



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on December 13, 2013

Iraq 10 Years After Saddam's Capture

Ten years after the capture of Saddam Hussein (shown) by U.S. troops on December 13, 2003, observers have documented an Iraq that is still in turmoil, as al-Qaeda militants wage an increasingly aggressive campaign to extend their influence over the country.



A report from Baghdad about the violence in Iraq, written by Colin Freeman, the chief foreign correspondent for the [Britain's Sunday Telegraph](#), has been picked up by newspapers worldwide. The report observed that al-Qaeda — which is supported by the militant rebels fighting the civil war in neighboring Syria — has been especially active in western and northern Iraq.

"Al-Qaeda is trying to return the country to the civil war era by killing Shias," the *Telegraph* quoted Sami al-Askary, an Iraqi MP and advisor to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. "So far they have not succeeded, but nobody knows how long for. When the rage comes, you cannot expect how people will react."

"It is not as bad as during the civil war, but whenever you leave your house, you can't be sure that you will be coming back," the British daily quoted Shadi Karaqzi, identified as an accounting student. "We are living in terror."

"The wish of most young men now is just to live abroad so that they can have a normal life," added his friend Ghaith Hamed.

The report cited United Nations figures listing the death toll from the militants' violent attacks thus far in 2013 as more than 7,000, with 979 deaths in October alone.

Under Iraq's new Shiite-dominated government, the Sunni minority, who enjoyed a privileged status under Saddam's government, has been relegated to second-class status. Since many were affiliated with Saddam's Baath party, they are barred from government jobs.

A December 12 [AFP report](#) noted how the divide between Shiites and Sunnis that has existed since Saddam Hussein was in power has yet to be mended. Furthermore, Iraq's economy has never fully recovered from the negative economic effects of the sanctions imposed on the country during Saddam's rule and the cost of his wars against Iran and Kuwait.

The report quoted Ayham Kamel, identified as a London-based Middle East analyst at the Eurasia Group consultancy. "A lot of Sunnis believe that there needs to be a shift ... putting the Saddam legacy and the participation of Sunnis in his regime aside," said Kamel. "We need to get more power-sharing, and really send signals that the conflict, and some of the tensions that existed between Sunnis and Shias during the Saddam era, is over, that there is a new path forward."



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While conflict in the Middle East (except for that between Israel and its more militant Islamic neighbors) is usually depicted as stemming from differences between Shiite and Sunni Muslims, the plight of [the region's Christians](#) is generally overlooked.

Iraq is just one country in the region that has historically had a large Christian population, exceeded only by Egypt and Lebanon. As recently as 1987, Iraq was eight-percent Christian, numbering 1.4 million.

While Christians enjoyed relative peace during the Saddam regime (Saddam Hussein's minister of foreign affairs and close advisor, Tariq Aziz, was a Chaldean Catholic), life became unbearable for many during the turmoil that followed his removal. In some case, they were caught in the crossfire between Shiite and Sunni forces fighting for control, but in other case they were specifically targeted.

Anti-Christian violence increased following a September 12, 2006 speech by Pope Benedict XVI that included statements that many Muslims interpreted as disparaging Islam. An October 19, 2006 [report by the IRIN network](#) quoted a statement from a woman, Julie Carlo, who said of the anti-Christian violence: "Recently, life for Christians in Iraq has turned into a horror movie. I will leave everything here [and] even if I do not have anything to eat there [Jordan], it is better to die from hunger than be beheaded."

The report noted that church attendance had decreased considerably in Iraq since the removal of Saddam, and at least 60 percent of Baghdad's churches had closed after receiving threats from extremists.

"Less than 20 percent of the devout [Christian community] who were attending prayers are continuing to come to the church. Thousands have left in the past weeks to other countries and we are sure that soon this church is going to be forced to close too," said Reverend Zayya Edward, the pastor of the Church of the Virgin Mary in Baghdad.

A March 13, 2008 [BBC report](#) noted that the murder of Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho of Mosul had been the latest in a string of attacks on churches, priests, and lay Christians. BBC noted:

Nobody knows how many of Iraq's Christians have now fled. Before the war there were estimated to be about 800,000 and Chaldeans were the largest Christian community in Iraq.

It is thought about half the Christian population of Iraq has moved — the majority to Syria, fewer to Jordan and some to northern Iraq.

Not everyone believes that life became worse in Iraq after the removal of Saddam Hussein, however. The Killeen (Texas) *Daily Herald* for December 13 quoted a statement from retired Lt. Col. Steve Russell, who served as the commander of 1st Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division at the time of Hussein's capture. Russell is the author of *We Got Him!: A Memoir of the Hunt and Capture of Saddam Hussein*. "The Iraqi people are far better off today than they were under Saddam," said Russell. "We forget how evil Saddam was."

While Saddam Hussein undoubtedly was responsible for many evil deeds while he ruled Iraq, Iraqi Christians — as well as Muslims whose villages have recently been invaded by al-Qaeda militants — may question whether life, post-Hussein, has improved, or worsened.

A December 13 article in [Britain's Telegraph](#) by Patriarch Louis Sako, the Chaldean Catholic Patriarch of Babylon, observed that although Christian communities have existed in the Middle East for two millennia, Christians are being persecuted in the region the 21st century. Sako stated that the United



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Nations Committee for Refugees recently estimated that 850,000 Iraqi Christians have left the country since 2003, observing: "This is an immense loss for those who stay, as well as for Iraqi culture and politics."

Sako wrote that violent conflict between Muslims and Christians was not a necessary fact of life and traced the long history of Christians in the Middle East living peacefully alongside Muslims, offering the Umayyad caliphate of 661-750 as an example. He continued:

Unfortunately, many Muslims do not know the history of Christians in the religious and intellectual formation of Islamic civilization, or the value of Christianity to stable democracy. It is vital that these factors become better known, and their significance to Islam better understood.

It is also critical that Muslims not only reject violence against Christians, but actually to promote civil harmony and religious freedom in their societies. Most Muslims are good and not violent. They do not agree with the extremists but they are also afraid to act publicly. They must do so.

Sako concluded by stating: "The entire international community should insist that Christians remain in the Middle East, not simply as minorities, but as citizens enjoying full equality under the law, and therefore in a position to continue to contribute to peace, justice, and stability."



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