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Events of 2015

The situation of Iraq's minorities remained bleak throughout 2015 as fighting continued between the Iraqi government and allied forces, ISIS, and the Kurdish Peshmerga. While minorities have long suffered discrimination and the threat of targeted attacks, particularly since 2003, the rise of ISIS in 2014 has led to a dramatic deterioration in their situation. After the armed group's capture of Mosul in June 2014 and subsequent expansion into Tel Afar, Sinjar and the Ninewa Plains, entire minority populations were expelled from their historical homelands. In addition, minorities have been targeted for egregious human rights violations, including summary executions, kidnapping, rape, sexual slavery and forced conversion. Large numbers of Iraq's religious minorities, including Armenian and Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, Bahá'i, Kaka'i, Sabeen Mandaean, Shabak, Turkmen and Yezidis, remained displaced from their homes at year's end, living in either the Kurdistan region, the southern and central Iraqi governorates, or outside of the country.

In March 2015, a report released by the UN found that ISIS violations perpetrated against Yezidis may amount to crimes of genocide, as certain acts, including killings and the forcible transfer of members of the community, appear to have represented attempts to destroy the Yezidi minority. Mass graves containing the corpses of Yezidi men and women were discovered throughout the year. In the month of November 2015 alone, at least six mass graves were discovered in Sinjar after the area was retaken from ISIS control, one of which contained more than 120 bodies. At year's end, activists estimated the number of Yezidis still missing or in ISIS captivity to be between 3,500 and 4,000. While male Yezidi children have been forced to convert to Islam, indoctrinated in ISIS ideology and trained to become fighters for the group, Yezidi women kidnapped by ISIS have been forced to convert to Islam and marry ISIS fighters, while others have been sold or given away as sex slaves, both in Iraq and Syria. ISIS has also targeted other minority women for kidnapping and sexual violence, including Christian and Shi'a women, albeit in smaller numbers. For example, on 13 March, ISIS reportedly killed nine Turkmen Shi'a women after they refused to marry ISIS fighters.

On several occasions, ISIS retaliated against minorities for engaging in cultural or religious practices deemed inconsistent with their puritanical ideology. For example, on 21 March the armed group abducted 56 Kurdish men for participating in celebrations of Nawroz, the Kurdish

New Year, demanding ransom payments for their release. On 15 April, ISIS killed two Yezidi men in Mosul for exchanging greetings to mark the Yezidi New Year. ISIS also undertook a systematic assault on other religious minorities during the year. The UN documented at least 31 houses owned by Christians and destroyed by ISIS in the Mosul area from May to October. Representatives of the Turkmen community reported hundreds of kidnappings of men and women by ISIS during the year, as well as a massacre of Turkmen civilians in Mosul in August.

The proliferation of Shi'a militias and other paramilitary groups opposed to ISIS has itself contributed to deepening sectarianism. During the month of May, reports emerged that Shi'a militias had set up checkpoints in Diyala and were harassing and assaulting Kurdish drivers and passengers, culminating in the killing of three Kurdish drivers. The Turkmen community reported violations after an attack by the Kurdish Peshmerga on the city of Tuz Khurmatu, including burning and looting of Shi'a Turkmen-owned shops and the removal of Shi'a mourning flags and banners. According to Human Rights Watch, the situation in Tuz Khurmatu worsened after a car bombing in October, with clashes between armed groups drawing in civilians on all sides. Attacks such as these are not isolated incidents. Turkmen leaders have long complained of aggression from both the Iraqi and Kurdish authorities in Turkmen-majority areas, motivated by their desire to extend their control over those areas.

Another devastating aspect of the conflict for minorities has been the systematic destruction of symbols of their cultural, intellectual and religious heritage, part of the ISIS strategy to eliminate all remnants of diversity in the areas they control. Since the group's takeover of Mosul in 2014, it has destroyed innumerable churches, mosques, shrines, graves and other religious and cultural sites. Throughout 2015, reports continued to emerge of the group looting and destroying mosques and churches in Mosul, in addition to numerous Kaka'i, Shabak and Yezidi shrines in Sinjar and the Ninewa Plains. After destroying an estimated 90 artifacts from Mosul Museum in February, most of them linked to the Assyrian civilization, in March the group sparked international outrage and condemnation from the UN when it proceeded to destroy the ancient city of Hatra and the historical Assyrian capital of Nimrud. On 15 July, the group reportedly ordered staff at the University of Mosul to burn more than a thousand Master's and PhD dissertations authored by Christian, Shabak and Yezidi students.

These systematic attempts to destroy Iraq's diverse religious culture have had a deep psychological impact on its minorities and affected their perceptions of the possibility of rebuilding a future in Iraq. For some communities, the ISIS campaign is only the latest wave in a long history of forcible displacement and assimilatory cultural policies: for example, under decades of Ba'athist rule, non-Arab minorities, especially Kurds but also Assyrian Christians, Kaka'i and Yezidis, were either forced to identify as Arabs or expelled from their lands, while hundreds of their villages were systematically destroyed. Those displaced within Iraq and the Kurdish region also face multiple challenges to preserving their identity. For example, many minority families now living in the Kurdish region are unable to send their children to schools because of the language barrier and also reportedly face pressure to assimilate into Kurdish culture or support the political aims of the Kurdish parties. Assyrian Christians have also long complained of Kurdish restrictions on their political and cultural activities. In the southern governorates, too, Shabak have reported being prevented from taking part in religious rituals which they share with Shi'a Muslims.

Human rights groups now report that many minorities are resorting to emigration outside of Iraq as a permanent solution. Despite the fact that many areas that are home to minorities, such as Sinjar, have been recaptured from ISIS control, the numbers of minorities returning to their homes has remained modest. The reality of displacement could pose a threat to the future vitality of certain minority languages and cultures, especially those with a smaller number of adherents. For example, rights groups have warned that the Sabeen Mandaean culture is at risk of extinction due to the mass emigration of community members, including religious leaders, and the difficulty of

keeping religious rituals alive in host countries outside of Iraq. As more and more areas are recaptured from ISIS control, it remains to be seen whether the Iraqi and Kurdish governments will commit to addressing these grievances and making minorities full partners in building a more inclusive political order.

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