleeping in gardens, churches, and public places, before the Church and other institutions began to oversee the creation of refugee camps. This experience of displacement was traumatic, especially for the large number of children who were uprooted from their homes.

Initially, Christians were housed in camps, while later most moved to homes; with the town overwhelmed by an influx of refugees, rents were high and breadwinners found it difficult to find work. During this period, the mortality rate of Christians spiked, with some attributing this to trauma; among the people who died shortly after were several Dominican sisters. Respondents to ACN's survey pointed to strokes, high blood pressure, and diabetes as consequences of the displacement. The World Health Organization notes that the fourth leading cause of ill health in Iraq is mental health disorders.

*"In Erbil, fatigue began to appear on me both physically and morally, as I hardly spent time with my family, meeting them for only a few minutes at night ... The news during this period about the liberation of Baghdeda was poor, and seeing it became a dream for each of us; **many Christians died in Erbil because of trauma.** We were hopeless and tired."*

Baghdeda resident



ISIS's conquest of the Nineveh Plains

Those who escaped were impacted by ISIS in other ways



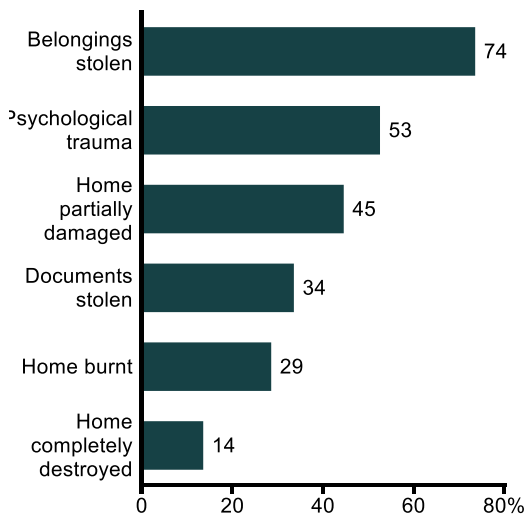
The flag of ISIS, raised above the main entrance to Baghdad, in a propaganda video. (April 2015.)

Christian homes were almost uniformly looted of family possessions: furniture, food, clothes, and appliances. In particular, any possessions of value – passports, jewelry, and gold – were looted by militants. Christian tombs were left broken open by militants assuming that gold had been buried alongside the bodies. Upon arrival, Christians found corpses exposed to the open air.

In 2016, ISIS reportedly held an auction for property formerly owned by Christians, in West Mosul: 400 houses, 19 buildings, and 167 shops, as well as other goods.

Many families lost important documents: passports, title deeds, and financial records. The loss of these documents made resettlement difficult, as often families struggled to prove ownership, given that acquiring proof from the central government, which kept poor records, was near impossible.

Share of displaced Christians indicating that they or an imr family member were impacted by ISIS



Returning families struggle with the trauma inflicted upon them by ISIS. Although some institutions, such as the Holy Family center in Baghdad and the Hope Trauma center in Al-Qosh, provide professional psychotherapy and trauma treatment, these services are unable to serve all victims of trauma. Also, Iraq does not have the same mental health infrastructure as in other countries.

In October and November 2016, while ISIS was staging its battle to keep the Nineveh Plains, ahead of the 2017 Mosul offensive, militants staged a deliberate campaign to destroy houses, before fleeing the front lines to Mosul.

Most observers assume that the burning of homes, and in some cases, crops, was a deliberate attempt to prevent resettlement of towns and villages by Christians.

*“They stole our car, and after a few days, some other materials ... When they let us go, they took all our money and gold. When I left Baghdad, I saw that **everything had been stolen from the shops.**”*

Baghdada resident

ISIS's conquest of the Nineveh Plains

ISIS systematically damaged Christian cultural heritage

ISIS documented much of its destruction of churches in its province of Nineveh. Specifically, it claimed that because these churches were constructed after the region had already been claimed for a prior Islamic caliphate centuries ago, it was permitted to destroy them.

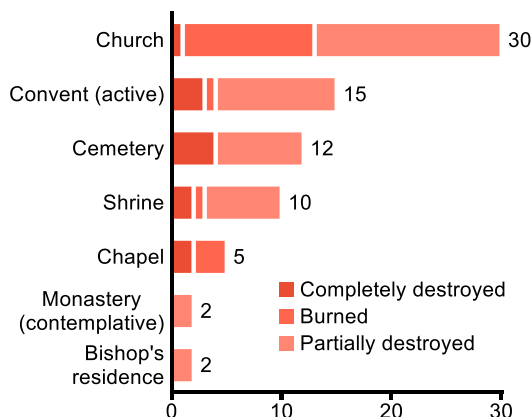
In ACN's survey, 25% of Christians said their church had been partially destroyed, 25% said it had been burned, and 8% said it had been completely destroyed.

Churches were often used for functional purposes, knowing that the sites were less likely to be targeted for airstrikes, for example:

- *Sacred Heart Chaldean Catholic Church, Tel Keppe*: Used as a jail
- *Great Al-Tahira Syriac Catholic Church, Baghdeda*: Used for shooting practice
- *St. George Syriac Orthodox Church, Baghdeda*: Used for storing chemical weapons, including C4
- *Our Lady of Perpetual Help Chaldean Catholic Church, Mosul*: Used as the headquarters for ISIS's religious police. This police would monitor public morality, e.g., whether women were appropriately covered

ACN's assessment survey recorded the following instances of desecration of religious sites in the Nineveh Plains, excluding Mosul. Note that in a minority of cases the primary damage was not caused by ISIS, but by Kurdish, coalition forces, or in some cases, Iraqi paramilitary forces engaged in battle. It is difficult to isolate the agent in each case who caused the most damage, although where properties were burned, this was almost exclusively the work of ISIS.

Religious Church properties in the Nineveh Plains



Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey; ACN Damage Assessment Survey

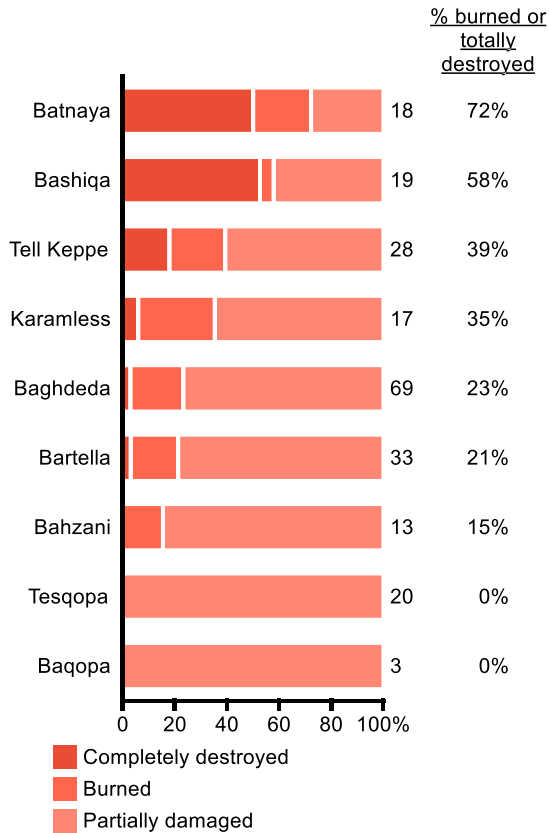


In 2015, ISIS released footage of the destruction of the Chaldean Catholic St. George Monastery in Mosul. From top to bottom: smashing a cross on an altar, toppling a statue of the Virgin and Jesus, overturning a cross.

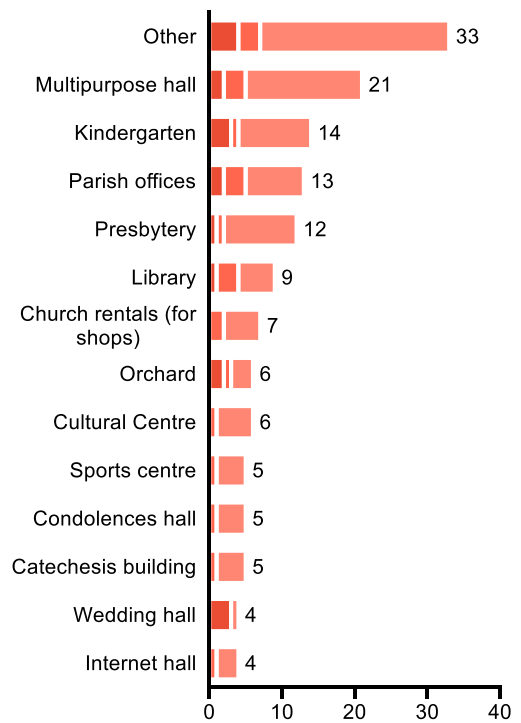
ISIS's conquest of the Nineveh Plains

ISIS also decimated ancillary Church infrastructure

Damage type, by location



Ancillary Church infrastructure in the Nineveh Plains



Damage varied by location. Batnaya was hit the hardest, due to extensive bombing of ISIS hideouts, while Bashiqa, similarly, was subject to heavy coalition bombing, far more liable to result in completely destroyed buildings. Tel Keppe was occupied for a longer period than other towns, and was effectively integrated into Mosul's orbit as a satellite city, making its liberation more difficult.

Tesqopa and Baqopa, neighboring villages, were only briefly occupied by ISIS. Consequently, they were damaged to a lesser degree.

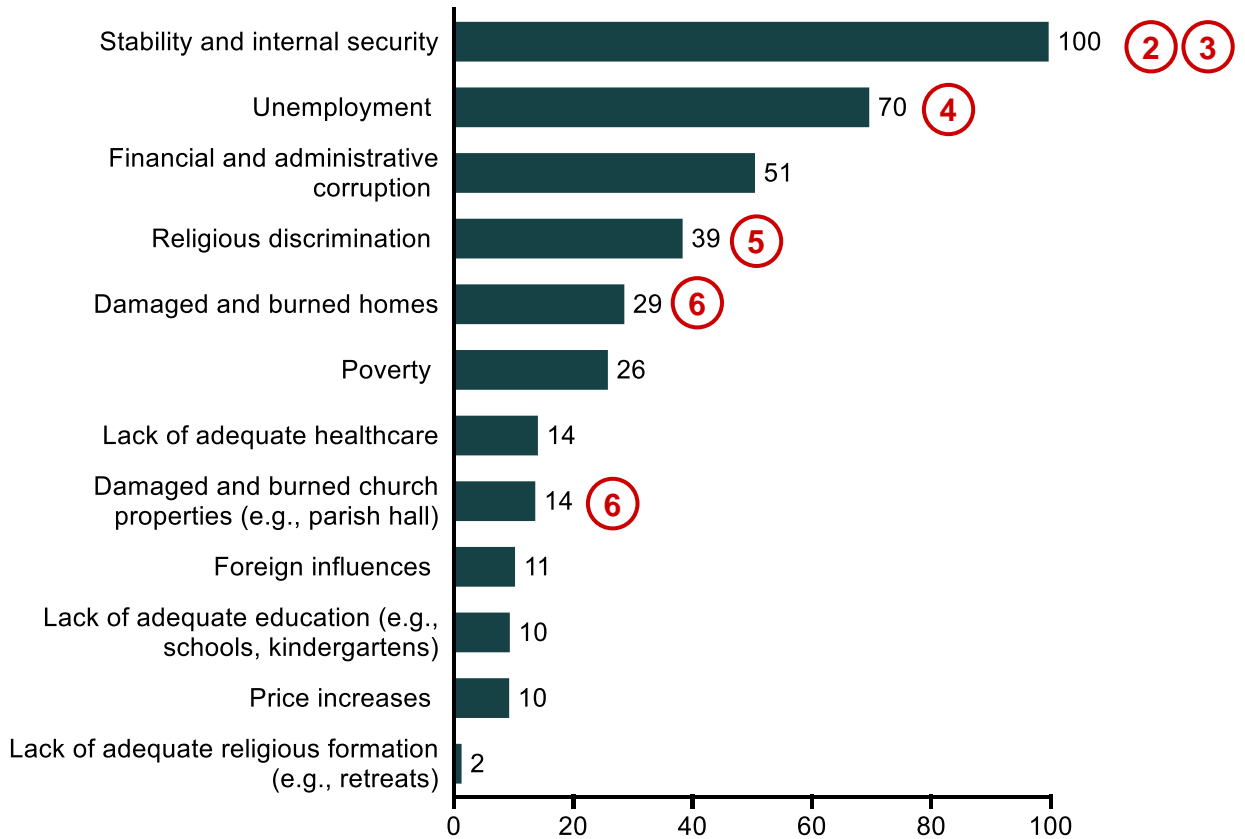


In 2015, ISIS released footage of the destruction of the Syriac Catholic St. Behnam Monastery in Khidr Ilyas.

Current challenges

Security, unemployment, and corruption rated most important

Weighted score, based on respondent prioritization*



This report considers six challenges in depth:

- ① **Emigration**
- ② **Security concerns around militias**
- ③ **Security concerns around ISIS**
- ④ **Economic concerns**
- ⑤ **Religious discrimination**
- ⑥ **Continued reconstruction needs**

*An issue was given three points for being selected as a first priority, two points for being selected as a second priority, and one point for being selected as a third priority

Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey

Most Iraqi Christians in the Nineveh Plains have considered leaving the country. More than a third expect to leave the country in the next five years.

The Christian population in the ISIS-affected Nineveh Plains has declined dramatically from 102,000 in 2014 to 36,000 today.

Emigration in 2019 did not slow relative to 2018. Survey responses suggest the population could fall to 23,000 as early as 2024.

Key findings:

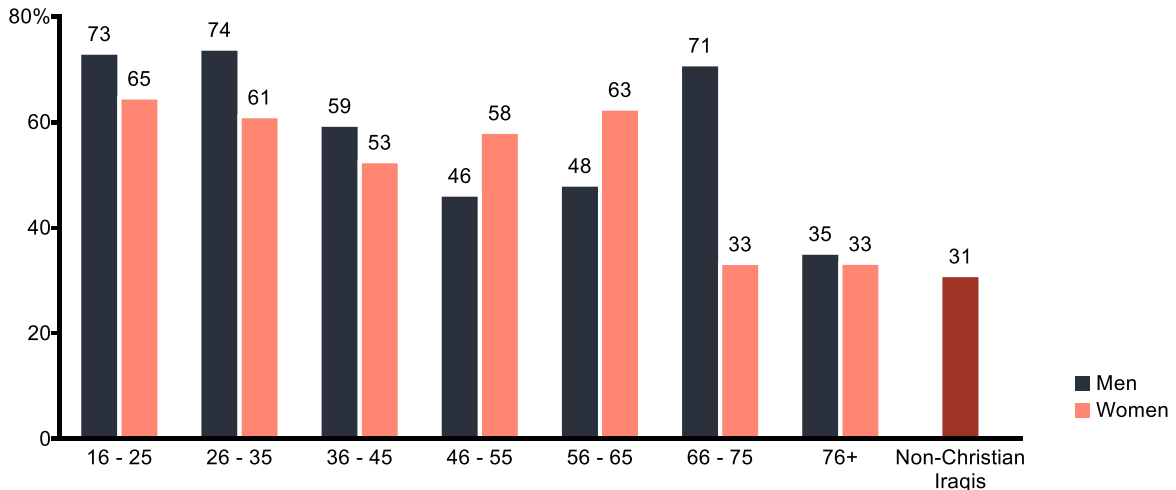
- 57% of Iraqi Christians in the Nineveh Plains have considered emigration, mostly for security reasons
- 36% expect to leave Iraq in the next five years
- An overwhelming majority, 64%, have at least one immediate family member already living in another country



This young Syriac Catholic in Baghdeda, like many of his age, has no job and wishes to live in Germany one day, as shown by his tattoo.

Most Christians, especially young men, have considered emigration

Share of Christians who have considered emigration, by age group and gender



An expression of the persistent challenges facing Christians in Iraq is the extreme emigration rate. Although several hundred Christians have been murdered since 2003, it is this high rate of emigration that has directly caused the rapid diminution in the Christian population since 2003. Approximately 57% of surveyed Christians said they had considered emigration, with the rate highest among young men. This is much higher than the rate for Muslim Iraqis, which is 31% according to Arabarometer.

In 2014, emigration by Christians accelerated to an all-time high, and it continues almost unabated. In the Nineveh Plains, which, until recently, had a Christian plurality, only 40% of 102,000 displaced Christians have returned. Most Christians repaired their homes with the help of foreign aid organizations, who provided funds on condition that families commit to remaining in their homes for two years. As these agreements expire, some families are leaving. In the summer of 2019, the Christian population of this region reached an inflection point, with more families leaving their hometown than returning. In Baghdeda alone, 3,000 Syriac Catholics left over the course of just three months in 2019 – a drop of 12% in the number of Syriac Catholics in the town.

Although a large number of Christians have resettled in areas occupied by ISIS, there is no evidence that emigration is slowing. In Baghdeda alone, across three summer months, the population of the city declined from ~24,000 to ~21,000. (The rate of emigration peaks in the summer as families prefer not to move while children are in school.)

Christians leave not only due to continued challenges that make life in the Nineveh Plains undesirable, but also chain migration. The fact that almost all Christians have at least one immediate family member overseas not only incentivizes migration as a way of repairing fragmented family units, but facilitates it via common shared knowledge of the processes and commonly accepted grounds for refugee status in Germany, Australia, the US, and other countries.

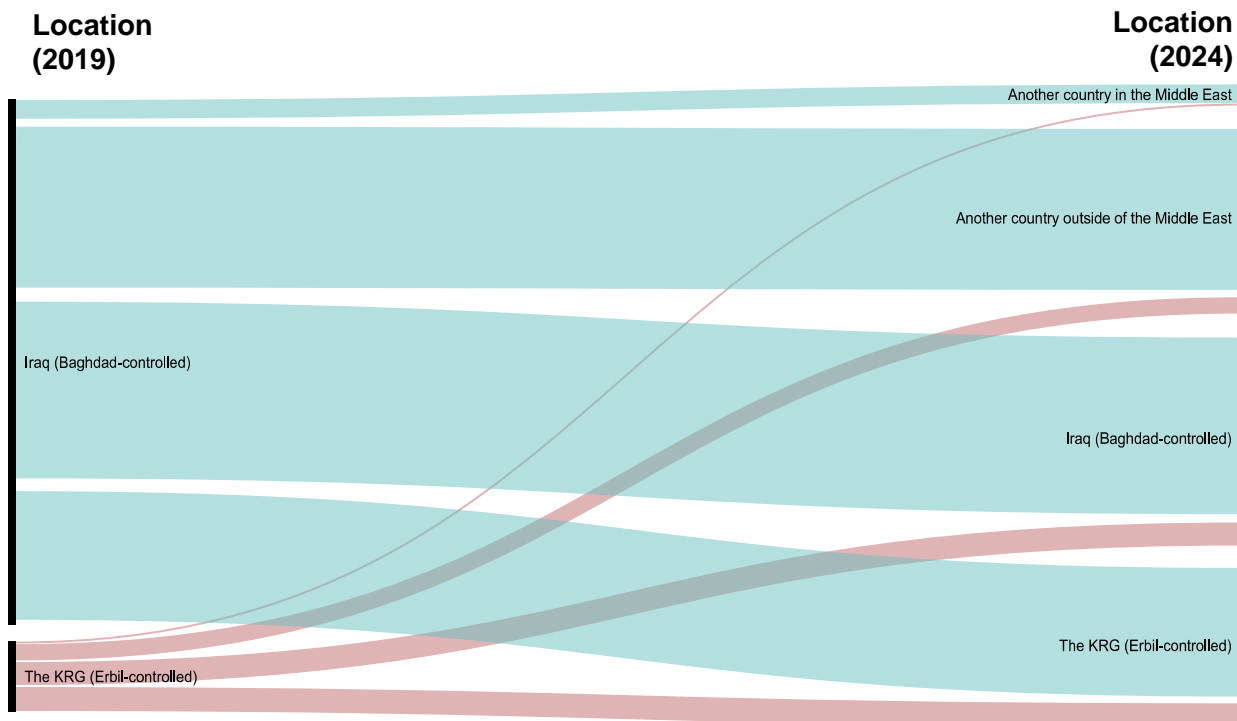
*“The people are tired. This is the **end of Christianity in Mosul**. This isn’t the first time people have been forced to flee Mosul. In five years, **there will be no Christians left here at all.**”*

Mosul resident

*“There are many **young men who get married and are not having children because they want to emigrate.**”*

Baghdeda resident

36% expect to emigrate from Iraq in the next five years



Around 36% of displaced Christians in the Nineveh Plains expect to have migrated successfully to another country within five years. In 2019, the number of returned displaced Christians in ISIS-occupied areas of the Nineveh Plains, as well as Mosul, was ~36,000. Based on responses to ACN's survey, this population will fall to ~23,000 by 2024.

In ACN's survey, the vast majority of returned Christians were living in towns controlled by Baghdad (i.e., the central Iraqi government). Displaced Christians living in Tesqopa and Baqopa live in a disputed territory effectively controlled by Erbil, i.e., the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).

Only a minority of Christians polled expected to live under the control of Baghdad five years from now. Of Christians living under the control of Baghdad today, roughly one third expects to emigrate, one third expects to be living under the control of the KRG, and one third expects to remain under the control of Baghdad. It is impossible to extrapolate whether the Christians who responded that they expect to live under the control of the KRG intend to move to Kurdistan, or expect their town to be absorbed into Kurdistan. This trend was most pronounced in Bartella, where a large majority of respondents expected to be living in a KRG-controlled area five years from now.

*"Can I come with you? I **can fit in your suitcase.**"*

Baghdeda resident

*"Time is the biggest challenge, because **people are leaving now.**"*

Baghdeda resident

*"Life is better now but I have an eye problem. I would like to leave Iraq, but only with my family. The problem is that **even if the government changes the people will be the same. I still think about ISIS and remember what happened.**"*

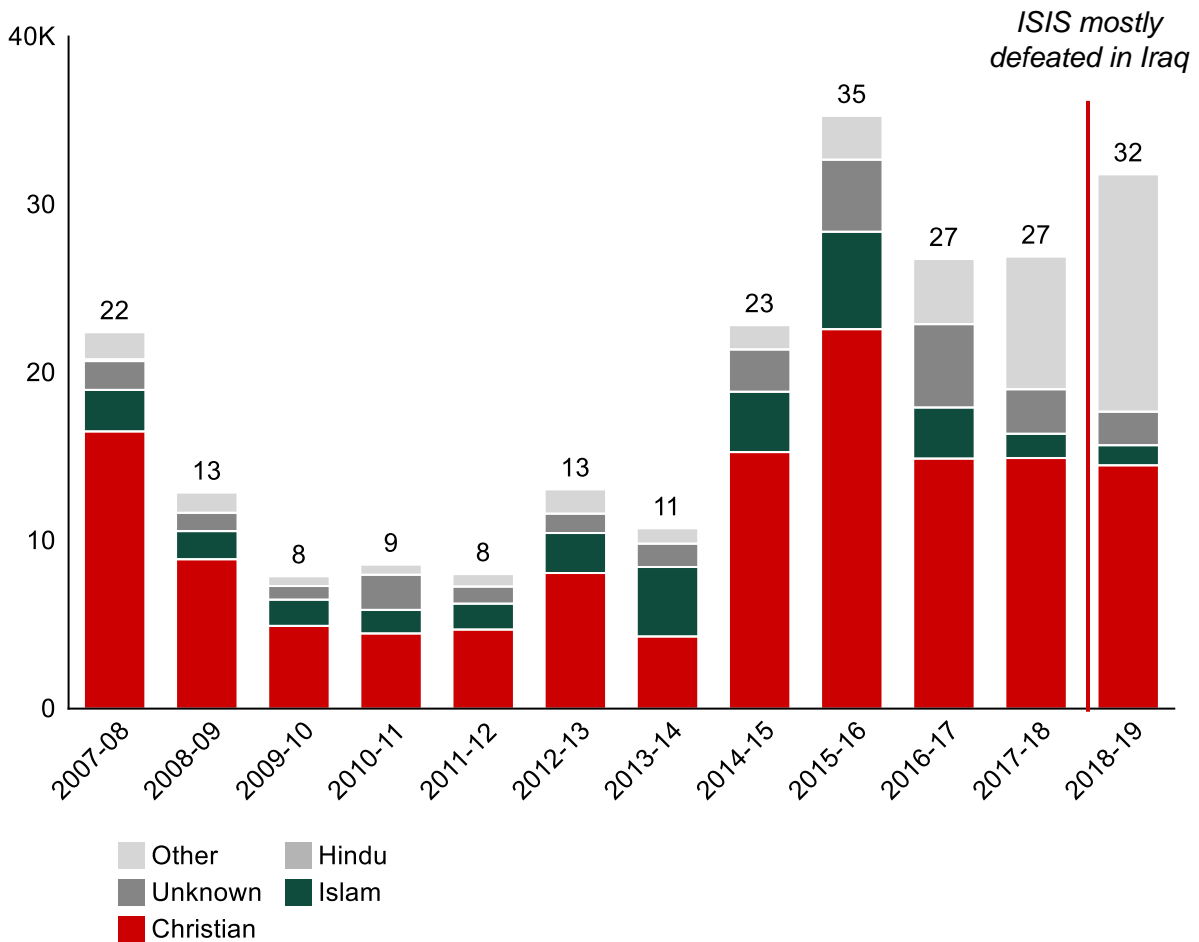
Baghdeda resident

*"**Half of these young people will leave in two years. They will become cleaners and work in supermarkets, starting all over again from the bottom. It's terrible.**"*

Baghdeda resident

Emigration to Australia, a top destination, is not abating

Humanitarian application lodgements by Iraqis, by religion



Australia is one of the primary locations to which Iraqi Christians emigrate, if not the primary location. Since 2007, at least 139,000 Iraqi Christians have sought refuge in the country. Assuming similar rates of emigration between 2003 and 2007, ~15% of the pre-Iraq War Christian population today lives in Australia.

These figures were obtained in 2019 from the Australian government under a Freedom of Information request.

Although the 2018-2019 figures show a slight fall in the number of Iraqi Christians lodging applications to Australia, from 14,913 in 2017-18 to 14,480 in 2018-2019 this still constitutes an *increase* of the share of domestic Iraqi Christians emigrating. The ~15K who emigrated to Australia in the last year probably constituted 1 in 10 Iraqis.

Source: Australian Government Department of Home Affairs (2019)

Security, followed by family reasons, is the main driver of emigration

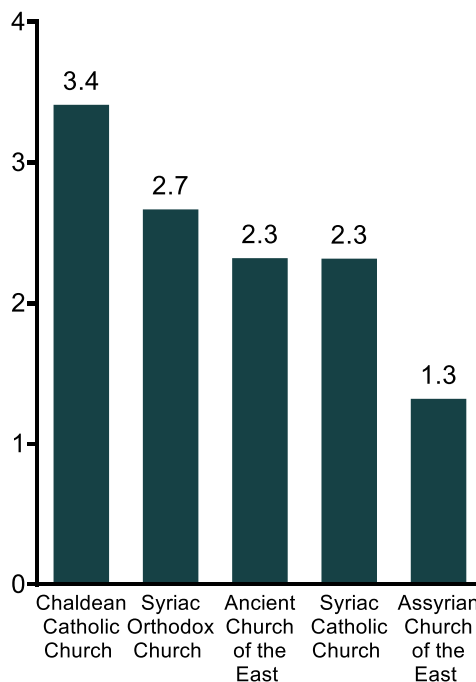
What is the primary reason that makes you want to emigrate?



ACN's survey indicates that security and political reasons remain the primary driver of emigration. These include the threats associated with ISIS, Iran-backed militias, and the heightened risk of a regional war between the US and Iran, which could play out on Iraqi soil. For example, in 2019, ISIS burned farmers' crops in the Nineveh Plains and surrounding areas.

A second major consideration is the deep ties that link Iraqi Christians to Western countries – far greater than those possessed by other native Iraqi groups. In 2003, there were 1.5 million Christians in Iraq, roughly 5% of the population. In 2020, their population likely stands at 120,000, a decline of 92%, after 16 years of church bombings, targeted assassinations, kidnappings, and displacement. With such extensive emigration, almost all Iraqi Christians have family or friends living in the US, Germany, Sweden, Canada, or Australia. This problem is particularly endemic among Chaldean Catholics, who unlike Syriac Catholics, did not in the 2003 to 2013 period have a large safe haven such as Baghdeda in which to shelter. Almost the entire population of Tel Keppe, previously the Chaldean Catholic capital of Iraq, has emigrated to the United States. Also, because of their connection to Rome, Iraqi Catholics are more likely than other denominations to have deep connections to the West. (For example, priests often study in Italy or France.)

Average number of immediate family members overseas

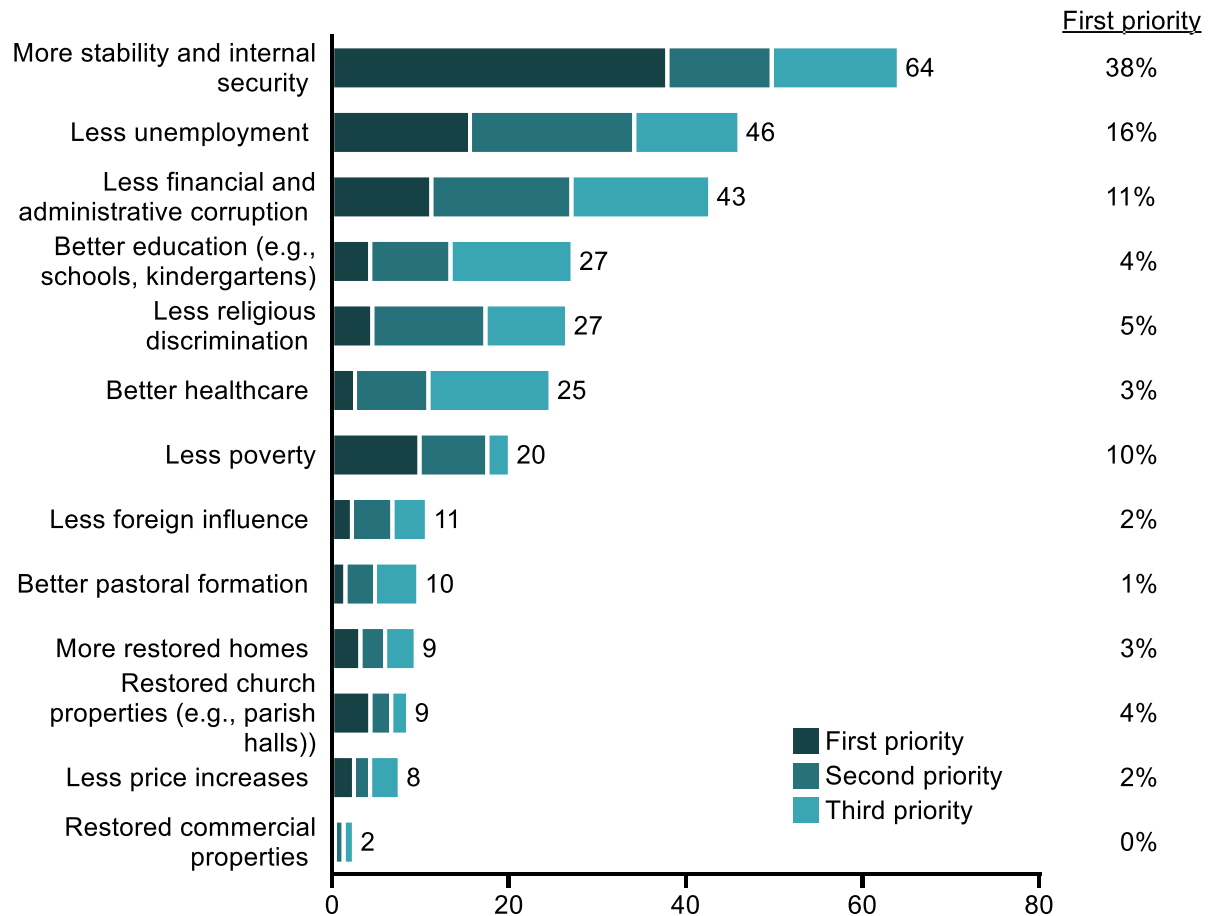


*“There are many people who have spent four or five years in Australia or Europe ... They are now **starting to speak to people in Baghdeda**, explaining that the life is better elsewhere.”*

Baghdeda resident

Respondents rated security as most critical in changing their mind

Respondents selecting a reason for persuading them not to emigrate



When asked what would persuade them to remain in Iraq, respondents overwhelmingly rated better stability and security as most important, which was the top priority for 38% of respondents.

The other two major areas were decreasing unemployment and reducing corruption, although these largely figured as second and third priorities. These areas will be addressed in later portions of this report.

Notably, several traditional development areas were not considered critical by respondents:

- Better education (4% as first priority)
- Better healthcare (3% as first priority)
- More restored homes (3% as first priority)
- More restored Church properties (4% as first priority)

Many Iraqi Christians fear Iranian-backed militias, who control some parts of Mosul and the Nineveh Plains.

The most immediate security concern is Iranian-backed militias. These operate with the permission of the Iraqi government. The US government has sanctioned two such militias for human rights abuses and in January 2020 assassinated two militia leaders.

These mostly Shia militias helped defeat ISIS, although Iraqi protesters criticize these militias for ceding Iraqi national interests to Iran.

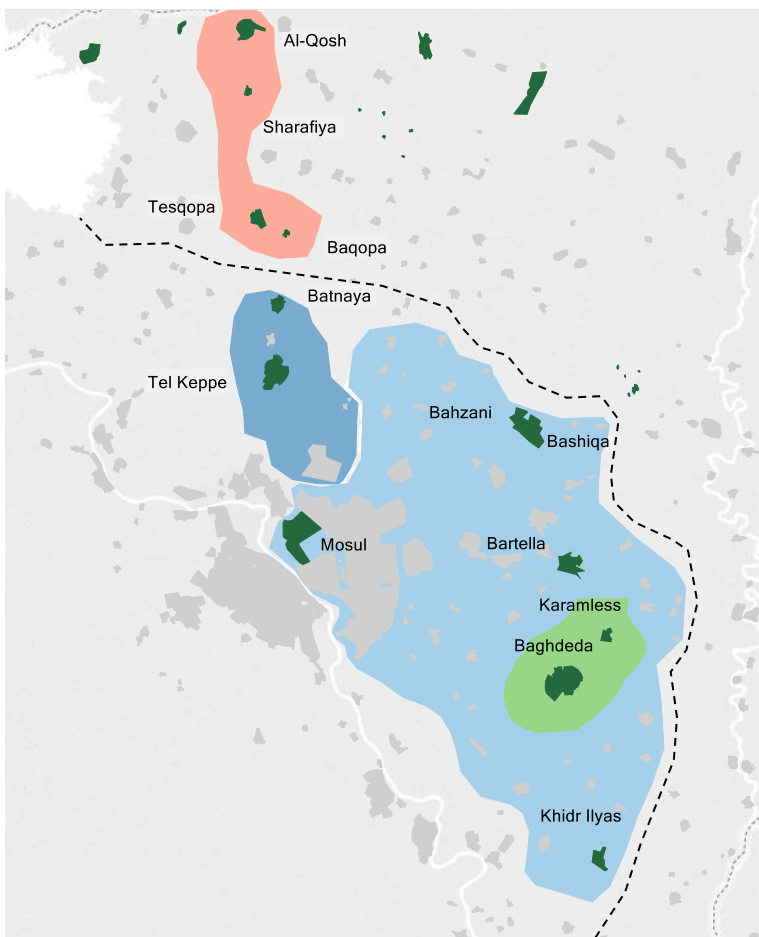
Key findings:

- 24% claim their family has been negatively affected by a militia or other hostile group
- Most common impacts include trauma (19%), theft (15%), displacement (15%), threats of violence (10%), and injury (9%)
- Small numbers claimed kidnapping (2%) and murder (2%), but these are hard to verify



Bartella, a town in the Nineveh Plains that was previously almost exclusively Christian, is now majority Shabak. The Shabak, who are mostly Shia, have an Iranian-aligned militia. This billboard, erected by the Shabak Militia, pays homage to martyrs in the war against ISIS. It also depicts Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, and Ruhollah Khomeini, who led Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. (November 2019.)

Today, some militias remain in the Nineveh Plains



- Influence of the Nineveh Plains Forces (NPF)
- Influence of the Babylon Brigade
- Influence of the Shabak Militia
- Influence of the Nineveh Protection Units (NPU)
- Christian presence
- Dividing line between the Peshmerga and Iraqi Army

The **Nineveh Plains Forces (NPF)** is a militia whose members are predominantly Chaldean Catholic. They work closely with the Peshmerga, the military force for the Kurdistan Regional Government.

Affiliation: Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party (Kurdish-aligned)

The **Babylon Brigade or 50th Brigade** is a militia whose members are predominantly Shia Muslim. Its high-profile leader, Ryan Al-Kaldani, purports to be Chaldean Catholic. Al-Kaldani has been accused of corruption and human rights abuses. It is part of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

Affiliation: Babylon Movement, Badr Organization (Iran-aligned, pro-Baghdad)

The **Shabak Militia or 30th Brigade** is a militia whose members are mostly Shia Muslim Shabak. The Shabak are a minority in the Nineveh Plains who were also displaced by ISIS. Their leader, Waad Qado, has been accused of corruption and human rights abuses. Most Shabak consider their presence essential to personal security. It is part of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

Affiliation: Shabak Democratic Assembly, Badr Organization (Iran-aligned, pro-Baghdad)

Note: The Shabak Militia is the primary force in Bartella

The **Nineveh Protection Units (NPU)** are a predominantly Syriac Catholic and Syriac Orthodox militia. Their presence is generally welcomed by the Christian population, although some Church leaders have criticized the concept of a "Christian militia." The NPU has a working relationship with the Shabak Militia, who control all surrounding areas.

Affiliation: Assyrian Democratic Movement (pro-Baghdad)

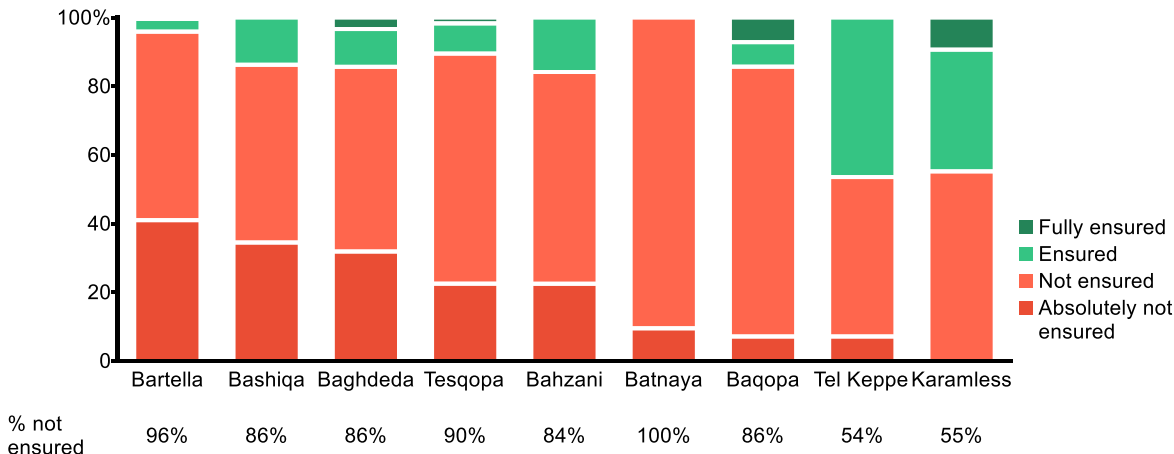
Note: The NPU has a small presence in Bartella

Note: Although some towns are controlled militarily by Kurdistan, the government in Baghdad controls other aspects of life (e.g., the schools and hospitals); in all locations, responsibilities are shared with the Iraqi Army and police, but the division of responsibility varies substantially; note that control for non-Christian towns are approximations

Source: Interviews (Xavier Bisits; 2019)

Most Christians feel unsafe living under militias

Assessment of personal security



These militias have the following functional roles:

- Manning checkpoints, including the major thoroughfare that runs through northern Iraq's two largest cities, Erbil and Mosul; they play a role in preventing the passage of militants
- Maintaining general security, i.e., neutralizing any threats posed by ISIS, other militants, or other militias
- Preventing the extension of the frontier with Kurdistan, who have expressed an interest in controlling a greater part of the Nineveh Plains
- Securing the functional political and economic interests of affiliated organizations (e.g., political parties)

In all locations, these militias share some responsibility with the Iraqi Army and police, as well as the intelligence service (Division 155), which guards several points of entry into Baghdad-controlled Iraq.

Although they purport to uphold security, they interfere with life in several ways:

- *Political instability:* The control of areas by militias discourages outsiders from visiting and makes both foreign and nationals reluctant to invest
- *Limited freedom of movement:* Constant checkpoints, at which there are often delays, limit free movement, which impacts both the economy and personal mobility
- *Corruption and economic impacts:* In some areas, militias have become involved in local businesses, engaging in mafia-life behavior to secure domination over certain sectors of the economy. For example, in Nineveh, some militias controlled the scrap metal business for a time.
- *Human rights abuses:* Some specific accusations of violence and intimidation have been made against these militias. In 2019, the leader of the Shabak Militia, Waad Qado, was formally sanctioned by the US government for extracting money from the local population through "extortion, illegal arrests, and kidnappings". The leader of the Babylon Brigade, Ryan Al-Kaldani, was also sanctioned.
- *Cultural impacts:* In some areas, militias have been accused of strategically positioning Shia Muslim shrines in prominent positions, sometimes in front of Christian monuments, as a form of intimidation.

In ACN's survey, living under or close to an Iran-backed militia was directly correlated with feelings of insecurity. Christians feel most unsafe in Bartella, where 41% feel that their security is "absolutely not ensured." Bartella is the site of the Shabak Militia.

The Shabak Militia and Babylon Brigade operate with impunity

Some of the militias in the Nineveh Plains operate with effective impunity, limiting the ability of the Iraqi government to enforce criminal law.

In particular, militias in the Nineveh Plains refused to comply with the Prime Minister's instructions in July 2019 to disband and integrate into the Iraqi Army. In part, this refusal to cooperate relates to entrenched economic and political interests. In part, it relates to a genuine fear of ISIS, and the feeling that such militias are needed to protect against the return of ISIS-like groups. The Shabak Militia is broadly supported by the Shabak population.

39% of those living under an Iran-backed militia claimed to have been negatively affected by a militia in the post-2017 period, vs. 18% of those surrounded by an Iran-backed militia, and only 14% of those adjacent to an Iran-backed militia.

*“The ethno-sectarian patchwork in the Nineveh Plains is clearly complex, but the crux of the issue is fairly simple: the PMF 30th and 50th brigades **do not want to follow orders from the Iraqi prime minister**, and nor do they want to give up lucrative money-making opportunities and Mafiosi-like power at the local level.”*

Washington Institute for Near East Policy



A billboard erected by the Shabak Militia between Erbil and Mosul argues in favor of their continued presence as a force that protects all minorities: “The suffering of the people of the Nineveh Plains, who are of so many groups and beliefs, is great, and is not limited to ISIS ... The members of the 30th Brigade are from this area, know its people the best, and should have first priority in defending it.” (October 2019.)



To protest the Prime Minister's instructions, the Shabak Militia blocked the main road between Erbil and Mosul for a period in August 2019. Their primary point of protest was Bartella, a mixed Christian-Shabak town.

Some Christians complain of corruption and human rights violations

The Shabak and Babylon Brigades, the two primary Iranian-backed militias operating in the Nineveh Plains, have been the subject of several complaints. It is difficult to independently verify all of the claims below. Independent NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and visiting journalists have gathered evidence concerning some of the events described below.

- Looting Sunni Arab and Christian homes
- Illegally occupying and selling agricultural land
- Supporting or tolerating squatters in Christian homes
- Extortion, through illegal arrests and kidnapping
- Charging arbitrary customs fees at checkpoints
- Supporting or tolerating a boycott of Christian businesses
- Supporting or tolerating the erection of Shia Muslim shrines in front of Christian monuments
- Supporting or tolerating the placement of loudspeakers broadcasting Muslim prayers in Christian areas
- Blocking the roads to churches
- Firing guns in the vicinity of churches
- Threatening clergy
- Attempting to control checkpoints into majority Christian areas, including Baghdeda
- Tolerating crime against Christians, including sexual assault and robbery
- Forced disappearances, predominantly of Sunni Muslims



A faded photo of Ryan Al-Kaldani, a purportedly Chaldean Catholic militia leader with links to Iran, sits opposite Sacred Heart Church in Tel Keppe, once the largest church in the Middle East. There are only 130 Christians in Tel Keppe today. (October 2019.)

*“The 50th Brigade is a **law unto themselves.**”*

Member of security detail

*“ISIS left, but the militias came. The security is good, but **sometimes they take money from the people.**”*

Mosul resident

*“We have not been directly assaulted, but we treat the militias with caution and in fear, due to the large numbers of militias, and Kurdish, Sunni, and Shiite paramilitary groups. We minorities are **lost with no voice or rights** amid a loss of security, authority, law, and order.”*

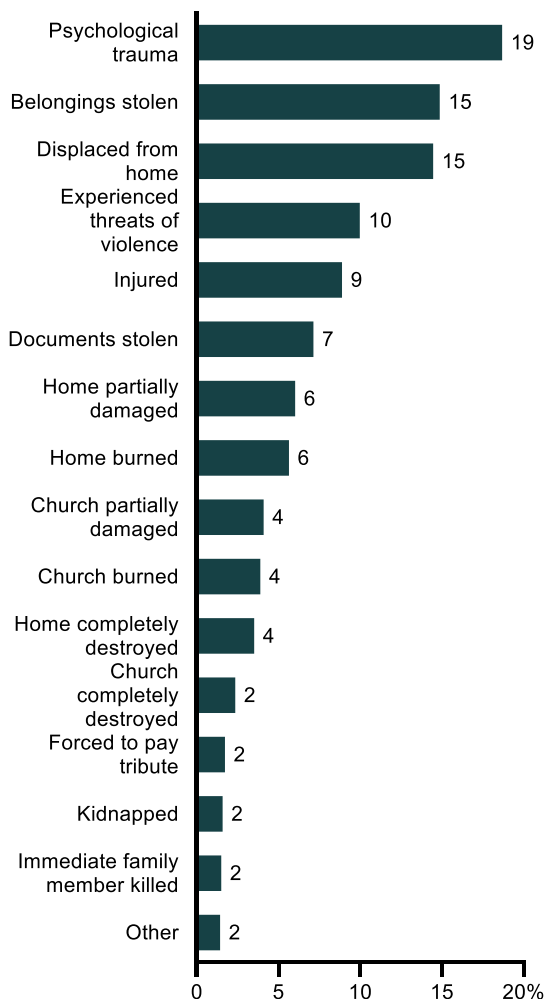
Baghdeda resident

“I cannot say the name of the group that affected me because this country is not safe.”

Baghdeda resident

Hostile groups continue to impact Christians

Share impacted by a group hostile to Christians after 2017



“There have been incidents of kidnapping and violence ... There was an incident in 2017 where a militia member boarded a bus and harassed a Christian girl ... Through the militias, Iran wants to control administrative processes: the ID office, the taxi office, the property office. They do this through the 30th Brigade.”

Expert in Iraqi politics

Noticeably high, here, is the amount of threatened violence, often linked to demands for money.

Some commentators ACN spoke to were surprised to hear a figure as high as 2% for having a family member killed by a hostile group in the period after 2017, as there are no publicized cases of this occurring. It is possible that such events are under-reported, given the security situation.

Write-in responses by survey respondents revealed more specifics around the impacts of these groups.

- **Harassment and intimidation**
 - “Harassment of my business.”
 - “Provocations.”
 - “Harassment and provocation.”
 - “A lack of trust in the area.”
 - “The PMF controls all the Nineveh Plains and subjects it to tyranny of all manner.”
 - “The loss of trust and security, and a large number of political factions.”
 - “The migration of brothers and sisters from Iraq.”
 - “Fear, insecurity, and instability are allowed.”
- **Destruction or theft of belongings**
 - “After theft, nothing is left.”
 - “My house was burned and everything was stolen.”
 - “My home was burned.”
 - “Everything was ruined.”
 - “Theft of our home’s furniture.”
 - “Destruction, theft, and looting of my workplace.”
 - “Harassment of my business, and of our marketing.”
 - “Our home, documents, and property, were taken from us.”

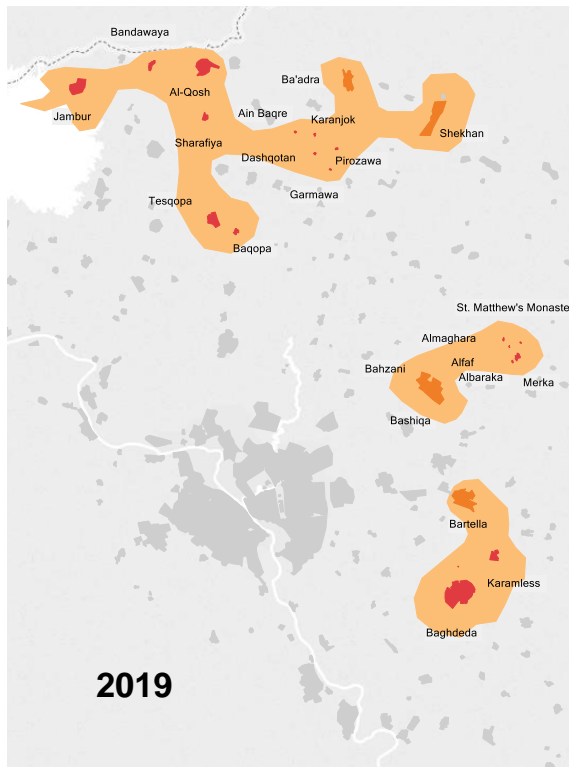
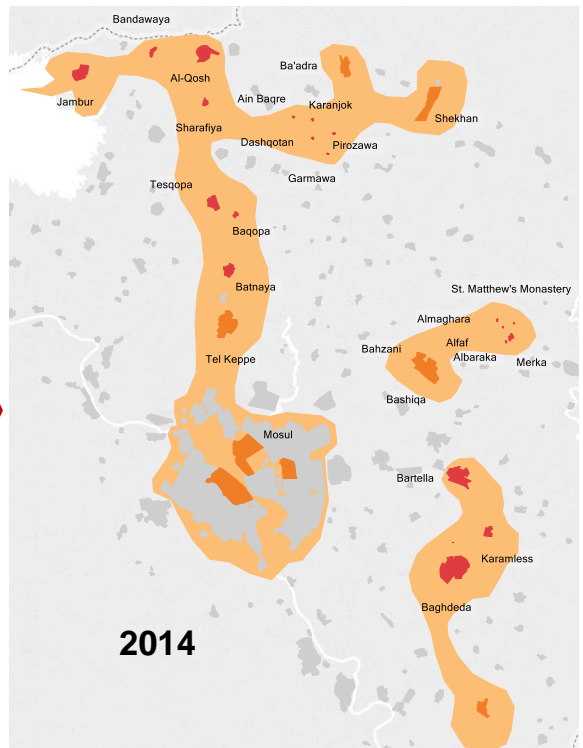
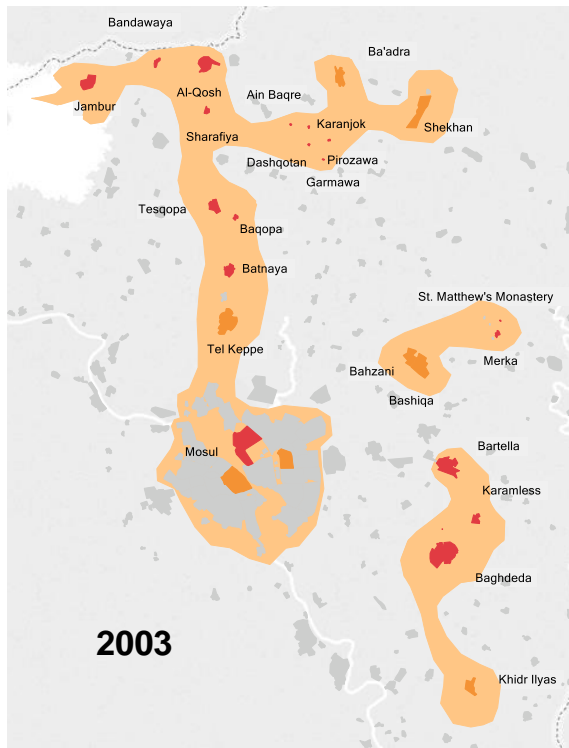
Respondents were in some cases unwilling to name the specific offender. This contrasted to their willingness to describe offenders from the period 2003 to 2013, which was normally Al-Qaeda, Ansar Al-Sunnah, Jaish Al-Rashideen, or their affiliates.

When asked to provide more detail on the perpetrator of these offences, several respondents named the PMF or its members, especially the Shabak Militia and Babylon Brigade. Others said they did not know the identity of the perpetrator, or mentioned Shiite militias in general, especially in Mosul. Some wrote that they are careful not to say the name of the group in question, because they feared for their safety.

“There were many people who came and locked their homes, returned to Kurdistan, then found their belongings were stolen the next time they came ... That wasn’t ISIS.”

Baghdeda resident

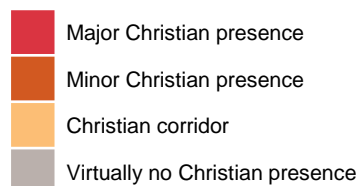
Some Christians link militias to demographic displacement



Between 2014 and 2020, substantial demographic change occurred in the Nineveh Plains. Mosul, Khidr Ilyas, Batnaya, and Tel Keppe have been virtually emptied of Christian families, while Bartella has gone from majority to minority Christian. Although not reflected on the map for 2020 below, there are a small number of Christians in Batnaya (~100 people), Tel Keppe (~130 people), and Mosul (~40 people).

Today, Christians in the Nineveh Plains complain of demographic displacement at the hands of two groups: the Shabak and Sunni Arabs. Although some historically Assyrian towns are now majority Yezidi (i.e., Bashiqa and Bahzani) relations with Yezidis are typically cordial.

In Tel Keppe and Batnaya, the Babylon Brigade has been accused of facilitating demographic displacement; in Bartella, the Shabak Militia has been accused of doing the same.



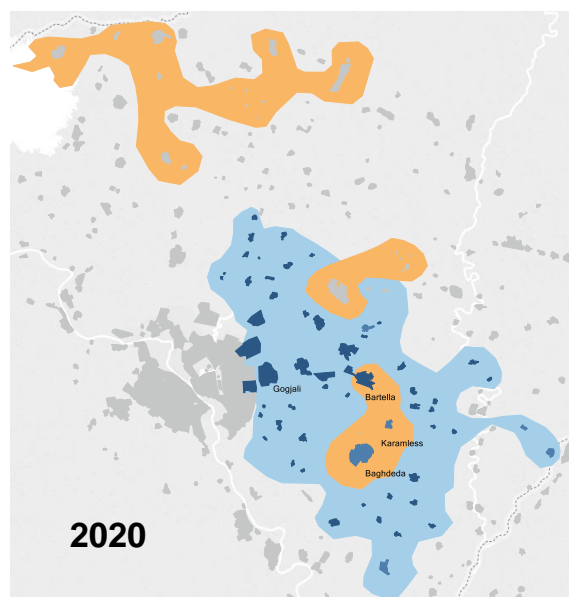
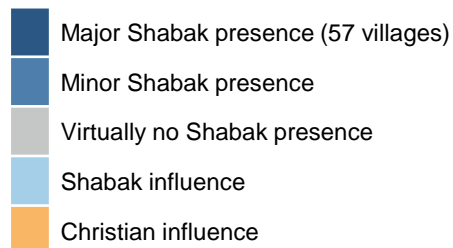
In particular, locals complain about the Shabak Militia

In some parts of the Nineveh Plains, there is growing sectarian tension between Christians and the Shabak. The Shabak now outnumber Christians and have purchased homes in several historically Christian towns. Although the actions of the Shabak Militia should be considered, there are several other contributing factors:

- Religious persecution:** Although Sunni Shabak were substantially less affected by ISIS or similar hostile groups, Shiite Shabak were targeted in a similar way to which Shiite Arabs were targeted. In particular, after ISIS in 2013 gave the Shabak three days to leave Mosul, many left their homes for Bartella. Like Christians, some Shabak still fear for their future, and many enthusiastically support their militia, the Shabak Militia. Many ordinary Shabak demonstrated in favor of this militia in 2019, when the Iraqi Prime Minister attempted, unsuccessfully, to force it to disband.
- Economic opportunism:** By migrating to towns from villages, the Shabak improve their economic and educational prospects. In particular, Bartella sits on a major thoroughfare between Mosul and Erbil, the two economic powerhouses of northern Iraq. In this respect, it is uniquely positioned to cater to regular commuters and businesses who operate in both cities: scrap metal, heavy machinery, and building materials. Because the Shabak Militia controls this road, they are well-positioned to protect the economic interests of Shabak business owners.
- Differences in fertility rates:** Christians, who are better off and more educated, have a substantially lower fertility rate.
- Differences in emigration rates:** Christians, while forming a small percentage of Iraq as a whole, consistently form a plurality or majority of asylum seekers from Iraq in some jurisdictions. For example, in 2015, 78% of refugees admitted to Australia from Iraq were Christian. There is a mix of reasons for this, which may include differing levels of persecution. One important factor is that Christians are in a better socioeconomic position, which positions them well to find jobs in Western society, as well as navigate the complex asylum application process.

The Shabak are a group of disputed origins, who historically adhered to a syncretic indigenous religion, but are increasingly mainstream Shiite Muslims. A minority of the Shabak are Sunni. Some Christians claim that the etymological roots of the word Shabak refer to the Iranian Shah, who ruled Iran until the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Irrespective of their ethnic connection to Persia, the Shabak claim a close connection to Iran.

Historically, the Shabak lived in villages in the Nineveh Plains or parts of Mosul. Today, as in the past, they are poorer than Christians. Like Christians, however, the Shabak were persecuted by Al-Qaeda and similar groups between 2003 and 2014, fleeing Mosul. Today, the Shabak have resettled in small numbers in several towns in the Nineveh Plains that historically had few or no Shabak, including Karamless (~6%), and Baghdeda (~4%). In Bartella, which was historically 100% Christian, they constitute ~52% of the population today. This demographic displacement began in the 2000s, accelerated in 2017, and shows no sign of slowing.



“The problem is that the Shabak have 10 children, and we only have a couple. With time, we will have a smaller share of the population.”

Bashiqa resident

Some claim the Shabak Militia serves Iranian interests in the region

Many Christians posit that Iran has a strategy of securing the Nineveh Plains, so it can function as a safe corridor between Iran and its allies in Syria and Lebanon, which Iran considers critical to its national security interests. With such a corridor, Iran would bypass a mostly hostile Sunni Arab population in Mosul and Western Iraq.

Iran may consider Christians more pliable and easy to displace than other populations, which is why it has focused on towns such as Bartella, Karamless, and Baghdeda, with varying degrees of success. If the NPU leaves, the Shabak Militia will have a clear line of passage through the Nineveh Plains, allowing for free passage of arms, cash, economic goods, and possibly drugs. Although evidence of this strategy is hard to come by, Christians in the Nineveh Plains point to the following evidence:

- **Apparent subsidization of home purchases:** Many Shabak have purchased Christian homes, legally, using funds from obscure sources. The average price of a Christian home is \$30,000 - \$50,000, which, ordinarily, would have placed it well out of reach of a Shabak or Yezidi family. In the mid-2000s, Shabak families, who are mostly poor, began purchasing these homes, outbidding other Christian families. Some Christians suggest these families are being funneled money by Iran, likely through the Shabak Militia. This strategy, if true, has been effective in Bartella and Karamless; it has been less effective in Baghdeda, which has an effective ban on sales to individuals who did not live in the town before 2014.
- **Illegal occupation of homes:** Some Christians point to the illegal occupation of homes in the Nineveh Plains by the Shabak. Since many documents were destroyed by ISIS, and the Iraqi bureaucracy is often slow and ineffective, Christians have often struggled to prove they own the title to their home, especially if they were displaced for multiple years. Some Christians say that the Shabak Militia has provided cover for this phenomenon, which is in the interests of Iran. Some Shabak say that this occurs merely because Christians are emigrating at such high rates.
- **Known links between the Shabak Militia and Iran:** It is well-known that the Shabak Militia, like other Iranian-backed militias, receives money and military goods from Iran. Without Iran, this militia would not have the same caliber and quantity of tanks, cars, and weapons that it does have. Militia members have confirmed this fact. Given the support provided by Iran to this militia, it would be unsurprising if it acted in other ways to protect Iranian interests in the region.

These observations have had some high-level confirmation. Cables leaked to The New York Times and The Intercept confirm Iran's attempt to control or influence parts of the Iraqi state, in defense of Iran's national security interests. In particular, these cables reveal Iran's focus on protecting links to Syria and Lebanon.



Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, an Iranian-backed political and military organization, holds an office in Bartella, which it seeks to influence as a Shia enclave in northern Iraq. The group has fought alongside Hezbollah and is designated a terrorist organization by the United States. In 2019, its leaders were sanctioned for firing on protesters. (November 2019.)

"I've heard that Iran pays 50% of the price of a house, when a Shabak family wants to buy one."

Clergy member

"The 30th Brigade receives money and cars from Iran – everything. The NPU receives nothing from Iran."

NPU member

"Shiite-affiliated groups have been gaining influence in the Nineveh Plain in recent years, as Iran has allegedly taken an interest in the area as a strategic foothold in the corridor that runs through Erbil and Mosul to Syria."

The Atlantic (May 2019)

"We know that people are getting support from Iran because they couldn't afford to buy the house themselves. If a Christian offers \$100,000, a Shabak will offer \$150,000. Before 2003, the Shabak lives in villages and were poor. How can they be buying these buildings?"

Baghdeda resident

Some suggest Iran is creating a corridor through Nineveh

Iran has strong links to both the Assad government in Damascus and some groups in Lebanon. For this reason, it has a strong interest in well-protected, contiguous land routes between Iran and Syria that facilitate the movement of arms, trade, weapons, and possibly drugs. (As in much of Iraq, shops in Christian towns controlled by Iran-linked militias are often stocked with Iranian-produced goods.)

In August 2019, Iran formally proposed an oil pipeline from Iran to Syria via Iraq, passing through the Nineveh Plains; such a pipeline might allow Iran to avoid US oil sanctions, and would allow Iran to avoid the tense Hormuz Strait.

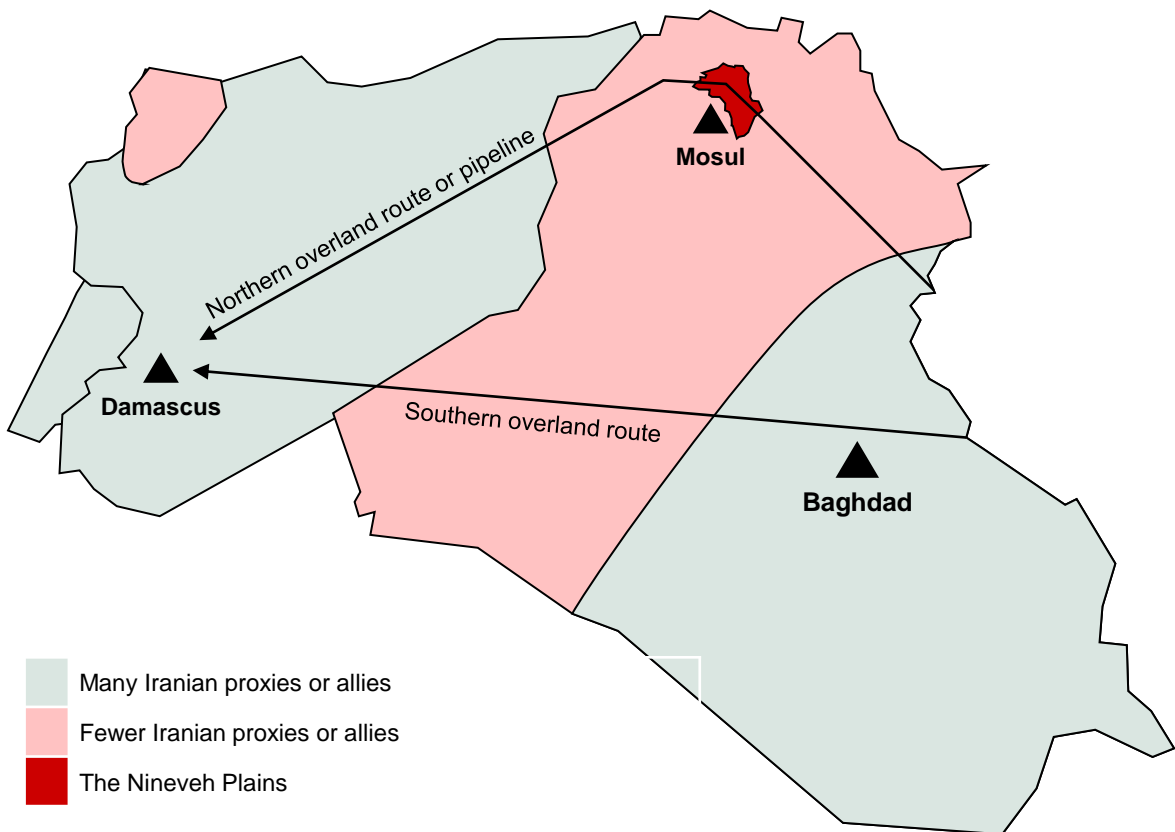
Some security analysts note that Iran's existing overland route crosses through hostile Sunni Arab territory in the Iraqi desert. If Iran can effectively secure a northern route via the Nineveh Plains, this new route might be preferable to existing options. The Nineveh Plains, due to its large Shabak population, essentially constitutes a rare Shia enclave in northern Iraq.

“There is a Shia crescent, going from Iran, to the Nineveh Plains, to Syria, and to Lebanon. This is very clear. There are two routes, one which goes from Baghdad, to Al-Anbar, to Syria, and to Lebanon. The other one goes through the Nineveh Plains.”

Expert on Iraqi politics

“[Iran] wants to build a “land bridge” to Syria through Iraq. Second, it aims to alter fundamentally the demography of Nineveh in favor of Tehran. The Christians are at best collateral damage.”

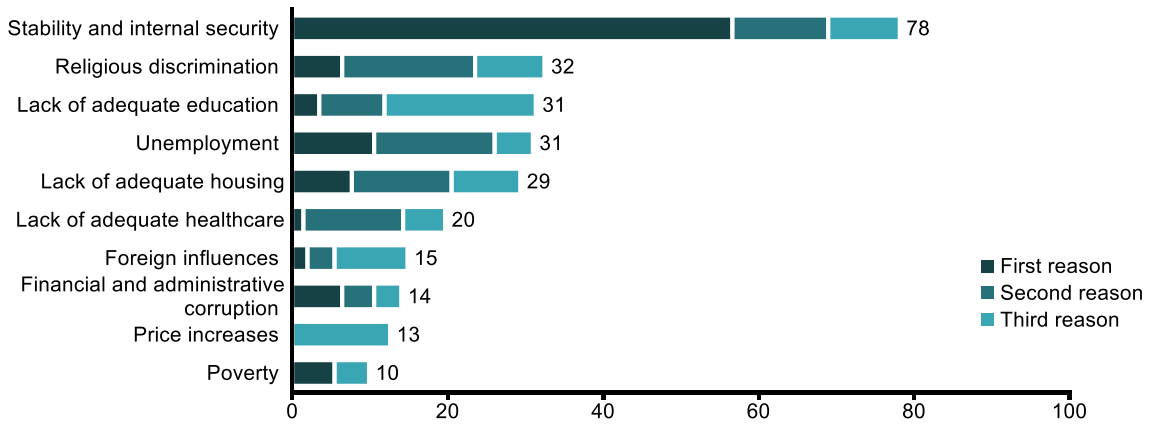
CEO, American NGO



Note: Map is grossly simplified
Source: Center for Strategic and International Studies; WSJ (April 2019)

Due to militias, resettlement of Tel Keppe, Batnaya, is limited

Share citing a reason for returning to the Nineveh Plains but not their original home



Ryan Al-Kaldani, the purportedly Chaldean Catholic chief of the Iran-backed militia, the Babylon Brigade, which has been accused of limiting returns to the Nineveh Plains.

Although the Babylon Brigade is not explicitly associated with demographic change, as the Shabak Militia is, it is accused of other acts of intimidation.

In 2017, it reportedly ordered Sunni Arabs to evacuate Tel Keppe; a small number of Sunni Arab residents complied, moving to Mosul. It has also reportedly looted the homes of Christian residents, stripping homes of plumbing and wiring. It also reportedly damaged the Syriac Catholic St. Behnam Monastery in Khidr Ilyas.

Its tendency to engage in skirmishes, extortion, and other human rights violations, has frightened many returning residents. An overwhelming majority of respondents who are still internally displaced in the Nineveh Plains cite security as the main reason. These mostly consist of families from Tel Keppe and Batnaya living in Tesqopa, or families from Mosul living in Baghdeda or Bartella. In 2019, Al-Kaldani reportedly cut off the ear of a detainee in the mostly abandoned Chaldean Catholic town of Batnaya; acts like these frighten IDPs.

“The 50th Brigade is reportedly the primary impediment to the return of internally displaced persons to the [Nineveh Plains]. The 50th Brigade has systematically looted homes in Batnaya, which is struggling to recover from ISIS’s brutal rule. The 50th Brigade has reportedly illegally seized and sold agricultural land, and the local population has accused the group of intimidation, extortion, and harassment of women.”

The US Treasury Department (July 2019)

Christians may be affected by the 2020 US-Iran escalation



Ryan Al-Kaldani, the Babylon Brigade's leader, often pays homage to Shia figures and holidays; on Facebook, he shares images such as the above promoting the unity of Christians and Muslims. One member of the NPU speculated, without evidence, that he may have even converted to Shia Islam. (December 2018.)

In December 2019 and January 2020, tensions between the US and Iran dramatically escalated, with the focus of these tensions being Iranian involvement in Iraq.

At this juncture, Iraqi Christians are left vulnerable. If war erupts, Christians are at risk of being called American collaborators, as the US is commonly identified as a Christian country. In Iraq's previous civil war, Christians were sometimes assumed to be moles for the US.

Only a minority of Christians support allying themselves with Iranian-backed groups; these include the most high-profile "Christian" militia leader, Ryan Al-Kaldani. In January 2020, he called for the expulsion of US troops from Iraq.

Al-Kaldani, who is not on good terms with the Chaldean Patriarchate, cultivates a personality cult as a high-profile Christian allied with Iran and Shia political forces.



Ryan Al-Kaldani outside the US Embassy with protestors. (December 2019.)

"When I asked the Americans for weapons and missiles, they said that they would need the approval of the US Congress. When I traveled to Iran, they sent the weapons in less than 15 hours ... Qasim Soleimani contributed a lot to Iraq."

Ryan Al-Kaldani

Security concerns are linked to Nineveh's disputed status

All locations in the Nineveh Plains fall into Iraq's disputed territories, claimed by both the KRG and Baghdad. In theory, a vote should regularize this situation, but there is no sign that such a vote is on the horizon.

A lack of clarity on the future of the Nineveh Plains creates political and economic uncertainty; individuals and businesses cannot plan for the future when it is unclear who will control their home five years from now. Jihadist groups such as ISIS exploit this uncertainty to expand their operations.

The military groups who control the Nineveh Plains tend to be allied with either the government in Baghdad or the Kurdish government in Erbil, making them a routine reminder of the undetermined status of the region.

This issue is highly polarizing among Christians. Some Christians complain of attempts to make the region more Kurdish, while committing some abuses against the Christian population, including kidnapping. Others claim that the Kurdish population is inherently more tolerant of minorities. 57% of respondents who do not expect to emigrate in five years said they would most likely be living under the control of Baghdad.



An Iraqi flag painted onto barricades outside the entrance to Karamless and Baghdeda, claimed by Baghdad. In other Christian areas, the Kurdish flag can be seen. (November 2019.)

*"Without clarity on whether our future belongs to Kurdistan or Baghdad, we can't do anything. **People don't feel safe because of the political situation.**"*

Baghdeda resident

*"**We want Baghdad, Baghdad, Baghdad.** We speak Arabic, not Kurdish. Baghdad used to be the city of peace. We want a better government, not to become part of Kurdistan ... The Kurds kidnapped a member of my family."*

Tesqopa resident

*"The Kurds intend to make **demographic change.** The Kurdish flag only represents Kurds, and their anthem only mentions Kurds."*

Legal expert

*"We were **threatened with arrest by the Kurdish nationalist parties,** who are attempting to take control of the region."*

Tesqopa resident

*"We felt very safe when the Kurdish controlled our region, but **now we feel uncomfortable** [that the Kurds are gone.]"*

Bahzani resident

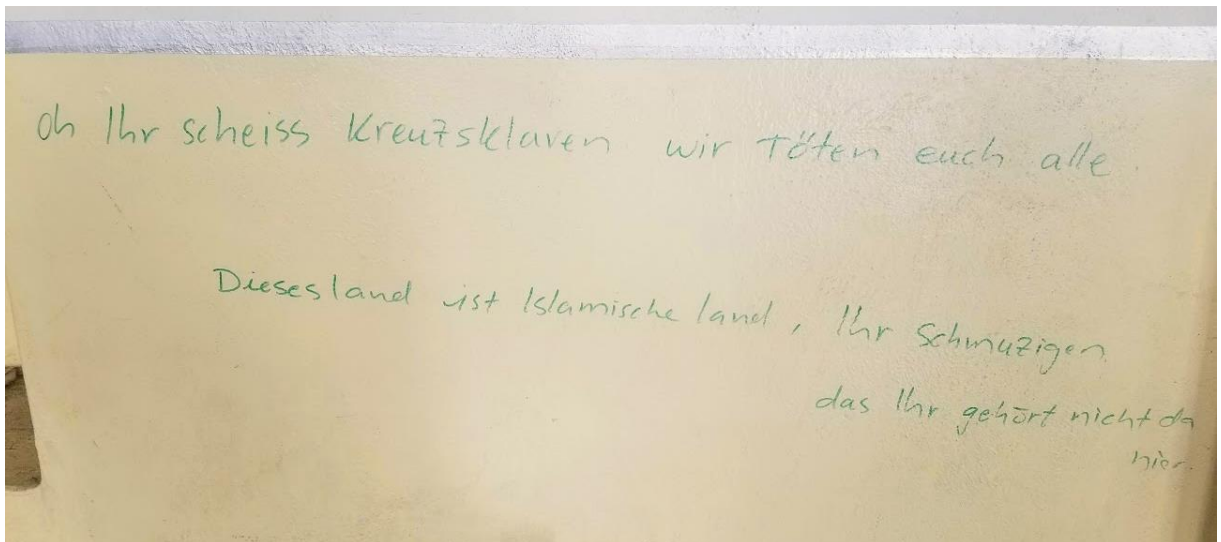
An overwhelming majority of Nineveh Plains Christians believe ISIS is likely to return.

Although ISIS holds no territory in Iraq or Syria, it maintains an active presence as it transitions to insurgency-style tactics. Although the Iraqi Army is more disciplined and better-resourced today, limiting the likelihood of the organization's territorial return, ISIS has refined its underground capabilities and, as of November 2019, is considered to be increasing in strength.

Although there are no recorded accounts of ISIS murders of Christians since 2017, ISIS claimed the deaths of at least 37 Iraqis in 2019. Another ~2,000 Iraqis died at the hands of other groups or were found in mass graves.

Key findings:

- 87% feel unsafe or absolutely unsafe
- 67% believe it is likely or very likely that ISIS or a similar group will return in the next five years
- Of those who wish to emigrate, 69% cite political and security reasons as the primary cause



Graffiti left by ISIS at a chapel adjacent to St. Kyriakos Chaldean Catholic Church in Batnaya reads: "Slaves of the cross – we will kill you all. This land is an Islamic land – filth like you don't belong here."

It was left by a German-speaking ISIS militant. In many areas, ISIS graffiti can still be seen, frequently reading: "The Islamic State will persist." (June 2019.)

ISIS remains active around Mosul

Although ISIS no longer retains any territory in the Nineveh Plains, it remains active in the Nineveh Governate, especially Mosul, where the caliphate was declared. In some areas, including mountains south of the Mosul Dam, small groups of militants keep a presence. Christians in the Nineveh Plains talk of the “ISIS mentality” continuing to be a threat among ordinary Sunni residents.

ISIS claims the occasional bombing or assassination, largely in Mosul, and burned the crops of some farmers in 2019; all recorded victims are Muslim, rather than Christian, and these attacks chiefly amount to score-settling or intimidation of farmers in rural areas who are opposed to the group or refuse to make payments. ISIS’s official news agency released statements claiming responsibility for burned crops belonging to Shia farmers in the disputed regions of Iraq. More than 6,000 acres were burned in 136 separate incidents recorded by the government.

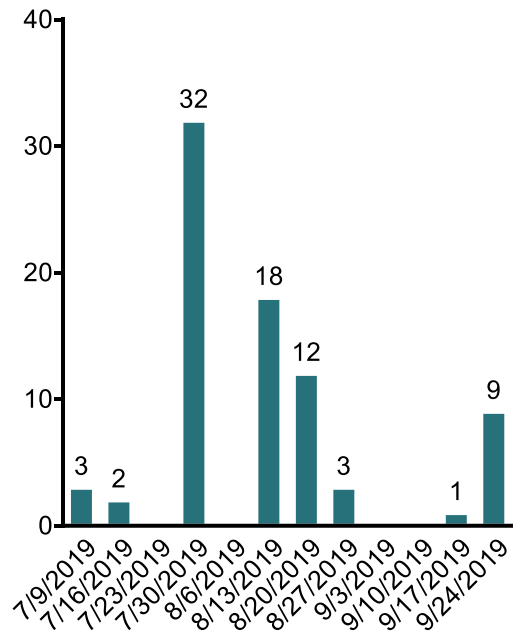
A second major form of attack is IED or Improvised Explosive Device attacks on checkpoints within Mosul, including Eastern Mosul, where a small Christian presence of around 40 people remains.

Although most Christians are well-protected by local military forces, who are ordinarily drawn from the town itself, remnant ISIS forces are known to exist in the area. In particular, it is suggested they take advantage of the porous border between Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq, where responsibilities for security are sometimes unclear. A 2019 report by the US Inspector General suggested that ISIS had “solidified its insurgent capabilities” in Iraq. The group likely retains ~14,000 – 18,000 members in Iraq and Syria, including ~3,000 foreigners. The US classifies parts of Mosul as “attack zones” or “support zones”, where ISIS either conducts offensive operations or wields the support of the local population.

The group retains its hostility toward Christians. In November 2019, ISIS claimed responsibility for the murder of an Armenian Catholic priest travelling in Syria. He was in Raqqa governorate, a former part of ISIS’s territory. The 2019 attacks on Catholic churches in Sri Lanka confirm this interest. The last recorded ISIS attack affecting Christians in the Nineveh Plains was a bombing in April 2018 in Bartella, that injured four schoolchildren.

With the possible withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, ISIS may strengthen its position in Iraq in 2020.

Civilian deaths in Nineveh Governate



“Five months after American-backed forces ousted the Islamic State from its last shard of territory in Syria, the terrorist group is gathering new strength, conducting guerrilla attacks across Iraq and Syria, retooling its financial networks and targeting new recruits at an allied-run tent camp, American and Iraqi military and intelligence officers said.”

The New York Times

“We can’t see ISIS anymore, but it’s here ... People still think like ISIS, and we need to fight those ideas. We will only stop young men from thinking like ISIS if they get work ... If you don’t have a salary, young men join Al-Qaeda or ISIS to make jihad. Once you’ve joined, you can’t leave them without them threatening you, so you have to continue.”

Baghdeda resident

Others downplay the risk of ISIS's return

While many Christians worry about the persistence of ISIS's ideas in their region, others downplay this risk. The Iraqi army has substantially improved its security practices and control of ISIS-sympathetic areas and there is nothing akin to the state collapse that precipitated ISIS's abrupt taking of territory in 2014.

Among many Sunni Arabs, ISIS has lost credibility; although it demonstrated its ability in some respects to run an orderly state, most Iraqis disliked other aspects of its rule: banning cigarettes, restricting the movement of women, and limiting free speech.

Today, there is a strong stigma among Sunni Arabs around ISIS; in the Nineveh Plains, several Arab villages remain depopulated, as locals refuse to return for fear of recriminations for their support of ISIS. Likewise, in Mosul, there have been no large-scale protests, since some Sunni Arabs fear they will be tied to ISIS if they protest the government.

*“ISIS doesn’t exist anymore in Mosul. There might be **sleeper cells**, but **only a small amount** ... Life under ISIS was very expensive. In East Mosul, a pack of cigarettes cost 25,000 dinars. In West Mosul, it **cost 100,000 dinars.**”*

Mosul resident (Muslim)

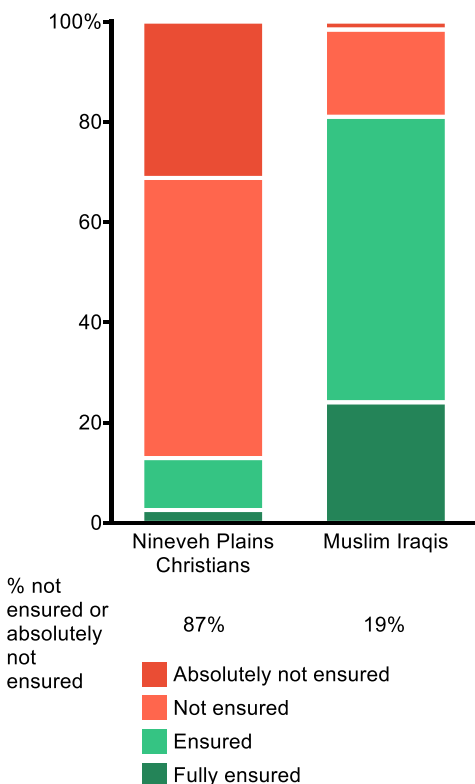
*“Hardly anyone in Mosul supports the ideas of ISIS anymore – **maybe 1%**. The people who supported ISIS all left to Syria.”*

Mosul resident (Muslim)

*“Iraq has changed in ways that **might prevent ISIS from returning in force**. The nationwide sectarian polarisation from which ISIS benefited has faded. Additionally, now that many Sunni Arabs have experienced the dual trauma of ISIS’s draconian control and the military campaign to recapture their home areas from ISIS, **most want nothing more to do with the group.**”*

International Crisis Group

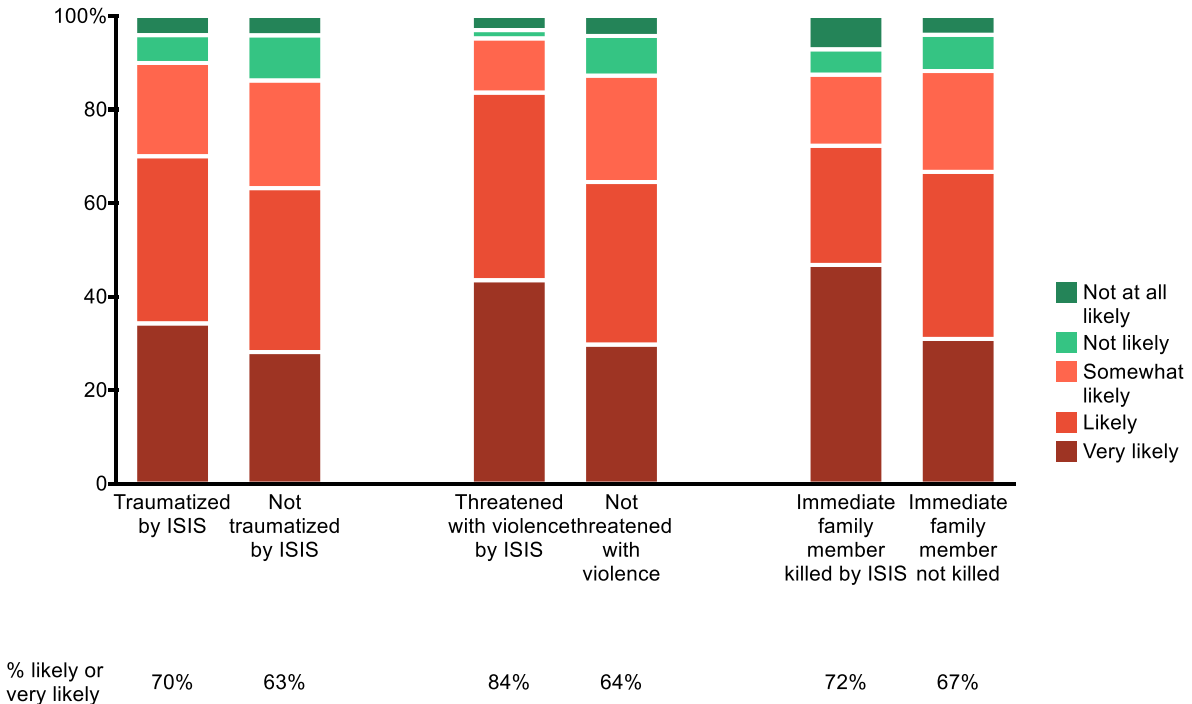
Assessment of personal security



Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey; interviews (2019); International Crisis Group (2019)

Irrespective of ISIS's chances of return, Christians are afraid

Likelihood that ISIS or similar will return in five years



A large share of Christians (~66%) believe it is likely or very likely that ISIS or a similar group will return in the next five years.

Christians who experienced worse impacts at the hands of ISIS are more likely to believe that ISIS will return, as are those who self-identify as traumatized. For example, 72% of those who had an immediate family member killed believe it is likely or very likely that ISIS or a similar group will return, vs. 67% of those who did not experience the death of an immediate family member.

Much of this fear is grounded in the reality that some Sunni Arab neighbors were complicit in ISIS's rise. The belief that ISIS will return correlates with respondents describing their relations with non-Christians as bad or very bad.

One expression of this fear is that some families have purchased homes in Erbil, in Kurdistan, as a back-up, should security conditions in the Nineveh Plains deteriorate.

“An extremist religious group threatened to kill me and harassed me on Facebook.”

Baghdeda resident

“We have some Muslim neighbors and colleagues; they visit our shops and if we invite them to lunch they will join and be polite. Pushed in the right direction, they will not hesitate to kill us.”

Baghdeda resident

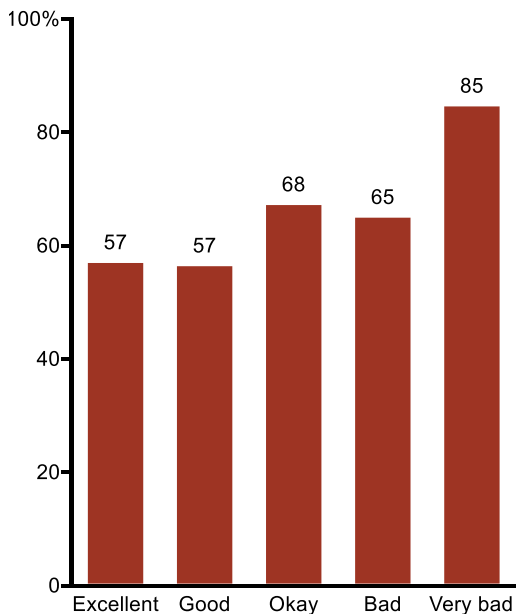
Sectarian trust issues fuel much of the fear of ISIS's return

Although some NGOs have dedicated great efforts to peace-building and trust creation exercises, the underlying problems are difficult to resolve.

Some Christians do not make a distinction between Shia Muslims and Sunni Muslims, or between Muslims who support extremist groups and those who do not. Because there is little cross-community interaction, the prospects for these relationships improving are poor.

Belief that ISIS will return correlates with respondents describing their relations with non-Christians as okay, bad or very bad.

Share who believe it is likely or very likely ISIS or similar will return within five years



Description of relationship with non-Christians

*“All **Muslims are the same**. They are all like ISIS.”*

Baghdeda resident

*“There are **many Muslims from Mosul** in our town. They came when ISIS arrived, some because their homes were destroyed in Mosul. We also have prisons here with 1,500 ISIS fighters. **People are afraid to return because of this.**”*

Tel Keppe resident

*“When I’ve visited Mosul, I’ve had people **scream at us in the car** because they can tell that we’re Christian.”*

Baghdeda resident

*“Muslims are **dirty** ... You should only travel with Christian drivers.”*

Erbil resident



ISIS flags left by militants, such as this one in at a Syriac Orthodox cultural center in Bartella, are a reminder of ISIS's recent presence. In most cases, locals have painted over or obscured the writing. (June 2019.)

Most young people are chronically unemployed, and frustrated at a lack of good jobs.

Although unemployment is a chronic concern in Iraq, it is a particular issue in the Nineveh Plains. Although Christians are more likely than other groups to be part of the merchant or professional class, they contend with discrimination and interference from the militias who control their area.

Unemployment is a secondary driver of emigration among young people, although less important than security concerns.

Key findings:

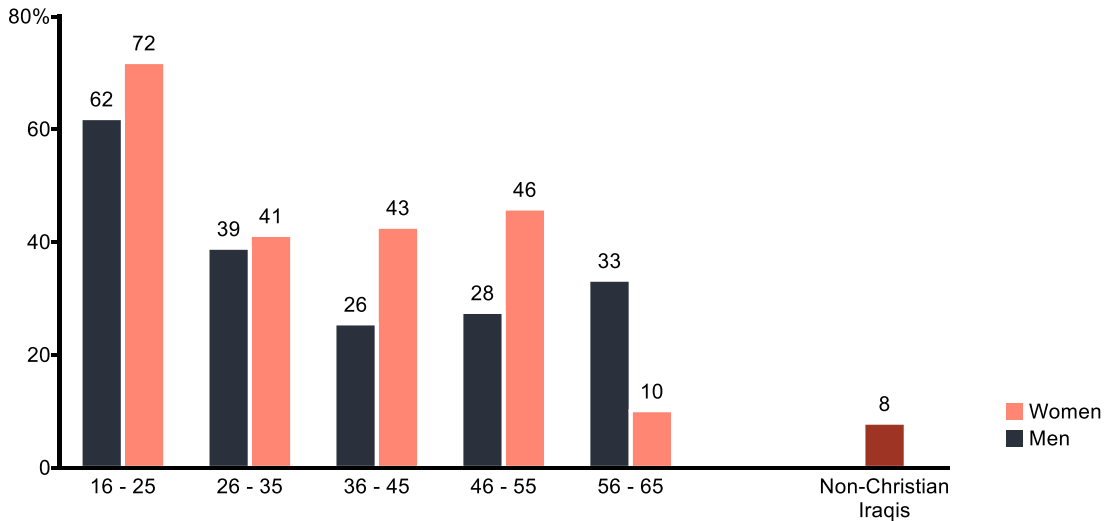
- 93% of respondents describe the economy as bad or very bad, vs. only 39% before ISIS
- 45% of respondents looking for work are unemployed, including 67% of respondents aged 25 or under
- Some respondents running businesses complain about militias interfering in their work



Graffiti at a public park in Baghdeda with the name of an unemployed young Syriac Catholic man. (November 2019.)

The unemployment rate in Iraq is higher among Christians

Unemployment rate by age group and gender



A large share of Christians in the Nineveh Plains are unemployed, underemployed, or in a job inappropriate to their training or qualifications.

This trend is particularly pronounced among young people, who feel frustrated and upset at the lack of jobs. In particular, young people who graduate from university, such as the University of Mosul, feel frustrated that jobs in the government are so difficult to find. Some people attribute this to discrimination against Christians.

11% of Christians who wish to emigrate say this is primarily for economic reasons. Also, unemployment is correlated with wishing to emigrate. Of those who are unemployed, 71% have considered emigration, vs. 53% of full-time and 54% of part-time workers.

“There is less work than there used to be previously. People who used to run businesses have left the country.”

Baghdeda resident

*“My father owns a money exchange shop. Before ISIS, business was excellent. Now, because half the population has gone, it is good but **not nearly as good as before**. He used to have two associates, but now it is just him ... Everyone earns less money than before ISIS.”*

Baghdeda resident

*“The security in Mosul today is excellent. People from Bartella and Baghdeda visit all the time to buy materials. **There is no work, though.**”*

Mosul resident

*“There are **no jobs here, and there is no money.**”*

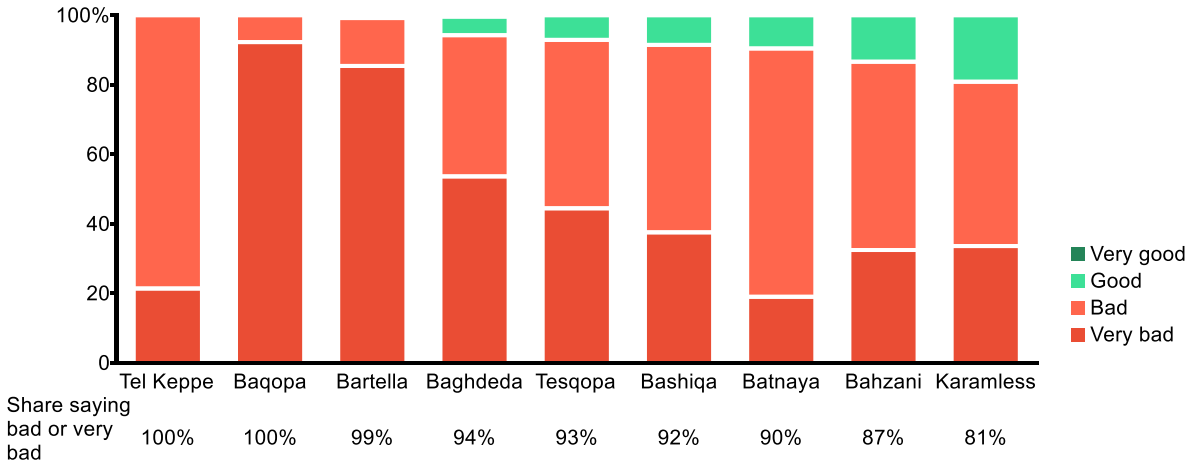
Baghdeda resident

*“Baghdeda is **dead economically.**”*

Baghdeda resident

In many locations, the economy is poor or middling

Opinion on the economy



In the Nineveh Plains, 93% of Christians characterize the economy as bad or very bad. The primary driver of the poor economy is the state of Iraq as a whole, which is burdened by sanctions, poor security, extreme corruption, and an unpredictable political system.

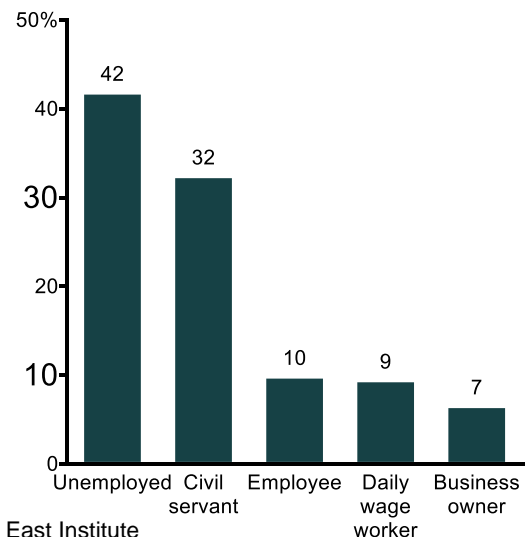
There is some evidence brought by ACN's survey to suggest that the economic situation in the Nineveh Plains may be worse than elsewhere in Iraq. For example, across Iraq, only 79% of the population characterizes the economy as bad or very bad, vs. 93% among Christians. Likewise, unemployment nationwide (8%) is far lower than in the Nineveh Plains (45%). These differences are probably linked to several exacerbating factors in the case of these towns, such as the poor security.

Some Christians claim employment and purchasing discrimination. For example, some Christians claim there is a "covert boycott" of Christian-owned business in the Nineveh Plains. Several Christians ACN interviewed claim that imams instruct their followers not to purchase from Christians. ACN was not able to independently verify these reports. Irrespective of whether these claims are true, they speak to the tensions in the region. Meanwhile, some of the economic hindrances that apply to other groups in Iraq do not generally apply to Christians in the Nineveh Plains; for example, literacy among Christians is better. Historically, schools created by the Dominicans and Jesuits have been among the most prestigious in the country. As an illustration, many Christians, before ISIS, were successful civil servants.

*"I am 100% sure that **Shabak families only want to purchase from other Shabak**. Perhaps, this is a deliberate policy. Perhaps, it's because the imams are telling them to do that ... Before ISIS, the security in Mosul wasn't good for the Shabak, so they came to purchase from us. This is why our economy was strong. Now, though, they control parts of Mosul and Bartella, so they can shop there instead."*

Baghdeda resident

Self-described job among Syriac Catholics*



*Conducted by Fr. Ammar in Erbil during the displacement
Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey; Arabarometer; Middle East Institute

The economic situation is directly linked to poor security

The poor economy is directly linked to poor security in the region, including the influence of militias. Although locals often suggest starting businesses or factories as a solution to unemployment, direct economic intervention is unlikely to be a long-term solution without improvements to security. The economy has the following structural issues:

- **Economic interference by militias:** Militias interfere with the local economy, either directly, or indirectly. In some instances, militias have had associated economic offices, which have monopolized certain industries at the expense of free enterprise. For example, this occurred in the Nineveh Plains at the hands of the Shabak Militia with the scrap metal industry. Likewise, militias will sometimes demand payments from businesses attempting to transport goods past checkpoints, which are arbitrary and do not have the character of a tax or tariff. Finally, militias will sometimes request payments for permission to run or open a business, such as a restaurant.
- **Low predictability:** The unstable security situation makes investment by international companies or even national companies based in Baghdad challenging. Given the low to moderate chances of a terrorist group returning, or a regional war, large investments are not worth making. For example, the Bank of Baghdad, a major commercial bank, does not operate any branches in Mosul or the Nineveh Plains. Likewise, few of the gasoline filling stations present in Kurdistan operate any outlets in the area.
- **Emigration:** The steady emigration of Christians, who are the minority with the most assets in the region, diminishes the logic of business creation. It does little sense to start a business serving a declining population with poor long-term viability.
- **Security costs:** Companies seeking to operate in the Nineveh Plains or Mosul face burdensome security arrangements to keep their assets and personnel safe.
- **Reputational and legal concerns:** To foreign companies, there is a large reputational risk associated with having to seek accommodation with military actors receiving sanctions from the United States.



A flag associated with the Shabak Militia flies at a scrap metal site outside of Mosul. (November 2019.)

*“Interviews at scrapyards and with those in the industry corroborate accounts by lawmakers that the militias oversee or direct the transport of scrap, which is then melted down for use in building materials, and turn a large profit. These sources say **PMF groups use their growing influence — and sometimes, according to some witnesses, intimidation** — to corner the market and control transport of metal from damaged cities such as Mosul to Kurdish-run northern Iraq where it is bought and melted into steel.”*

Reuters

*“The militias are doing negative things. They’re taking on an **administrative and economic role**. In some places, if you want to open a shop – like a restaurant – you can’t do that without paying a sum of money to a militia. Likewise, if you’re trying to transport goods from Erbil to Mosul, they won’t let you past a checking point unless you pay a tax.”*

Baghdeda resident

In addition, limited movement harms commerce

Militias in the region have imposed restrictions on movement that limit free commerce, which harms economic specialization and businesses that develop economies of scale.

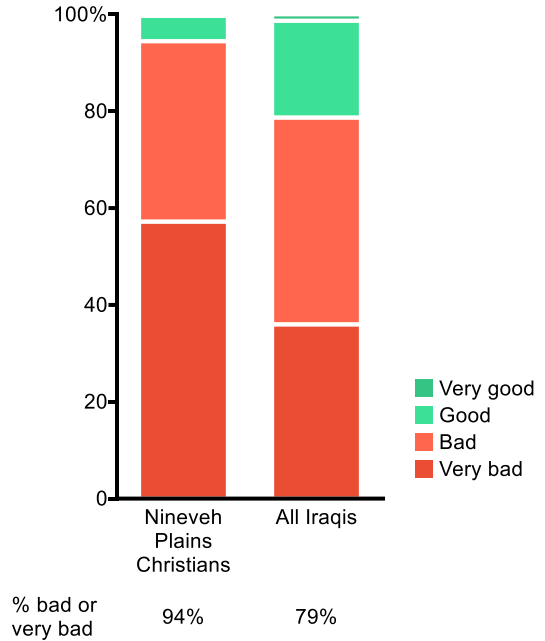
This problem is notable in Baghdeda, where, before ISIS, the town was a thriving city. In particular, it had an artificial advantage due to the insecurity in Mosul; large numbers of Shabak families would visit to make purchases. Also, Arabs from Mosul would visit to purchase alcohol or other products in semi-clandestine circumstances. In ACN's survey, 67% of respondents from Baghdeda rated the pre-ISIS economy as good or very good, vs. only 52% in other regions.

Today, not only do the Shabak have their own commercial centers, but they are also able to shop in Mosul, due to the improved security. Because of the NPU's security concerns, it is also more difficult for outsiders to visit Baghdeda than in the past. Visiting Muslims, especially those from Mosul, are required to leave their documents at the checkpoint, for collection upon their return. Visitors who are not able to cite a satisfactory or convincing reason for their visit are denied entry.

*“Baghdeda needs to be **opened up to its neighboring Muslim villages**, so they can come and purchase goods here. First, though, we need security.”*

Member of religious congregation

Opinion on the economy



*“People aren’t coming back for commerce. They’ve **sealed themselves off.**”*

Clergy member



Economic infrastructure in Kurdistan, which is secure, is considerably better than in areas controlled by Iranian-backed militias. Compare a gas station in Erbil (left) to a gas station in Baghdeda (right), only an hour away. (November 2019.)

Respondents stressed the importance of employment

Although there are great obstacles to the improvement of the economic situation in the Nineveh Plains, respondents stressed the importance of this goal.

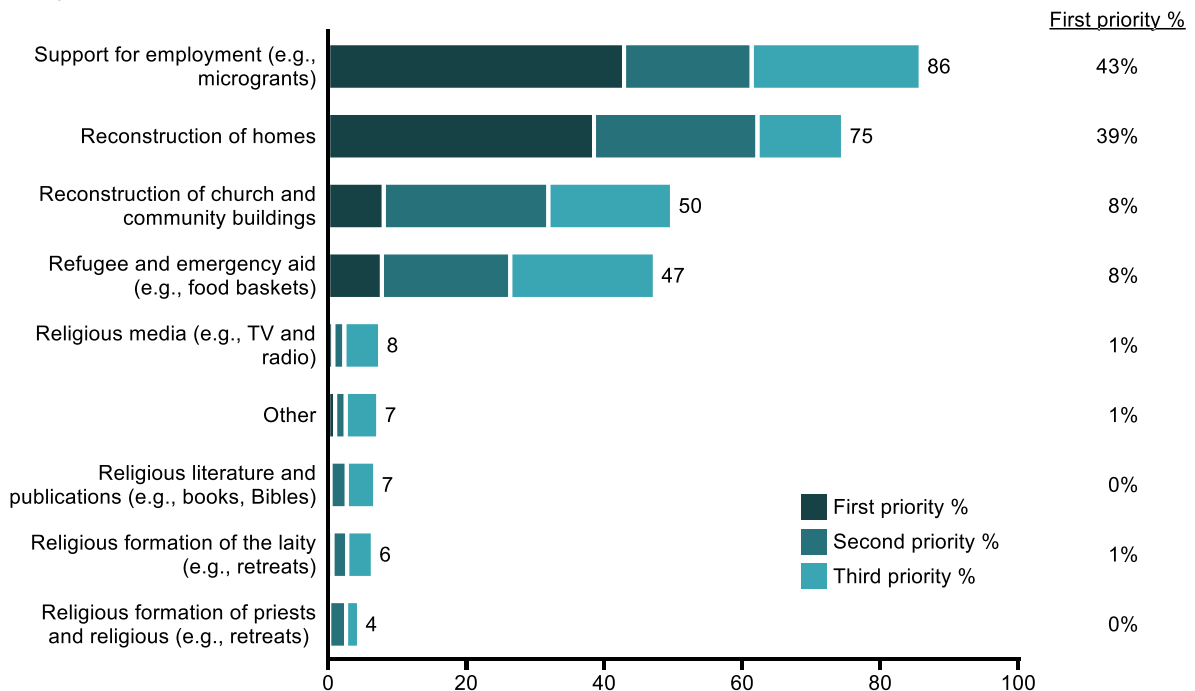
When asked to indicate what international NGOs should focus on in their work with the Christian community, 43% selected support for employment, followed closely by the reconstruction of homes.

Interviews with Iraqis reveal that when respondents indicate that support for employment is important, they envisage direct employment by the government or NGOs as the solution to this problem. Because of Iraq's socialist past, there is a tendency to focus on government employment rather than private enterprise as the solution to unemployment; given the poor state of Iraq's finances right now as well as the security concerns that NGOs have with operating in the Nineveh Plains, neither of these are likely to occur in the near future.



A café in Baghdad; the most common small businesses in the area include cafes, hairdressers, grocery shops, and restaurants. Today, fewer residents work in agriculture, as was common in the past. (November 2019.)

Share of respondents including an NGO priority as one of their top three priorities



Many Christians complain of treatment as second-class citizens in the land of their ancestors, purely on account of their religion.

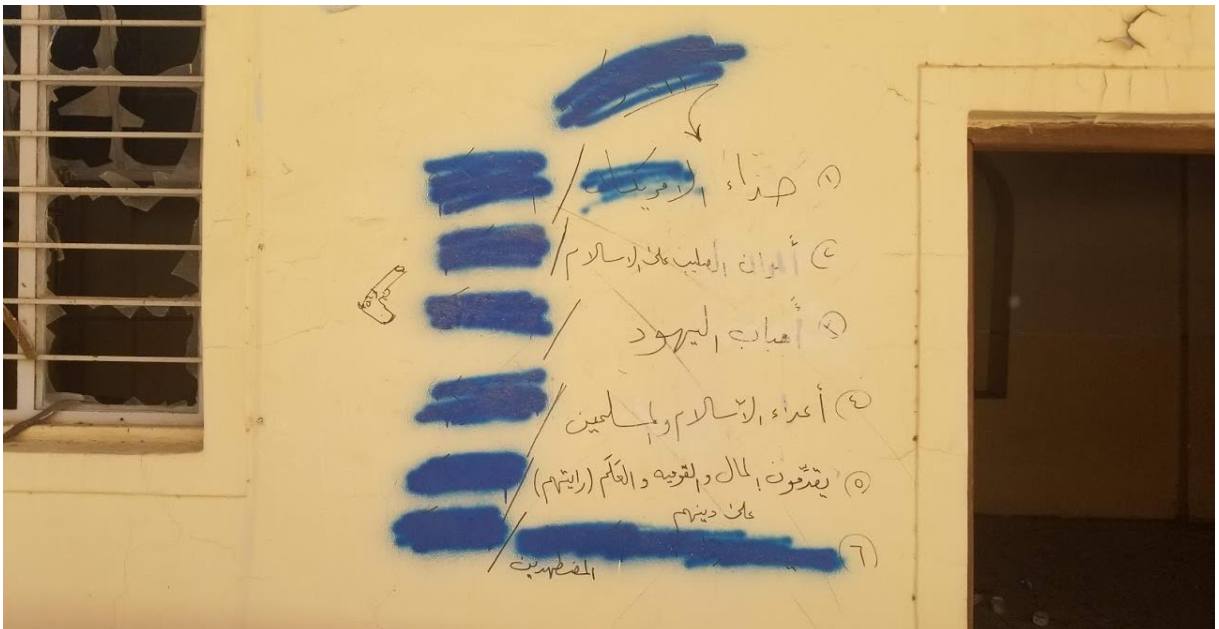
While all groups in Iraq suffered under Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other groups, Christians remain the subject of suspicion.

Their religion not only ties them to US forces, but it also subjects them to the intolerance of other groups in Iraqi society.

This discrimination manifests itself not only in overt violence, but discrimination in employment, marriage law, and education.

Key findings:

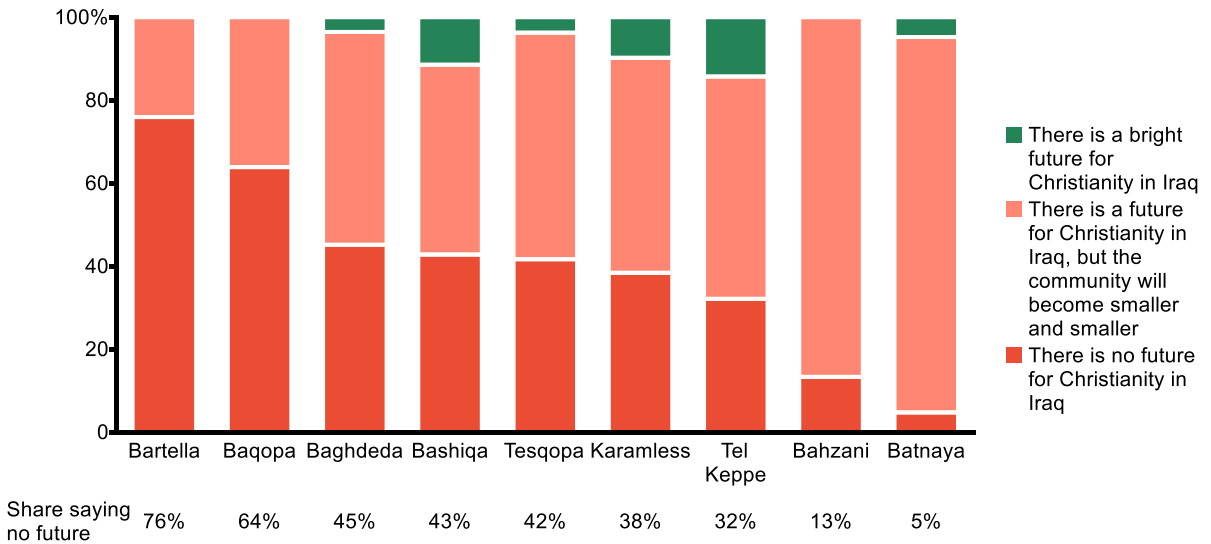
- Only 27% Christians say they have good or excellent relations with non-Christians
- Sectarian tensions are especially high in Bartella, where only 6% describe relations with neighbors as good or excellent
- 50% of respondents say there is no future for Christianity in Iraq



ISIS graffiti left in Batnaya lists the characteristics of Christians: “American boots”, “Jew lovers”, “enemies of Islam and Muslims”, “those who choose money, nationalism, and their flag over religion”, and “oppressors.” (November 2019.)

Many Christians see no future for Christianity in Iraq

Assessment of the situation of Christianity in Iraq



In many areas, there is pessimism about the long-term viability of Christianity in Iraq. Only 3% of respondents said they saw a bright future for Christianity in Iraq. This pessimism is most notable in Bartella, where tensions between Syriacs and the Shabak are high.

A variety of laws discriminate against Christians living in Baghdad-controlled Iraq:

- **Marriage law:** It is illegal for Christian men to marry Muslim women, without converting to Islam.
- **Parental rights:** Although Christian women are permitted to marry Muslim men, their children must be raised Muslim.
- **Conversions:** It is virtually illegal although not technically illegal for Muslims to convert to Christianity. Although there are several well-documented instances of Muslims converting, all of them convert in secret or seek asylum overseas upon conversion. A convert to Christianity might be prosecuted under Iraq's anti-blasphemy law; more likely, they might be murdered by their family or local jihadist militants.

Likewise, those living under the control of the KRG face similar legal issues. While the Kurdish government talks about its reputation for tolerance, it maintains a secret religious police that seeks to enforce some Islamic laws. It also refused to recognize Christians in its drafting of a constitution and is frequently accused of land theft from Christians.

“At my son’s school, the other students ask him all the time why he isn’t a Muslim.”

Mosul resident

“The new textbook for the fifth or sixth grade speaks ill of the Jews and the Christians. The Jews are not the same as the Zionists. Christians are not hypocrites or polytheists as written there.”

Chaldean Catholic leader

“I know a Muslim who became Catholic ... he hasn’t told his family. Every Sunday, he tells them that he’s going on a drive. In reality, he’s attending mass.”

Baghdeda resident

Some feel that the government deliberately ignores Christian needs

Reduced public services

Some people believe that the government is complicit in some of the problems facing Christian areas.

One of the most challenging issues facing Christians in Iraq is a lack of appropriate government services:

- Reliable electricity
- Safe drinking water
- Roads that are fit for use
- Appropriate sewage and sanitation
- Salaries paid to government workers

While these problems exist in all areas, some people believe that the government is specifically disinterested in investment in Christian areas, due to animus or the belief that it is not worth investing in a community with high levels of emigration.

Meanwhile, although some organizations provide limited support to municipal facilities (e.g., public parks, street lighting), NGOs are reluctant to fund electricity and road projects since this is seen as the proper domain of the government. If NGOs begin to usurp the role of the government in Christians towns, this may incentivize the government to neglect these areas even further, which is not a long-term solution.

Employment discrimination

Many also suggest that the government is not interested in hiring Christian graduates, who were traditionally well-represented in some civil service and educational careers. For example, some people speak of the difficulty for well-qualified Christian candidates in getting jobs at the prestigious University of Mosul.

Some point to an incident at a local university near Baghdeda as a demonstration of this discrimination. The Iraqi government founded Al-Hamdaniya University in 2014, specifically in response to concerns about discrimination at the Sunni-dominated University of Mosul; in particular, it was intended to function as a safe space for Christians. In 2018, the government appointed a Muslim scientist, Aqeel Yahya Hashim Al-Araji as President of the University; local Christian leaders feel disenfranchised at the choice of a Muslim over what they consider to have been a better qualified Christian candidate. Both Cardinal Raphael Sako of Baghdad and Archbishop Boutros Mouche of Baghdeda called upon Al-Araji to be replaced without success.

*“Several thousands of people were recently hired by the Ministry of Education. Ask how many of them were Christian men and women. This is despite the fact that we have capable people ... This is **all planned, it is no coincidence.**”*

Chaldean Catholic leader

*“The government in Mosul and Baghdad are **distant from the people.** They came to power via force, not democracy.”*

Mosul resident

*“At this school, the **government does not always pay us our salaries.**”*

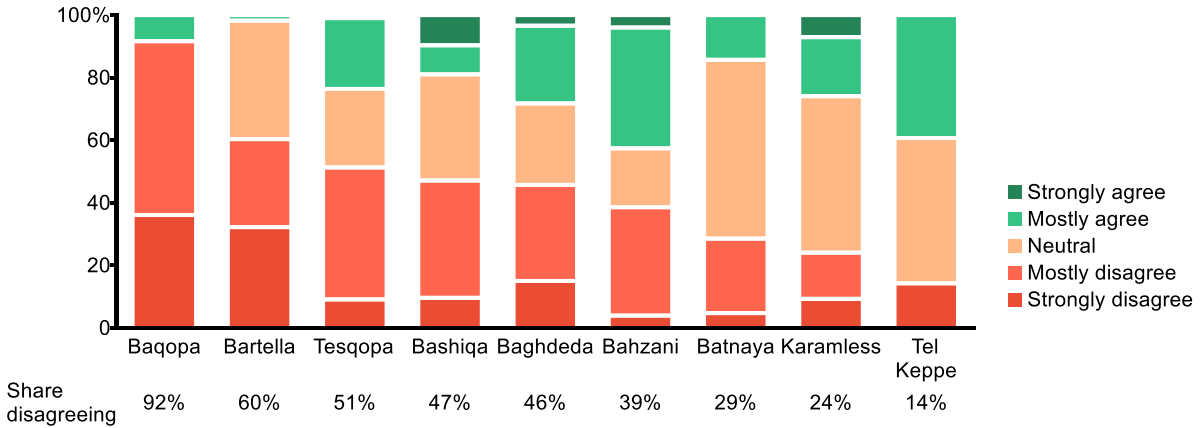
Tesqopa resident



At Al-Hamdaniya University, the government was accused of selecting a lesser-qualified Muslim candidate over a Christian professor to run an institution founded to support minorities. (November 2019.)

Some feel neglected by foreign governments and NGOs

Agreement with the statement that Christians receive sufficient international attention



Only a minority of Christians agree that international attention given to their cause is sufficient.

While hundreds of NGOs work out of Mosul and Erbil, few work in Christian areas, largely because of the perception that Christians are more educated and better-resourced than other communities in Iraq. Christian leaders vigorously disagree with this treatment, arguing that Christians, alongside Yezidis, have been the pre-eminent victims of aggression over the last 17 years, and deserve a share of the resources that are being invested in Iraq.

Some NGOs and international commentators claim that Christians are not disproportionately affected by extremist groups in Iraq. These comments, largely by Western journalists and human rights activists, are untrue and directly contradict the consensus of both Christian and Muslim Iraqis, as well as all available statistical evidence.

Most Christians are aware that the Hungarian and Polish governments have invested sums of money in the Christian community, as well as the US government, through USAID.

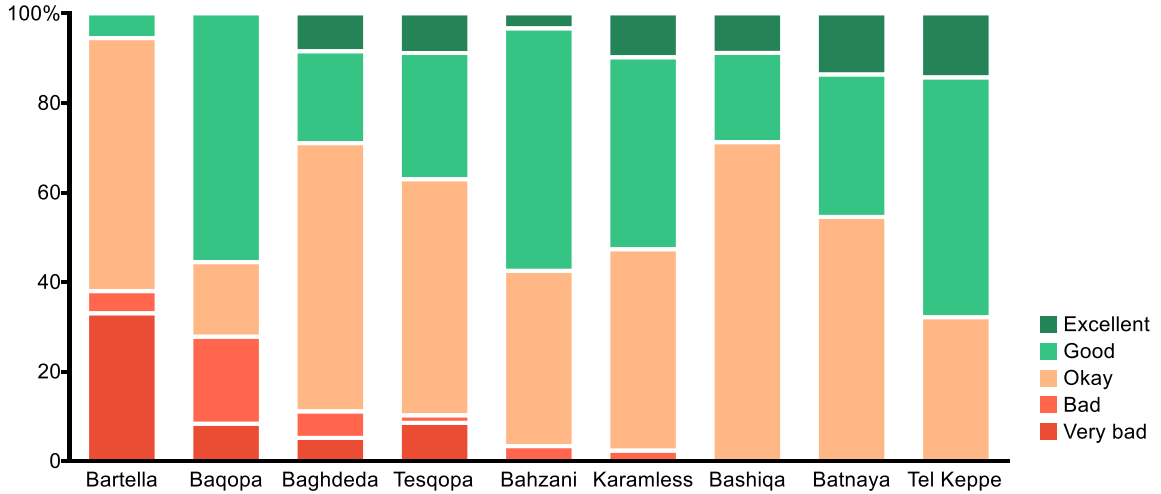
Some, however, note the apparent lack of interest on the part of Western European governments, such as the UK, France, and in Scandinavia. Many express the general opinion that these governments are secular to the point of discriminating against Yezidis and Christians, the religious minorities most impacted by ISIS.

“Christians from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq aren’t persecuted more than others,” said the head of Human Rights Watch in Australia, Elaine Pearson. **‘In both Syria and Iraq, Muslims have overwhelmingly borne the brunt of most of the atrocities by ISIS and by the Assad regime.’**
The New York Times

“When the international community talks about the Nineveh Plains, they always talk about all minorities. They don’t talk about the specific danger to Christians as a minority in this country. First, we are targeted because of our religion. Second, we are the most affected by emigration. Third, we have fewer children ... Before ISIS, there were more Christians than Yezidi and Shabak. Now, it’s the other way around.”
Baghdeda resident

85% describe relations with non-Christians as good or okay

Description of relationship with people who are not Christian



Share saying bad or very bad: Bartella (38%), Baqopa (28%), Baghdeda (11%), Tesqopa (10%), Bahzani (3%), Karamless (2%), Bashiqa (0%), Batnaya (0%), Tel Keppe (0%)

In most areas, people are reluctant to describe their relationships with non-Christians as bad; “okay” was the most common answer.

Sectarian tensions vary dramatically, however, from town to town. The following are worthy of particular comment:

- Bartella:** The most obvious outlier in responses was Bartella, where almost 40% described relations as bad or very bad; this is likely a reflection of the tensions between Shabak and Christians in the town. Some Christians, who are now in the minority, accuse the Shabak of “taking over” what had been an historically Christian town.
- Mosul:** In Mosul, relations with Sunni Arabs remain poor; this is reflected by the extremely low return rate, even though security is similar to some other parts of the Nineveh Plains.
- Baghdeda:** Although Baghdeda has a small Shabak population, many are afraid that the town risks becoming Shabak, much like Bartella has. There are attempts to prevent resettlement in the town by those who did not own homes in the town before ISIS.
- Bashiqa and Bahzani:** In Bashiqa and Bahzani, leaders speak of excellent relations between Christians and Yezidis, who are the dominant group.

*“In Bashiqa, we **don’t try to keep out non-Christians like in some other towns.** If you’re Muslim, come on in. If you’re Shabak, come on in. If you’re Yezidi, come on in. This means we have better relations, and the Christians are not afraid of other groups.”*

Bashiqa resident



Graffiti outside a church in Batnaya reads: “Muslims love Jesus, the son of the Virgin Mary.” It may have been left by members of the Shia-dominated “Christian” militia, the Babylon Brigade. (November 2019.)

Although substantial progress has been made, substantial reconstruction work remains to be done.

While substantial progress has been made, most towns remain in a worse state than in 2014.

Because many humanitarian NGOs sometimes pass over Christian towns, most funds have come from Christian-aligned organizations, as well as the Hungarian and Polish governments. Although the US government has earmarked large sums of money for minorities in Iraq, some Christians complain that this money is not reaching its target.

Key findings:

- *One in five respondents said their house had not yet been fully restored, especially in Tesqopa and Baqopa*
- *51% believe homes should be the number one priority for reconstruction*
- *After homes, gardens, cultural centers, and churches were considered most important*



A burned home in Baghdeda, only 200 metres away from the Reconstruction Office. (November 2019.)

Roughly 45% of the population has returned

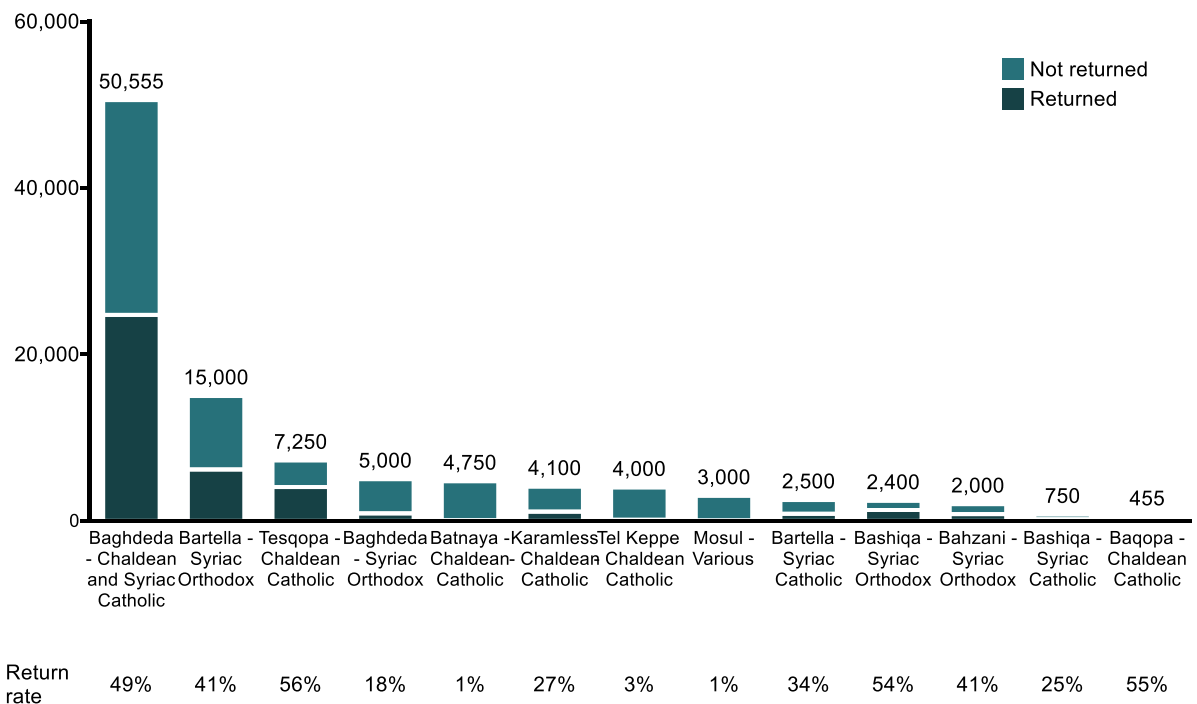
In 2017, small numbers of families began moving back to secured towns. In 2018, the pace of returns accelerated as water, electricity, and security in the towns improved.

By 2019, the pace of returns had slowed. In all locations, the population is either flat or slowly decreasing due to emigration.

A small proportion of the Christian population in the Nineveh Plains is still internally displaced. In particular, few Christians have resettled Batnaya and Tel Keppe, and many remain in Tesqopa.

- **Batnaya:** Controlled by the 50th Brigade, the security situation is still tense. A handful of Christians have returned, but few vestiges of ordinary life remain: water, electricity, and functioning institutions. A large number of homes repaired by the UNDP lie vacant, some of which have been damaged by militant groups after their repair.
- **Tel Keppe:** Although public utilities and commerce have resumed in Tel Keppe, the town has mostly been resettled by its Arab residents. Only ~130 of the ~4,000 Chaldean Catholics who previously lived in this city have returned, mostly due to security concerns.

Status of returns to Nineveh, including Mosul, by community (August 2019)



Source: ACN Returnee Survey

Many homes lie destroyed or unfit for human habitation

Although extensive work has been done to repair homes, in some towns, many homes still need to be fixed.

ACN found that approximately 12% of Christians currently living in the Nineveh Plains had not yet returned to the location in which they were living in 2014, i.e., they remain internally displaced within the Nineveh Plains. Of these, 54% were still waiting for their home to be repaired, indicating that the task of repairing homes for all those who would like to return is not yet finished. Of Christians who had not yet returned, 62% said they were likely, somewhat likely, or very likely to return to the location in which they were living in 2014.

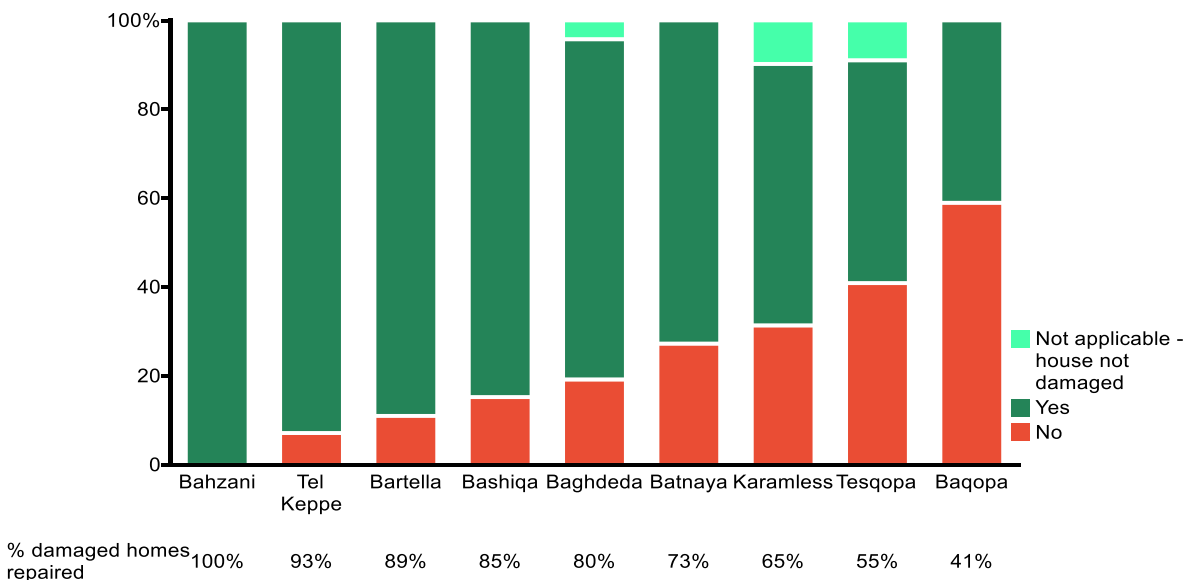
Many of the homes needing reconstruction are more heavily damaged; in another ACN survey, 22% of those without a restored home indicated it had been totally destroyed, vs. only 12% of those with a restored home.

Those without a home must find accommodation in other ways. For example, some rent a home elsewhere; for example, many families from Batnaya rent homes in Tesqopa. Others are living in homes that have been voluntarily given to them by Iraqi Christians who have emigrated and do not intend to return. In some cases, multiple families share the same home.



Damaged homes in Batnaya, one of the more damaged areas. (November 2019.)

2014 home repaired



Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey

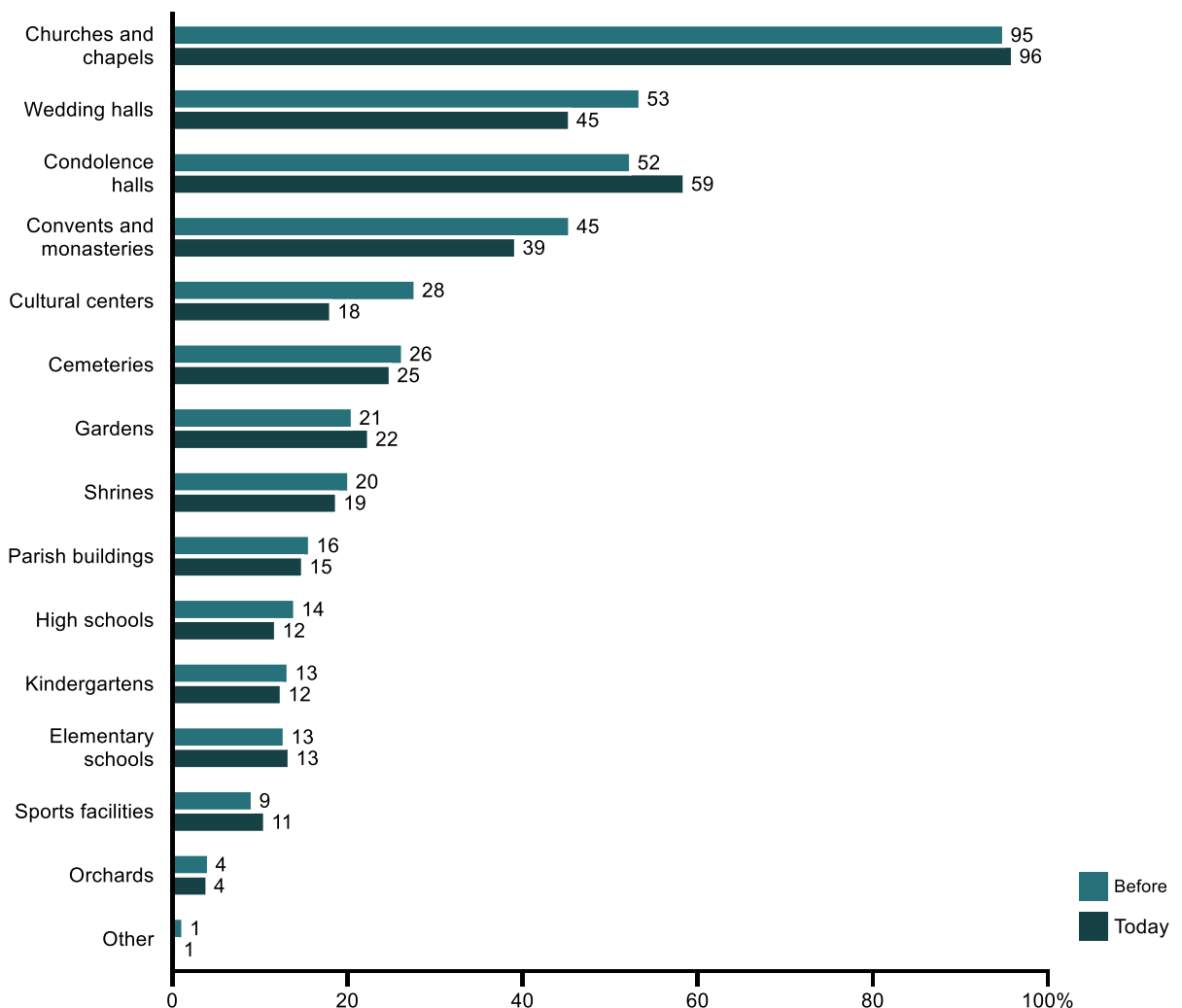
Religious facilities figure as important community spaces

Respondents indicated that both before and after ISIS, religious facilities figured among the most important community spaces. For example, it is a common family activity to visit monasteries, passing an entire day there and sometimes staying the night. In Iraq, there are fewer public spaces in the Western sense of the word, and in this sectarian society where the state is more absent, religious communities fill the gap in the social life. Monasteries, for example, function as an affordable resort or getaway for Christian families, in accord with their historical function of hospitality.

Although in most cases, respondents recorded similar usage rates of community spaces in the last 12 months as before ISIS, there were statistically significant differences in three categories: cultural centers, wedding halls, and monasteries.

This decline reflects not only damaged facilities, but also socio-demographic changes that have reduced demand for certain facilities. For example, the decline in the use of wedding halls is likely driven by substantial emigration of young people. Also, some people are delaying marriage due to economic uncertainty.

Share of respondents using a community space in the last 12 months



Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey

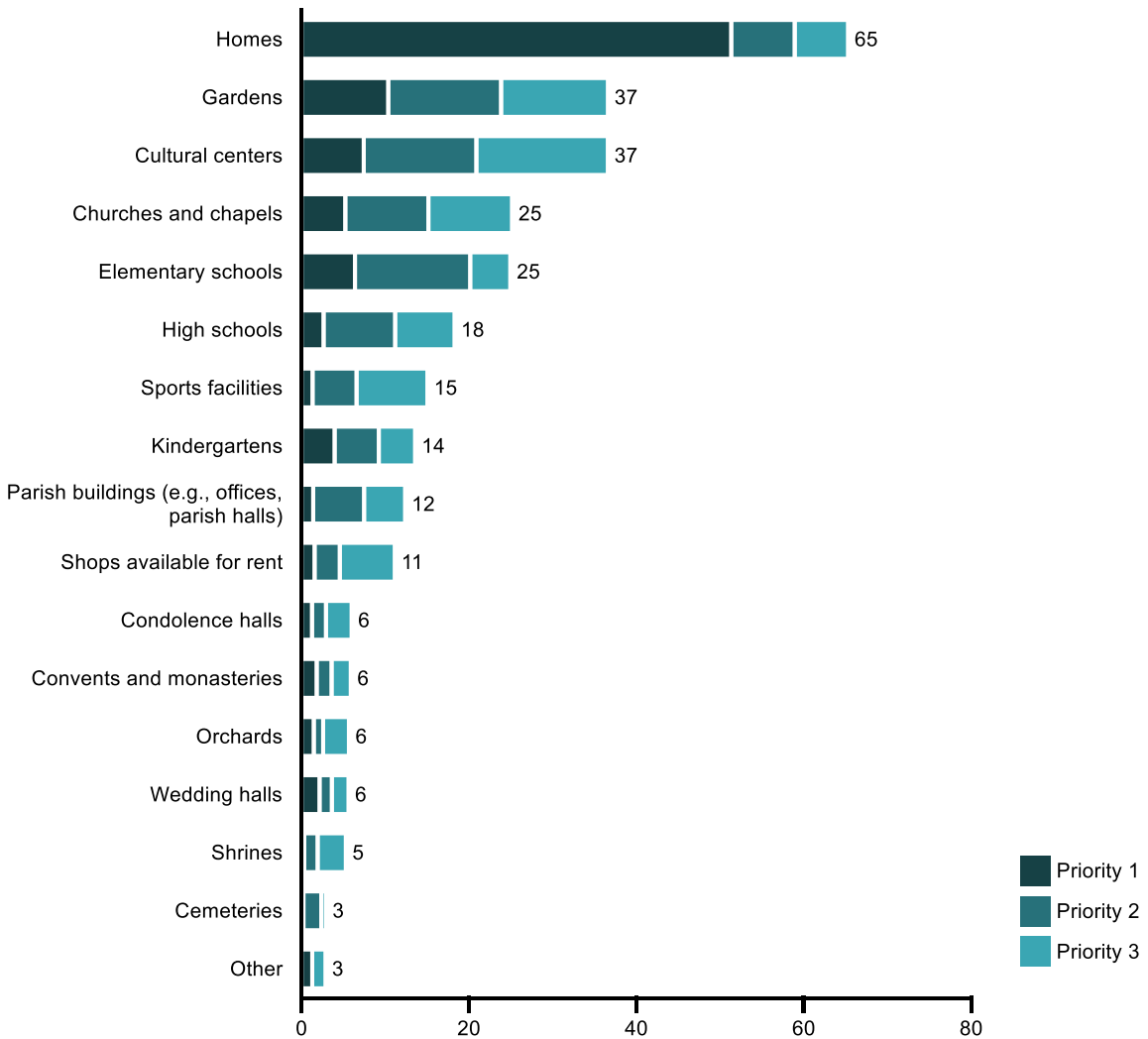
Respondents prioritized homes, gardens, and cultural centers

As expected, homes were overwhelmingly considered most important by respondents. Surprisingly, however, respondents did not otherwise prioritize the buildings that they most frequent for reconstruction. Only small numbers of respondents prioritized condolence halls (6%), wedding halls (6%) and cemeteries (3%). Rather, gardens and cultural centers figured prominently. The rationale here may be that these facilities are most critical to quality of life for families, in a context in which many are worried about the declining number of children.

*“Gardens are **very popular and some of them still need work.** It’s not uncommon for people to leave Iraq because the streets are terrible and nothing looks good.”*

Baghdeda resident

Share of respondents including a property type as one of their top three construction priorities



Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey

Reconstruction facilitates high participation in community activities

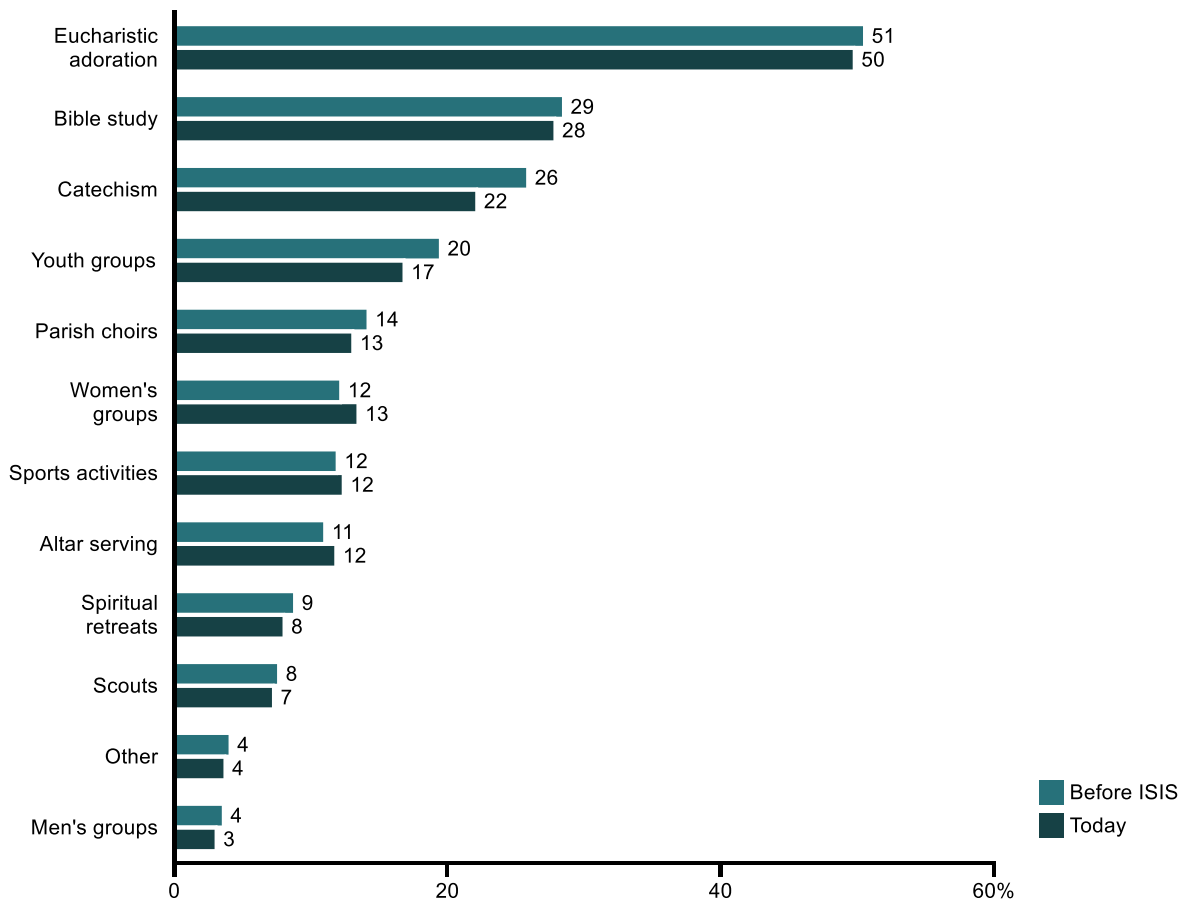
Participation across all activities is broadly the same today as before ISIS. High numbers, though, point to the importance of repairing and maintaining facilities that allow these activities to take place.

The below figures stress the importance of religious life to Syriacs, Chaldeans, and Assyrians living in the Nineveh Plains.



Tel Keppe has seen extremely little reconstruction of community spaces. Of eight churches or chapels, only one has been rehabilitated, using the funds of parishioners. Pictured here is the cemetery overlooking Sacred Heart Church, almost totally ravaged by militants. (November 2019.)

Share of respondents taking part in an activity in the last 12 months



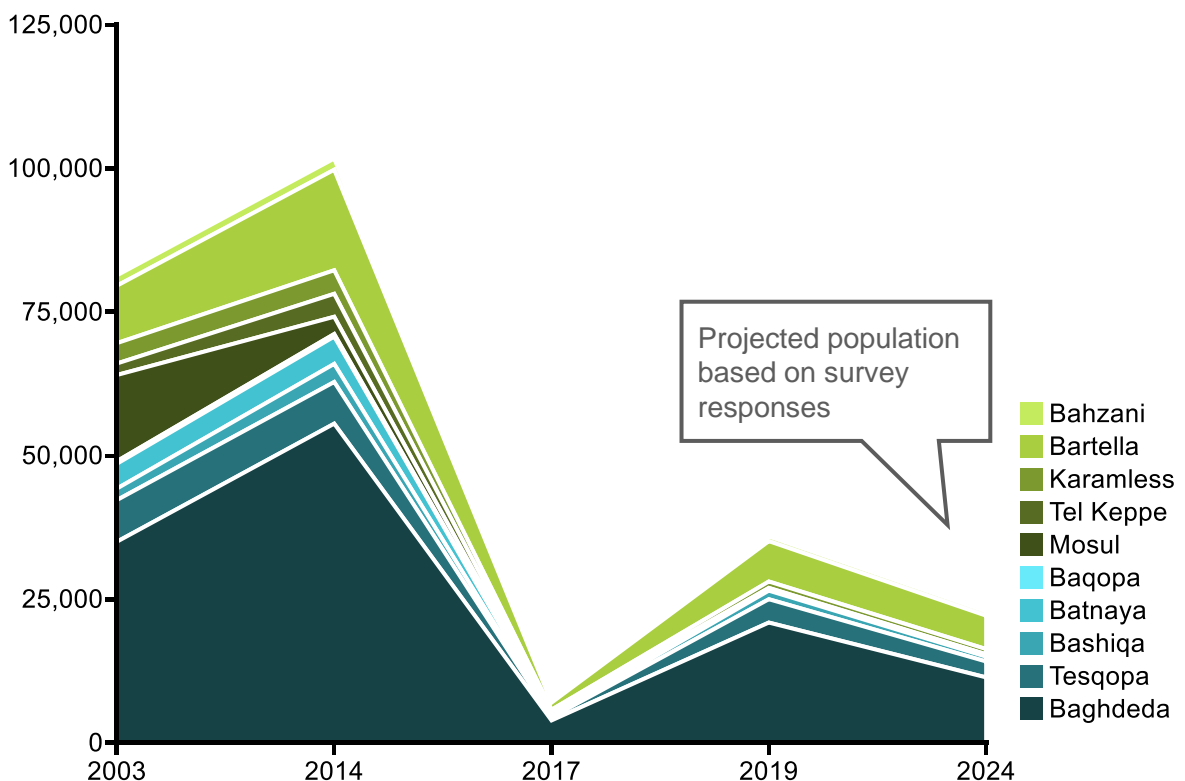
Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey

Key findings

1 In most areas, the population has reached an inflection point due to emigration.

- Although, until recently, the population of these locations was increasing, with the return of families from Erbil, Dohuk, and elsewhere, there are now more families leaving than arriving.
 - > 57% of Christians have considered emigration; of these, 55% expect to leave by 2024.
 - > Given these plans, the Christian population in former ISIS-occupied areas may be as little as 23,000 in 2024 – losing 80% of its population since its peak of 102,000 in 2014.
- Although emigration is a legitimate choice, it worsens the situation for Christians who remain by reducing the critical mass of remaining Christians. As in the past, empty Christian homes are often occupied, sometimes illegally, by other groups, effecting a demographic displacement. With demographic displacement, Christian leaders and militias are likely to be replaced by Iranian-backed leaders and militias, who provide a less hospitable environment for Christians.
- *Recommendation:* NGOs, Churches, and governments seeking to improve the condition of Christians in Iraq should make emigration a primary focus while engaging with Iraq. These groups need to respect the right to emigrate, while fully engaging with the causes that drive people to emigrate. A primary criterion during project design should be impact on the emigration calculus.

Christian population (historical + forecast)



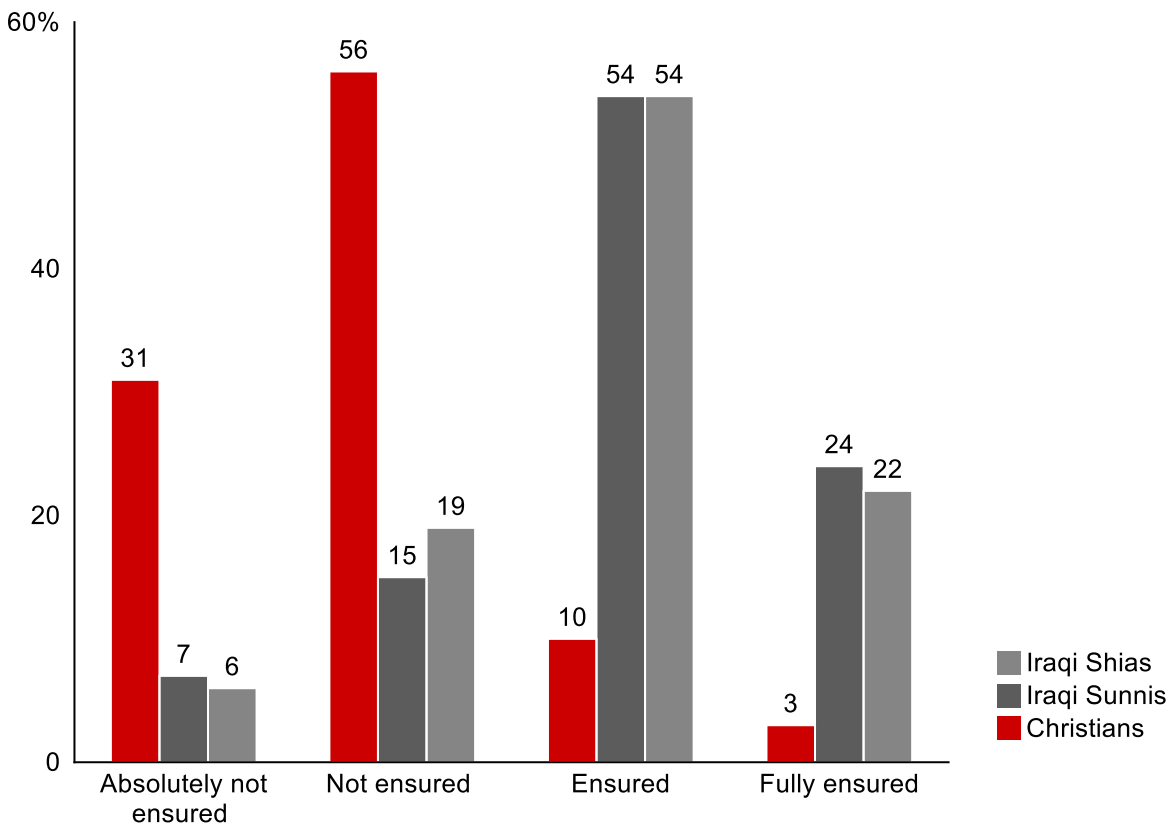
Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey

Key findings

2 Christians have returned to their homes, but they still feel unsafe, and substantially more insecure than other groups in Iraq. Militias rather than ISIS are the primary cause of problems.

- Although ISIS has been defeated, Christians remain subject to threats, extortion, and intimidation. ACN's survey found that substantial minorities in all locations, especially Bartella, claimed to have been negatively impacted by post-ISIS militias in the last one to two years.
- It is this concern around security, rather than the economic or family reasons, that is the primary driver of emigration.
- *Recommendation:* NGOs, Churches, and governments seeking to improve the condition of Christians in Iraq should make as a primary goal advocacy leading to the restoration of security in the Nineveh Plains. Local groups should work closely with the local Church in Iraq to perform this advocacy, which can be delicate. Foreign governments should exert pressure on the government in Baghdad and Erbil, which, distracted by a variety of domestic issues, does not view this as a high priority issue. There are a variety of political solutions, which although challenging, will likely be better than the status quo, including an international peace-keeping force, the abolition of militias, or limited autonomy within Iraq's federal framework, in cooperation with the Yazidis, Shabak, and Kakai.

Feeling of personal security



Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey; Arabarometer

Appendix: Methodology

This study combines multiple sources

This study combines secondary data with primary data collection. ACN's primary data collection includes:

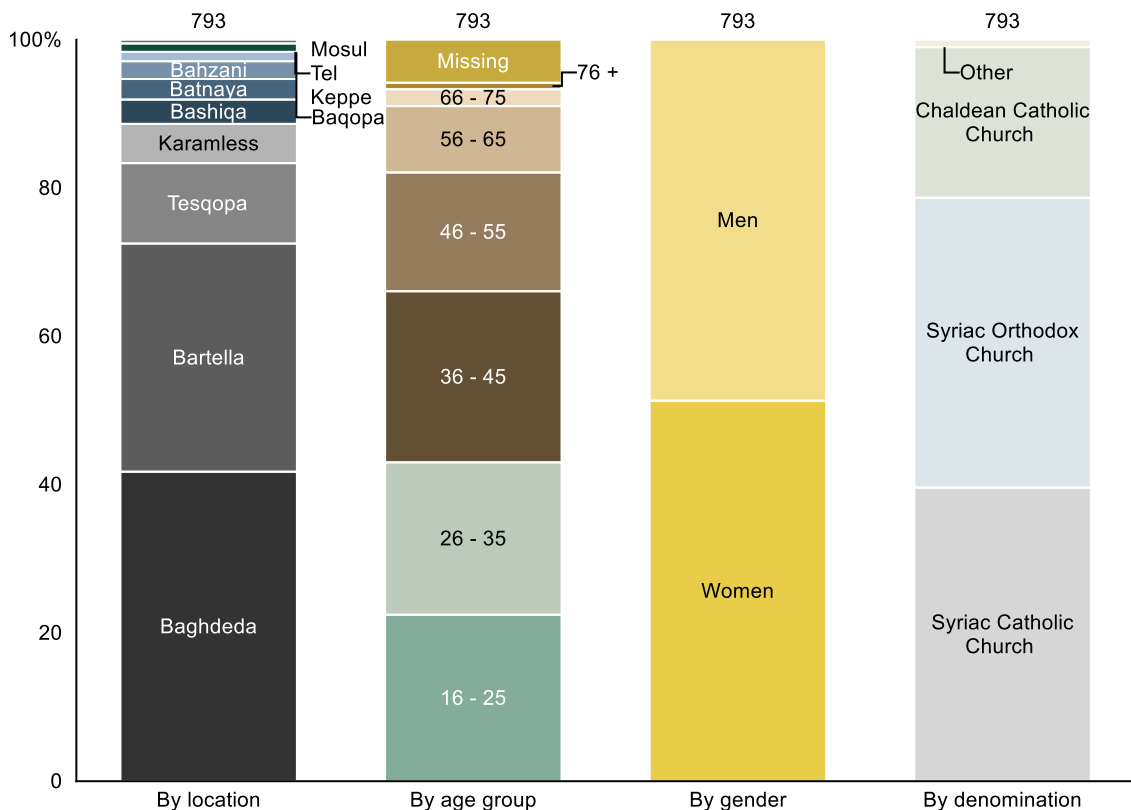
- The 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey and interviews
- The 2018-2019 ACN Nineveh Plains Reconstruction Statistics
- The 2017-2018 ACN Nineveh Plains Destruction Assessment
- The 2017 ACN Christian IDPs and Return to the Nineveh Plains Survey (March 2017)
- The 2016 ACN Christian IDPs and Return to the Nineveh Plains Survey (November 2016)

Data in the stratified sampling survey was collected between August and November 2019 through an individual-level survey. Surveys were completed via a paper questionnaire, and only sometimes completed with the assistance of a formal surveyor. In Karamless, individuals were chosen through random sampling and the survey was done via home visits. In other locations, surveys were distributed with the assistance of the local Church, or via approaching individuals in public places. A total of 793 individuals were surveyed.

Questionnaires were distributed as much as possible to match the known distribution of Christians in ISIS-occupied areas of the Nineveh Plains; survey results in this report are weighted to account for gender and location. Because of the survey design, it should be expected that while survey results are generally representative, this is not a true representative survey because random sampling was not able to be executed. Although attempts were made to mitigate against this occurring, it is possible that results skew toward the more educated and the more religious, because distribution was primarily done through the Church.

In some locations, results should not be taken to be statistically significant due to a low N (e.g., Mosul). These have been included for the sake of completeness. Some questions had missing responses, which are not represented in graphs in this report; missing responses were most common for questions where respondents had to rank the top three items.

Overview of survey respondents



Source: 2019 ACN Christian Life Survey

Appendix: About the authors

About the authors

**Fr. Dr.
Andrzej
Halemba**



Fr Andrzej Halemba is a Polish Catholic priest, missionary, and translator. Since 2006, he has been working for ACN. From 2006 to 2010, he was responsible for English and Portuguese speaking African countries. Since 2010, he has focused primarily on 23 countries in the Middle East. After the 2014 genocide of Iraqi Christians, he oversaw ACN's programs to support suffering Christians. He founded the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee and has also been involved in the response to the Syrian crisis. He has a PhD in Theology.

Xavier Bisits



Xavier Bisits is a management consultant for Bain & Company based in Washington, DC. In 2019, he acted as Project Support Officer for ACN in Erbil and Baghdeda. He holds an MA from Trinity College, Cambridge, where he founded Cambridge Students for Life, and an MS from the University of Virginia. He is a member of Democrats for Life of America.



CHRISTIANS OF IRAQ

IRAQ

18 Governorates
capital: Baghdad *
surface: 437,072 km²

Flag: It reads the phrase *Allahu Akbar (God is greatest)*, added in green Arabic script.
according to Iraqi Constitution Islam is official religion

President of State must not be necessarily Muslim, although all of them have been Arab Muslims

population (2018) **37 million**
pre-crisis population (2013) **34 million**

languages: Arabic (official), Kurdish (official), Turkem (a Turkish dialect), Syriac, Neo-Aramaic, Armenian

Ethno-religious landscape

Arabs 75-80 %

religions in Iraq

- Shites Arabs 58-63%
- Sunni Arabs 17%
- Sunni Kurds 15-20%
- Kurds 15-20 %
- Others 5%

Others 5%
Turkmen
Yezidi
Shabak
Kakai
Bedouin
Romani
Assyrian
Circassian
Persian
Sabeian-Mandeanm

Christians total 227,700

Catholic Church	56.9%	128,000
Orthodox Church	35.8%	80,500
Protestant Church	7.1%	15,900
Independent	33.2%	74,800
Unaffiliated	4.7%	10,600
Doubly-affiliated	37.8%	-85,100
Evangelical movement	27,900	56.9%
Renewalist movement	57,000	25.3%

Christians distributions by Churches in Iraq

Decline of Christians population

Year	Percentage
1910	6.4%
1970	3.8%
2005	2.0%
2013	1.3%
2015	1.0%
2025 (forecast)	0.6%
2050 (forecast)	0.4%

*reflect current borders

Christians victims of war

Christian Martyrs 2003-2014

1,107 Christians killed + 15 priests killed

53 died in the Saiedat Al-Najat church in Baghdad in 2011.

Profile of persecution

- 81% Church Life
- 86% Family Life
- 48% Violence
- 87% National Life
- 61% Private Life
- 84% Community Life

Attacks on Christians in 11/2016 -10/2018

- 169 Christians attacked (8 killed, 17 arrested)
- 6,010 Christians-owned houses and shops attacked
- 13 churches attacked

Destruction in the Nineveh Plains (without Mosul)

- Teleskuf: 21 churches, 1,287 destroyed
- Baqofa: 3 churches, 108 destroyed
- Batnaya: 43 churches, 108 destroyed
- Telekef: 40 churches, 880 destroyed
- Bahazani: 13 churches, 310 destroyed
- Bashiqua: 12 churches, 580 destroyed
- MOSUL: 96 churches, 1,813 destroyed
- Bartella: 12 churches, 580 destroyed
- Karmles: 67 churches, 754 destroyed
- Qaraqosh (Bakhdeda): 68 churches, 7,336 destroyed

Church properties 05/2017

- 34 totally destroyed
- 132 burnt
- 197 partially damaged
- total 369 including
- 46 churches, chapels, shrines
- 18 convents and monasteries
- 10 cementaries
- 9 parish offices

Christians private houses 11/2018

- 1,040 totally destroyed
- 3,292 burnt
- 9,708 partially damaged
- total 14,035

Catholic Churches in Iraq

Chaldean Church

- 95 parishes
- 1 patriarchate (Babylon)
- 4 archeparchy (Mosul, Basra, Kirkuk, Erbil)
- 1 archdiocese (Baghdad)
- 3 dioceses (Alqosh, Akra, Amadiyah & Zaku)
- 71 priests
- 1 monastic order
- 2 female congregations

Greek-Melkite Catholic Church

- 1 parish
- 1 patriarchal exarchate (Iraq as one)

Armenian Catholic Church

- 2 parishes
- 1 archeparchy (Baghdad)
- 1 administrator

Latin Church

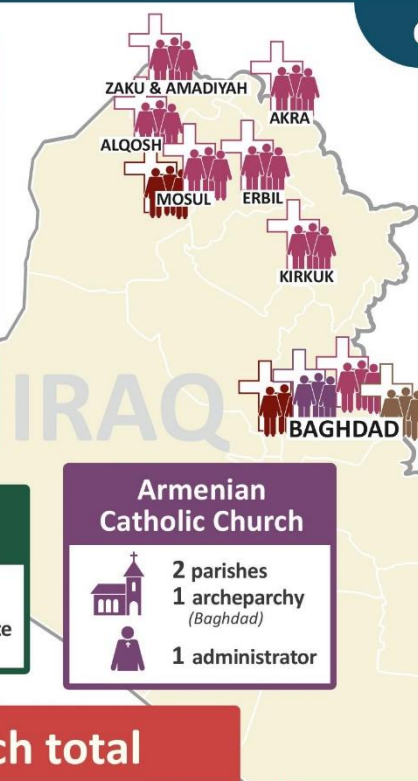
- 3 parishes
- 1 archdiocese (Baghdad)
- 11 priests
- 2 monastic orders
- 6 male congregations
- 9 female congregations

Catholic Church total

- 117 parishes
- 1 patriarchate
- 1 patriarchal exarchate
- 7 archeparchies
- 2 archdioceses
- 3 dioceses
- 134 priests
- 6 male congregations
- 4 monastic orders
- 15 religious men
- 12 female congregations
- 139 religious women

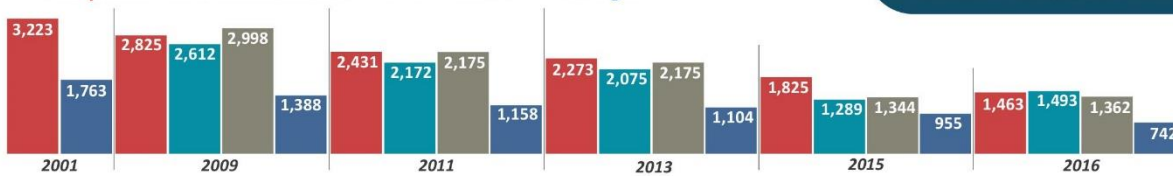
Syriac Catholic Church

- 16 parishes
- 2 archeparchy (Mosul, Baghdad)
- 1 monastic order
- 52 priests
- 1 female congregation



Distribution of Catholics by Church Rites (dioceses)

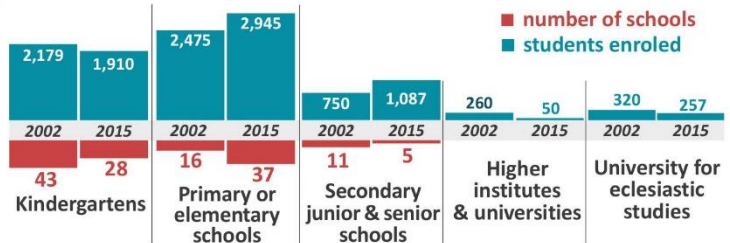
Sacraments received



Catholic education network

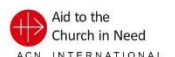
Centres for diocesan clergy
Philosophy and theology:
2 seminaries and 2 residences

Centres for religious clergy
Secondary schools:
1 seminars and 4 residences
Philosophy and theology:
1 seminars



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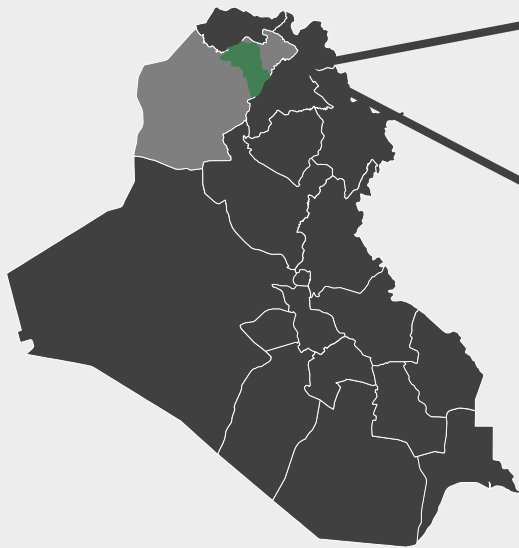
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THE NINEVEH PLAINS IN IRAQ



Aid to the
Church in Need

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