



2013 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iraq

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Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies provide for religious freedom, with some exceptions. The constitution identifies Islam as the official religion, mandates Islam as a fundamental source of legislation, and states that no law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam. The constitution also states that no law may contradict principles of democracy or the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in the constitution. The constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief and practice, and freedom from intellectual, political, and religious coercion. Some apparent contradictions between the constitution and other legal provisions were tested in court; the courts upheld full legal protection for religious freedom in those cases. Other contradictions remained untested. Some officials reportedly misused their authority, for example, by using sectarian profiling in arrests and detentions or by using religion as a determining factor in employment decisions. The government, however, continued to call for tolerance and acceptance of all religious minorities, provided security for places of worship such as churches, mosques, shrines, and religious pilgrimage sites and routes, and funded the construction and renovation of places of worship for some religious minorities.

Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and other terrorist and illegally armed groups committed violent attacks that restricted the ability of all believers to practice their religion. The overwhelming majority of mass casualty terrorist attacks carried out by AQI targeted Shia Muslims at Shia mosques, funerals, religious shrines, and neighborhoods. There were also attacks by illegally armed groups, including AQI, targeting Sunni religious sites and events, as well as other religious minority sites and leaders.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, although to a lesser extent in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) than in other areas of the country. A combination of sectarian hiring practices, corruption, targeted attacks, and the uneven application of the law had a detrimental economic effect on minority non-Muslim communities, and contributed to the departure of non-Muslims from the country. No reliable statistics on religiously motivated violence were available.

The Ambassador, embassy officers, and senior U.S. government officials worked closely with the government to promote religious freedom, urging the protection of members of religious

minorities and their inclusion in the political process. The embassy also funded programs to address religious minority concerns such as economic development, essential and humanitarian services, and capacity development. Embassy and consulate officials maintained an active dialogue with Shia, Sunni, and religious minority populations and urged improved mutual understanding.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 31.9 million (July 2013 estimate). Religious demography statistics vary due to violence, internal migration, and governmental tracking capability. Numbers are often estimates from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and community leaders.

According to 2010 government statistics, 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. Arab and Kurdish Sunni Muslims make up 32 to 37 percent of the population. From 18 to 20 percent are Sunni Kurds, 12 to 16 percent are Sunni Arabs, and the remaining 1 to 2 percent are 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 and international NGOs estimate there are approximately 500,000 Christians, a decline of nearly 300,000 over the last five years. 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 Syrians (Eastern Orthodox), 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, with 15 percent in Dahuk Province (in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region -- IKR) and the rest in Ninewa Province, mainly concentrated in the impoverished district of Sinjar. Estimates of the size of the Sabeen-Mandaeen community vary widely. According to Sabeen-Mandaeen leaders, about 4,000 remain in the country, generally along the Tigris River and its tributaries. The Sabeen-Mandaeen population in Basrah has fallen dramatically over the last decade to an estimated 500-750. Bahai leaders report fewer than 2,000 members, spread throughout the country in small groups. According to the Institute for International Law and Human Rights, the Kakai community numbers approximately 200,000, mainly in villages southeast of Kirkuk, around Mosul and the Ninewa plain, in Diyala and Erbil in the north, and in Karbala. Fewer than 10 Jews reportedly reside in Baghdad, and there are unconfirmed reports of very small Jewish communities in other parts of the country.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, an estimated 1.1 million people of diverse religious backgrounds remain internally displaced persons (IDPs) due to sectarian violence between 2006 and 2008; the Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MOMD) disputes this figure and reported the number of IDPs dropped to around 800,000 during the year. The number of religious minorities internally displaced by violence remains uncertain because many stay with relatives and friends. An international NGO reported that 6,156 Christian families remained internally displaced in the northern governorates. The NGO largely attributes the high number to Christians returning from Syria where they had previously found refuge. The NGO attributed the decision of these Christian families to resettle in northern Iraq, even though some lived elsewhere prior to becoming refugees in Syria, to the area's relative security compared with elsewhere in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for religious freedom. 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. Nevertheless, it also states no law may contradict principles of democracy or the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in the constitution. The constitution also guarantees freedom from intellectual, political, and religious coercion. Apparent contradictions between the constitution and other legal provisions remain, although recent court decisions have upheld the constitutional protection of religious freedom.

Government laws and regulations prevent the conversion of Muslims to other religions, require conversion of minor children to Islam if either parent converts to Islam, and outlaw the practice of some faiths. In the IKR there were several cases of single-Christian-parent families affected by the conversion policy. In some cases, the Christian parent fled with the minor children to avoid conversion of the children to Islam. The country's civil and penal codes do not contain legal remedies or penalties for conversion from Islam.

The law prohibits practice of the Bahai Faith and practice of the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam. Although constitutional provisions on freedom of religion may override these laws, no court challenges yet invalidate them, and there is no legislation proposed to repeal them.

The constitution guarantees citizens the right to choose which court (civil or religious) will adjudicate matters of personal status, including marriage, divorce, custody of children, inheritance, endowments, and other personal matters. Until parliament enacts implementing legislation, the 1959 Personal Status Law remains the de facto legal authority. It also 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 protects members of minority religious groups by criminalizing disrupting or impeding their religious ceremonies and desecrating their religious buildings. Members of all religious groups are free to practice religious rites and manage religious endowments, endowment affairs, and religious institutions.

The constitution protects all citizens by birth from having their citizenship withdrawn, establishes their right to demand reinstatement of their citizenship, and allows them to hold multiple citizenships. To remedy a former regime policy of stripping citizenship based on political affiliation, the 2005 Iraqi constitution provides in its article 18 that "an Iraqi citizen by birth may not have his citizenship withdrawn for any reason. Any person who had his citizenship withdrawn shall have the right to demand its reinstatement." In contradiction to the constitution, section two of Article 18 of the Citizenship and Nationality Law of 2006 notes that reinstatement of citizenship does not apply to Iraqi Jews who emigrated from Iraq and gave up their Iraqi citizenship based on a 1950 law.

Of the 325 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 Yezidi; one Sabeen-Mandaean; and one Shabak.

The Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament (IKP) reserves 11 seats for minorities: five seats for Christians, five for Turkmen, and one seat for Armenians.

The Council of Iraqi Christian Church Leaders, a quasi-governmental group consisting of representatives from each of the 14 officially recognized churches, requires Christian groups to register. To do so, the group must have a minimum of 500 adherents in the country. Without

formal registration, the groups cannot qualify for government funding or official recognition from the central government's Christian and Minorities Endowment Office.

National identity cards denote the holder's religion, but do not differentiate between Shia and Sunni Muslim. 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 children for school or acquire passports.

The government maintains three waqfs (religious endowments): the Sunni; the Shia; and the Christian, Yezidi, Sabeen-Mandaean, and "other." Operating under the authority 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. Funding is available for registered Christian groups, but many churches prefer to fund themselves.

The constitution provides that the Federal Supreme Court shall be made up of a number of judges, experts in Islamic jurisprudence, and legal scholars. The constitution, however, leaves the method of regulating the number and selection of judges to legislation that requires a two-thirds majority vote in the Council of Representatives. The Federal Supreme Court's composition continues to be governed by the 2005 Federal Supreme Court Law, which does not require that Islamic jurisprudence experts be included on the court.

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 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 class periods per week of Islamic education, including study of the Quran, as a graduation requirement for Muslim students. 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. The Ministry of Education includes an office for Kurdish and other language education, which aims to ensure that minority communities are taught in their native languages. Article 4 of the Constitution establishes Arabic and Kurdish as official state languages but guarantees the right to educate minority children in their languages, and makes Turkmen and Syriac official languages in "the administrative units in which they constitute density populations." There were reports, however, of discrimination in practice against language rights of minorities in Sinjar in Ninewa, and elsewhere in KRG-controlled territory. For example, some Christian leaders reported that Christian students were forced to study in Kurdish and not in their own languages.

The KRG Ministry of Education funds Aramaic-language public schools (elementary and high school) in its territory, and the curriculum does not contain religion or Quranic studies. The KRG ministry also allocates additional funds for research and education on Syriac language and literature. The KRG provides some services, including salaries for Yezidi religious instruction, at certain state-funded schools.

Government Practices

There were reports of arrests and detentions, as well as reports of restrictions and discrimination based on religion by both the central government and the KRG. Sectarian misuse of official

authority continued to be a concern. Official investigations of abuses by government forces, illegal armed groups, and terrorist organizations were infrequent, and the outcomes of investigations were often unpublished, unknown, or incomplete. Religious and ethnic minorities residing in the disputed internal boundaries (DIBs) in north-central Iraq faulted the central government and the KRG for the lack of security in the area, creating a security vacuum enabling attacks by armed terrorist groups, including the suicide bombings targeting the Shabak in the towns of Bashiqa on September 14 and Al-Mowafaqiah on October 17.

Many Sunni Muslims alleged an ongoing campaign of revenge by the Shia majority in retribution for the Sunnis' favored status and abuses of Shia during Saddam Hussein's regime. Complaints included allegations of discrimination in public sector employment due to the ongoing campaign of de-Baathification. This process was originally intended to target loyalists of the former regime. According to Sunnis and NGOs, however, the Accountability and Justice Law (de-Baathification law) has been implemented selectively -- targeting Sunnis -- and used to render many Sunnis ineligible for government employment.

Sunnis also reported that central government security forces targeted them for harassment, illegal searches, arbitrary arrest and detention, and torture and abuse. Since politics and religion are often inextricably linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as religious intolerance. Grievances over perceived sectarian differences in treatment by security forces were exacerbated after 44 Sunni protesters were killed by security forces when they sought to disband a protest in Hawija in April following months of protests against the government seeking redress for policies they believed were anti-Sunni.

In July government security forces reportedly made mass arrests in predominantly Sunni areas of Abu Ghraib and Taji following a large-scale prison break carried out by AQI terrorists. Government officials denied the arrests targeted Sunni Muslims. Upon release detainees and witnesses reported to NGOs they were not shown arrest warrants and some detainees reported they were tortured while in custody.

In July during Ramadan, armed Shia militants, reportedly with the tacit support of local security forces, raided dozens of businesses in Baghdad, including cafes employing women, restaurants, bars, social clubs, and nightclubs they considered "un-Islamic." Eyewitnesses reported local police destroyed property and beat staff and patrons; several people were hospitalized for their injuries and at least one individual died. Baghdad municipal officials stated the raids only focused on establishments "engaged in prostitution," a claim local NGOs dismissed as false. They viewed the attacks as part of a broader assault on secular establishments.

On June 28, the Shia Endowment authorities demolished the house of Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Bahai Faith, in Baghdad. According to local Bahai contacts and the Ministry of Human Rights, the house had been converted into a mosque decades ago and turned over to the Shia Endowment under the Saddam Hussein regime. The mosque had deteriorated and, according to endowment officials, had to be demolished in order to build a new one. The Bahai World Center reported that it had been attempting to regain ownership of the holy site since 2004.

Yezidi political leaders alleged 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. Several human rights NGOs and Yezidi political leaders stated the KRG neglected Yezidi neighborhoods and discriminated in the provision of basic public services such as water, sanitation, and electricity. These groups also stated Yezidis were routinely held in arbitrary detention by KRG officials at Asayish checkpoints. For example, on October 20 19-year-old Hadi Hamo was detained incommunicado at a KRG checkpoint for nine days. He was released without charge on October 29. Yezidis stated this form of intimidation was intended to harass Yezidis who did not self-identify as Kurdish.

On December 2, 2011, 300 to 1,000 rioters attacked Christian and Yezidi businesses in Dahuk Province, burning and destroying 26 liquor stores, a massage parlor, four hotels, and a casino, denouncing the businesses as un-Islamic. By the end of the year, the KRG had compensated all of the Chaldean, Syriac, and Yezidi victims of the Dahuk riots, although some victims asserted the compensation was insufficient.

On December 7, the KRG Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs filed a lawsuit against Dr. Abdul Wahaid, a lecturer at Sulaimaniyah University, for making derogatory statements about the Yezidi religion during his lectures. The case was ongoing at year's end.

Some Christians in the IKR reported the KRG unreasonably delayed the return of church land and land confiscated from members of their community under the former regime. Evangelical churches continued to report they were unable to obtain official registration, and the government registration requirements, including the requirement to have at least 500 members in their congregations, were too onerous. Christian leaders said a Kurdish partner was often required in order to do business in the IKR. Yezidis and foreigners indicated they faced the same obstacle. Despite such reports, many non-Muslims chose to reside in the IKR because of its reputation of offering greater security and tolerance. The KRG denied allegations it discriminated against Christians and other minorities.

On February 27, the Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works approved a request by the Dominican Sisters to construct a hospital on a parcel of public land in Hamdaniyah, Ninewa Province, in the KRG, within the DIB area. At year's end, final approval was pending before the Ministry of Health, which is responsible for issuing permits for hospital construction throughout the country.

To receive assistance from the KRG Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, religious groups are required to register with them. Some Christian pastors not registered with the KRG Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs reported pressure to desist from proselytizing and to provide information about their congregations to the KRG, under the perceived threat of imprisonment and threats to their congregants and families. On April 4, IKR President Barzani honored a private amnesty request for a pastor arrested and charged in 2011 under the KRG's Anti-Terrorism Law; his family and friends said the charges were false. He was convicted of espionage, a lesser charge, in 2012. Barzani ordered the release of the pastor on humanitarian grounds, and he subsequently relocated abroad.

Members of minority religious groups were underrepresented in government appointments, public sector jobs, and elected positions outside of the Council of Representatives. Although members of minority religious groups held senior positions in the national parliament and central government, as well as in the KRG, they were proportionally underrepresented in the unelected government workforce, particularly at the provincial and local levels. This underrepresentation limited minority groups' access to government-provided security and economic development. Non-Muslims, particularly Christians and Yezidis, stated they were being politically isolated by the Muslim majority because of their differences in religion. Yezidis and Christians in the IKR alleged discrimination against individuals who refused to self-identify as Kurdish. While some Yezidis considered themselves Kurdish and obtained senior positions in the KRG leadership, others who rejected self-identifying as Kurdish complained of marginalization and even death threats by KRG officials.

The central government and the KRG continued to provide political representation and support to members of minority religious groups. The Iraqi Council of Ministers (COM) had one Christian member (environment), as did the KRG's COM (communication and transportation).

On April 30, 2012, the Baghdad-Rusafa Federal Court of Appeals upheld a lower court ruling that an 18-year-old could change his religion from Islam to Christianity, setting a legal precedent for

the freedom of religion and belief. The plaintiff's father had converted from Christianity to Islam in 2002 when the plaintiff was under 18, thereby legally changing the plaintiff's religion to Islam. The plaintiff had subsequently petitioned to change his religion back to Christianity on his national identity card when he turned 18. The court ruled in the plaintiff's favor based on a provision in the Civil Affairs Law allowing children who come of age to independently choose their religion.

The combination of corruption, attacks against non-Muslim businesses, uneven application of rule of law, and nepotistic hiring practices by members of the majority Muslim population had a detrimental economic effect on non-Muslim communities and contributed to the departure of non-Muslims from the country.

Humanitarian organizations working with displaced Christian families noted that members of this vulnerable population were often unable to sell their homes at a reasonable price if they chose to migrate. They also faced increasing rental costs in their areas of displacement.

Although Easter and Christmas were not national holidays, government policy recognized Christians' right to observe them, and Christian groups reported they were able to observe the two holidays without government interference. On March 28, the general secretariat of the COM designated Easter Sunday as an official holiday for Christians. The government also provided increased protection to Christian churches during these holidays. In October the Maysan Provincial Council recognized a Sabean-Mandaean holiday as an official government holiday in the province.

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

Terrorist groups continued to victimize all ethnicities and religious groups, as well as religious pilgrims and pilgrimage sites, including through suicide bombings and attacks with improvised explosive devices. Terrorists also committed acts of harassment, intimidation, robbery, kidnapping, and murder.

Shia Muslims were the victims of suicide bombings and vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks throughout the year, carried out by AQI and its local affiliates. Coordinated bomb attacks targeted Shia neighborhoods, mosques, funeral processions, and Shia shrines during religious holidays. In numerous instances, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), an al-Qaida affiliate, distributed threatening leaflets to Shia mosques and neighborhoods denouncing them as "rejectionists," a derogatory term for Shia.

According to Amnesty International, on October 6 a man driving a truck full of explosives blew himself up at a primary school in the Shia Turkmen village of Qabak just outside the town of Tal-'Afar, located northwest of Mosul in northern Iraq. At least 12 children between ages six and 12 were killed and scores were injured. On October 5 in Baghdad, another suicide bomber attacked a crowd of Shia pilgrims in al-Adhamiya District on the eve of a Shia holy day, killing at least 51 people and injuring at least 70. On December 19, at least 36 Shia pilgrims were killed by suicide bombers in three separate locations while on their way to Karbala to observe a Shia holy day. Separately, Human Rights Watch reported a spate of coordinated car bombings targeting Shia mosques and neighborhoods in July, which killed over 70 and wounded hundreds of others, and according to Human Rights Watch also demonstrated "clear evidence that al-Qaida was guilty of crimes against humanity."

On July 24, militants shot and killed 14 Shia truck drivers after stopping them at a makeshift checkpoint in Suleyman Bek, 100 miles north of Baghdad. Upon checking identity papers, the militants killed all Shia drivers while releasing Sunni drivers. AQI claimed responsibility.

Terrorist groups, and in particular AQI and its affiliates, increasingly attacked funerals and religious mourners through coordinated bombings. On September 21, coordinated VBIEDs and a

suicide bomber attacked a Shia funeral tent in Sadr City, killing up to 100 people. A subsequent explosion targeted police, ambulances, and firefighters. On September 25, angry Sadr City residents stormed the local council building and official buildings and set them on fire, demanding that the government hand over those responsible for the funeral attacks. The next day, a suicide bomber attacked a funeral in Doura, a predominantly Sunni Muslim district of Baghdad, killing at least 16.

On September 14, a suicide bomber targeted a (Shia) Shabak funeral near Bartalah, in the KRG-controlled DIB areas. The attack followed weeks of intimidation and death threats by ISIL against the Shabak community in Mosul and the Ninewa plain, whom the ISIL condemned as "rejectionists" for their adherence to the Shia faith. Shabak leaders attributed the attacker's ability to enter the KRG-controlled area of the Ninewa plain to a lack of security coordination between the Iraqi Army and Police and the KRG Peshmerga forces.

In September there was a surge in attacks on Sunni tribal leaders in the southern provinces of Nassiriyah, Qut, and Basrah, resulting in the deaths of 17 Sunnis. The killings followed "written letters and text messages that vowed retaliation for insurgent attacks against Shia across Iraq," according to Sunni religious leaders. In response to the violence, some 185 Sunni families fled Basrah, and religious leaders ordered the closure of seven Sunni mosques in order to provide greater security to others that remained open for prayers. The mosques reopened a week after the initial closure. Prime Minister Maliki condemned the targeting of Sunnis and met with Sunni tribal leaders in Basrah to discuss improving security.

On February 5, militants affixed a bomb to the vehicle of the Christian Minister of Environment, Sargon Sulaywah. The bomb severely injured the driver, but the minister was unharmed. On June 15, gunmen attacked two guards outside St. Mary's Assyrian Church in east Baghdad, according to the Ministry of Interior. Shortly after the attack, three Assyrian Christian-owned businesses were bombed in Baghdad's Karada district. An Assyrian Christian business owner and a Muslim employee were killed. On September 22, a suicide bomb targeted the home of Christian member of parliament Emad Youhanna in Rafigayn, injuring 19 people, including three of his children. The attack and others similarly targeting minorities were attributed to AQI in press reports. On Christmas Day three attacks targeted Christian neighborhoods in Baghdad, killing at least 26 people: a car bomb exploded near a church in Doura (southern Baghdad), and two bombs exploded in an outdoor market in a predominantly Christian section of the Athorien neighborhood of Baghdad. Baghdad Chaldean Patriarch Archbishop Louis Sako reported he did not believe the car bomb was targeting the church, and no Christians were killed in the attack.

On October 10, the Ninewa Police Directorate reported that three Yezidis who worked in a liquor store in the Dawassa area of central Mosul were killed by unidentified gunmen on their way home from work. On October 18, according to Ninewa security forces, unidentified gunmen broke into the house of a Yezidi family in Sinjar and killed a woman, her two daughters, and son.

In mid-October Yezidi students at Mosul University reported receiving anonymous messages, warning them to leave the university or be killed. According to NGOs and members of the Yezidi community, threatening flyers were also posted around the campus. Many of the nearly 1,000 Yezidi students at the university discontinued their studies because of the threats. On October 28, IKR Minister of Higher Education Ali Said approved a request by Yezidi leaders in Ninewa Province to allow Yezidi Mosul University students to study at schools in the IKR, which had previously not been allowed.

On February 13, an individual attacked the Chairman of the Sabeen-Mandaean Society, Saleem Dhamin, in his house in Suq al-Shuyooq, Dhi Qar Province. The attacker stabbed Dhamin and his wife during an alleged robbery. Local police arrested the attacker, who remained in custody and under investigation. According to a human rights organization, Dhamin was threatened prior to the attack in relation to an allocation of land to build a Mandaean place of worship. On June 23 in

Amarah, an unidentified gunman entered the house of a Mandaean termitha (priest), Bashier Hamied, during the night and fired at him and his family. No one was injured. On July 15 in Diwaniyah, unknown arsonists set on fire a recently constructed Mandaean place of worship which, according to a human rights organization, burned for over four hours while nearby firefighters failed to intervene.

Terrorist attacks on many mosques and other holy sites rendered some of them unusable. On April 19, a bomb exploded in a Shia mosque in Kirkuk, killing one and injuring 12. On May 10, a bomb exploded just outside the al-Sultan Sunni mosque in Mahaweel, south of Baghdad, following Friday prayers, killing three and wounding seven. On October 15, an explosion targeted Sunni worshippers as they departed the Al-Quds Mosque after morning prayers in the Al-Dubat neighborhood of Kirkuk City, during the commemoration of Eid al-Adha. Media reported that 12 people died in the blast and at least 20 were injured. No group claimed responsibility for the attack.

Many worshippers reportedly did not attend religious services or participate in religious events because of the threat of violence, despite the government's continued provision of additional security to holy sites. For example, the Yezidis cancelled 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 groups such as ISIL.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On January 21, provincial authorities funded the construction of the first official Christian cultural center in Iraq, located in Kirkuk. Louis Sako, then Chaldean Archbishop of Kirkuk and head of the Chaldean Catholic Church after his election in February, said the center "sent a message of peace and promoted the language of dialogue" in Iraq.

On August 25, the governor of Wasit Province reportedly told the press the province would allocate land on the banks of the Tigris River for the Sabeen-Mandaean religious group to practice religious rituals to avoid their having to travel to Baghdad or Maysan Province.

On October 20, the Basrah provincial council announced plans to restore an old Jewish temple. The temple was built in 1915, and a representative of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities said the restoration project sought to maintain the heritage of the holy site. The municipal government funded the project.

Throughout the year Iraqi Security Forces deployed police and army personnel to protect religious pilgrimage routes and sites, as well as places of worship during religious holidays. In October the Iraqi Security Forces deployed 30,000 police and army personnel to Karbala to protect pilgrim land routes to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj; in late October the Iraqi Security forces deployed 12,000 police and army personnel to the Shia holy city of Karbala to protect hundreds of thousands of religious pilgrims who had traveled to the city for Eid al-Adha.

Following a spate of bomb attacks on Sunni and Shia mosques in Baghdad, on May 19 Prime Minister Maliki called for joint Sunni-Shia Friday prayers in one of Baghdad's largest mosques as a protest against sectarian attacks by militant groups. Joint Sunni-Shia prayer sessions continued throughout the year despite being targeted by terrorist attacks.

During the year the KRG prime minister established a special commission with unprecedented decision-making authority to resolve several pending Christian land disputes over the return of land confiscated from churches and community members during the Saddam Hussein regime.

On December 20, the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs announced funding for the building of three Christian churches and a cultural center. The Armenian Church in Ankawa and a Syriac Orthodox Church were each allotted 2.5 billion Iraqi Dinars (\$2.1 million); a

Chaldean Church was allotted 5.5 billion Iraqi Dinars (\$4.7 million); and an Assyrian Cultural Center was also slated to receive funding from the KRG. The ministry also planned to provide funding for the renovation of several old churches.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Violence by sectarian and illegally armed groups in many parts of the country restricted religious freedom, although to a lesser extent in the IKR. Some Islamist elements continued to exert pressure on society to conform to their interpretations of Islam's precepts, including by demanding the closure of liquor stores and nightclubs. Although these efforts affected all citizens, non-Muslims were especially vulnerable to this pressure and violence because of their minority status.

Illegally armed groups regularly targeted many individuals from all ethnicities and religions because of their religious identity, although the overwhelming majority of the mass-casualty attacks targeted the majority Shia population. Although no reliable statistics on religiously motivated violence were available, acts committed against religious groups included harassment, intimidation, robbery, kidnapping, killing, suicide bombings, and attacks with improvised explosive devices.

Attacks against members of minority religious groups from prior years regularly went uninvestigated. For example, a January 2012 shooting of a Yezidi couple inside their home in Mosul, in Ninewa Province, had still not been investigated by year's end.

Shia in Sunni-dominated neighborhoods, Sunnis in Shia-dominated neighborhoods, and members of minority religious groups in both Sunni- and Shia-dominated neighborhoods reported receiving anonymous death threat letters demanding they leave their homes. On September 5, unidentified armed attackers broke into a Shia family's home located in the largely Sunni neighborhood of al-Latifya, north of Babel, and killed 18 members of the family. Six children and eight women were among those killed. The attack was the second on a Shia family in al-Latifya in less than a month.

On July 22, Assyrian Christian media reported that a Muslim ambulance driver in Erbil (IKR) refused to transport the body of a deceased Assyrian Christian woman to her church, claiming it was "haram" (forbidden).

Sunni Muslims continued to allege an ongoing campaign of revenge by the Shia majority in retribution 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 majority of the Sunni population sympathized with al-Qaida and former regime elements.

There were some 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 some Christian NGOs, some Muslims threatened women and girls, regardless of their religious affiliation, for refusing to wear the hijab, dressing in Western-style clothing, or not adhering to strict interpretations of Islamic norms governing public behavior. Numerous women, including Christians, reported opting to wear the hijab after being harassed.

While non-Muslim students were not required to participate in religious instruction at public schools, some non-Muslim students reported they felt pressured to do so from teachers and classmates. There were also reports that some non-Muslim students were obligated 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. During the year, however, the Ministry of Education began implementing a curriculum proposal it had approved in 2012, developed and proposed by the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities, a consortium of minority civil society organizations.

The alliance reported it was able to modify textbooks and instructional material in religious courses to be more tolerant of other religions. For example, a reference to the Sabean-Mandaean faith as "worship of the stars and the sun" was amended in religious textbooks to describe the faith as one of the oldest monotheistic faiths.

Christian, Yazidi, and Shabak leaders reported their communities continued to be targets of harassment and violence. Some Muslims targeted shopkeepers for providing goods or services considered inconsistent with Islam and sometimes subjected them to violence after they did not comply with warnings to stop such activity. These societal elements especially targeted liquor store owners, primarily Christian and Yazidi. By law only Christians and member of other non-Islamic groups were licensed to sell alcohol. In May militants began a campaign of targeting liquor-store owners in Baghdad, killing 12 people. The campaign also targeted cafes in which men and women publicly mingled together. On August 7, as part of a wider crackdown on "un-Islamic" businesses during Ramadan, militants used an IED to attack and kill the owner of a liquor kiosk in Baghdad.

Throughout the year both Sunni and Shia Muslim religious leaders), pilgrims, and religious congregants at shrines, places of worship, and private homes suffered fatal attacks and injuries. On May 26, unidentified gunmen shot and killed the Sunni imam of the al-Muthanna mosque in eastern Baghdad.

On January 3, a Christian priest participated in the Shia commemoration of Arbreen in order to show respect for the community and demonstrate the unity of the Iraqi people. On January 4, Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr visited the Our Lady of Salvation Church to offer condolences for an attack on the church in 2010 and "send a message of peace" to Iraq's Christian community.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials traveled frequently throughout the country to meet with religious group leaders. Officials from the Department of State, the embassy, and the consulates met regularly with representatives of all religious and ethnic communities, including minority communities, and maintained an active dialogue with them.

The Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iraq in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs served as the State Department's special coordinator for Iraq's religious and ethnic minority groups. The special coordinator visited minority groups in Iraq to discuss the political, economic, and security challenges they face. During a September visit to the IKR, the special coordinator facilitated discussions of Christian land claims in the IKR between high-level KRG officials and Christian leaders. Embassy and consulate officers met with Iraqi government and security forces to discuss religious minority community concerns and the government's protection of minority religious groups. The embassy formed a high-level working group on minority issues, designed to bring a coordinated focus to U.S. activities related to minorities. The embassy consistently raised the issue of minority protection at high level meetings with Iraqi officials, and the embassy prioritized funding for local NGOs working on minority protection issues.

The Ambassador and the Consuls General in Erbil and in Basrah also engaged with minority religious groups, and all worked with representatives of the international community and with Iraqi government officials to address minority concerns. Meetings with religious leaders, such as influential clergymen and heads of religious endowments across Iraq, emphasized ongoing U.S. support for their communities. The embassy and consulates also worked closely with the Ministries of Education, Human Rights, Labor and Social affairs, other relevant ministries, the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities, the minority caucus, and parliamentary committees to emphasize the importance of the protection and full inclusion of religious minorities.

The U.S. government funded new initiatives and continuing projects to support religious and ethnic minority communities, including funding for the construction of a hospital and technical assistance to groups working on legislation affecting minority rights. A U.S. government-funded curriculum reform project continued. In the IKR, Christians stated they welcomed the introduction of a new Arabic-language textbook during the year that eliminated much of the overtly religious language of previous texts. The embassy funded projects supporting religious minority communities through economic empowerment and entrepreneurship initiatives, especially for minority women. These projects focused on both immediate and longer-term needs of communities, including economic development, essential and humanitarian services, and capacity development.

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