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2021 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, Yazidis, 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). On March 3, parliament passed a law granting special rights, including restitution for damages, to Yazidis and other religious minority survivors of ISIS abuses, and providing for their rehabilitation and integration into society. Predominantly Sunni provinces, such as Anbar, Salah al-Din, Kirkuk, and Ninawa, reported fewer security incidents compared with 2019 and 2020. Yazidis, Christians, and local and international NGOs reported continued verbal harassment and physical abuse from members of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a state-sponsored organization composed of more than 50 mostly Shia militias originally formed to combat ISIS. In May, parliamentarians publicly warned that pro-Iran PMF forces continued to carry out the forced displacement of Sunnis and Christians with the intent to effect demographic changes in Salah al-Din, Ninawa, and Diyala Provinces. According to the Kurdistan Regional Government’s (KRG) Yazidi Rescue Coordinating Office, 2,763 Yazidis remained missing following ISIS’s assault on the north of the country in 2014, compared with 2,874 reported as missing in 2020. Some religious and ethnic minority leaders, mostly Christians and to a lesser degree, Sabeen-Mandean, Shabak, and Faili Kurds, expressed dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the October 10 parliamentary election, saying powerful political parties encouraged nonminority voters to back candidates for the minority-quota seats, thereby outvoting “legitimate” candidates. Representatives of minority religious communities, including Christians and Yazidis, said that despite local authorities occasionally verbally harassing them, the central government generally did not interfere with religious observances by members of minority groups. On March 5-8, national and KRG leaders hosted the first papal visit to the country, during which Pope Francis met with Shia Grand Ayatollah Sayed Ali al-Sistani and conducted Christian and interfaith ceremonies in Baghdad, Mosul, and in the IKR. Government officials and Christian and other minority religious leaders stated the visit helped raise the profile of Christian issues in the country and the importance of its religious diversity.

Minority religious groups, including Christians and Yazidis, 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 Ninawa 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 Yazidi community in Sinjar reported in January and May that the PKK had kidnapped hundreds of Yazidi children to recruit and subject to ideological “brainwashing” in the years since ISIS was defeated in Sinjar in 2015. It was unclear how many of the kidnappings occurred during the year. During the year, authorities found three additional mass graves in Diyala, Salah al-Din, and Anbar Provinces containing victims of al-Qa’ida and ISIS, as well as one from the time of the Baathist regime, with more than 210 graves discovered since 2003; according to the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da’esh/ISIL (known as UNITAD), work with international teams to exhume and identify the remains would likely take years.

According to media and human rights organizations, societal violence perpetrated by sectarian armed groups, mainly pro-Iran Shia militias, continued during the year, although there were no documented cases of violence specifically related to religious affiliation in the IKR. Christians in the south and in PMF-controlled towns on the Ninawa Plain, as well as Sabeen-Mandean in Basrah, Dhi Qar, and Maysan Provinces, reported they continued to avoid celebrating their religious festivals when these observances coincided with Shia Islamic periods of mourning, such as Ashura. There were continued reports that members of non-Muslim minority groups felt the Muslim majority pressured them to adhere to certain Islamic practices, such as wearing the hijab or fasting during Ramadan.

The U.S. embassy 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 Mustafa al-Kadhimi, through interagency coordination groups, and in targeted assistance programs for stabilization projects. These concerns included the presence of armed groups harassing religious groups and promoting and enabling demographic changes, lack of available resources for stabilization and rehabilitation efforts for internally displaced Christians and other minority groups, and general safety concerns. The Ambassador and other embassy and consulate general 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 39.7 million (mid-year 2021). According to 2010 government statistics – the most recent available – 97 percent of the population is Muslim. Shia Muslims, predominantly Arabs but also including Turkoman, Farsi Kurds, and others, constitute 55 to 60 percent of the population. Sunni Muslims are approximately 40 percent of the Muslim population, of which Arabs constitute 24 percent, Kurds 15 percent, and Turkomans 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 250,000 Christians remain in the country, down from a pre-2003 population estimate of between 800,000 and 1.4 million persons. Approximately 67 percent of Christians are Chaldean Catholics (an eastern rite of the Roman Catholic Church), and nearly 20 percent are members of the Assyrian Church of the East. The remainder are Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, and Anglican and other Protestants. There are approximately 2,000 members of evangelical Christian churches in the IKR, while an unknown number, mostly converts from Islam, practice secretly.

According to Yezidi leaders, most of the 400,000 to 500,000 Yezidis in the country are located in the north, with approximately 150,000 remaining internally displaced as of August, compared with 200,000 to 230,000 remaining displaced 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 225,000 to 250,000 Kaka'i in the IKR.

Estimates of the size of the Sabean-Mandean community vary, but according to Sabean-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 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 Circassians, Chechnya, and Dagestan) 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, Dhafer Eliyahu, in March, 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 families 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 15,000 to 20,000 Zoroastrians in the IKR. A Zoroastrian religious leader said there are approximately 30,000 Zoroastrians throughout the country.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), approximately 1.2 million persons remain displaced within the country, predominantly in Ninewa, Dohuk, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Kirkuk Provinces, compared with 1.5 million persons at the end of 2020. According to the KRG's Joint Crisis Coordination Center (JCC), there are approximately 664,909 IDPs in the IKR as of December 2021, compared with 700,000 in 2020. According to the JCC, there are 247,422 Syrian, 8,746 Turkish, 9,700 Iranian, and 752 Palestinian refugees, and 507 individuals of other nationalities in the IKR. Forty percent of the IDPs throughout the IKR 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, Yazidis, and Sabeen-Mandaeans; it does not explicitly mention followers of other religions or atheists. Federal law prohibits the practice of the Baha’i Faith and prescribes 10 years’ imprisonment for anyone practicing it, although the law is not enforced. The KRG does not enforce the federal ban as a matter of policy and recognizes the Baha’i Faith as a religion.

The law prohibits *takfiri* organizations including terrorist organizations al-Qa’ida and ISIS, which declare Muslims who practice a less austere form of Islam apostates. A 2001 resolution prohibits the practice of the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam.

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

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 Iraqi citizenship under a 1950 Iraqi 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 minor 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 all women who are 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 women of the Christian, Jewish, or Sabeen-Mandaean faith.

An article of the penal code punishes with up to three years’ imprisonment or a 300 Iraqi dinar fine (\$.20) 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 crimes committed by ISIS against Yazidis, Christians, Turkomans, and Shabak as crimes of genocide and crimes against humanity. A law passed on March 3 by the national Council of Representatives (COR) grants rights to Yazidis 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 these benefits include Yazidi, Christian, Shabak, and Turkoman female survivors who were kidnapped by ISIS; Yazidis, Christians, Shabak, and Turkomans who survived mass killing operations carried out by ISIS; and Yazidi children who were kidnapped by ISIS.

The following religious groups are recognized by the personal status law and are 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, Yazidis, Sabeen-Mandaeans, 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 Yazidis, have their own personal status courts responsible for handling marriage, divorce, and inheritance issues.

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

Neither national nor IKR law specifies penalties for the practices of unrecognized religious groups, including Wahhabi Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Yarsanism, other than Baha’is; however, contracts signed by institutions of unrecognized religious groups are not considered legal or admissible as evidence in court.

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.”

Eight faiths are recognized and registered with the KRG MERA: Islam, Christianity, Yazidism, Judaism, Sabeen-Mandaicism, 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, Latin 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 12 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.

The law reserves nine of the Council of Representatives’ (COR) 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 Sabean-Mandean, from Baghdad; one for an ethnic Shabak, from Ninewa; and one for a Faily Kurd, from Wasit. Usually one of the COR rapporteur (administrative) positions is designated for a Christian parliamentarian and the other for a Turkoman. The Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament (IKP) reserves 11 of its 111 seats for ethnic and religious minorities: five for Chaldeans, Syriacs, and Assyrians; five for Turkomans; and one for an Armenian, most of whom also belong to minority religious 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 civil courts must consult the religious authority of a non-Muslim party for its 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.

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 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 Turkoman 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 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 are concentrations 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 need to provide information on the school’s bylaws, number of students, size, location, facility and safety conditions, financial backing, and tax compliance, and to 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, Sabean-Mandean, Yezidi, Jewish, and Muslim. There is no distinction between Shia and Sunni Muslims, or a designation of Christian denominations. Individuals practicing other faiths may only receive identity cards if they self-identify as Muslim, Yezidi, Sabean-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 that during the year it had received 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. IHCHR Vice President Ali Mizer al-Jarba said there were allegations that “detainees, most of

whom were being prosecuted for terrorism cases, were tortured during pre-trial interrogation.” He added that detainees’ families had demanded medical examinations to document this torture so that medical records could be used to challenge their indictments in the Court of Cession.

International and local NGOs said the government continued to use the antiterrorism law as a pretext for detaining individuals, mostly Sunnis, without due process. Observers again said the antiterrorism law did not afford due process or fair trial protections. Sunni leaders said authorities referenced the law in their detentions of young Sunni men on suspicion of having ISIS links. 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 Shia. The PMF is a state-sponsored organization composed of more than 50 mostly Shia militias originally formed to combat ISIS. 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.

Predominantly Sunni provinces, such as Anbar, Salah al-Din, Kirkuk, and Ninewa, reported fewer security incidents compared with 2019 and 2020.

Yezidis, Christians, and local and international NGOs reported members of the PMF continued to verbally harass and physically abuse members of religious minority communities. According to media, from December 2020 through February, Iran-aligned militias operating under the PMF carried out a series of attacks on religious minority-owned businesses in Baghdad, including against Christian and Yezidi-owned alcohol establishments. Minority community leaders said the attacks were designed to harass vulnerable minority entrepreneurs to pay illicit bribes and protection money to the militias. In some cases, Muslim business competitors drove minority religious entrepreneurs out of business.

During the year, there was almost no reported progress in locating or rescuing missing Yezidis. On August 2, authorities in the KRG’s Yezidi Rescue Coordinating Office reported 2,763 Yezidis, mainly women and children, were still missing both inside and outside the country, compared with up to 2,874 reported missing in 2020. According to the Yezidi Rescue Coordinating Office, during the period 2014-2021, approximately 100,000 Yezidis left the country, with most moving to Germany and others to Turkey, Greece, Georgia, Armenia, France, the Netherlands, Croatia, the United States, Australia, Hungary, and Bulgaria. Approximately 62 Christians also remained missing at the end of the year. According to the KRG MERA, as of August 2, more than 3,550 Yezidis had escaped, been rescued, or released from ISIS captivity since 2014, compared with 3,543 through 2020. 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 Turkoman of Ninewa), 900 Shia and Sunni Turkomans kidnapped by ISIS were still missing at year’s end.

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 Bartella Subdistrict, and Sunni areas in Diyala and Babil Provinces, including Jurf al-Sakhar District in Babil Province. On August 11, Father Behnam Banoka, a Syriac Catholic Church leader in Bartella District, a Christian majority district in Ninewa Province, reported that member of parliament (MP) Qusay Abas, elected under the Shabak quota, had pressured the Ninewa municipality director to redistribute residential lands in Christian majority Bartella City to Shabak families. According to Banoka, these ongoing demographic changes and the presence of the 30th PMF (Shabak) in the area were among the main reasons Christian IDPs were not returning to Bartella. Members of Bartella’s Christian community said the brigade’s efforts to alter demographics negatively impacted their way of life.

According to press, in May, parliamentarian Raad al-Dahlaki, a Sunni from Diyala Province, warned that PMF forces and associated Iranian-backed militias continued to forcibly displace Sunnis in Salah al-Din, Diyala, and Ninewa Provinces. 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.” He added, “There are secret prisons for armed factions in Samarra and Jurf al-Sakhr Districts and in Diyala Province that contain Sunni detainees.” Deputy speaker of parliament Hassan al-Kaabi dismissed these allegations as “inaccuracies” and called for the resignation of Sunni parliamentarian Dhafer al-Ani from Baghdad Province for having presented “inaccuracies” regarding the situation. In May, al-Ani stated the PMF had carried out demographic changes in Salah al-Din, Ninewa, and Diyala Provinces. Al-Ani called on the government to investigate and warned against “the continuation of these schemes that lead to the killing of civilians and the looting of the assets of people who have suffered from the crimes of ISIS,” referring to what he said were secret prisons armed PMF factions used in Samarra and Jurf al-Sakhr Districts.

Christian leaders reported that interest in the community in emigrating remained high, though COVID-19 travel restrictions prohibited many from leaving. On August 6, Chaldean Patriarch in Iraq and the World Raphael Louis Sako released a statement warning of what he said were suspicious efforts to alter demographics in the areas inhabited by Christians in Ninewa Province. He recommended the government implement a strategy to prevent these changes, warning that more Christians would emigrate if the situation continued.

On November 24, in a speech during Christmas Eve Mass at Saint Joseph Church in Baghdad, Prime Minister Kadhimi encouraged Christians to remain in the country and those who had left to return, stating, “We cannot imagine the Iraqi identity without Christians and other components.” President Barham Salih wished the Christian community a Merry Christmas via Twitter, affirming his support for Christians who have suffered from the impact

of extremism and terrorism. Salih said the country needed to take a serious stand to establish “a capable state and good governance that upholds the principles of citizenship and protects rights and peaceful coexistence.” COR Speaker Mohammed al-Halbusi sent his best wishes to Christians and hoped for peace and prosperity for the country.

In October, the head of the Iraqi Turkoman Front, Hasan Toran, said the PMF had not allowed Sunni Turkomans to return to their villages in Tuz-Khurmato District, Salah al-Din Province, but the PMF had allowed Shia Turkomans to return. He stated that in Telafar, Ninewa Province, the PMF continued to verbally harass Sunni Turkomans at checkpoints and required them to obtain the approval of the PMF’s intelligence apparatus to obtain government documentation. The KRG reported that Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities were victims of demographic changes emanating from the south of Tuz-Khurmato into Kirkuk Province, including in the villages of Matiq and Arab Koye. These minorities included Kaka’i in Daquq and Mekhas in Khanaqin.

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.

Shirko Toufiq, a media official of the 15th Kurdistan Democratic Party’s (KDP) headquarters in Diyala, told the Shafaq News Agency on December 7 that “the Iraqi government facilitated the Arabization of Kurdish territories in Diyala by ostracizing and marginalizing the Kurds in security and administrative government positions in the disputed territories in Diyala.” Toufiq said the actions of ISIS and support of some “Sunni Arab locals” for that group contributed to the defacing and obscuring the cultural identity of 72 Kurdish villages in Diyala and forcing 4,200 Kurdish families to move to the Kurdistan Region or other governorates. Kaka’i leaders said many of the residents of those villages were also members of their religious minority.

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. During the year, however, there were 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.

Christian religious leaders continued to publicly accuse the 30th Brigade of verbal harassment of Christians in Bartella and elsewhere in Hamdaniya District of Ninewa. Local residents continued to say militias posted pictures of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and former Quds Force Commander Qassim Suleimani, as well as of Iraqi militia leaders such as Secretary General of the U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Qais al-Khazali 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 January 2, the leader of the Shia Sadrist movement, Muqtada al-Sadr, directed his deputies, including MPs, religious advisors, PMF leaders, and Deputy COR Speaker Hassan al-Kabi, to form a special committee to receive complaints from Christians inside and outside the country regarding their stolen properties and real estate, and he promised in a statement strict legal measures to punish perpetrators; however, although al-Sadr requested tangible results by May, the committee continued working through the end of year. On October 5, former parliamentarian and current COR Speaker and Advisor for Components (Minority Groups) Affairs Emad Youkhana said Sadr’s committee had managed to return more than 90 properties, but that the committee sometimes used illegal approaches including threats of violence to return these properties. Youkhana told the press that while the committee set up to address the return of properties was functioning, it was inefficient and weak, and its procedures were too slow and complicated to be effective.

The committee of security officials and Christian religious leaders created in 2019 by the OPM to return all Christian properties in Ninewa Province to their Christian owners continued to operate.

On September 24, Cardinal Sako told media that armed groups had stolen approximately 3,000-4,000 properties or projects that belonged to Christians in Baghdad and other provinces. On October 6, head of the Christian, Yezidi, and Sabean Mandaean Endowment Raad Kajaji said that starting in 2017, to prevent others from taking over Christian properties illegally, the government had instructed that no property ownership transactions would be made without the endowment’s approval and needed to be “issued at the request of the owner.” According to Kajaji, however, the regulation had not been fully successful in stopping illegal property transfers. Christians of many denominations and residing throughout many parts of the country said the perpetrators sometimes falsified documents certifying themselves as Christians to obtain properties.

According to a high level committee established in 2020 by the KRG Council of Ministers to resolve outstanding land disputes affecting Christian communities, as of November, there were 55 confiscations of properties owned by Christians, as well as reports of individuals forcibly relocated from properties that had belonged to Christians but that had been confiscated by the former Baathist regime. Of these, 38 cases were adjudicated, or the original owners dropped the charges. The committee, which includes representatives from the IKP, IKR Presidency, IKR Judicial Council, KRG Ministries of Justice, Agriculture, Municipalities, and Finance, and the head of IKR’s Independent

Human Rights Commission, requested immediate compensation for Christians whose lands had been confiscated, for a total of 3.2 trillion dinars (\$2.19 billion). The committee also instructed the Duhok Governorate Council to issue a decree centralizing the purchase and sale of lands and properties located in villages inhabited predominately by Christians. In October, following pressure from the committee, the Duhok Court of Appeals amended several previous decisions in favor of Assyrian Christian residents of Kashkawa village regarding the ownership of disputed lands. While Assyrian Christian leaders welcomed the decision, as of October, implementation was still pending with the relevant KRG departments.

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. According to Sunni Endowment representatives, the Shia Endowment confiscated a shrine and cemetery in Baquba District in Diyala, while Shia militias, including AAH, Badr, and Khurasani, turned some Sunni mosques in the province into PMF headquarters. In Ninewa, the Sunni Endowment stated that the Shia Endowment worked secretly to confiscate properties owned by the Sunni Endowment in Mosul by using false documents or claiming Shia Endowment jurisdiction over the properties based on some of the shrines and mosques bearing Shia religious names.

Kaka'i community members again said the central government's Shia Endowment continued to occupy places of Kaka'i worship in Diyala and Baghdad, converting 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, taken by the Shia Endowment in 2019. Kaka'i representatives also reported that the Sunni Endowment continued to occupy Kaka'i houses of worship in Kirkuk.

In October, Christian sources reported the ISF continued to occupy Christians' houses in Talkayf District, Ninewa Province, and to repurpose them as military barracks. The sources also reported that the ISF continued to use a youth center as a detention center for ISIS prisoners in Talkayf, intimidating Christians in the district. In October, Mayor of Talkayf District Bassim Balo said civilians were concerned about the possibility that ISIS forces might attempt to break into the facility and free the ISIS detainees. He said some Christians had decided to leave the area to avoid ISF searches and restrictions of movement on residents in the area. According to Balo, the ISF used many houses belonging to Christians without compensating the residents.

According to the KRG MERA, a Zoroastrian temple opened in Erbil in December 2020 with the support of the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs was forced to close during the year because of lack of financial support from the Zoroastrian community to pay the monthly rent on the building.

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 49 Syriac- and 18 Turkoman-language schools.

Christian religious education continued to be included in the curricula of at least 255 public schools in the country, including 55 in the KRG, 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. One Kaka'i leader reported an incident in December of a student in Erbil being pressured by her teacher in front of her classmates to convert to Islam.

During the year, minority NGOs together with the NGO Minority Alliance Network continued to hold seminars and workshops to discuss curriculum reform in IKR schools, again recommending amendments to the current curriculum to emphasize religious minority rights. KRG State Minister for Component (Minority) Affairs Ayden Maroof reported the KRG Education Ministry was working to implement a pilot project with NGOs, including the Minority Alliance Network, to convey to students a thorough understanding of important social values that were complementary to Islamic studies in primary and intermediate schools. Maroof said the project would later extend to high schools.

Private Islamic religious schools continued to operate in the country. They had to obtain a license from the director general of private and public schools and pay 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. During the year, the university was in the process of opening a medical school affiliated with the American University of Beirut and seeking required permission from the IKR.

According to a representative of the Yezidi NGO Yazda, national government and KRG authorities continued to discriminate against minorities, including Turkomans, Arabs, Yezidis, Shabak, and Christians, in territories claimed by both the KRG and the central government in the northern part of the country. In October, Yazda representative Jameel Shumar said Yezidis still faced difficulties if they self-identified as Yezidis rather than as Kurdish Yezidis, especially at IKR checkpoints. He said IKR authorities denied entry to the IKR of Yezidi politicians known for considering Yezidis a separate group from the Kurds and that only those Yezidis who identified publicly as Kurdish could obtain senior positions in the IKR leadership. Kaka'i leaders also criticized a lack of representation in local KRG positions.

On June 22, former member of the Ninewa Provincial Council and member of the Yezidi Movement for Progress and Reform Khudaida Khalaf said KDP Peshmerga forces insulted Yezidi tribal leader Khalaf Omar Hamzi and his son while they were passing through checkpoints in Dohuk Province. According to Khalaf, Peshmerga members asked Hamzi if he was Kurdish or Yezidi. When he told them he was Yezidi, they shoved him and insulted his use of traditional dress. Khalaf said these kinds of incidents happened frequently to Yezidis passing through Peshmerga checkpoints, especially to known Yezidi activists.

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 central government 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-Mandeans, continued to hold senior positions in the national parliament and central government – among them Minister of Displacement and Migration Evan Faiq 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 for members of religious minority groups, in particular for Yezidis and Christians, and in May, the KRG elected Christian lawyer Muna Yukhna Yaqu to lead the Independent Human Rights Commission of the Kurdistan Region. Minority leaders, however, said they were still underrepresented in government appointments, in elected positions outside the COR, and in public sector jobs, and that this overall underrepresentation limited members of minority groups' access to government-provided economic opportunities. On October 4, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani announced the KRG had elevated Ankawa, a predominantly Christian suburb of Erbil, to an “autonomous district” of Erbil Province to allow local leaders more administrative control, including the ability to nominate civic leaders, appoint officials, and manage security.

Although the IKP continued to reserve 11 seats for religious and ethnic minority candidates and the national COR reserved nine seats for religious and ethnic minority candidates, the law did not restrict who could vote in quota seat races. Citing reports of Kurds voting for minority parties that aligned with major Kurdish parties, some members of the IKR's minority populations said these votes undermined the intended purpose of the minority quota seats and diluted the voice of members of minority groups in government, while others opposed restricting who could vote in quota seat races. Religious minority leaders, including Christians and Yezidis, also expressed their dissatisfaction with the election arrangements and their wish to restrict quota seats only to minority voters. According to religious and ethnic minority leaders, particularly Christians and, to a lesser degree, Sabean-Mandeans, Shabak, and Faili Kurds, national-level politicians and parties and the IKR's powerful political parties instructed non-Christian voters to vote for religious minority quota candidates loyal to the parties they wanted to win the October 10 parliamentary election, outvoting “legitimate” minority quota candidates. Christian parliamentarians Rehan Hana and Yonadam Kanna and other minority representatives and religious leaders supported restricting quota seat races to voters of the same ethnicity and/or religion, while Christian parliamentarians affiliated with Shia political coalition parties drawing votes from Shia-majority provinces opposed imposing restrictions.

The COR was once again unable to pass a new law regulating the number and selection of judges following unexpected vacancies on the Federal Supreme Court bench beginning in late 2020. In March, the COR amended existing legislation to replace the entire bench. As a result, the only Christian judge on the court was removed, and a new position of Secretary General was created, which was filled by a different Christian judge. Efforts to add Islamic jurists to the bench faced resistance from multiple parties in the COR, especially religious minorities, while some political analysts contended that every Iraqi judge was an Islamic jurist by virtue of his or her training in Islamic law.

On December 9, Cardinal Sako said the main obstacle to the consolidation of the democratic process in the country was the sectarian approach of political parties and the quota system, which designates seats in parliament along ethnic, religious, and sectarian lines, and which also applies to the distribution of positions in government institutions. Sako said sectarianism fueled corruption, poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy, pointing out that the number of Christians in the country had fallen to fewer than 500,000, while it was more than 1.5 million before 2003.

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-Mandeans, 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 PMF militias blackmailed and attacked them. The ban on alcohol consumption by Muslims, according to local sources, prevented Muslim store owners from applying for permits allowing them to carry and sell alcohol. Community sources reported the continuing practice of Muslim businessmen using Christians as front men to apply for these permits and operate the stores.

Yezidi community leaders reported that the government continued to require Yezidi female 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 – in part because the Yezidi community did not consider these children to be Yezidi. The Yezidi religion traditionally requires a child to have two Yezidi parents to be considered a member of the community. According to political party Patriotic Union of Kurdistan COR parliamentarian Rezan Sheikh Dier, efforts to pass a law entitled “My name is my mother's name” continued during the year. If passed, the bill would allow a mother's religion to be passed down to her child. In August, IKR NGOs and artists launched a campaign to support the draft law, but they said media and some members of the community, especially more traditional Muslims, objected to the bill.

During the year, the NGOs Christian Aid Program Nohadra for Humanitarian Aid in Iraq (CAPNI) and the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization continued to seek amendments to the national identification card law requiring minor 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.

In an October report on civil documentation, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported that different patterns of rights violations emerged. The report stated, “Sometimes, the right of IDPs and returnees to obtain documentation is deliberately denied by security actors, especially for persons with perceived affiliation to extremist groups, who are usually subjected to multiple requirements related to security clearance and to family denunciation processes. In most cases, authorities are unable to effectively provide documentation due to limited operational resources dedicated to the Civil Affairs Directorates and to administrative regulations not being adapted to the specific situation of IDPs and returnees.” This lack of access to documentation affected many IDPs, including those who were members of religious minorities, such as Yazidis and Christians.

On September 22, Muna Yako, head of the Independent Human Rights Commission in the IKR, called on the KRG, Christian churches, and human rights organizations to help a divorced Christian woman. Yako reported that the woman’s husband had converted to Islam following their divorce, thereby automatically legally converting their 10-year-old son to Islam and giving the father custody. Yako said IKR political parties did not consider these cases important and had not updated the relevant laws. Former Christian MP, COR Speaker, and Advisor for Components Affairs Emad Youkhana said Christian politicians and churches often asked the IKP to amend the national identification card law, but he said politicians and leaders lacked the will to change laws.

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 common problem reported by members of unrecognized religious minority groups due to the country’s constitution and its personal status law.

Based on local media reports during the year, social recognition of the genocide that ISIS committed against the Yazidis continued to grow. Cross-sectarian genocide commemoration events took place on August 3 for the fourth consecutive year. On August 3, KRG Prime Minister Barzani issued a statement on the seventh anniversary of the genocide that said, “On this painful anniversary, the KRG will continue its efforts to return displaced Yazidi to their areas with dignity, and we are also working with the federal government and the international community on the reconstruction of Sinjar and the rest of the Yazidi areas.” On August 3, Prime Minister Kadhimî said, “The Iraqi people are commemorating the seventh anniversary of the heinous crime of ISIS against our Yazidi people at the hands of ISIS. The Yazidi portfolio is one of the government’s priorities. The government will not spare any effort in supporting the Yazidi survivors and in preparing a government program for their rehabilitation, in addition to the government’s effort to return the IDPs to their areas and to provide all forms of assistance for the stability and reconstruction of their areas.”

On July 15, Yazidi MP Khaleda Khalil (KDP) stated that a group of political parties had worked to stop progress on a proposed law to help Yazidi survivors of ISIS in the COR for political reasons. She said this delay was “on the pretext that they [the group of political parties] had mentioned the genocide in an article in the Yazidi Survivors’ Law as if the genocide of our people, the Yazidis, deserves nothing more than a mention in a few words that do not entail any legal action.” In October 2020, Khalil submitted a bill to the Iraqi COR presidency to recognize the 2014 Yazidi killings as genocide, stating that the law would compel the government to take responsibility for the victims, strengthen accountability for those who committed crimes against humanity, and provide psychological and medical care as well as reparations to the victims and survivors of ISIS crimes.

During an August 16 visit to Ninewa Province as part of an initiative to encourage members of minority religious groups to remain in the country, Prime Minister Kadhimî renewed his calls to Iraqi Christians and other minorities abroad to return to the country and take part in rebuilding it. Kadhimî also said Sinjar would shine in the country’s history as witness to the strength of Yazidis in the face of the brutality of ISIS terrorists. According to Kadhimî, the government was working on implementing the Sinjar Agreement of October 2020, which, he promised, would facilitate reconstruction in the area and restore social cohesion in its communities. He also stated the government was sparing no efforts to end the displacement of Yazidis and locate those still missing.

On January 25, Ammar al-Hakim, the head of the Hikma Trend political party, called for the voluntary return of all members of minorities to their respective areas of origin. On July 2, al-Hakim stressed the importance of the ethnic and religious diversity in minority areas and the importance of imposing government control to ensure their safety. After a January 25 meeting in Baghdad with the religious leader of the Sabean-Mandaean community, Sheikh Sattar Jabbar Helou, President Salih stated that Sabean-Mandaeans were an essential part of the national social fabric.

Followers of recognized religious groups, including Baha’is (recognized only in the KRG) and Yezidis (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 governments also continued to designate festivals as religious holidays in their localities.

Some militias in Ninewa continued to draw their members from local Yezidi and Christian communities but remained subordinate to larger organizations – the PKK in the case of the YBS (Sinjar Resistance Units), for example, and larger Iran-aligned militias in the cases of the 30th (Shabak) and 50th (Christian) PMF Brigades. According to Yezidi and Christian officials, some militias continued to receive support from the central government in Baghdad through the PMC, which oversees PMF forces, while others received assistance from the KRG. Representatives of religious minority groups, such as Yezidi and Sabeen-Mandean parliamentarians, continued to state they sought a role in their own security and had requested government support to create armed groups from their own communities. Others asked to join regular law enforcement units, but by year’s end, none had done so because the government had not implemented a recruitment process.

In October 2020, the central government and KRG reached an agreement on cooperation with the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq on a framework for the security and political administration of Sinjar District, as well as forming a joint committee from the central government and KRG to reconstruct Sinjar with the local administration of Ninewa Province. Yezidi leaders and community members criticized the agreement, saying they did not have enough involvement in the negotiations and remained apprehensive about the progress of implementation. On July 18, former Ninewa Provincial Council Speaker Sedo Jato and a Yezidi MP representing the KDP in Sinjar said, “Ten months after signing the Sinjar Agreement between the Iraqi government and IKR government under UN supervision, only one aspect of the agreement has been implemented: recruiting new Yezidi and Arab residents into the Sinjar police.” Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Iraq Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert characterized the implementation as “slow” in an August 30 statement and called on the central government, KRG, and concerned parties in Sinjar to be more serious in implementing the agreement because it was in the best interest of the residents of Sinjar District, Ninewa Province, and of all Iraqis. On August 30, National Security Adviser Qassem al-Araji announced that the government had formed a security force for Sinjar District in northern Ninewa Province composed of 2,500 local citizens, as required by the Sinjar Agreement. According to the head of the Sinjar Council, Falah Hassan, however, the force had not yet deployed as of year’s end. Yezidi leaders and activists 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.

In March, during the first papal visit to the country, Pope Francis met with Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani and conducted Christian and interfaith ceremonies in Baghdad, Mosul, and the IKR. Christian and other religious and ethnic minority leaders stated the visit helped raise the profile of Christian issues in the country and the importance of its religious diversity. Prime Minister Kadhimi applauded Pope Francis’ visit as a great success and called on the Iraqi people and others to form a dialogue of understanding and tolerance. “The Pope’s message reached all over the world as he travelled with a heart full of hope in the beloved cities of Iraq. Our people’s message reached all the peoples of the earth,” Kadhimi said.

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, attached to the OPM, organized 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 (\$2,500) 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.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

According to Colonel Muhammad Khalil al-Baziin, the Salah al-Din Province police commander, on July 30, ISIS gunmen attacked a Sunni funeral gathering in the village of al-Boujili, in the town of Yathrib, in Salah al-Din Province, killing 10 civilians and three policemen, and wounding more than 40 others. According to family members of the victims, the PMF’s Shia-dominant AAH-associated 42nd Brigade was responsible for the attack, not ISIS.

On May 9, Yonan Youkhana, the school principal of Chelak village and a member of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, said dozens of families in majority-Christian Chelak village in Dohuk Province had fled their homes due to Turkish airstrikes on PKK units near the village. An international NGO, Christian Peacemaker Teams, reported in June that airstrikes injured civilians living in the border regions with Turkey, and more than 1,500 persons from 22 villages evacuated their villages.

According to Yezidi activists and officials, Yezidis continued to be afraid to return to Sinjar because of continuing Turkish airstrikes targeting the PKK that occurred in August, September, and December. In August, Turkish airstrikes targeted a public medical facility in Sinjar District used by Yezidi fighters affiliated with the PKK, a group also known as the People’s Protection Units or YBS, reportedly killing and wounding many Yezidi civilians. Another Turkish airstrike the same month targeted a vehicle reportedly belonging to the PKK inside the city of Sinjar (west of Ninewa Province), killing YBS leader Saeed Husain Saeed and two of his companions and injuring two others. On September 3, security sources said a Turkish airstrike targeted a YBS checkpoint near Sinjar Mountain in Sinjar District, wounding a YBS member. Yezidis there protested the presence of the PKK and called

for its expulsion as a means of ending Turkish military operations in their district. On December 7, a Turkish airstrike in Khanasor killed a YBS commander, Marwan Badal. On December 11, a Turkish airstrike struck a YBS-linked building in Khanasor, with no casualties reported.

In January and May, 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 subject 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, although the KRG reported more than 400 persons had been kidnapped since the PKK took control of Sinjar in 2015.

On June 7, the head of the Yezidi Council in Sinjar, Falah Hasan, said two Yezidi Peshmerga fighters from Sinjar (deployed in Dohuk), Fero Merza Osman and Badal Amen Osman, went missing on June 6 while they were visiting their families in the Khanasor housing complex in Sinjar District. Hasan said that according to their families, the PKK captured both of them. Haidar Shasho, commander of the Yezidkhan Protection Forces (Yezidi Peshmerga), said he assumed that the PKK had taken the men for political reasons, as part of the PKK’s conflict with the KDP.

In October, head of the Iraqi Turkoman Front Hasan Toran reported that the PKK continued to recruit Turkomans from Telafar. He said that although these newly recruited PKK members were not very active, they received \$300-\$500 in salary monthly. According to Turkoman sources, PKK Shia Turkoman 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 Turkomans.

In a July 4 statement, Sinjar Mayor Mahma Khalil, a Yezidi affiliated with the KDP, accused the PKK of stealing from Yezidi farmers and business owners in Sinjar, in addition to conducting kidnappings.

The AAH militia built an office in Bartella. Reportedly, the 50th “Babylon” Brigade in Batnaya and Tal Kayf continued to control the local real estate market, selling land to non-Christians from outside the district, granting questionable security approvals, and taking bribes, as well as continuing to control trade routes in the Ninewa Plain through checkpoints, forcing Christian merchants to pay bribes to gain access.

During the year, officials found at least 10 mass graves containing victims of al-Qa’ida, ISIS, and the Baathist regime, with more than 210 discovered since 2003. On June 2, the Director General of the Department of Victims of Terrorism and Military Operations in the GOI’s Martyrs Foundation, Tariq al-Mandalawi, announced that the Department of Mass Graves had opened more than 203 of these graves since 2003, many of them in Salah al-Din, Najaf, Karbala, Samawah, and Ninewa, and on the outskirts of Baghdad. He added that work was underway in cooperation with international teams to document the bodies and examine them in the Ministry of Health to compare DNA results of the remains with families. According to UNITAD, work with international teams to exhume and identify the remains would likely take years.

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 90 mass graves, 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 since 2014. Of these, they had exhumed 17, each containing the remains of three to 25 individuals. On January 13, the official spokesman for the Council of Notables of Iraq and Salah al-Din Province, Tami al-Majma’i, said a mass grave was found in Ishaqi District, south of Salah al-Din, containing more than 50 bodies. Al-Majma’i accused AAH-affiliated militias that controlled the area after its liberation from ISIS of being behind the disappearances of residents. On May 29, the director of the Mass Graves Affairs and Protection Department in the central government’s Martyrs Foundation, Diaa al-Saadi, said his department had begun excavating a mass grave containing the remains of 600 victims of ISIS in Mosul. On June 6, the GOI’s Martyrs Foundation announced the discovery of a new mass grave in the eastern province of Diyala containing mostly Shia victims of the Baath regime. On September 10, security forces discovered a mass grave of Sunni ISIS victims in Heet District of Anbar Province, in the west of the country. The Kocho community of Sinjar, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Nadia Murad’s hometown, reburied 41 Yezidi victims (26 men and 15 women) of the ISIS massacre of their town identified from mass grave exhumations on December 9. The reburial was the second in Kocho, the first being in February for 104 victims.

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, mainly by pro-Iran Shia militias, 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 abuses. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

The KRG reported that ISIS forces killed one Kaka’i during the year and that there were several attacks and raids of villages in the territories whose control is disputed by the national government and the KRG. Although Kaka’i human rights activists did not report any serious attacks by ISIS during the year, they said fear of future attacks and a feeling of general insecurity caused Kaka’i members to evacuate several towns in Diyala and Kirkuk Provinces.

Sources in the Yazidi community estimated the number of children born of Yazidi mothers and ISIS fathers ranged from several dozen to several hundred. Yazidi leaders said societal stigma made it difficult to obtain accurate numbers. According to Yazidi sources, Yazidi leaders had excommunicated some Yazidi women who had children born of sexual violence by Muslim men when the women were captives of ISIS. Due to the position of Yazidi leaders and many in the community that children born of rape were neither welcomed nor recognized as Yazidis, also the case under Iraqi law, many female Yazidi survivors of ISIS said they were compelled to leave their children in orphanages in Syria or Iraq so they could rejoin their community. According to Yazidi sources, these children were also under threat of honor and retribution killings. Many Yazidis feared that the children would grow up radicalized due to the possibility of their exposure to radicalization in IDP camps or informal settlement areas and because they had experienced rejection. Some of the women said they preferred to stay in the camps' harsh environment with their children rather than leave them behind.

On June 8, a delegation of primarily Sunni faculty from the University of Ninewa College of Law visited Yazidi IDPs living in the Shariya camp in Dohuk Province to observe conditions and provide moral support as a gesture of Sunni solidarity with the Yazidis after 400 tents burned down. On June 14, the General Secretariat of the Imam Hussein Holy Shrine announced the dispatch of relief materials to Yazidi IDP families in Shariya camp, at the direction of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Sheikh Abdul-Mahdi al-Karbalai.

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

On November 28, Maysan police reported an individual threw an improvised explosive device at a Christian family house in Maysan Province, Amara City, causing material losses but no casualties. According to press reports, the family had a liquor license and sold alcohol from their house. Maysan Province police issued a statement saying the reason for the attack was not to affect demographic change or based on ethnic grounds, but rather due to commercial rivalry. On November 29, Namer Slewa the Christian owner of the house, told media that unlicensed but influential Muslim alcohol sellers planned the attack to run Slewa out of business. According to Slewa, this was the third time the same business rivals had attacked him, adding that on one occasion, they injured his employees.

On October 19, Basher Shemoon, a Christian member of the Ninewa Plain elders' council, reported that Shabak Shia had raised religious banners and pictures throughout the city of Bartella, including on the ancient Christian Church of the 40 Martyrs, blocking all the streets inside the city. He said the actions were part of an effort to intimidate Christian residents during a Shia ceremony.

In October, head of the interreligious Masarat Foundation for Cultural and Media Development Saad Salloum said institutes training religious leaders and journalists had begun using a curriculum focused on understanding the country's different religions as part of a three-year pilot program prior to the curriculum's adoption for use in public schools. Salloum said the Masarat Foundation was also establishing a news agency dedicated to diversity publications and that the foundation's research on hate speech had revealed an overall reduction of such speech against minorities. The foundation was created in 2020 with the goal of developing a special curriculum for understanding different religions in the country, to be taught through the Iraqi Institute for Religious Diversity. Founded by religious leaders, academics, and civil society activists in 2019, the Iraqi Institute for Religious Diversity continued to develop curricula on Christianity, Yazidism, Sabean-Mandeanism, Judaism, the Baha'i Faith, Zoroastrianism, and Kaka'ism.

In a lecture posted on YouTube on April 10, Shia scholar Sheikh Saad al-Mudaris said, "Jews are pleased with Charles Darwin's theory that mankind is descended from apes, since this removes their shame of being descendants of those whom Allah had turned into apes and pigs." He said Jews spread Darwinism around the world and that they used their money to force universities and institutes to spread the theory.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The embassy 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 Kadhimi. Issues raised included the presence of undisciplined armed groups in minority areas 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 officials continued to meet regularly with national and regional ministries of education, justice, labor, and social affairs, and the Iraqi High

Commission for Human Rights. 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 used 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 bilateral Strategic Dialogue held in Washington, D.C. in July provided additional opportunities to advance religious freedom and highlight the need for outreach to the country’s vulnerable religious and ethnic minority communities. In October, the Department of State signed a statement authored by the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance expressing support for missing Yazidi women and children.

Embassy efforts 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 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 Yazidis, the KRG, the central government, and other organizations and groups to coordinate efforts to ensure that exhumations of Yazidi 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 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, the Consul General in Erbil, and other senior embassy officials made regular visits to minority areas 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. Embassy officials also met with Yazidi, Christian, Shabak, Turkoman, Jewish, Sabeen-Mandean, Kaka’i, Baha’i, Zoroastrian, and other religious and minority leaders to encourage reconciliation within their communities. 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. For example, the embassy and consulate general supported a virtual reality exhibition in Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, Dohuk, and Baghdad, and at the COR to raise awareness of ISIS crimes against religious and ethnic minority communities in Sinjar.

In the Ninewa Plain and Sinjar, U.S. government officials and staff worked with an additional 47 local organizations, including many faith-based organizations, 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 U.S. government awarded \$1 million 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. The embassy funded efforts to help Yazidi 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 expanded programs in the Ninewa Plain that 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 about coordinating international assistance to IDPs and recent returnees to address problems identified by members of religious groups.

In September, the U.S. government returned to the Republic of Iraq a rare cuneiform tablet bearing a portion of the Epic of Gilgamesh, a Sumerian poem with religious themes considered one of the world’s oldest works of literature. On September 23, the Smithsonian Institution’s Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C held a repatriation ceremony for the tablet, with Department of State officials in attendance.

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