

# IRAQ 2019 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 Sabean-Mandeans, but does not explicitly mention followers of other religions or atheists. The law prohibits the practice of the Baha’i Faith, although the law is generally not enforced. The law bans “*takfiri*” sects such as Wahhabism that declare as apostates Muslims who practice a less austere form of Islam. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) does not enforce the federal ban on Baha’i practitioners and recognizes the Baha’i Faith as a religion. Restrictions on freedom of religion, as well as violence against and harassment of minority groups committed by government security forces, remained widespread outside the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), according to religious leaders and representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). More than 600 demonstrators were killed in protests against the central government in Baghdad and southern provinces in October and November. The protesters were mostly young Shia Muslims, but minority religious communities, such as Chaldean Catholics, expressed their support for the movement, according to news reports. Sunni Muslims in Anbar were detained by Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) for expressing their support of the protests on social media, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW) reporting. According to human rights organizations, although the Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC) and Ministry of Interior security forces were implicated in committing gross human rights abuses, the federal government held no one responsible for killings, illegal detentions, and torture of protestors. NGO leaders said the government continued to use the antiterrorism law to detain individuals without due process. Predominantly Sunni provinces, such as Anbar, Salah al-Din, Kirkuk and Ninewa, reported fewer security incidents compared with 2018. In June a Sunni parliamentarian (MP) from Diyala Province stated Sunnis in his province were being forcibly displaced by government-affiliated Shia militia groups, resulting in systematic demographic change along the Iraq-Iran border. Community leaders continued to state the national identity card law mandating children with only one Muslim parent, including children born of rape, be listed as Muslim resulted in forced designation as Muslim. Yezidis, Christians, and local and international NGOs reported continued verbal harassment and physical abuse by members of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a state-sponsored organization composed of more than 40 mostly Shia militias originally formed to combat ISIS, including at checkpoints

and in and around PMF-controlled towns on the Ninewa Plain. Christians said the PMF controlled the trade roads in the Ninewa Plain, forcing merchants to pay bribes, and controlled real estate in Christian areas. Sources said some government officials sought to facilitate demographic change by providing land and housing for Shia and Sunni Muslims to move into traditionally Christian areas in the Ninewa Plain, Sunni areas in Diyala Province, and Sunni areas in Babil Province. Representatives of minority religious communities said the central government did not generally interfere with religious observances, but local authorities sometimes verbally harassed them.

According to security sources in Khanaqin, in May ISIS attacked a Kurdish village and killed four individuals in two attacks. According to the Directorate General of Yezidi Affairs in the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs, approximately 3,000 Yezidis remained missing following ISIS's assault on northern Iraq in 2014. The central government's Martyrs Foundation announced that during the year, 18 more mass graves had been discovered throughout the country; they contained victims of al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Baathist regime, some remains dating back decades. In March the Directorate of Mass Graves, with the support of the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Daesh/ISIL (UNITAD), began exhumation of a mass grave of ISIS victims, discovered in 2017, in the village of Kocho, the first such exhumation in the majority-Yezidi district of Sinjar.

Although media and human rights organizations said security conditions in many parts of the country improved from 2018, reports of societal violence mainly by pro-Iran Shia militias continued. Throughout the youth-led reformist protests that began in October, many demonstrators were kidnapped, wounded, and killed by masked individuals and armed groups reportedly affiliated with Iran, such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, and Kataib Hezbollah. Non-Muslim minorities reported continued abductions, threats, pressure, and harassment to force them to observe Islamic customs. Christian priests, who sought the withdrawal of the Iranian-backed Shabak Shia PMF 30th Brigade (30th Brigade), reportedly received threats from Iran-aligned Shabak individuals on social media. According to a police investigation, two Shia Shabak men assaulted two elderly women belonging to a minority religious group in Bartella in May. Police arrested the two men, who said they believed the women would be easy targets because of their religious affiliation. The attackers were reportedly affiliated with the 30th Brigade.

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 Ambassador and other embassy and consulate general officials continued to meet 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 religious minorities. On July 18, speaking at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom held in Washington, DC, the Vice President announced the U.S. government had provided \$340 million for assistance in northern Iraq, focusing on helping minority religious communities previously targeted by ISIS. He said an additional \$3 million would provide shelter and clean water to communities victimized by ISIS. Embassy officials met with Shia, Sunni, and other religious group representatives to underscore U.S. support for their communities and 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, Faily (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.

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 in the north of the country. According to Christian leaders, the Christian population has declined over the past 17 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 continue to report that 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 Sabean-Mandean community vary. According to Sabean-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. Most Sunni Shabak and some Shia Shabak reside in Ninewa. Armenian leaders report a population of approximately 7,000 Armenian Christians. According to Kaka'i (known as Yarsani or Ahl al-Haq in Iran) activists, their distinct ethnic and religious community has approximately 120,000 to 150,000 members and has long been located in the Ninewa Plain and in villages southeast of Kirkuk, as well as in Diyala and Erbil.

There are fewer than six adult members in the Baghdad Jewish community, according to a local Jewish community leader. In the IKR, there are 70 to 80 Jewish families, according to the Jewish representative in the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA). There are possibly more, as some Jewish families do not openly acknowledge their religion for fear of persecution, according to the KRG MERA, and NGO sources. According to the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs, there are approximately 60 Zoroastrian families in the IKR.

According to the International Organization for Migration, as of December, nearly 1.5 million persons remain displaced within the country, predominantly in Erbil, Dohuk, and Ninewa Provinces, compared with 1.8 million persons at the end of 2018. Population movements are multidirectional, with some persons fleeing their homes and others returning home. According to the KRG's Joint Crisis Coordination Center in the KRG, 40 percent of internally displaced persons (IDPs) are Sunni Arabs, 30 percent Yezidis, 13 percent Kurd (of several religious affiliations), and 7 percent Christians. Other religious minorities comprise the remaining 10 percent.

## **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, such as Christians, Yezidis, and Sabean-Mandeans, but it does not explicitly mention followers of other religions or atheists. Law 105 of 1970 prohibits the practice of the Baha’i Faith and prescribes 10 year’s 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.

Law 32 of 2016 bans the Baath Party, and also prohibits “*takfiri*” organizations, such as al-Qa’ida and ISIS, that declare as apostates Muslims who practice a less austere form of Islam. 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 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 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 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.

For the practice of unrecognized religious groups other than Baha'is – including Wahhabi Islam, Zoroastrianism, 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.

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-Mandaeism, Zoroastrianism, Yarsanism, and the Baha'i Faith.

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 (25 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 Office of the Prime Minister, organizes a lottery 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: 3.7 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,

carrying out a lottery to choose the pilgrims for official Hajj visas allotted to the IKR.

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 48 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, according to a 2018 study by the Danish Immigration Service. The only religions that may be listed on the national identity card application are Christian, Sabeian-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, Sabeian-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.

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. 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 Sabean-Mandean; one for an ethnic Shabak; and one for a Faili Kurd from Wasit. Usually one of the Council of Representatives (COR) rapporteur (administrative) positions is designated for a Christian MP 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.

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 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**

More than 600 demonstrators were killed in mass protests against the central government in Baghdad and southern provinces in October and November. According to news reports, the protesters were mostly young Shia, but minority religious communities, such as Chaldean Catholics, expressed their support for the movement. Human Rights Watch also documented examples of Sunnis in Anbar being detained by ISF for expressing their support of the protests on social media.

The reports stated, however, that there was no evidence that members of minority religions taking part in the protests were specifically targeted by security forces suppressing the protests. According to human rights organizations, including HRW, although the PMC and Ministry of Interior forces were implicated in committing gross human rights abuses, the federal government held no one responsible for killings, illegal detentions, and torture of protestors. In October journalists reported that authorities issued arrest warrants for 130 activists and journalists for covering the demonstrations. The warrants were based on the terrorism law; however, reportedly the real reason for the arrest warrants was their coverage of the demonstrations taking place in Shia-dominant provinces of the country.

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 arbitrary detentions of young Sunni men on suspicion of ISIS links.

According to international human rights organizations, some Shia militias, including some under the PMF umbrella, continued to commit physical abuses and were again implicated in several attacks on Sunni civilians, allegedly to avenge ISIS crimes against Shia. Following the return of central government control in Kirkuk in 2017, Kurds, Turkomans, Kaka'i, Christians, and other minorities faced abuses by PMF and ISF that included violence and forced displacement by PMF and ISF.

In June MP Raad al-Dahlaki, a Sunni from Diyala Province, warned of forced displacement of Sunnis in Diyala. Al-Dahlaki stated government-affiliated Shia militia groups intimidated the Sunni population in the province, resulting in a systematic demographic change along the border with Iran. There were reports that gunmen attacked the village of Abu Al-Khanzir in the province, killing three members of the same family and prompting a wave of displacement from the village.

Sources said some government officials sought 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 Bartalla Subdistrict, Sunni areas in Diyala Province, and Sunni areas in Babil Province, including Jurf al-Sakhar District.

In addition to the Christian denominations recognized by the government, there were 14 registered evangelical Christian and other Protestant churches in the KRG, compared with 11 in 2018: 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.

Representatives of minority religious communities 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 again reported abuse, harassment, and delays at numerous checkpoints operated by various PMF units, including the 30th Brigade in Qaraqosh, Bartalla, and Karamles, and the 50th “Babylon” Brigade in Batnaya and Tal Kayf, impeding movement in and around several Christian towns on the Ninewa Plain. Christians in Bartalla said they felt threatened by the actions of the Shabak 30th Brigade, such as deploying forces in Christian areas, establishing its headquarters in the Christian sub-district of Bartalla, controlling the trade roads in the Ninewa Plain by establishing check points, forcing merchants to pay bribes, controlling real estate in Christian areas, and other forms of harassment of Christians and Sunni Arabs.

Christian religious leaders continued to publicly accuse the 30th Brigade of verbal harassment of Christians in Bartalla and elsewhere in Hamdaniya District of Ninewa. Members of the Christian community in Bartalla said activities of the 30th Brigade threatened their way of life and could change the area’s demographics. Local residents also said militias posted pictures of Iranian Ayatollah Khamenei and former Quds Force Commander Qassim Suleimani on shops in Bartalla, as well as Iraqi militia leaders such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq Secretary General Qais al-Khazali and former PMF Deputy Commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. They also stated that the 30th Brigade refused to comply with government orders to withdraw from checkpoints in the Ninewa Plain. Sources said Shabak individuals threatened priests over social media after the priests sought the withdrawal of the brigade from the area on social media. Local sources said six Shabak Sunni families left their home in Bashiqa District because the 30th Brigade verbally harassed them and pressured them to sell part of their lands. Kaka’i activists and religious leaders reported continued verbal harassment and

discrimination by the PMF in Kirkuk and Diyala, who identified Kaka'i men by their distinctive mustaches.

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. The Yezidi religion traditionally required a child to have two Yezidi parents to be considered Yezidi. 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 the 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.

According to Zoroastrian leaders, there were no reported cases of discrimination against them in the IKR during the year. They continued to state, however, that their religion was listed as “Islam” on their federal identification cards, a common problem reported by non-Christian religious minorities.

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 child as Muslim or to have the child remain undocumented by federal authorities, denying them the ability to legally convert from Islam. Remaining undocumented would affect 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 receive higher allotments than those with undocumented children.

According to Christian and other minority community leaders, some Shabak MPs, including Hunain Qado, with the support of some of some Shia elements in the central government, continued to direct the 30th Brigade to harass Christians, drive out the area's dwindling Christian population, and allow Muslims to settle in the area's traditionally Christian town centers. Christians in Tal Kayf said the nominally Christian but majority Shia Arab PMF 50th “Babylon” Brigade actively continued to facilitate the settlement of Sunni Arab and Shia Shabak populations in that town, but it no longer blocked Christians from returning to the area.

In Ninewa Province, some Shabak MPs in the COR continued to advocate for the provision of land grants in accordance with a 2017 federal law granting land to the families of mostly Shia Muslim PMF victims who fought ISIS. Throughout the year, according to media and local news reports, Hamdaniya District Mayor Essam Behnam resisted political pressure at both the federal and provincial levels to issue such land grants in Hamdaniya. In 2018 Behnam suspended the grants in a historically Christian majority district, citing the constitution's prohibition of forced demographic change. During the year, government construction of large housing development projects on government-owned land in the outskirts of Bartalla continued. Christian community leaders continued to express concern that all the future occupants of this housing would be Shabak and Arab Muslims not native to Bartalla.

During the year, the Office of the Prime Minister created a committee of security officials and Christian religious leaders to return all Christian properties in Ninewa to their Christian owners. The committee returned tens of houses to their Christian owners and remained active as of the end of year. Reportedly, no similar committee was formed to help return properties in Baghdad or other provinces. According to Christian MP Yonadum Kanna, he and other Christian leaders worked individually to help Christians return to their homes; he said he managed to return 180 homes during the year.

During the year, the PMF Imam Ali Brigade continued to block the return of the members of the Yezidi Sinjar District Council and the mayor to Sinjar City from their temporary location in Dohuk, notwithstanding an official letter from the Office of the Prime Minister provided in 2018 that ordered their return.

Some Yezidi and Christian leaders continued to report physical abuse and verbal harassment by KRG Peshmerga and Asayish forces in the KRG-controlled portion of Ninewa; some leaders said the majority of such cases were motivated more by territorial disputes rather than religious discrimination.

According to multiple sources, many alleged Sunni ISIS sympathizers or their families whom government forces and militia groups had expelled in 2018 from their homes in several provinces had not returned home by year's end. Some of these IDPs said PMF groups, including Saraya al-Khorasani and Kata'ib Hezbollah, continued to block their return.

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 between 2,900 and 3,000 Yezidis, mainly women and children, remained missing in and outside the country. Approximately 150 Christians also remained missing. According to the KRG MERA, as of October more than 3,500 Yezidis had escaped, been rescued, or were released from ISIS captivity since 2014.

As of August the KRG Yezidi Rescue Office, established by then-KRG prime minister Nechirvan Barzani, had spent approximately \$5 million since its inauguration in 2014 to rescue captive Yezidis from 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 Yezidis activists and officials, the Yezidis were afraid to return to Sinjar because of the continuing Turkish airstrikes targeting the PKK. In November a Turkish airstrike hit the local headquarters of Yezidi PKK fighters in Sinjar, called the People's Protection Units (also known as YBS), killing or injuring 20 of them.

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 the IKR, those not identifying as Kurdish said actions such as obtaining a residency card or a driver's license were challenging.

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 the ISF returned to the Sunni Endowment the property of a Sunni mosque in Mosul, confiscated by PMF militia in 2018. The Shia Endowment's seizure of property owned by the Sunni Endowment continued to create tension with Sunnis in Mosul. One unidentified group placed banners throughout Mosul with the hashtag #OurWaqf [religious endowment] is our Red Line.

At year's end, the central government had not opened an investigation of the alleged ISF and PMF destruction of the second century tomb in Qaraqosh of religious notable Youhana al-Delimi, despite a lawsuit filed by Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Dawood Matti Sharaf in 2017. According to Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Sharaf, the government had neglected to address the issue.

Advocacy groups and religious minority representatives reported increased emigration. According to estimates, including those cited by several Christian MPs, the monthly number of Christian families leaving the country, including the

IKR, ranged from 10 to 22. A director of an Assyrian NGO reported four Syriac language schools remained closed in Dohuk due to lack of students.

Some Yezidis and Christians continued to maintain their own militias. 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. Some representatives of religious minority groups, such as Yezidi and Sabean-Mandean MPs, 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.

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; however, during the year, there were no court challenges lodged 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 the Baha'i and Yezidi faiths reported the KRG allowed them without interference or intimidation to observe their religious holidays and festivals. Provincial governments also continued to designate festivals as religious holidays in their localities.

Government policy continued to require Islamic instruction in public schools outside the IKR, but non-Muslim students were not required to participate. In most areas of the country, primary and secondary school curricula continued to include three classes per week of Islamic education, including study of the Quran, as a graduation requirement for Muslim students. 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 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.

In the IKR, private schools were required to pay a registration fee of 750,000 to 1.5 million dinars (\$660-\$1,300) to the Ministry of Education or Ministry of Higher

Education, depending on the type of school. The KRG subsidized tuition by approximately 25 percent. 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.

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, some schools still did not utilize elements of the universally adopted 2015 Ministry of Education curriculum incorporating lessons of religious tolerance. Other than making small changes to the curriculum, observers stated that the Ministry of Education did not have a clear strategy to implement the rest of the religious tolerance curriculum.

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 continued to partner 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 – an effort that continued through year's end.

The central government again extended by two years 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 again 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 the northern part of the country.

Christian leaders reported the KRG continued to provide land and financial support for new construction and renovation of existing structures for use as educational

facilities, although budget cuts halted some projects. The KRG MERA built four churches and one Christian center during the year.

While there remained no legal bar to ministerial appointments for members of religious minorities, 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 two 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, 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 continued to include Sunni and Shia Muslims and one Christian. Although there were no reliable statistics available, minorities stated 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 they were often passed over for choice government jobs or lucrative contracts by the Shia-dominated government because the Sunnis were allegedly accused of being Baathists who sympathized with ISIS ideology.

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 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.

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 Brigade. Sabeen-Mandeans 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 the continuing practice of Muslim businessmen using Christians as front men to apply for these permits and operate the stores.

During the year, the Kaka’i community reported it controlled all of its places of worship. In 2018 Kaka’i leaders had reported that the central government’s Shia Endowment had forcibly taken over several places of Kaka’i worship in Kirkuk, Diyala, and Baghdad, converting them into mosques.

In September the KRG announced the closure of a restaurant named the “Hitler Restaurant,” located outside Dohuk. The KRG stated that “Nazism and racism would not be tolerated in the autonomous Kurdish region and such actions are against the law.” The KRG’s Department of Martyrs and Anfal Affairs later released a statement calling for expanded laws to punish genocide denial in the KRG.

### **Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**

According to security sources in Khanaqin, in May ISIS attacked a Kurdish village and killed four individuals in two attacks.

Mass graves containing victims of ISIS continued to be found. According to KRG MERA’s Office of Yezidi Affairs and the GOI’s Martyrs’ Foundation in Baghdad, by year’s end, a total of 81 mass graves 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 November 2018, the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq and the UN Human Rights Office documented the existence of 202 mass graves in the provinces of Ninewa, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, and Anbar. In December the Martyrs Foundation announced that 18 more mass graves had been discovered during the year throughout the country, containing victims of al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Baathist Regime, some dating back decades. In March the national government, with the support of UNITAD, began exhumation of a mass grave of ISIS victims in the village of Kocho, discovered in 2017, the first such exhumation in Sinjar District.

### **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, mainly by sectarian armed groups, in many parts of 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 improved from 2018, reports of societal violence mainly by pro-Iran Shia militias continued. Throughout the protests that began in October, many activists were killed, wounded, and kidnapped reportedly for political reasons by masked individuals and armed groups affiliated with Iran, such as AAH, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, and Kataib Hezbollah. Non-Muslim minorities reported continued 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. Religious leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the head of the Shia Marjaiya in Najaf, called for the protection of minorities in a Friday sermon. Political and religious leader Ammar Al-Hakim, the head of the Hikma Party, also called for the protection of religious minorities.

According to media, the Yezidi Supreme Spiritual Council issued a statement in April appearing to accept children born of ISIS rape into the community; days later, however, the council issued a second statement clarifying it was referring to children born of Yezidi parents and kidnapped by ISIS, but not children born of rape.

Christian priests, who sought the withdrawal of the 30th Brigade, reportedly received threats from Iran-aligned Shabak individuals on social media. According to a police investigation, two Shia Shabak men assaulted two elderly women belonging to a minority religious group in Bartella in May. Police arrested the two men, who said they believed the women would be easy targets because of their religious affiliation. The attackers were reportedly affiliated with the 30th Brigade.

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 they coincided with Shia 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 continued to ensure that there were no violent incidents disrupting the large Shia commemorations of Ashura in Najaf and Karbala.

In an August 6 interview with the *National Review* on the fifth anniversary of the ISIS invasion of northern Iraq, Archbishop Bashar Warda of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Erbil said, “Christianity in Iraq is perilously close to extinction... Those of us who remain must be ready to face martyrdom.”

Based on Iraqi media reports, there was increasing social recognition of the genocide ISIS committed against the Yazidis. Cross-sectarian genocide commemoration events took place two consecutive years in a row. The KRG marked the genocide’s anniversary with a commemoration ceremony in Dohuk with participants including then-IKR president Barzani, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, Yazidi leader Mir Hazim Beg, KRG ministers, diplomats, and genocide survivors. The same day, the Ninewa Provincial Council also commemorated the anniversary of the genocide in Sinjar. The IKR parliament passed a resolution recognizing August 3 as Yazidi Genocide Remembrance Day.

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.

Sunni Muslims reported continued discrimination based on a public perception the Sunni population sympathized with terrorist elements, including ISIS.

During the year, with the stated purpose “To support the faithful and encourage them to stay in their homeland,” the Syriac Catholic Church re-established a diocese for the Kurdistan region. To mark the occasion, the Syriac Catholic

patriarch celebrated Mass at the Queen of Peace Syriac Catholic Church in Erbil on August 24.

In Baghdad on February 18, the University of London's SOAS Jewish Music Institute featured Baghdadi folk songs and lullabies with British-born musician Carol Isaacs, of Iraqi Jewish origin. Titled "The Wolf of Baghdad," the presentation was a personal familial audiovisual journey, an effort to revive Iraq's vanishing Jewish community that formed one-third of Baghdad's population in the 1940s. In December members of the Jewish community from the IKR and abroad gathered in the town of Al-Qosh in the Nineveh Plains to celebrate Hanukkah.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The embassy 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 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.

Embassy efforts centered on identifying the most pressing concerns of religious minorities – insecurity, lack of employment, and road closures – and obtaining government and KRG commitments to assist these concerns. Efforts included promoting recruitment of minorities 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, 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 protection interventions, education, and livelihoods.

On July 18, the Department of the Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated two militia figures pursuant to Executive Order 13818: Rayan al-Kildani, the leader of the PMF 50th Brigade, and Waad Qado, the leader of the 30th Brigade, along with two former Iraqi governors, Nawfal Hammadi al-Sultan and Ahmed al-Jabouri. The OFAC press release stated, "Many of the corruption-

and abuse-related actions committed by these sanctioned individuals occurred in areas where persecuted religious communities are struggling to recover from the horrors inflicted on them by ISIS. Therefore, today's sanctions demonstrate solidarity with all Iraqis who oppose corruption and human rights abuse undertaken by public officials and underscore the Administration's commitment to support the recovery of persecuted religious communities in Iraq."

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 religious minorities and 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. On July 18, speaking at the Ministerial to Advance International Religious Freedom held in Washington, D.C., the Vice President stated, "We announced a new initiative to ensure that religious freedom and religious pluralism would prosper across the Middle East: the Genocide Recovery and Persecution Response Program. And to date, I'm proud to report the United States has provided more than \$340 million in aid to faith and ethnic minority communities persecuted by ISIS in Iraq and throughout the region." The Vice President said an additional \$3 million would provide shelter and clean water to ISIS-targeted communities.

The Ambassador, other senior embassy officers, the Consul General in Erbil, and the U.S. Agency for International Development Administrator's Special Representative for Minority Assistance Programs 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.

Working with the local business sector, the U.S. Agency for International Development organized the Ninewa Investment Forum on December 4-5 in Erbil to connect local businesses with investors from around the world, including the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. The event featured panel discussions that raised awareness of the business opportunities and challenges that exist in Ninewa, including among religious minority communities.

U.S. officials in Baghdad 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 Consul General in Erbil met leaders of minority religious groups and civil society groups to address their 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 and to advocate for religious minority needs with the government.