

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1507
Land:	Irak
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	2022 Report on International Religious Freedom, Iraq
Udgivet:	15. maj 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	2. juni 2023

2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution establishes Islam as the official religion and states that no law may be enacted contradicting the “established provisions of Islam.” It provides for freedom of religious belief and practice for all individuals, including Muslims, Christians, Yezidis, and Sabeen-Mandean, but it does not explicitly mention followers of other religions or atheists. Restrictions on freedom of religion remained widespread outside the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), and Iraqi security forces (ISF) committed violence against and harassed members of minority groups, according to religious leaders and representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Activities that promote the normalization of relations with Israel have long been illegal, with penalties as severe as life in prison and a law passed in May that reinstated the death penalty as a potential sentence. The legal code also prohibits Jews from joining the military and holding jobs in the public sector.

As in previous years, there were credible reports that government forces, including the Federal Police, the National Security Service (NSS), and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), abused and tortured individuals – particularly Sunni Arabs – during arrest and pretrial detention and after conviction. Yezidis, Christians, and local and international NGOs reported continued verbal harassment and physical abuse from members of the PMF, a state-sponsored organization composed of approximately 60 mostly militia groups. Shia Arabs compose most popular mobilization unit members, while Christian, Yezidi, Sunni Arab, and other minority groups run their own PMF units, generally operating within or near their home regions. All units officially report to the chairman of the Popular Mobilization Commission and are under the ultimate authority of the Prime Minister, but Iranian leaders and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps influenced the activities of several units. In November, Sunni members of parliament warned that PMF forces and associated Iran-aligned militias continued to prevent displaced Sunnis in Salah al-Din, Diyala, and Ninewa Provinces from returning to their areas of origin. According to the Kurdistan Regional Government’s (KRG) Yezidi Rescue Coordinating Office, 2,693 Yezidis remained missing following ISIS’s assault on the north of the country in 2014, compared to the 2,763 reported as missing in 2021. During protracted government formation negotiations, religious and ethnic minority leaders were largely sidelined from the national power-sharing discussions. After October 2021 parliamentary elections, many minority community leaders complained that larger and more powerful parties – predominately Shia and Kurdish parties – succeeded in bolstering their preferred candidates for parliamentary quota seats reserved for minority communities, so that nonminority parties had significant influence in electing representatives for minority communities. Outside the IKR, members of minority communities, including Christians and Yezidis, said that despite occasional verbal harassment from local authorities, the central government generally did not interfere with their religious observances. In June, the Council of Representatives (COR) allocated 25 billion dinars (\$17.1 million) to support implementation of the Yezidi Survivors Law that mandates financial and psychosocial support for Yezidi and other survivors of the 2014 genocide by ISIS.

According to Iraqi security sources, ISIS relies on kidnapping workers, merchants, and farmers, and demanding ransom to finance its activities in Salah al-Din and Diyala. Members of minority religious groups, including Christians and Yezidis, said the presence of armed affiliates of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, and PMF militias in Sinjar and the Ninewa Plain, as well as continued Turkish airstrikes targeting alleged PKK positions, continued to endanger residents and hinder the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs). The Yezidi community in Sinjar reported in April that the PKK had kidnapped hundreds of Yezidi children to recruit and subject them to ideological “brainwashing” in the years since ISIS

was defeated in Sinjar in 2015, although it was unclear how many of these kidnappings occurred during the year. During the year, officials found three mass graves containing victims of ISIS and the Baathist regime, in Ninewa, Muthana, and Najaf Provinces. According to the central government's Martyrs Foundation, 242 mass graves containing victims of al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Baathist regime had been found in the country as of year's end. In November, a delegation representing the UN Committee on Forced Disappearances visited the country and released a public statement saying the delegation had received "worrying information about patterns of disappearances and alleged enforced disappearances that currently occur in different governorates, which operate simultaneously and sometimes demonstrate scenarios of collusion between State agents and non-State actors," including "alleged enforced disappearance of children, especially of Yezidi origin, who were born following the rape of their mothers by Daesh [ISIS]."

There were continued reports of societal violence by sectarian armed groups across the country, except in the IKR. Although media and human rights organizations said security conditions in many parts of the country continued to improve, reports of societal violence, mainly by Iran-aligned militia groups, continued. Members of non-Muslim minority groups reported abductions, threats, pressure, and harassment to force them to observe Islamic customs.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 40.5 million (midyear 2022), while the Iraqi Ministry of Planning estimates the population to be 42.2 million. According to 2010 government statistics – the most recent available – 97 percent of the population is Muslim. Shia Muslims, predominantly Arabs but also including Turkmen, Faili Kurds, and others, constitute 55 to 60 percent of the Muslim population. Sunni Muslims are approximately 40 percent of the Muslim population, of which Arabs constitute 24 percent, Kurds 15 percent, and Turkmen the remaining 1 percent. Shia, although predominantly located in the south and east, are the majority in Baghdad and have communities in most parts of the country. Sunnis form the majority in the west, center, and north of the country.

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

Yezidi leaders state that most of the 400,000 to 500,000 Yezidis in the country are located in Ninewa Province and the IKR. Approximately 170,000 to 200,000 Yezidis remain internally displaced as of August, compared with 200,000 to 230,000 as of October 2020. The Shabak

number between 350,000 and 400,000, three-fourths of whom are Shia. Most Sunni Shabak and some Shia Shabak reside in Ninewa. According to Kaka'i (also known as Yarsani) activists, their community has approximately 120,000 to 150,000 members located in the Ninewa Plain and in villages southeast of Kirkuk as well as in Diyala and Erbil; the KRG estimates there are 110,000 to 200,000 Kaka'i.

Estimates of the size of the Sabeian-Mandean community vary, but according to Sabeian-Mandean leaders, 10,000 to 15,000 members remain in the country, mainly in the south, with between 450 and 1,000 living in the IKR and Baghdad. Armenian leaders report a population of approximately 12,000 Armenian Christians, both the Armenian Apostolic Church (Armenian Orthodox) and Armenian Catholic in the country, including in the IKR. Baha'i leaders report fewer than 2,000 members, spread throughout the country in small groups, including approximately 100 families in the IKR. Leaders of the Kavkaz (the unified name for the Circassian, Chechen, and Dagestani groups) community report a population of approximately 50,000 members, located in Baghdad, Ninewa, Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, Kirkuk, and Diyala Provinces. Most identify as Sunni Muslims who migrated from the Caucasus to Iraq during the wars between the Ottoman and Russian empires following forced displacement.

According to media organizations, following the death by stroke of a Jewish doctor in 2021, only four Jewish citizens remain in federal Iraq. According to unofficial statistics from the KRG Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA), there are possibly as few as 100 to as many as 250 Jewish individuals in the IKR. Jewish leaders report that most do not openly acknowledge their religion for fear of persecution or violence by extremist actors. According to the KRG MERA, there are approximately 80,000 to 100,000 Zoroastrians in the IKR, while a Zoroastrian religious leader estimated there are approximately 50,000 Zoroastrians throughout the country.

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the country, approximately 1.2 million persons remain displaced within the country, predominantly in Ninewa, Dohuk, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Kirkuk Provinces, as of September 30, compared with approximately the same number at the end of 2021 and 1.5 million at the end of 2020. According to the KRG's Joint Crisis Coordination Center, as of November, there are approximately 664,996 IDPs in the IKR, compared with 664,909 in 2021. According to the center, there are 253,960 Syrian, 8,890 Turkish, 9,982 Iranian, and 787 Palestinian refugees, and 628 individuals of other nationalities in the IKR. Of the IDPs throughout the IKR, 40 percent are Sunni Arabs, 30 percent Yezidis, 13 percent Kurds (of several religious affiliations), and 7 percent Christians. Other minority religious groups comprise the remaining 10 percent.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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

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

federal ban as a matter of practice and policy, and the KRG recognizes the Baha'i Faith as a religion.

The law prohibits takfiri (apostate) organizations, including the terrorist organizations al-Qa'ida and ISIS, which declare as apostates any Muslims who practice a less strict form of Islam, as the organizations define it. A 2001 resolution by the Revolutionary Command Council, the top decision-making body in the government, prohibits the practice of the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam.

A law passed by the COR in May imposes penalties up to the death sentence on activities that promote the normalization of relations with Israel. The law applies to citizens, officials, entities, and companies; foreigners are also prohibited from promoting normalization with Israel inside the country, and further reinforces the prohibitions against normalization with Israel already imposed by the Penal Code of 1969. The law also prohibits Jews from joining the military or holding jobs in the public sector. The KRG does not apply the central government's anti-Israel laws and relies instead on a separate IKR law, which provides protections for the rights of members of religious minority groups, including Jews. The KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs dedicates one of its eight departments to Jewish affairs.

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

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

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

The penal code punishes with up to three years' imprisonment or a 300 dinar fine (\$.21) any person who "attacks the creed of a religious minority or pours scorn on its religious practices; willfully disrupts, prevents, or obstructs a religious ceremony, festival, or meeting of a religious minority; wrecks, destroys, defaces, or desecrates a building or sacred symbol set aside for the ceremonies of a religious minority; deliberately misspells texts to alter or make light of the meaning, tenets, or teachings of a book sacred to a religious minority; publicly insults a symbol or a person who constitutes an object of sanctification, worship, or reverence to a religious minority; or publicly imitates a religious ceremony or celebration with intent to deceive."

IKR law forbids "religious or political media speech, individually or collectively, directly or indirectly, that brings hate and violence, terror, exclusion, and marginalization based on national, ethnic, religious, or linguistic claims."

The law characterizes certain actions committed by ISIS against Yezidis, Christians, Turkmen, and Shabak as crimes of genocide and crimes against humanity. A law passed in March 2021 by the national COR grants rights to Yezidis and other survivors of ISIS. These rights include restitution for damages and access to social and medical services, including services that provide for the rehabilitation and integration of victims into society. Those eligible for benefits include Yezidi, Christian, Shabak, and Turkmen women and girl survivors who were kidnapped by ISIS; Yezidis, Christians, Shabak, and Turkmen who survived mass killing operations carried out by ISIS; and Yezidi children who were kidnapped by ISIS.

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

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

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

Eight faiths are recognized and registered with the KRG MERA: Islam, Christianity, Yezidism, Judaism, Sabeen-Mandaeism, Zoroastrianism, Yarsanism, and the Baha'i Faith. According to KRG MERA, individuals from 14 different Christian government-recognized denominations reside in the IKR, including denominations associated with the Chaldean Church, Assyrian Old Eastern Church, Syriac Orthodox Church, Syriac Catholic Church, Armenian Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Roman Catholic Church, Presbyterian Church, Assyrian Protestant Church, Coptic Orthodox Church, and Seventh-day Adventist Church.

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

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

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

The constitution provides for a Federal Supreme Court made up of judges, experts in Islamic jurisprudence, and legal scholars. The constitution leaves the method of regulating the number and selection of judges to legislation that requires a two-thirds majority in the COR for passage, but such legislation has never been passed.

The constitution provides citizens the right to choose which court (civil or religious) will adjudicate matters of personal status, including marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, and charitable donations. Islam takes precedence when one of the parties to the dispute is from an unrecognized faith. The law states that in cases where no Muslim is a party, civil courts must consult the religious authority of the non-Muslim party or parties for an opinion under the applicable religious law and must apply the religious authority's opinion in court. In the IKR, the Personal Status Court adjudicates personal disputes between members of the same religion, while the Civil Status Court handles all other cases. Minority religious groups may request a non-Muslim judge to adjudicate their cases.

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

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

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

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

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

Government regulations require Islamic instruction in public schools outside the IKR, but non-Muslim students are not required to participate. In most areas of the country, primary and secondary school curricula include three classes per week – two classes per week in the IKR – of Islamic education, including study of the Quran, as a graduation requirement for Muslim students. The government provides Christian religious education in public schools in some areas where there is a high concentration of Christians, and there is a Syriac curriculum directorate within the Ministry of Education.

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

National identity cards issued since 2016 do not denote the bearer's religion, although the online application still requests this information, and a data chip on the card still contains data on religion. The only religions that may be listed on the national identity card application are Christian, Sabeen-Mandean, Yezidi, Jewish, and Muslim. There is neither a distinction between Shia and Sunni Muslims, nor a designation of specific Christian denominations. Individuals practicing other faiths may only receive identity cards if they self-identify as Muslim, Yezidi, Sabeen-Mandean, Jewish, or Christian. Without an official identity card, one may not register a marriage, enroll children in public school, acquire passports, or obtain some government services. Passports do not specify religion.

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

Government Practices

The Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights (IHCHR) reported receiving hundreds of complaints from relatives of persons detained on terrorism charges, citing claims of arrests based on malicious prosecutions, torture, and forced disappearance. Sunni leaders said these abuses frequently targeted Sunnis held on terrorism charges. On November 17, the IHCHR reported that “we continue to receive cases of forced disappearance that happened during and after the ISIS invasion, however, those who disappeared since 2014 are still missing.” From 2014 to 2020, the government arrested an estimated 59,000 individuals on terrorism charges and reportedly denied many of those arrested the right to fair and public hearings. All of these individuals remain in detention, the IHCHR representative added. Authorities sentenced more than 11,000 individuals to death under the same circumstances since 2014. Sunni political leaders continued to protest the allegedly illegal detention of Sunni Arabs who represent approximately 90 percent of all prisoners in detention, including 9,000 that received death sentences.

On March 13, the Gulf Center for Human Rights reported more than a dozen torture cases, most involving Sunni Arabs, in the country’s prisons. The center characterized these prisons as some of the most horrific in the world, where continuous torture practices take place in the absence of effective government measures to prevent or limit them.

International and local NGOs said the government continued to use the antiterrorism law as a pretext for detaining individuals without due process, most of whom were Sunni Arabs, including those suspected of having links to ISIS. Observers again said the antiterrorism law did not afford due process or fair trial protections. Sunni leaders said authorities used the antiterrorism law to quell Sunni protests and detain young Sunni men. According to international human rights organizations, some Shia militias, including some operating under the PMF umbrella, continued to commit physical abuses and were implicated in several attacks on Sunni civilians, allegedly to avenge ISIS crimes against Shias. The PMF is a state-sponsored organization composed of more than 50 mostly Shia militias originally formed to combat ISIS. Paramilitary militias in the PMF frequently threatened members of Sunni and minority communities with terrorism charges to silence their dissent, especially in areas where the militias have taken over local land and economic activities and blocked the return of Sunni IDPs. Human rights activists also said PMF forces operated secret prisons in which they held Sunni individuals on false accusations of ISIS affiliation. PMF forces reportedly extorted families of the detainees. Multiple international NGOs reported that PMF units prevented residents, including Sunni Arabs and members of ethnic and religious minority groups, from returning to their homes after government forces ousted ISIS.

As in previous years, there were credible reports that government forces, including Federal Police, the NSS, and the PMF, abused and tortured individuals – particularly Sunni Arabs – during arrest and pretrial detention and after conviction.

Yezidis, Christians, and local and international NGOs reported members of the PMF continued to verbally harass and physically abuse members of religious minority communities. On September 27, a security force from the local police and a private security company connected with the Shia militia Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH) threatened to evict the 130 Christian IDP families from the Mariam al-Adra IDP camp in Baghdad, totaling more than 400 individuals. The families had fled ISIS atrocities in the Ninewa Plains in 2014. A Christian leader of camp residents said, “the security company belongs to KH and they want to use this location for money laundering activities.” Camp residents complained that “the guards at the gates began harassing camp residents by delaying their entrance and searching their cars.” Following intense negotiations with the Chaldean Church and the Christian Endowment, the new private owners of this recently purchased government property gave Christian residents until February 2023 to vacate the premise. The Chaldean Church and the Christian Endowment sought alternative housing arrangements for these Christian IDPs in Baghdad and the Ninewa Plains and agreed on housing ready for occupancy in early 2023. During the year, there was minimal progress in locating or rescuing missing Yezidis. On November 2, authorities in the KRG’s Yezidi Rescue Coordinating Office reported 2,693 Yezidis, mainly women and children,

were still missing both inside and outside the country, compared with up to 2,763 reported missing in 2021. Since 2014, the Yezidi Rescue Coordinating Office reported that 3,562 Yezidis were freed from ISIS captivity, including 12 during the year. Between 2014 and 2022, approximately 120,000 Yezidis left the country, most moving to Germany and others to Turkey, Greece, Georgia, Armenia, France, the Netherlands, Croatia, the United States, Australia, Hungary, and Bulgaria.

According to Shabak parliamentarian Mohammed Ibrahim (a Shia of Ninewa), 233 Shabak individuals kidnapped by ISIS in 2014 were still missing. According to Ninewa Governorate's Advisor for Women's Affairs Sukina Ali (a Shia Turkmen of Ninewa), 900 Shia and Sunni Turkmen kidnapped by ISIS were still missing at the end of the year.

According to a July report by the Baghdad Center for Human Rights, prisoners were separated according to sectarian affiliation, and some prison halls are specifically designated for either Shiites or Sunnis.

Sources said some government officials continued to facilitate arbitrary demographic change by providing land and housing for Shia and Sunni Muslims to move into traditionally Christian areas in the Ninewa Plain, such as the Bartella Subdistrict, and Sunni areas in Diyala and Babil Provinces, including Jurf al-Sakhar District in Babil Province.

There were reports of Iran-aligned PMF groups also arbitrarily or unlawfully detaining Kurds, Turkmen, Christians, and other members of minority groups in Ninewa Province. There were numerous reports of the 30th and 50th PMF Brigades' involvement in extortion, unlawful arrests, kidnappings, and detention of individuals without warrants. Credible law-enforcement information indicated that the 30th PMF Brigade continued to operate secret prisons in several locations in Ninewa Province that held unknown numbers of detainees arrested on sectarian-based and reportedly false pretenses. Leaders of the 30th PMF Brigade allegedly forced families of the detainees to pay large sums of money in exchange for the release of their relatives.

On June 25, a Syriac Catholic Church leader reported that the 30th PMF Brigade (Shabak Brigade) continued to seize and occupy Christian properties in Bartella City, a predominately Christian city. The church official explained how the 30th PMF Brigade seized land belonging to a Christian family in Bartella City over eight years earlier and later installed electric generators owned by brigade members on the property. This Catholic community leader said the case was one of many similar examples, adding that he alerted many Christian politicians, including in the Babiloon Movement, but none were able to achieve the return of the seized land. Members of Bartella's Christian community asserted the PMF brigade was trying to alter the demographic makeup of the area and pressure Christians to leave their ancestral homelands and properties.

On November 30, member of parliament Raad al-Dahlaki, a Sunni leader from Diyala Province, warned that PMF forces and associated Iran-aligned militias continued to prevent displaced Sunni Arabs in Salah al-Din, Diyala, and Ninewa Provinces from returning to their areas of origin. Dahlaki stated, "Armed factions backed by Iran are constantly practicing demographic change operations with the government's knowledge, but no one can dare to stop these operations, especially in the areas near the road between Iran and Syria." He added, "Sunni detainees who were detained by armed factions in Samarra and Jurf al-Sakhr Districts and in Diyala Province and transported to unknown locations are still missing."

Many Christian IDPs refused to return to the town of Tal Kayf, citing fear of the PMF 50th Brigade's occupation forces. Additionally, the town hosts the Tesferat detention center and court, which the International Committee of the Red Cross reported holds women and children suspected of being ISIS family members. Prior to 2003, there were approximately 1.5 million Christians in the country, but that figure had reportedly fallen to less than 150,000, located primarily in the Ninewa Plain. Since 2013, over 90 percent of Iraqi Christians departed the country, citing ongoing insecurity and targeting of their community.

Only a very small number of the country's population of 400,000 to 500,000 Yezidis had returned to their homes, with Sinjar having an estimated return rate of only 35 percent, including non-

Yezidis. Many chose to stay in IDP camps or informal settlements in Duhok, saying a lack of a reconstruction plans or public services, as well as inadequate security discouraged them from returning home. UNHCR officials reported that over 330,000 Yezidis were living in IDP camps in Duhok province, in the IKR.

On November 25, the head of the Iraqi Turkmen Front reported that the PMF had not allowed Sunni Turkmen to return to their villages in Tuz-Khurmato District, Salah al-Din Province. The PMF, however, allowed Shia Turkmen to return to their villages. He stated that in Telafar, Ninewa Province, the PMF continued to verbally harass Sunni Turkmen at checkpoints and required them to obtain the approval of the PMF's intelligence apparatus to obtain government documentation. Kaka'i leaders reported that members of the Kaka'i community remained in only three out of 15 formerly Kaka'i villages in Kirkuk province, the decline due to feelings of general insecurity.

Throughout the year, Hamdaniya District Mayor Essam Behnam, a Christian, said he continued to resist both federal and provincial-level political pressure to issue land grants in Christian-majority Hamdaniya, Ninewa Province, to the mostly Shia families of PMF fighters who fought ISIS.

In June, the COR allocated 25 billion dinars (\$17.1 million) to support implementation of the Yezidi Survivors Law to provide support to Yezidi and other survivors of the 2014 genocide by ISIS. In August, in cooperation with NGOs, the government opened a Survivors' Directorate branch office in Sinjar as part of the law. Following the implementing regulations passed in September 2021 and funded in June, the Survivors' Directorate began accepting applications from survivors, but no funds were dispersed by the end of the year.

On November 18, a document of annulment of judgment from the Federal Court of Cassation, the country's highest court, was granted to a Christian woman who was subjected to forced Islamization in her official documents when her father converted to Islam when she was a child. The decision gave the woman permission to return to Christianity. The Christian and Minorities Affairs Endowment said that "this is the first time after 2003 that an Iraqi court ruled against the law on the Islamization of minors. This decision is a big change and will solve part of the issue of forced Islamization of minors in the Iraqi law."

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

Representatives of minority religious groups, including Christians and Yezidis, continued to state that while the central government did not generally interfere with religious observances and even provided security for religious sites, including churches, mosques, shrines, and religious pilgrimage sites and routes, local authorities in some regions continued to verbally harass and impose restrictions on their activities.

In September, the Assyrian Church of the East inaugurated its new patriarchal headquarters in Erbil in a ceremony attended by high-level KRG officials and representatives of various religious groups.

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

On June 5, the leader of the Shia Sadrist movement, Muqtada al-Sadr, announced the extension of the work of the committee to restore the houses and properties of Christians and other minorities who submitted complaints against those who seized their properties. Sadr added, "The committee

proved its success, hence, we decided to extend its work.” On June 6, a former member of parliament stated that “unfortunately, the government is unprofessional and inefficient in working on the matter of restoring minorities’ properties, while the Sadr committee’s work is professional and well organized, and the committee managed to restore about 100 to 120 properties since it was formed.” The former member of parliament added, “The committee now is working on Christian, Sabeen Mandeian, Faili Kurds, and other minorities’ seized properties in Baghdad, Basra Kirkuk and Ninewa Provinces.” In July, the Christian Endowment said, “In general, the [Sadr’s] committee’s work is good and helped a lot of families from Christians and other minorities to restore their usurped properties. They are also coordinating their work with the Minorities Endowment.”

On August 6, Chaldean Patriarch Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako called for Christians to be treated as citizens and enjoy equal rights as “the second monotheistic religion in Iraq.” He warned that “some political parties are still confiscating Christian properties in several areas of Ninewa province and other areas in the IKR such as the town of Ankawa, the village of Hazar Jot (Akre district), and the village of Bardah Rasch (Amedi district). The necessary procedures to return these usurped properties have not taken place until today, despite our follow-up.” Cardinal Sako expressed hope that the government formation negotiations “could also include Christians, Yezidis, and Mandaicans in a collective national spirit.”

In 2020, the KRG Council of Ministers established a high-level committee to resolve outstanding land disputes affecting Christian communities. As of November, the committee had returned 55 Christian properties that had been confiscated by the former Baathist regime. Of these, courts either adjudicated 38 cases or the original owners had dropped the charges. The committee included representatives from the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament, IKR Presidency, IKR Judicial Council, KRG Ministries of Justice, Agriculture, Municipalities, and Finance, and the head of IKR’s Independent Human Rights Commission. The committee requested immediate compensation for Christians whose land and properties were confiscated, totaling 3.2 trillion dinars (\$2.1 billion). The committee instructed the Duhok Governorate Council to issue a decree centralizing the process for purchase and sale of lands and properties located in villages inhabited predominately by Christians. In 2021, following pressure from the committee, the Duhok Court of Appeals reversed prior judicial decisions and ruled in favor of Assyrian Christian residents of Kashkawa village regarding ownership of disputed lands. While Assyrian Christian leaders welcomed the judicial decision, the relevant KRG departments had made no effort to implement this ruling at year’s end.

Sources reported that Shia militias and the Shia Endowment continued to confiscate properties owned by the Sunni Endowments in Diyala and Ninewa Provinces, leading to sectarian tensions in those provinces. In an October 12 press conference, the Sunni Endowment in Ninewa Province announced that it filed a lawsuit against political parties trying to transfer the Sunni ownership and oversight responsibilities of religious sites in Mosul to the Shia Endowment. Sunni Endowment officials protested against the placing of signs identifying two Sunni shrines as belonging to the Shia Endowment. On October 19, a group of Sunni Arab parliamentarians in a press conference said they would file lawsuits to stop the attempted takeover of the Sunni Endowment properties in the city of Mosul.

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

On November 26, Christian sources reported the ISF continued to occupy Christians’ homes in Talkayf District, Ninewa Province, and repurposed them as military barracks. The sources also reported that the ISF continued to use a youth center in Talkayf as a detention center and storage facility for police weapons and arms, further intimidating Christians in the district. On November 26, a Talkayf District leader said that civilians remained concerned over the presence of the Terrorism Investigative Court and juvenile prison. Local leaders expressed concern that ISIS forces

might attempt to break into these facilities to free ISIS detainees. The leaders said some Christians had already left or planned to leave the area to avoid ISF inspections and the limitation of movement on residents. Local leaders added that the ISF continued to occupy many Christian houses without compensating the original owners.

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

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

Private Islamic religious schools continued to operate, which required obtaining a license from the director general of private and public schools and payment of annual fees.

The Catholic University in Erbil continued to operate with full accreditation from the KRG Ministry of Higher Education and remained open to students of all faiths. The university was in the process of opening a medical school affiliated with the American University of Beirut and was seeking the required approval from the IKR.

According to Yezidi and Kaka'i representatives, the federal government and KRG authorities continued to discriminate against members of minority groups, including Turkmen, Arabs, Yezidis, Shabak, and Christians, in areas controlled by both the KRG and the central government in the northern part of the country.

While there remained no legal bar to ministerial appointments for members of religious minority groups, in practice there were still few non-Muslims in the federal government's Council of Ministers or the KRG Council of Ministers, a situation unchanged from the previous three years. Members of minority religious communities, including Christians, Yezidis, Kaka'i, and Sabean-Mandean, continued to hold senior positions in the national parliament, central government, and KRG, among them, Minister of Displacement and Migration Evan Jabro, a Christian, and KRG Minister of Transportation Communication Ano Abdoka, a Syriac Orthodox Christian. Several KRG district and subdistrict mayoral positions continued to be reserved exclusively for Yezidis and Christians. Minority leaders, however, said they remained underrepresented in government appointments and public sector jobs, which limited access to government-provided economic opportunities for members of minority groups. The leaders indicated that appointing Sabean-Mandean to senior government positions, including at the director general level, would facilitate directing of relevant government resources to their communities.

On August 25, Chaldean Patriarch Cardinal Sako warned that "Iraqi Christians are heading towards extinction unless the government changed its social and political policies towards them. It is necessary to rewrite the basic provisions of coexistence, starting with the constitution, in accordance with the principles and ideals affirmed by Pope Francis during his visit to the country in March 2021." Sako criticized the lack of citizenship rights and respect for human rights for Christians especially with regards to ongoing seizure and confiscation of Christian homes and properties, even following the end of ISIS occupation. He also said, "The Islamic heritage [of Iraq] makes Christians second-class citizens and allows usurpation of their property."

Christians said they continued to face discrimination that limited their economic opportunities, such as PMF "taxation" on goods transported from Erbil or Mosul into the Ninewa Plain. Sabean-Mandean, Yezidis, and Christians continued to report fear of importing and distributing alcohol and spirits, despite receiving permits. Christian, Yezidi, and Sabean-Mandean store owners, especially those operating with alcohol sales licenses, reported that PMF militias blackmailed and attacked them. According to local sources, the official ban on alcohol consumption by Muslims

prevented Muslim store owners from applying for permits to carry and sell alcohol. Community sources reported that Muslim businessmen used Christians as front men to apply for alcohol permits.

On June 25, Sheikh Sattar Jabbar al-Hilu, the head of the Sabean-Mandaean community, said the Sabean-Madaeans “faced discrimination practices based on sect and ethnicity in all Iraqi government institutions.” Hilu added that the number of the Sabean-Madaeans in the country had declined from 75,000 in 2003 to around 20,000 today, due to displacement.

Yezidi community leaders reported that the government continued to require Yezidi women captives of ISIS, who were repeatedly raped and bore children, to register those children as Muslims and convert to Islam themselves to obtain identification cards, passports, and other governmental services. They reported that obtaining civil documentation for children born of ISIS atrocities in the country, absent paternal presence, continued to be very challenging, if not impossible. Women without a male guardian continued to commonly experience a delay of more than one year to secure their own citizenship documentation, the delay reportedly attributed to government processing time. Yezidi leaders said that delaying issuance of such documentation for Yezidi children born during ISIS captivity increased risks to their safety and security. Some Yezidis did not consider these children born during ISIS atrocities to be Yezidi and some survivors reported being shunned by their home communities.

During the year, the NGOs Christian Aid Program Nohadra for Humanitarian Aid in Iraq and the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization continued to seek amendments to the national identification card law requiring children to be listed as Muslim on the identification application form if one parent had converted to Islam. The NGOs said the law was a “flagrant violation” of the rights on non-Muslims in the country.

On June 30, Minister of Interior Othman al-Ghanimi called for the continued issuance of official documents and passports to IDPs from Ninewa Province in the IDP camps in Dohuk province. Ghanimi said that during a single day over 1,000 IDP families applied for official documents in camps in Duhok. Lack of official documentation affects many IDPs, the majority of whom are Yezidis. Both Yezidi and Christian leaders reported excessive bureaucratic procedures that delayed their obtaining official documentation.

On November 12, the new government announced the cancellation of mandatory security checks for residents of the formerly ISIS-occupied territories. On November 9, Defense Minister Thabit al-Abbasi said the decree was effective immediately by orders from Prime Minister Sudani. In 2019, the government of then-prime minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi issued a decree that ended the security checks, but it was not fully implemented. Ninewa Governor Najem al-Jabouri, Ninewa NSA Director Ninewa Brigadier General Hisham al-Hashimi, and Chairman of the Ninewa Court for Terrorism Judge Raed al-Musleh stated they disapproved of the decision to abolish the security check and warned that ISIS members could obtain official identification and as a result return to their areas easily. The Ninewa officials suggested simplifying procedures and reducing the time required to obtain clearance rather than outright abolishing it. A senior Yezidi leader also protested ending these security checks and described it as a “huge catastrophe.” The senior leader said these mandatory security checks were crucial for safeguarding the Yezidi community, including in Sinjar, Ninewa, less than 60 kilometers from the presence of hardened ISIS prisoners in the al-Hol detention center in Syria.

According to Christian leaders, authorities continued to force Christian families formally registered as Muslim but privately practicing Christianity or another non-Islamic faith to either register their children as Muslims, or to have the children remain undocumented by federal authorities, thereby denying them the ability to legally convert from Islam. They said that remaining undocumented affected the family’s eligibility for government benefits, such as school enrollment and ration card allocation for basic food items, which are determined by family size. Larger families with legally registered children received higher allotments than those with undocumented children. In November, media reported that a Christian woman said she had converted to Islam to obtain a divorce because it was difficult as a Christian to obtain church permission to divorce. At the time of

her conversion, her sons and daughters were minors. When she tried to renew their official papers, she discovered that her children had also been converted to Islam by law.

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

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

In March, then prime minister Kadhimi declared March 6 a national day for tolerance and coexistence to commemorate Pope Francis' visit.

Based on local media reports, public recognition of the genocide that ISIS committed against the Yazidis continued to grow during the year. Cross-sectarian genocide commemoration events took place on August 3 for the fourth consecutive year. On August 3, Prime Minister Kadhimi commemorated the eighth anniversary of the Yazidi genocide, saying: "We remember with sorrow and agony the heinous crime against our Iraqi Yazidi people. Fairness and justice for your cause. Your presence in Iraq cannot be waived." Also on August 3, KRG Prime Minister Barzani stated, "Our Yazidi brothers and sisters have endured great pain and hardship throughout history. Today, we stress the importance of implementing the Sinjar Agreement [and] call on all militias and armed outlaw groups to leave Sinjar so that its people may return home."

On November 28, Yazidi member of parliament Suliman Shareef said he would resubmit a bill initially submitted by Yazidi member of parliament Khalida Khalil in 2020 that would recognize the 2014 Yazidi killings as genocide. The proposed law would require the government to take responsibility for the victims by holding accountable those who committed the crimes against humanity and by providing psychological and medical care as well as reparations to the victims and survivors of ISIS crimes.

On October 26, Prime Minister Sudani promised in a meeting with Yazidi members of parliament to preserve the rights of residents of Sinjar, reconstruct Sinjar, and resolve the IDP crisis there. He also promised to implement the 2020 Agreement on the Restoration of Stability and Normalization in Sinjar (Sinjar Agreement). Components of the Sinjar Agreement include appointing a mayor, fielding a 2,500-member local security force, removing PKK forces from Sinjar, rebuilding Sinjar, and supporting Yazidi IDP returns. Community members and NGOs stated that lack of progress on implementing the Sinjar Agreement was compelling many Yazidis to pursue emigration.

In an October 17 speech to a minorities conference, Ammar al-Hakim, head of the Hikma Trend political party, congratulated the Faili Kurds for electing Faili member of parliament Mohsen al-Mandalawi as the COR's first deputy speaker, and called for giving the Sabeen Mandeans and Yazidis ministerial positions in the upcoming government. Saad Saloum, the founder of the Masarat Organization, said that the conference, sponsored by al-Hakim, sent a positive message about respect for minorities' rights in the new government.

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

Christian and Yazidi militia groups in Ninewa Province continued to draw their fighters from local Yazidi and Christian communities, but these groups remained subordinate to larger organizations.

According to Yazidi and Christian officials, some militias continued to receive support from the central government in Baghdad through the PMC, which oversees PMF forces, while other armed groups received assistance from the KRG's Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. Representatives of religious minority groups, such as Yazidi and Sabeen-Mandean parliamentarians, continued to state

they sought a role in establishing their own security force and requested government support in that regard.

On May 17, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Iraq Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert told the UN Security Council that the implementation of the 2020 Sinjar Agreement between the central government and the KRG was unsatisfactory. The special representative specifically cited the lack of agreement on a new independent mayor, as well as the blocking of funds needed for a new local security force. Yezidi leaders and community members continued to criticize the agreement, saying they did not have enough participation in the negotiations and remained apprehensive about the progress of implementation. Yezidi leaders and activists also cited the lack of progress in implementing the plan or improving the security situation in Sinjar as major impediments to the ability of internally displaced Yezidis to return to their homes.

On February 9, the NSS and Nahrain Center for Strategic Studies (linked to NSS) conducted a week-long conference on harmony among religions. Religious leaders and academics from all religions and sects attended the conference. A participant reported that it was part of the government's strategy for diversity management, formed in September 2021. A representative from the country's Jewish community participated for the first time. Many attendees reportedly cried during the Jewish representative's emotional speech in the conference. A representative of Ofuk Organization for Development said that the organization, in cooperation with the NSS and the NGO Iraqi Minorities Network, were seeking to end the isolation of the country's Jewish community, while cautioning that it would be a slow and careful process.

In July, Dhi Qar Governorate in the south of the country began construction of a center for interreligious dialogue, to include places of worship for Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Sabeans. The complex is slated to include a hall and a center for interreligious dialogue and to be built near the ancient city of Ur, one of the most important archaeological sites in the country and linked to the Patriarch Abraham, the father of the three great monotheistic religions.

In November, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted the Third Interfaith Dialogue between Iraq and the Vatican to advance the progress outlined in Pope Francis' landmark May 2021 visit to the country. Ministry Undersecretary Omar al-Barzanchi celebrated this interfaith dialogue as a testament to the government's commitment to bridging different countries and sustaining interfaith dialogue.

The Sunni and Shia endowments continued to accept Hajj applications from the public and submit them to the Supreme Council for the Hajj. The council used a lottery to select pilgrims for official Hajj visas. Lottery winners paid differing amounts to the government depending on their mode of travel for the Hajj, 3.7 million dinars (\$2,600) by land and 4.8 million dinars (\$3,300) by air. In the IKR, the KRG MERA organized Hajj and Umrah travel, administering a lottery to choose the pilgrims for official Hajj visas allotted to the IKR and coordinating flights and visas with outside authorities.

During a visit to Najaf Governorate in January, then Prime Minister al-Kadhimi issued directions for the completion of the land pilgrim route linking the country from Najaf to the holy lands in Saudi Arabia. Construction of the road started in 2013 but remained halted during the year due to the country's financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

On December 27, Prime Minister Sudani and the Iraqi Council of Ministers reversed a Saddam Hussein-era decree that nationalized Yezidi properties and land in Sinjar since 1975. He said the decision was evidence of the "Iraqi government's clear and explicit endeavor to protect the rights of the Iraqi components, especially the beloved Yezidi community in Sinjar and the Ninewa." Yezidi leaders praised this decision as encouraging Yezidi return but cautioned that implementation could take years.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

According to the country's security sources, ISIS continued to rely on kidnapping workers, merchants, and some farmers, and demanding ransom in return for their release, to finance its activities in Salah al-Din and Diyala Provinces. The ransom demanded by ISIS from families of the abductees sometimes reached 10 million dinars (\$6,900). On May 15, ISIS members kidnapped a Shia Turkmen who was found dead the following day on the outskirts of the village of Karadagli. In April, ISIS members kidnapped a farmer from a village in eastern Diyala province, and later released him in exchange for a ransom of eight million dinars (\$5,500).

On December 18, ISIS claimed responsibility for a roadside bombing in the Riyadh subdistrict of Kirkuk that targeted a federal police convoy and killed eight police, including a major. On July 26, ISIS claimed responsibility for an armed attack on a group of Shia Muslims in the al-Salam subdistrict of Diyala that killed 12, including a soldier.

According to Yezidi activists and officials, one of the reasons why Yezidis continued to fear returning to Sinjar was because of continuing Turkish airstrikes targeting the PKK. Several times during the year, Turkish airstrikes struck facilities used by Sinjar Resistance Unit (YBS) Yezidi fighters affiliated with the PKK in Sinjar District, reportedly killing and wounding many Yezidi civilians. In January, two Turkish airstrikes killed two YBS leaders, Azad EzulDin and Suliman Shamo. On February 1, the Turkish Air Force carried out multiple airstrikes against PKK fighters in Sinjar District and Makhmor District in Ninewa Province. On June 15, a security official said the Turkish Air Force bombed the Asayish Ezidikhana (a PKK-affiliated Yezidi militia) headquarters in Sinuni Subdistrict in Sinjar. In August, September and October, local media reported that Turkish drones struck vehicles in the Khanasor and al-Shuhada neighborhoods in Sinjar District. Local officials added that the continued attacks in Sinjar, in addition to creating an unstable security situation, terrified the Yezidi people and pushed them to leave Sinjar.

In April, the Yezidi community in Sinjar District reported that the PKK had kidnapped hundreds of Yezidi children from Sinjar and the al-Hol camp in Syria and subjected them to ideological "brainwashing" since the group had assumed control of parts of the area in 2015, with the aim of recruiting them. It was unclear how many of the kidnappings occurred during the year.

On April 9, a Yezidi teenager returned to his family in Sinjar two months after being kidnapped by the PKK. A local resident said that the PKK "had kidnapped the young man and moved him to the Qandil Mountains to train him to become a fighter in its ranks." Others added that the boy returned to his home after his family demanded the army pressure the PKK to release him.

On January 10, Idris Zozani, a Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader in Sinjar, accused the PKK of being behind the abduction and killing of KDP member Ahmed Husain Hamid, a Yezidi from Sinjar. Zozani blamed the government for not taking legal actions to put an end to violations committed by outlawed armed groups in Sinjar, adding that the PKK has abducted and killed tens of individuals in the region over the past years.

On May 18, the head of the Yezidi Council in Sinjar, Falah Hasan, reported that YBS militants kidnapped a Yezidi farmer in Sinjar, according to eyewitnesses.

On June 5, local media affiliated with the KDP reported that PKK fighters kidnapped a Yezidi Peshmerga soldier from his house in Sinjar District and took him to an unknown location.

On June 25, Dian Jafar, the Yezidi head of the Migration Directorate in Dohuk, stated that the PKK was using Sinjar as a location for transporting weapons between Syria and Qandil Mountains. Jafar also said the PKK kidnapped Yezidi children to force them to fight, and the children's families were afraid to speak up. Jafar added that residents of Sinjar, who are predominantly Yezidi, and Yezidis in IDP camps, were afraid of the PKK, and those who refused to cooperate with them received death threats.

On July 5, the Iraqi Turkmen Front said Iran was strongly supporting the PKK in the country, especially in areas with heavy minority populations, such as mostly Yezidi Sinjar as well as Telefar and the Ninewa Plain, where many Sunnis and Christians live, because Iran is using the PKK to

target Turkish military bases and Erbil. They added, “Iranians now have established a foothold in areas they never dreamed of reaching before. For example, in Telafar district, the PKK recruited 300 Shia Turkmen.” According to Turkmen sources, PKK Shia Turkmen members had shared interests with Iran-backed Shia PMF militias in Telefa, and the PKK and PMF worked together in Sinjar District, using these areas as a road to link Iran and Syria and to alter the demographics in favor of Shia Turkmen.

The Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) militia, a U.S. government-designated terrorist organization, opened an office in Bartella. Additionally, the Christian 50th “Babylon” Brigade in Batnaya and Tal Kayf continued to control the local real estate market. The brigade sold land to non-Christians from outside the district and granted questionable security approvals. In addition, the brigade-controlled trade routes in the Ninewa Plain through checkpoints and forced Christian merchants to pay bribes for access.

Officials discovered three mass graves containing victims of ISIS and the Baathist regime in Ninewa, Muthanna, and Najaf provinces. According to the government’s Martyrs Foundation, it had discovered 242 mass graves to date in the country, containing victims of al-Qa’ida, ISIS, and the Baathist regime.

On February 22, the National Team for Mass Graves conducted an opening ceremony memorializing the lives of Yezidi victims exhumed from the seven mass grave locations in Hardan area in Sinjar District. Representatives from the Kurdistan Regional Government and Ninewa local government attended the ceremony. The National Team for Mass Graves include the Forensic Medicine Directorate in Baghdad, the Mass Graves Affairs Directorate in Baghdad, the IKR Ministry of Martyrs and Anfal Affairs, and the IKR Genocide Committee.

On June 28, a ceremony was held for the victims whose remains were exhumed from five of the six mass graves in the village of Qni, east of Sinjar District. In 2014, many Qni inhabitants were killed by ISIS militants, and the remains included approximately 100 Yezidi women and men.

KRG MERA’s Office of Yezidi Affairs and the government’s Martyrs’ Foundation in Baghdad reported that, as of November, authorities had found a total of 83 mass graves since 2014, in addition to dozens of individual grave sites containing the bodies of more than 2,500 Yezidis in Sinjar District and other predominantly Yezidi areas of Ninewa Province. Of these, they had exhumed 17 sites, each containing the remains of between three and 25 individuals.

In May and November reports to the UN Security Council, the head of the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da’esh/ISIL (UNITAD) reported progress in “all investigative lines of [its] inquiry,” including identifying communication from the leadership of ISIS that “regulated and incentivized” the use of chemical weapons and crimes against the Christian and Yezidi communities. UNITAD highlighted its other findings, including the continuing excavation of mass graves. The reports also noted that UNITAD was shifting the focus of its work from “structural investigations to the development of case files against perpetrators.”

In September, the UN Security Council approved a one-year extension of the mandate of UNITAD, originally established in 2017, to support domestic efforts to hold ISIS accountable for actions that may amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. UNITAD-supported exhumation and identification activities continued throughout the year.

After meeting with Grand Ayatollah Sistani on December 19, UNITAD Senior Advisor and Head of Investigative Team Christian Ritscher said, “UNITAD remain[s] firmly committed to continue our investigative work to ensure that ISIL members are held accountable for the crimes that they committed against all affected communities in Iraq, including the Yazidi community, the Shia, the Sunni, the Christian, the Ka’kai, the Shabak and the Shia-Turkmen. ISIL’s [ISIS’] international crimes aimed to destroy the diverse social fabric of Iraq, as well as its rich cultural heritage.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

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

In November, a delegation representing the UN Committee on Forced Disappearances visited the country, presenting its preliminary findings in a public statement. In its statement, the delegation said it had received “worrying information about patterns of disappearances and alleged enforced disappearances that currently occur in different governorates, which operate simultaneously and sometimes demonstrate scenarios of collusion between State agents and non-State actors,” including “alleged enforced disappearance of children, especially of Yezidi origin, who were born following the rape of their mother by Daesh [ISIS]; the Delegation was informed about cases in which, after their return to the country, the mothers had to leave their children in orphanages on a temporary basis with the intention to get them back. When they return to the orphanage, the mothers are told that their child was ‘given’ (sold) to another family, allegedly with the direct involvement of State agents.” The full committee planned to adopt and publish the final visit report in March 2023.

Following the May 20 death of an elderly Christian woman in al-Kut (Wasit Province), Shia Muslims in the province, as a gesture of social cohesion, organized a memorial service in Kut’s husseiniya (a Shia prayer hall used for religious commemorations) attended by hundreds of Shia Muslims. Father Ignatius Offi from the Syriac Catholic Church in Ninewa praised this gesture from the people of Kut city, saying “This is the habit of good southern Iraqis and all the Iraqis.”

On June 10, hundreds of young men and Shia clerics stormed the Sinbad Land amusement park in Baghdad in an effort to prevent a concert by Moroccan pop singer Saad Lamjarred, who has been accused of raping and sexually assaulting several women.

An August 14 conference brought together more than 50 religious leaders representing different groups and religions including Sunni, Shia, Christian, Sabean-Mandaean, Kaka’i, and Baha’i from Kirkuk Province. The conference was supported by the UN Development Program in Iraq and sponsored by the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Migration and Displacement. Abdul-Karim Kadhim Ajeel of the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers said the conference highlighted the main role of the leaders of religious communities in restoring

peace, spreading tolerance, and renouncing violence in Kirkuk Province. He added that with the support of moderate figures, many displaced persons were able to return to their homes.

In November, the head of the Baghdad-based interreligious Masarat Foundation for Cultural and Media Development, Saad Salloum, said the foundation started to train Muslim religious leaders using a curriculum focused on understanding the country's different religions. He said the foundation was also establishing a news agency dedicated to religious and cultural diversity. Salloum also stated that the foundation's research on hate speech had revealed an overall reduction of such speech against members of minority groups, but they still needed funding for the project.

In February, the Catholic University in Erbil and Koya University cohosted an "International Conference on Religion and Social Peace." Conference organizers said the purpose was to promote "coexistence and unity through ... a realistic interpretation of the religious and doctrinal texts that are in harmony with common social norms." They said they hoped the conference would build strong relations among Iraqis and "promote dialogue of coexistence" and "renounce violence and extremism," while highlighting the role of religious and educational institutions and the media in boosting social peace and finding ways for religious and ethnic minorities to assume more constructive roles in ensuring social peace and coexistence.

Christian leaders reported that Christians' interest in emigrating remained high. On November 20, Chaldean Patriarch Sako released a statement describing factors that have led to the marginalization of Christians in the country. Top reasons for Christian emigration included political and social instability, lack of security, lack of equal opportunities, discrimination, and lack of legal provisions to protect the full equality of Christian citizens.

According to an Iranian news agency, a survey by a think tank affiliated with the Shrine of Hussein in Karbala found more than 90 percent of the country's citizens supported the expenditure of state funds for enhancing the Arbreen pilgrimage to Karbala, which commemorates the martyrdom of Hussein.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

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

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

Efforts by the embassy and consulate general continued to center on identifying the most pressing concerns of members of religious minority groups – insecurity, lack of civil documentation, lack of employment, harassment by Iran-aligned militias, and road closures – and obtaining central government and KRG commitments to assist in addressing these concerns. Efforts included

promoting the recruitment of members of minority groups into security forces operating on the Ninewa Plain. UNITAD and the embassy also engaged with Yezidis, the KRG, the central government, and other organizations and groups to coordinate efforts to ensure that exhumations of Yezidi mass graves were performed to international standards and to coordinate U.S.-funded mental health and psychosocial support programs for survivors.

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

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

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

In the Ninewa Plain and Sinjar, U.S. government officials and staff worked with 47 local organizations, including many faith-based groups, to provide assistance for recovery, including economic, health, legal, and social cohesion services, to minority religious communities in the northern part of the country. The U.S. government continued to rebuild critical infrastructure to restore essential services, while also rebuilding heavily damaged and destroyed shelters in religious and ethnic minority communities.

During the year, the embassy continued implementing its \$1 million grant to support three local faith-based organizations in their efforts to preserve their communities' cultural heritage, including digitization of ancient religious manuscripts and texts, and documentation of oral histories. In December, the embassy announced an additional \$750,000 in U.S. funding for the further renovation of the Lalish Temple, the holiest Yezidi temple and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, bringing total U.S. support to more than \$2.3 million. The embassy implemented funding to help Yezidi survivors of the Kocho massacre in Sinjar to rebuild their lives, including through the establishment of "New Kocho" village and memorials in Kocho and Solagh, the latter a mass grave site commonly known as the "mothers' cemetery." The U.S. government also implemented programs in the Ninewa Plain focused on building mutual tolerance, trust, and understanding among youth of diverse religious backgrounds while increasing income generation.

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