

KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Iraq remained precarious for religious minorities. Both the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) and the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) made some overtures toward the country’s diverse religious communities. However, Iraqis of many faith backgrounds, especially religious minorities, faced ongoing political marginalization by the government as well as abuse by both government-affiliated and nonstate actors. The IFG and KRG’s continued failure to resolve longstanding jurisdictional disputes over certain northern territories created a power vacuum filled by armed groups, including the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), defensive Yazidi fighters and Yazidis groomed into PMF [service](#), and remnants of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The IFG’s lack of ability or will to curb the increasing power of PMF units remained among the most significant [threats](#) to religious freedom. In 2023, several of these largely Shi’a Muslim and sometimes Iran-backed militias expanded their influence among top officials in Baghdad and within communities throughout the country. Early in the year, [Kataib Babiliyoun](#), a nominally Christian PMF brigade supported by the Shi’a majority of southern Iraq, accelerated its campaign to control Christian properties in the Nineveh Plains region of the north. In March, members of the indigenous Chaldean, Assyrian, and Syriac churches staged protests in Al-Hamdaniya to resist this takeover. PMF brigades around the country also asserted their power via harassment, physical abuse, detention, extortion, and checkpoint interrogation of religious minorities.

Although Iraq’s parliament took some initiatives to advance human rights, such as introducing a draft law against enforced disappearance, it also considered laws that might curtail freedom of religion or belief. The draft Freedom of Expression and Cybercrimes

[bills](#) contained vague language that prosecutors could use [against](#) atheists, Shi’a Muslim theological dissenters, Sunni Muslims, other religious minorities, women, and sexual and gender [minorities](#) for defaming religious sects or leaders or expressing opinions deemed contrary to “public morals” or “public order.”

Like their IFG counterparts, leaders in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) took some steps in support of religious minorities. For example, in June, the U.S. Consulate in Erbil [praised](#) the KRI government’s efforts to find and rescue the estimated 2,700 Iraqi Yazidi girls and women kidnapped by ISIS who are still missing. However, Christian residents of the KRI decried authorities’ refusal to settle claims for confiscated properties, threats to prosecute a [blasphemy](#) complaint against a clergy member in Duhok, and tolerance or use of militia checkpoints to harass and restrict the movements of Christians near Alqosh.

At year’s end, the IFG’s [implementation](#) of the Yazidi Survivors Law was still inadequate, and the 2020 United Nations (UN)-brokered agreement between the IFG and KRG to stabilize Yazidis’ homelands in Sinjar remained essentially unfulfilled. Some Yazidi survivors of ISIS’s 2014 genocide raised their children in displacement camps for fear of returning to an area ruled by competing militias, subject to Turkey’s periodic military [strikes](#), and [lacking](#) crucial infrastructure and employment prospects. In April 2023, a social media [campaign](#) spread hate speech against Yazidis, seeking to incite violence against them. The IFG’s 2023 budget law established a reconstruction fund of \$38 million for Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains but faced criticism for failing to apportion adequate amounts. Religious minorities continued to cite the perilous security situation as a key reason for their internal displacement and reluctant emigration.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Iraq on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on PMF and other militia units or leaders responsible for 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;
- Assist Iraq with building institutional capacity to safeguard vulnerable

religious minority communities by creating or improving independent oversight mechanisms for PMF and other militias and by integrating religiously affiliated militias; and

- Use diplomatic channels to encourage the IFG and KRG to help kidnapped and displaced Yazidi genocide survivors return and reintegrate into Iraqi society; to resolve conflicts over disputed areas per Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution while including all religious and ethnic minorities; to comprehensively implement the Sinjar

Agreement with full inclusion of the Yazidi community; and to conduct a national and regional dialogue on potential constitutional and statutory reforms to more effectively protect religious freedom and ensure religious communities’ political representation.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise religious freedom concerns in Iraq through hearings, letters, and delegations and by linking development funding to Iraqi officials delivering on their promises to religious minority communities.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Iraq](#)
- **Hearing:** [Religious Minorities and Governance in Iraq](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Commemorates the Ninth Anniversary of the Yazidi Genocide](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Iraq](#)

Background

Article 2 of the [federal constitution](#) establishes Islam as the official religion and affirms “the full religious rights to freedom of belief and religious practice.” However, personal status laws restrict conversion from Islam, prohibit Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men, and reclassify Christian minors as Muslim if a parent converts to Islam. A 1970s-era ban on the Baha’i religion remained in place, as did statutes criminalizing [blasphemy](#). Some Evangelical Christians in both IFG areas and the KRI reported each government’s intolerance of perceived proselytizing activities and refusal to officially recognize their denominations.

Out of an estimated [population](#) of 41 million, 95–98 percent of Iraqis are Muslim, with Shi’as constituting 61–64 percent and Sunnis 29–34 percent. Christians of all denominations, including Chaldean and other Catholics, the Assyrian Church of the East, Syriac Orthodox, and Evangelical Protestants, together comprise about one percent of the population. The Jewish [community](#) of Iraq is virtually nonexistent following decades of government discrimination and expulsion.

The KRI and other territories in the north are home to several indigenous religious and ethnic groups, including Christians, Yazidis, Kaka’is, Sabaeen Mandeans, Turkmen, and Shabaks. Minority communities include internally displaced persons (IDPs) from elsewhere in the region or greater Iraq. Some religious minorities voiced apprehension over the IFG’s [closure](#) of IDP camps and aim of reintegrating not only IDPs from vulnerable religious groups but also IDPs with family connections to ISIS fighters who committed atrocities against minorities.

Political Representation of Religious Communities

Entrenched sectarianism jeopardized relations among ethnoreligious political groups, including Iran-linked Shi’a Muslim parties and their Shi’a rivals, Sunni Muslim politicians of both Arab and Kurdish background, and religious minority groups with few allotted parliamentary quota seats. In November 2023, the Federal Supreme Court ruled to end the parliamentary speakership of Mohammed Al-Halbousi, the highest Sunni Muslim Arab officeholder in Iraq. The decision prompted Sunni concerns of renewed political marginalization. In March 2023, Christian politicians objected to the [reactivation](#) of a 2016 ban on the sale, import, or production of alcohol, restricting the livelihoods and religious practice of primarily Christian and Yazidi communities. A civil society [coalition](#) announced efforts to secure parliamentary support for a proposed Law to Protect Religious Freedom and Prevent Discrimination.

Iraq’s Provincial Council political quota system reserves 10 total seats for Christian, Sabean-Mandaean, Faili Kurd, Yazidi, and Shabak blocs or “components.” In December 2023, each group [participated](#) in long-awaited provincial elections. Christian community members expressed alarm that Rayan al-Kildani—a U.S.-[designated](#) human rights abuser for his brigade’s past “persecution of religious minorities”—led the political arm of Kataib Babiliyoun to a “[clean sweep](#)” of the four Christian quota seats in Baghdad, Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Basra. The

wins reflected that people of any religious background may vote for candidates filling religious quota seats. By exploiting these loopholes in Iraq’s election laws, al-Kildani’s party coopted the four seats intended to remedy the inadequate representation of Iraq’s Christian community. In February 2024, after the reporting period, the Supreme Court of the IFG issued a ruling that would eliminate religious minority quota seats in the Kurdish parliamentary system.

In July 2023, the IFG revoked the administrative authority of the patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, Cardinal Louis Raphaël Sako, stripping him of his custodianship of Christian endowments. In November, the Supreme Court [dismissed](#) Cardinal Sako’s complaint over President Abdul Latif Rashid’s revocation. Reports indicate President Rashid made his decision under advice from al-Kildani. Christian advocates characterized as a double blow Cardinal Sako’s loss of power and deficiencies in the government’s response to a fatal wedding reception fire in Al-Hamdaniya in September. Some Christian residents, survivors of ISIS who had attempted to rebuild communities in the Nineveh Plains, cited the two incidents as examples of Christians’ lack of political agency and motivating factors in their intention to permanently emigrate from Iraq.

Key U.S. Policy

The Joseph R. Biden administration maintained its strategic relationship with Iraq, highlighting security and economic development as priorities. In August 2023, the U.S. Department of Defense and the Iraqi Ministry of Defense led the [inaugural](#) U.S.-Iraq Joint Security Cooperation Dialogue in Washington, DC, where they “reaffirm[ed] their commitment to security cooperation and shared interest in regional stability.” Top U.S. and Iraqi [officials met](#) several times in 2023, including during U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken’s [visit](#) to Iraq in November.

Throughout the year, the United States announced sanctions against nonstate and state-affiliated actors in Iraq who committed human rights abuses, including religious freedom violations. In June, the U.S. Department of State designated several ISIS leaders involved in funding and [operations](#) in Iraq and who had [perpetrated](#) sexual violence against Yazidi women and girls as Specially Designated Global Terrorists.

In the aftermath of Hamas’s October 7 attacks, Iraqi nonstate actors with support from Iran conducted drone strikes and other attacks on U.S. targets in Iraq, Syria, and neighboring countries. In November, the U.S. Departments of State and the Treasury concurrently [designated](#) PMF brigade Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS) and individuals affiliated with the Iran-aligned Kata’ib Hizballah (KH) as Specially Designated Global Terrorists.

In fiscal year 2023, the United States [obligated](#) \$360 million for programs in Iraq. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded programs throughout the year, such as a series of 45 [videos](#) preserving Yazidi heritage and the inauguration of a [memorial](#) commemorating the Yazidi genocide.