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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution establishes Islam as the official religion and states that no law may be enacted contradicting the “established provisions of Islam.” It provides for freedom of religious belief and practice for all individuals, including Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, and Sabeian-Mandaeans, but it does not explicitly mention followers of other religions or atheists. Restrictions on freedom of religion remained widespread outside the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR). Activities that promote the normalization of relations with Israel have long been illegal, with penalties as severe as life in prison and the death penalty. The legal code also prohibits Jews from joining the military and holding jobs in the public sector.

The Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights (IHCHR) reported receiving hundreds of complaints from relatives of persons detained on terrorism charges, citing claims of arrests based on malicious prosecutions, torture, and forced disappearance. Sunni leaders said these abuses frequently targeted Sunnis held on terrorism charges. Sunni political leaders continued to protest the allegedly illegal detention of Sunni Arabs, who represent approximately 90 percent of all prisoners in detention, including 9,000 who received death sentences. International and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) said the government continued to use the antiterrorism law as a pretext for detaining individuals without due process, most of whom were Sunni Arabs, including those suspected of having links to ISIS. Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) militias frequently threatened members of Sunni and minority communities with terrorism charges to silence their dissent, especially in areas where the militias have taken over local land and economic activities and blocked the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

As in previous years, there were credible reports that government forces, including the Federal Police, the National Security Service (NSS), and the PMF, abused and tortured individuals – particularly Sunni Arabs – during arrest, pretrial detention, and after conviction. Yezidis, Christians, and local and international NGOs reported PMF members continued to verbally harass and physically abuse members of religious minority communities. During the year, the government reported minimal progress in locating or rescuing missing Yezidis.

The Syriac Catholic Church alleged the 30th and 50th PMF Brigades facilitated land sales with the aim of reducing Christian demographics in the Ninewa Plain and had supported Shabaks (a predominantly Shia ethnoreligious group) in seizing at least three Christian properties. Local authorities allegedly authorized illegal approvals for Muslims to increasingly rent property in Christian towns. Yezidi representatives reported Iran-aligned militia groups (IAMGs) maintained private real estate offices to buy Yezidi and Sunni Arab real estate and properties in order to change the demography of the Sinjar district in favor of the Shia community. Only a small number of the country's population of 400,000 to 500,000 Yezidis had returned to their homes, with Sinjar having an estimated return rate of only 35 percent, including non-Yezidis. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) reported Yezidis comprised 30 percent of approximately 700,000 IDPs present inside and outside camps in the IKR. There have been limited efforts to implement the comprehensive 2020 Agreement on the Restoration of Stability and Normalization in Sinjar (Sinjar Agreement) signed by the government and the KRG, which included expanded reconstruction efforts to support voluntary returns of Yezidis still displaced in the IKR and abroad. Kaka'i (Yarsani) community members again said the federal government's Shia Endowment seized Kaka'i worship sites in Diyala and Baghdad and later converted them into Shia mosques.

On July 3, President Abdulatif Jamal Rashid revoked the 2013 presidential decree recognizing Cardinal Louis Sako as the Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Iraq. In a statement issued on July 15, Sako called the action "unprecedented," and "unfair," stating the president was targeting him and the decision was part of an effort to gain control of church assets. On December 18, the Chaldean Patriarchate announced it would cancel Christmas activities in part in protest against Rashid's withdrawal of the decree.

According to Christian leaders, authorities continued to force Christian families formally registered as Muslim but privately practicing Christianity or another non-Islamic faith to either register their children as Muslims, or to have the children remain undocumented by federal authorities, thereby denying them the ability to legally convert from Islam. Zoroastrian, Kaka'i, and Baha'i Faith leaders again reported their religion was listed as "Islam" on their federal identification cards, a continuing

problem reported by members of unrecognized religious groups due to the country's constitution and personal status law.

According to Yezidi activists and officials, Yezidis continued to fear returning to Sinjar because of poor infrastructure, the lack of empowered local government, and the presence of Iran-aligned militia groups as well as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, which Turkish airstrikes targeted. Several times during the year, Turkish airstrikes struck facilities used by Sinjar Resistance Unit (YBS) Yezidi fighters affiliated with the PKK in Sinjar District. ISIS remnants also threaten the security of Sinjar. In May, the central government's Martyrs Foundation announced the exhumation of the remains of 605 ISIS victims from mass graves near a prison in Badush in northern Iraq. ISIS fighters had taken the inmates from the prison in 2014 and killed the Shia among the prisoners, according to the Foundation. There were continued reports of societal violence by sectarian armed groups across the country, except in the IKR. Although media and human rights organizations said security conditions in many parts of the country continued to improve, reports of societal violence by Iran-backed militias continued. Members of non-Muslim minority groups reported abductions, threats, pressure, and harassment to force them to observe Islamic customs. In response to desecrations of the Quran in Sweden and Denmark over the summer, large numbers of protesters gathered in Baghdad, and, on one occasion, burned parts of the Swedish embassy.

The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and the Consulate General in Erbil addressed at the highest levels a full range of religious freedom concerns in the country through frequent meetings with senior government officials, including with Prime Minister Mohammed Shiaa al-Sudani, through interagency coordination groups, and in targeted assistance programs for projects including recovery in communities with members of religious minority groups. U.S. delegations, along with embassy and consulate staff, met with members of religious and ethnic groups in Baghdad and Erbil on numerous occasions throughout the year. These groups voiced their concerns regarding the presence of armed groups harassing their community members and promoting and forcing demographic changes; a lack of available resources for stabilization and rehabilitation efforts for internally displaced Christians, Yezidis, and members of other minority groups; and general safety concerns. The Ambassador and other U.S. officials met regularly with national and regional government officials, members of parliament, and parliamentary committees to emphasize the need for the security, full inclusion, tolerance, and protection of the rights of members of minority religious groups. Embassy officials met with Shia, Sunni, Yezidi, Christian, and other religious-group representatives to underscore U.S. support for these communities and to assess the needs and challenges they continued to face.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 41 million (midyear 2023), while the Iraqi Ministry of Planning estimates the population to be 43.3 million. According to 2010 government statistics – the most recent available – 97 percent of the population is Muslim. Shia Muslims, predominantly Arabs but also including Turkmen, Farsi Kurds, and others, constitute 55 to 60 percent of the Muslim population. Sunni Muslims are approximately 40 percent of the Muslim population, of which Arabs constitute 24 percent, Kurds 15 percent, and Turkmen the remaining 1 percent. 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 north of the country.

According to Christian leaders as well as NGO and media reports, fewer than 150,000 Christians remain in the country, down from a pre-2003 estimate of approximately 1.5 million. Approximately 67 percent of Christians are Chaldean Catholics (an eastern rite of the Roman Catholic Church), and nearly 20 percent are members of the Assyrian Church of the East. Leaders of the Armenian community report a population of approximately 12,000 Armenian Christians in the country, representing both the Armenian Apostolic Church (Armenian Orthodox) and Armenian Catholic Church, including in the IKR. The remainder are Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Anglican, and other Protestants and evangelical Christians.

Yezidi leaders stated most of the 400,000 to 500,000 Yezidis in the country are located in Ninewa Province and the IKR. On October 6, the Prime Minister's office said more than 185,000 Yezidis remained in internal displacement camps. International organizations, however, said there were 132,000 total IDPs in camps, of which 118,000 are Yezidi. The Shabak number between 350,000 and 400,000, three-fourths of whom are Shia. Most Sunni Shabak and some Shia Shabak reside in Ninewa. According to Kaka'i (Yarsani) activists, their community has approximately 110,000 to 120,000 members located in the Ninewa Plain and in villages southeast of Kirkuk, as well as in Diyala, Sulaymaniyah, Halabja, and Erbil.

Estimates of the size of the Sabean-Mandean community vary, but according to Sabean-Mandean leaders, 10,000 to 15,000 members remain in the country, mainly in the south, with between 450 and 1,000 living in the IKR and Baghdad. Baha'i Faith leaders report fewer than 2,000 members, spread throughout the country in small groups, including approximately 100 families in the IKR. Leaders of the Kavkaz (the unified name for the Circassian, Chechen, and Dagestani groups) community report a population of approximately 50,000 members, located in Baghdad, Ninewa, Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, Kirkuk, and Diyala Provinces. Most identify as Sunni Muslims who were forcibly displaced from the Caucasus

to Iraq during the wars between the Ottoman and Russian empires in the nineteenth century.

According to media organizations, only a handful of Jewish citizens remain in federal Iraq. According to unofficial statistics from the KRG Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA), there are possibly from 100 to 250 Jewish individuals in the IKR. Jewish leaders report most do not openly acknowledge their religion for fear of persecution or violence by extremist actors. According to the KRG MERA, there are approximately 80,000 to 100,000 Zoroastrians in the IKR, while a Zoroastrian religious leader estimated there are approximately 50,000 Zoroastrians throughout the country.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), approximately 1.1 million persons remain displaced within the country as of August, compared with approximately the same number at the end of 2022 and 1.5 million at the end of 2020. According to the KRG's Joint Crisis Coordination Center, there are 697,986 IDPs in the IKR as of September, a slight increase from the numbers reported in 2022.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution establishes Islam as the official religion of the state and a “foundational source” of legislation. It states no law may be enacted contradicting the “established provisions of Islam.” It also states no law may contradict the principles of democracy or the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in the constitution.

The constitution protects the “Islamic identity” of the Iraqi people, although it makes no specific mention of Sunni or Shia Islam. The constitution also provides for freedom of religious belief and practice for all individuals, specifying Christians, Yezidis, and Sabeian-Mandaeans; it does not explicitly mention followers of other religions or atheists. Federal law prohibits the practice of the Baha’i Faith and provides a penalty of 10 years in prison for anyone convicted of practicing it, although the law is not enforced as a matter of informal policy. The KRG also does not enforce the federal ban as a matter of practice and policy, and the KRG recognizes the Baha’i Faith as a religion.

The law prohibits organizations that espouse *takfiri* ideology (roughly translates to “one who denounces a fellow Muslim as infidel”), including the terrorist organizations al-Qa’ida and ISIS, which declare as apostates any Muslims who practice a less strict form of Islam, as the organizations define it. A 2001 resolution from the Saddam-era Revolutionary Command Council prohibits the practice of the Wahhabi movement of Sunni Islam.

The law imposes penalties up to the death sentence on activities that promote the normalization of relations with Israel. The law applies to citizens, officials, entities, and companies; foreigners are also prohibited from promoting normalization with Israel inside the country. The law also prohibits Jews from joining the military or holding jobs in the public sector. The KRG falls under the central government's anti-Israel laws but has its own separate IKR law that provides protections for the rights of members of religious minority groups, including Jews. The KRG MERA dedicates one of its eight departments to Jewish affairs.

The constitution states individuals have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and belief. Followers of all religions are, according to the constitution, free to practice religious rites and manage religious endowment affairs and institutions. The constitution guarantees freedom from religious coercion and states all citizens are equal before the law without regard to religion, sect, or belief.

The constitution guarantees the reinstatement of citizenship to individuals who gave up their citizenship for political or sectarian reasons; however, this does not apply to Jews who emigrated to Israel and were forced to renounce their citizenship under a 1950 law.

Civil laws provide a simple process for a non-Muslim to convert to Islam. Personal status laws and regulations prohibit the conversion of Muslims to other religions, and they require the administrative designation of children as Muslims if either parent converts to Islam or if one parent is considered Muslim, even if the child is conceived by rape. Civil status law allows women identified in their official documents as non-Muslims to marry Muslim men, but it prohibits Muslim women from marrying non-Muslims. Muslim men may only marry non-Muslim women of the Christian, Jewish, or Sabeian Mandaean faith.

The penal code punishes with up to three years' imprisonment or a 300 dinar fine (less than \$1) any person who "attacks the creed of a religious minority or pours scorn on its religious practices; willfully disrupts, prevents, or obstructs a religious ceremony, festival, or meeting of a religious minority; wrecks, destroys, defaces, or desecrates a building or sacred symbol set aside for the ceremonies of a religious minority; deliberately misspells texts to alter or make light of the meaning, tenets, or teachings of a book sacred to a religious minority; publicly insults a symbol or a person who constitutes an object of sanctification, worship, or reverence to a religious minority; or publicly imitates a religious ceremony or celebration with intent to deceive."

IKR law forbids "religious or political media speech, individually or collectively, directly or indirectly, that brings hate and violence, terror,

exclusion, and marginalization based on national, ethnic, religious, or linguistic claims.”

The law characterizes certain actions that ISIS committed against Yazidis, Christians, Turkmen, and Shabak as crimes of genocide and crimes against humanity. The law grants rights to Yazidis and other survivors of ISIS. These rights include restitution for damages and access to social and medical services, including services that provide for the rehabilitation and integration of victims into society. Those eligible for benefits include Yazidi, Christian, Shabak, and Turkmen women and girl survivors who were kidnapped by ISIS; Yazidis, Christians, Shabak, and Turkmen who survived mass killing operations that ISIS carried out; and Yazidi children who were kidnapped by ISIS. The law does not specifically reference children born as a result of sexual violence committed by ISIS members.

The personal status law recognizes the following religious groups as registered with the government: Muslims, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Assyrian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Armenian Apostolic, Armenian Catholics, Roman Catholics, National Protestants, Anglicans, Evangelical Protestant Assyrians, Seventh-day Adventists, Coptic Orthodox, Yazidis, Sabean-Mandaeans, and Jews. Recognition allows groups to appoint legal representatives and perform legal transactions, such as buying and selling property. All recognized religious groups in the country, except for Yazidis, have their own personal-status courts responsible for handling marriage, divorce, and inheritance issues. The law does not permit some religious groups, including Baha’i, Zoroastrian, and Kaka’i, to register under their professed religions, which, although the groups are recognized in the IKR, remain unrecognized under federal law and lack legal protections provided to the recognized religions.

Three diwans (offices) are responsible for administering matters for the recognized religious groups at the national level within the country: the Sunni Endowment Diwan, the Shia Endowment Diwan, and the Christian and Minorities Endowment Diwan. The three diwans operate under the authority of the Prime Minister’s Office to disburse government funds to maintain and protect religious facilities through the endowments of their respective communities.

Federal law criminalizes the practice of the Baha’i Faith. Although not recognized by the federal government, practicing Wahhabi Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Yarsanism are not criminalized. Contracts signed by institutions of these unrecognized religious groups are not considered legal or admissible as evidence in court.

Eight faiths are recognized and registered with the KRG MERA: Islam, Christianity, Yazidism, Judaism, Sabean-Mandaeism, Zoroastrianism, Yarsanism, and the Baha’i Faith. According to the KRG MERA, individuals from 14 different Christian government-recognized denominations reside

in the IKR, including denominations associated with the Chaldean Church, Assyrian Old Eastern Church, Syriac Orthodox Church, Syriac Catholic Church, Armenian Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Roman Catholic Church, Presbyterian Church, Assyrian Protestant Church, Coptic Orthodox Church, and Seventh-day Adventist Church.

According to the KRG MERA's Directorate of Christian Affairs, 15 Protestant and evangelical Christian groups are registered in the IKR, several with multiple branches: Nahda al-Qadassa, Nasari Evangelical, Kurd-Zman, Ashti Evangelical, Evangelical Free, Baptist Church of the Good Shepherd, St. Mary's Episcopal Church, al-Tasbih International Evangelical, Rasolia (Pentecostal), United Evangelical, Assemblies of God, and Seventh-day Adventist.

In areas other than the IKR, the law does not provide a mechanism for new religious groups to obtain legal recognition. In the IKR, religious groups obtain recognition by registering with the KRG MERA. To register, a group must have a minimum of 150 adherents, provide documentation on the sources of its financial support, and demonstrate it is not "anti-Islam."

The law reserves nine of the Council of Representatives' (COR) 329 seats for members of religious and ethnic minority communities: five for Christian candidates from Baghdad, Ninewa, Kirkuk, Erbil, and Duhok; one for a Yezidi from Ninewa; one for a Sabeen-Mandean from Baghdad; one for an ethnic Shabak from Ninewa; and one for a Faili Kurd from Wasit. Usually one of the COR rapporteur (administrative) positions is designated for a Christian parliamentarian and the other for a Turkmen. The Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament reserved 11 of its 111 seats for members of ethnic and religious minority groups: five for Chaldeans, Syriacs, and Assyrians; five for Turkmen; and one for an Armenian, some of whom also belong to minority religious groups. No seats are reserved for members of other religious and ethnic minority groups.

The constitution provides for a Federal Supreme Court 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 COR for passage, but such legislation has never been passed.

Islam takes precedence when one of the parties to a personal status dispute, including over such matters as marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, and charitable donations, is from an unrecognized faith. The law states that in cases where no Muslim is a party, civil courts must consult the religious authority of the non-Muslim party or parties for an opinion under the applicable religious law and must apply the religious authority's opinion in court. In the IKR, the Personal Status Court adjudicates personal disputes between members of the same religion,

while the Civil Status Court handles all other cases. Minority religious group members may request a non-Muslim judge to adjudicate their cases.

The KRG MERA administers endowments that pay salaries of clergy and fund construction and maintenance of religious sites for Muslims, Christians, and Yezidis, but not for the other five registered religions.

The law requires the government to maintain the sanctity of holy shrines and religious sites and guarantee the free practice of rituals for recognized religious groups. In the IKR, the KRG MERA administers a lottery to choose pilgrims for official Hajj visas allotted to the IKR, which according to the KRG numbered 2,000 during the year.

By law, the government provides support for Muslims outside the IKR desiring to perform the Hajj or Umrah, organizing travel routes and immunization documents for entry into Saudi Arabia.

The constitution provides for freedom of assembly and peaceful demonstration "regulated by law." Those regulations prohibit all "slogans, signs, printed materials, or drawings" involving "sectarianism, racism, or segregation" of citizens. The demonstration regulations also prohibit anything that would violate the constitution or law; encourage violence, hatred, or killing; or prove insulting to Islam, "honor, morals, religion, holy groups, or Iraqi entities in general."

The constitution provides minority groups the right to educate children in their own languages. While it establishes Arabic and Kurdish as official state languages, it makes Syriac – typically spoken by Christians – and Turkmen official languages only in the administrative units in which those groups "constitute density of population."

Government regulations require Islamic instruction in public schools outside the IKR, 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 – two classes per week in the IKR – of Islamic education, including study of the Quran, as a graduation requirement for Muslim students. The government provides Christian religious education in public schools in some areas where there is a high concentration of Christians, and there is a Syriac curriculum directorate within the Ministry of Education.

In the IKR, to register with the KRG MERA, private schools must provide information on the school's bylaws, number of students, size, location, facility and safety conditions, financial backing, and tax compliance, and must undergo an inspection.

National identity cards issued after 2016 do not denote the bearer's religion, although the online application still requests this information,

and a data chip on the card still contains data on religion. The only religions that may be listed on the national identity card application are Christian, Sabeen-Mandean, Yezidi, Jewish, and Muslim. There is neither a distinction between Shia and Sunni Muslims, nor a designation of specific Christian denominations. Individuals practicing other faiths may only receive identity cards if they self-identify as Muslim, Yezidi, Sabeen-Mandean, Jewish, or Christian. Without an official identity card, one may not register a marriage, enroll children in public school, acquire passports, or obtain some government services. Passports do not specify religion.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

The IHCHR reported receiving hundreds of complaints from relatives of persons detained on terrorism charges, citing claims of arrests based on malicious prosecutions, torture, and forced disappearance. Sunni leaders said these abuses frequently targeted Sunnis held on terrorism charges. Sunni political leaders continued to protest the allegedly illegal detention of Sunni Arabs, who represent approximately 90 percent of all prisoners in detention, including 9,000 who received death sentences. A Yezidi activist critical of KRG policies towards the Yezidis noted continued harassment by KRG security forces that he attributed to his policy views. The activist said the KRG *Asayish* (internal security service) confiscated his and his colleague's cell phones and laptops at a checkpoint between Sinjar and Duhok Province without presenting a warrant or official documentation.

International and local NGOs said the government continued to use the anti-terrorism law as a pretext for detaining individuals without due process or fair trial protections, most of whom were Sunni Arabs, including those suspected of having links to ISIS. Sunni leaders said authorities used the antiterrorism law to quell Sunni protests and detain young Sunni men. According to international human rights organizations, some Shia militias, including some operating under the PMF umbrella, continued to commit physical abuses and were implicated in several attacks on Sunni civilians, allegedly to avenge ISIS crimes against Shias. The PMF is a state-sponsored organization comprised of more than 50 mostly Shia militias (but also Sunni, Shabak, Christian, and Yezidi) originally formed to combat ISIS. Militias in the PMF frequently threatened Sunnis with terrorism charges to silence their dissent, especially in areas where the militias have taken over local land and economic activities and blocked the return of Sunni and other IDPs. Human rights activists also said PMF forces operated secret detention facilities in which they held Sunni individuals on false accusations of ISIS affiliation. PMF forces reportedly extorted families of the detainees. Multiple international NGOs reported that PMF units prevented residents, including Sunni Arabs and

members of ethnic and religious minority groups, from returning to their homes after government forces ousted ISIS.

As in previous years, there were credible reports that government forces, including the Federal Police, the NSS, and the PMF, abused and tortured individuals – particularly Sunni Arabs – during arrest and pretrial detention and after conviction. There were numerous reports of the 30th and 50th PMF Brigades' involvement in extortion, illegal arrests, kidnappings, and detention of individuals without warrants. Informed observers reported the 30th PMF Brigade continued to operate secret detention facilities in several locations in Ninewa Province, which held unknown numbers of detainees arrested on sectarian-based and reportedly false pretenses. Leaders of the 30th PMF Brigade allegedly forced families of detainees to pay large sums of money in exchange for the release of their relatives.

Yezidis, Christians, and local and international NGOs reported members of the PMF continued to verbally harass and physically abuse members of religious minority communities. During the year, the government reported minimal progress in locating or rescuing missing Yezidis. On August 3, IKR President Nechirvan Barzani confirmed that 2,646 (1,244 women and 1,402 men) of the 6,417 Yezidis kidnapped by ISIS in 2014 remained missing both inside and outside Iraq, the same number reported still missing in 2022. Members of other minority populations were also victims of human rights abuses committed by ISIS. Since 2014, the Yezidi Rescue Coordinating Office reported 3,572 Yezidis had been freed from ISIS captivity, including 10 during the year. Between 2014 and 2022, approximately 120,000 Yezidis left the country, most moving to Germany and others to Turkey, Greece, Georgia, Armenia, France, the Netherlands, Croatia, the United States, Australia, Hungary, and Bulgaria.

On August 6, media sources reported the 233 Shabak individuals whom ISIS kidnapped in 2014 were still missing. According to Ninewa Governorate's Advisor for Women's Affairs Sukina Ali (a Shia Turkmen of Ninewa), 900 Shia and Sunni Turkmen whom ISIS kidnapped in 2014 were still missing at the end of the year.

On January 15, local observers said that Kaka'i individuals affiliated with the Babylon Movement, the so-called political wing of the 50th PMF Brigade – an ostensibly Christian militia operated primarily by Shia militants – harassed a Kaka'i activist's family and relatives after the activist criticized an Iran-aligned political party's alleged campaign to assert that the Kaka'i religion was part of the Shia faith. The 50th ("Babylon") PMF Brigade is under the command of Rayan al-Kildani, whom the U.S. Department of Treasury designated in 2019 under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act for his involvement in severe human rights abuses.

Hundreds of Christian soldiers of the 13th regiment of the 50th PMF Brigade, a regiment of approximately 450 Christians established by the Assyrian Democratic Movement, protested on March 11 in Qaraqosh, a city with a Christian majority in the Ninewa Plain, against the alleged abuses of the 50th Brigade's commanders. Those protesters accused the 50th Brigade commanders of mistreating and insulting the Christian soldiers under their command.

Authorities separated detainees according to sectarian affiliation, and some prison halls were specifically designated for either Shia or Sunnis. Sunni prisoners reportedly faced more frequent abuse and mistreatment than Shia prisoners.

The Syriac Catholic Church alleged that the 30th and 50th PMF Brigades facilitated land sales with the aim of reducing Christian demographics in the Ninewa Plain and that they had supported Shabaks in seizing at least three Christian properties. Local authorities had allegedly authorized illegal approvals for Muslims to increasingly rent property in Christian towns.

On February 6, Yezidi representatives reported that Iran-aligned militias maintained private real estate offices to buy Yezidi and Arab Sunni real estate and properties in order to change the demography of the Sinjar district in favor of Shia. Yezidi observers also accused Iran-backed militias and the PKK of using the Sinjar district as a passage for drugs and weapons through the Iraqi-Syrian border.

On May 19, member of parliament (MP) Raad al-Dahlaki, a Sunni leader from Diyala Province, said that PMF groups had not withdrawn from Iraqi cities despite the liberation of those areas from ISIS. Dahlaki stated that the liberated cities did not welcome the weapons of the armed factions but no one dared to complain about it. Dahlaki said he believed the armed factions were "carrying out political, security, and economic activities, in addition to a dangerous goal which is the demographic change, especially in the Sunni areas like the town of Jurf al-Sakhr in Babil Province, and other towns in Salah al-Din, Diyala, and Ninewa Provinces." Throughout the year, Christian officials reported federal and provincial-level political pressure to issue land grants in Christian-majority areas to the mostly Shia families of PMF fighters who fought ISIS.

Christian IDPs refused to return to the district of Tal Kayf, in Ninewa Province, citing fear of the PMF 50th Brigade.

Only a very small number of the country's population of 400,000 to 500,000 Yezidis had returned to their homes, with Sinjar having an estimated return rate of only 35 percent, including non-Yezidis. IOM reported more than 5,000 Yezidi IDPs returned to Sinjar during the year. Many chose to stay in IDP camps or informal settlements in Duhok, saying

inadequate security as well as a lack of reconstruction plans, public services, and economic opportunities discouraged them from returning home.

Almost one million of the country's IDPs and refugees resided in the IKR, with approximately 132,000 living in 25 registered camps and the rest living in informal settlements, according to the KRG's Joint Crisis Coordination Center. KRG officials committed not to close those camps until the IDPs returned to their area of origin voluntarily. Forty percent of IDPs throughout the IKR were Sunni Arabs, 30 percent were Yezidis, 13 percent were Kurds (of several religious affiliations), 7 percent were Christians, and the remainder were members of other religious minority groups, according to KRG figures.

On November 6, Minister of Displacement and Migration Evan Jabro announced the voluntary return of 487 Yezidi IDPs (116 families) from Shariya camp in Duhok Province to their place of origin in Sinjar District in Ninewa Province. Jabro observed that in coordination with IOM, the IDPs received financial support upon their return and transportation for individuals and their belongings. Dian Jafar, the head of the Directorate of Migration and Crisis Response in the IKR Ministry of Interior, said this was the sixth group of Yezidi families included in the IOM's safe return program, bringing the total number of beneficiaries to 321 families. Jafar added IOM had previously constructed homes and helped with job opportunities for IDP returnees.

On November 8, a Turkmen official in Ninewa reported that the PMF had not allowed Sunni Turkmen to return to their villages in Tuz-Khurmato District, Salah al-Din Province. The PMF, however, allowed Shia Turkmen to return to their villages. The official stated that in Tel Afar, Ninewa Province, the PMF continued to verbally harass Sunni Turkmen at checkpoints and required them to obtain the approval of the PMF's intelligence apparatus to obtain government documentation.

There have been limited efforts to implement the comprehensive 2020 Sinjar Agreement, signed by the government and the KRG, which included expanded reconstruction efforts to support voluntary returns of Yezidis still displaced in the IKR and abroad. Yezidi leaders and community members continued to criticize the agreement – although they agreed with its components – saying they did not have enough participation in the negotiation of the Sinjar Agreement and remained apprehensive about the progress of implementation. Yezidi leaders and activists also cited the lack of progress in implementing the Sinjar Agreement or improving the security situation in Sinjar as major impediments to the ability of internally displaced Yezidis to return to their homes. IOM reported an uptick in the migration of Yezidis to Turkey, beginning in August, with intended onward travel to Europe. According to the IOM, 1,861 individuals crossed the Ibrahim al-Khalil border crossing between

August 24 and September 24, of which 30 percent departed from camps and 70 percent from informal settlements.

On April 17, Yezidi MP Shareef Suliman, a member of the Migration Committee in the Iraqi COR, said that the 2023 budget had allocated 50 billion Iraqi dinars (\$38 million) for the reconstruction of Sinjar and the Ninewa Plain and, in accordance with the Sinjar Agreement, also included funding to recruit 2,500 members of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) from the local population in Sinjar. Yezidi MP Mahma Khalil of the Kurdish Democratic Party had raised objections to the allocation of 50 billion Iraqi dinars (\$38 million) for the reconstruction of Sinjar and the Ninewa Plain, suggesting that Sinjar should receive a separate, dedicated fund instead of being merged with other areas.

In June 2021, the COR allocated 25 billion dinars (\$19 million) to support implementation of the Yezidi Survivors Law to provide support to Yezidi and other survivors of the 2014 genocide by ISIS. On March 1, the General Directorate of Survivors' Affairs (GDSA) distributed the first reparation disbursements under the Yezidi Survivors Law to 24 Yezidi survivors (21 women and three men). The survivors received debit cards that they could use to withdraw their monthly disbursements from the government. On August 1, the GDSA confirmed 635 beneficiaries were receiving monthly payments under the Yezidi Survivors Law. On December 1, the GDSA announced the total number of beneficiaries had reached 1,381. GDSA officials stated the GDSA was capable of processing up to 100 survivor applications each month; however, they pointed to challenges including staff shortages and an insufficient number of offices in the directorate, which limited their processing capacity.

In early 2023, the government imposed a new requirement for survivors to file a criminal complaint to be eligible for reparation. In an April joint public statement, a group of 13 international NGOs, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, raised concerns about the new requirement. In their statement, the groups said that new evidentiary standards were burdensome, risked overloading judicial mechanisms, and could delay or hinder prompt and effective reparation.

Enforced disappearance is currently not a crime and thus cannot be prosecuted as such. On August 6, the Council of Ministers issued a draft "Missing Persons Law" and sent it to parliament. The draft aims to help relatives of the missing know the fate of the disappeared and access to reparations, including by setting up a national commission for the missing. The draft does not criminalize enforced disappearance or outline penalties for perpetrators.

Authorities have routinely restricted movements of displaced persons throughout the country. Sunni Arab households displaced in 2017 into the East Mosul camps were prevented from returning to their areas of origin

due to a lack of civil documentation; insufficient coordination among government, KRG, and local authorities to remove legal obstacles and rebuild destroyed housing; and lack of acceptance by local communities. These movement restrictions severely limited IDP access to livelihoods, education, health services, and basic citizen rights. Following the KRG's July 24 announcement that it would allow approximately 3,000 Sunni Arab IDPs to return to nearby villages of origin, one group of 122 households departed, but other families from the nearby villages were awaiting approvals to depart. In addition, many parts of the country liberated from ISIS control, including Mosul and the Sinjar region, continued to experience movement restrictions due to excessive numbers of PMF checkpoints, ISF shakedowns, and other government and paramilitary actions related to smuggling. Due to the federal government's lack of interagency coordination, local authorities often failed to recognize returnees' security permits and did not comply with the central government's orders to facilitate dignified returns.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

NGOs continued to state that constitutional provisions on freedom of religion should override laws banning the Baha'i Faith and the Wahhabi movement of Sunni Islam. There were, however, no court challenges filed to invalidate the laws, and no legislation proposed to repeal them.

In July, the Iraqi government re-introduced two draft laws to the parliament that, if passed, would severely curtail exercise of the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. The proposed draft Law on Freedom of Expression and Peaceful Assembly would allow authorities to prosecute anyone who makes public comments that violate "public morals" or "public order." The draft law prohibits the undermining of "religions, religious beliefs, or sects." As religious figures play a prominent role in Iraq's major political parties, banning criticism of them would severely limit Iraqis' exercise of their right to freedom of expression, according to human rights observers. The draft legislation also could restrict public religious observances of minority groups important to the expression of their faith.

Prime Minister Sudani established a committee to examine the issue of coerced conversion of minors to Islam. The committee worked to identify solutions, but both the Sunni and Shia Endowments refused to make any changes or address any of the challenges facing Christians subject to coerced conversion.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or in Community with Others

Representatives of minority religious groups, including Christians and Yezidis, continued to state that local authorities in some provinces continued to impose restrictions on their activities. Observers noted that movement restrictions remained in place between Christian areas in the

Ninewa Plain and at IKR and central government checkpoints during the year.

On July 3, President Abdulatif Jamal Rashid revoked the presidential decree issued in 2013 recognizing Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako as the Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Iraq and establishing the patriarch as the sole administrator of the church's properties and financial affairs. President Rashid said he made the decision in order to correct a constitutional error since the president has no right to appoint or recognize religious leaders. President Rashid did not revoke the decrees related to any other religious leaders at that time. In a statement issued on July 15, Cardinal Sako called the president's action "unprecedented" and "unfair," stating the president was targeting him and the decision was part of the PMF 50th Brigade Commander al-Kildani's efforts to usurp his authority and gain control of church offices and assets. Cardinal Sako moved from Baghdad to a Chaldean monastery in the IKR in protest. In August, Cardinal Sako told an NGO that he lodged a complaint with the country's Federal Supreme Court (FSC) and called for the reversal of President Rashid's decision. On November 11, the FSC ruled against Cardinal Sako. On December 18, the Chaldean Patriarchate announced it would cancel Christmas activities citing the ongoing war in Israel, out of respect for the victims of a wedding hall fire in Hamdaniya, and to protest President Rashid's withdrawal of the decree.

On March 11, Iraqi authorities began to enforce a law passed on October 22, 2016, but not published in the official gazette until February 22, 2023, banning the importation, manufacturing, and sale of alcohol. The law specified a punishment for these offenses of a fine of not less than 10 million Iraqi dinars (\$7,600) and not exceeding 25 million Iraqi dinars (\$19,100). According to the press, some observers saw the measure as a government attempt to head off political challenges from religious conservatives and to distract attention from ongoing economic problems. Christian politicians attempted in March to overturn the 2016 legislation, and Yezidi and Christian communities noted the detrimental economic and human rights impact the legislation had on the Yezidi, Christian, and other religious and ethnic minority communities. Members of the Babylon Movement said the legislation was unconstitutional because it ignored the rights of members of minority groups and restricted their freedom. Prior to the government's enforcement of the 2016 law, Sabean-Mandean, Yezidis, and Christians continued to report fear of importing and distributing alcohol and spirits, despite receiving permits. Christian, Yezidi, and Sabean-Mandean store owners, especially those operating with alcohol sales licenses, reported PMF militias blackmailed and attacked them.

Christian religious leaders continued to publicly accuse the 30th PMF Brigade of verbal harassment of Christians in Bartella and elsewhere in Hamdaniya District of Ninewa. Local residents continued to report militias

posted pictures on shops in Bartella of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and former Quds Force Commander Qassim Suleimani, as well as of militia leaders, such as [Specially Designated Global Terrorist and Global Magnitsky Act designated human rights violator] Qais al-Khazali Secretary General of [U.S. designated Foreign Terrorist Organization and Specially Designated Global Terrorist] Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), and former Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC) Chief of Staff Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. They also stated the 30th Brigade continued to disregard 2019 government orders to withdraw from checkpoints in the Ninewa Plain.

Community members reported Shia militias and the Shia Endowment continued to confiscate properties owned by the Sunni Endowments in Diyala and Ninewa Provinces, leading to sectarian tensions in those provinces. On March 9, the Iraqi Sunni Endowment and Sunnis in Samarra condemned the announcement by Shia Imam Askari to change the name of the city's oldest Sunni mosque to a Shia name. The Samarra Sunni Endowment condemned the action, describing the proposed name change as "provocative."

In November, Cardinal Sako addressed emerging threats facing Christians in Iraq, including their exclusion from the political process, and his ongoing concern over the continuing exodus of nearly 20 Christian families per month from a country that was once home to 1.5 million Christians. He also spoke out against the government's decision to evict displaced persons from a housing project in Baghdad. The repurposing of the government-owned Mariam al-Adra (Virgin Mary) Compound in Baghdad resulted in the forced eviction of 121 families (approximately 400 individuals) who had taken shelter there after having been displaced from the Ninewa Plain during the 2014 ISIS invasion. According to the Christian Department in the Minorities Endowment, 63 of the 121 families had been evacuated by the end of the year, with 14 families relocating to a building belonging to the Chaldean Church in Baghdad. The rest of the families relocated to the Ninewa Plain and Erbil, where they reportedly moved in with relatives or rented homes.

Kaka'i community members again said the federal government's Shia Endowment seized Kaka'i worship sites in Diyala and Baghdad and later converted them into Shia mosques. According to Kaka'i representatives, the government had still not responded to their request for the return of the Baba Mahmud House of Worship, which was transferred to the Shia Endowment in 2019. Kaka'i representatives also reported the Sunni Endowment seized Kaka'i houses of worship in Kirkuk during the year.

Christian representatives reported the ISF continued to occupy Christians' homes in Tal Kayf District, Ninewa Province, and repurposed them as military barracks without compensation. Community members confirmed the ISF was using the youth center as an administration office and that the juvenile prison was transferred out of Tal Kayf. The leaders said some

Christians had already left or planned to leave the area to avoid ISF inspections and limitations on the movement of residents. Local leaders added that the ISF continued to occupy many Christian houses without compensating the original owners.

During the year, Dhi Qar Governorate in the south of the country continued to reconstruct a center for inter-religious dialogue, which it first announced in July 2022, to include places of worship for Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Sabeans. The complex is slated to be built near the ancient city of Ur, one of the most important archaeological sites in the country and linked to the Patriarch Abraham, the father of the three great monotheistic religions.

The KRG Ministry of Education continued to fund religious instruction in schools for Muslim and Christian students. The ministry also continued to fund Syriac-language public elementary and secondary schools, which were intended to accommodate Christian students. The curriculum in these schools did not contain religious or Quranic studies. In the IKR, there were 48 Syriac-language and 18 Turkmen-language schools.

Christian religious education remained part of the curricula of at least 255 public schools in the country, including 55 in the IKR, according to the Ministry of Education. Christian and Yezidi leaders outside the IKR reported continued discrimination in education and the lack of religious minority input on school curricula and language of instruction.

Private Islamic religious schools continued to operate, which required obtaining a license from the Ministry of Education's Director General of Private and Public Schools and payment of annual fees.

The Catholic University in Erbil continued to operate with full accreditation from the KRG Ministry of Higher Education and remained open to students of all faiths. The university continued to seek required approvals from the KRG for the opening of a medical school affiliated with the American University of Beirut. The KRG MERA's Directorate of Coexistence held in October a meeting with religious leaders, syndicates, and political parties to discuss peace building and diversity and assess how to overcome the barriers and challenges to peaceful coexistence in the region.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

While there remained no legal bar to ministerial appointments for members of religious minority groups, in practice there were still few non-Muslims in the federal government's Council of Ministers or the KRG Council of Ministers, a situation unchanged from the previous three years. Members of minority religious communities, including Christians, Yezidis, Kaka'i, and Sabeian-Mandeans, continued to hold senior positions in the national parliament, central government, and KRG, among them, Minister

of Displacement and Migration Evan Jabro, a Christian, and KRG Minister of Transportation Communication Ano Abdoka, a Syriac Orthodox Christian. Several KRG district and subdistrict mayoral positions continued to be reserved exclusively for Yezidis and Christians. Minority leaders, however, said they remained underrepresented in government appointments and public sector jobs, which limited access to government-provided economic opportunities for members of minority groups. The leaders indicated appointing Sabeen-Mandeans to senior government positions, including at the director general level, would facilitate directing relevant government resources to their communities.

On December 18, minority candidates ran for 10 reserved seats out of the 285 seats in the Iraqi provincial councils in 15 provinces: four Christian seats (Ninewa, Baghdad, Kirkuk, and Basrah), two Faili Kurd seats (Baghdad and Wasit), two Sabeen Mandaean seats (Baghdad, Maysan), one Shabak seat (Ninewa), and one Yezidi seat (Ninewa). The Babylon Movement, the political wing of the 50th PMF Babylon Brigade, secured all four Christian quota seats. In Basrah, the independent Christian winner was disqualified by the Supreme National Commission for Accountability and Justice, leading to the allocation of the seat to the Babylon Movement candidate. The Babylon Movement also obtained two quota seats in Ninewa and Baghdad, as well as two general seats through the al-Iraq Hawia Wataniya party, in addition to the Sabeen Mandaean quota seat in Wasit.

Christians said they continued to face discrimination that limited their economic opportunities, such as PMF “taxation” on goods transported from Erbil or Mosul into the Ninewa Plain.

Followers of recognized religious groups, including Baha’is (recognized only in the KRG) and Yezidis (recognized by both the central government and the KRG), reported the KRG allowed them to observe their religious holidays and festivals without interference or intimidation. Provincial and local governments in the IKR continued to designate some Muslim, Christian, and Yezidi religious feasts as local holidays.

According to Christian leaders, authorities continued to force Christian families formally registered as Muslim but privately practicing Christianity or another non-Islamic faith to either register their children as Muslims, or to have the children remain undocumented by federal authorities, thereby denying them the ability to legally convert from Islam. They said remaining undocumented affected the family’s eligibility for government benefits, such as school enrollment and ration card allocations for basic food items, which are determined by family size. Larger families with legally registered children received higher allotments than those with undocumented children.

Zoroastrian, Kaka'i, and Baha'i Faith adherents again reported their religion was listed as "Islam" on their federal identification cards, a continuing problem reported by members of unrecognized religious groups due to the country's constitution and personal status law.

Political parties and coalition blocs tended to organize along either religious or ethnic lines, although some parties crossed sectarian lines.

Based on local media reports, public recognition of ISIS's perpetration of genocide against Yazidis continued to grow during the year. Cross-sectarian genocide commemoration events took place on August 3 for the fifth consecutive year. On August 3, Prime Minister Sudani commemorated the ninth anniversary of the Yazidi genocide, saying, "Some countries and deviant parties were involved in this treacherous crime, seeking harm for Iraq, but their efforts ended in disappointment." Also on August 3, Nechirvan Barzani, president of the IKR, stated, "As long as there is one missing Yazidi left, this genocide is not over." Nadia Murad, a former captive of ISIS, Nobel Peace Prize winner, and UN Office on Drugs and Crime Goodwill Ambassador stated, "Today, we grieve for all those we have lost and mourn the life we once knew. I will continue to fight for survivors, advocate for justice and work to heal our homeland."

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

In April, the government announced the launch of a new Syriac-language television channel, Al-Syriania, as part of an efforts to save Syriac, which is linguistically related to Aramaic. The Christian Syriac-speaking community historically has used the language in school and church services.

Christian and Yazidi militia groups in Ninewa Province continued to draw some fighters from local Yazidi and Christian communities, but these groups remained subordinate to larger organizations controlled by Iran-aligned actors and militias.

According to Yazidi and Christian officials, some militias continued to receive support from the central government in Baghdad through the PMC, which oversees PMF forces, while other armed groups received assistance from the KRG's Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. Representatives of religious minority groups, such as Yazidi and Sabean-Mandean parliamentarians, continued to state they sought a role in establishing their own security force and requested government support in that regard.

In March, a Sunni political party accused Minister of Communications Hayam al-Yasiri of eliminating senior Sunnis from positions in the ministry through "systematic eradication" campaigns. The minister explained the decisions were merit-based and not arbitrary.

The Sunni and Shia endowments continued to accept Hajj applications from the public and submit them to the Supreme Council for the Hajj. The council used a lottery to select pilgrims for official Hajj visas. Lottery winners paid differing amounts to the government depending on their mode of travel for the Hajj, 3.7 million dinars (\$2,800) by land and 4.8 million dinars (\$3,700) by air. In the IKR, the KRG MERA organized Hajj and Umrah travel, administering a lottery to choose the pilgrims for official Hajj visas allotted to the IKR and coordinating flights and visas with outside authorities.

ACTIONS BY FOREIGN FORCES AND NONSTATE ACTORS

According to Yezidi activists and officials, Yezidis continued to fear returning to Sinjar primarily because of a lack of public services and economic opportunity, and the presence of armed actors vying for control in Sinjar absent any competent local authority: Iran-aligned militia groups and the PKK, [a U.S.-designated terrorist organization]. Iran-aligned militia groups used Sinjar to smuggle weapons and other contraband to Syria, contributing to a degradation in security. The PKK also used Sinjar to coordinate illicit trade between Iraq and Syria. A Chatham House report documented how the PKK transports small arms and light weapons between Iraq and Syria, via Sinjar, through a network comprising PKK fighters and local smugglers. The PKK and IAMGs, Chatham House concluded, have turned Sinjar into a “military corridor,” which negatively affects stability and security of the region. Yezidi IDPs feel compelled to join one of the two armed factions to provide for their families. PKK and IAMGs, according to Yezidi leaders, attempted to fill spots in the local police force meant to include Yezidis.

According to observers, several times during the year, Turkish airstrikes targeted and struck facilities used by Sinjar Resistance Unit (YBS) Yezidi fighters affiliated with the PKK in Sinjar District, resulting in the deaths of YBS fighters.

ISIS, which ravaged Sinjar in 2014, continued to play a role in undermining local security. During the year the security situation was unstable in many areas due to intermittent attacks by ISIS and its affiliated cells; sporadic fighting between the ISF and ISIS in remote areas; the presence of militias not fully under the control of the government, including certain PMF units; and sectarian, ethnic, and financially motivated violence. ISIS carried out sporadic attacks on civilians, often in Shia communities. On January 1, ISIS killed two persons they had kidnapped in Kirkuk in 2021. At year’s end, an investigation was underway.

In May, the central government’s Martyrs Foundation announced the exhumation of the remains of 605 ISIS victims from mass graves near a prison in Badush in northern Iraq. In 2014, ISIS fighters had taken inmates from the prison, separated out those who were Shia, and killed them near

a waterway, according to the Mass Graves Department of the Foundation. "The process of opening the graves took more than two years and resulted in the removal of 605 bodies," department chief Dhiaa Karim told a press conference in Baghdad on May 14, held in participation with a representative from the state-linked Medical Legal Directorate.

On March 27, the Iraqi Ministry of Health announced the completion of the exhumation of mass grave sites of ISIS victims in the village of Hamdan in Sinjar. Ryam Dahir from the Yezidi Organization for Documentation said that the mass grave was discovered in 2015 during the operation that liberated Sinjar City. The Forensic Medicine Department had worked with the General Directorate for Mass Graves in Baghdad to excavate the mass grave sites near Sinjar. Zaid Ali Abbas, the Director General of the Forensic Medicine Department, reported that four different sites in the area contained approximately 30 bodies. He announced that the extracted remains would be identified with forensics, noting that evidence from the mass graves were linked to the mass killings ISIS committed in 2014 against the Yezidi community in Hamdan and the surrounding areas. The remains had been transferred to forensic laboratories to identify and match their DNA with relatives, after which the remains would be buried according to Yezidi religious traditions as a tribute to the victims and their families.

On September 15, the UN Security Council voted to extend the mandate of the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD) for one year. First established in 2018, UNITAD's mandate is expected to end in September 2024. In December 2022, special adviser Christian Ritscher, the head of UNITAD, stated his team would continue to extend support to local authorities for ongoing Iraqi efforts to exhume the mass graves of ISIS victims. He emphasized the Yezidi community's right to witness justice served for the heinous international crimes that ISIS had committed against members of their community and others. He added UNITAD's joint efforts with the Iraqi government and national experts would support accountability and justice for ISIS atrocities.

On February 1, former UN high commissioner for refugees Special Envoy Angelina Jolie and human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Nadia Murad together visited northern Iraq's Sinjar region, including Murad's childhood home and village as well as other key areas in the region where the NGO Nadia's Initiative led recovery efforts. Jolie and Murad spent the day meeting with women and children who survived the 2014 genocide. Murad said in a tweet, "The trip was a reminder to me that our work to protect minorities and women in Sinjar and throughout the world is far from over. If we want to ensure what happened to Yezidis never happens again, we must address the underlying causes of genocide and sexual violence." Yezidis said the visit brought attention and

international support to Sinjar and the Yazidi community still suffering from the ISIS genocide.

KRG MERA's Office of Yazidi Affairs reported that during the year, the Committee for Investigation and Gathering Evidence (CIPE) identified a total of 94 mass graves since 2014, in addition to dozens of individual grave sites containing the bodies of more than 2,500 Yazidis in Sinjar District and other predominantly Yazidi areas of Ninewa Province. CIPE had exhumed 17 of those 94 sites, each containing the remains of between three and 25 individuals. The Office of the Rescue of Yazidis (ORY) had identified 40 single graves that indicated the burials of individual Yazidis. According to Khairi Ali, the director of the Petrichor Organization in Sinjar, 92 mass graves had been discovered by the end of the year, and 50 sites with more than 600 remains had been exhumed. Petrichor Human Rights Organization is an NGO based in Sinjar advocating for human rights and positive policy change and support for Yazidis and other members of marginalized groups in Ninewa Province.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were continued reports of societal violence by sectarian armed groups across the country, except in the IKR. Although media and human rights organizations said security conditions in many parts of the country continued to improve, reports of societal violence, by Iran-aligned militia groups continued. Members of non-Muslim minority groups reported abductions, threats, pressure, and harassment to force them to observe Islamic customs. Many Shia religious and government leaders continued to urge PMF volunteers not to commit these types of abuses. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as solely based on religious identity.

On September 26, a fire broke out in a Christian wedding hall in Hamdaniya in Ninewa governate, causing the death of at least 125 persons including women and children. According to the Jesuit Refugee Service, most Hamdaniya residents had been displaced by ISIS and subsequently returned in waves between 2017 and 2021. Christian church leaders expressed their gratitude to the different religious communities that provided support following the fire, including the Shia Marjaiya in Najaf, the Shia clerical institution led by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, which shared its condolences, and the Sunni endowment in Ninewa that suspended all Birth of the Prophet celebrations in remembrance of the Hamdaniya victims. The Christian leaders also thanked Ninewa residents who donated blood and medical supplies for the victims.

On January 9, Sunni Sheikh Abdulrazaq al-Saadi from Anbar issued a statement that the construction of a Christian Chaldean Church in the ancient city of Ur in Dhi Qar was "catastrophic and against the teachings of the Quran", calling for the conversion of the church into a cultural

center under the Ministry of Culture's supervision. A church official said the Iraqi government and local Dhi Qar government had authorized the construction of the church, which began in August 2022 and was still underway at the end of year.

Yezidi officials estimated the number of children born of Yezidi mothers and ISIS fathers ranged from several dozen to several hundred. Yezidi leaders said societal stigma made it difficult to obtain accurate numbers. According to Yezidi community members, Yezidi leaders had excommunicated some Yezidi women who had children born of sexual violence committed by Muslim men when the women were captives of ISIS. Some Yezidi religious leaders and community members deemed children born of sexual violence during ISIS captivity were neither welcomed nor recognized as Yezidis. Many Yezidi women survivors of ISIS atrocities said they were compelled to leave their children in orphanages in Syria or abandon their children so they could rejoin their community. According to Yezidi leaders, these children were also under threat of so-called "honor" and retribution killings. Many Yezidis feared the children would grow up radicalized due to the possibility of their exposure to violent radicalization in displaced persons camps or informal settlement areas and because they had experienced rejection. Reports from the al-Hol displaced persons camp in Syria stated some Yezidi women preferred remaining in the camps with their children rather than leave them behind, despite the harsh conditions there.

On May 1, the Yezidi religious leader Qawal Bahzat called on IKR leadership to put an end to hate speech against Yezidis and urged the IKR Parliament to pass a law criminalizing it. Members of the Yezidi community reported shop owners refused to sell merchandise to Yezidi IDPs near the IDP camps. On May 2, the Yezidi Director of the Migration Directorate in Duhok Province, Dian Jafar, said more Yezidi families had returned to Sinjar after Muslim individuals in the KRG accused Yezidis of burning a mosque in Sinjar during protests after Sunni Arab families had also returned to that area.

Christian leaders reported Christians' interest in emigrating remained high. On September 23, Cardinal Sako released a statement accusing the Iraqi government of marginalizing the country's Christian minorities. The patriarch said the government had violated their human and national rights, excluded them from employment, and seized their properties. He said Christians had witnessed systematic demographic change in the Ninewa Plain, where the population had decreased from four percent to less than one percent of the Iraqi population, stressing Christians would continue to depart Iraq due to their economic exclusion.

According to press reports, in February, a post appeared on the Facebook page of Bishop Bahzad Mziri of the Anabaptist Church in Duhok, making comments about the Prophet Muhammad that were considered insulting

and derogatory. Duhok's Directorate of Endowment and Religious Affairs and the public prosecutor filed a complaint in court against the bishop. Mziri apologized and said he was not responsible for the post, saying his account had been hacked, and was acquitted.

On November 2, the head of the Baghdad-based interreligious Masarat Foundation for Cultural and Media Development, Saad Salloum, said the foundation continued to train Muslim religious leaders using an interfaith curriculum focused on understanding the country's different religions. Salloum, however, added the lack of funding hindered the foundation from continuing the courses and led to the closing of its news agency.

On July 19, large numbers of protesters stormed the Swedish embassy in Baghdad and burned parts of the building after an Iraqi refugee living in Sweden threatened to set fire to the Quran. The man, Salwan Momika, an Iraqi of Christian origin, lived in Sweden as a self-identified atheist. During his July 19 protest, he stepped on and kicked the Quran but did not set it aflame. Momika previously burned a Quran during a June demonstration in Stockholm, which resulted in protesters briefly entering the Swedish embassy in Baghdad. Following the July incident in Stockholm, the Swedish ambassador departed Iraq, and Iraq withdrew the Iraqi Chargé from Sweden. Due to security concerns, the government of Sweden said it was temporarily moving its embassy's operations to Stockholm. The *Wall Street Journal* reported the Iraqi government suspended the license of Swedish telecommunications company Ericsson to operate in Iraq. On July 22, further protests occurred in Iraq in response to a subsequent Quran burning in Denmark.

In a July 22 program on al-Nujaba TV, Islamic scholar Yasser al-Tarbouli said Jews control the West through freemasonry and the "global crusaders." He said Jews have "blown the Holocaust out of proportion" and asked, "Didn't Hitler have Jewish cabinet members? Didn't the Jews financially support Hitler's wars to take over Europe?"

On May 10, various social media accounts posted a video of Qais al-Khazali, AAH Secretary General, saying that in the seventh century, the Israeli Mossad had used a prostitute to orchestrate the assassination of the first Shia Imam, Ali ibn Abi Talib. He also said "the Jews" assassinated Imam Ali's two sons, Hasan and Hussein. In an August 13 lecture aired on Al-Ahd TV, Khazali stated Jews are the followers and soldiers of the devil, and the "Jewish lobby controls decision-making, media, economy, and the weapons trade." He said this is "no longer" a conspiracy theory and asserted the "Jewish lobby had murdered the Prophet Muhammad, his forefathers, and Ali ibn Abi Taleb and all the imams." In addition, he said this "lobby" is responsible for the "occultation of the Hidden Imam and is searching for him in order to murder him."

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and Consulate General in Erbil raised at the highest levels a full range of religious freedom concerns in the country through frequent meetings with senior government officials, including Prime Minister Sudani. Issues raised included the presence of undisciplined armed groups in areas with predominantly minority religious populations and creating conditions for the safe and voluntary return of displaced populations, including religious groups. The embassy and consulate general reinforced messages promoting religious freedom and inclusion through public speeches, and embassy interagency coordination groups promoted religious and ethnic minority community stabilization and humanitarian assistance. The Ambassador and other embassy and consulate general officials continued to meet regularly with national and regional ministries of education, justice, labor, and social affairs, and the IHCHR. They also met with members of parliament, parliamentary committees, and minority group representatives serving in government positions to emphasize the need for full inclusion of members of religious minority groups and the protection of their rights.

On July 18, the U.S. Department of State's spokesperson stated the U.S. government was disturbed by the harassment of Cardinal Sako, troubled by the news that Sako had left Baghdad, and looked forward to his safe return to the capital. The spokesperson emphasized the U.S. government's concern that the cardinal's position as a respected leader of the [Chaldean Catholic] Church was under attack from a number of quarters, in particular by a militia leader who was sanctioned under the Global Magnitsky Act. The spokesperson further underscored the Iraqi Christian community was a vital part of Iraq's identity and a central part of the country's history of diversity and tolerance. Senior officers of the embassy engaged Iraqi leaders in support of these principles.

The embassy and consulate general continued to use social media platforms to highlight meetings with civil society, including religious and interfaith community leaders, and promote messages of respect for religious diversity and U.S. support for religious and ethnic minority communities. The Ambassador frequently used her official X (formerly Twitter) account to highlight messages to local audiences supporting religious and ethnic minority communities.

Efforts by the embassy and consulate general continued to center on identifying the most pressing concerns of members of religious minority groups – insecurity, lack of civil documentation, lack of employment, harassment by Iran-backed militias, and road closures – and obtaining federal government and KRG commitments to assist in addressing these concerns. Efforts included promoting the recruitment of members of minority groups into security forces operating on the Ninewa Plain. Embassy and consulate general staff also engaged with Yezidis, the KRG, the central government, and other organizations and groups to coordinate efforts to ensure that exhumations of Yezidi mass graves were

performed to international standards and to coordinate U.S.-funded mental health and psychosocial support programs for survivors. The United States continued its financial and political support for UNITAD in pursuing these aims.

The U.S. government acknowledged in an annual report to Congress, as mandated by the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act, the Iraqi government's first disbursements of reparations to Yezidi genocide survivors in March while also noting "significant" obstacles to full implementation of the related Iraqi legislation. In July, consistent with recommendations from international rights experts on the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances, the government referred to parliament a draft law to address the issue of missing persons– an entrenched form of political violence in Iraq that has compounded the vulnerability of members of religious minority groups and theological dissenters.

The U.S. government continued to develop, finance, and manage projects to support members of all religious communities, with special emphasis on assistance to IDPs and returnees. U.S. government humanitarian assistance efforts, including in areas with religious minority populations, provided critical shelter, essential healthcare, emergency food assistance, protection services such as gender-based violence response, and water, sanitation, and hygiene services. It also promoted access to civil documentation and legal services, improved the capacity of health care facilities, and increased access to education and livelihood opportunities.

The Ambassador, senior consulate general officials in Erbil, and other senior embassy and consulate general officials made regular visits to areas with predominantly minority populations to meet with community leaders, religious leaders, and local and provincial authorities to underscore U.S. support for their communities, hear their concerns, particularly regarding security and protection, and to assess the needs and challenges they continued to face. These meetings included hosting Christian and Yezidi roundtables in November. Embassy and consulate general officials also met with Yezidi, Christian, Shabak, Turkmen, Jewish, Sabeen-Mandean, Kaka'i, Baha'i, Zoroastrian, and other religious and minority leaders on numerous occasions to discuss the challenges they face and encourage reconciliation within their communities. Embassy officials discussed with Sabeen-Mandean leaders the issue of facilitating Sabeen-Mandean emigration from the country, which those leaders identified as their highest priority.

The U.S. government made efforts through implementing partners, including faith-based partners, to increase awareness throughout the country of religious and ethnic minority issues as well as to engage the diaspora.

In October, the embassy funded a monument that Nadia's Initiative built to memorialize the Yazidi women who escaped from ISIS and attempted to reach Sinjar Mountain. On October 18, UN officials, Yazidi religious leaders, NGOs, Iraqi officials, and KRG representatives attended a ceremony commemorating the memorial site. The new memorial was located near the "Grave of Mothers," where ISIS had killed a large group of older Yazidi women during the Yazidi genocide in 2014.

In the Ninewa Plain and Sinjar, U.S. government officials and staff worked with 287 local organizations, including many faith-based groups, to provide more than \$3 million of assistance for the recovery of minority religious communities in the northern part of the country. The U.S. government continued to rebuild critical infrastructure to restore essential services, rebuild public spaces, and support the revitalization of communities.

During the year, the embassy continued implementing its \$2 million grant to support three local faith-based organizations in their efforts to preserve their communities' cultural heritage, including digitization of ancient religious manuscripts and texts as well as documentation of oral histories. In December, the embassy announced an additional \$750,000 in U.S. funding for the further renovation of the Lalish Temple, the holiest Yazidi temple and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, bringing total U.S. support to more than \$2.3 million. The embassy implemented funding to help Yazidi survivors of the Kocho massacre in Sinjar rebuild their lives, including through the establishment of "New Kocho" village and memorials in Kocho and Solagh. The U.S. government also implemented programs in the Ninewa Plain focused on building mutual tolerance, trust, and understanding among youth of diverse religious backgrounds while increasing income generation.

U.S. officials in Baghdad and Erbil continued to have regular discussions with government officials, endowment leaders, UN officials, and other nations' embassies regarding coordinating international assistance to IDPs and recent returnees to address problems identified by members of religious groups.

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