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IRAQ 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes Islam as the official religion and states 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, Yezidis, and Sabeen-Mandean, but does not explicitly mention followers of other religions or atheists. Restrictions on freedom of religion as well as violence against and harassment of minority groups committed by government security forces (ISF) remained widespread outside the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), according to religious leaders and representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Predominantly Sunni provinces, such as Anbar, Salah al-Din, Kirkuk, and Ninawa, reported fewer security incidents compared with 2018 and 2019. In September, a Sunni Muslim parliamentarian from Diyala Province said government-affiliated Shia militia continued to forcibly displace Sunnis in his province, leading to widespread demographic change along the Iraq-Iran border. Yezidis, 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. Christians said the PMF continued to control territory in Christian areas and trade routes in the Ninawa Plain, and militias reportedly coerced Christians to pay bribes to pass through PMF checkpoints. In August, former parliamentarian Kamil al-Ghurawi, a Sunni from Baghdad, accused government-affiliated Shia militia groups of forcibly displacing Sunni residents in al-Madain District on the outskirts of Baghdad and attempting to alter the district’s demography. According to the Kurdistan Regional Government’s (KRG) Yezidi Rescue Coordinating Office, 2,874 Yezidis remained missing following ISIS’s assault on northern Iraq in 2014. Representatives of minority religious communities said that despite occasional harassment from local authorities, the central government generally did not interfere with religious observances by members of minority groups.

According to multiple sources in Khanaqin, ISIS attacks in May and June on several Kaka’i villages wounded and killed a total of 13 persons. In June, the director of the Kaka’i-affiliated Chraw Organization for Documentation reported that attacks of this kind were not isolated and were increasing. The central government’s Martyrs Foundation announced in March that 18 additional mass graves had been discovered throughout the country, marking more than 200 such graves discovered since 2017; they contained victims of al-Qa’ida, ISIS, and the

Baathist regime, with some remains dating back decades. Two additional mass graves were discovered in Sinjar District during the year. In October, forensic teams, with support from the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Daesh/ISIL (UNITAD), began the exhumation of the last of 17 mass graves in Kocho and began work at a site at Solagh, known as the “Grave of Mothers,” where ISIS killed dozens of Yezidi women considered too old to be sold into sexual slavery. The Yezidi community in Sinjar District reported in August that the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) had kidnapped hundreds of Yezidi children with the aim of recruiting them in the years since ISIS was defeated in Sinjar in 2015 and that 70 children were still missing.

In July, the Roman Catholic Church-affiliated organization Aid to the Church in Need released a report stating that the country’s Christian community faced “extinction” and that 87 percent of Christians living in the Ninewa Plain reported feeling a lack of security “remarkably” or “very much.” According to media and human rights organizations, societal violence perpetrated by sectarian armed groups, mainly pro-Iran Shia militias, continued, although there were no reports of religiously based violence in the IKR. Members of non-Muslim minority groups reported abductions, threats, pressure, and harassment to force them to observe Islamic customs. Christian priests, including Father Yaqoub al-Saedy of the Syriac Orthodox Church and Father Bihnam Banoqa of the Syriac Catholic Church, both located in Bartella, and said they received threats from Iran-aligned Shabak individuals on social media after the priests sought the withdrawal of the Iranian-backed Shabak Shia PMF 30th Brigade. Interreligious entities, including the Masarat Foundation and the Iraqi Institute for Diversity, continued their work to promote respect for the country’s religious diversity, including through contributions of information on religious minority groups to school textbooks.

U.S. embassy officials raised religious freedom concerns at the highest levels in meetings with senior government officials, through interagency coordination groups, and in targeted assistance programs for stabilization projects. The bilateral strategic dialogue held in Washington, D.C. in August provided additional opportunities to highlight the need for outreach to the country’s vulnerable religious and ethnic minority communities. 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 religious minority groups. Embassy officials met with Shia, Sunni, 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 38.9 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to 2010 government statistics – the most recent available – 97 percent of the population is Muslim. Shia Muslims, predominantly Arabs but also including Turkoman, Faili (Shia) Kurds, and others, constitute 55 to 60 percent of the population. Sunni Muslims are approximately 40 percent of the 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-2002 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, Anglican, and other Protestants. There are approximately 2,000 registered members of evangelical Christian churches in the IKR, while an unknown number, mostly converts from Islam, practice secretly.

Yezidi leaders continue to report that most of the 400,000 to 500,000 Yezidis in the country reside in the north, with approximately 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. Estimates of the size of the Sabeen-Mandean community vary, but according to Sabeen-Mandean leaders, 10,000 to 15,000 members remain in Iraq, mainly in the south, with between 750 and 1,000 in the IKR and Baghdad. Armenian leaders report a population of approximately 7,000 Armenian Christians, both Armenian Apostolic Church (Armenian Orthodox) and Armenian Catholic. Baha'i leaders report fewer than 2,000 members, spread throughout the country in small groups, including approximately 500 in the IKR.

There are fewer than six adult members in the Baghdad Jewish community, according to a local Jewish community leader. In the IKR, there are approximately

80 Jewish families, according to the KRG international advocacy coordinator, although some Jewish families do not openly acknowledge their religion for fear of persecution, according to the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA) and NGO sources, and the number could be higher. According to the KRG MERA, there are approximately 60 Zoroastrian families in the IKR. Zoroastrian sources report there are approximately 20,000 to 25,000 Zoroastrians in 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 Governorates, compared with 1.5 million persons at the end of 2019. According to the KRG's Joint Crisis Coordination Center, there are approximately 700,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the IKR. Forty percent of IDPs throughout the country are Sunni Arabs, 30 percent Yezidis, 13 percent Kurds (of several religious affiliations), and 7 percent Christians. Other religious minorities comprise the remaining 10 percent.

According to the IOM, there were more than 205,000 IDPs in camps and approximately 104,000 in critical shelters throughout the country at year's end.

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,” but 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, Yezidis, and Sabean-Mandeans; it does not explicitly mention followers of other religions or atheists. The law prohibits the practice of the Baha'i Faith and prescribes 10 years' imprisonment for anyone practicing the Baha'i Faith. The KRG, however, does not enforce the federal ban on the Baha'i Faith and recognizes it as a religion, while in other parts of the country the law generally is not enforced.

The law prohibits “*takfiri*” organizations, such as 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.

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 non-Muslim women who are identified in their official documents as non-Muslims to marry Muslim men, but it prohibits Muslim women from marrying non-Muslims.

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, Yezidis, Sabeans-Mandeans, 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, with the exception of the Yezidis, 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, Yezidi, and Sabeans-Mandean 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.

The law does not specify penalties for the practice of unrecognized religious groups other than Baha’is – including Wahhabi Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Yarsanism; however, contracts signed by institutions of unrecognized religious groups are not legal or permissible as evidence in court.

Outside 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, Yezidism, Judaism, Sabean-Mandaism, Zoroastrianism, Yarsanism, and the Baha’i Faith.

According to the KRG MERA’s Directorate of Christian Affairs, there are 11 registered evangelical Christian and other Protestant churches in the IKR, several with multiple branches: Nahda al-Qadassa, Nasari Evangelical, Kurd-Zaman, Ashti Evangelical, Evangelical Free, Baptist Church of the Good Shepherd, al-Tasbih International Evangelical, Rasolia, the United Evangelical, Assemblies of God, and Seventh-day Adventist groups.

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.

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. The penal code criminalizes disrupting or impeding religious ceremonies and desecrating religious buildings. The penal code imposes up to three years’ imprisonment or a fine of 300 dinars (26 cents) for such crimes.

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 Sunni and Shia endowments accept Hajj applications from the public and submit them to the Supreme Council for the Hajj. The council, attached to the OPM, organizes a lottery to select pilgrims for official Hajj visas. Lottery winners pay differing amounts to the government for their visas prior to the Hajj depending on their mode of travel: 3.7 million dinars (\$3,300) for Hajj travel by land and 4.8 million dinars (\$4,200) for travel by air. In the IKR, the KRG MERA organizes Hajj and Umrah travel, administering a lottery to choose the pilgrims for official Hajj visas allotted to the IKR.

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.

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.” In the IKR, there are 49 Syriac- and 18 Turkoman-language schools.

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 Council of Representatives (COR) for passage.

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 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.

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, Sabeen-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, Sabeen-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.

By law, children with one parent who converts to Islam must be listed as Muslim on the application for the national identity card, even if the other parent is of another religion.

Civil laws provide a simple process for a non-Muslim to convert to Islam, but the law forbids conversion by a Muslim to another religion.

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 and gave up their citizenship under a 1950 law.

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, or religious or linguistic claims.”

The law reserves nine of the COR’s 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; one for a Sabeen-Mandean; one for an ethnic Shabak; and one for a Faili 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 minorities: five for Chaldeans, Syriacs, and Assyrians; five for Turkomans; and one for an Armenian.

The antiterrorism law defines terrorism as “every criminal act committed by an individual or an organized group that targeted an individual or a group of individuals or groups or official or unofficial institutions and caused damage to public or private properties, with the aim to disturb the peace, stability, and national unity or to bring about horror and fear among people and to create chaos to achieve terrorist goals.” Anyone found guilty under this law may be sentenced to death.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

International and local NGOs said the government continued to use the antiterrorism law as a pretext for detaining individuals 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. In July, parliamentarian and member of the Security and Defense Committee Mohammed al-Karbuli criticized the “random arrests of Sunnis in areas north of Baghdad.” Al-Karbuli said, “The security forces returned to committing past’s mistakes by arresting innocent people and terrorizing them.” According to al-Karbuli, more than 50 young Sunni men were arrested in those areas “in a humiliating manner and with false accusations.”

Yezidis, Christians, and local and international NGOs reported continued verbal harassment and physical abuse from members of the PMF, a state-sponsored organization composed of more than 50 mostly Shia militias originally formed to combat ISIS. 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. In October, Salah al-Din Province Police Commander Major General Qandil al-Jabouri said police had found eight bodies belonging to residents of al-Farhatiyeh Subdistrict of Balad District in Salah al-Din Province, out of 12 civilians who were kidnapped by an unidentified armed force; the whereabouts of the other four was unknown. According to the families of the victims, the 42nd Brigade of the PMF, tied to U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), was responsible for the killings and kidnappings.

In December, Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein stated that the country’s security situation had improved compared with previous years and that the government was making great efforts to return IDPs to their places of origin and to create a safe environment for them.

In September, parliamentarian Raad al-Dahlaki, a Sunni from Diyala Province, warned of continued forced displacement of Sunnis in Diyala by PMF forces or associated militias. Al-Dahlaki stated that government-affiliated Shia militia groups intimidated the Sunni population in the province, resulting in widespread demographic change along the border with Iran. Sunni parliamentarian Nahida al-Daini, also of Diyala Province, reported similar acts of intimidation.

Sources said some government officials continued to facilitate 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 Province and Babil Province, including Jurf al-Sakhar District. According to parliamentarian Rihan Hanna, a Christian from Kirkuk, the Iran-aligned Shabak PMF and the 50th (Babylon) PMF Brigades were making

demographic changes by facilitating and giving permission to Arab and Shabak Shia to move into Christian areas in the Ninewa Plain, while Christians refused to return to the area because they feared these forces. In August, former parliamentarian Kamil al-Ghurawi, a Sunni from Baghdad, accused government-affiliated Shia militia groups of forcibly displacing Sunni residents in the al-Madain District on the outskirts of Baghdad in order to make the district majority Shia.

In October, the administrator of the minorities' portfolio of the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights, Ammar Polos, said the forcible return of displaced Christians in Baghdad's Virgin Mary camp to the old city of Mosul, where their homes remain demolished and uninhabitable, amounted to a second displacement for Christians, adding, "We will not tolerate this measure." Also in October, Christian parliamentarian Yonadum Kanna said he rejected the forced return of IDPs, considering it another displacement, especially in the absence of the government's capabilities to reconstruct the IDPs' destroyed homes and the state's inability to provide employment opportunities and a decent standard of living for the IDPs.

Representatives of minority religious groups 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.

Christians continued to report abuse, harassment, and delays at numerous checkpoints operated by various PMF units, including the Shabak Shia-backed 30th Brigade in Bartella, impeding movement in and around several Christian towns on the Ninewa Plain. The AAH reportedly was building an office in Bartella, while the 50th "Babylon" Brigade in Batnaya and Tal Kayf reportedly controlled the local real estate market, selling land to non-Christians from outside the district, granting questionable security approvals, and taking bribes. The 30th Brigade also reportedly controlled trade routes in the Ninewa Plain through checkpoints, forcing Christian merchants to pay bribes to gain access. According to Father Behnam Benoka of the Syriac Catholic Church in the Bartella Subdistrict, on February 14, gunshots were heard near the construction site of the AAH office, after which the AAH closed the road in the area, inhabited mostly by Christians, and started investigating Christian families in the area. According to some of the families, AAH members were behind the shooting and sought to frighten Christians and convince them to leave the area.

According to Father Benoka, in July, four Christian women reported that Bartella's police commander, Ghazwan Ali Qasim (Arab Sunni), attempted to coerce them into prostitution based on their difficult economic situations. Benoka added that although the community had raised complaints about Qasim's conduct many times, the commander had been "promoted instead of being punished." According to Father Yaqob Saedy of the Syriac Orthodox Church, 30th PMF Brigade members assaulted two Christians in July when the pair tried to pass through Bartella's main checkpoint. Following an argument, Shabak PMF members forced the two Christians out of their car and beat them.

Christian religious leaders continued to publicly accuse the 30th Brigade of verbal harassment of Christians in Bartella and elsewhere in Hamdaniya District of Ninewa. Members of the Christian community in Bartella said the brigade's actions threatened their way of life and could change the area's demographics. Local residents also said militias continued to post pictures of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and former Quds Force Commander Qassim Suleimani, as well as of Iraqi militia leaders, such as AAH Secretary General Qais al-Khazali and former Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC) Chief of Staff Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, on shops in Bartella. They also stated that the 30th Brigade continued to disregard 2019 government orders to withdraw from checkpoints in the Ninewa Plain. Sources said Shabak members threatened priests, including Father Banoqa and Father al-Saedy, both in Bartella, on social media after the priests sought the withdrawal of the 30th Brigade. According to al-Saedy, "some parties" in the Ninewa Plain were trying to change the demography of the traditionally Christian city. Although al-Saedy did not specify which group, his statement drew condemnation from members of the Shabak community.

In August, Shia Shabaks raised Shia ritual banners in front of a historic church in Karmles Town, which Christians said was an act of provocation. Local sources said that as of year's end, two of six Shabak Sunni families had returned home after having left their homes in Bashiqa District in 2019 because the 30th Brigade had verbally harassed them and pressured them to sell part of their land.

Yezidi community leaders continued to report that Yezidi captives of ISIS who were repeatedly raped and bore children were forced 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. According to Yezidi journalist Khudar Domli, "What ISIS did to them by force, this [National Card] Act does by law." The Yezidi religion traditionally required a child to have two Yezidi parents to be

considered a member of the community. Sources in the community estimated the number of these children ranged from several dozen to several hundred. They said societal stigma made it difficult to obtain accurate numbers. Due to the position of Yezidi leaders and community on children born of rape, many Yezidi female survivors of ISIS said they were compelled to leave their children in orphanages in Syria or Iraq so they could rejoin their community. Some of the women preferred to stay in the camps' harsh environment with their children rather than leave them behind.

According to Zoroastrian leaders, after the Zoroastrian NGO Yasna opened a branch in Duhokin, Salafist Islamist groups criticized the Zoroastrian religion's practices and beliefs. According to one Zoroastrian representative, Zoroastrians in the IKR received death threats on social media from Salafists, who accused the Zoroastrian community of infidelity and incest. Zoroastrian leaders also 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.

During the year, the NGOs CAPNI for Humanitarian Aids in Iraq (CAPNI) and Hammurabi Human Rights Organization sought amendments to the national identification card law that requires minor children to be listed as Muslim on the identification application form if one parent converted to Islam. The NGOs said the law was a "flagrant violation" of the rights on non-Muslims in the country. During a conference in December, CAPNI representatives said non-Muslim religious groups requested the government amend the national identity card law so that minor children would continue to follow the original religion of their parents before one parent converted to Islam until they became adults and could decide for themselves.

According to Christian leaders, Christian families formally registered as Muslim but privately practicing Christianity or another faith continued to be forced to either register their children as Muslims or to have the children remain undocumented by federal authorities, denying them the ability to legally convert from Islam. Remaining undocumented affected the family's eligibility for government benefits, such as school enrollment and ration card allocation for basic food items, which depend on family size. Larger families with legally registered children received higher allotments than those with undocumented children.

Throughout the year, Hamdaniya District Mayor Essam Behnam said he continued to resist political pressure at both the federal and provincial levels to issue land

grants in Hamdaniya, Ninewa Province, to the families (mostly Shia Muslim) of PMF victims who fought ISIS.

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. During the year, the committee returned dozens of houses to their Christian owners. According to Christian parliamentarians, there was no similar committee to help return properties in Baghdad or other provinces. According to Christian parliamentarian Yonadum Kanna, he and other Christian leaders continued to work individually to help Christians return to their homes. During the year, he managed to return fewer than 10 homes to their original occupants, compared with 180 homes returned in 2019. According to Kanna, during the year, he received fewer complaints from Christians because the security situation had significantly improved following the defeat of ISIS. He also said there were also fewer complaints of confiscated homes being occupied by someone other than the original occupant. Kanna said he had worked with the Higher Judicial Council to place restrictions on selling or buying real estate owned by Christians, making it more difficult for militias or others to use falsified documents to assume ownership of Christian properties. In November, unknown gunmen attacked a lawyer working with the Chaldean Catholic Church in Baghdad working to return houses to members of the Christian community.

The KRG continued to actively support and fund the rescue of captured Yezidis and provide psychosocial support services at a center in Dohuk Province. By year's end, authorities in the KRG's Yezidi Rescue Coordinating Office reported 2,874 Yezidis, mainly women and children, were still missing both inside and outside the country, compared with up to 3,000 reported missing in 2019. According to the Yezidi Rescue Coordinating Office, during the 2014-2020 period, approximately 100,000 Yezidis left the country, mostly 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, compared with 150 in 2019. According to the KRG MERA, as of September 5, more than 3,543 Yezidis had escaped, been rescued, or released from ISIS captivity since 2014, compared with 2,500 through 2019. According to Shabak parliamentarian Qusay Abass (Ninewa, Shia) via a media statement in August, 233 Shabak individuals kidnapped by ISIS in 2014 were still missing. According to Ninewa Governorate's Advisor for Women's Affairs Sukina Ali (Shia Turkoman of Ninewa), 900 Shia and Sunni Turkomans kidnapped by ISIS were still missing at year's end.

According to some Yezidi sources, Yezidis in the IKR continued to experience discrimination when they refused to self-identify as Kurdish. They said only those Yezidis who identified publicly as Kurdish could obtain senior positions in the IKR leadership.

In some parts of the country, non-Muslim religious minorities, as well as Sunni and Shia in areas where they formed the minority, continued to face verbal harassment and restrictions from authorities. Sources reported that Shia militias and the Shia Endowment confiscated 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 Sunni mosques into PMF headquarters in other Sunni areas in the province. In Ninewa, the Sunni Endowment reported 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.

Some militias in Ninewa drew their ranks from local Yezidis and Christians but were 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 and 50th Brigades. According to Yezidi and Christian officials, some received 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 Sabean-Mandean parliamentarians, stated they needed to have 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 because the government had not implemented a recruitment process.

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.

The KRG and the central government continued to provide increased protection to Christian churches during the Easter and Christmas holidays. 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.

According to the Syriac Orthodox Parish of Mosul, in October, following a Ninewa court decision, Bishop Necedemos Dawod Sharf received 23 Syriac-language manuscripts that ISIS had stolen from the Tahera Church in the old city of Mosul. The manuscripts were part of a larger group of ancient manuscripts stolen in 2014.

In October, Yezidi NGOs in Sinjar reported that the PKK had seized control of local schools, transforming them into military camps and PKK indoctrination centers. In October, the Kurdish Directorate Deputy Manager in Sinjar, Shahab Ahmed, told media that the PKK had taken over a primary school in Sinjar City and transformed it into a military camp. Shahab said the PKK refused to leave the school and that his directorate had asked authorities in Ninewa to intercede. Despite the requests, the PKK refused to vacate these schools through year's end.

The KRG Council of Ministers issued an executive order establishing a high committee with representatives from the IKP, IKR Presidency, KRG Judicial Council, KRG Ministries of Justice, Agriculture, Municipality, and Finance, and the head of IKR's Independent Human Rights Commission to resolve outstanding land disputes affecting Christian communities. According to committee members, by year's end, the committee had not taken any concrete steps.

In November, Christian sources reported the ISF had seized Christians' houses in Talkayf District, Ninewa Province, and repurposed them as military barracks. The sources also reported that the ISF continued to use a youth center as a jail for ISIS prisoners in Talkayf, intimidating Christians in the district. In November, Mayor of Talkayf District Bassim Balo said civilians were concerned about the possibility that ISIS forces might attempt to break into the jail and free the ISIS detainees. He said some Christians had decided to leave the area because of 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.

Some non-Muslim students reported pressure from instructors and classmates to participate in Islamic education classes, even though they were not required to take part. Reports continued that some non-Muslim students felt obliged to participate because they were not allowed to leave the classroom during religious instruction. 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. Private Islamic religious schools continued to operate in the country, but 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.

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.

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. During the year, minority NGOs along with the NGO Minority Alliance Network held numerous seminars and workshops to discuss education curriculum reform in IKR schools, recommending amendments to the current curriculum to emphasize religious minority rights.

In July, KRG State Minister for Component (Minority) Affairs Ayden Maroof announced the KRG Education Ministry was working on new curricula covering the history of religious and ethnic minority groups to be included in IKR history textbooks. According to Maroof, the adoption of the new curricula followed the KRG Prime Minister's decision in July to embrace diversity and to challenge false stereotypes in IKR society.

In June, the head of the interreligious Masarat Foundation for Cultural and Media Development, Saad Salloum, announced the launch of a special curriculum for understanding different religions in the country, to be taught through the Iraqi Institute for Diversity. Religions included in the curriculum are Christianity, Yazidism, Sabean-Mandeanism, Judaism, the Baha'i Faith, Zoroastrianism, and Kaka'ism. According to the foundation, which includes both governmental and nongovernmental representatives, the curriculum would be used to instruct religious leaders, clerics, journalists, and university professors on the country's diverse religions and the need to respect all faith traditions.

In September, the Ministry of Education allocated five billion dinars (\$3.4 million) to build new schools in majority-Yezidi Sinjar District and to develop the district's education sector.

According to a representative of the Yezidi NGO Yazda, KRG authorities continued to discriminate against minorities, including Turkomans, Arabs, Yezidis, Shabaks, 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 Yezidi faced difficulties if they self-identified as Yezidis rather than Kurdish Yezidis, especially at IKR checkpoints. He said Yezidi politicians known for considering Yezidis a separate group from the Kurds were not allowed to enter the IKR.

Christian leaders reported the KRG continued to provide land and financial support for new construction and the renovation of existing structures for use as educational facilities. The KRG MERA finished building the St. Peter and Paul Chaldean Church in Ankawa near Erbil and handed it over to the Chaldean Archdiocese in 2017. Restoration of the Syriac Orthodox Um al-Nour Church in Erbil continued through year's end.

While there remained no legal bar to ministerial appointments for members of religious minority groups, in practice there were 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'is and Sabeen-Mandean, continued to hold senior positions in the national parliament and central government – among them Minister of Displacement and Migration Evan Faiq Jabro, a Christian from Basra Province, and KRG Minister of Transportation Communication Ano Abdoka, a Syriac Orthodox Christian from Ankawa. Several KRG district and subdistrict mayoral positions were reserved for members of religious minority groups, in particular for Yezidis and Christians. Minority leaders, however, said they were still underrepresented in government appointments, in elected positions outside the COR, and in public sector jobs, and that the overall underrepresentation limited members of minority groups' access to government-provided economic opportunities. In December, Christian parliamentarian Yonadam Kanna said Christians in the country were marginalized and not given high-ranking positions. In May, parliamentarian Nawfal al-Nashi said Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhimi had marginalized minority groups when he formed his cabinet. The Federal Supreme Court's nine members continued to include Sunni and Shia Muslims and one Christian.

Although the IKP had 11 seats reserved for ethnic minority candidates, the law did not restrict who could vote in quota seat races. Citing reports of Kurds voting for minority parties that align 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. Christian parliamentarians Rehan Hana and Yonadam Kanna supported restricting quota seat races to voters of the same ethnicity, while Christian parliamentarians affiliated with Shia political coalition parties drawing votes from Shia-majority provinces opposed imposing restrictions.

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. 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.

In October, unknown individuals bombed a Christian-owned liquor store in Baghdad. According to local residents, the attackers were PMF-associated militia members who may have attacked the store after its owners refused to pay bribes.

Kaka'i community members said the central government's Shia Endowment continued to occupy places of Kaka'i worship in Diyala and Baghdad, converting them into Shia mosques. In 2019, the Shia Endowment seized the Kaka'i House of Worship Baba Mahmud in Khanaqin District, Dyala Province, stating that Baba Mahmud was one of the Shia Imam Ali's sons and therefore, the place of worship should be under the Shia Endowment's control. According to Kaka'i representatives, the government did not respond to their request for the return of the Baba Mahmud House of Worship and because there was no endowment for the Kaka'i, the group had no legal recourse. Kaka'i representatives also reported that the Sunni Endowment continued to occupy Kaka'i houses of worship in Kirkuk.

In October, the central government and KRG reached an agreement on cooperation with the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) on a framework for the security and political administration of Sinjar District as well as a pledge of future reconstruction and development efforts. According to Yezidi parliamentarian Saeb

Khudur, the agreement, although criticized by members of the Yezidi community for not having involved Yezidis in the negotiations, included many longstanding Yezidi requests, including providing a framework for appointing a mayor, the removal of the PKK from the district, and the recruitment of 2,500 Yezidi local police. The United Nations and several countries, including the United Kingdom, France, Egypt, and Jordan, among others, stressed that for implementation to succeed, diverse sections of the Yezidi community, as well as others in Sinjar, needed be included in discussions on implementation. Yezidi leaders said they were particularly apprehensive about what removal of the PKK would entail, given the membership of several thousand Yezidis in the PKK-affiliated YBS.

Based on local media reports, there was increasing social recognition of the genocide that ISIS committed against the Yezidis. Cross-sectarian genocide commemoration events took place on August 3 for the third consecutive year. On August 3, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani issued a statement on the sixth anniversary of the genocide against the Yezidis, calling on “all parties to reconstruct Sinjar, normalize the conditions in the city, and to ensure that they are free of any foreign armed forces or militias,” adding, “The security and stability of the region should be protected in coordination between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the federal government.” Barzani stated, “The efforts of the Kurdistan Regional Government are still ongoing in order to liberate the remaining kidnapped Yezidis,” and he called on “the federal government to work to compensate and assist the displaced Yezidis.”

In October, Yezidi parliamentarian Khaleda Khalel of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) submitted a bill to the Iraqi COR presidency to recognize the 2014 Yezidi 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.

According to media and other sources, extensive security efforts continued to ensure that there were no violent incidents disrupting the large Shia commemorations of Ashura in Najaf and Karbala.

In September, the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs announced the first Zoroastrian temple would soon open in Erbil. According to a community source, the temple, supported by Yasna and located in a Yasna-run facility, was opened in December with the participation of Zoroastrian worshipers and a representative from KRG MERA in attendance.

In August, as part of an initiative to encourage minority religious groups to remain in the country, Prime Minister Kadhimi called on Christian emigres to return to the country. Leaders of non-Muslim communities continued to state that corruption, uneven application of the rule of law, and nepotism in hiring practices throughout the country by members of the majority Muslim population continued to have detrimental economic effects on non-Muslim communities and contributed to their decision to emigrate.

On November 14, Ammar Hakim, a politician and cleric as well as the head of the National Wisdom Movement, a coalition of political parties, said Christians were an important part of the country and emphasized the need to support Christians and others who suffered because of ISIS, including IDPs in the Ninewa Plain. On December 19, Hakim called for justice for Yezidis and the reconstruction of their cities.

The Central Post Office, under the authority of the Ministry of Communications, issued a set of postage stamps in October celebrating churches in Baghdad and their history. The stamps were designed by the Christian Endowment and printed at the Central Post Office. The issuance was part of an initiative by the Ministry of Communication to document the religious diversity of Iraqi society.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

According to the Institute for Economics and Peace's *Global Terrorism Index 2020*, Iraq was considered the second country most impacted by terrorism globally, with terrorist attacks primarily targeting civilians, private property, and economic and security institutions. The report did not specify whether terrorists targeted religious groups or places of worship. According to multiple sources in Khanaqin, ISIS attacks in May and June on several Kaka'i villages wounded and killed a total of 13 persons. In June, the director of the Kaka'i-affiliated Chraw Organization for Documentation reported that attacks of this kind were not isolated and were increasing. Prime Minister Kadhimi and President Barham Salih said they would address Kaka'i security concerns, but there was no action by year's end.

According to Kaka'i human rights activists, ISIS attacks caused the displacement of residents of seven Kaka'i villages during the year, two in Khanaqin District in Diyala Province and five in Daqoq District, Kirkuk Province. Kaka'i gravesites in Kirkuk and Ninewa Provinces were also destroyed by unidentified individuals believed to be affiliated with ISIS.

In August, Jankez Alyas, an Iraqi Turkoman Front member in Telafar District, said approximately 400 Turkomans from Telafar had joined the PKK during the year, adding that many of them were sent to PKK camps for training and indoctrination. According to Alyas, the PKK were taking advantage of poor, unemployed youth, mostly from Shia Turkoman communities, and a few Sunni Turkomans by offering them monthly salaries as a way to increase PMF influence in the Turkoman areas and implement its agenda in Telafar District, which is majority Sunni Turkoman. On March 20, parliamentarian Arshad al-Salhi (Sunni Turkoman) of the Iraqi Turkoman Front stated that the PKK had common interests with Iran-backed Shia PMF militias in Telefar, similar to how the PKK and PMF worked together in Sinjar District to use these areas as a road to link between Iran with Syria and to alter demographics in favor of Shia Turkomans.

The Yezidi community in Sinjar District reported in August that the PKK had kidnapped hundreds of Yezidi children since the group had asserted control of parts of the area, with the aim of recruiting them. It was unclear how many of the kidnappings occurred during the year. Also according to the Yezidis, the PKK was paying monthly salaries to Yezidi families to recruit youth as young as 14. These youth reportedly received PKK military training in the Qandil Mountains, where they were subjected to “brainwashing” and were not permitted to contact their families. A Yezidi woman said she had been harassed and threatened by the PKK since the group kidnapped her son six years ago. The KDP-appointed mayor of Sinjar, Mahma Khalil, who at year’s end was exiled in Dohuk while a “shadow” PKK-appointed mayor operated in part of Sinjar District, stated the PKK maintained secret prisons in Sinjar and that the PKK had arrested more than 70 Yezidis since taking control of parts of the district.

Yezidi groups said the presence of armed affiliates of the PKK, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, and PMF militias in Sinjar continued to hinder the return of IDPs. According to Yezidi activists and officials, the Yezidis were afraid to return to Sinjar because of continuing Turkish airstrikes targeting the PKK that occurred in January, June, August, and November. In January, a Turkish airstrike hit Yezidi PKK fighters, also known as the People’s Protection Units of YBS in the subdistrict of Snunyt in Sinjar Province, killing eight PKK fighters and injuring six. Yezidis there protested the presence of the PKK, calling for its expulsion as a means to end Turkish military operations in their district.

Mass graves containing ISIS victims continued to be found, with more than 200 having been discovered since 2017. The central government’s Martyrs Foundation announced in March that 18 additional mass graves had been discovered

throughout the country; they contained victims of al-Qa'ida, ISIS, and the Baathist regime, with some remains dating back decades. According KRG MERA's Office of Yezidi Affairs, two additional mass graves were discovered in Sinjar District during the year. KRG MERA's Office of Yezidi Affairs and the government's Martyrs' Foundation in Baghdad reported a total of 83 mass graves, in addition to dozens of individual grave sites containing the bodies of more than 2,500 Yezidis, had been found in Sinjar District and other predominantly Yezidi areas of Ninewa Province since 2014. In August, Zain al-Abidin Musleh Ali, deputy director of the Ninewa Martyrs Directorate, said the ISF found six locations containing dozens of mass graves of ISIS victims in Sinjar, Zammar, and Qayyarah Districts, Qaraj and Badush Subdistricts, and in Ninewa Province. In October, after pausing activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, authorities resumed the exhumations of mass graves. In October, the ISF found a mass grave of ISIS victims in Kirkuk Province that included the remains of approximately 45 persons. With U.S.-funded support, UNITAD and the International Committee for Missing Persons, in cooperation with the IOM and Yazda, began exhuming mass graves created by ISIS in Kocho, and also at Solagh, known as the "Grave of Mothers," where ISIS killed dozens of Yezidi women considered too old to be sold into sexual slavery.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. There were continued reports of societal violence by sectarian armed groups across the country, but no reports of religiously based violence 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. Shia religious and government leaders continued to urge PMF volunteers not to commit these abuses. In November, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of UNAMI, told the UN Security Council during a videoconference that she was encouraged by improvements in the security situation in the country, with dramatically reduced levels of violence. She said that notwithstanding the improvements, forced disappearances and killings continued, and there was still a pressing need for justice and accountability.

In August, security forces reported that unidentified individuals set fire to a house belonging to a Kaka'i family in the Arab village of Kewey, in Kirkuk. No

causalities were reported. Kaka'is said they believed the arson was the result of an Arab-Kaka'i land dispute.

On November 14, al-Abbas Combat Division, one of the brigades of the “PMF of the Shia Marjaiya in Najaf,” announced it had organized an aid campaign for Yezidis living in Ninewa Province.

On November 18, Yezidi Prince Hazim Tahseen Beg named Ali Elias Hajj as the new *baba sheikh*, following the death of Baba Sheikh Khartu Haki Ismail on October 1. According to some Yezidis, the selection of Ali over Khartu's son Farhad sparked controversy within the Yezidi community because Farhad reportedly enjoyed widespread support of Yezidi religious, tribal, and community leaders. Yezidis opposed to naming Elias Hajj stated there was undue political influence by the KDP in the selection process.

Christians in the south and in PMF-controlled towns on the Ninewa 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 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 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 Sabeen-Mandean, said they opted to wear the hijab after experiencing continual harassment.

In July, the Roman Catholic Church-affiliated organization Aid to the Church in Need released a report saying that the country's Christian community faced “extinction.” The report stated that Christians living in the Ninewa Plain reported lack of security, and that 87 percent said they experienced this lack “very much,” or “remarkably.” Almost 70 percent of Christians cited violent local militia activity and the possibility of a return of ISIS as among the main reasons for this fear; 69 percent said these concerns were the primary reason they were considering emigrating. Christians also listed unemployment (70 percent), financial and

administrative corruption (51 percent), and religious discrimination (39 percent) at the social level as the major challenges that pushed them to emigrate.

According to media reports, a mob set fire to the Dijla television station in Baghdad after it aired a program featuring music around the Ashura commemoration. A court issued a warrant for the station's administrative head for "intentionally insulting the rites of a religious sect."

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 then Prime Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi. Issues raised included the presence of undisciplined armed groups in minority areas and creating conditions for the safe and voluntary return of displaced populations. These messages were reinforced through public speeches, and embassy interagency coordination groups promoted religious and ethnic minority community stabilization and humanitarian assistance. The bilateral Strategic Dialogue held in Washington, D.C. in August provided additional opportunities to highlight the need for outreach to the country's vulnerable religious and ethnic minority communities.

Embassy efforts centered on identifying the most pressing concerns of members of religious minority groups – insecurity, lack of employment, and road closures – and obtaining government and KRG commitments to assist in addressing these concerns. Efforts included promoting recruitment of members of minority groups into security forces operating on the Ninewa Plain. UNITAD and the embassy's interagency coordination group on minority stabilization also engaged with Yezidis, the KRG, the central government, and other organizations and groups to coordinate efforts to ensure exhumations of Yezidi mass graves were performed to international standards. U.S. government humanitarian assistance efforts, including in areas with religious minority populations, centered on providing tents, food, medicine, medical supplies, psychosocial support, and other interventions, including for education and livelihoods.

The Ambassador and other embassy and consulate officials continued to meet regularly with national and regional ministries of education, justice (which includes the functions of the former national Ministry of Human Rights), 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 U.S. government continued to develop, finance, and manage projects to support all religious communities, with special emphasis on assistance to IDPs and returnees.

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 and assess the needs and challenges they continued to face.

The U.S. government awarded \$9 million in small grants directly to seven local faith-based and community organizations in the north of the country for programs that were in progress during the year. In the Ninewa Plain, U.S. government officials or staff worked with an additional 83 local organizations and 17 faith-based organizations to provide assistance with recovery, including livelihoods, health, legal, and social cohesion services to minority communities in the northern part of the country. The U.S. government continued to rebuild critical infrastructure with the aim of restoring essential services, while also rebuilding heavily damaged and destroyed shelters in religious and ethnic minority communities.

U.S. officials in Baghdad and Erbil continued to hold regular discussions with government officials, endowment leaders, and UN officials coordinating international assistance to IDPs and recent returnees to address problems identified by religious groups related to the distribution of assistance.

The Ambassador and the Consul General in Erbil met leaders of minority religious groups and civil society groups to address the groups' concerns, particularly regarding security and protection. Embassy officials met with Yezidi, Christian, Shabak, Turkoman, Jewish, Sabean-Mandean, Kaka'i, Baha'i, Zoroastrian, and other religious and minority leaders to promote reconciliation within their communities.