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IRAQ 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The security situation in the country deteriorated sharply during the year and the government lost effective control of significant terrain to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This resulted in increased levels of violence and lawlessness in that territory, as well as a destabilization of security throughout the country. Freedom of belief and practice was severely limited in areas beyond the government's control, where ISIL targeted religious groups it considered heretical in a systematic campaign of atrocities and forced expulsion.

The constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief and practice, and freedom from intellectual, political, and religious coercion. While representatives of various religious communities, including Sunni Muslims, reported that the government did not generally interfere with religious observances and devoted considerable attention to the protection of religious sites and events, many Sunnis considered themselves targeted by the government and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). International human rights groups and Sunni Muslims reported that the ISF tortured, abused, arrested, illegally detained, and harassed Sunni Muslims on the basis of their religious affiliation. Activists also said the government failed to investigate and prosecute ethno-sectarian crimes, including those carried out by Shia militia and Kurdish forces against Sunnis in areas liberated from ISIL. There were also reports that some officials misused their authority, for example, in using sectarian profiling in arrests and detentions or in using religion as a determining factor in employment decisions. The government that was formed in September, however, publicly called for tolerance for all religious communities and implemented reforms to rectify sectarian imbalances and hiring standards in government offices. The government provided security for places of worship including churches, mosques, shrines, and religious pilgrimage sites and routes. Despite efforts to protect religious communities and sites, continued violence affected all religious groups throughout the year.

ISIL sought to exterminate Shia Muslims and religious minorities from seized Iraqi territory under its control. Many of ISIL's atrocities in areas it did not control targeted Shia mosques, funerals, religious shrines, and Shia neighborhoods. Beginning with ISIL's advances into northern Iraq in June, attacks targeting religious and ethnic minority communities intensified. ISIL abuses, which targeted people on the basis of their religious identity, included killings, rape, kidnapping, enslavement, theft, and destruction of religious sites. ISIL's targeting of

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Christians, Sabeen-Mandaeans, and Yezidis also resulted in killings, sexual slavery, forced conversion, ransom demands, property seizures, and forced business closures. Many members of religious minority groups fled from their homes as a result. In June ISIL killed as many as 670 Shia and other non-Sunni prisoners who had been detained in a prison in Mosul. ISIL also imposed strict interpretations of Sunni Islam in areas it controlled, such as Mosul, and targeted dissenters with torture, rape, and execution. In multiple cases throughout the year, ISIL and other armed groups attacked Sunni religious leaders whose ideology differed from that of ISIL.

The deterioration of security conditions was accompanied by numerous instances of societal abuse of religious freedom throughout the year. For example, Shia militias near Samarra reportedly killed previously abducted Sunni men in June according to Amnesty International (AI). Local media reported that Shia militias and Kurdish forces in some instances prevented internally displaced Sunnis from returning to their homes, which in some cases had been looted and burned, in predominantly Sunni Arab towns retaken from ISIL control. There were also credible reports of Shia militia groups intimidating or abusing Sunni and religious minority populations, as well as unknown actors kidnapping or killing members of religious minority groups.

The President, the Secretary of State, other senior Department of State officials, the Ambassador, and embassy and consulate officers promoted religious freedom in speeches, meetings, coordination groups, and assistance programs. Their public statements and meetings condemned ISIL's religious freedom abuses. They urged both the central government and the Kurdistan Regional government to protect members of religious minorities and ensure their inclusion in the political process. Embassy and consulate officials maintained an active dialogue with Shia, Sunni, and religious minority groups, emphasizing tolerance, inclusion, and mutual understanding. The embassy designed and managed programs to address religious minority concerns in economic development, essential and humanitarian services, and capacity development. The U.S. government provided funding to the ongoing international humanitarian effort to assist more than two million Iraqis, many of whom were from religious minority communities, who had been displaced during the year.

Section I. Religious Demography

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The U.S. government estimates the population at 32.6 million (July 2014 estimate). Religious demography statistics vary due to violence, internal migration, and governmental tracking capability. Numbers cited are often estimates from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious community leaders.

According to 2010 government statistics, the most recent statistics available, 97 percent of the population is Muslim. Shia Muslims, predominantly Arabs but including Turkmen, Shabak, Faili (Shia) Kurds, and others, constitute 60 to 65 percent of the population. Arab and Kurdish Sunni Muslims make up 31 to 37 percent of the population, with 18 to 20 percent representing Sunni Kurds, 12 to 16 percent Sunni Arabs, and the remaining 1 to 2 percent Sunni Turkmen.

Approximately 3 percent of the population is composed of Christians, Yezidis, Sabeen-Mandaeans, Bahais, Kakais (sometimes referred to as Ahl-e Haqq), and a very small number of Jews. Shia, although predominantly located in the south and east, are the majority in Baghdad and have communities in most parts of the country. Sunnis form the majority in the west, center, and the north of the country.

Christian leaders estimate there are approximately 400,000-500,000 Christians, a significant decline over the last 10 years from a pre-2002 estimate of 800,000-1.4 million. Approximately two-thirds of Christians are Chaldeans (an eastern rite of the Catholic Church), nearly one-fifth are Assyrians (Church of the East), and the remainder are Syriacs (Eastern Orthodox and Catholic), Armenians (Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox), Anglicans, and other Protestants. Evangelical Christians reportedly number approximately 5,000.

Yezidi leaders report that most of the approximately 500,000 Yezidis reside in the north. Estimates of the size of the Sabeen-Mandaean community vary. According to Sabeen-Mandaean leaders, about 1,000-2,000 remain in the country, predominantly in southern Iraq with small pockets in Kurdistan and Baghdad. Bahai leaders report fewer than 2,000 members, spread throughout the country in small groups. According to Kakai activists, their community numbers approximately 100,000, mainly in villages southeast of Kirkuk, in Diyala and Erbil in the north, and in Karbala. Fewer than 10 Jews reportedly reside in Baghdad.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, an estimated 900,000 Iraqis of diverse religious backgrounds remain internally displaced due to sectarian violence between 2006 and 2008. Following ISIL's incursions into Anbar in January and throughout Ninewa and areas of the disputed internal boundaries between June and August, an additional 1.8 million people were

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displaced. Due to the challenges in gaining access to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in areas of conflict, as well as the government's limited capacity in registering IDPs, the exact number of religious minorities among those displaced remains unknown. ISIL's abuses disproportionately affected religious minorities, with between 100,000 and 200,000 Christians, an estimated 300,000 Yezidis, and several thousand Kakais displaced throughout the country. In the wake of this displacement, high concentrations of these minorities now reside in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution recognizes Islam as the official religion, mandates Islam be considered a source of legislation, and states no law may be enacted contradicting the established provisions of Islam, though it does not differentiate between Sunni and Shia Islam. It also states no law may contradict principles of democracy or the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in the constitution. The constitution guarantees freedom from religious, intellectual, and political coercion.

Apparent contradictions between the constitution and other legal provisions remain. For example, the law prohibits the practice of the Bahai Faith, and a 2001 resolution prohibits the practice of the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam. Although constitutional provisions on freedom of religion may override these laws, no court challenges have yet invalidated them, and there is no pending legislation to repeal them.

Personal status laws and regulations prevent the conversion of Muslims to other religions and require conversion of minor children to Islam if either parent converts to Islam. In the IKR, there were several cases of Christian single-parent families affected by the conversion policy, which applies to all religious minorities. In some cases, the Christian parent fled with the minor children to avoid conversion of the children to Islam.

National identity cards denote the holder's religion, but do not differentiate between Shia and Sunni Muslims. Passports do not specify religion. Bahais and Kakais may only receive identity cards if they self-identify as Muslims. Without an official identity card, Bahais and Kakais cannot register their marriages, enroll

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their children in public school, acquire passports, or access some government services.

The Council of Iraqi Christian Church Leaders, an independent group formed by church leaders in 2006, consists of representatives from each of the 13 officially recognized churches and requires Christian groups to register. To do so, the group must have a minimum of 500 adherents in the country. Without formal registration, religious groups cannot qualify for government funding or official recognition from the government's endowment for Christian, Yezidi, Sabean-Mandaean, and "other" religions.

The constitution guarantees citizens the right to choose which court (civil or religious) will adjudicate matters of personal status, including marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, endowments, and other personal matters. The Personal Status Law stipulates that civil courts must consult the religious authority of a non-Muslim party for its opinion under the applicable religious law and apply that opinion in court.

The constitution requires the government to maintain the sanctity of holy shrines and religious sites and guarantee the free practice of rituals. The penal code criminalizes disrupting or impeding religious ceremonies and desecrating religious buildings.

The law specifies that constitutional guarantees providing for reinstatement of citizenship do not apply to Jews who emigrated and gave up their citizenship under a 1950 law.

Of the 328 seats in the Council of Representatives, the law reserves eight seats for members of minority groups: five for Christian candidates from Baghdad, Ninewa, Kirkuk, Erbil, and Dahuk; one for a Yezidi; one for a Sabean-Mandaean; and one for a Shabak. In the 2014 national parliamentary elections, six minority candidates won parliamentary seats outside of the quota allocation, bringing total minority representation to 14 seats. The Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament reserves 11 seats for minorities: five for Christians, five for Turkmen, and one for Armenians.

The constitution states that followers of all religions are free to practice religious rites and manage religious endowments (waqf), endowment affairs, and religious institutions. The government maintains three waqfs: the Sunni; the Shia; and the Christian, Yezidi, Sabean-Mandaean, and "other." Operating under the authority

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of the prime minister's office, the endowments disburse government funding to maintain and protect religious facilities.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) also maintains three waqfs: the Sunni, the Christian, and the Yezidi endowments. The KRG Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs operates the endowments, which pay the salaries of clergy and fund the construction and maintenance of religious sites. To receive assistance, religious groups are required to register with the ministry. While funding is available for registered Christian groups, some churches choose not to register and, therefore, fund themselves. The KRG also provides funding to some religious groups without endowments. For example, monthly government stipends fund temple maintenance and cultural activities for the Sabean-Mandaean community in the IKR.

The government provides support for Muslims desiring to perform the Hajj, organizing travel routes and immunization documents for entry into Saudi Arabia. The government also provides funding to Sunni and Shia waqfs, which accept Hajj applications from the public and submit them to the supreme council for the Hajj. The council, attached to the prime minister's office, organizes a lottery process that selects pilgrims for official Hajj visas.

The constitution provides that the federal Supreme Court is made up of judges, experts in Islamic jurisprudence, and legal scholars. The constitution leaves the method of regulating the number and selection of judges to legislation that requires a two-thirds majority in the Council of Representatives. The federal Supreme Court's composition continues to be governed by a law that does not require that Islamic jurisprudence experts be included on the court. The federal Supreme Court is presently comprised of nine members, representing a cross-section of ethnicities and religions.

The government requires Islamic religious instruction in public schools, but non-Muslim students are not required to participate. In most areas of the country, primary and secondary school curricula include three classes per week of Islamic education, including study of the Quran, as a graduation requirement for Muslim students. During the year, the Ministry of Education (MOE) approved the inclusion of Syriac and Christian religious education in the curricula of 152 public schools in Baghdad, Ninewa, and Kirkuk. Private religious schools operate in the country, but must obtain a license from the director general of private and public schools and pay annual fees.

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Many Christians who speak the Syriac language consider the right to use and teach it to their children a question of religious freedom. The constitution establishes Arabic and Kurdish as official state languages but guarantees the right to educate minority children in their own languages, and makes Turkmen and Syriac official languages in “the administrative units in which they constitute density populations.” The MOE includes an office for Kurdish and other language education, which aims to ensure that minority communities are taught in their native languages.

The KRG MOE funds Syriac-language public schools (elementary and high school) in its territory, and the curriculum does not contain religion or Quranic studies.

Government Practices

Because religion, politics, and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. There were reports the central government engaged in killings, kidnappings, arrests, detentions, restrictions, and discrimination based on religious affiliation. Misuse of official authority based on sectarian identity continued to be a concern. There were relatively fewer reports of official abuse and discrimination based on religious affiliation in the IKR, but similar reports based on ethnic affiliation. Official investigations of abuses by government forces, illegal armed groups, and terrorist organizations were infrequent, and the outcomes of investigations that did occur were often unpublished, unknown, or incomplete. The government also publicly called for tolerance for all religious communities and developed a committee that implemented reforms to rectify sectarian imbalances in the ministries and implement fair hiring standards, and issued and began implementing an executive order to enforce legal rights related to detainees, a key concern of Sunnis. Religious and ethnic minorities residing within the territory of the disputed internal boundaries in north-central Iraq blamed the central government and the KRG for the lack of security in the area. This sharpened following ISIL’s incursion into Mosul in June when the ISF retreated and when KRG forces withdrew from Sinjar and parts of the Ninewa Plain in early August.

There were some reports that Iraqi police or the ISF either killed Sunni detainees or failed to prevent deadly attacks on Sunni detainees by Shia militias. These reports increased in the wake of ISIL’s advances into northern Iraq in June.

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Conflict between the ISF and ISIL in other locations also led to fighting along sectarian lines. In one example, on March 25, media reported that the ISF, accompanied by Shia militias, entered Buhruz, Diyala Province, to challenge an ISIL force for control of the predominantly Sunni town. ISF soldiers reportedly watched while Shia militia members rounded up and killed a group of Sunni men, including teenagers and elderly persons. Three Sunni mosques were reportedly burned during the confrontation, along with shops and homes of Sunni residents.

Yezidi and Christian political and civil society leaders stated that Kurdish Peshmerga and Asayish forces harassed and committed abuses against their communities in the portion of Ninewa Province controlled by the KRG or contested between the central government and the KRG. Both activists and members of the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament stated that KRG security officials held some Yezidis in arbitrary detention both before and after ISIL occupied the Sinjar district of Ninewa.

Sunni Muslim groups stated there was an ongoing campaign of revenge by the Shia majority in retribution for the Sunnis' favored status and abuses of Shia during the Saddam Hussein regime. Complaints included reports of discrimination in public sector employment due to de-Baathification. This process was originally intended to target loyalists of the former regime. According to Sunnis and local NGOs, however, the Accountability and Justice Law (de-Baathification law) has been implemented selectively and used to render many Sunnis ineligible for government employment. According to sources in Basrah, Sunnis were, in limited cases, passed over for official positions solely on the basis of their religious affiliation. Unrest over Sunni political disenfranchisement and unresolved grievances continued from 2013, with violent clashes between the ISF, police, and anti-government protesters in Anbar Province in January.

Sunnis also reported that central government security forces targeted them for harassment, illegal searches, arbitrary arrest and detention, and torture and abuse. International and local NGOs cited the government's use of the anti-terrorism law as a pretense for detaining Sunni men – and their female relatives – for extended periods of time without access to a lawyer or due process. Human Rights Watch (HRW) and AI reported evidence of torture and ill-treatment of Sunni detainees, as well as deaths in custody of Sunni men detained under the anti-terrorism law. In one case cited, the body of a man who died in custody showed bruises, open wounds, and burns consistent with the application of electricity.

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Human rights NGOs and Yezidi leaders stated KRG authorities discriminated against some groups of Yezidi, Christian and Kakai IDPs in providing humanitarian assistance in the IKR. There were also reports that KRG authorities prevented individuals whom they deemed security threats from entering the IKR. While Kurdish authorities generally admitted ethnic and religious minority IDPs, entry for male Arabs, particularly Sunnis, was more difficult than for others. As Kurdish forces regained territory from ISIL, media reports and government officials noted the Peshmerga were preventing Sunni Arabs from returning to their homes in some areas of reclaimed territory. Kakai IDPs in Erbil also reported pressure from provincial authorities to move from a primarily Christian suburb to IDP camps. In September a provincial official reportedly threatened to move Kakai IDPs to a camp by force if they did not go voluntarily.

Members of religious minority groups, community activists, and media related that many non-Muslims chose to reside in the IKR and areas under KRG control because they considered these areas to offer greater security, tolerance, and protection for minority rights. Some Christians in the Disputed Internal Boundaries Areas reported that false claims of land ownership by local officials blocked Christians from building on land that the Christians said was their property. According to a human rights NGO, one such dispute near Shaqlawa prevented the construction of dwellings for primarily Christian IDPs. A Yezidi activist stated that local Kurdish officials in the village of Ain Sifne in the Shaykhan district of Ninewa continued to pressure local Yezidis to swap their land for larger amounts of poorer quality land elsewhere, in an effort to “Kurdify” the area.

The Iraqi cabinet, the Council of Ministers (COM), had one Christian minister while the KRG’s COM had no minority ministers. Members of minority religious groups were underrepresented in government appointments, public sector jobs, and elected positions outside of the Council of Representatives. Members of minority religious groups held senior positions in the national parliament and central government, as well as in the KRG, although they were proportionally underrepresented in the unelected government workforce, particularly at the provincial and local levels. Minority group leaders said this underrepresentation limited minority groups’ access to government-provided economic opportunities.

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Non-Muslims throughout the country, including Christians, Yazidis, and Sabean-Mandaeans, stated they were being politically isolated by the Muslim majority because of religious differences.

In the IKR, some evangelical Christian groups chose not to register with the government-run endowments, despite requirements to do so to operate legally. They reported they preferred to avoid increased government scrutiny of their internal operations, and to avoid KRG regulations for registration that indirectly constrained proselytization.

The combination of corruption, attacks against non-Muslim businesses, uneven application of the rule of law, and nepotism in hiring practices throughout the country by members of the majority Muslim population had a detrimental economic effect on non-Muslim communities and contributed to their emigration. The deputy chairman of the Council of Sabean-Mandaeans in Dhi Qar Province, for example, attributed his group's increased emigration rate to the lack of security and limited economic opportunity. Advocacy groups and representatives of religious minority communities said the failure of the ISF, including the Kurdish Peshmerga, to ensure protection for minority communities against ISIL in Mosul and across the Ninewa Plain also led to the departure of Christians and other religious minority communities from northern Iraq during the year.

Government policy continued to recognize Christians' right to observe Easter and Christmas without interference. The government also provided increased protection to Christian churches during these holidays. Local Bahais were able to celebrate the festivals of Naw-Ruz and the Festival of Ridvan without interference or intimidation. Provincial governments have also designated religious holidays in their localities; for example, in 2013, the Maysan provincial council recognized a Sabean-Mandaean holiday as an official holiday. The Maysan provincial council also provided physical protection for the Sabean-Mandaean community during times of worship, formally excused the group from Shia Muslim dress codes during times of mourning, and granted land for places of worship.

An advocacy group reported that the Ministry of Antiquities initiated an investigation into the destruction of the home of the founder of the Bahai Faith and the government sent a notice halting construction work on the site. Discussions between the government and the various groups involved in the possible reconstruction of the site were ongoing at year's end.

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Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

The security situation deteriorated sharply during the year due to ISIL's takeover of Iraqi territory and accompanying abuses, including targeting victims on the basis of their religious identity. Iraqis of all faiths faced increasing levels of violence, abductions, and intimidation. Religious pilgrims and pilgrimage sites were also targets for attack. ISIL employed suicide bombs and coordinated attacks with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs). In areas under its control ISIL targeted minority religious and ethnic communities, committing killings and mass executions; and engaging in rape, kidnapping, and detention, including mass abductions and enslavement of women and girls from minority religious groups. ISIL also engaged in harassment, intimidation, robbery, and the destruction of personal property and religious sites.

ISIL pursued a campaign of violence against Iraqis of all faiths, but against religious minorities in particular. For example, in August ISIL seized the predominantly Yezidi village of Kocho and attempted to forcibly convert the community to Islam. After several days of attempted conversion, ISIL separated Yezidi males from women and children and executed at least 100 men within the span of a few hours. The remaining women and children were taken hostage by ISIL and forced into sexual slavery and servitude.

In areas not under ISIL control, the majority of suicide bomb and VBIED attacks targeted Shia Muslims. ISIL forces took credit for most of these attacks via social media postings. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), approximately two VBIEDs were detonated each day in Baghdad, with the number of incidents increasing as ISIL forces moved closer to Baghdad in September and October. Coordinated bomb attacks regularly targeted Shia markets, mosques, and funeral processions, as well as Shia shrines.

ISIL published open threats via leaflets, social media, and press outlets of its intent to kill Shia "wherever they were found" on the basis of being "infidels." For example, on June 11, ISIL took control of Camp Speicher in Tikrit and summarily executed nearly 1,700 unarmed Shia male air force cadets. ISIL produced YouTube videos of the executions and subsequent decapitations boasting of its attacks against the "Shia infidels." Attacks on Shia shrines and in predominately Shia neighborhoods during religious holidays were common. Several attacks on May 22 targeted Shia pilgrims at the shrine of Imam Musa Kadhim in Baghdad's Kadhimiyah neighborhood, killing at least 33 civilians and wounding 86. A mortar

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attack on June 30 at the Askariya Shrine in Samarra (one of the most important Shia religious sites in Iraq) killed six people and damaged the shrine.

Approximately 33 people were killed in three attacks in Baghdad on October 13 as Shia Muslims celebrated Eid al-Ghadir. The attacks, two of which involved suicide car bombs, occurred in or near the predominantly Shia districts of Kadhimiyah and Sadr City, according to police.

In areas it controlled, ISIL sought out non-Sunnis and subjected them to intimidation, kidnappings, and executions. According to multiple reports from international NGOs and the local press, ISIL fighters typically questioned members of a group to determine if they were Sunni, and then killed or abducted the non-Sunni members. In one incident, ISIL forces breached Mosul's Badush prison June 12 and killed as many as 670 Shia and other non-Sunni prisoners, according to international human rights groups. UNAMI personnel interviewed six survivors of the attack, who described how ISIL had separated Sunni and Shia detainees, and then executed only the Shia prisoners. In July during ISIL's siege of the principally Shia Turkmen town of Amerli, some residents died of starvation and a lack of medical supplies.

According to UNAMI, in June ISIL killed at least 13 Sunni Muslim clerics in Mosul who had encouraged their followers to reject ISIL's ideology. Between June and October, ISIL fighters killed 40 Sunni clerics, including scholars, muftis, and preachers, according to the Fallujah Preachers Association.

In areas of Ninewa Province, ISIL committed numerous atrocities against religious minorities in a systematic campaign to drive out and potentially eradicate entire religious communities from their historic homelands. According to a September UNAMI report, ISIL carried out numerous massacres against Yezidi civilians in the Sinjar district of Ninewa, killing at least 500 individuals in August and dumping their corpses in mass graves. Yezidi activists reported more than 4,000 Yezidis, mostly women and girls, remained in ISIL captivity. According to numerous credible reports, including ISIL's own videos, ISIL forces sexually assaulted many of these captives. In an ISIL publication, the group claimed it had conducted this "large-scale enslavement" of Yezidi women and children because of the Yezidis' religious beliefs.

ISIL frequently kidnapped religious minorities for ransom. For example, in June the group kidnapped dozens of Yezidis near the Syrian border and then demanded their families pay a ransom to prevent their execution, according to HRW. In

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another case, ISIL kidnapped several dozen Christian men, women, and children from the Ninewa Plain town of Qaraqosh on August 24. Following the failure of the community's religious leaders to pay a ransom, the kidnapping victims' whereabouts remained unknown.

Killings, forced conversion, threats of violence, and intimidation resulted in the departure of many minorities from ISIL-controlled areas, resulting in additional hardship for religious minorities. Several thousand Kakais were displaced, most of whom remained IDPs in Erbil and Khabat in Erbil Province. Similarly, after its June 10 assault on the Mosul, ISIL issued an ultimatum to Christian residents the week of July 14 to convert to Islam, pay a protection tax, or face execution July 19. Most Christians who had remained in the city after ISIL's initial offensive – approximately 400 families – departed the city by July 20, adding to the nearly 50,000 Christians who had already fled the city and surrounding region. In Nasriya in southern Iraq, flyers were reportedly circulated to approximately 300 Mandaens demanding their conversion or exile.

In Mosul, ISIL forces threatened residents who did not convert with death and punished those who failed to adhere to the group's strict interpretation of sharia.

ISIL forces attacked mosques and other holy sites, rendering many of them unusable, and looted and destroyed religious and cultural artifacts. According to HRW, ISIL destroyed seven Shia places of worship in Tal Afar after taking over control of the predominantly Shia Turkmen city in late June. In Mosul, ISIL destroyed shrines important to Christians and Muslims, including the tomb of Jonah. According to the Assyrian International News Agency, by late July, ISIL had occupied or destroyed 45 Christian institutions in Mosul and the surrounding area, including the headquarters of the Syrian Catholic Diocese, the Church of Our Lady of the Annunciation, and the archbishop's Palace Chapel. Kakai community activists reported that, on August 28, ISIL destroyed two ancient Kakai shrines on the Ninewa Plain. According to a Sabeen-Mandaean rights organization, ISIL also threatened to destroy a Mandaean temple in Naisriya.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Violence by sectarian and illegally armed groups occurred in many parts of the country. Although no reliable statistics on religiously motivated violence were available, acts committed against religious groups included killings, IED and

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VBIED attacks, suicide bombings, kidnapping, robbery, harassment, and intimidation.

Shia in Sunni-dominated neighborhoods, Sunnis in Shia-dominated neighborhoods, and members of minority religious groups in both Sunni- and Shia-dominated neighborhoods and regions were reportedly harassed or intimidated. Religious demographic shifts underway due to the ongoing conflict with ISIL were of significant concern, according to local NGOs and religious leaders.

Sunni Muslims continued to state there was an ongoing campaign of retribution by the Shia majority for the Sunnis' favored status and abuses of Shia under the Saddam Hussein regime. Sunni Muslims also reported discrimination based on a public perception that the Sunni population sympathized with former regime and terrorist elements, including ISIL. For example, according to UNAMI, on February 25, Dhi Qar police arrested four individuals suspected of distributing sectarian flyers demanding that Sunnis leave the area within a month or be killed.

As conflict with ISIL intensified, media and human rights organizations reported that Shia militias and some volunteers in the Popular Mobilization Committees (PMCs) increasingly targeted Sunnis with abductions, execution-style killings, and torture, as well as destruction of homes and businesses. According to AI, Shia militias reportedly kidnapped more than 170 Sunni men in and around Samarra, a predominantly Sunni city, from June to September, then killed dozens of the abducted men. The whereabouts of the rest of the men remained unknown. AI reported that more than 30 Sunni men were abducted and killed in Samarra June 6 as a reprisal for the men's suspected connection with ISIL fighters, who had advanced into the city on June 5. HRW reported in October that killings and abductions by Shia militias had increased throughout the year in Baghdad, Diyala, and Babil provinces.

According to HRW, Shia militias looted and destroyed Sunni homes and businesses in the town of Yengija in late September and early October, about 50 miles south of Kirkuk. Sunni residents of villages within a 10-mile radius of Yengija reported to HRW that Sunni homes in their villages had also been destroyed by Shia militias. After Shia militias burned two Sunni homes during the Iraqi offensive to retake the town of Bayji in Salah ad Din Province, an Iraqi general told the press the militias would be pulled back from the front lines there. Media, human rights groups, and government officials reported that Shia militias

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prevented displaced Sunni Arabs from returning home to areas over which the militias exerted control.

Some militia leaders acknowledged abuses by their members. According to news reports, on October 31 a militia group announced the expulsion of 49 members accused of “using the name of the Islamic resistance...to carry out their crimes.” The statement contained no details, saying only that the expulsion occurred “in the wake of increasing kidnappings and blackmail.” The Shia religious establishment also expressed concern about reported abuses. A senior representative of the *Marja’iyah* religious authority, Sheikh Abdul Mehdi al-Karbala’i, in his November 28 sermon referred to “individual deeds of bad actors.” While the government supported the establishment of volunteer PMCs in response to ISIL’s incursions, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi repeatedly called for these groups to place themselves under the command and control of the Iraqi security forces.

In the southern part of the country the security situation deteriorated following ISIL advances in Mosul in June and the subsequent redeployment of Iraqi army units from the southern provinces to fight ISIL. Minorities faced increasing hostility and some groups, such as Sabeen-Mandaeans, engaged in less public religious rites. The Sunni Endowment confirmed UNAMI findings that the Sunni minority in the south had been subjected to assassinations, kidnappings, and threats. For example, four Sunnis, including a prominent tribal sheikh, were kidnapped during the first week of October in Basrah. Two were later released after interrogation and payment of a ransom, while the others remained in an unknown location. The assistant dean of Shatt al-Arab University and a Sunni physician were also kidnapped in southern Iraq in September; their whereabouts remained unknown.

Christian, Yezidi, Sabeen-Mandaeen, and Shabak leaders reported their communities continued to be targets of violence and harassment. For example, some individuals exerted pressure on minority group members to cede certain land rights unless they conformed to a stricter observance of Islamic precepts. This included demanding the closure of liquor stores and nightclubs and, at times, subjecting shopkeepers to violence for noncompliance. Although these efforts affected all citizens, non-Muslims said they were especially vulnerable to this pressure and violence because of their minority status.

Groups targeting Christians and Sabeen-Mandaeans reportedly combined kidnappings or killings with criminal activities for profit. For example, unknown

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assailants reportedly killed a Sabeen-Mandaeen resident of Baghdad in February after he refused to pay a ransom, and killed a Sabeen-Mandaeen business owner south of Baghdad in June. Two Sabeen-Mandaeans were kidnapped and held for ransom in Maysan and Baghdad in August, but neither individual was returned to his family despite the payment of ransoms. Christian groups reported that militias and armed groups confiscated homes abandoned by community members who had fled the country following the sectarian violence of 2006-2008. Settlement was often reached when owners of the properties were forced to sell at prices below market value.

Given the deterioration in the overall security situation and repeated attacks on religious pilgrims, the ISF deployed police and army personnel to protect religious pilgrimage routes and sites, as well as places of worship, during religious holidays. There were no terrorist attacks, for example, during the Ashura commemorations November 4 in Karbala or Najaf. Even with added protection, many worshippers reportedly did not attend religious services or participate in religious events because of the threat of violence. Yezidis cancelled many religious ceremonies, including their annual *Jama*, or gathering, which includes a pilgrimage to the tomb of Sheikh Adi Ibn Musafir, due to ongoing security concerns following repeated threats from ISIL.

Sunni and Shia religious leaders, pilgrims, and religious congregants at shrines, places of worship, and private homes suffered fatal attacks and injuries throughout the year. For example, an attack on July 3 killed four Shia worshipers and wounded 15 people when a suicide bomber detonated explosives at the entrance of a Shia shrine in western Baghdad.

There were reports that non-Muslim minorities felt obliged to adhere to certain Islamic practices, such as wearing the hijab or fasting during Ramadan. According to representatives of Christian NGOs, some Muslims threatened women and girls, regardless of their religious affiliation, for refusing to wear the hijab, for dressing in Western-style clothing, or for not adhering to strict interpretations of Islamic norms governing public behavior. There were also cases, particularly in the southern part of the country, in which Muslim women were threatened by their family or community members for not wearing the hijab and told to dress more conservatively. Numerous women, including Christians, reported opting to wear the hijab after being harassed.

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While non-Muslim students were not required to participate in religious instruction in public schools, some non-Muslim students reported they felt pressured to do so by teachers and classmates. There were also reports that some non-Muslim students felt obliged to participate because they could not leave the classroom during religious instruction. Christian and Yezidi leaders reported continued discrimination in education and the lack of minority input into issues such as school curricula and language of instruction. Schools did not universally adopt the new MOE curriculum that incorporated lessons of religious tolerance.

The Alliance for Iraqi Minorities and UNAMI organized a conference in March with representatives of several ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural minority communities aimed at raising awareness of the rights of minorities, the protections needed for these communities, and actions to include and empower these groups in the government. In April the University of Salah ad Din organized a three-day civil peace conference in Erbil. The dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies at the University of Salah ad Din told the media that the conference stressed the need for tolerance among followers of all religions and ethnic groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

At the highest levels, U.S. government officials promoted religious freedom in speeches, meetings, coordination groups, and assistance programs. In remarks on August 7, while authorizing humanitarian airdrops and targeted airstrikes to help the thousands of Iraqi civilians trapped on Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq, the President described ISIL's treatment of religious minorities including Christians and Yezidis as "barbaric." In September the President denounced ISIL's treatment of minority communities, saying ISIL had threatened the Yezidi community with genocide. On September 10, the President identified humanitarian assistance to civilians displaced by ISIL as a key element of the U.S. strategy to degrade and defeat ISIL. These civilians included Sunni and Shia Muslims, as well as tens of thousands of Christians and other religious minorities. At the United Nations General Assembly on September 24, the President called on political, civic, and religious leaders – including those in Iraq – to take concrete steps to address the danger posed by religiously motivated fanatics and to reject sectarianism.

The Secretary of State, during his September 10 visit to Baghdad, urged the new government to protect members of religious minorities and integrate them into the government. He stated that the United States remained committed to working with

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the new government as long as it was committed to diversity, inclusivity, and protecting minorities in Iraq. The Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights and the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor also condemned ISIL's persecution of religious minorities and extensive abuses of religious freedom.

The Ambassador and the Consuls General in Erbil and in Basrah worked with minority religious groups, representatives of the international community, and government officials to address their concerns, particularly regarding security and protection. Embassy and consulate officials maintained an active dialogue with leaders of religious communities, advocates from minority-focused civil society groups, and minority representatives in the government.

As the humanitarian crisis deepened during the year, U.S. officials in Baghdad and Erbil met regularly with NGOs and UN officials coordinating international assistance to IDPs to address problems identified by religious minority groups with overall aid distribution.

U.S. officials met often with religious leaders, clergy, and wafq leaders to demonstrate U.S. interest and support. The embassy and consulates also worked closely with the Ministries of Education, Human Rights, Labor and Social Affairs, other relevant ministries, as well as with the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities, members of parliament, and parliamentary committees to emphasize the importance of the protection and full inclusion of religious minorities.

The U.S. government developed, financed, and managed projects to support religious and ethnic minority communities, including assistance to IDPs of all communities. The embassy funded projects supporting religious minority communities through economic empowerment and entrepreneurship initiatives, especially for women. These projects focused on both immediate and longer-term needs of communities, including economic development, essential and humanitarian services, and capacity development. In addition, in response to the immense humanitarian crisis in the country, which disproportionately affected minority communities in northern Iraq, the United States pledged an additional \$12.8 million in June to support international aid efforts, bringing total U.S. government humanitarian spending for Iraq to \$202 million for the fiscal year.