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COI QUERY RESPONSE – Iraq

Conversion from Islam to Christianity

1. Treatment by state

The Constitution of Iraq, in article 2, establishes Islam as the official religion of the country:

‘First: Islam is the official religion of the State and is a foundation source of legislation:

A. No law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam

B. No law may be enacted that contradicts the principles of democracy.

C. No law may be enacted that contradicts the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in this Constitution.

Second: This Constitution guarantees the Islamic identity of the majority of the Iraqi people and guarantees the full religious rights to freedom of religious belief and practice of all individuals such as Christians, Yazidis, and Mandeans.¹

Sources reported that more than 95 % of the population of Iraq is Muslim, of which about 60 % are Shia Muslims.² Although estimates on the exact number of Christians remaining in Iraq vary³, the Christian population in Iraq was reported to have significantly decreased since 2003.⁴ According to CIA World Factbook, the Christian population in Iraq has decreased from 50 % to 90 % since 2003.⁵ According to Open Doors, an organisation working on supporting Christians who are subjected to religious discrimination,⁶ Christians in Iraq mainly lived in the north of the country, particularly in the provinces of Nineveh, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Dohuk and northern Kirkuk, while small numbers also resided in Baghdad and Basra provinces.⁷ However, the same source noted that converts to Christianity resided in all provinces of Iraq, including small groups of converts from Islam in the south and center provinces of the country.⁸

¹ Iraq, Constitution of the Republic of Iraq, 2005, [url](#)

² US, CIA, The World Factbook – Iraq, last updated 3 October 2024, [url](#); USDOS, 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq, 30 June 2024, [url](#), p. 5

³ CFRI, Christians in Post-2003 Iraq: Fragmentation Dynamics, Ethnic and Sectarian Fault Lines, 11 August 2023, [url](#)

⁴ US, CIA, The World Factbook – Iraq, last updated 3 October 2024, [url](#); USDOS, 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq, 30 June 2024, [url](#), p. 5; Rudaw, Iraqi Christians exodus leaves churches empty in the south, 25 January 2024, [url](#)

⁵ US, CIA, The World Factbook – Iraq, last updated 3 October 2024, [url](#)

⁶ Open Doors, About, n.d., [url](#)

⁷ Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), p. 23

⁸ Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), pp. 23 – 24

The Iraqi Constitution, in articles 14 and 43, stipulates the following concerning religious freedom and freedom of belief:

‘Article 14:

Iraqis are equal before the law without discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, origin, color, religion, sect, belief or opinion, or economic or social status.
[...]

Article 43:

First: The followers of all religions and sects are free in the:

A- Practice of religious rites, including the Hussein rituals.

B- Management of religious endowments (waqf), their affairs, and their religious institutions, and this shall be regulated by law.

Second: The State shall guarantee freedom of worship and the protection of places of worship.’⁹

However, despite the Constitutional provisions on freedom of belief, restrictions on freedom of religion in general were reported to be ‘widespread’¹⁰, and ‘many Iraqis experience violence and displacement due to their religious identity’ in practice.¹¹ Additionally, some laws also violated freedom of religion, for example, a conversion from Islam to other religions is not legally allowed or recognized.¹²

In a May 2024 Country Focus report on Iraq, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) noted that the Iraqi Penal code ‘does not contain any provision regarding conversion’.¹³

The 2016 National Identity Card Law of Iraq, in article 26, stipulates the following concerning religious conversion:

‘First: A non-Muslim may change his religion in accordance with the law.

Second: With regard to religion, minor children shall follow the spouse who converts to Islam.

Third: The Court of Personal Status shall consider the change of religion provided for in item (First) of this Article as well as the change of the abstract (first) name in case it is

⁹ Iraq, Constitution of the Republic of Iraq, 2005, [url](#)

¹⁰ USDOS, 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq, 30 June 2024, [url](#), p. 1

¹¹ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 - Iraq, 2024, [url](#)

¹² Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), p. 37

¹³ EUAA, Iraq - Country Focus, May 2024, [url](#), p. 29

associated with the change of religion. Such a situation is not subject to the requirement of publication in a local newspaper.¹⁴

The Personal Status Law of Iraq, in article 17, also notes that:

‘Muslim men may marry a woman from a religion that has been divinely revealed. Muslim women may not marry non-Muslims.’¹⁵

Although Iraqi laws allowed conversion from other faiths to Islam,¹⁶ sources reported that conversion from Islam to another religion was legally prohibited.¹⁷ Open Doors indicated that as a result, former Muslims could not change their religion on identity cards and converts remained officially registered as Muslims.¹⁸ The United States Department of State (USDOS) annual report on religious freedom in Iraq, covering 2023, stated that the legal prohibition to conversion was ‘rarely enforced’ in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), while ‘individuals were generally allowed to convert to other religious faiths without KRG [Kurdistan Regional Government] interference’.¹⁹

According to Freedom House, children ‘with one Muslim parent, including converts, are automatically designated as Muslim’.²⁰ Similarly, sources reported that based on the Iraqi Personal status law, children of individuals who have converted from Islam continued to be officially considered to be Muslims.²¹ Additionally, converts from Islam to Christianity were reported to be hindered to carry out some civil administrative acts, including the registration of birth, wedding and death, ‘since the authorities will continue to consider them Muslim’.²²

The USDOS annual report on religious freedom in Iraq, covering 2023, stated that according to Christian leaders, Christian families formally registered as Muslim but privately practicing Christianity continued to be forced by the authorities ‘to either register their children as Muslims, or to have the children remain undocumented by federal authorities’.²³ According to the same source, remaining undocumented ‘affected the family’s eligibility for government benefits, such as school enrollment and ration card allocations for basic food items’.²⁴

¹⁴ Iraq, National Identity Card Law, 2016, [url](#)

¹⁵ Iraq, Personal Status Law, 1959, [url](#)

¹⁶ USDOS, 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq, 30 June 2024, [url](#), p. 9; Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), p. 37

¹⁷ USDOS, 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq, 30 June 2024, [url](#), p. 9; Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), pp. 34, 37; Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 - Iraq, 2024, [url](#); UN Human Rights Committee, Concluding Observations on the 6th Periodic Report, 16 August 2022, [url](#), para. 30

¹⁸ Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), p. 34

¹⁹ USDOS, 2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Iraq, 23 April 2024, [url](#), p. 78

²⁰ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 - Iraq, 2024, [url](#)

²¹ USDOS, 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq, 30 June 2024, [url](#), p. 9; Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), p. 34

²² Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), p. 35

²³ USDOS, 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq, 30 June 2024, [url](#), p. 30

²⁴ USDOS, 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq, 30 June 2024, [url](#), p. 30

USDOS reported that in November 2022, a Christian woman, who was forced to be registered as Muslim in her official documents after her father's conversion to Islam, was granted a decision of annulment of judgment from the Federal Court of Cassation.²⁵ The decision permitted the woman to return to Christianity, while according to the same source this constituted the 'the first time after 2003 that an Iraqi court ruled against the law on the Islamization of minors'.²⁶

In November 2022, USDOS noted that, according to media sources, a Christian woman who had allegedly converted to Islam to obtain a divorce, when tried to renew her children's official papers discovered that they 'had also been converted to Islam by law'.²⁷

In June 2024, Rudaw, a local media network based in Erbil in the KRI, reported on the case of a Christian woman, married to a Christian man, residing in Duhok in the KRI, who was ordered by Iraqi authorities to convert to Islam with her children.²⁸ According to the same source, the woman's mother converted to Islam when she was fifteen years old, and the authorities' decision was based on the interpretation of Iraq's Personal Status Law, which stipulates that if a parent converts to Islam their minor children 'should also adopt the new faith'.²⁹

An expert on tribalism, tribal mechanisms and tribal law in Iraq interviewed by the EUAA in October 2022 noted that '[a]s regards punishment for conversion, although Islamic law condemns apostasy by death', he 'has not come across a case where this punishment was applied in practice'.³⁰

Furthermore, Open Doors indicated that violations against converts were reported to be more prevalent in the Arab than in the Kurdish areas.³¹ However, during the period from 1 October 2022 to 30 September 2023, tolerance towards converts to Christianity in the KRI was reported to have decreased, considering an increasing influence of 'conservative Islam'³², while an increase in reports of women killed by male relatives, including for reasons such as converting to a different religion, was also noted.³³ For instance, Open Doors reported that in 2023, two converts to Christianity from Islam 'were accused of blasphemy after posting online messages on social media', with one of them being sentenced to imprisonment, and the other fleeing the country with a case against him was pending.³⁴

A confidential source cited in the 2023 General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands stated that during the period from

²⁵ USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 16

²⁶ USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 16

²⁷ USDOS, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq, 15 May 2023, [url](#), p. 22

²⁸ Rudaw, Iraqi court tells Christian woman to convert to Islam, 1 June 2024, [url](#)

²⁹ Rudaw, Iraqi court tells Christian woman to convert to Islam, 1 June 2024, [url](#)

³⁰ EUAA, Iraq: Arab tribes and customary law, April 2023, [url](#), p. 73

³¹ Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), p. 24

³² Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), pp. 24, 25

³³ EUAA, Iraq - Country Focus, May 2024, [url](#), p. 54

³⁴ Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), p. 7

October 2021 to September 2023 there were no known cases of criminal prosecutions individuals who had converted from Islam to another religion by the authorities.³⁵

Open Doors also noted in a January 2024 report on Iraq, that Christian churches were hindered to openly integrate converts from Islam to Christianity, particularly in the towns of origin of the converts.³⁶ According to the same source, if it became known that a church integrated converts, it could 'become a target and might be closed'.³⁷ The same source indicated that in the KRI 'some Kurdish churches have been able to integrate Kurdish converts'.³⁸

2. Treatment by society of individuals who have converted

According to an expert on tribalism, tribal mechanisms and tribal law in Iraq interviewed by the EUAA in October 2022, conversion from Islam to Christianity or other religions was 'socially taboo' in Iraq and was in general 'ill-perceived by the society'.³⁹ The same expert also indicated that although religious conversion existed in the country, it was not openly 'talked about'.⁴⁰ Similarly, the 2023 General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands indicated that, according to confidential sources, conversion from Islam to another religion, including Christianity, was seen negatively within a convert's family, and was viewed with suspicion at the community level, while family and social networks did not 'easily accept conversion'.⁴¹

Furthermore, sources reported that converts to Christianity opted to not disclose their conversion.⁴² Open Doors noted in a January 2024 report on Iraq, that individual who have converted from Islam to Christianity often had to hide their faith from their families, due to the shame the conversion was associated to bring to the family.⁴³

Converts from Islam experienced social pressure to retain their Muslim identity⁴⁴, ostracism and discrimination⁴⁵, especially from family and community members.⁴⁶ Open Doors indicated that pressure from family and extended family against converts from Islam included killing

³⁵ Netherlands, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Country of Origin Information Report: Iraq, November 2023, [url](#), p. 55

³⁶ Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), p. 38

³⁷ Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), p. 38

³⁸ Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), p. 38

³⁹ EUAA, Iraq: Arab tribes and customary law, April 2023, [url](#), pp. 72, 73

⁴⁰ EUAA, Iraq: Arab tribes and customary law, April 2023, [url](#), p. 72

⁴¹ Netherlands, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Country of Origin Information Report: Iraq, November 2023, [url](#), p. 55

⁴² Netherlands, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Country of Origin Information Report: Iraq, November 2023, [url](#), p. 55; EUAA, Iraq: Arab tribes and customary law, April 2023, [url](#), p. 72

⁴³ Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), p. 35

⁴⁴ Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), pp. 7, 24, 29, 34; RFI, Country Overview Iraq, March 2023, [url](#), p. 4

⁴⁵ RFI, Country Overview Iraq, March 2023, [url](#), p. 4

⁴⁶ Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), pp. 7, 24, 29, 34; RFI, Country Overview Iraq, March 2023, [url](#), p. 4

attempts and death threats, physical abuse, detention, disownment and expulsion from the family home.⁴⁷

Converts from Islam to Christianity also faced pressure from their tribes and tribal leaders to renounce their faith.⁴⁸ The EUAA noted in an October 2022 report by about Arab tribes and customary law in Iraq, noted that conversion was not ‘usually accepted by tribes’, whereas ‘the way that converts to Christianity are treated by tribes varies from tribe to tribe and place to place, and can depend on the extent to which the convert draws attention to themselves’.⁴⁹ Open Doors stated that Christian women, especially converts from Islam, experienced ‘unequal treatment in all sectors of Iraqi society’⁵⁰, and further faced ‘risk being forcibly married, put under house arrest or divorced’.⁵¹

Additional information on the treatment of converts to Christianity, including tribal treatment, can be found in the EUAA Country of Origin Information report [Iraq: Arab tribes and customary law](#), published in April 2023.

Additional information on the treatment of converts to Christianity can be found in the EUAA Country of Origin Information report [Iraq - Targeting of Individuals](#), published in January 2022.

Additional information on the treatment of converts, including converts to Christianity in Iraq, can be found in the EUAA Country of Origin Information report [Iraq - Country Focus](#), published in May 2024.

3. Availability of state protection

Information on the availability of state protection for individuals converted from Islam to Christianity was scarce among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints. However, the following information may be relevant.

The 2023 General Country of Origin Information Report on Iraq by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands noted that, according to a confidential source, during the period from October 2021 to September 2023 there were no known cases in which converts ‘had in practice sought and received adequate protection from the authorities’.⁵²

⁴⁷ Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), pp. 29, 34, 41

⁴⁸ Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), pp. 24, 26, 29, 30

⁴⁹ EUAA, Iraq: Arab tribes and customary law, April 2023, [url](#), p. 72

⁵⁰ Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), p. 44

⁵¹ Open Doors International, Iraq: Full Country Dossier, January 2024, [url](#), pp. 17, 29

⁵² Netherlands, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, General Country of Origin Information Report: Iraq, November 2023, [url](#), p. 55

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