

Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailedanalysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



Iraq

Population: 32.59 millions (#40 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 438,317 square km. Located in the heart of the Middle East, Iraq borders Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Turkey, and the Persian Gulf. Entering Iraq from the northwest and running parallel to one another, the Tigris and Euphrates are major rivers that provide fresh water to the arid desert and generate favorable conditions for agriculture that have allowed civilizations to flourish for millennia in a region historically known as Mesopotamia. Desert plains occupy most the terrain; marshland is common in the southeast near the Iranian border, and mountains straddle the Turkish and northeast Iranian borders. Hot, dry weather occurs during the summer, whereas mild, dry weather occurs in the winter. Some mountainous areas experience greater precipitation, especially snow in the wintertime. Dust storms, sandstorms, and flooding are natural hazards. Environmental issues include the draining of marshlands, inadequate fresh water supplies, pollution, soil degradation, soil erosion, and desertification. Iraq is administratively divided into eighteen governorates and one region (Kurdistan).

Peoples

Arab: 75%–80%

Kurdish: 15%–20%

Other: 5%

Arabs comprise a strong majority and populate most areas. Non-Arabs are predominantly Kurds, who are concentrated in the north in Kurdistan. Other ethnic groups comprise 5% of the population and include Turkmans and Assyrians. As a result of war, there were an estimated 1.5 million Iraqi refugees outside Iraq in 2010, mainly in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt.[1]

Population: 39,192,111 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: 2.55% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 4.00 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 72.6 male, 77.2 female (2017)

Languages: Arabic dialects (71.5%), Kurdish dialects (20.0%), Azerbaijani (5.5%), Iranian Persian [Farsi] (1%), Turkmen (1%),

other (1%). The Iraqi (also known as the Mesopotamian) dialect of Arabic is the most commonly spoken Arabic dialect and is intelligible to speakers of some Arabic dialects. Arabic is the official language. Kurdish is an official language in Kurdish-speaking regions. Languages with over one million speakers include Arabic dialects (28.0 million), Kurdish dialects (7.8 million), and Azerbaijani (2.2 million).

Literacy: 79.7% (2015)

History

Various ancient civilizations flourished in the Mesopotamian Cradle of Civilization, including the Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans. Cuneiform is the oldest known form of ancient writing; it was etched on clay tablets in the region as early as four millennia before the birth of Christ. Many innovations of early civilization derive from this region. The region was subsequently conquered by foreigners, including Persians, Greeks under Alexander the Great, Parthians, and others. Islam spread to Iraq in the seventh century AD and Baghdad became the capital of the Abassid caliphate in the eight century. The Ottoman Empire annexed Iraq in the sixteenth century, and Iraq remained under Ottoman control until after World War I, when it became part of the British mandate for the Middle East. Iraq achieved independence in 1932 with a constitutional monarchy government and joined the United Nations in 1945. Iraq was a founding member of the Arab League. In 1956, Iraq allied with the United Kingdom, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey under the Baghdad Pact. Iraq's membership in the alliance came to an end in 1959 as a result of a coup led by Abdul Karim Qasim that killed the king and prime minister in 1958. The Arab Socialist Renaissance Parth (Ba'ath Party) overtook the government in 1963, assassinated Qasim, and instated Abdul Salam Arif as president and Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr as prime minister. Arif ousted the Ba'ath government later that year but perished in a plane crash in 1966. Arif's brother assumed power but was overthrown by followers of the Ba'ath Party who instated Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr as president and chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) in 1968. Bakr resigned in 1979 and was followed by his cousin Saddam Hussein. Hussein led Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1988, ultimately leading Iraq to victory after suffering extensive damage to the country's infrastructure and economy. Hussein suppressed a Kurdish rebellion in the north by releasing chemical and biological weapons on the civilian population, major atrocities that killed thousands.

In August 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, and the following February the United States led a coalition that expelled Iraqi forces under United Nations resolutions. Following the liberation of Kuwait, no-fly zones were established in northern and southern Iraq, and a no-drive zone was established in southern Iraq by the United States, United Kingdom, and France in an effort to protect civilian populations that were rebelling against the brutal Hussein regime. The United Nations Security Council demanded the government deliver all weapons of mass destruction in the early 2000s. Sanctions were imposed following the refusal of the government to fully comply with United Nations inspections. The United States led a military coalition in 2003 that overthrew the regime and captured Hussein in late 2003, although weapons of mass destruction were never found. Prior to the establishment of the Iraqi Interim Government in 2004, the Coalition Provisional Authority governed Iraq and worked to restore order, security, and stability. A new Iraqi constitution came into effect in 2005, but violence escalated between the various ethnic and political factions vying for power. The United States increased the number of military personnel in 2006 as part of an operation dubbed "the surge," which facilitated the return of greater stability and peace thereafter. In 2009, the United States agreed to depart Iraq and withdrew from urban areas. In 2010, the United States announced the end of its major combat operations in Iraq. The United States military completed its withdrawal in December 2011.

National legislative elections in 2014 resulted in the establishment of a new prime minister, Haydar al-Abadi, to govern Iraq. The Iraqi government engaged in military operations against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) between 2014 until defeat of the militant group was publically declared in 2017. ISIS carried out significant atrocities against the Iraqi population in northern Iraq. Kurdistan voted on an independence referendum in 2017 with 93% voting in favor of independence. The Iraqi government quickly mobilized the military in response to discourage secession and reassert its control over the region. Political instability, infighting among and between various factions, ethnic and tribal divides, severe endemic corruption at all levels, and the lack of a democratic tradition all remain major challenges.

Culture

Iraq boasts numerous archeological sites in ancient Mesopotamia, also known as the Cradle of Civilization. The ancient cities of Sumer, Babylonia, Assyria, and Chaldea, such as Babylon, Nineveh and Ur, were all located within present-day Iraq. The Minaret of Samarra is one of the largest mosques in the Arab world and was built in Samarra in 848 AD. Iraq is known throughout the Arab world for its many talented musicians, singers, and dance performers. Commonly eaten foods include chicken, lamb, vegetables, yogurt, olive oil, and spices. Tea is widely consumed daily.[2] Cigarette consumption rates are moderately high compared to the worldwide average rate of smoking, whereas alcohol consumption rates are very low, as most Muslims abstain from drinking. Polygamy is permitted in accordance with Shari'a law.

Economy

GDP per capita: $17,000 (2017) [28.6% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.685

Corruption Index: 18 (2017)

Iraq's abundant oil and natural gas reserves remain underdeveloped due to past political instability, wars, and outdated oil transshipment infrastructure. Oil profits account for 80% of foreign exchange earnings and 85% of total government revenues. Economic legislation has begun to establish means for channeling oil monies into other governmental and economic sectors over the long term. However, widespread corruption, high unemployment rates, inadequate infrastructure, and outdated business laws impede greater economic development. Phosphates and sulfur are additional natural resources. Services employ 54.6% of the labor force and generate 59.8% of the GDP, whereas industry employs 18.7% of the labor force and generates 18.7% of the GDP. Oil, chemicals, clothing, construction, food processing, fertilizer, and metal processing are major industries. Agriculture employs 21.6% of the GDP and generates 4.8% of the GDP. Common crops and agricultural goods include wheat, barley, rice, vegetables, cotton, dates, cattle, sheep, and poultry. China, India, and Turkey are the primary trade partners.

Transparency International has consistently ranked Iraq among the most corrupt nations worldwide for many years. Corruption occurs on all areas of society and has seriously inhibited economic growth and development. Terrorist attacks and insurgencies remain major challenges that have exacerbated corruption and instability since the fall of the Hussein regime in 2003.

Faiths

Muslim: 97%

Other: 3%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Chaldean Catholics – 167,000

Assyrian Church of the East – 50,000

Armenian Orthodox – 15,000

Evangelical – 53,371

Latter-day Saints – less than 50 – 2

Seventh Day Adventists – 87

Religion

The population is overwhelmingly Muslim. Shi'a Muslims comprise 55-60%, whereas Sunni Muslims constitute the remainder of the Muslim population. Christians account for the largest non-Muslim religious group and in 2003 were estimated to number between 800,000 and 1.4 million. However, due to emigration, the number of Christians declined to approximately 250,000 in 2017. Associated with the Catholic Church, Chaldean Christians are the largest Christian denomination and account for two-thirds of the Christian population. Assyrian Christians (Church of the East) are the second largest denomination and constitute approximately 20% of Iraqi Christians. As much as 80% of the Christian population is estimated to live in the north in Mosul, Irbil, Dahuk, Kirkuk, and in surrounding areas. Found in northern areas, Yezidis and Shabaks are syncretic religious groups that incorporate indigenous religious beliefs or Christianity into Islam. There are approximately 600,000-750,000 Yezidis, and 350,000-400,000 Shabaks. There are a couple thousand Baha'is scattered throughout Iraq.[3]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 8th

The constitution protects religious freedom but recognizes Islam as the state religion. Religious freedom has been consistently upheld by the government since 2003, but its practice has been limited by extremists, terrorists, and gangs that target religious minority groups. Violent attacks on religious leaders and places of worship curtail the freedom of religious practice for many. These attacks have occurred frequently in many areas of the country. The government has issued numerous statements and has followed policies that encourage religious tolerance. All citizens are regarded as equal according to the constitution

regardless of religion, socioeconomic status, nationality, and ethnicity. Religious groups must register with the government to operate. To register, a religious group was previously required to have at least 500 followers in the country and receive approval from the Council of Iraqi Christian Church Leaders.[4] However, there no longer appears to be a mechanism for religious groups to register with the national government as of 2017. Religious groups may continue to register with the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) government, which requires religious groups to have at least 150 followers, submit documentation regarding sources for financial support, and demonstrate tolerance for Islam. Islamic religious instruction in public schools is required for all Muslim students outside the IKR. The government recognizes major Muslim holidays as national holidays and permits Christians to observe their religious customs for Easter. Personal status laws and regulations ban the conversion of Muslims to other religions. Societal abuse of religious freedom remains widespread in many areas primarily outside of the IKR.[5]

Largest Cities

Urban: 70.5%

Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Kirkuk, Erbil?, Najaf, Karbala, Sulaymaniyah, **Nasiriyah, Amarah, Hillah, Diwaniyah, Kut,** Dohuk, **Zubayr, Baqubah, Fallujah, Ramadi, Samawah, Zaxo, Ab? al-Kah??b, Ash-Sha?rah, Tall'afar, Al-K?fah, Kelar, S?marr?', Sha?? al-'Arab, S?q ash-Shuy?kh, Ash-Sham?l, Al-Qurnah, S?r?n-Diy?n?, Al-H?rithah, Al-Wa?dah, Tikr?t.**

Cities listed in **bold** have no known Latter-day Saint congregations.

Two of the thirty-four cities with over 100,000 inhabitants have unofficial congregations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Fifty-one (51%) of the national population resides in the thirty-four largest cities.

Church History

In 2000, Iraq was assigned to the Europe Central Area.[6] The first congregation was formed in April 2003 at Tallil Air Base to serve Latter-day Saint American military personnel.[7] In 2008, Iraq was assigned to the Middle East/African North Area. The organization of the Baghdad Iraq Military District in late 2009 permitted the organization of branches for LDS American military personnel.[8] The district and all of its branches were discontinued by the early 2010s upon the departure of nearly all American military personnel.

The first senior couple missionaries on humanitarian assignment were assigned to Kurdistan during the mid-2010s. Three couples served in the country until fall 2017 when all three couples left due to conflict that emerged after the Kurdish Referendum vote. Northern Iraq was assigned to the Beirut Lebanon District sometime in the mid-2010s.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: Less than 50 (2018)

There were approximately 1,300 Latter-day Saints in late 2009.[9] At the time, nearly all Latter-day Saints in Iraq were foreigners serving in the American military or who were on government or business assignment. Several Christian Iraqi refugees joined the Church in the mid-2000s in Jordan and returned to Iraq in 2007. Several Kurdish families joined the Church in Kurdistan during the mid-2010s. There were nine members in Dohuk and fourteen members in Sulaymaniyah in late 2017.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches: 0 Groups: 2 (2018)

Following the organization of the first member group in April 2003, dozens of additional military groups were formed throughout the country. When the Baghdad Iraq Military District was organized, there were three branches included in the new district (I Z, Taji, and Camp Victory). Three additional branches were organized in 2010 (Balad, Mosul, and Talil). In early 2011, there were six branches and over thirty service member groups.[10] In late 2011, the Church closed the district and five of the six branches due to the withdrawal of most American military personnel. The Baghdad Branch also eventually closed sometime in the mid-2010s and met as a member group thereafter.

There appeared to be three member groups that began to operate in Kurdistan during the mid-2010s. Although it is unclear whether these groups were formally organized or not, sacrament meetings appeared to be held on at least an intermittent basis in Duhok, Irbil, and Sulaymaniyah. The groups were under the administration of the Beirut Lebanon District. At least two of these groups continued to operate on a semi-official basis as of 2018 with support from district leadership.

Activity and Retention

Member activity rates among foreign military personnel appear consistent with the member activity rates in their countries of origin. No formal missionary activity had occurred in Iraq as of 2018. Small numbers of Kurdish members have joined the Church in Kurdistan. Information on the activity and retention rates of these converts is unknown.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Arabic, Iranian Persian (Farsi), English.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures and most church materials are translated into Arabic. The Book of Mormon is translated into Iranian Persian (Farsi). General Conference talks have been translated into Iranian Persian at least since 2007 and audio translations are provided on the Church's website.[11] Gospel Principles, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith**,** and a few additional proselytism materials are available in Iranian Persian.

Meetinghouses

Military congregations appeared to meet at military installations. It is unclear whether congregations in Kurdistan met in the privacy of member homes or in rented facility.

Health and Safety

Lawlessness and societal abuse of religious freedom have been extreme in many areas. Religious minorities, Sunnis in predominately Shia neighborhoods and Shias in predominate Sunni neighborhoods, have frequently reported receiving death threats that demanded their departure. Failure to comply with such threats often resulted in death. The frequency of these threats has reportedly declined in recent years as stability has been restored, but remains a serious problem. Recent acts of violence that were religiously motivated include beheadings, drive-by shootings, suicide bombings, kidnappings, and church and mosque bombings. Islamist extremists and al-Qaeda operatives are common perpetrators of the crimes[12] but are rarely caught or brought to justice due to an inadequate and undertrained police force, widespread corruption, and endemic complicity of various ethnic and religious factions in obstructing investigation into members of their own groups.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has engaged in significant humanitarian and development work. There have been at least 133 projects conducted in the country, including 35 in 2017.[13] In 1991, the Church donated 13,000 blankets, clothing, and medical supplies to Kurdish and southern Iraqi refugees.[14] In 2003, Latter-day Saints in Oxnard, California teamed up with other Christians in the community to donate school supplies to needy Iraqi school children.[15] A similar service project occurred in 2004 that provided school supplies including nearly 600 books to a school that accommodated children with Down syndrome.[16] Local members in Fort Worth, Texas sent clothing, blankets, pillows, and hygiene kits to Iraq in 2004.[17] LDS American military medical professionals performed service to needy Iraqis by providing eye care that same year.[18] Latter-day Saints in the Denver, Colorado area assembled over 3,000 school kits to donate to nine schools in Iraq in 2005.[19] Additional humanitarian projects completed include donating wheelchairs for the disabled and emergency relief for war victims.[20]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church appears to continue to lack official government recognition or registration. There does not appear to be a current method for the Church to seek registration with the federal government. The requirement of at least 150 members to obtain registration with the Kurdish government is currently unattainable given there appears to be no more than 50 members in the entire country. Notwithstanding some legal challenges, Latter-day Saints benefit from recent governmental support of promoting religious freedom and a lack of governmental restrictions on proselytism and conversion for non-Muslims, although cultural intolerance and physical violence towards Christians renders such freedoms largely nominal and moot. Societal abuse of religious freedom and violence directed towards Christians remains intense in many areas, which deter efforts to conduct coordinated missionary activity. Consequently, the Church has requested local members to refrain from missionary activity among the indigenous population, particularly outside of Kurdistan. In Kurdistan, there appears to be opportunities for member-missionary activity among family and close friends and associates.

Cultural Issues

The strong ethno-religious ties of Arabs to Islam present a nearly insurmountable barrier for Latter-day Saints at present due to a lack of Muslim-oriented missionary approaches, almost entire absence of an Iraqi Arab Latter-day Saint community, and societal intolerance of Christian missionary activity and conversion from Islam. Prospective missionary work targeting Kurds and Iraqi Christians may be the most productive for the Church, as these groups have demonstrated greater tolerance for missionary-minded Christians and make greater accommodations to the beliefs of non-Muslims. The Kurdish region is significantly more culturally open and inclusive in comparison to other regions of the country. Iraqis engaged in a polygamous relationships must end these relations in divorce and be interviewed by a member of the area presidency to be considered for baptism. Widespread tea drinking opposes Church teachings.

National Outreach

The entire native population is unreached by mission outreach due to church policy, unstable political conditions, the holding of church meetings in military installations or in private homes, and violence directed toward religious minorities. In early 2011, military branches operated in or near cities populated by 25% of the national population. However, by 2017 the Church operated member groups in cities inhabited by less than three percent of the national population. Long-term challenges extending mission outreach to Iraq include distance from currently established mission outreach centers, the lack of Iraqi Latter-day Saints, ongoing violence directed toward Christians, and the lack of developed Muslim-specific missionary approaches. Irbil and Dohuk offer the greatest opportunities to expand national outreach as most Iraqi Christians reside in these locations and these locations experience the greatest cultural openness.

The Internet has been a successful tool for Arabic-speaking members to create websites detailing Latter-day Saint beliefs and practices that can reach some Iraqis. Several Egyptian Latter-day Saint converts initially learned about the Church through websites created by Arabic-speaking converts. The Church has yet to develop an Arab language website for use by interested individuals who are not members of the Church.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Member activity and convert retention rates among Iraqi Arabs and Kurds appear good. Cultural barriers to conversion and living Church teachings for many Iraqis will require strong devotion to the Church prior to baptism and will likely ensure good convert retention and member activity rates in the long run.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Iraq experiences major ethnic integration challenges. However, ethnic integration challenges among the few Iraqi Latter-day Saints have thus far been minimal. Most members are Kurds or Assyrian/Chaldean and are fluent in Arabic and English. Greater receptivity among a particular ethnic group may generate a demography for congregations that is not representative of the Iraqi population, which could challenge the integration of other ethnic groups in the future.

Language Issues

Widespread use of Arabic among the Arab majority simplifies prospective Latter-day Saint mission outreach approaches in most areas. Use of Church materials translated into Standard Arabic is appropriate as most Iraqis demonstrate good competency with Standard Arabic. The Church has no materials translated into Kurdish or Azerbaijani dialects, which are spoken by ten million Iraqis. Kurdish materials are greatly needed as Protestant groups have reported considerably greater receptivity among Kurds than among Iraqi Arabs, which combined with the greater stability in the Kurdish north, make outreach among Kurds a logical avenue if formal missionary work one day becomes possible. Furthermore, Kurdish translations of Church materials appear necessary to provide minimal gospel study and missionary resources for recent Kurdish converts. Literacy rates are modest as nearly one-fifth of Iraqis cannot proficient read and write. Literacy programs sponsored by the Church may improve literacy rates, strengthen positive relations with local and regional governments, and provide an opportunity for proselytism that is culturally appropriate.

Missionary Service

No Iraqi Latter-day Saints appeared to have served a full-time mission as of 2018. No full-time, proselytizing missionaries have been assigned to Iraq. Unstable political conditions and violence targeting foreigners and religious minorities render prospects of assigning proselytizing missionaries unfeasible for the foreseeable future.

Leadership

Military servicemen or nonnatives staffed leadership for all congregations nationwide when there was a sizable American military presence. Native members undertake all leadership responsibilities in member groups at present. District leadership based in Beirut supervises and mentors leadership for member groups in Kurdistan.

Temple

Iraq is not assigned to a temple district although the region as a whole is assigned to the Frankfurt Germany Temple. Temple trips likely occur irregularly, as most members serve in the military. Difficulties obtaining visas present insurmountable barriers for most Iraqi members to attend the temple. Prospects of a temple closer to Iraq may come to fruition over the medium term for a small temple in the United Arab Emirates to serve members in the Middle East.

Comparative Growth

With once one of the largest bodies of Latter-day Saints in the Middle East attributed to the assignment of LDS military and government personnel, Iraq had twice as many Latter-day Saints than Afghanistan in late 2009 although the Kabul Afghanistan Military District was organized more than a year earlier than the Baghdad Iraq Military District. Iraq, Syria, and Turkey are the only countries in the region where the Church has expanded its outreach among the local population through the organization of congregations in additional cities. Small Latter-day Saint communities also exist among the native population Israel, and Jordan. Sizeable numbers of Latter-day Saints in the Gulf States and Arabian Peninsula such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar have developed a perpetual presence capable of sustaining two stakes as of 2018.

Missionary-minded Christian groups report slow and inconsistent growth due to persecution of religious minorities and emigration of Christians abroad. Seventh Day Adventists reported no membership growth during the 2000s and 2010s and few convert baptisms. The activities of Christian groups are difficult to study given most of these groups keep a low profile to avoid government interference, persecution, and violence.

Future Prospects

The establishment of multiple member groups in Kurdistan during the mid-2010s among the native population represents one of the most significant developments of the Church in the Middle East within recent memory. However, the extremely small size of the Church in Kurdistan, combined with political instability and lack of government registration make long-term Church operations vulnerable to disruption in the coming years given the region’s turbulent history of conflict. Nevertheless, assignment of these member groups to the Beirut Lebanon District provides long-term support from Lebanese church leadership, which includes several native members rather than iterant senior missionary couples. Member groups in Kurdistan may advance into branches one day if Kurdish converts remain active and are properly mentored to serve as local church leaders. However, prospects for missionary activity outside of Kurdistan appear poor given safety concerns, the extreme persecution of religious minority groups, lack of government registration, prohibitions on the conversion of Muslims, extremely few Iraqi Arab converts, and corruption.

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