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USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Iraq improved slightly but remained concerning. Both the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) took several positive steps. In March, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi designated March 6 as a national holiday to celebrate the country's ethnic and religious diversity. In March, Iraq's Parliament passed the [Yazidi Survivor Law](#) to compensate members of the Yazidi community. In October, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani [declared](#) Ankawa, the Christian suburb of Erbil, a district, giving its residents more authority in their local affairs. Internationally, the German government was the first to prosecute members of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) for committing crimes against humanity, war crimes, and [genocide against the Yazidis](#). In April, it [prosecuted](#) one of its citizens who abused Yazidi women while she was an ISIS member; the court found her guilty of aiding and abetting crimes against humanity, among other crimes. Similarly, in November, a German court [sentenced](#) another ISIS fighter to life in prison for killing a five-year-old Yazidi girl.

However, nearly five years after the United States and its allies declared ISIS defeated, religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq continue to struggle to return and live peacefully in their homes. [Almost one million](#) Sunni Arab Muslims, over 200,000 Yazidis, tens of thousands of Christians, and smaller numbers of Kaka'is, Turkmen, and others remain forcibly displaced. Renewed ISIS [attacks](#) in 2021 reignited fear among religious and ethnic minorities seeking to return and rebuild their homes in former ISIS-controlled areas. Militias, some backed by foreign actors such as Iran and operating under the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—also known as Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs)—routinely [targeted](#) Sunni Arab Muslims and accused them of affiliation with ISIS. The PMF also regularly used checkpoints to stop and harass Sunni

Arab Muslims returning to territories once controlled by ISIS. These militias reportedly used similar tactics against other religious minorities, including Yazidis, Christians, Kaka'is, and others. The Iraqi government continued to allow these groups to operate with impunity; for example, in June, authorities [released](#) Gasim Muslih, the head of PMF operations in Anbar Province, without prosecution. He was accused of targeting members of non-Shi'a Muslim communities, and authorities had arrested him for the [killing](#) of Sunni Muslim activist Ihab al-Wazni. Al-Wazni's murder in May had led to protests to which the government [responded with lethal force](#), killing more than 600 peaceful protesters.

Seven years after the ISIS genocide, Yazidis continued to [languish](#) in internally displaced person (IDP) camps in Duhok and elsewhere, and the whereabouts of around 3,000 abducted Yazidi women and girls remained unknown. In June, a [fire](#) at the Sharya IDP camp destroyed almost 1,400 homes, temporarily leaving many Yazidis without shelters. Similarly, many Iraqi Christians remained displaced, with the PMF making returns to their homes in the Nineveh Plains in northern Iraq extremely difficult. Individuals and families who managed to return found some of their lands, including sacred places, either destroyed or expropriated.

Ongoing [airstrikes](#) in northern Iraq by the Turkish military against alleged positions of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Sinjar Resistance Unit (YBS), for its alleged alignment with the PKK, further impeded religious freedom improvement in 2021. These operations disproportionately impacted ethnic and religious minority groups, particularly Yazidis, in Sinjar and Dohok, impeding their ability to resettle in their original communities and to [worship](#) safely. The Turkish government reportedly made little effort to minimize or avoid civilian casualties.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Iraq on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Use diplomatic and other available channels to encourage the IFG and the KRG to resolve conflicts over the disputed areas per Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, while including all religious and ethnic minorities in the process, and to comprehensively implement the Sinjar Security

Agreement with full inclusion of the Yazidi community in particular;

- Impose targeted sanctions on additional PMF leaders who direct militia engagement in severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Continue to assist Iraqi religious and ethnic minorities to rebuild communities

devastated by ISIS and to advocate for their own interests, including opening a broad discussion on governance to hold fair and free local and regional elections to select their own representatives.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Incorporate religious freedom concerns into its larger oversight of the U.S.-Iraq bilateral relationship through hearings, letters, and congressional delegations.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom in Iraq in 2021](#)
- **Hearing:** [Strategies for Religious Freedom in Fragile States](#)
- **Factsheet:** [CPC and SWL Recommendations](#)

Background

The population of Iraq was about [39.7 million](#) in 2021. Most of the population is Muslim; 64–69 percent are Shi’a Muslims, who [live](#) predominantly in the southern and eastern regions of the country, and 29–34 percent are Sunni Muslims, who mainly reside across the western, center, and northern regions. The remaining [1–5 percent](#) of the population are from various religious and ethnic groups, including Yazidis and Christians of different denominations (Syriac, Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Assyrian Church of the East), Kaka’is (also known as the Yarsan or Ahl al-Haq), and a small number of Jews. These communities predominantly [live](#) in the northern region as well as in Baghdad and Erbil. Reportedly, there is a [growing number](#) of atheists, agnostics, and religiously unaffiliated individuals in Iraq, mainly living in large cities.

Political instability remained of serious concern throughout the country, particularly given the role it has played in enabling religious violence in prior years. For example, Iraqis took to the streets to express their dissatisfaction with the outcome of the October parliamentary elections and reportedly [clashed](#) with security forces. In November, several drones carrying explosives [targeted](#) Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi’s Baghdad residency, injuring six bodyguards; although no group openly claimed responsibility, Iranian-backed PMF groups have been widely [blamed](#) for the attack.

Positive Developments

There were some positive developments to advance religious freedom in Iraq in 2021. Following the announcement of March 6 as a national holiday of [tolerance and coexistence](#), Pope Francis, on a historic visit to Iraq, and preeminent Shi’a cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani [jointly](#) released a statement to encourage religious and ethnic minorities to work together to advance peaceful coexistence in Iraq and beyond. The Pope’s [visit and prayers](#) with victims of ISIS in Mosul and other Iraqi cities reinvigorated religious minorities, especially Iraqi Christians. Reacting to his visit, Qaraqosh resident Yusra Mubarak [said](#), “I can’t describe my happiness, it’s a historic event that won’t be repeated.” The passage of the [Yazidi Survivors Law](#) represented crucial governmental recognition of the particularly heinous crimes the community suffered under ISIS rule. However, this law had not been implemented by the end of the reporting period. The lack of a [lasting solution](#) for Yazidi children born as a result of ISIS’s rampant use of sexual violence remains another challenge for the community.

Ongoing Border Dispute between the IFG and KRG

Longstanding border disputes between the KRG and IFG continued to represent another challenge to the advancement of religious freedom in 2021. Although the [2020 Sinjar Security Agreement](#) was aimed at reducing tension between the two parties and protecting the Yazidi community, its slow implementation and lack of Yazidi representation

have raised concerns about the future of the accord. In fact, there was no meaningful implementation of the agreement by any of the signatories throughout 2021; for example, the two parties failed to appoint an independent mayor or deport militia groups from Sinjar, both of which are terms [mandated](#) by the accord. This failure has directly impeded the ability of Yazidis to return to their Sinjar homeland.

Other Religious Freedom Issues in Iraq

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in the KRG-controlled areas remained consistent with the previous year. The region continued to be a crucial [safe destination](#) for Iraqis displaced from elsewhere in the country, and the KRG’s extension of greater municipal representation for religious and ethnic components is commendable. However, the lack of security for religious and ethnic minority groups in and along disputed areas continued to hinder religious freedom improvements. Furthermore, some of those minority communities—particularly Syriac-Chaldean-Assyrian Christians—maintained their longstanding demands for the restitution of land and properties that had been previously expropriated by or under KRG authorities.

In 2021, blasphemy and apostasy laws remained [in place](#) throughout the country, and the federal government continued to deny formal recognition of religious minorities and nontheist groups such as the Baha’is, Jehovah’s Witnesses, humanists, Kaka’is, and others. Finally, the federal government continued to exploit the “de-Ba’athification” [process](#), originally intended to remove former Baath party officials post-2003, as a pretext to discriminate against Sunni Muslims in government employment and other practices.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S. policy toward Iraq continues to prioritize stability, development, and democratization. In July 2021, President Joseph R. Biden met with Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in Washington to formally conclude the United States combat mission in Iraq by the end of 2021. In [July 2021](#), the State Department [provided](#) an additional \$155 million in humanitarian assistance for Iraq and Iraqi refugees in the region, totaling over \$200 million dollars for fiscal year 2021. The additional funds were primarily earmarked to support Iraqis who were displaced by ISIS, including members of several religious minority communities. Also, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) [maintained](#) financial and programmatic support for Iraqi religious and ethnic minorities to recover and rebuild what ISIS had destroyed. Since the defeat of ISIS, USAID has spent almost \$500 million dollars on reconstruction efforts in Iraq. Additionally, the U.S. government has used punitive measures against individuals responsible for human rights violations. In January 2021, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed [Global Magnitsky sanctions](#) on PMF Chairman and Iraqi former National Security Advisor Falih al-Fayyadh, who has also been accused of direct links to religious freedom violations, for engaging in serious human rights abuses.