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2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iraq

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes Islam as the official religion and states no law may be enacted contradicting the “established provisions of Islam.” The constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief and practice for Muslims, Christians, Yezidis, and Sabean-Mandeans, but not for followers of other religions or atheists. The law prohibits the practice of the Bahai Faith and the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam. The constitution provides for freedom from religious coercion and requires the government to maintain the sanctity of religious sites. There were continued reports that Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Shia militias killed ISIS detainees and their collaborators, who were presumably all Sunni. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) said the government continued to use the antiterrorism law as a pretext for detaining individuals without timely access to due process. Community leaders continued to state forced conversion was the de facto outcome of the national identity card law mandating children with only one Muslim parent, even children born as a result of rape, be listed as Muslim. Christian converts reported being forced to choose to register their child as a Muslim or to have the child remain undocumented, affecting their eligibility for government benefits. Some Yezidis, Christian leaders, and NGOs reported occurrences of harassment and abuses by Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Peshmerga and Asayish (internal security) forces, including Asayish-imposed requirements for security permits, which impeded the movement of Yezidis between Dohuk Province and the Sinjar area. Christians reported harassment and abuse at numerous checkpoints operated by Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) units, impeding their movement in and around several Christian towns on the Ninewa Plain. Christians and Yezidis in PMF-controlled towns reported harassment of Christian women by PMF members. They also said the central government in Baghdad was facilitating demographic change by providing land and housing for Shia to move into traditionally Christian areas. Media and government officials continued to state Peshmerga and the PMF prevented displaced Sunni Arabs, Yezidis, Turkmen, and others from returning to their homes in some areas liberated from ISIS. Representatives of minority religious communities said the central government did not generally interfere with religious observances but they faced harassment and restrictions from local authorities in some regions, particularly outside the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR).

During the year the government fought numerous battles to regain control of the significant terrain previously lost to ISIS. On December 9, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced that, after more than three years of combat, all territories were liberated from ISIS control. More than 3,000 Yezidis captured by ISIS were still missing as of December. ISIS continued its campaign of violence against members of all faiths, in particular non-Sunnis. In areas that remained under its control, ISIS committed individual and mass killings, engaging in rape, kidnapping, random detentions and mass abductions, torture, abduction and forced conversion of non-Muslim male children, and the enslavement and sex trafficking of women and girls from minority religious communities. ISIS also continued to engage in harassment, intimidation, robbery, and the destruction of personal property and religious sites. In areas no longer under direct ISIS control, it launched suicide bombings and vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks against all segments of society, including Shia Muslims, whom ISIS considered heretics. On May 30, a coordinated bomb attack on an ice cream parlor in Karrada, a predominantly Shia neighborhood of Baghdad, resulted in the deaths of more than 22 individuals and injuries to more than 30. ISIS struck again hours later, detonating a bomb outside of a government pension office also in Karrada, killing 14 and wounding 34. ISIS attacked religious pilgrims and pilgrimage sites, including a September 14 bombing in Nasariyah that killed at least 80 persons. From January 1 to June 30, the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) reported 5,706 civilian casualties resulting from ISIS attacks, including 2,429 persons killed and 3,277 wounded.

According to media and human rights organizations, security conditions in many parts of the country, although improved somewhat from 2016, were still accompanied by societal violence, mainly committed by sectarian armed groups. Armed groups continued to target Sunnis for execution-style killings and the destruction of homes and businesses. Non-Muslim minorities reported threats, pressure, and harassment from some groups attempting to force them to observe Islamic customs. In November Christian men in the Ninewa Plain brawled with Shabaks who had sexually harassed a group of Christian female students wearing skirts and dresses. In many regions except for the IKR, minority groups of any religious adherence said they continued to experience violence and harassment from the majority group in the region. Christian and Yezidi internally displaced persons (IDPs) cited security issues as the primary concern, with the lack of central command and control of some PMF units being a primary concern in Sinjar and areas in the Ninewa Plain. Some Yezidi and Christian communities formed their own militias to protect their communities, stating they must have a role in their own security. In July unidentified gunmen fired upon and killed two Yezidis in their Baghdad alcohol shops. On December 24, the city of Mosul hosted its first Christmas service since the ISIS campaign destroyed large parts of the area years ago. Saint Paul's Chaldean Catholic Church, the only functioning church in the city, held Mass with ISF protection. In December the St. Gorgis Chaldean Catholic Church, previously destroyed and defiled by ISIS, was rededicated in the Ninewa Plain town of Teleskof.

The U.S. government continued to address at the highest levels a full range of religious freedom concerns in the country through frequent meetings with senior government officials, speeches, coordination groups, and targeted assistance programs for

stabilization projects. The Ambassador and other embassy and consulates general officials continued to meet regularly with national and regional government officials, members of parliament, parliamentary committees, and minority group representatives serving in government positions, to emphasize the need for the security, full inclusion, and protection of the rights of religious minorities. On August 15, the Secretary of State declared that without qualification ISIS was responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control, including Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims. In August the embassy inaugurated the Minority Working Group, which met monthly to review interagency engagement on the Department of State’s goals for safeguarding religious minorities. Another embassy coordination group, the Stabilization and Humanitarian Affairs Working Group, addressed interagency stabilization and reconciliation efforts throughout the country, including areas with religious and ethnic minority populations. The U.S. government continued to develop, finance, and manage projects to support all religious communities, with special emphasis on IDPs. Authorities announced UNESCO had started the first stage of the restoration of the ancient city of Nimrud. Additionally, an agreement was reached on the reconstruction of the ancient monasteries of Mar Behnam and Mar Mattai. On October 25, the Vice President announced the U.S. government would expand its funding for religious minorities beyond its contributions to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). He said under this new expansion the U.S. government would provide direct support for new programs addressing the country’s persecuted and displaced religious minority communities. The Ambassador, other embassy officials, and consulates general officials issued public statements condemning ISIS abuses of religious freedom. Embassy and consulates general officials maintained an active dialogue with Shia, Sunni, and religious minority communities, emphasizing tolerance, inclusion, and mutual understanding.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 39 million (July 2017 estimate). According to 2010 government statistics, the most recent available, 97 percent of the population is Muslim. Shia Muslims, predominantly Arabs but also including Turkmen, Faili (Shia) Kurds, and others, constitute 55 to 60 percent of the population. Sunni Muslims are approximately 40 percent of the population. Of Sunnis, Sunni Kurds constitute 15 percent, Sunni Arabs 24 percent, and Sunni 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.

Christian leaders estimate there are fewer than 250,000 Christians remaining in the country, with the largest population – at least 200,000 – living in the Ninewa Plain and the IKR. The Christian population has declined over the past 15 years from a pre-2002 population estimate of between 800,000 and 1.4 million persons. 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. The remainder are Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, and Anglican and other Protestants. There are approximately 3,000 evangelical Christians in the IKR.

Yezidi leaders report most of the 600,000-750,000 Yezidis in the country reside in the north, with more than 350,000 still living in camps in the IKR. Estimates of the size of the Sabeen-Mandean community vary. According to Sabeen-Mandean leaders, 10,000 remain in the country, mainly in the south with small pockets in the IKR and Baghdad. Bahai leaders report fewer than 2,000 members, spread throughout the country in small groups. The Shabaks include about 350,000-400,000 persons, two-thirds to three-fourths of whom are Shia and the rest Sunni; most are located in Ninewa. Armenian leaders report a population of around 7,000. According to Kaka'i (also known as Yarsani) activists, their community has approximately 120,000-150,000 members, traditionally located in the Ninewa Plain; others live in villages southeast of Kirkuk, as well as in Diyala, Erbil, and Karbala. The Jewish representative in the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA) reports 430 Jewish families reside in the IKR. According to a Baghdad Jewish community leader, there are nine adult members of the local Jewish community.

Due to four years of intensive combat, 5.8 million civilians remained displaced within the country. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), by year's end 3.3 million individuals had returned home, leaving 2.5 million IDPs within the country. Population movements are multi-directional, with some persons fleeing their homes and others returning home. According to the IOM, as of November, approximately 67 percent of the IDP population is Arab Sunni, 8 percent Yezidi, 9 percent Turkmen Shia, 6 percent Kurdish Sunni, 3 percent Arab Shia, 3 percent either Syriac, Chaldean, or Assyrian Christians, 2 percent Shabak Shia, and less than 1 percent Turkmen Sunni, Shabak Sunni, or Kurdish Shia.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes Islam as the official religion of the state, and a “foundation source” of legislation. It states no law may be enacted contradicting the “established provisions of Islam,” but 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 guarantees the freedom of religious belief and practice for Christians, Yezidis, and Sabeen-Mandean, but does not explicitly protect followers of other religions, or atheists. According to the penal code, Jews are not allowed to hold jobs in state enterprises or join the military. The law prohibits the practice of the Bahai Faith and the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam.

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

Personal status laws and regulations prohibit the conversion of Muslims to other religions, and require administrative designation of minor children as Muslims if either parent converts to Islam, or if one parent is considered Muslim, even if the child is born as a result of rape.

The following religious groups are recognized by the personal status law and thereby registered with the government: Islam, Chaldean, Assyrian, Assyrian Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, Armenian Catholic, Roman Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Latin-Dominican Rite, National Protestant, Anglican, Evangelical Protestant Assyrian, Adventist, Coptic Orthodox, Yezidi, Sabeen-Mandean, and Jewish. Recognition allows groups to appoint legal representatives and to perform legal transactions such as buying and selling property. All recognized religious groups have their own personal status courts responsible for handling marriage, divorce, and inheritance issues. According to the Yezidi-affiliated NGO Yazda, however, there is no personal status court for Yezidis.

There are three diwans (chambers) responsible for administering matters for the recognized religious groups within the country: the Sunni Endowment Diwan, the Shia Endowment Diwan, and the Endowment of the Christian, Yezidi, and Sabeen-Mandean Religions Diwan. The three endowments operate under the authority of the Prime Minister's Office to disburse government funds to maintain and protect religious facilities.

Outside of the IKR, the law does not provide a mechanism for a new religious group to obtain legal recognition. The law allows punishment for anyone practicing the Bahai Faith with 10 years' imprisonment. For unrecognized religious groups other than Bahai – e.g., Wahhabi Muslim, Zoroastrian, and Kaka'i (Yarsani) – the law does not specify penalties for practicing; however, contracts signed by institutions of unrecognized religious groups are not legal or permissible as evidence in court.

In the IKR, religious groups obtain recognition by registering with the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA). To register, a group must have a minimum of 150 adherents, provide documentation of the sources of its financial support, and demonstrate it is not anti-Islam. Eight faiths are registered with the KRG MERA: Islam, Christianity, Yezidi, Judaism, Bahai, Sabeen-Mandean, Zoroastrian, and Kaka'i.

In addition to the Christian denominations recognized by the government, the KRG has registered nine evangelical Protestant churches: Rasolia Church, Baptist Church, Kurd-Zaman Church, United Evangelical Church, Mushikha Evangelical Church, Ashti Evangelical Church, International Church, al-Nahda Church, and Evangelical Free Church.

In the IKR, Christian groups may register separately with the Council of Iraqi Christian Church Leaders, an independent group formed by church leaders, consisting of representatives from Christian churches, including six evangelical Protestant churches. Registration with the Council of Iraqi Christian Church Leaders provides Christian churches and leaders with access to the KRG MERA and to the KRG's Christian endowment.

The KRG MERA operates endowments that pay salaries of clergy and fund construction and maintenance of religious sites for Sunni Muslims, Christians, and Yezidis.

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. The penal code criminalizes disrupting or impeding religious ceremonies and desecrating religious buildings. The penal code imposes up to three years' imprisonment or 300 Iraqi dinars (IQD) (25 cents) for such crimes.

By law the government provides support for Muslims outside the IKR desiring to perform the Hajj and Umrah, organizing travel routes and immunization documents for entry into Saudi Arabia. The Sunni and Shia endowments 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 to select pilgrims for official Hajj visas. According to the law, the commission offers 3.5 million IQD (\$3,000) for Hajj travel by land, and 4.2 million IQD (\$3,600) for travel by air.

In the IKR, the KRG MERA organizes Hajj and Umrah travel, carrying out a lottery to choose the pilgrims for official Hajj visas allotted to the IKR.

The constitution guarantees 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 populations.” 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 Council of Representatives (COR) for passage.

The constitution guarantees citizens the right to choose which court (civil or religious) will adjudicate matters of personal status, including marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, and endowments. Islam takes precedence when one of the parties to the

dispute is from an unrecognized faith. The law states civil courts must consult the religious authority of a non-Muslim party for its opinion under the applicable religious law and apply the religious authority's opinion in court. In the IKR, the Personal Status Court adjudicates personal disputes between Muslims, and the Civil Status Court handles all other cases.

National identity cards denote the bearer's religion. The only religions that may be listed on the national identity card are Christian, Sabeen-Mandean, Yezidi, and Muslim; there is no distinction between Shia and Sunni Muslim, nor a designation of Christian denominations. Individuals practicing other faiths may only receive identity cards if they self-identify as Muslim, Yezidi, Sabeen-Mandean, or Christian. Without an official identity card, non-Muslims and those who convert to faiths other than Islam may not register their marriages, enroll their children in public school, acquire passports, or obtain some government services. Passports do not specify religion.

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

Civil laws provide a simple process for a non-Muslim to convert to Islam, but conversion by a Muslim to another religion is forbidden by law.

The law in the IKR formally recognizes the Bahai, Zoroastrian, and Sabeen-Mandean faiths, promotes equal political, cultural, societal, and economic representation of all minority groups and 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, or religious or linguistic claims.”

Of the 329 seats in the national Council of Representatives, the law reserves nine seats for members of minority communities: five for Christian candidates from Baghdad, Ninewa, Kirkuk, Erbil, and Dohuk; one for a Yezidi; one for a Sabeen-Mandean; one for an ethnic Shabak; and one for a Faili Kurd from Wasit. The Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament reserves 11 of its 111 seats for minorities: five for Christians, five for Turkmen, and one for an Armenian.

Islamic education, including study of the Quran, is mandatory in primary and secondary school, except in the IKR. Non-Muslim students are not required to participate in Islamic studies. The government provides Christian religious education in public schools in some areas where there are concentrations of Christian populations, and there is a Syriac curriculum directorate within the Ministry of Education.

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

Government Practices

Summary paragraph: There were continued reports that ISF and Shia militia killed ISIS detainees and their alleged collaborators. NGOs reported the government continued to use the antiterrorism law as a pretext for detaining individuals without timely access to due process. International human rights groups said the government still failed to investigate and prosecute ethnosectarian crimes, including those carried out by armed groups in areas liberated from ISIS. Sunni Arabs continued to report some government officials used sectarian profiling in arrests and detentions and used religion as a determining factor in employment decisions. Some Yezidi and Christian leaders reported continued occurrences of harassment and abuse by the KRG Peshmerga and Asayish forces. According to various NGOs, the Asayish-imposed security permitting and check point requirements impeded the movement of Yezidis to and from the Sinjar area, resulting in a de facto blockade. Christians reported harassment and abuse at numerous checkpoints operated by various PMF and Peshmerga units that impeded movement in and around several Christian towns on the Ninewa Plain. Media and government officials reported the Peshmerga and PMF prevented displaced Sunni Arabs, Yezidis, Turkmen, and others from returning to their homes in some areas liberated from ISIS. Community leaders continued to state that forced conversion was the de facto result of the national identity card law, mandating the listing of children with only one Muslim parent as Muslim, even if that child was born as a result of rape. Representatives of minority religious communities continued to report that while the central government did not generally interfere with religious observances, and even provided security for places of worship and other religious sites, including churches, mosques, shrines, and religious pilgrimage sites and routes, minority groups continued to face harassment, including sexual assault, and restrictions from local authorities in some regions. Because religion, politics, and ethnicity were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

There were continued reports that ISF, including the PMF and Peshmerga, and Shia militia killed Sunni detainees. International and local NGOs said the government continued to use the antiterrorism law as a pretext for detaining individuals without timely access to due process. For example, Arab residents stated that Shia Turkmen PMF units arrested, kidnapped, or killed Sunni Turkmen and Arabs in Tal Afar after the ISF liberated the city from ISIS rule in August. None of those responsible within PMF units were brought to justice by year's end.

Yezidi community leaders reported that Yezidi captives of ISIS who were repeatedly raped and bore children were forced to register those children as Muslims and convert to Islam themselves in order to obtain ID cards, passports, and other governmental services. A Yezidi physician who provided psychosocial support services to numerous Yezidi women and children who were survivors of ISIS captivity for more than three years said more than 25 children of ISIS fathers and Yezidi mothers were relinquished by their rescued mothers and given to government authorities. All of those children were listed as Muslim. Christian leaders said, in some cases, Christian families formally registered as Muslim but privately practicing Christianity or another faith were forced to choose to register their child as a Muslim or to have the child remain undocumented,

which would affect eligibility for government benefits such as school enrollment and ration card allocation for basic food items, which depends on family size. Larger families with legally registered children received higher allotments than those with undocumented children.

Representatives of minority religious communities said that while the central government did not generally interfere with religious observances, and even provided security for places of worship and other religious sites, including churches, mosques, shrines, and religious pilgrimage sites and routes, minority groups continued to face harassment, including sexual assault, and restrictions from local authorities in some regions. Christian religious leaders continued to publicly accuse the Iranian-backed Shabak Shia PMF militia 30th Brigade, controlled by Iraqi parliament member Hanin Qado and his brother Waad, of harassment and sexual assaults on Christian women in Bartalla and in Hamdanyah District. A Syriac Orthodox priest and the mayor of Hamdanyah attested to these repeated incidents. Arab Sunni leaders in Hamdanyah made similar allegations.

Some Yezidi and Christian leaders continued to report harassment and abuse by KRG Peshmerga and Asayish forces in the portion of Ninewa Province controlled by the KRG or contested between the central government and the KRG. According to various NGOs, the Asayish imposed security permitting and checkpoint requirements that impeded the movement of Yezidis from Dohuk Province to and from the Sinjar area. Local sources reported the Asayish required clearance letters for anyone to cross the main bridge from Dohuk to Ninewa. PMF units in the area also threatened Yezidi returnees and impeded their movement. Christians reported harassment, abuse, and delays at numerous checkpoints operated by various PMF units, which impeded movement in and around several Christian towns on the Ninewa Plain, including the 30th Brigade in Bartalla and the 50th Brigade in Bashiqa and Tel Kayf.

According to international human rights organizations, some Shia militias, including some under the PMF umbrella, committed abuses and atrocities. The groups participated in operations against ISIS as part of the PMF and were implicated in several attacks on Sunni civilians, allegedly to avenge ISIS crimes against Shia. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported in June that 52 civilians (22 men, 20 women, and 10 children) from the Sunni Imteywit tribe disappeared while in the custody of Yezidi fighters from the Ezidkhan Brigades, associated with the PMF. Yezidi officials alleged that Imteywit and Jahaysh tribal members participated in ISIS atrocities against Yezidis in 2014, allegations the tribal members denied.

Some government forces and militia groups forced alleged ISIS sympathizers from their homes in several governorates. For example, there were reports the PMF militia group Kata'ib Hizballah kidnapped and intimidated local Arab Sunni residents in Diyala and Babil Governorates and prevented Arab Sunni IDPs from returning to their places of origin.

According to HRW, beginning in August authorities detained approximately 1,400 foreign women and children who surrendered with ISIS fighters and then transferred them to overcrowded and exposed temporary facilities without sufficient access to information or freedom of movement. Sites included Ninewa’s Hamam al-Alil humanitarian transit camp, a repurposed school in Tel Kayf, and a prison in the Rusafa district of Baghdad. Families suspected of ISIS affiliation in Salah al-Din’s al-Shahama camp were also denied freedom of movement. In September HRW reported that Shia PMF fighters affiliated with the Badr Organization detained and beat at least 100 male villagers and allegedly shot and killed four who self-identified as ISIS-affiliated during counter-ISIS operations outside Hawija.

In August Shabak Shia PMF attacked and assaulted a delegation from U.S. and Canadian churches during its visit to Christian areas recently liberated from ISIS in the Ninewa Plain, according to first-hand accounts from KRG officials and the delegation. The delegation was accompanied by Khalid Jamal Alber, Director of Christian Affairs of the KRG MERA and Peshmerga. The delegation was stopped by the Shabak Shia PMF at a checkpoint between Qaraqosh and Bartalla, two Christian towns. According to the report, the PMF insulted the delegation and gunfire was exchanged between the Peshmerga and the PMF. The Peshmerga and ISF rescued the delegation after the KRG’s Ministry of Interior and the Prime Minister’s Office intervened.

The KRG continued to actively support and fund the rescue of captured Yezidis and provide psychosocial support services at a center in Dohuk Province. According to the KRG Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs director general for Yezidi affairs, since 2014, KRG authorities have funded the rescue from ISIS of more than 3,100 kidnapped Yezidis including 1,735 children, but more than 3,000 Yezidis captured by ISIS were still missing at year’s end. Rescued captives reported being sold multiple times, subjected to forced conversions to Islam, sexual exploitation, and violence.

In May a Yezidi COR member reported the KRG had paid more than 5.8 billion IQD (\$5 million) in ransom to secure the release of 3,004 Yezidis from ISIS, and more than 69.9 million IQD (\$59,900) to middlemen to arrange safe passage to IKR-controlled areas.

Yezidi groups said the presence of armed affiliates of the PKK, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, PMF militias in Sinjar, and the KRG’s imposition of security restrictions on movements into and out of the district continued to hinder the return of IDPs.

According to Yazda, Yezidis in the IKR were discriminated against when they refused to self-identify as Kurdish and Muslim; only those Yezidis who considered themselves Kurdish and Muslim could obtain senior positions in the IKR leadership. In the IKR, those not identifying as Kurdish and Muslim said actions such as obtaining a residency card or a driver’s license were challenging. The KRG continued to offer support and funding to some non-Muslim minorities, but other minorities in the IKR, such as evangelical Christians, said they continued to face difficulties registering and proselytizing.

In some parts of the country, non-Muslim religious minorities, as well as Sunni and Shia in areas where they formed the minority, continued to face harassment and restrictions from authorities.

Nabaz Ismael, a spokesperson of the KRG MERA, said MERA was planning to reduce the number of mosques where Friday sermons were delivered by combining mosques located in the same neighborhoods. The spokesperson said the primary goal was to reduce the opportunities for extremist messages on Fridays and to prevent mosques from being used for political purposes.

Members of a Kurdish family from Ranya District in Sulimaniyah Governorate who had converted to evangelical Christianity in 2000 said they had to hide their religion and move frequently to avoid harassment, including from some of their own family members. Several members of the family were physically assaulted in incidents where their conversion to Christianity from Islam and their public distribution of Bibles were mentioned by the attackers. Family members said they received no assistance from local police, ostensibly because of their religion. The family moved to Turkey later in the year.

According to the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) – a group politically opposed to the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party – the Peshmerga looted houses of Christians and public service infrastructure, including electric cables, water pumps, and water pipes in Bashika, Teleskof, and Batnaya. Also the ISF and PMF looted Christian property and public service infrastructure in Tel Kayf, Qaraqosh, and Bartalla during their liberation. Yezidi properties were looted in Bashika.

In July Christian civil society organizations reported the Assyrian Christian mayors in Al Qosh and Tel Kayf were replaced, reportedly due to corruption, with KDP members who also were Christian. At the direction of the mayor, security forces in Al Qosh arrested and threatened a group who publicly protested this decision. Christian groups stated this was part of a “Kurdization” of their towns.

In May Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Dawood Matti Sharf accused the ISF and PMF of destroying the second century CE tomb in Qaraqosh of religious notable Youhana al-Delimi and filed a lawsuit against ISF and PMF commanders assigned to the area.

In July the KRG used official funds to open a new church in the Ankawa neighborhood of Erbil for Christian IDPs on 1,000 square meters (10,800 square feet) of land donated by the KRG at a cost of 3.55 billion IQD (\$3.9 million).

Advocacy groups and religious minority representatives reported continued emigration. Estimates ranged from 10 to 22 Christian families leaving the country, including the IKR, every day. Several Christian MPs said 20-22 Christian families were leaving the country daily. Some Yezidis and Christians formed their own protection militias. Some of these

received support from Baghdad through the PMF, while others received assistance from KRG Peshmerga units. Some representatives of religious minority groups, such as Yezidi and Sabeen-Mandean MPs, stated they must have a role in their own security and requested government support to create armed groups from their own communities; others asked to join regular law enforcement units.

According to the Jewish leader in Baghdad, in addition to the prohibition by law for Jews to hold government jobs or to serve in the military, there was widespread discrimination against Jews, causing the remaining Jews to avoid publicly self-identifying for fear of violence.

NGOs continued to state that constitutional provisions on freedom of religion should override laws banning the Bahai Faith and the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam, but there continued to be no court challenges lodged to invalidate them, nor was legislation proposed to repeal them.

The KRG and the central government continued to provide increased protection to Christian churches during the Easter and Christmas holidays. Bahais reported they continued to celebrate the festivals of Naw-Ruz and Ridvan in the IKR without government interference or intimidation. Provincial governments also continued to designate these as religious holidays in their localities. Followers of the Bahai and Yezidi faiths reported the KRG allowed them to observe their religious holidays. Yezidis used Kurdish, one of the languages officially sanctioned by the constitution, in their worship services.

Government policy continued to require Islamic instruction in public schools, but non-Muslim students were not required to participate. In most areas of the country, primary and secondary school curricula included three classes per week of Islamic education, including study of the Quran, as a graduation requirement for Muslim students. Syriac and Christian religious education was included in the curricula of at least 150 public schools in Baghdad, Ninewa, and Kirkuk. Private Islamic religious schools continued to operate in the country, but had to obtain a license from the director general of private and public schools and pay annual fees.

In the IKR, private schools were required to pay a registration fee of 750,000 to 1,500,000 IQD (\$640 to \$1,300) to the Ministry of Education or Ministry of Higher Education, depending on the type of school. To register with the KRG, private schools needed to provide information on the school's bylaws, number of students, size, location, facility and safety conditions, financial backing, and tax compliance, and undergo an inspection. In October the Catholic University in Erbil, which opened in 2016 with KRG approval, received accreditation from the Ministry of Higher Education. The Catholic University remained open to students of all faiths.

While the government did not require non-Muslim students to participate in religious instruction in public schools, some non-Muslim students continued to report pressure to do so from teachers and classmates. There were also continued reports that some non-Muslim students felt obliged to participate because they could not leave the classroom during religious instruction. Christian and Yezidi leaders outside the IKR reported continued discrimination in education and lack of minority input on school curricula and language of instruction. By year’s end schools still had not universally adopted the 2015 Ministry of Education curriculum incorporating lessons of religious tolerance. Many Christians who spoke the Syriac language said it was their right to use and teach it to their children as a matter of religious freedom. Seeking to establish private Christian schools, the Chaldean church in Basrah said local authorities mandated the inclusion of Islamic religious instruction in their curricula for the Muslim students enrolled.

The KRG Ministry of Education continued to fund the religion curriculum for Islam and Christian classes for students of those faiths. The KRG Ministry of Education continued to fund Syriac-language public elementary and secondary schools, which was intended to accommodate Christian students; the curriculum did not contain religious or Quranic studies.

There were reports of KRG authorities discriminating against minorities, including Turkmen, Arabs, Yezidis, Shabaks, and Christians, in the disputed territories. For example, courts rarely upheld Christians’ legal complaints against Kurds regarding land and property disputes.

Christian leaders reported the KRG continued to provide land and financial support for construction of new and renovation of existing structures for use as educational facilities, although budget cuts halted some projects. The KRG said it planned to allocate land for a Jewish cultural center in Erbil and for a Bahai religious and cultural center near Erbil. According to Bahai and Jewish representatives, MERA had “committed” to providing land for construction of community centers for those faiths. According to KRG MERA Director of Co-Existence Amir Othman, his ministry’s recommendation for lands was passed to the Ministry of Municipalities, which reviews such recommendations and allocates appropriate public land parcels. Both recommendations remained pending at year’s end.

While there remained no legal bar to ministerial appointments for members of religious minorities, in practice there were few non-Muslims in the Iraqi Council of Ministers (COM) or the KRG COM. Members of minority religious communities continued to hold senior positions in the national parliament and central government, although minority community leaders said they were still underrepresented in government appointments, in elected positions outside the COR, and in public sector jobs, particularly at the provincial and local levels. Minority community leaders continued to say this underrepresentation limited minorities’ access to government-provided economic opportunities. The Federal Supreme Court’s nine members included Sunni and Shia Muslims and one Christian.

Some Sunni Muslims continued to say they perceived a campaign of “revenge” by Shia government officials in retribution for the Sunnis’ favored status and abuses against Shia during the Saddam Hussein regime. Sunnis said they faced discrimination in public sector employment as a result of de-Baathification, a process originally intended to target loyalists of the former regime. According to Sunnis and local NGOs, the government continued the selective use of the de-Baathification provisions of the law to render many Sunnis ineligible for government employment, but did not do so to render former Shia Baathists ineligible.

Human rights NGOs and Yezidi leaders stated KRG authorities discriminated against organizations providing humanitarian assistance to Yezidis. KRG authorities continued their blockade, started in April 2016, of goods into Sinjar District that, together with the volatile security situation in Sinjar, prevented the return of most Yezidi families. The KRG said the blockade was designed to constrain the PKK, which maintained an established presence in the Sinjar area. Security forces restricted items such as food, medicines, and farming supplies needed for local livelihoods. Yazda reported the deaths of several Yezidi women in Sinjar because of lack of access to medicine and medical care. Since the October 16 withdrawal of Peshmerga from the Sinjar area, it was possible, though not necessarily safe, to access Sinjar from central government-controlled areas.

Sabean-Mandaeans and Christians said they continued to face discrimination that limited their economic opportunities, such as their inability to sell alcohol following the central government’s implementation of its alcohol ban in many parts of the country. Basrah, Dhi Qar, Maysan, and Muthanna Provinces continued to prohibit the import, sale, or transport of alcohol, although southern Iraqis were still allowed to legally consume and own alcohol. The KRG stated the ban would not be applied or enforced within the IKR. According to a Deutsche Welle article, minority communities considered the prohibition of alcohol an affront to religious freedom. In the article a Christian member of parliament stated, “The ban on alcohol is part of a war against religious minorities that aims to force them out of the country through exclusion, marginalization, and harassment policies.” According to a 2017 report sponsored by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Iraq’s ban on alcohol sales imposed “massive restrictions on Christians, Yazidis and Sabaeen Mandaean who sell spirits, since it affects their choice of livelihood and effectively leads to their financial ruin.”

The 2015 national identity card law, adopted by the COR, did not clarify whether the national identity card would continue to identify the bearer’s religion. The law continued to prevent Yezidis, many of whom consider themselves to be a distinct ethnic group as well as a religious group, and Shabaks from self-identifying with their religious and ethnic group and from official government recognition through official documentation.

According to HRW, since June KRG forces expelled at least four Yezidi families and threatened others because of their relatives’ participation in the IDF or the PMF. The KRG’s security forces, Asayish, returned the displaced families to Sinjar, where access to

basic goods and services was very limited. According to the Yezidi International Human Rights Organization, at the end of July the number of Yezidi IDPs expelled to Sinjar in this manner was more than 150.

The KRG MERA Director General for Christians confirmed that a 2016 Dohuk court decision returning lands to Christians had not yet been implemented.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

On December 9, Prime Minister al-Abadi announced that after more than three years of combat, all territories were finally liberated from ISIS control. Throughout the year, however, ISIS continued to target victims on the basis of their religious identity, killing and subjecting persons of all faiths to violence, abductions, and intimidation. Media reported the security situation remained precarious as a result of ISIS occupation of territory and the escalation of fighting between ISIS and government forces in Ninewa and Kirkuk; although the Iraqi military and progovernment forces retook large amounts of territory in both provinces, clearance operations continued in some areas. In areas under its control, ISIS continued to commit individual and mass killings, and engaged in rape, kidnapping, and detention, including mass abductions and enslavement of women and girls from minority religious communities. ISIS also continued to engage in harassment, intimidation, robbery, and destruction of personal property and religious sites. ISIS continued to enforce strict rules on dress, behavior, and movement on the inhabitants who remained in areas it controlled, and severely punished infractions. Its fighters carried out execution-style public killings and other punishments, including after its “courts” condemned individuals for transgressing its rules or its interpretation of Islamic law. In areas not under ISIS control, it continued suicide bombings and VBIED attacks against civilians.

November UNAMI reports listed 3,112 civilian deaths and an additional 4,375 wounded as a result of acts of terrorism, violence, and armed conflict, mostly in Baghdad and in the northern and western provinces. ISIS claimed responsibility for the majority of these bombings. ISIS continued to target all religious minorities who refused to convert to Islam or who opposed the terrorist group. ISIS also targeted Sunni civilians who cooperated with the ISF. The country’s High Commission for Human Rights reported cases of ISIS killing women for not wearing an *abaya*. According to multiple reports from international NGOs and the local press, ISIS fighters continued to question members of detained groups to determine if they were Sunni, and then killed or abducted the non-Sunnis. According to the NGO Shlomo Organization for Documentation, ISIS abducted 150 Christians from the Batnaya, Qaraqosh, and Tel Kayf areas in 2014; their fate remained unclear at year’s end of the year. On February 15, the NGO reported the discovery of a mass grave west of Mosul containing 150 sets of human remains, possibly of Christian civilians from the area. At year’s end it was unclear if they were the remains of the Christians abducted in 2014.

Coordinated ISIS bomb attacks continued to target Shia neighborhoods, markets, mosques, and funeral processions, as well as Shia shrines. On May 30, a coordinated bomb attack on an ice cream parlor in the mainly Shia district of Karrada in Baghdad resulted in the deaths of more than 22 and injuries to more than 30. ISIS struck again hours later in the same district, detonating a bomb outside a government pension office, killing 14 and wounding 34. ISIS fighters continued their practice of claiming responsibility for these attacks via social media postings.

Large celebrations of Ashura in Najaf and Karbala were violence-free, in part because of extensive security efforts.

According to the mayor of Sinjar and several local media outlets, on October 3, a mass grave was found in Sinjar containing remains of seven Yezidis killed by ISIS. Nearly 40 mass graves, believed to contain at least 1,000 bodies of Yezidis, were discovered in Sinjar. According to the KRG MERA, more than 3,000 Yezidis captured by ISIS were missing as of December.

The Yezidi Organization for Documentation again reported cases of rape, forced labor, forced marriage, forced religious conversion, material deprivation, and battery by ISIS.

According to the Iraqi-Kurdish news agency Rudaw, a 14-year-old Yezidi girl was kidnapped, tortured, and raped by members of ISIS. She reported during an interview in October after her rescue and return to Iraq that she was trafficked to Raqqa, Syria and forced to marry more than 13 ISIS fighters, consecutively.

NGOs reported ISIS continued to kidnap religious minorities for ransom. According to officials from the Turkmen Women's Association, ISIS militants had kidnapped and held 500 Turkmen women and children from Tal Afar and Mosul since June 2014. A Shabak member of the Ninewa Provincial Council said ISIS held more than 250 Shabaks (most of whom are thought to be Shia) captive, and had executed three of them in October. UNAMI reported that between October 27 and the beginning of November, ISIS had relocated between 64 and 70 abducted Yezidi women from Aaliyah subdistrict of Tal Afar, Muhalabiya subdistrict of Mosul, and from Qayrawan subdistrict of Sinjar, to the Seventeen-Tamouz area in Mosul city. On November 4, 2016, ISIS reportedly brought an unspecified number of Yezidi women to Tal Afar and placed them in one of the schools. ISIS reportedly gave some of the women to its militants and sent others to Raqqa, Syria. After the liberation of Tal Afar and Raqqa, the whereabouts of these women remained unknown. ISIS forced children to serve as informants, checkpoint staff, and suicide bombers in areas under its control. Yazda reported ISIS continued to force Yezidi children into combat roles, including sending young boys to conduct suicide attacks against the ISF in Mosul.

According to religious leaders, killings, forced conversion, threats of violence, and intimidation continued to motivate many minorities to leave ISIS-controlled areas. Yezidi civil rights activists reported 360,000 Yezidis displaced to Dohuk Province in the IKR

because of ISIS in 2014 largely remained in place due to the chaotic and confused security situation in Sinjar, where multiple state and nonstate armed groups controlled different areas. A limited number of Yazidi and Kaka'i IDPs returned to liberated areas of Ninewa.

Although the government declared victory over ISIS on December 9, ISIS continued to target non-Muslims and Muslims after that date, including through threats, restrictions, looting, and attacks on and seizures of religious sites. In Mosul, ISIS fighters reportedly continued to threaten with death local residents who did not convert to Islam. They also continued to punish those who failed to adhere to the group's strict interpretation of sharia. ISIS continued to impose severe restrictions on women's movement and dress, and enforcement patrols by ISIS forces were reportedly routine. ISIS fighters continued to attack mosques and other holy sites, including Sunni religious sites, rendering many of them unusable. They converted Christian churches into mosques, and looted and destroyed religious and cultural artifacts. The NGO Shlomo reported in 2014 that ISIS burned the majority of Christian houses in the areas of the Ninewa Plain that it occupied and accused the PMF and ISF of burning some Christian houses after the liberation of Christian cities from ISIS during the year. Shlomo also reported that 22 of 24 churches in the Ninewa Plain had been looted and destroyed. A Catholic social organization conducted a survey of several historically Christian towns and found 1,233 houses destroyed, 3,520 houses burned, and 8,217 partially damaged. The same organization reported that as of September 3, only 200 Christian families from a pre-ISIS population of 19,000 families had returned to the Ninewa Plain; Christian IDPs in several Ninewa Plain villages under PMF control reported the PMF imposed arbitrary checkpoints and detained and harassed civilians without legal authority to do so.

As coalition forces advanced towards Mosul in June, ISIS destroyed with explosives the al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul, which had dominated the skyline for eight centuries. In July authorities announced UNESCO had started the first stage of the restoration of the ancient city of Nimrud. The city was liberated from ISIS in November 2016, and is associated with the Assyrian civilization dating from the 13th century B.C. Additionally, in November UNESCO hosted a meeting with the minister of culture in attendance where an agreement was reached over the reconstruction of the fourth century Mar Behnam Monastery and the Mar Mattai Monastery, founded more than 1,600 years ago.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were continued reports of societal violence, mainly by sectarian armed groups, in many parts of the country, but few reports of religious violence in the IKR. Non-Muslim minorities reported continued abductions, threats, pressure, and harassment to force them to observe Islamic customs. Sabean-Mandean leaders continued to report threats, abuses, and robberies. In regular Friday sermons, Shia religious and government leaders urged PMF volunteers not to commit these abuses.

In January a 19-year-old Yezidi man, Namat Ismail, from Sinjar was found dead on a road in Sulaimaniya Province. His family said he had engaged in a dispute regarding religion with Muslim co-workers.

In February the Zoroastrian representative in the IKR filed a legal complaint against a Kurdish Islamic preacher, Mala Hasib, who reportedly issued a decree that all converts to Zoroastrianism had to be killed if they did not repent within days. In December an imam in Mosul delivered a nonsanctioned Friday sermon in which he decried Christians as infidels. Upon receiving complaints about the imam, the Sunni endowment removed him from the mosque.

In July in Baghdad unidentified gunmen fired upon and killed two Yezidis in their stores that sold alcoholic beverages. Yezidis and Christians, the main importers and sellers of alcohol, continued to be subject to harassment or attacks and were often forced to pay “protection” money to local authorities. Public reaction to a new national law banning the sale, import, and production of alcoholic beverages without any exception for liturgical uses was overwhelmingly negative. Opponents declared it violated language in the constitution that guaranteed the personal freedoms of minority groups.

Media reported criminal networks and some militia groups seized Christian properties in Baghdad, as well as areas of Anbar, Babil, Basrah, Diyala, and Wasit, with relative impunity, despite pledges by the Prime Minister’s Office to open investigations into the seizures.

In December the St. Gorgis Chaldean Catholic Church rededicated its church in the town of Teleskof in the Ninewa Plain, which during its occupation ISIS had looted and burned after beheading members of the congregation on its altar.

Christians in the south and those in PMF-controlled towns on the Ninewa Plain and Sabeen-Mandeans in Basrah, Dhi Qar, and Maysan Governorates reported they continued to avoid celebrating their religious festivals when they coincided with Islamic periods of mourning. There were continued reports that non-Muslim minorities felt pressured by the Muslim majority to adhere to certain Islamic practices, such as wearing the hijab or fasting during Ramadan. Non-Shia Muslims and non-Muslim women continued to feel societal pressure to wear hijabs and all-black clothing during Muharram, particularly during Ashura, to avoid harassment. According to representatives of Christian NGOs, some Muslims continued to threaten women and girls, regardless of their religious affiliation, for refusing to wear the hijab, for dressing in Western-style clothing, or for not adhering to strict interpretations of Islamic norms governing public behavior. Numerous women, including Christians and Sabeen-Mandeans, said they opted to wear the hijab after continual harassment.

Minority religious leaders continued to report pressure on minority communities to cede land rights to their businesses unless they conformed to a stricter observance of Islamic precepts.

Leaders of non-Muslim communities said corruption, uneven application of the rule of law, and nepotism in hiring practices throughout the country by members of the majority Muslim population continued to have detrimental economic effects on non-Muslim communities and contributed to their emigration.

Christians in the Ninewa Plain complained of Shabak business owners monopolizing the purchase of businesses to the detriment of Christians. They said these actions resulted in decreased job opportunities for Christians as the Shabak owners preferred to employ other Shabaks.

Sunni Muslims reported continued discrimination based on a public perception the Sunni population sympathized with terrorist elements, including ISIS. Some Sunni Muslims said Sunnis were often passed over for choice government jobs or lucrative contracts from the Shia-dominated government because the Sunnis were allegedly accused of being Ba'athists who sympathized with ISIS ideology.

During the year, civil society and religious institutions held numerous conferences and workshops to promote religious tolerance. Hardwired, an NGO focused on religious freedom and reconciliation, held workshops in Erbil in July. Participants included Yezidis, Christians, and Muslims from Sinjar, Mosul, Hamdaniya, Sulaimaniyah, and Dohuk.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. government continued to address at the highest levels a full range of religious freedom concerns in the country through frequent meetings with senior government officials, including Prime Minister Abadi, and through speeches and coordination groups such as the Stabilization and Humanitarian Assistance Working Group. The latter managed interagency efforts throughout the country, including in areas with religious minority populations. The Ambassador and other embassy and consulates general officials continued to meet regularly with national and regional Ministries of Education, Justice (which includes the functions of the former Ministry of Human Rights), Labor, and Social Affairs, the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights, as well as members of parliament, parliamentary committees, and minority group representatives serving in government positions, to emphasize the need for full inclusion of religious minorities and protection of their rights.

On August 15, the Secretary of State declared ISIS responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control, including Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims. He also declared ISIS was responsible for crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing against these same groups and, in some cases, against Sunni Muslims, Kurds, and other minorities. The Secretary stated “The protection of these groups and others subject to violent extremism is a human rights priority for the Trump administration.” The embassy continued to support programs that documented ISIS atrocities.

The U.S. government continued to develop, finance, and manage projects to support all religious communities, with special emphasis on assistance to IDPs. On October 25, the Vice President announced the U.S. government would expand its funding beyond its contributions to the UN to include direct support for new programs addressing the country's persecuted and displaced religious minority communities.

On September 11-13, the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia visited religious minority communities in the north. He met with KRG and municipal officials, religious leaders, NGOs, and representatives of Christian political parties, and participated in a ribbon-cutting ceremony for a recently rebuilt Yezidi temple. At the ceremony, the Special Advisor expressed U.S. government support for the Yezidi people and its commitment to advance their religious freedom and protection in their ancestral homeland. He also visited with senior government officials and minority members of parliament in Baghdad in November to discuss justice, security, and protection of religious and cultural heritage.

Following the liberation of the Ninewa Plain in early March, in mid-March the Ambassador, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, and the Consul General in Erbil traveled to Bashiqa to visit destroyed churches, Mar Matta Monastery, and a Yezidi temple, and to meet with Yezidi religious leaders and activists and Christian and Yezidi families in several minority IDP camps. On August 23, the Ambassador, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, and the Consul General in Erbil visited Teleskof, which was controlled by ISIS August 7-18, 2014, and whose population of 4,000 is almost 100 percent Chaldean Catholic. The delegation reiterated U.S. government support for Christians and other minorities. In December senior embassy officials visited Bashiqa and Sheikhan to meet with Christian and Yezidi leaders as well as Christian, Yezidi, and Shabak IDPs, while attending the opening ceremony of a restored church in Teleskof. The Erbil Consul General visited Yezidi leaders in Sinjar and al-Qosh. Members of the Bahai Faith met with embassy officials in November to urge U.S. government support and advocacy on their behalf to the Iraqi government to officially acknowledge the religion.

U.S. officials in Baghdad, Basrah, and Erbil also continued to hold regular discussions with government officials, endowment leaders, and UN officials coordinating international assistance to IDPs to address problems identified by religious groups with overall humanitarian aid distribution. The Ambassador and the Consuls General in Erbil and Basrah met leaders of minority religious groups and civil society groups to address their concerns, particularly regarding security and protection. Embassy officials met religious leaders on a regular basis to demonstrate U.S. interest in and support for resolving issues with the provision of humanitarian assistance. In particular, they met with Yezidi, Christian, Shabak, Turkmen, Jewish, and other religious and minority leaders to promote reconciliation within their communities and to advocate more effectively for religious minority needs with the government.

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