

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Iraq improved incrementally in key areas, but remained concerning overall. Religious minorities in the Nineveh Plains and Sinjar faced major barriers to their safe return in the short term and their secure, ongoing presence in the long term. Although a coalition of Iraqi armed forces, Kurdish Peshmerga, U.S. military, and other multinational partners successfully ended the territorial threat of ISIS in late 2017, many of the areas that the terrorist group once controlled remained under- or uninhabited in 2019. Substantial humanitarian assistance from the United States and other international donors bolstered reconstruction and stabilization efforts in those areas, and yet tens of thousands of civilians from religious and ethnic minorities were still at serious risk. The majority of Iraqi Christians remained displaced and their challenges even after return have been significant, while Yazidis—500,000 of whom fled ISIS atrocities in 2014—still faced serious distress in 2019. Their collective trauma from ISIS atrocities remained largely unaddressed, typified by the fact that the fates of nearly 3,000 abducted Yazidi women and children are unknown. In a United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees survey in February, only 3 percent of Yazidi IDPs who were interviewed planned to return to Sinjar; there is little evidence that this number subsequently improved. Meanwhile, new sources of upheaval, including protests in Iraqi

cities and renewed multinational violence in neighboring northeastern Syria, highlighted the fragility of any improved stability in northwestern Iraq.

More than any other single factor, a lack of security, mainly due to the corrosive presence of largely Iranian-backed militias of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—*al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*, also known as Popular Mobilization Units (PMU)—continued to impede progress toward improved religious freedom conditions. The PMF continued to operate largely with impunity, despite nominal efforts to bring them under the oversight and accountability of the Iraqi armed forces. Some factions, such as the Iran-backed 30th (“Shabak”) and 50th (“Babylon”) brigades, have played an instrumental role in either making key towns in the area increasingly inhospitable to minority returnees, or limiting their movement to or from those areas. Some of those factions have continued to harass and threaten Christian returnees in Bartella, Qaraqosh, and elsewhere; for example, in September, the 30th Brigade placed a [curfew on Christians](#) in Bartella during the Shi’a Muslim commemoration of Ashura—an [inflammatory action](#) in a community already plagued by sectarian tensions. The behavior of those two brigades has been so destructive that in July the U.S. Department of the Treasury placed [Global Magnitsky sanctions](#) on both of their respective leaders, Waad Qado and Rayan al-Kildani.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Iraq on the U.S. Department of State’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- As part of high-priority bilateral relations, maintain pressure on the Iraqi government to implement its own stated policy to rein in the PMF, particularly those factions that continue to engage in sectarian violence; present specific obstacles to the return and rehabilitation of Yazidis, Christians, and other religious and ethnic components in northern Iraq; and/or intervene against the protest movement on behalf of Iranian interests;
- Impose targeted sanctions on additional PMF leaders who direct militia engagement in severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Highlight religious freedom as part of U.S. engagement with Iraqi President Barham Salih and the incoming prime minister, urging them to prioritize the rehabilitation, preservation, and representation of the country’s vulnerable religious and ethnic components; and
- Assist in the empowerment of Iraqi religious and ethnic minorities—through their political and civic representatives as well as religious leaders—to initiate and advocate for their own interests, including opening a broad discussion into governance and a representational security framework for the Nineveh Plains area.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission delegation visit:** [Baghdad in July-August 2019 to participate in commemoration of 2014 Yazidi genocide under ISIS](#)
- **Hearing:** [Religious Minorities’ Fight to Remain in Iraq](#)
- **Policy Update:** [Protecting Religious Minorities in Northern Iraq](#)

Background

Iraq is a [religiously and ethnically diverse](#) country, although that diversity has diminished as a result of the country's recent history of political instability, sectarian violence, and Islamist insurgency. Most Iraqis identify as Muslim, consisting of around 64–69 percent Shi'a Muslim and 29–34 percent Sunni Muslim. The country is also home to an estimated 200,000 Christians from a variety of Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant denominations—who remain from a pre-2003 population of around 1.5 million—as well as up to 700,000 Yazidis, most of whom remain internally displaced.

Religion and ethnicity are often bound closely together in the Iraqi context. Many of the country's smaller communities—such as Sabeen-Mandaeans, Turkmen, Kak'ais, and Shabaks—have in recent years faced serious threats that cannot be easily defined as exclusively religious or ethnic. Many of these smaller communities experienced severe hardship under ISIS rule or fleeing from it—including Yazidis and Turkmen, from whom ISIS abducted thousands of women and children into sexual and domestic slavery—and they still struggle to find their place in a post-ISIS Iraq. Some of their internally displaced people (IDPs) have found stable if imperfect refuge alongside indigenous communities within Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) territory; others have sought to return to their traditional towns and villages that are slowly but persistently rebuilding and recovering.

Post-ISIS Rehabilitation of Religious Minorities to Northern Iraq

Sources in Iraq told USCIRF in 2019 that only an estimated 30–50 percent of the population of Chaldeans, Assyrians, and other Christians have likely returned to their communities of origin since the fall of ISIS in late 2017, mostly from refuge in Erbil and other parts of KRG territory. Meanwhile, most Yazidi survivors of ISIS atrocities still languished in IDP camps in Duhok, atop Mount Sinjar, and elsewhere in exile. Their historic homeland of Sinjar remained mostly inhospitable for returnees, as PMF checkpoints made the road between there and Duhok nearly impassable at times, the crippled local economy hampered livelihood opportunities, the former lifeline of Mosul for goods and services remained inaccessible, and fear of an ISIS resurgence lingered. To make matters worse, Turkish airstrikes have repeatedly targeted positions of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and its allies in and near Sinjar since 2017, including [the most recent such incidents](#) in November 2019 and January 2020. The threat of more such airstrikes has contributed to the fragile state of security and stability in that area.

The Yazidi community was also haunted throughout 2019 by the [absence of justice](#) for the atrocities of five years earlier. Since 2017, Iraqi courts have tried thousands of suspected ISIS fighters on charges of terrorism, most often in large groups of mostly Sunni Muslim defendants on the basis of forced confessions rather than evidence. In fact, a rare bright spot in Iraq's transitional justice context came in the form of [efforts by courts](#) in Nineveh Province to rely on a higher standard of evidence rather than coerced confessions, the latter of which remained alarmingly prevalent elsewhere in the country. However, the judiciary has ignored Yazidi leaders' [demands for](#)

[war crimes trials](#) of ISIS fighters and commanders. This lack of justice is also closely tied to international efforts to document the atrocities, as the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (UNITAD) began work in March [to uncover mass graves](#) in and around Sinjar that hold the remains of Yazidi victims of ISIS violence.

Other Religious Freedom Issues across Iraq

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in KRG territory remained largely consistent relative to prior years, in that the Muslim majority and various religious minorities share reasonably free conditions relative to the rest of Iraq, despite some lingering issues such as the unresolved status of some Christian properties. Relations between the KRG and the Iraqi Federal Government continued to improve following tensions surrounding the failed 2017 independence referendum, allowing for the resumption of joint anti-ISIS operations and other areas of cooperation—which lessen the potential for the sorts of social and political instability in disputed areas that have historically represented serious threats to religious freedom in Iraq.

In Iraqi Federal Government territory, there were few signs of change from prior years in regard to reconciliation among Shi'a and Sunni Muslims or other religious groups, or specific reforms to promote religious inclusivity, such as the revision of the public school curriculum. Blasphemy and apostasy laws likewise remained unchanged, and there was no movement toward extending formal recognition or freedom of worship to smaller religious groups such as Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2019, U.S. policy with the most direct relevance to religious freedom conditions in Iraq mainly involved humanitarian aid and targeted sanctions. As of October, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) [had allocated](#) nearly \$400 million to helping ISIS victims recover and rebuild through its Iraqi and international nongovernmental partners. The U.S. government also increasingly used punitive measures to single out Iraqi PMF leaders, corrupt politicians, and other individuals who have played a particularly destructive role in abusing religious freedom and/or broader human rights. In addition to the two PMF leaders noted earlier, in July the Treasury Department listed as "Specially Designated Nationals" Nawfal Hammadi al-Sultan and Ahmed al-Jubouri, two politicians whose negligence and corruption have negatively impacted religious minorities and other constituents in Nineveh and Salah al-Din provinces, respectively. In December, the Treasury Department [extended Global Magnitsky](#) sanctions to another corrupt politician and three additional individuals who, as leaders of armed proxies for Iran, have [directly contributed to violence](#) against civilian protestors who participated in anti-Iran and antigovernment demonstrations beginning in October. On January 3, 2020, just after the reporting period, a U.S. airstrike in Baghdad [killed two figures](#) who were central to PMF operations: General Qassem Soleimani, who headed the Qods Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and [Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis](#), deputy commander of the PMF and founder of the Kata'ib Hezbollah militia.