



State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2014 - Iraq

Publisher [Minority Rights Group International](#)

Publication Date 3 July 2014

Cite as Minority Rights Group International, *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2014 - Iraq*, 3 July 2014, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53ba8de912.html> [accessed 5 August 2014]

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The year 2013 was the deadliest in Iraq since 2007, claiming the lives of between 7,800 and 9,500 civilians. The Iraqi population has been increasingly targeted in recent years, with more attacks aimed at recreational areas and intended to spread terror. Minorities have continued to pay a particularly heavy price in this context. While Kurdish, Shi'a and Sunni communities have developed their own armed groups as a means of self-defence, marginalized minorities such as black Iraqis, Christians, Sabian Mandaean, Shabaks, Turkmen and Yezidis have found themselves with little effective protection in this deteriorating security environment.

Numerous factors, both internal and external, have contributed to this escalating violence. The sizable Sunni population has felt marginalized by the Shi'a-dominated government; such sentiments led to a series of protests beginning in December 2012. In April 2013, a sit-in held in Haweeja was violently stormed, allegedly on the orders of senior government officials, leaving dozens dead. The crackdown sparked other deadly clashes in Sunni strongholds, bringing the total death toll to more than 170, and exacerbating the Sunni population's resentment. Tensions escalated during the year, culminating in December with the arrest of prominent Sunni politician Ahmed al-Alwani on charges of terrorism and the decision the same month to raid one of the main Sunni protest camps in Ramadi; both incidents sparked fresh violence.

The escalation of the conflict in Syria also played an important role in fuelling sectarian tensions and reinvigorating Sunni and Shi'a militias, including al-Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq, which merged with its Syrian counterpart in April to become the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). The head of the UN Mission in Iraq noted in July that 'the battlefields are merging. [The] Syrian conflict is not only spilling over into Iraq. Instead, the conflict has spread to Iraq, as Iraqis are reportedly taking arms against each other in Syria, and in Iraq.'

In this context, members of smaller minorities have been particularly targeted for a variety of reasons. First, rebel groups such as ISIS have conducted attacks on civilian targets with a view to inciting sectarian hatred and undermining the government's ability to maintain basic security in the country. Smaller minorities often constitute 'soft targets', as they lack wider political support and do not have their own militias, meaning attacks against them are often met with impunity, despite verbal condemnations from authorities. For example, the Sabian Mandaean, a Gnostic religious minority who are forbidden by the pacifist principles of their faith to carry weapons, suffered a high number of kidnappings, murders, death threats and forced conversions, as well as attempts to

kill their community leaders. Black Iraqis, living mainly around Basra, also faced security challenges during the year. They have been subjected to a series of kidnappings and murders, including the assassination of community leader Jalal Diab in April.

Another factor is that most minority groups are concentrated in strategic areas such as Baghdad or the oil-rich regions of Mosul, Kirkuk and the Ninewa Plains, where control is disputed between different factions. In these areas, religious and ethnic minorities have been pressured by Arab or Kurdish political groups. Yezidis and Kaka'i, two communities living mainly in the province of Ninewa and around Kirkuk respectively, reported having been subjected to threats and intimidation for their refusal to self-identify as Kurds. The Turkmen minority, the third main ethnic group, living mainly around Kirkuk, also reported cases of land confiscation by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and ongoing policies of 'Kurdification'.

Nevertheless, religious minorities are also targeted for ideological reasons, with fundamentalist groups such as ISIS aiming to bring an end to Iraq's religious diversity and to establish a Sunni caliphate in the region. Both Christians and Yezidis are frequently associated collectively with the West and attacked as a result. Throughout 2013, following Shi'a Ayatollah al-Baghdadi's *fatwa* at the end of the previous year requiring Christians in the country to either convert to Islam or face death, Christian neighbourhoods in Mosul and Baghdad were subjected to targeted attacks. The violence peaked on Christmas Day with explosions in several Christian areas of Baghdad, killing dozens. Kidnappings and intimidation to force Christian families to leave Iraq have also been reported, with many fleeing to the Kurdish region or becoming refugees in neighbouring countries. Yezidis were also targeted by Sunni extremist groups, including a number of attacks on Yezidi students attending Mosul University. By year's end, approximately 2,000 Yezidi students had stopped attending their classes at the university. Abductions of Yezidi women and girls continued to be reported; these led to protests by Yezidi diaspora communities during the year.

The Turkmen community suffered deadly attacks by Sunni Islamist groups. During 2013, bomb attacks in Turkmen residential areas killed or injured hundreds of civilians. One attack occurred near Tuz Khurmatu in June, when two suicide bombers struck against a Turkmen protest demanding increased protection for their community. The UN estimated that dozens were killed. Likewise, Shabaks, a small ethnic minority which does not define itself as either Arab or Kurd, have been victimized because of their presence in disputed territory in and around Mosul. In 2013, suicide bombs exploded during a funeral and in a Shabak village hundreds of death threats were reportedly sent to encourage Shabaks to move away.

Minority women and girls are among the most vulnerable in this climate of insecurity. Minority women have been specifically targeted for not conforming to strict Islamic or traditional norms and have become vulnerable to abductions characterized by a pattern of sexual violence. Mental health issues also continued to be reported. For instance, according to one report, over 30 suicides had occurred in the Yezidi community of the Ba'shiqah sub-district near Mosul by November; 64 per cent of the cases involved women. Activists noted that actual figures are likely to be higher as family members refrain from reporting the real cause of death, which in some cases may be linked to 'honour' crimes.

As in previous years the repeated attacks, creating a climate of fear and intimidation, also led members of minority communities to flee the country en masse or move to the Kurdish region, where security is perceived to be greater. In September, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees noted that the recent spate of bombings and the increased sectarian tensions had led to 5,000 people being displaced during a short period of time. According to the agency, the escalation in violence in 2013 uprooted nearly 10,000 people during the year. This new wave of displacement added to the continued reshaping of Iraq's ethnic-religious map.

The rich religious diversity of Iraq itself is at risk. For a few years, Iraq has consistently ranked among the countries where minority groups are most under threat. Smaller communities such as

the Sabian Mandaean are facing a risk of total disappearance in Iraq. With more than 90 per cent of the population having died or fled the country since 2003, community leader Sattar Hillo noted that fewer than 10,000 Sabian Mandaean remained in the country by the end of 2013.

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