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It has been a decade since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The sectarian conflict between the Shi'a and Sunni communities has escalated, and tensions between different groups have grown. The sizeable Sunni population accuses the government of Shi'a Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki of marginalizing them. Everyone in Iraq is exposed to attacks and violence, and the resulting deaths and injuries have blighted Iraqi daily life. According to the UN Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI), the number of civilian casualties rose to at least 3,238 reported deaths in 2012, compared with 2,771 the year before (other sources reported higher figures). The year 2012 was the first since 2009 in which the figures had increased. The escalation continued beyond year's end; May 2013 witnessed the bloodiest month of violence since June 2008, in which 1,045 Iraqi civilians and security officials were killed.

The cycle of violence affected Shi'a and Sunni groups, as well as smaller minority communities. Shi'a Muslims experienced the worst attacks of any religious community in 2012, with pilgrims celebrating religious festivals especially targeted. In January 2013, Shi'a pilgrims were targeted by insurgents who killed and injured hundreds. In May, Sunni mosques and areas were attacked, which resulted in the killing and injuring of hundreds. And in August, a leading Sunni cleric, Sheikh Mahdi al-Sumaidaie, was seriously injured and four of his bodyguards were killed in an attack on his convoy; the attack occurred after the sheik had celebrated the beginning of the Eid al-Fitr holy day. He had urged all Iraqis to renounce violence and work together.

Tensions between the Shi'a and Sunni communities escalated after the fugitive Iraqi vice-president, Tariq al-Hashimi, was sentenced to death *in absentia* in September allegedly for orchestrating terror attacks on officials and security forces. Hashimi was the most prominent Sunni politician in the country. The Shi'a holy day of Ashura in November passed peacefully, albeit following a string of car bombings just before. Only days after, at least 40 Shi'as were killed in attacks in Baghdad and southern Iraq. In March 2013, the tenth anniversary of the US invasion was marked by a series of attacks in Shi'a areas that killed nearly 60 people.

Smaller minority communities also faced attacks. According to UNPO, two Turkmen teachers were found dead in December near Humera, south-west of Kirkuk; both bodies bore signs of having been tortured. In January 2013, a tent full of Turkmen mourners in Tuz Khurmato was struck by a suicide bomber; at least 35 people were killed and over 100 were wounded.

Ethnic and religious minorities have been targeted in Iraq since 2003. The fact that minority communities do not have the protection of militias makes them more vulnerable to kidnapping for ransom; nor do they get the necessary protection from the authorities. Bomb attacks and suicide bombings have been used in areas where minorities live. Large numbers of the smaller religious communities, including Christians, Sabeen Mandaean and Yezidis, have left the country. Violence has even reached the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, which has been safer than the rest of Iraq. Reports of sectarian violence were fewer there than elsewhere, although religious minority communities noted cases of arbitrary detention, harassment, discrimination and threats by officials of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Some members of minority groups wear veils or hide their religious symbols to avoid being targeted. According to Christian women in Iraq interviewed by MRG, social pressures and the increasing sectarian tensions lead them to keep a low profile.

Christians continued to flee the country. The current population is believed to be less than half its pre-2003 size. Some were reportedly forced to sell their homes to militants at cheap prices. Christians had previously fled Baghdad for the comparative safety of the northern provinces. The flight north was especially marked following the large-scale attack on Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad in 2010, which left 56 Christians and 2 priests dead. Dwindling resources, lack of employment prospects and a sense that the violence is coming closer led Christian displaced to decide finally to leave the country. For example, in May, 20 Christian families reportedly fled Mosul after receiving threatening letters calling on them to leave their homes. A controversial amateur internet video launched in September sparked a wave of such death threats by militant groups. In addition, several Christians were killed or kidnapped, and churches were attacked during the year. A radical group attacked a church in Dohuk in May and looted some of its contents. In September, the Chaldean Catholic Sacred Heart Cathedral in Kirkuk was hit by a bomb blast; there were no casualties. Although the building may not have been the intended target, the attack added to a general sense of vulnerability. A local human rights group reported three other attacks on churches in the city during the year. It was estimated that only 25,000 Christians now live in Mosul while their number was 75,000 in 2003.

Other minorities were attacked, such as the killing of a Yezidi and his wife in Sanjar district north of Mosul and a Shabak person in Nineveh by militants. In December, a Sabeen Mandaean goldsmith was killed in his shop south of Baghdad. Moreover, 20 graves belonging to Sabeen Mandaeans were attacked in Kirkuk. A local human rights organization tallied the following serious attacks on members of minorities: 5 killings, 5 kidnappings and 12 murder attempts against Christians; 2 killings and 4 kidnappings against Yezidis; 2 killings of Sabeen Mandaeans; and 26 killings of Shabaks. There were other less serious attacks, as well as incidents that went unrecorded.

There are inadequate health facilities in areas where many minorities live. A key issue during the year was the prevalence of suicides among minorities. There were, for example, about 50 suicides in the city of Sinjar, mainly inhabited by Yezidis. The UN is planning a sensitization campaign in schools in order to train teachers and pupils about the issue. Among the main reasons for these tragedies were dire poverty and failure to get asylum abroad. Other minorities have also witnessed increases in the suicide rates.

Some Iraqi women, including those who lost their husbands in the armed conflict, have experienced financial problems and have been sexually exploited. Those displaced, including women belonging to minorities, face serious risk of abuse by people smugglers. While the parliament passed a law in April to tackle trafficking, enforcement remains a serious problem faced by women who are vulnerable to sexual abuse.

There is a need to reform the educational curriculum to reflect the variety of different communities and encourage tolerance. A minority alliance worked during the year with the Ministry of Education to bridge ethnic and religious divides through education. The alliance reviewed the

material provided to children studying at the intermediate level and made recommendations. Many of these were accepted and the revised textbooks were distributed to schools in September 2012. A key recommendation was that Iraqi children needed to learn more about the wide range of minorities in their country and their contributions to its history and culture.

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