

IRAQ 2018 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.” The constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief and practice for Muslims, Christians, Yezidis, and Sabeen-Mandeans, but not for followers of other religions or atheists. The law prohibits the practice of the Baha’i Faith and the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam. The constitution also provides for freedom from religious coercion and requires the government to maintain the sanctity of religious sites. Institutional and societal restrictions on freedom of religion as well as violence against minority groups remained widespread, according to religious leaders and representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGO) focused on religious freedom. NGO leaders said the government continued to use the antiterrorism law as a pretext for detaining individuals without due process. Community leaders continued to state forced conversion was the de facto outcome of the national identity card law mandating children with only one Muslim parent, even children born as a result of rape, be listed as Muslim. Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) security forces closed some roads between the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) and areas subject to territorial disputes between the KRG and the country’s central government for much of the year, impeding the movement of Yezidis between Dohuk Province and the Sinjar area. Most roads were reopened by year’s end. Yezidis, Christian leaders, and NGOs reported harassment and abuses by the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a state-sponsored organization composed of more than 40 mostly Shia militias, which also includes Sunni and other minority units originally formed to combat ISIS. Christians reported harassment and abuse at numerous PMF-operated checkpoints, restricting their movement in and around several Christian towns on the Ninewa Plain. Christians in PMF-controlled towns reported harassment of Christian women by PMF members. They also said elements of the central government in Baghdad were attempting to facilitate demographic change by providing land and housing for Shia and Sunni Muslims to move into traditionally Christian areas. Representatives of minority religious communities said the central government did not generally interfere with religious observances, but some faced harassment and restrictions from local authorities. Advocacy groups and religious minority representatives reported increased emigration.

According to Yazda, an NGO focused on Yezidi issues, more than 3,000 Yezidis still remained missing following ISIS’s assault on northern Iraq in 2014. In

November the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the United Nations Human Rights Office documented the existence of 202 mass graves in the provinces of Ninewa, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, and Anbar, and cautioned that there may be “many more.” The UN offices stated they believed the graves held anywhere from eight to as many as “thousands” of bodies. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said, “These graves contain the remains of those mercilessly killed for not conforming to [ISIS’s] twisted ideology and rule, including ethnic and religious minorities.”

Although according to media and human rights organizations security conditions in many parts of the country improved somewhat from 2017, there were continued reports of societal violence, mainly by sectarian armed groups. Non-Muslim minorities reported continued abductions, threats, pressure, and harassment to force them to observe Islamic customs. On July 23, three gunmen, who KRG authorities said had links to a terrorist group, forcibly entered a government building in downtown Erbil. Unable to gain entry to the Erbil governor’s office, they killed a Christian employee whom authorities believed was targeted because of his religion, before police killed the attackers. In March local media reported the killing of a Christian family in Baghdad. Some Christian leaders, including Chaldean Catholic Cardinal Louis Sako, said they considered the killing a hate crime; others said the killers sought to force Christian owners of prime real estate to surrender their property. In February several gunman shot and killed a Christian man in front of his house in Baghdad. According to Christian sources, the victim had received threats to stop working in the alcohol business near a Muslim neighborhood. Sabeen-Mandean leaders continued to report threats, abuses, and robberies. In Friday sermons, Shia religious and government leaders urged PMF volunteers not to commit such abuses. Armed groups continued to target Sunnis for execution-style killings and the destruction of homes and businesses. Christian leaders in the Ninewa Plain reported multiple instances of theft and harassment of Christians by the PMF.

The U.S. government continued to raise religious freedom concerns at the highest levels in the country through frequent meetings with senior government officials, speeches, coordination groups, and targeted assistance programs for stabilization projects. Visits by the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator, representatives of the office of the Vice President, and other senior U.S. officials to minority areas reinforced the U.S. government’s commitment to preserve and support religious diversity through increased support to minority communities. The Ambassador and other embassy and consulates general officials continued to

meet regularly with national and regional government officials, members of parliament, parliamentary committees, and Shia, Sunni, and minority group representatives, to emphasize the need for the security, full inclusion, tolerance, and protection of the rights of religious minorities. The Department of State issued a press statement on U.S. support for vulnerable minorities in Iraq on June 11, saying, “This Administration has made the protection of Iraq’s diversity of faiths and its threatened religious minorities a top and unceasing priority. Those who survived genocide, crimes against humanity, and other atrocities, as well as those who perished as a result of these acts, deserve nothing less.” The United States announced over \$178 million in new U.S. foreign assistance to support ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq on October 16. On December 11, President Trump signed the Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act. The act promotes justice for the victims and survivors of those minority communities, particularly Yazidis and Christians, targeted by ISIS.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 40.2 million (July 2018 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, while Sunni Muslims are approximately 40 percent of the population. Of Sunnis, Sunni Kurds constitute 15 percent, Sunni Arabs 24 percent, and Sunni 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.

Christian leaders estimate there are fewer than 250,000 Christians remaining in the country, with the largest population – at least 200,000 – living in the Ninewa Plain and the IKR. The Christian population has declined over the past 16 years 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, and 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 the religion secretly.

Yezidi leaders report most of the 400,000 to 500,000 Yezidis in the country reside in the north, and approximately 360,000 remain displaced. Estimates of the size of the Sabeian-Mandean community vary. According to Sabeian-Mandean leaders, 10,000 remain in the country, mainly in the south with between 750 and 1,000 in the IKR and Baghdad. Baha'i leaders report fewer than 2,000 members, spread throughout the country in small groups, including approximately 500 in the IKR. The Shabak number between 350,000 and 400,000, three-fourths of whom are Shia and the rest Sunni; most are located in Ninewa. Armenian leaders report a population of approximately 7,000 Armenian Christians. According to Kaka'i (also known as Yarsani) activists, their community has approximately 120,000 to 150,000 members, traditionally located in the Ninewa Plain and in villages southeast of Kirkuk, as well as in Diyala and Erbil. The Jewish representative in the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA) reports 70 to 80 Jewish families reside in the IKR, though he noted that some Jewish families do not openly acknowledge their religion for fear of persecution. According to a Baghdad Jewish community leader, there are fewer than six adult members of the local Jewish community.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as of December, nearly 1.8 million persons remained displaced within the country. Population movements are multi-directional, with some persons fleeing their homes and others returning home. According to the IOM, as of May, approximately 67 percent of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) population were Arab Sunni, 13 percent Kurdish Sunni, 8 percent Yezidi, 6 percent Turkoman Shia, 2 percent Arab Shia, 1 percent either Syriac, Chaldean, or Assyrian Christian, 2 percent Shabak Shia, and less than 1 percent Turkoman Sunni, Shabak Sunni, or Kurdish Shia.

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 Christians, Yezidis, and Sabeian-

Mandaeans, but it does not explicitly protect followers of other religions, or atheists. According to the penal code, Jews may not hold jobs in state enterprises or join the military. The law prohibits the practice of the Baha'i Faith and 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 require 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 non-Muslim women 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 thereby registered with the government: Islam, Chaldean, Assyrian, Assyrian Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, Armenian Catholic, Roman Catholic, National Protestant, Anglican, Evangelical Protestant Assyrian, Seventh-day Adventist, Coptic Orthodox, Yezidi, Sabean-Mandean, and Jewish. Recognition allows groups to appoint legal representatives and perform legal transactions such as buying and selling property. All recognized religious groups have their own personal status courts responsible for handling marriage, divorce, and inheritance issues. According to the government, however, there is no personal status court for Yezidis.

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 Sabean-Mandean Religions Diwan. The three endowments operate under the authority of the Office of the Prime Minister to disburse government funds to maintain and protect religious facilities.

Outside of the IKR, the law does not provide a mechanism for a new religious group to obtain legal recognition. The law prescribes 10 years' imprisonment for anyone practicing the Baha'i Faith. For the practice of unrecognized religious groups other than Baha'i – including Wahhabi Muslim, Zoroastrian, Yarsanism, and the Kaka'i faith – the law does not specify penalties; however, contracts signed

by institutions of unrecognized religious groups are not legal or permissible as evidence in court.

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 registered with the KRG MERA: Islam, Christianity, Yezidism, Judaism, Sabean-Mandaism, Zoroastrianism, Yarsanism, and the Baha'i Faith.

In addition to the Christian denominations recognized by the government, the KRG has registered 11 evangelical Christian and other Protestant churches: Nahda al-Qadassa Church in Erbil and Dohuk, Nasari Evangelical Church in Dohuk, Kurd-Zaman Church in Erbil, Ashti Evangelical Church in Sulaimaniya, Evangelical Free Church in Dohuk, the Baptist Church of the Good Shepherd in Erbil, al-Tasbih International Evangelical Church in Dohuk, Rasolia Church in Erbil, as well as United Evangelical, Assemblies of God, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches in Erbil. The KRG allows new Christian churches to register with a minimum of 50 adherents.

In the IKR, Christian groups may register separately with the Council of Iraqi Christian Church Leaders, an independent group formed by Christian church leaders, which includes six evangelical Protestant churches. Registration with the Council of Iraqi Christian Church Leaders provides Christian churches and leaders with access to the KRG MERA and to the KRG's Christian endowment.

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 six 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 and 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 Prime Minister's office, organizes a lottery process to select pilgrims for official Hajj visas. Lottery winners pay differing amounts to the government for their visas prior to Hajj depending on their mode of travel: 3.5 million dinars (\$3,100) for Hajj travel by land, and five million dinars (\$4,400) for travel by air. In the IKR, the KRG MERA organizes Hajj and Umrah travel, carrying out a lottery to choose the pilgrims for official Hajj visas allotted to the IKR.

The constitution guarantees 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 56 Syriac and 21 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 endowments. 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 Muslims, and the Civil Status Court handles all other cases.

New national identity cards do not denote the bearer's religion, although the online application still requests this information. The only religions that may be listed on the national identity card application are Christian, Sabean-Mandean, Yezidi, Jewish, and Muslim. There is no distinction between Shia and Sunni Muslim, or a designation of Christian denominations. Individuals practicing other faiths may only receive identity cards if they self-identify as Muslim, Yezidi, Sabean-Mandean, Jewish, or Christian. Without an official identity card, one may not register one's marriage, enroll children in public school, acquire passports, or obtain some government services. Passports do not specify religion.

The law provides constitutional guarantees for the reinstatement of citizenship to individuals who gave up their citizenship for political or sectarian reasons;

however, this law does not apply to Jews who emigrated and gave up their citizenship under a 1950 law.

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 law in the IKR formally recognizes the Baha'i, Zoroastrian, and Sabean-Mandean faiths, and promotes equal political, cultural, societal, and economic representation of all minority groups. It 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 minority communities: five for Christian candidates from Baghdad, Ninewa, Kirkuk, Erbil, and Dohuk; one for a Yezidi; one for a Sabean-Mandean; one for an ethnic Shabak; and one for a Faili Kurd from Wasit. Usually one of the COR rapporteur positions is designated for a Christian MP and the other 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.

Islamic education, including study of the Quran, is mandatory in primary and secondary schools, except in the IKR. Non-Muslim students are not required to participate in Islamic studies. The government provides Christian religious education in public schools in some areas where there are concentrations of Christian populations, and there is a Syriac curriculum directorate within the Ministry of Education.

The antiterrorism law of November 2005 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 is 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 reported the current antiterrorism law did not allow for the right to due process and a fair trial. Sunni leaders said authorities referenced the law in their arbitrary detentions of young Sunni men on suspicion of ISIS links but provided no corroborating evidence.

According to international human rights organizations, some Shia militias, including some under the PMF umbrella, committed abuses and atrocities and were implicated in several attacks on Sunni civilians, allegedly to avenge ISIS crimes against Shia. Following the return of central government control in Kirkuk in late 2017, Kurds, Turkomans, Kaka'i, Christians, and other minorities faced discrimination, displacement, and in some cases, violence from PMF and Iraqi security forces. Media outlets carried numerous reports of Shia PMF groups invading, looting, and burning the houses of Kurds, Sunni Turkomans, Sunni Arabs, and other ethnic minorities in Kirkuk Governorate. Kurds faced similar violence in Khanaqin, a majority Kurdish city in Diyala Governorate that also passed from KRG to central government control in 2017. Analysts stated that discrimination continued to stoke ethno-sectarian tensions in the disputed territories throughout the year. In August four Kurds, including a Peshmerga, were beheaded in Khanaqin by unknown attackers. The Kaka'i community in Daquq, Kirkuk Governorate, continued to suffer harassment and intimidation, which Kaka'i civil society groups said accelerated under PMF occupation of the area.

The religious status of children resulting from rape became a more prominent issue because of the number of minority children resulting from gender-based violence perpetrated by ISIS. Yezidi community leaders reported 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 ID cards, passports, and other governmental services. Yezidi sources reported the number of these children range from several dozen to several hundred. They said societal stigma made it difficult to obtain accurate numbers. According to Christian leaders, in some cases Christian families formally registered as Muslim but privately practicing Christianity or another faith were forced to choose to register their child as a Muslim or to have the child remain undocumented. Remaining undocumented would affect the family's eligibility for government benefits such as school enrollment and ration card allocation for basic food items, which depends on family size. Larger families with legally registered children received higher allotments than those with undocumented children.

Representatives of minority religious communities said that, while the central government did not generally interfere with religious observances and even provided security for places of worship and other religious sites, including churches, mosques, shrines, and religious pilgrimage sites and routes, minority groups continued to face harassment, including sexual assault, and restrictions from local authorities in some regions. Christian religious leaders continued to publicly accuse the Iranian-backed Shabak Shia PMF militia 30th Brigade, controlled by Iraqi parliament member Hunain Qado and his brother Waad, of harassment and sexual assaults on Christian women in Bartalla and elsewhere in Hamdaniya District. The chair of the municipal council of Bartalla made public court documents from several cases involving militiamen charged with theft, harassment, and sexual harassment. Shabak Sunni leaders in Hamdaniya made similar allegations.

According to Christian and other minority community leaders, Shabak parliamentarians, including Qado, with the support of some other Shia elements within the central government in Baghdad, had directed the 30th Brigade to harass Christians to drive out the area's dwindling Christian population and allow Shabak and other Shia Muslims to settle in the area's traditionally Christian town centers. Christians in Tal Kayf made similar claims that the nominally Christian but majority Sunni Arab PMF 50th "Babylon" Brigade actively sought to prevent and disrupt the return of the displaced Christian community to facilitate the settlement of Sunni Arab and Shia Shabak populations in that town.

The Ninewa provincial government ordered that all district governments comply with a 2017 federal law granting land to the families of mostly Shia Muslim PMF martyrs of the war against ISIS as compensation for their loss. The order included those districts with Sunni and non-Muslim majorities. In September Hamdaniya District Mayor Essam Behnam issued an order suspending such grants in the historically Christian majority district, citing the constitution's prohibition of forced demographic change. Throughout the year, Behnam successfully resisted political pressure at both the federal and provincial levels to issue such land grants in Hamdaniya. Iraq's National Investment Commission, under the presidency of the Council of Ministers, approved the building of large housing development projects on government-owned land in the outskirts of Bartalla. Pointing to a surplus of houses in Christian town centers, Christian community leaders alleged that virtually all the future occupants of this housing would be Shabak and Arab Muslims not native to Bartalla.

Some Yezidi and Christian leaders continued to report harassment and abuse by KRG Peshmerga and Asayish forces in the KRG-controlled portion of Ninewa; some leaders said the majority of such cases were motivated by politics rather than religious discrimination. According to various NGOs, central government, and KRG sources, KRG security forces and ISF blocked major roads between the IKR and central government-controlled Iraq, including roads serving minority communities such as the roads between Dohuk and Sinjar, al Qosh and Tal Kayf, and Sheikhan and Mosul. The closure of these roads forced minorities to take long, circuitous detours, restricted their access to markets for their goods, and left them vulnerable to harassment and extortion at numerous checkpoints. After lengthy negotiations, the KRG and GOI opened most of these roads during the year, including the al Qosh-Tal Kayf and Shaykhan-Mosul roads in October and the Dohuk-Sinjar road in December.

In June elements of the PMF Imam Ali Brigade refused to allow the Yezidi Sinjar District Council to return to Sinjar City from its temporary location in Mosul, even with an official letter from the Office of the Prime Minister. In October a combination of PMF and popular protest again prevented the Yezidi mayor of Sinjar and the district council from returning to Sinjar. Christians reported continued harassment, abuse, and delays at numerous checkpoints operated by various PMF units, impeding movement in and around several Christian towns on the Ninewa Plain, including the Shabak Brigade in Qaraqosh, Bartalla, and Karamles, and the 50th “Babylon” Brigade in Batnaya and Tal Kayf.

According to multiple sources, some government forces and militia groups forced alleged ISIS sympathizers or family members of suspected members from their homes in several governorates. For example, there were reports the PMF militia group Kataib Hizballah kidnapped and intimidated local Arab Sunni residents in Diyala and Babil Governorates and prevented Arab Sunni IDPs from returning to their places of origin.

The KRG continued to actively support and fund the rescue of captured Yezidis and provide psychosocial support services at a center in Dohuk Province. According to the KRG MERA director general for Yezidi affairs, since 2014 3,322 Yezidis kidnapped by ISIS had been rescued or released, but 3,015 Yezidis were still missing as of October. Rescued captives reported being sold multiple times and subjected to forced conversions to Islam, sexual exploitation, and violence. The Iraqi Independent Human Rights Commission reported in August that 600 Turkomans kidnapped by ISIS, including more than 120 children, remained missing, none of whom had been reported rescued by the end of the year. A

Turkoman NGO, however, stated in December that more than 1300 Turkomans were still missing and said it had evidence that ISIS had trafficked Turkoman women to Chechnya, Turkey, and Syria. The KRG MERA also reported that 250 Christians were rescued, leaving an estimated 150 missing.

In October the KRG MERA director general for Yezidi Affairs reported the KRG had paid more than \$7 million in ransom and payments to middlemen to secure the release of approximately 2,000 Yezidis from ISIS since 2014. In July the Ninewa Provincial Council established two offices, one in Mosul and the other in Sinjar, responsible for investigating the fate of Yezidis still missing or held captive by ISIS. 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 Yazda, a global Yezidi organization, Yezidis in the IKR were discriminated against when they refused to self-identify as Kurdish; only those Yezidis who considered themselves Kurdish could obtain senior positions in the IKR leadership. In the IKR, those not identifying as Kurdish said actions such as obtaining a residency card or a driver's license were challenging. The KRG continued to offer support and funding to some non-Muslim minorities, but other minorities in the IKR, including evangelical Christians, said they continued to face difficulties in changing their registration from Muslim to Christian if they were converts, or engaged in in proselytizing.

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 harassment and restrictions from authorities. In July ISF forces and local police forcibly entered Mar Gorgees Syriac Catholic Church in Bartalla, cut the internet network of the church and adjacent cultural center, and destroyed the church's internet server equipment. While authorities accused the church of unauthorized distribution of an IKR-based internet service to the Christian community in Ninewa Province, Syriac Catholic Church leaders said the action represented an attack on the church, and they accused the security forces of acting on behalf of a rival, politically connected internet provider.

The KRG MERA reduced the number of mosques delivering weekly Friday sermons from 3,000 to 2,000 by combining mosques located in the same neighborhoods. MERA Spokesman and Director of General Relations Mariwan Naqshbandy said MERA was formulating a policy to produce and distribute pre-approved content for Friday sermons in MERA-funded mosques to prevent the

spread of extremism. The KRG MERA banned eight imams from delivering Friday sermons, citing extremist ideology and incitement to violence. The imams continued to receive MERA salaries and were ordered to undergo a rehabilitation course to regain permission to preach in MERA-approved mosques. MERA also banned 10 books by well-known Islamic scholars because they encouraged violence and extremism. MERA also introduced a mandatory training program for new imams that included instruction on religious pluralism and tolerance and against extremist preaching and hate speech.

According to the international human rights NGO Heartland Alliance, KRG law protecting the rights of religious freedom was undermined by vague wording and did not provide implementation mechanisms or penalties for violations.

In September Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Dawood Matti Sharf said the central government had not opened an investigation into the alleged ISF and PMF destruction of the second century tomb in Qaraqosh of religious notable Youhana al-Delimi, despite a lawsuit filed by the archbishop in 2017.

Advocacy groups and religious minority representatives reported increased emigration. Estimates, including those cited by several Christian parliamentarians (MPs), the daily number of Christian families leaving the country, including the IKR, ranged from 10 to 22. A director of an Assyrian NGO reported that four Syriac language schools closed in Dohuk due to lack of students. Some Yezidis and Christians maintained their own militias. Some of these received support from Baghdad through the PMF, while others received assistance from KRG Peshmerga units. Some representatives of religious minority groups, such as Yezidi and Sabean-Mandean MPs, stated they must have a role in their own security and requested government support to create armed groups from their own communities; others asked to join regular law enforcement units. Other minority leaders in the Ninewa Plain expressed hope that the Ministry of Interior would hire minorities to serve in local police forces to absorb and replace the minority militias in the region. Some leaders conducted recruitment drives to demonstrate the considerable interest among minority communities in joining police units, including among current members of minority militias; however, no local police positions were available at year's end.

One of the remaining members of the Jewish community in Baghdad described the prevalence of anti-Semitic rhetoric from both Muslim and Christian leaders. Although the sermons did not advocate for violence against the Jewish community, the community member expressed concern that more priests were including anti-

Semitic rhetoric in their sermons, comparable to the anti-Semitic rhetoric often heard from some Muslims. He presented pictures of the continued desecration of the Jewish cemetery in the Shia-majority Sadr City section of Baghdad. The small community did not file any reports on the desecration with local authorities due to reported fear of retribution. Despite Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's decision to speak out in favor of the return of Jews in a June 2 response to a follower's question, the member of the Jewish community said Jews continued to avoid publicly self-identifying for fear of violence.

A group of IKR- and Ninewa Plain-based religious leaders from established apostolic Christian churches sent a letter to the IKR MERA director general of Christian affairs stating MERA made it too easy for new Christian groups to become established in the IKR. The letter accused the newcomers of damaging the churches' relationship with the Muslim community by proselytizing, and demanded MERA provide the names of adherents submitted by the new churches. MERA refused to change the requirement for new churches to register but complied with the apostolic churches' request to compile a list of adherents of evangelical and other Protestant churches. Apostolic church leaders said the list would allow them to remove from their rolls the names of former members now attending other churches so the apostolic churches would not be blamed for any proselytizing performed by former members now belonging to evangelical or other Protestant churches.

NGOs continued to state constitutional provisions on freedom of religion should override laws banning the Baha'i Faith and the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam; however, during the year, there were no court challenges lodged to invalidate them and no legislation proposed to repeal them. According to a December article on the website Al Monitor, Deputy Justice Minister Hussein al-Zuhairi stated during a dialogue with the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination that the Baha'i Faith was not a religion, emphasizing the government's commitment to legislation prohibiting the Baha'i Faith.

The KRG and the central government continued to provide increased protection to Christian churches during the Easter and Christmas holidays. Followers of the Baha'i and Yezidi faiths reported the KRG allowed them to observe their religious holidays and festivals without interference or intimidation. Provincial governments also continued to designate these as religious holidays in their localities.

Government policy continued to require Islamic instruction in public schools, but non-Muslim students were not required to participate. In most areas of the country, primary and secondary school curricula included three classes per week of Islamic education, including study of the Quran, as a graduation requirement for Muslim students. Christian religious education was included in the curricula of at least 150 public schools in Baghdad, Ninewa, and Kirkuk. Private Islamic religious schools continued to operate in the country, but had to obtain a license from the director general of private and public schools and pay annual fees.

In the IKR, private schools were required to pay a registration fee of 750,000 to 1.5 million dinars (\$660 to \$1,300) to the Ministry of Education or Ministry of Higher Education, depending on the type of school. To register with the KRG, private schools needed to provide information on the school's bylaws, number of students, size, location, facility and safety conditions, financial backing, and tax compliance, and undergo an inspection. 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.

The government continued not to require non-Muslim students to participate in religious instruction in public schools, but some non-Muslim students reported pressure to do so from instructors and classmates. Reports continued that some non-Muslim students felt obliged to participate because they could not leave the classroom during religious instruction. Christian and Yezidi leaders outside the IKR reported continued discrimination in education and lack of minority input on school curricula and language of instruction. By year's end, schools still had not universally adopted the 2015 Ministry of Education curriculum incorporating lessons of religious tolerance. Many Christians who spoke the Syriac language said it was their right to use and teach it to their children as a matter of religious freedom. Seeking to establish private Christian schools, the Chaldean church in Basrah said local authorities mandated the inclusion of Islamic religious instruction in their curricula for Muslim students.

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 was intended to accommodate Christian students. The curriculum did not contain religious or Quranic studies. The KRG MERA and Ministry of Education partnered with Harvard University to develop a religious studies curriculum that would present information on all recognized faiths from a nonsectarian, academic perspective to

replace the existing religion classes. The curriculum was still under development at year's end.

The central government extended by one year the contracts of several hundred Christian employees who faced violence in Baghdad in 2010. They were allowed to relocate from the south to the IKR and transfer their government jobs from the central government to the KRG, while the central government continued to pay their salaries.

There were reports of KRG authorities discriminating against minorities, including Turkomans, Arabs, Yezidis, Shabaks, and Christians, in territories claimed by both the KRG and the central government in northern Iraq. For example, courts rarely upheld Christians' legal complaints against Kurds regarding land and property disputes. The director general of Christian affairs in the KRG MERA said that of 59 long-pending property dispute cases between Christians and Kurds, the KRG courts had only ruled on five cases, although in four of the five they ruled in favor of Christian plaintiffs. In one such case in the Nahla Valley area of Dohuk, a court sentenced Kurds convicted of taking Christian-owned land to a three-month suspended sentence, a token fine, and a requirement the Kurds make a written pledge they would not encroach on the land again. The KRG MERA director general, however, said authorities made no attempt to follow up on the case, and some of the Kurds continued to occupy land the court ruled belonged to the Christian community. A land dispute dating from 2003 when the KRG seized 11,000 hectares (27,000 acres) of farmland near Ankawa owned by 220 Christian farmers for the construction of the Erbil International Airport remained unresolved.

Christian leaders reported the KRG continued to provide land and financial support for construction of new and renovation of existing structures for use as educational facilities, although budget cuts halted some projects. The KRG spent approximately 2.5 billion dinars (\$2.2 million) on the construction of an Armenian Apostolic church in the Ankawa neighborhood of Erbil, and another 500 million dinars (\$439,000) on a community center for the Assyrian Church of the East. The KRG said in 2017 that it planned to allocate land for a Jewish cultural center in Erbil, a Baha'i religious and cultural center near Erbil, and a Zoroastrian temple in Sulaimaniya. According to KRG MERA Director of Co-Existence Amir Othman, his ministry passed its recommendation for lands to the Ministry of Municipalities, which reviews such recommendations and allocates appropriate public land parcels, but by year's end, no land had been allocated for any of the three projects. The Zoroastrian representative in MERA said Ministry of Municipalities officials had refused to implement the government directives for religious reasons.

While there remained no legal bar to ministerial appointments for members of religious minorities, in practice there were few non-Muslims in the Council of Ministers (COM) or the KRG COM, a situation unchanged from the previous year. Members of minority religious communities continued to hold senior positions in the national parliament and central government, although minority leaders said they were still underrepresented in government appointments, in elected positions outside the COR, and in public sector jobs, particularly at the provincial and local levels. Minority leaders continued to say this underrepresentation limited minorities' access to government-provided economic opportunities. The Federal Supreme Court's nine members included Sunni and Shia Muslims and one Christian. Although there are no reliable statistics, minorities stated they believed they continued to be underrepresented in the ranks of police, senior military, and in intelligence and security services.

Some Sunni Muslims continued to speak about what they perceived as anti-Sunni discrimination by Shia government officials in retribution for the Sunnis' favored status and abuses against Shia during the Saddam Hussein regime. Sunnis said they continued to face discrimination in public sector employment as a result of de-Baathification, a process originally intended to target loyalists of the former regime. Sunnis and local NGOs said the government continued the selective use of the de-Baathification provisions of the law to render many Sunnis ineligible for choice government positions, but it did not do so to render former Shia Baathists ineligible. Some Sunnis said Sunnis were often passed over for choice government jobs or lucrative contracts from the Shia-dominated government because the Sunnis were allegedly accused of being Baathists who sympathized with ISIS ideology.

Although the IKP has 11 seats reserved for ethnic minority candidates, the law does not restrict who may 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 voters said these votes undermined the intended purpose of the nine minority quota seats and diluted the voice of minorities in government. Minority political party leaders said they were unsuccessful in their campaign to amend the law to restrict voting in quota seat races to voters of the same ethnicity of the candidate.

Human rights NGOs and Yezidi leaders stated KRG authorities discriminated against Yezidis by closing the Dohuk-Sinjar road and continuing to restrict commercial traffic after opening the road to passenger traffic in December. Yezidi

activists reported the deaths of several Yezidi women in Sinjar because of lack of access to medicine and medical care, primarily due to the road closure. Since the October 2017 withdrawal of Peshmerga from the Sinjar area, it was possible, although not necessarily safe, to access Sinjar from central government-controlled areas. KRG security forces, ISF, and the PMF had closed the road between the neighboring Christian towns of Telskuf and Batnaya, slowing the return of IDPs. A local priest in Telskuf said KRG security forces refused requests from humanitarian organizations to pass through their roadblock to conduct relief and reconstruction work in Batnaya. Authorities reopened the Telskuf-Batnaya road in October and the Dohuk-Sinjar road in December, but both roads remained closed to commercial traffic at year's end.

Christians said they continued to face discrimination that limited their economic opportunities, such as "taxation" on their goods transported from Mosul into the Ninewa Plain by the PMF Shabak Brigade. Sabean-Mandean and Christians continued to report fear of importing and distributing alcohol and spirits despite receiving permits. The legal 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 Muslim businessmen sometimes used Christians as front men to apply for these permits and operate the stores.

On March 21, the tomb of a Kaka'i religious leader was destroyed by an explosion in Daquq, south of Kirkuk. A local Kaka'i NGO said members of the PMF were responsible.

Kaka'i leaders said the central government's Shia Endowment had forcibly taken over several places of Kaka'i worship in Kirkuk and converted them into mosques.

In observance of World Religion Day on January 21, the then speaker of parliament hosted 350 government officials, ethnic and religious leaders, and the international community in a celebration to urge interfaith dialogue and promote religious pluralism. Although representatives from several religious minorities welcomed the event, they said it was unlikely discrimination against their communities would end anytime soon.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Mass graves containing victims of ISIS continued to be found. According to KRG MERA's Office of Yezidi Affairs, a total of 87 mass graves containing the bodies

of over 2,500 Yezidis had been found in Sinjar District and other predominantly Yezidi areas of Ninewa Province since 2014. On November 6, UNAMI and the United Nations Human Rights Office released a report documenting the existence of 202 mass graves in the provinces of Ninewa, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, and Anbar and cautioned there may be “many more.” The UN offices stated they believed the graves each held anywhere from eight to as many as “thousands” of bodies. On November 6, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said, “These graves contain the remains of those mercilessly killed for not conforming to [ISIS’s] twisted ideology and rule, including ethnic and religious minorities.” Estimates available to the UN ranged from 6,000 to more than 12,000 victims buried in these graves.

According to the KRG MERA director general of Christian affairs, ISIS abducted 150 Christians from the Batnaya, Qaraqosh, and Tal Kayf areas in 2014; their fate remained unclear at year’s end.

In April Syrian Democratic Forces in Raqqa, Syria rescued a young Christian woman kidnapped by ISIS in 2014 from Qaraqosh. She said she was sold four times to different ISIS fighters, each of whom raped her and subjected her to torture and other forms of mistreatment.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On July 23, three gunmen who KRG authorities said had links to a terrorist group forcibly entered a government building in downtown Erbil. Unable to gain entry to the Erbil governor’s office, they then killed a Christian employee whom authorities believed was targeted because of his religion before police killed the attackers.

In February several gunman shot and killed a Christian man in front of his house in Baghdad. According to Christian sources, the victim had received threats to stop working in the alcohol business near a Muslim neighborhood. In March local media reported the killing of a Christian family in Baghdad. Some Christian leaders, including Chaldean Catholic Cardinal Sako, said they considered the killing a hate crime. Others said the killers wanted to force Christian owners of prime real estate to surrender their property.

There were continued reports of societal violence, mainly by sectarian armed groups, in many parts of the country, but few reports of religious violence in the IKR. Non-Muslim minorities reported continued threats, pressure, and harassment to force them to observe Islamic customs. Kaka’i activists and religious leaders

reported harassment and discrimination by the PMF in Kirkuk and Diyala, who identified Kaka'i men by their distinctive mustaches. Sabeen-Mandean leaders continued to report threats, abuses, and robberies. In regular Friday sermons, Shia religious and government leaders urged PMF volunteers not to commit these abuses.

During May court proceedings, a judge demanded the Zoroastrian representative in the IKR MERA swear on the Quran before testifying. She refused and asked to swear on a copy of the Gathas, the hymns of Zarathustra, but the judge did not allow it.

In June media continued to report political parties, criminal networks, and some militia groups seized more than 30,000 Christian properties in Baghdad, as well as areas of Anbar, Babil, Basrah, Diyala, and Wasit with impunity, despite pledges by the prime minister's office to open investigations into the seizures.

In December, in response to the central government's announcement that Christmas would be an official Iraqi holiday, prominent Sunni cleric and self-proclaimed "Grand Mufti" of Iraq Abdul-Mehdi al-Sumaidaie issued a fatwa that Muslims should not take part in New Year celebrations or congratulate Christians during Christmas. Both the central government and the KRG Sunni Endowments rejected his fatwa and posted criticisms of it online.

Christians in the south and in PMF-controlled towns on the Ninewa Plain, as well as Sabeen-Mandean in Basrah, Dhi Qar, and Maysan Governorates, reported they continued to avoid celebrating their religious festivals when they coincided with Islamic periods of mourning, such as Ashura. There were continued reports that non-Muslim minorities 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 continual harassment. According to media and other sources, extensive security efforts helped to ensure that there were no violent incidents disrupting the large Shia commemorations of Ashura in Najaf and Karbala.

Minority religious leaders continued to report pressure on minority communities to cede land rights to their businesses unless they conformed to a stricter observance of Islamic precepts.

Leaders of non-Muslim communities said 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. Sunni Muslims reported continued discrimination based on a public perception the Sunni population sympathized with terrorist elements, including ISIS.

In November the Catholic Patriarchs of the East held a four-day conference in Baghdad to bring attention to the challenges threatening the survival of Christian communities in the region. Chaldean Patriarch Cardinal Sako, who hosted the meeting, said the patriarchs wanted to encourage “families to stay in our homeland keeping up our faith, identity, ethics, traditions, and language.” This was the first time the conference was held in the country. Catholic rites representatives included Maronite Patriarch Cardinal Beshara al-Rahi, Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Youssef Absi, Syriac Catholic Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan, the representative of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem Monsignor William Hanna Shomali, and Cardinal Sako, who delivered the opening speech.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. government continued to address at the highest levels a full range of religious freedom concerns in the country through frequent meetings with senior government officials, including Prime Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi and his predecessor former Prime Minister Haider Abadi, and through speeches and U.S. embassy coordination groups promoting religious and ethnic minority community stabilization and humanitarian assistance.

On December 11, President Trump signed the Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act. The act promotes justice for the victims and survivors of those minority communities, particularly Yazidis and Christians, targeted by ISIS. Embassy efforts centered on identifying the most pressing concerns of religious minorities – insecurity, lack of jobs, and road closures – and obtaining government and KRG commitments to assist these concerns. Efforts included agreeing to recruit minorities in two Emergency Response Battalions, one for Sinjar and one for the Ninewa Plain, and reopening roads connecting

persecuted religious communities to economic and urban centers. The embassy's interagency coordination group on minority stabilization also engaged with Yezidis, the KRG, 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, and medical supplies.

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 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 religious minorities and protection of their rights. On January 15, the Ambassador hosted an event to observe Religious Freedom Day that promoted religious pluralism and reconciliation. A wide range of representatives from the country's many religious communities attended, including the Chaldean Catholic Church, Syrian Church, Assyrian Catholic Church, Coptic Church, as well as members of the Yezidi, Kaka'i, Baha'i, Jewish, Sabeen-Mandean, and Islamic faiths (both Sunnis and Shia). On January 16, the embassy convened an interfaith dialogue with a former participant of two U.S.-sponsored exchange programs that focused on the promotion of religious diversity. On October 16, the embassy hosted the Deputy Secretary of State for a roundtable with representatives of Iraq's minority religious communities.

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. As part of the continued commitment by the Vice President, Secretary of State, and the USAID Administrator to support ethnic and religious minorities, the United States announced over \$178 million in U.S. foreign assistance to support these vulnerable communities in Iraq in October. This brought total U.S. assistance for this population to nearly \$300 million since fiscal year 2017, implemented by both the Department of State and USAID. These efforts, implemented in close partnership with local faith and community leaders, included USAID's Genocide Recovery and Persecution Response program totaling \$133 million, funding of approximately \$37 million to clear explosive remnants of war, \$8.5 million for social, economic, and political empowerment of minority communities, and \$2 million for the preservation of historic and cultural sites. In July USAID also appointed a Special Representative for Minority Assistance

Programs, based in Erbil, to oversee U.S. assistance for Iraq's minority communities.

Senior advisors to the Vice President accompanied the Ambassador to the Ninewa Plain to discuss with community leaders how the United States could improve support to endangered minorities recovering from ISIS' genocide campaign against them. In separate visits, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and the USAID Administrator visited the Ninewa Plain and met with Christian, Yezidi, and Shabak leaders to assure them of the U.S. government's commitment to preserve and support religious diversity through increased support to minority communities. The Ambassador, senior embassy officers, Consuls General in Erbil and Basrah, and the USAID Administrator's Special Representative for Minority Assistance Programs made regular visits to minority areas to meet with minority 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.

U.S. officials in Baghdad, Basrah, and Erbil also 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 Consuls General in Erbil and Basrah met leaders of minority religious groups and civil society groups to address their concerns, particularly regarding security and protection. Embassy officials met religious leaders on a regular basis to discuss broader religious freedom issues and to demonstrate U.S. interest in and support for resolving issues with the provision of assistance. In particular, they met with Yezidi, Christian, Shabak, Turkoman, Jewish, Sabeen-Mandean, Kaka'i, Baha'i, Zoroastrian, and other religious and minority leaders to promote reconciliation within their communities and to advocate for religious minority needs with the government.