

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Iraq remained poor despite the ostensibly significant Sinjar Security Agreement signed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) in October to provide protection for religious minorities. Almost four years after the defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), religious and ethnic minorities in the Nineveh Plains and Sinjar continued to face [immense challenges](#) to returning safely to their towns and homes from internally displaced persons (IDP) and refugee camps. Renewed fear of persecution is growing among these communities amid lingering potential for a [re-emergence](#) of ISIS or ISIS like groups. Iranian-backed militia groups under the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), also known as Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), continued their constant harassment of religious and ethnic minorities, especially in northern Iraq, making the improvement of religious freedom conditions [more difficult](#). In 2020, the PMF operated with impunity in the Nineveh Plains and Sinjar, committing heinous violations against these long-suffering communities.

Although humanitarian assistance from the United States and other international donors contributed to improving the infrastructure that ISIS had ravaged across northern Iraq, a substantial proportion of displaced religious and ethnic minorities did not feel safe returning to or living in their homes in 2020. [Over one million](#) Sunni Arab Muslims remained forcibly displaced, both internally and externally. Accused or suspected of aiding ISIS, many of them

continued to fear retaliation if they return to their homes in former ISIS-controlled territories. The Yazidi minority remained especially vulnerable, still largely [scattered](#) throughout the Middle East and beyond with limited opportunity to return safely to their heartland of Sinjar. Living in IDP and refugee camps further exposed Yazidis to threats from ISIS affiliates and other hostile militia groups; for example, throughout the year, ISIS [hunted](#) Yazidi boys and girls to traffic or force them into other illegal activities. Additionally, of the [6,000](#) Yazidi girls and women whom ISIS abducted in 2014, only [a few hundred or so](#) were able to reunite with their families during the year; Iraq’s inability to address this atrocity continued to perpetuate collective trauma throughout the Yazidi community. Also, many Iraqi Christians in northern Iraq remained [displaced](#) in 2020; those who were able to return to their homelands found their property, including places of worship, destroyed or expropriated.

Turkish airstrikes and other military operations against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in northern Iraq, particularly in the area of Sinjar, have worsened the situation as they disproportionately impacted already devastated religious and ethnic minority communities. The Turkish military has reportedly taken minimal precautions to avoid civilian casualties in the area; for example, in June and July, the Turkish advance into Sinjar as part of “Operation Claw-Eagle” and “Operation Claw-Tiger” [claimed the lives](#) of five civilians and wounded dozens more.

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);
- Encourage the Iraqi government, as part of high-priority bilateral relations, 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, Sunni Arab Muslims and other religious and ethnic components in northern Iraq; and/or intervene against the protest movement on behalf of Iranian interests;
- Use diplomatic and other available channels to encourage the IFG and the KRG to resolve the disputed areas per article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution while including all religious and ethnic minorities in the process and comprehensively implement the Sinjar Security Agreement with full inclusion of the Yazidi community in particular;
- 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; and
- Continue to assist Iraqi religious and ethnic minorities to rebuild communities devastated by ISIS and to advocate for their own interests, including opening a broad discussion on governance to hold fair and free local and regional elections to select their own representatives.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Policy Update:** [Protecting Religious Minorities in Northern Iraq](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Condemns Turkish Military Operations in Northern Iraq](#)

Background

[The Iraqi population](#) is predominantly Muslim: 64–69 percent are Shi'a Muslim and 29–34 percent are Sunni Muslim. The Shi'a Muslim population resides predominantly in the south and eastern regions of the country, whereas the Sunnis live in the west, center, and north of the country. There are also about 200,000 Christians from various denominations, including Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants, mainly located in the Nineveh Plains in the north. However, that population has drastically declined since 2003, when Iraqi Christians were estimated to number 1.5 million. Iraq is also home to almost 700,000 Yazidis, who remained largely internally displaced, as well as about 150,000 Kaka'is, also known as the Yarsan or Ahl al-Haq; these two communities are mainly spread across the north. Finally, a tiny Jewish community continues to reside in Baghdad and Erbil.

The Struggle of Religious Minorities in Northern Iraq

Six years after fleeing the ISIS genocide, the Yazidi community continued to face [severe challenges](#) to reclaiming its homeland along with its religious and ethnic identity. The whereabouts of thousands of kidnapped Yazidi women, girls, and boys remain unknown. Despite joint efforts between the KRG and the IFG to locate abductees and reunite them with their families, few were able to return to their homes in 2020. Around [2,800](#) abducted Yazidis were still missing, many of them reportedly still [trafficked](#) into sex, labor, or terrorism. Furthermore, many ISIS fighters responsible for those atrocities remain at large despite Yazidi [demands](#) for accountability. The 2020 United Nations (UN) Security Council [renewal](#) of the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by ISIS, which continued to document atrocities and uncover mass graves throughout the year, offered some hope.

Despite international development efforts by the U.S. government to improve living conditions for religious and ethnic minorities in northern Iraq, significant [obstacles](#) remained in 2020. The [presence](#) of armed groups and checkpoints in and around Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains, particularly from Iranian-backed PMF factions, have prevented religious and ethnic minorities from returning to their communities of origin. [At checkpoints](#), PMF fighters demanded that IDPs and refugees, especially religious minorities, pay excessive amounts of money to cross or risk being sent back to the camps. As a result of these and other repressive practices, [less than 50 percent](#) of the population of displaced Christians have been able to return to their homes since ISIS was defeated in 2017. Tens of thousands from that community remained in IDP and refugee camps under difficult and inhumane conditions. Christians who managed to return to their communities also faced [new challenges](#), including a lack of basic services, dire economic conditions, and stolen properties.

Security Challenges in Northern Iraq

The continued [presence](#) of competing armed factions, backed by different regional players with varying interests in northern Iraq, represented a challenge to improved security in 2020. [The Sinjar Security Agreement](#), signed in October, was aimed at reducing

tensions between the KRG and the IFG that contributed to the security problems in northern Iraq. However, it was widely [criticized](#) for failing to address concerns of the Yazidis—Sinjar's most vulnerable and traumatized community. For example, the agreement allowed the KRG to appoint a mayor in Sinjar without involving and consulting Yazidi locals. Religious minorities continued to fear that the KRG and IFG's failure to agree on security measures for disputed areas opened the opportunity for ISIS to reemerge in areas with significant minority populations. For example, in April 2020, the Iraqi government [raided](#) a home in Hawija, Kirkuk, where dozens of ISIS members were hiding. Additionally, Turkish [airstrikes](#) in northern Iraq represented another security challenge as ongoing military operations further destabilized already vulnerable Yazidi areas in Sinjar.

Other Religious Freedom Issues in Iraq

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in the KRG territory remained relatively consistent with the prior year, although the regional government created the new [Ministry of Minority Affairs](#) to advance the rights of both religious and ethnic minorities. Moreover, the KRG continued to host hundreds of thousands of IDPs who fled in prior years from ISIS territory—mainly from Yazidi, Christian, Turkmen, and Shabak communities. A lack of security for these communities in and along disputed areas persisted throughout the year.

Religious freedom conditions in Iraq, apart from northern Iraq, remained poor. Although Sunni-Shi'a Muslim reconciliation efforts continued, there was reportedly little progress. The IFG refused to remove blasphemy and apostasy laws and continued to deny formal recognition of religious minority and nontheist groups, including Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, humanists, Kaka'is and others. Finally, the "de-Ba'athification" [process](#), which was adopted to remove Baath party officials from the government post-2003 and has since remained a fixture in Iraqi law, continued to provide a basis for discrimination against Sunni Muslims.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2020, the U.S. government maintained support for ethnic and religious minority groups to recover and rebuild their communities through financial and programmatic support as well as civic and political engagement. Since the defeat of ISIS in 2017, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) [has spent over \\$438 million](#) to help with reconstruction efforts in Iraq, including \$38 million in 2020 alone. In addition, the U.S. government provided the Iraqi government with [\\$60 million](#) to help combat the spread of COVID-19.

The U.S. government also enacted punitive measures against individuals responsible for human rights violations; for example, in January 2021, immediately after the reporting period, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed [Global Magnitsky sanctions](#) on PMF Chairman and Iraq's former National Security Advisor Falih al-Fayyadh for engaging in egregious human rights abuses. U.S. government officials in Baghdad, Erbil, and Washington, DC, continued to [raise](#) religious freedom issues through bilateral engagement with their Iraqi counterparts.