Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	**1611**
Land:	Irak
Kilde:	US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)
Titel:	Annual Report 2025 – Iraq
Udgivet:	25. marts 2025
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	15. august 2025

IRAQ

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom in Iraq remained tenuous, despite some government initiatives to improve conditions for religious minorities. The government's lack of will or ability to curtail the increasing power of state-subsidized, Iran-linked militias—especially factions of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—continued to pose a systematic and ongoing threat to religious freedom. Even as U.S.-sanctioned PMF leaders ostensibly set up a human rights department in June, some brigades continued to target religious minorities for harassment, property appropriation, extortion, detention, and torture. In June, Prime Minister Mohammed Shi'a al-Sudani recognized the administrative authority of Chaldean Cardinal Sako, one year after the government had revoked it on the reported advice of the PMF 50th ("Babylon") Brigade leader, Rayan al-Kildani. Kildani is a U.S.-designated human rights abuser with backing from Shi'a Iraqi constituents and Iran. He continued to attempt appropriation of Christian properties and representation, such as orchestrating the suspension of 15 mayors and district leaders in Nineveh Province in July. The same month, Syriac Catholic Archbishop Benedict Younan Hano sent a letter to Prime Minister Sudani seeking protection from PMF actors. The letter highlighted displaced Christians' resulting reluctance to return to Mosul and the Nineveh Plains. Sunni Kurds, Assyrian Christians, and others reported the increasing infiltration of sectarian Shi'a actors into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

Ongoing territorial disputes between the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) and the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) prolonged a power vacuum in parts of northern Iraq. Many Yazidis feared the IFG's repeated pledges to close remaining displacement camps. They expressed apprehension over returning to the Sinjar district, which the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) had devastated a decade earlier. Many of the 200,000 remaining displaced Yazidis felt unsafe returning, despite some IFG and KRG rebuilding, housing, employment, and psychological support programs. Turkey continued its military strikes in the area, purportedly in pursuit of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terrorists. The IFG and KRG made some progress toward recruiting up to 1,500 Sinjaris to a local police force, but their failure to fully implement the 2020 Sinjar Agreement allowed for competing militias to intimidate residents and pressure young Yazidi men to join their ranks. In July, the Nineveh Provincial Council selected a Yazidi mayor for Sinjar, ostensibly fulfilling one provision of the Sinjar Agreement. However, some reports suggested the appointment process reflected PMF influence rather than due consultation with Yazidi communities.

Influential members of Baghdad's leading Shi'a Muslim parties proposed amendments to Personal Status Law No. 188, requiring Muslim families seeking a religious legal framework to choose between Shi'a and Sunni clerical authority in family law matters. The amended law would potentially amplify Shi'a-Sunni sectarianism, privilege husbands' choice of religious framework, and allow circumvention of the national civil family law in favor of individual clerics' interpretations of Shari'a. Some interpretations would likely include those that are highly restrictive of women's property and parental rights while allowing forced marriage for female children. In March, the Supreme Court affirmed IFG policies to monitor and block websites with "anti-religious" content, including perceived insults to scriptures or prophets.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Iraq on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose additional targeted sanctions on, freeze the assets of, and bar the entry to the United States of PMF and other militia units or leaders responsible for severe violations of religious freedom;
- Assist Iraq with building institutional capacity to safeguard vulnerable religious minority communities by creating or improving independent oversight mechanisms for PMF and other militias and by fully integrating religiously affiliated militias into state forces;
- Provide technical support to supplement or assist the IFG's efforts to preserve and closely guard internationally collected evidence of genocide, ensuring the security of sensitive data and paving the way for investigations and prosecutions by third countries; and
- Prioritize encouraging the IFG and KRG to comprehensively implement the Sinjar Agreement with full inclusion of the Yazidi community and to conduct a national and regional dialogue on potential reforms to more effectively protect religious freedom and ensure religious communities' political representation.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise religious freedom concerns in Iraq through hearings, letters, and delegations and by linking any budgeted support to Iraqi officials taking tangible steps toward curtailing threats to the political representation, safety, and continued existence in Iraq of religious and ethnic minority communities.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** USCIRF Solemnly Commemorates the 10th Anniversary of ISIS's Genocide against Iraqi and Syrian Religious Minorities
- **Issue Brief:** Religious Freedom Challenges in Iraq 10 Years after ISIS's Genocide
- **Podcast:** 10 Years On: Ongoing Threats to Religious Minority Survivors of ISIS's Genocide
- **Podcast:** Responses to Genocide: Two Former U.S. Officials Reflect on ISIS's Genocide in Iraq and Syria
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List** and **Appendix 2**

Background

Article 2 of Iraq's constitution establishes Islam as the official religion and affirms "the full religious rights to freedom of belief and religious practice." However, prohibitions on Baha'is, statutes criminalizing blasphemy, and personal status laws misclassifying converts and their minor children persist.

In November, Iraq conducted its first nationwide census since 1987, with the final results expected in 2025. Previous estimates suggest a 2024 population of 42–45.4 million that is 95–98 percent Muslim, of which Shi'a Muslims constitute 61–64 percent and Sunnis 29–34 percent. Christians of varying ethnic and denominational backgrounds may constitute less than one percent, and "others" may account for between one percent and four percent. The census did not differentiate between sects (e.g., Sunni or Shi'a) and removed categories for ethnicity, potentially perpetuating miscalculation of populations such as Yazidis and Armenian, Assyrian, Syriac, and Chaldean Christians, for whom ethnicity and religion are closely tied. Members of some communities expressed concern over the alleged structuring of the census to allow for political redistribution to further disenfranchise Sunni Muslims in national discourse.

Ongoing Challenges and Positive Steps for Religious Minority Survivors of ISIS

The year 2024 marked the 10th anniversary of ISIS's launch of genocide and crimes against humanity targeting Iraqi and Syrian religious minorities. Approximately 2,594 abducted Iraqi Yazidi women and girls remained missing in ISIS internment camps and enclaves in Syria and elsewhere. Complex search and rescue operations benefited from state and nonstate actor contributions, as in the October liberation of a young Yazidi woman whom ISIS had trafficked into slavery in Gaza. Yazidi advocates called on IFG and KRG institutions to urgently increase their contributions to rescue efforts.

Both the IFG and KRG continued or proposed initiatives benefiting religious minorities, 10 years after ISIS targeted them, including contributing to the reconstruction of Yazidis' Lalish Temple. Prime Minister Sudani visited Nineveh to inaugurate several important infrastructure and other projects benefiting its religiously diverse population. The IFG allocated approximately 50 billion Iraqi dinars ($38 million) to the Sinjar and Nineveh Plains Reconstruction Fund, although some minority advocates regarded the initiative as underfunded. The IFG tasked a High Committee with addressing hate speech campaigns targeting Yazidis, and in February it announced the creation of a Ministry of Justice committee to hear religious minorities' property-related claims.

Christian, Shi'a and Sunni Turkmen, and other religious minority advocates continued to object to the electoral system allowing Shi'a-majority constituencies to propel PMF-affiliated candidates into minorities' quota seats, counter to legitimate representation. In February, the federal Supreme Court further limited minorities' political representation by effectively abolishing the 11 KRI parliament quota seats for Assyrian and Armenian Christians and Shi'a and Sunni Muslim Turkmen. In May, the court restored five quota seats to Christians and Turkmen, resulting in a net loss of seats and continued exclusion of other communities. The KRI parliament elections in October prompted Assyrians' additional objections to the quota seat redistribution to KRI governorates with smaller Christian populations. Some members of that community also objected to perceived tokenism benefiting candidates aligned with large, Muslim-majority parties.

In the KRI, some Christians reported KRG officials' refusal to settle claims for misappropriated properties, tolerance of militias' checkpoint harassment of Christians, and impediments to Christian farmers transporting supplies between villages. Some Assyrians feared reported KRG plans for a dam that would threaten indigenous sites and monuments and potentially displace Christian residents from the Nahla Valley.

Key U.S. Policy

The administration of then President Joseph R. Biden maintained the United States' Strategic Framework Agreement with Iraq. In April, then Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III met with Prime Minister Sudani to reflect on successes in combating ISIS and discuss a "transition to an enduring bilateral security relationship." In September, the countries announced a plan for withdrawal of remaining U.S. troops in Iraq by September 2025 and in December described ongoing, mutual anti-ISIS efforts. Although ISIS did not reclaim territory, U.S. military reports pointed to an increase in related attacks in both Iraq and Syria. Throughout the year, the United States held to account those PMF brigades responsible for attacks on U.S. personnel or bases in Iraq and Syria. In January, U.S.-attributed strikes on a PMF logistics center near Baghdad reportedly killed three people, including a senior commander.

In March, then Deputy Assistant Secretary for Iraq and Iran Victoria Taylor visited Cardinal Sako in Erbil to hear concerns over the reported role of PMF actors in the IFG's selection of administrators for Christian, Yazidi, and Sabean-Mandaean properties. Some reports suggested that high-level U.S.-Iraq meetings included related discussion of religious minorities' need for protection.

Throughout the year, the United States commemorated the 10th anniversary of ISIS's genocide and crimes against humanity targeting Yazidis, Christians, Shi'a Muslims, and others. In May, then Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya visited the Rabban Hormizd Christian monastery and Lalish Temple, stressing the need for the IFG and KRG to "demonstrate concrete progress in addressing survivors' concerns." In July, then Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken hosted Yazidi genocide survivors, following his March meeting with Yazidi advocate, genocide survivor, and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Nadia Murad. In November, the United States House of Representatives unanimously passed with bipartisan support H.R. 554, affirming U.S. support for the religious and ethnic minority survivors of genocide in Iraq. The United States also highlighted the more than $500 million it had contributed since 2018 to support Yazidis, Christians, Shi'a Muslims, and other survivors of ISIS and to advance religious and ethnic pluralism.