

IRAQ

Systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations continue in Iraq. In recent years there have been an alarming number of religiously-motivated killings, abductions, beatings, rapes, threats, forced displacements and conversions, and attacks on religious leaders and holy sites. In 2012, USCIRF again recommends that Iraq be designated as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998.¹ USCIRF has recommended CPC status for Iraq since 2008, and placed Iraq on its Watch List in 2007.

Background

The smallest religious minorities are seeing their numbers diminishing at an alarming rate. Half or more of the pre-2003 Iraqi Christian community is believed to have left the country, with Christian leaders warning that the consequences may be the end of Christianity in Iraq. In 2003, there were estimated to be 800,000 to 1.4 million Chaldean Catholics, Assyrian Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East members, Syriac Orthodox, Armenians (Catholic and Orthodox), Protestants, and Evangelicals in Iraq. Today, Christian leaders estimate the number at about 500,000. Almost 90 percent of the small Mandaean community either has fled Iraq or been killed. Mandaean leaders have asked that the 3,500 to 5,000 remaining members be collectively resettled to a third country so that their religion, language, and culture can survive. The Yazidi community reportedly numbers about 500,000, down from about 700,000 in 2005. The Baha’i faith, estimated at only 2,000 adherents in Iraq, remains banned under a 1970 law. Iraq’s ancient and once-large Jewish community, many of whose members fled following the founding of the state of Israel, now numbers fewer than 10.

Control over Ethnically and Religiously Mixed Disputed Areas: Many displaced non-Muslim minorities have moved to disputed areas, including in the ethnically- and religiously-mixed Nineveh governorate, over which the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the central Iraqi government dispute control. Religious and ethnic minorities in these areas, including non-Muslims and ethnic Shabak and Turkomen, have accused Kurdish forces of engaging in systematic abuses and discrimination to further Kurdish territorial claims. The Nineveh Plains is the historic homeland of Iraq’s Christian community, and some Christian groups have been seeking a dedicated area for Christians there, which they argue would help address their lack of security and political and economic marginalization.

Iraqi IDPs and Refugees: More than 1.5 million Iraqis remain internally displaced within Iraq and hundreds of thousands continue to live as refugees in neighboring countries, including in Syria where the security situation is increasingly dire. These individuals, many of whom fled religious-based persecution, continue to need significant humanitarian assistance. Members of Iraq’s smallest religious minorities continue to make up a disproportionate percentage of the refugees who voluntarily have registered with UNHCR in the region.

Constitutional Reform and Representation: Members of the smallest minorities have urged reforms to provisions in Article 2 of the Iraqi Constitution giving Islam a preferred status, which provide a potential justification for discrimination against non-Muslims. In a positive development, the 2010 Iraqi parliament (Council of Representatives or COR) reserved eight seats for the smallest minorities: five for Christians and one each for Mandeans, Yazidis, and Shabak. In addition, six Yazidi candidates were elected, bringing the total number of religious minority parliamentarians to 14 (out of 325). A minority caucus was recently established for the first time in the COR.

Religious Freedom Conditions

In the past year, religious sites and worshippers were targeted in violent attacks, often with impunity, and businesses viewed as “un-Islamic” were vandalized. While the Iraqi government has made welcome efforts to increase security, it continues to fall short in investigating attacks and bringing perpetrators to justice. The government took actions against political rivals in late 2011 that have escalated Sunni-Shi’a sectarian tensions. Religious freedom abuses of women and individuals who do not conform to strict interpretations of religious norms also remain a concern.

Continuing Violent Attacks: Despite the government’s efforts to increase security, Muslim and Christian religious sites and worshippers still experienced violent attacks during the past year. The most deadly such attacks were committed against Shi’a pilgrims. Perpetrators of these attacks rarely have been identified, prosecuted, or punished. Four individuals

¹ Commissioner al-Hibri dissented from the CPC recommendation for Iraq.

were convicted and sentenced for the high-profile October 2010 siege on a Catholic church in Baghdad, but little progress has been made in investigating and prosecuting perpetrators of other attacks. Christian and Yazidi businesses viewed as “un-Islamic,” such as liquor stores, were vandalized in Baghdad and in the KRG region. Christian, Mandaean, and Yazidi organizations continued to report individual cases of violence against community members during the past year.

Sunni-Shi’a Tensions: Since 2007, there has been a marked decline in sectarian violence attributed to actors from the Shi’a-dominated Ministries of Interior and Defense and armed Shi’a groups with ties to the Iraqi government or elements within it. Nevertheless, sectarianism within the government remains a concern. In late 2011, Sunni-Shi’a sectarian tensions increased significantly after the Shi’a-led government sought to arrest or fire senior Sunni officials, and terrorist groups sought to exacerbate the situation by perpetrating mass-casualty attacks against mainly Shi’a targets.

Abuses against Women and Secularists: Human rights groups continue to express concern about violence against women and girls, including domestic violence and honor killings, as well as pressure on women, non-Muslims, and secular Muslims to comply with conservative Islamic norms, particularly related to dress and public behavior. In early 2012, young people who dressed in the so-called “emo” goth style reportedly were killed and threatened after the Interior Ministry posted a statement on its website calling such individuals “devil worshippers.”

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

The United States’ diplomatic mission in Iraq is its largest and costliest anywhere. Since 2008, U.S.-Iraqi bilateral relations have been governed by a “Strategic Framework Agreement”, which emphasizes cooperation in specific areas including politics and diplomacy; defense and security; society and culture; and law enforcement and the judiciary. A major component of current U.S. efforts in Iraq is a police development program. In addition, over the past several years, the U.S. government has increased its efforts to help address the problems facing Iraq’s ethnic and religious minorities. In addition to designating Iraq as a CPC, the U.S. government should:

- Urge, and where appropriate, assist the Iraqi government to provide increased security to protect likely targets of sectarian or religiously-motivated violence and to investigate and prosecute perpetrators;
- Ensure that participants in the police development program are thoroughly vetted and that the program emphasizes outreach to minority communities;
- Work with Iraq’s government and its smallest minority communities and their political and civic representatives to help them reach agreement on what measures are needed to ensure their rights and security in the country;
- Fund exchange and educational opportunities focusing on religious freedom and tolerance, including through the State Department’s International Visitors Program and the Fulbright Foreign Student and Visiting Scholars Programs, for Iraqi officials, legal professionals, representatives of non-governmental organizations, religious leaders, students, and other members of key sectors of society;
- Ensure that U.S. development assistance prioritizes areas where the smallest minorities are concentrated and that the use of such funding is determined in consultation with those communities’ political and civic leaders; and
- Continue to assist Iraqi refugees and internally-displaced persons, including interviewing Iraqi refugees in the U.S. resettlement process in Syria by videoconferencing now that U.S. officials are not traveling there.

Please see USCIRF’s 2012 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Iraq.