



[Print Friendly Version]

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

[Home](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [FOIA](#) | [Privacy Notice](#) | [Archive](#) | [Search](#)

[About the State Department](#) | [Press & Public Affairs](#) | [Travel & Living Abroad](#)
[Countries & Regions](#) | [International Topics & Issues](#) | [History, Education & Culture](#)
[Business Center](#) | [Other Services](#) | [Employment](#)

Iraq



International Religious Freedom Report

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
 October 2001

The Interim Constitution provides for individual freedom of religion, provided that it does not violate "morality and public order;" however, the Government severely limits freedom of religion in practice, represses the Shi'a religious leadership, and seeks to exploit religious differences for political purposes. Islam is the official state religion.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Although Shi'a Arabs are the largest religious group, Sunni Arabs traditionally have dominated economic and political life. Sunni Arabs are at a distinct advantage in all areas of secular life. The Government also severely restricts or bans outright many Shi'a religious practices. The Government for decades has conducted a brutal campaign of murder, summary execution, arbitrary arrest, and protracted detention against the religious leaders and followers of the majority Shi'a Muslim population and has sought to undermine the identity of minority Christian (Assyrian and Chaldean) and Yazidi groups. The regime systematically has killed senior Shi'a clerics, desecrated Shi'a mosques and holy sites, interfered with Shi'a religious education, and prevented Shi'a adherents from performing their religious rites.

Shi'a Arabs, the religious majority of the population, have long been disadvantaged economically, politically, and socially. Christians in the country report being victimized by intra-Kurdish fighting.

The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iraq and thus is unable to raise directly with the Government the problems of severe restrictions on religious freedom and other human rights abuses. However, the U.S. Government makes its position clear in public statements and in diplomatic contacts with other states.

In 1999 and 2000, the Secretary of State designated Iraq a country of particular concern under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

While a precise statistical breakdown is impossible to ascertain because of likely inaccuracies in the latest census (conducted in 1997), according to best estimates, 97 percent of the population of 22 million persons are Muslim. Shi'a Muslims--predominantly Arab, but also including Turkoman, Faili Kurds, and other groups--constitute a 60 to 65 percent majority. Sunni Muslims make up 32 to 37 percent of the population (approximately 18 to 20 percent are Sunni Kurds, 12 to 15 percent Sunni Arabs, and the remainder are Sunni Turkomen). The remaining approximately 3 percent of the overall population consist of Christians (Assyrians, Chaldeans, Roman Catholics, and Armenians), Yazidis, Mandaean, and a small number of Jews.

The Shi'a, though predominantly located in the south, also are present in large numbers in Baghdad and have communities in most parts of the country. Sunnis form the majority in the center of the country and in the north.

Shi'a and Sunni Arabs are not ethnically distinct. Shi'a Arabs have supported an independent Iraq alongside their Sunni brethren since the 1920 Revolt; many Shi'a joined the Ba'ath Party and the Shi'a formed the backbone of the Iraqi Army in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War.

Assyrians and Chaldeans are considered by many to be distinct ethnic groups as well as the descendants of some of the earliest Christian communities. These communities speak a distinct language (Syriac). Although these groups do not define themselves as Arabs, the Government defines Assyrians and Chaldeans as such, evidently to encourage them to identify with the Sunni-Arab dominated regime. Christians are concentrated in the north and in Baghdad.

The Yazidis are a syncretistic religious group (or a set of several groups). Many Yazidis consider themselves to be ethnically Kurdish, though some would define themselves as both religiously and ethnically distinct from Muslim Kurds. However, the Government, without any historical basis, has defined the Yazidis as Arabs. Yazidis predominately reside in the north of the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Interim Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government severely restricts this right in practice. Islam is the official state religion. The Constitution does not provide for the recognition of Assyrians, Chaldeans, or Yazidis.

The Government's registration requirements for religious organizations are unknown. New political parties must be based in Baghdad and are prohibited from having any ethnic or religious character. The Government does not recognize political organizations that have been formed by Shi'a Muslims or Assyrian Christians. These groups continued to attract support despite their illegal status. There are religious qualifications for government office; candidates for the National Assembly, for example, "must believe in God."

There are no Shari'a (Islamic law) courts as such. Civil courts are empowered to administer Islamic law in cases involving personal status, such as divorce and inheritance.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Although Shi'a Arabs are the largest religious group, Sunni Arabs traditionally have dominated economic and political life. Sunni Arabs are at a distinct advantage in all areas of secular life, be it civil, political, military, or economic.

The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs monitors places of worship, appoints the clergy, approves the building and repair of all places of worship, and approves the publication of all religious literature.

The following government restrictions on religious rights remained in effect throughout the period covered by this report: restrictions and outright bans on communal Friday prayer by Shi'a; restrictions on Shi'a mosque libraries loaning books; a ban on the broadcast of Shi'a programs on government-controlled radio or television; a ban on the publication of Shi'a books, including prayer books and guides; a ban on many funeral processions other than those organized by the Government; a ban on other Shi'a funeral observances such as gatherings for Koran reading; and the prohibition of certain processions and public meetings commemorating Shi'a holy days.

Shi'a groups report capturing documents from the security services during the 1991 uprising that listed thousands of forbidden Shi'a religious writings. Since 1991 security forces have been encamped in the shrine to Imam Ali in Najaf, one of Shi'a Islam's holiest sites, and at the city's Shi'a theological schools. The shrine was closed for "repairs" for approximately 2 years after the 1991 uprising. The adjoining al-Khathra mosque, which also was closed in 1994, has remained closed since. The closure coincided with the death of Ayatollah Sayed Mohammed Taqi al-Khoei who was killed in what observers believe was a staged car accident; before his death, Ayatollah al-Khoei led prayers in the al-Khathra mosque.

During the period covered by this report, the U.N. Special Rapporteur reported that, according to Shi'a religious dignitaries in Iran, the Government continues to arrest Shi'a religious figures, disrupt Shi'a religious ceremonies—sometimes with armed force—and places restrictions on practices by most Shi'a religious leaders. As a consequence, the number of religious scholars, students, and other dignitaries in the seminaries reportedly has declined.

In June 1999, several Shi'a opposition groups reported that the Government had instituted a program in the predominantly Shi'a districts of Baghdad that uses food ration cards to restrict where individuals may pray. The ration cards, part of the U.N. oil-for-food program, reportedly are checked when the bearer enters a mosque and are printed with a notice of severe penalties for those who attempt to pray at an unauthorized location. Shi'a expatriates who reported this policy believe that it is aimed not only at preventing unauthorized religious gatherings of Shi'a, but at stopping Shi'a adherents from attending Friday prayers in Sunni mosques, a practice that many pious Shi'a have turned to because their own mosques remain closed.

The Government consistently politicizes and interferes with religious pilgrimages, both of Iraqi Muslims who wish to make the Hajj to Mecca and Medina and of Iraqi and non-Iraqi Muslim pilgrims who travel to holy sites within the country. For example, in 1998 the U.N. Sanctions Committee offered to disburse vouchers for travel and expenses to pilgrims making the Hajj; however, the Government rejected this offer. In 1999 the Sanctions Committee offered to disburse funds to cover Hajj-related expenses via a neutral third party; the Government again rejected the offer. Following the December 1999 passage of U.N. Security Council

Resolution 1284, the Sanctions Committee again sought to devise a protocol to facilitate the payment for individuals making the journey. The Sanctions Committee proposed to issue \$250 in cash and \$1,750 in travelers checks to each individual pilgrim to be distributed at the U.N. office in Baghdad in the presence of both U.N. and Iraqi officials. The Government again declined and, consequently, no Iraqi pilgrims were able to take advantage of the available funds or, in 2000, of the permitted flights.

Twice each year—on the 10th day of the Muslim month of Muharram and 40 days later in the month of Safar—Shi'a pilgrims from throughout the country and around the world seek to commemorate the death of the Imam Hussein in the city of Karbala. In past years, the Government has denied visas to many foreign pilgrims for the Ashura. For example, in 1999 the Government reportedly charged foreign Shi'a pilgrims \$900 for bus passage and food from Damascus to Karbala, a trip that normally would cost about \$150.

The Government does not permit education in languages other than Arabic and Kurdish. Public instruction in Syriac, which was announced under a 1972 decree, never was implemented. Thus, in areas under government control, Assyrian and Chaldean children are not permitted to attend classes in Syriac.

In northern areas under Iraqi Kurdish control, classes in Syriac have been permitted since the 1991 uprising against the Government. By October 1998, the first groups of students were ready to begin secondary school in Syriac in the north, but some Assyrian sources reported that regional Iraqi Kurdish authorities refused to allow the classes to begin. Details of this practice (for example, the number of students prepared to start secondary courses in Syriac and the towns where they were located) were not available, and Kurdish regional authorities denied engaging in this practice. There were no reports of elementary school instruction in Syriac being hindered in the north of the country.

Assyrian religious organizations have claimed that the Government applies apostasy laws in a discriminatory fashion. Assyrians are permitted to convert to Islam, whereas Muslims are forbidden to convert to Christianity.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government for decades has conducted a brutal campaign of murder, summary execution, and protracted arbitrary arrest against the religious leaders and followers of the majority Shi'a Muslim population and has sought to undermine the identity of minority Christian (Assyrian and Chaldean) and Yazidi groups.

Despite supposed legal protection of religious equality, the regime has repressed severely the Shi'a clergy and those who follow the Shi'a faith. Forces from the Intelligence Service (Mukhabarat), General Security (Amn al-Amm), the Military Bureau, Saddam's Commandos (Fedayeen Saddam), and the Ba'ath Party have killed senior Shi'a clerics, desecrated Shi'a mosques and holy sites (particularly in the aftermath of the 1991 civil uprising), arrested tens of thousands of Shi'a, interfered with Shi'a religious education, prevented Shi'a adherents from performing their religious rites, and fired upon or arrested Shi'a who sought to take part in their religious processions. Security agents reportedly are stationed at all the major Shi'a mosques and shrines and search, harass, and arbitrarily arrest worshippers.

Shi'a groups reported numerous instances of religious scholars—particularly in the internationally renowned Shi'a academic center of Najaf—being subjected to arrest, assault, and harassment during the period covered by this report. This follows years of government manipulation of the Najaf theological schools. As reported by Amnesty International in the late 1970's and early 1980's, the Government systematically deported tens of thousands of Shi'a (both Arabs and Kurds) to Iran, claiming falsely that they were of Persian descent. According to Shi'a sources, religious scholars and Shi'a merchants who supported the schools financially were prime targets for deportation. In the 1980's, during the Iran-Iraq war, it was reported widely that the Government expelled and denied visas to thousands of foreign scholars who wished to study at Najaf. After the 1991 popular uprising, the Government relaxed some restrictions on Shi'a attending the schools; however, this easing of restrictions was followed by an increased government repression of the Shi'a religious establishment, including the requirement that speeches by imams in mosques be based upon government-provided material that attacked fundamentalist trends.

Since the 1980's, the Government reportedly has attempted to eliminate the senior Shi'a religious leadership (the Mirjaiyat) through killings, disappearances, and summary executions.

Since January 1998, the killings of three internationally respected clerics and an attempt on the life of a fourth have been attributed widely to government agents by international human rights activists, other governments, and Shi'a clergy in Iran and Lebanon. Grand Ayatollah Sheikh Murtada al-Borojoudi, age 69, was killed in April 1998. Grand Ayatollah Sheikh Mirza Ali al-Gharawi, age 68, was killed in July 1998. Ayatollah Sheikh Bashir al-Hussaini escaped an attempt on his life in January 1999. Grand Ayatollah Mohammad al-Sadr, age 66, was killed in February 1999. Former U.N. Human Rights Commission Special Rapporteur for Iraq, Max Van Der Stoel, sent a letter in 1999 to the Government expressing his concern that the killings might be part of an organized attack by the Government against the independent leadership of the Shi'a community. The Government has not responded to Van Der Stoel's inquiries.

In the aftermath of these killings, the Government increased repressive activities in the south and in other predominantly Shi'a areas to prevent mourning observances and popular demonstrations. As part of this campaign, two Shi'a scholars in Baghdad, Sheikh Hussain Suwa'idawi, and Sheikh Ali al-Fraijawi, reportedly were executed in July 1998.

In April 1999, the Government executed four Shi'a men for the al-Sadr slaying after a closed trial. Shi'a religious authorities and opposition groups objected to the trial process and contend that the four executed men were innocent. At least one of the four, Sheikh Abdul Hassan Abbas Kufi, a prayer leader in Najaf, reportedly was in prison at the time of the killing. The Shi'a press reported in January 1999 that he had been arrested on December 24, 1998. The three others executed with Kufi were Islamic scholar Ahmad Mustapha Hassan Ardabili, Ali Kathim Mahjan, and Haider Ali Hussain. The status of Ali al-Musawi, another Shi'a cleric accused of complicity in al-Sadr's death, still is unknown. According to a report submitted to the Special Rapporteur in September 1999, another of al-Sadr's sons, Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr, was arrested along with a large number of theological students who had studied under the Ayatollah. Nineteen followers of al-Sadr reportedly were executed toward the end of 1999, including Sheikh Muhammad al-Numani, Friday imam Sheikh Abd-al-Razzaq al-Rabi'i, assistant Friday imam Kazim al-Safi, and students from a religious seminary in Najaf.

Although a funeral for al-Sadr was prohibited, spontaneous gatherings of mourners took place in the days after his death. Government security forces used excessive force in breaking up these illegal religious gatherings. Throughout the country, security forces used automatic weapons and armored vehicles to break up demonstrations, killing, injuring, and arresting hundreds of protesters.

Authorities have targeted suspected supporters of al-Sadr since he was killed in 1999. In February 2000, 30 Najaf religious school students, who were arrested after al-Sadr's death, reportedly were executed. In March 2000, scores of Shi'a who fled the country in 1999 and early 2000 told Human Rights Watch that they had been interrogated repeatedly and, in some cases, detained and tortured. Some were relatives of al-Sadr's students who had been arrested after the killing, and others were relatives of other prominent clerics. In May 2000, according to Human Rights Watch, at least six religious students in Najaf who were arrested after al-Sadr's killing were sentenced to death, including Shaikh Salim Jassem al-Abbudi, Shaikh Nasser al-Saa'idi and Sa'ad al-Nuri. Two clerics, Abdulsattar Abed-Ibrahim al-Mausawi and Ahmad al-Hashemi, reportedly were executed in May 2000 after 6 months' detention. The Government accused them of attempting to discredit the President after they blamed Saddam Hussein for the al-Sadr's killing. In late 1999 and early 2000, approximately 4,000 Shi'a families were expelled from Baghdad and sent to southern and western Iraq in reprisal for the disturbances that took place after al-Sadr's death.

Authorities took forceful preemptive measures well ahead of the first anniversary of al-Sadr's killing. Military units were deployed around shrines, mosques, and other religious institutions 2 months before the February anniversary. The Government closed mosques except during prayer time, and the turnout on the holy day of Ashura in April 2001 consequently was many times lower than it had been in the past. In late May 2001, the Ba'ath party reportedly issued orders prohibiting the ritual walking pilgrimage from Najaf to Karbala, a procession marking the end of the 40-day mourning period for Imam Husayn. Travelers reported that security troops opened fire on pilgrims who attempted the pilgrimage.

In the aftermath of the al-Sadr killing and subsequent repression, the Shi'a religious community remains in a precarious state. Of the three generally acknowledged senior Shi'a clerics, Ayatollah Ali as-Sistani is forbidden to lead prayers and remains under virtual house arrest in Najaf as a result of attempts on his life; Ayatollah Mohammed Sayeed al-Hakim is forbidden to lead prayers at the shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf (or in the adjoining al-Khathra mosque, which has remained closed since 1994); and the status of Ayatollah Hussein Bahr al-Aloom, who was arrested in 1991, reportedly died under questionable circumstances in June 2001. Many scholars at the Shi'a religious schools in Najaf reportedly have been arrested, as have many of al-Sadr's religious appointees throughout the country. These restrictions and abuses had an adverse effect on the development of a new set of Shi'a leaders.

The al-Sadr killing intensified Shi'a anger at the ruling Sunni minority and led to more severe government repression of the Shi'a. The Shi'a resistance also launched bolder actions against the regime—including grenade and rocket attacks on security headquarters, Ba'ath Party offices, and presidential residences in Baghdad, as well as small arms attacks in many parts of the capital. For example, the al-Amin, Nuwab ad-Dubbat, and al-Nafth districts of Baghdad reportedly have remained in a heightened state of alert every Friday since al-Sadr's death.

Reports of military operations against Shi'a civilians also increased notably in the summer of 1998 after the killings of Ayatollahs Ali al-Gharawi and Sheikh al-Borojouri. In numerous incidents during 1998, security forces injured and summarily executed Shi'a civilians, burned Shi'a homes, confiscated land belonging to Shi'a, and arbitrarily arrested and detained scores of Shi'a.

In January 1999, according to a report from the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), security officials reportedly arrested Sheikh Awas, imam of the Nasiriyah city mosque. Shortly after the arrest of Sheikh Awas, hundreds of Shi'a congregation members reportedly marched on the security directorate to

persons; however, many observers reportedly witnessed their arrests. Over the years, hundreds of thousands of persons have disappeared, and their whereabouts remain unknown. The majority of those targeted have been Shi'a Muslims and Kurds.

The former Special Rapporteur and others have reported that the Government has engaged in various abuses against the country's 350,000 Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, especially in terms of forced movements from northern areas and repression of political rights.

Most Assyrians live in the northern governorates, and the Government often has suspected them of "collaborating" with Iraqi Kurds. In the north, Kurdish groups often refer to Assyrians as Kurdish Christians. Military forces destroyed numerous Assyrian churches during the 1988 Anfal Campaign and reportedly executed and tortured many Assyrians. Both major Kurdish political parties have indicated that the Government occasionally targets Assyrians as well as ethnic Kurds and Turkomen for expulsion from Kirkuk, where it is seeking to Arabize the city.

There is evidence that the Government in the past compelled Yazidis to join in domestic military action against Muslim Kurds. Captured government documents included in a 1998 Human Rights Watch report describe special all-Yazidi military detachments formed during the 1988-89 Anfal campaign to "pursue and attack" Muslim Kurds. The Government also has targeted the Yazidis in the past. For example, 33 members of the Yazidi community of Mosul, arrested in July 1996, still are unaccounted for.

Although few Jews remain in the country, government officials frequently make anti-Semitic statements. For example, during the period covered by this report, a Ba'th Party official stated that "lowly Jews" were "descendants of monkeys and pigs and worshipers of the infidel tyrant."

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The country's cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity is not reflected in its political and economic structure. Various segments of the Sunni Arab community, which itself constitutes a minority of the population, effectively have controlled the Government since independence in 1932.

Shi'a Arabs, the religious majority of the population, have long been disadvantaged economically, politically, and socially.

Assyrian groups reported several instances of mob violence by Muslims against Christians in the north in recent years. Assyrians continue to fear attacks by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a Turkish-based terrorist organization operating against indigenous Kurds in the north of the country. Christians in the country report being victimized by intra-Kurdish fighting. Some Assyrian villagers have reported being pressured to leave the countryside for the cities as part of a campaign by indigenous Kurdish forces to deny the PKK access to possible food supplies.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iraq and thus is not able to raise directly with the Government the problems of severe restrictions on religious freedom and other human rights abuses. However, the U.S. Government makes its position clear in public statements and in diplomatic contacts with other states.

During the period covered by this report, the President regularly discussed the problems experienced by Shi'a, Christian, and other religious groups in his periodic reports to Congress on Iraq. The Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, in testimony before Congress on Iraq, highlighted the situation of persons in the south. In a number of speeches delivered during the period covered by this report, the Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues articulated the regime's crimes against humanity directed at the Shi'a population. The State Department spokesperson issued statements criticizing the deaths of Ayatollahs

al-Gharawi, al-Borojoudi, al-Sadr, and the attempt on the life of Ayatollah al-Hussaini. The Voice of America broadcast several editorials dealing with the human rights abuses committed against religious groups by the Government.

It is the policy of the United States to encourage a change of regime in Iraq. The United States government is in frequent contact with opposition groups, including religiously oriented Shi'a, Sunni, and Christian groups.

In March 2001, for the ninth consecutive year, the United States joined other members of the U.N. Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) to call on the U.N. Secretary General to send human rights monitors to "help in the independent verification of reports on the human rights situation in Iraq." However, the Government continued to ignore these calls. As in the past, it did not allow the U.N. Special Rapporteur to visit, nor did it respond to his requests for information. Denied entry to the country, the Special Rapporteur has based his reports on the Government's human rights abuses on interviews with recent émigrés from the country, interviews with opposition groups with contacts in the country, and other interviews, as well as on published reports.

In 1999 and 2000, then-Secretary of State Albright designated Iraq a country of particular concern under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

[End]

Released on October 26, 2001

International Religious Freedom Report Home Page

This site is managed by the Bureau of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

