

Why Iraqi Christians Can't Celebrate Christmas in Peace This Year

Many Christians in the West celebrate Christmas with door-to-door caroling, special church services and family gatherings to share the joy of the birth of baby Jesus.

But that is not the case in many restrictive and dangerous countries around the world, including Iraq. The risks are too great, mainly from Muslim terrorists. Iraq is No. 4 on the 2013 Open Doors World Watch List ([http://www.opendoors.org/world-watch-list](#)), which ranks countries that are the worst persecutors of Christians. It is estimated there are only 330,000 Christians left in Iraq, as many have fled the country due to violence and persecution.

Pastor Tariq* tells Open Doors that "churches are targets for terrorists, especially on Christmas Day. Many Christians stay home because they are too afraid."

Common Christmas traditions are still important to the Iraqi believers. Tariq and Human*, another pastor, say that in the past, many families would purchase a Christmas tree, decorate the house and make special food. They would also buy new clothes and visit relatives and friends. However, because the situation is worsening in Iraq, they can't always do these activities anymore.

The pastors tell Open Doors that believers enjoy celebrating the Christmas feast because it reminds them of God's love and His promises.

"But because security is limited, the freedom to celebrate Christmas is growing less and less," Tariq explains.

Last year, Christian students in central and south Iraq were

warned that if they skipped classes to celebrate Christmas, there would be severe consequences. Last December, Christmas coincided with Muslim religious observations. That is also the case this year and puts Christians more at risk.

In regard to feeling God's nearness, Tariq adds, "As believers, we can see the hand of God with us while we are passing through everyday situations, and every day we feel His protection and love. But some people who are far from God feel that He does not take care of them."

As well as facing the threat of persecution, many Iraqi Christians have lost their jobs and live in poverty. Akram*, an Open Doors co-worker, states, "Many Christians are very poor. So they cannot give gifts or new clothes to their children."

Open Doors USA President and CEO Dr. David Curry says, "At Christmas, many of us in the West are comfortable, warm and safe. Persecution for our faith is the most remote thing from our minds. I challenge you to keep these brothers and sisters in your prayers. Pastor Tariq says that we can show our love to believers in Iraq this Christmas by joining them in prayer."

An Open Doors field worker reports, "In Slemani [a city in northern Iraq], there is a mullah who speaks out strongly against Christianity. He even stated in the last few weeks that Muslims should not participate in celebrating in the Christmas season. He says that wearing the red Santa hats is the same as being converted to Christianity; this is a conversion ceremony introduced secretly by the Christians. His sermons are stirring hatred towards Christians and have been recorded and have been reported to the government. The waiting is now what the government will do with the mullah."

Please pray:

- For believers to feel the Lord's presence and peace even

in times of violence.

- That those who do not know Jesus as their Savior would witness the joy within these believers and ask questions about their faith.
- That the exodus of Christians from Iraq would lessen and the bombings and threats decrease.

* *Names changed for security purposes.*