

Iraq:

Challenges for Prayer:

Iraq's future remains uncertain. Saddam Hussein's dictatorship was removed, but a host of problems still plagues the country. Pray for:

a) *The establishment of a national government* that fairly balances the conflicting expectations of the various religious and ethnic communities, and provides an environment that promotes accountability to the people, economic growth and religious freedom. Without these, the future is bleak. Anarchy, civil war, fragmentation of the country and further suffering for the people – especially Christians – could follow. Pray therefore for anointed national leaders who can act with wisdom, courage and integrity.

b) *Healing after decades of suffering.* Nearly every person bears some scars of traumatic experiences – from Hussein's cruelty, from the US-led invasions or from the sectarian violence that has followed. Only the gospel can provide a full solution; pray that this may be freely proclaimed.

c) *The elimination of corruption.* Iraq is ranked as one of the world's most corrupt nations. This has significantly held back the nation from repairing damage and achieving development.

d) *The suffering the Iraqi people have endured.* The number of lives lost as a result of invasions, insurgencies and deprivation may be as high as 600,000, with nearly two million people displaced. More than half of the population live in poverty.

i Women suffer forced marriage, abduction, honor killing, violence and rape, used as a threat and weapon against them. They have almost no recourse to legal protection, and the religious establishment does little or nothing to protect them.

ii Children live in a context of instability and uncertainty. Many do not attend school, less than half have access to safe drinking water and some even face malnourishment. Hundreds of thousands face life as refugees in neighboring, and often unwelcoming, countries.

Many deep divisions run like fault lines through Iraqi society – Kurds against Arabs, Shi'as against Sunnis, Muslims against religious minorities, secular Baathists against Islamist groups. These groups jostle for the power and money that could be wrested from Iraq's uncertain future. These divisions run deep; they cripple the future hope of Iraq and cannot be erased overnight – probably not even in one generation. Only the power of the gospel is potent enough; pray that somehow, against all odds, the good news might break through, and Iraq might be transformed by God's love and justice.

Monumental political changes have occurred since 1991. The Kurds have been grateful to the USA since it liberated their homelands in northern Iraq that year. For the rest of Iraq, Saddam's harsh rule came to an end in 2003. But the US invasion was the perfect platform for Islamist insurgents to unleash terror against the erstwhile occupiers, government forces and other perceived collaborators in an orgy of violence. Rival Shi'a and Sunni factions turned on each other with murderous, even suicidal, intent. Through all this, ordinary people suffered intimidation, kidnappings and bombings. With the withdrawal of Western forces, the responsibility of maintaining and building peace lies with the Iraqis themselves. Signs are promising that they possess the will and the ability to build a stable society. Pray not just for the absence of terror but also for the palpable presence and influence of the Prince of Peace.

Pray for true freedom of religion and from persecution. Islamists vociferously demand exclusive rights for Muslims with full implementation of shari'a law. Christians of all confessions, Yazidis, Mandeans and even heterodox Muslim groups face "protection tax", kidnapping and paying ransom, destruction of their property, rape and murder. The government and police are not yet strong enough or inclined enough to offer substantial protection. Muslim leaders – both Shi'a and Sunni – are increasingly progressive, conciliatory and unity-oriented,

but extremist groups have their own agenda and continue attempts to sow terror and destabilize the country. Pray that Christians might persevere in this difficult situation; pray also for their protection and preservation.

The Christian community has lived an unbroken existence in Iraq since the 1st Century, but this legacy is at risk of disappearing. The majority are Assyrians and descendants of the Nestorian, or Ancient Church of the East, centered in Nineveh and Mosul. The Nestorian Church was one of the greatest missionary denominations of history, winning 6% of all of Asia's population 1,000 years ago. Today, it is reduced through persecution, harassment and compromise to less than two million in the world. Christians in Iraq, the victims of sustained persecution and even genocide, are now only half of what they numbered in the 1990s. Most have fled persecution to Syria or Jordan, others to the West. Few are likely to ever return. Two thirds of Baghdad's churches are closed or destroyed. Pray for the preservation of Iraq's biblical heritage, and for the restoration and rejuvenation of this most historic of Churches.

The Church is characterized by fragmentation – denominationally, ethnically and politically, despite the great opposition all Christians face. The majority are in the Catholic linked Chaldean Church, but others are part of the Assyrian Church of the East, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Protestant denominations or even a Muslim-background believers' network. Some in the historic denominations are being impacted by revival; others resent and oppose what they perceive to be aggressive proselytism and a money-spinning focus of the newer Protestant groups. Outreach to the Muslim majority remains a terrifying prospect to most, although compassionate ministry by some Christians to all in need sees many Muslims profoundly touched. Pray for unity among believers, with a Christ-centered front that responds to hatred and persecution with boldness, forgiveness and love.

Evangelicals are growing at an unprecedented rate. Many are coming from Muslim and even extremist backgrounds, touched by the peace, love and hope Christ offers. They are Arab and Kurd, in the north and south, within Iraq and scattered abroad. However, they come nowhere near offsetting the loss endured by Christianity as a result of the flight of the ancient confessions from Iraq. Pray for these believers, for their witness to non-Christians and for their faith to endure despite many difficulties.

Leadership for the churches is an increasingly desperate need. Many good leaders have fled the country; many others are dead, specifically targeted by Islamists. Some Iraqis are in training in Jordan, Lebanon and even in Iraq itself. Much of the pastoring and discipling is handled by Christian widows of slain leaders; pray for their equipping and enabling. With a young population and many Muslims coming to faith, leaders gifted in discipleship and teaching are crucial. Pray for the return of leaders who have fled, for the development of new leaders and for protection of all who shepherd God's people in Iraq.

All peoples are unevangelized except Assyrian and Armenian minority groups.
Pray for:

a) The Shi'a Arabs of Basra and the south. The exceptional brutality of the Sunni Baathist government brought death to many and devastation to their land and communities. As the majority population, they now control the government and military as well as possess powerful militia groups. There is very little direct witness to them.

b) Sunni Arabs gained the most from the former dictatorship, but, as they see their influence eclipsed, Sunni extremist groups remain a violent threat. Politically minded Sunnis are amenable to power-sharing agreements. Few have heard the gospel.

c) The Madan or Marsh Arabs probably descended from the ancient Sumerians. An oppressive, even genocidal, government policy toward them reduced their population from 450,000 in

the 1950s to a maximum of 90,000 today. Perhaps only 20,000 remain in the marshlands, reduced to 15% of their original size. Restoration of the marshes is now occurring, but the younger generation remain rooted in the cities, not in their traditional marsh homelands. There are no known Christians and no sustained outreach specifically to them.

d) *The Bedouin* number 1.4 million and remain thoroughly unevangelized. Their poverty, marginalization and semi-nomadic lifestyle make them difficult to reach. They have no churches, no outreach to them and only a handful of believers.

e) *Turkmen*, an Azeri-speaking Turkic group, are Iraq's third-largest ethnicity, concentrated in the north. They identify with Turkey and harbor their own dreams of autonomy in a region of Iraq controlled by Kurds. Their number may be anywhere from 500,000 to two million. Split between Shi'a and Sunni Islam, they may have several thousand Catholics in their number but remain largely unreached.

f) *The Yazidi* are a syncretistic offshoot of both Zoroastrianism and Sufi Islam. They originated from India centuries ago and have a unique religion, venerating the "peacock angel", identified by Muslims as Lucifer. This has resulted in centuries of persecution, most intensely since 2003. There are a small number of believers, but they have faced stiff persecution from Muslims and their own leaders.

g) *The smaller Domari (Gypsy) and Mandaean populations.* Both peoples are looked down upon. There are few, if any, believers in their midst.

The Kurdish Autonomous Region possesses significant autonomy but many of its own problems as well. Dominated by Kurds, it possesses restive minorities (Turkmen, Arabs, Assyrians) as well as strong antipathy to neighboring Turkey. The Kurds have fought long for an independent state; Iraqi Arab reprisals have been particularly cruel, and broken Western promises embittering. The KAR's degree of autonomy remains a sensitive issue, nationally and regionally. Pray for the following:

a) *Kurdish desires for freedom and security* are being realized, at least in Iraq, but neighbors with large Kurdish populations see this as a possible threat to stability. Control over the highly contested and oil-rich city of Kirkuk is a particularly hot issue. The Kurdish desire for sovereignty is probably the primary, long-term destabilizing issue for Iraq. The "trigger line", where Arab and Kurdish areas of control meet, is the most violent place in Iraq, and the historic Christian populations are caught in the middle.

b) *Economic improvement* to a region traditionally fraught with poverty. Initially NGOs lent much assistance. Now, the KAR is exporting oil via Turkey. However, the two most powerful (and rival) Kurdish clans have enriched themselves in the post-1991 and post-2003 power plays, much to the disgust of many other Kurds. Most of Iraq's Kurds were displaced by Saddam's genocidal intentions; their return en masse strains the KAR's ability to care for them.

c) *The Church* is officially tolerated in the KAR more than the rest of Iraq, with the Kurdish government even encouraging the work of Christian NGOs and the building of churches. Nonetheless, non-Kurdish ethnic minorities, such as the 45,000 Assyrian Christians, suffer growing marginalization at the hands of the increasingly dominant Kurds.

d) *The number of Kurdish believers* continues to grow – praise God. Even for Kurds, leaving Islam can have dangerous consequences, but many are coming to faith and have a passion for winning others as well. The Church is still young and small, and it faces not only growing pains from within but also pressures from without. Pray also for positive interface between Western Christian NGOs and the Kurdish people, both Christian and non-Christian.

Christian support ministries:

a) *The Bible Society* has been actively involved in Iraq since 1985, importing and printing many Scriptures and NTs. The recent translation of the Bible into Kurdish is one significant boost; almost all languages in Iraq have at least some Scripture. Most recently, the NT has been completed in Sorani Kurdish, and the Bahdini Kurdish NT was near completion in 2010.

b) *Christian literature* is in great demand. Much is imported. There is a growing need and hunger for commentaries, study books and Bibles. Pray that the increasing Scripture distribution would continue and would bear much fruit; more than one million Bibles in Arabic alone have been sent into Iraq. The development of Christian literature in Arabic is well advanced; pray for more materials to be developed in the different dialects of Kurdish.

c) *The JESUS film* is available in 11 languages and is widely seen on TV and extensively distributed in video format. Pray for its impact in the homes and hearts of Iraqis.

d) *Christian satellite TV and radio* are huge influences in Iraq. Millions watch **SAT-7** programs as well as three other Arabic Christian channels. **TWR**, **FEBA** and **IBRA** broadcast radio (mostly via shortwave) into Iraq in Arabic, Sorani Kurdish and a few other languages. The **KAR** has a local Christian radio station. Pray that the good news might reach further using these media; pray also that these tools would be helpful in building up and disciplining