

Edge of Extinction: The Faithful Remnant in Iraq

Religious minorities in Iraq have been pushed to the edge of extinction. While this marginalization has deep historical roots, the rise and brutality of the Islamic State (ISIS) since 2014 accelerated the crisis with devastating speed and scale.

In March 2016, the U.S. Department of State officially declared that ISIS had committed genocide against Christians, Yazidis, and Shiite Muslims—only the second time in U.S. history that an ongoing atrocity received such a designation.

The violence confirmed a chilling phrase still heard across the Middle East: *“First the Saturday people, then the Sunday people.”* It refers to how attacks often begin with Jews—those who worship on Saturday—and then extend to Christians, who worship on Sunday.

Around 1950, Iraq was home to approximately 150,000 Jews, many descended from those exiled to Babylon in the Old Testament era. Today, only four known Jewish individuals remain in the country.

The Christian community, too, has been decimated. In the past decade, Iraq’s Christian population has plummeted from 1.5 million to fewer than 250,000. Many are internally displaced, living without homes, property, jobs, or schools.

In June 2014, ISIS captured Mosul—biblical Nineveh and one of Iraq’s most historic cities. Immediately, Christians and other religious minorities were targeted. One 800-year-old church was turned into a torture chamber.

After Mosul fell, ISIS expanded across the Nineveh Plain. The largest Christian town in the region was Qaraqosh, home to 50,000 people. In August 2014, the people of Qaraqosh awoke to find their defenders had fled. ISIS was approaching, and the fall of the city became inevitable.

In scenes reminiscent of Jeremiah or Daniel’s time, thousands fled into the night—an exodus of fear and faith.

Among the fleeing were a group of Catholic nuns. They crammed into a small van with only the belongings they could carry. The road to Erbil was jammed with cars, motorcycles, and families on foot. In the chaos, desperate parents pounded on the nuns’ van, pleading with them to take their youngest children to safety. The nuns took in as many as they could—until there was no room left.

Within days of arriving in the displacement camps around Erbil, these same nuns helped launch a medical clinic to care for the thousands fleeing Mosul, Qaraqosh, and the Nineveh Plains.



Their courage and compassion exemplify a quiet but unwavering truth: even when faith is persecuted, it is not extinguished. It perseveres in those who flee, in those who serve, and in those who—amid terror—still carry hope.

Since the fall of ISIS's territorial control, the situation for religious minorities in Iraq has improved only marginally. While some Christians have returned to towns like Qaraqosh, ongoing instability, security threats from militia groups, and the destruction of infrastructure have hindered large-scale resettlement. As of 2025, Iraq's Christian population remains under 250,000, with many continuing to emigrate due to fear of renewed violence and lack of economic opportunity. International aid and advocacy—especially support for rebuilding homes, churches, and schools—remain crucial for ensuring that these communities can survive and thrive in their ancestral homeland.