

IRAQ 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution declares Islam to be the official religion, and states no law may be enacted contradicting the “established provisions of Islam.” The constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief and practice for Muslims, and for Christians, Yezidis, and Sabaeen-Mandean. The law, however, prohibits the practice of the Bahai faith, and the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam. The constitution guarantees freedom from religious coercion and requires the government to maintain the sanctity of religious sites. There were reports of several instances of police or armed groups killing or physically abusing Sunni prisoners while in custody. International and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported the government continued to use the anti-terrorism law as a pretense for detaining Sunnis without access to due process. Yezidi, Christian, and Sunni leaders continued to report harassment and abuses by Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Peshmerga and Asayish forces. Media and government officials reported Peshmerga and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) prevented displaced Sunni Arabs, Turkmen, and others from returning to their homes in some liberated areas. Representatives of minority religious communities reported the government did not generally interfere with religious observances and provided security for places of worship including churches, mosques, shrines, and religious pilgrimage sites and routes, but minority groups stated they also faced harassment and restrictions from the authorities in some regions. The KRG banned five imams for defamation of minority groups, but restricted the activities of some non-Muslim minorities in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR). Sunni Arabs reported some government officials used sectarian profiling in arrests and detentions and used religion as a determining factor in employment decisions. International human rights groups said the government failed to investigate and prosecute ethno-sectarian crimes, including those carried out by armed groups in areas liberated from Da’esh (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).

Throughout the year, the government fought numerous battles to regain control of significant terrain lost to Da’esh. At the same time, Da’esh pursued a campaign of violence against members of all faiths, but against non-Sunnis in particular. In areas under its control, Da’esh continued to commit killings and mass executions, and to engage in rape, kidnapping, and detention, including mass abductions and enslavement of women and girls from minority religious communities. Da’esh also continued to engage in harassment, intimidation, robbery, and the destruction of personal property and religious sites. In areas not under Da’esh control, it

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continued suicide bombings and vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks against all segments of society. Da'esh also targeted religious pilgrims and pilgrimage sites for attack. The United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI) reported Da'esh IEDs caused at least 5,403 casualties (1,167 killed and 4,236 wounded), amounting to half of all verified casualties in the first half of the year.

According to media and human rights organizations, the deterioration of security conditions was accompanied by societal violence, mainly committed by sectarian armed groups, in many parts of the country. Armed groups continued to target Sunnis for execution-style killings and the destruction of homes and businesses. Non-Muslim minorities reported threats, pressure, and harassment to force them to observe Islamic customs. In many regions minority groups, whatever their religious adherence, said they experienced violence and harassment from the majority group in the region.

The U.S. President in a speech at the UN called on the country's political, civic, and religious leaders to take concrete steps to address the danger posed by religiously motivated extremists, to reject sectarianism, and to promote tolerance between religious groups. Senior Department of State officials visited the country to urge the government to protect the country's diverse religious communities. The U.S. Ambassador, and officers of the embassy and consulates general, continued to meet regularly with the government ministries and members of parliament to emphasize the need for the security, full inclusion, and protection of the rights of religious minorities. U.S. officials in Baghdad, Basrah, and Erbil also held regular discussions with government officials, *waqf* (religious endowment) leaders, and UN officials coordinating international assistance to address the distribution of humanitarian aid. The Ambassador and embassy and consulate general officers issued public statements condemning abuses of religious freedom by Da'esh. Embassy and consulate general officers maintained an active dialogue with Shia, Sunni, and religious minority communities, emphasizing tolerance, inclusion, and mutual understanding. Embassy assistance programs supported minority religious communities and ethno-sectarian reconciliation.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 37 million (July 2015 estimate). According to 2010 government statistics, the most recent available, 97 percent of the population is Muslim. Shia Muslims, predominantly Arabs but including

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Turkmen, Faili (Shia) Kurds, and others, constitute 55 to 60 percent of the population. Arab and Kurdish Sunni Muslims make up approximately 40 percent of the population, with approximately 15 percent of the total population representing Sunni Kurds, approximately 24 percent Sunni Arabs, and the remaining 1 percent Sunni Turkmen. Shia, although predominantly located in the south and east, form the majority in Baghdad and have communities in most parts of the country. Sunnis form the majority in the west, center, and the north of the country.

Christian leaders estimate there are fewer than 250,000 Christians remaining in the country. The Christian population has declined over the last 10 years from a pre-2002 estimate of 800,000 to 1.4 million. Approximately 67 percent of Christians are Chaldean Catholics (an eastern rite of the Catholic Church); nearly 20 percent are members of the Assyrian Church of the East. The remainder are Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Anglican and other Protestant. Only 50 Evangelical Christian families reportedly remain in the IKR, down from approximately 5,000 in 2013.

Yezidi leaders report most of the approximately 350,000 – 400,000 Yezidis reside in the north. Estimates of the size of the Sabaeen-Mandaean community vary. According to Sabaeen-Mandaean leaders, no more than 3,000 remain in the country, mainly in the south with small pockets in the IKR and Baghdad. Bahai leaders report fewer than 2,000 members, spread throughout the country in small groups. According to Kaka'i (also known as Yarsani) activists, their community has approximately 300,000 members, located mainly in villages southeast of Kirkuk, in Diyala and Erbil in the north, and in Karbala. The newly appointed Jewish representative in the IKR Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs reports 430 Jewish families reside in the IKR. Fewer than 10 Jewish families are known to reside in Baghdad.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, an estimated one million citizens remain internally displaced due to sectarian violence dating from 2006 and 2008 before Da'esh became active. The conflict with Da'esh has displaced an additional 3.4 million since 2014. Since the liberation of Tikrit in April, 185,000 displaced persons, an estimated 90 percent of the original population, have returned to the city. Difficulties in gaining access to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in areas of conflict, as well as the government's limited capacity to register IDPs, mean estimates of religious minorities among the IDPs are imprecise. According to international sources, more than 60 percent of Iraqi

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IDPs are Arab Sunni, approximately 17 percent are Yezidi, approximately 8 percent are Turkmen Shia, approximately 3 percent are Arab Shia and 3 percent are Kurd Sunni. Shabak, Chaldean and Assyrian Christians, Turkmen Sunni, and Kurd Shia account for approximately 6 percent of the IDP population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares Islam to be the official religion of the state, and a “foundation source” of legislation. It states no law may be enacted contradicting the “established provisions of Islam,” but 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 guarantees the freedom of religious belief and practice for Christians, Yazidis, and Sabaeen-Mandeans. The law, however, prohibits the practice of the Bahai Faith, and the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam.

The constitution states each individual has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, and 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 require conversion of minor children to Islam if either parent converts to Islam.

The following religious groups are recognized by the law and thereby registered with the government: Islam, Chaldean, Assyrian, Assyrian Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, Roman Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Latin, National Protestant and Anglican, Evangelical Protestant Assyrian, Adventist, Coptic Orthodox, Yezidi, Sabaeen-Mandaean, and Jewish. Recognition allows groups to appoint legal representatives and to perform legal transactions such as buying and selling property. All recognized religious groups have their own personal status courts which are responsible for handling

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marriage, divorce and inheritance issues. There are three *diwans* (chambers) 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 Christians, Yezidi, and Sabaeen-Mandaean Religions Diwan. These entities replace the former Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, disbanded in 2003. The three endowments (*waqfs*) operate under the authority of the prime minister's office to disburse government funds to maintain and protect religious facilities.

The law does not provide a mechanism for a new religious group to obtain legal recognition. For other nonrecognized religions, the law does not specify penalties for practicing; however, contracts signed by institutions of worship for nonrecognized religions are not legal or permissible as evidence in court. The law allows punishment for anyone practicing the Bahai religion with 10 years' imprisonment.

In the IKR, religious groups obtain recognition by registering with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA). To register, a group must have a minimum of 150 adherents, provide documentation of the sources of its financial support, and demonstrate it is not anti-Islam. Without formal registration, religious groups do not qualify for government funding from the government's three endowments (*waqfs*) for Sunni, Christians, and Shia. The KRG MERA operates the endowments, pays salaries of clergy, and funds construction and maintenance of religious sites.

In the IKR, Christian groups may register separately with the Council of Iraqi Christian Church Leaders, an independent group formed by church leaders, consisting of representatives from Christian churches and six evangelical churches with Christian-background membership. Registration with the Council of Iraqi Christian Church Leaders provides Christian churches and leaders with access to the KRGMERA and to the KRG's Christian endowment (*waqf*).

The constitution requires the government to maintain the sanctity of holy shrines and religious sites and guarantee the free practice of rituals. The penal code criminalizes disrupting or impeding religious ceremonies and desecrating religious buildings. The penal code imposes three years' imprisonment or 300 dinars (20 cents) for such crimes.

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By law, the government provides support for Muslims desiring to perform the Hajj and the Umrah, organizing travel routes and immunization documents for entry into Saudi Arabia. The Sunni and Shia *waqfs* accept Hajj applications from the public and submit them to the Supreme Council for the Hajj. The council, attached to the prime minister's office, organizes a lottery process to select pilgrims for official Hajj visas. In the IKR, individuals are only eligible to receive government assistance to attend the Hajj once. According to the law for the high commission for Hajj and Umrah, the commission offers 3.5 million dinars (\$2,900) for Hajj travel by land, and 4.2 million dinars (\$3,400) for travel by air. The commission chooses pilgrims to receive the benefit based on a lottery system.

The constitution guarantees minority groups the right to educate children in their own languages. While it establishes Arabic and Kurdish as official state languages, it makes Turkmen and Syriac official languages in the administrative units in which those groups "constitute density populations." The KRG Ministry of Education funds Syriac-language public schools (elementary and high school) in its territory; the curriculum does not contain religious or Quranic studies.

The constitution provides the federal Supreme Court be 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 for passage.

The constitution guarantees citizens the right to choose which court (civil or religious) will adjudicate matters of personal status, including marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, endowments, and other personal matters. 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.

National identity cards denote the holder's religion. The only religions which may be listed on the national identity card are Christian, Sabaeen-Mandean, Yezidi, and Muslim, although there is no distinction between Shia and Sunni Muslim affiliation. Individuals practicing other faiths may only receive identity cards if they self-identify as Muslims. Without an official identity card, non-Muslims and those who convert to faiths other than Islam may not register their marriages, enroll their children in public school, acquire passports, or obtain some government services. Passports do not specify religion.

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The law states constitutional guarantees providing for the reinstatement of citizenship to individuals who gave up their citizenship for political or sectarian reasons do not apply to Jews who emigrated and gave up their citizenship under a 1950 law.

On April 21, the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament (IKP) passed the Rights of National and Religious Minorities Protection Law to promote equal political, cultural, societal, and economic representation of all minority groups in the IKP.

Of the 328 seats in the Council of Representatives, the law reserves eight seats for members of minority communities: five for Christian candidates from Baghdad, Ninewa, Kirkuk, Erbil, and Dohuk; one for a Yezidi; one for a Sabaeen-Mandaeen; and one for a Shabak. The Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament reserves 11 of its 111 seats for minorities: five for Christians, five for Turkmen, and one for Armenians.

Government Practices

There continued to be reports local police and armed groups killed Sunni detainees. International and local NGOs reported the government continued to use the anti-terrorism law as a pretense for detaining Sunnis without access to due process. Yezidi, Christian, and Sunni leaders continued to report harassment and abuses by KRG Peshmerga and Asayish forces. Displaced members of certain religious groups were reportedly prevented from returning to their homes after their cities were liberated from Da'esh, while other IDPs were denied access to safe areas. KRG authorities continued to prevent members of some religious groups, which they deemed security threats, from entering the IKR. In some parts of the country, non-Muslim religious minorities, as well as Sunni and Shia in areas where they formed the minority, faced harassment and restrictions from the authorities, but they enjoyed government support in other regions. Christians in the south and Sabaeen-Mandaeans in Basrah, Dhi Qar, and Maysan Governorates reported they avoided celebrating their religious festivals when those festivals coincided with Islamic periods of mourning. The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), however, continued to deploy police and army personnel to protect religious pilgrimage routes and sites, as well as places of worship, during Muslim and non-Muslim religious holidays.

In January the KRG banned five Islamic preachers for defamation and hostility against Shia, Yezidis, and Christians. The KRG also offered support and funding to some non-Muslim minorities, but other minorities in the IKR, such as

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evangelical Christians, faced difficulties registering and proselytizing. Because religion, politics, and ethnicity were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

In December the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) stated Iraqi security forces, affiliated popular mobilization forces, and KRG security forces were responsible for extrajudicial killings, abductions, illegal detentions, forced evictions, and looting and destruction of property belonging to Sunni Arab communities. There continued to be reports local police or armed groups under government control either killed Sunni detainees or failed to prevent deadly attacks on Sunni detainees.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported Shia Turkmen fighters from the PMF abducted and tortured between 150 and 175 Sunni Arabs from Tuzkhurmatu, killed between eight and 34 of those abducted, and kept approximately 50 in captivity as of year's end, while releasing the rest.

Also in Tuzkhurmatu, PMF units (composed of Shia Turkmen, the Iranian-backed Badr Brigade, the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kita'ib Hizballah) clashed with Peshmerga forces and the Asayish (Kurdistan internal security) after an October 22 car bombing and an exchange of fire on November 12. The two sides, supported by armed local residents from their respective communities, reportedly engaged in mass arrests, razed homes, and looted and burned villages.

In many cases Shia PMF reportedly operated independently and without oversight or direction from the government. According to Amnesty International (AI), on January 26, Shia PMF and government security forces killed at least 56 and possibly more than 70 Sunni men in Barwana, a village west of Muqdadiya in Diyala Governorate. Witnesses told AI Badr Brigades members, wearing green and red bandanas and armbands, went house to house and asked the men to come outside with their identification documents. They also said among the perpetrators were members of the Ministry of Interior's Special Weapons and Tactics force, as well as the Muqdadiya police force. Witnesses heard gunfire and then found the bodies of the men shot and blindfolded with their hands tied behind their backs and some of their fingers amputated. On January 28, the prime minister ordered an investigation into these killings. On March 20, the Commission of Inquiry submitted its report to the parliament. AI reported as of April, the authorities had not contacted any of the victims' families or informed them of any steps investigators took. There was no update on this case at year's end.

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International and local NGOs reported the government continued to use the anti-terrorism law as a pretense for detaining Sunni men – and their female relatives – for extended periods of time without access to a lawyer or due process. HRW and AI reported evidence of torture and ill-treatment of Sunni detainees, as well as deaths of Sunni men who were in custody, detained under the anti-terrorism law. On April 28, the Baghdad Center for Human Rights issued a statement detailing abuse of nine prisoners from al-Rusafa Prison in Baghdad. The statement said authorities beat detainees on the head, abdomen, face, hands, legs, and back with sticks, iron and plastic batons, and rifle butts. The statement included an account from an unnamed employee within the Iraqi Corrections Service, who said the prison director, internal affairs administrator, and a group of prison employees abused the detainees. In July local press reported Nasiriyah prison officials tortured Sunnis in an attempt to force them to identify as Shia. Religious organizations, such as the Association of Muslim Scholars spoke publicly about human rights abuses in prisons.

Yezidi, Christian, and Sunni political and civil society leaders continued to report harassment and abuses by KRG Peshmerga and Asayish forces against their communities in the portion of Ninewa Province controlled by the KRG or contested between the central government and the KRG. KRG security forces reportedly detained Yezidi advocates and others for prolonged periods without due process. Displaced Yezidis demanding increased services at IDP camps in Zakho, Shikha, and Aqra cities reported Asayish forces had beaten dozens of demonstrators using sticks and electric cables.

In March according to HRW, members of Shia PMF, including Kita'ib Hizballah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, apprehended, and detained up to 200 Sunni residents from Jalam areas of ad-Dawr, Salah ad Din Governorate. A local member of parliament called for a government investigation; however, at year's end the whereabouts of at least 160 abductees remained unknown.

As Kurdish forces liberated territory from Da'esh, media and government officials reported the Peshmerga prevented Sunni Arabs from returning to their homes in some liberated areas, particularly in Ninewa, Salah ad Din, Kirkuk, and Diyala Governorates. According to local and media sources, in October after clearing Da'esh from an area in Bayji, PMF arrested 30 Sunni tribesmen and accused them of being Da'esh collaborators. The PMF then released the tribesmen on the condition they did not return to Bayji.

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UNAMI and OHCHR reported Sunni Arab IDPs from Salah ad Din and Ninewa were denied access to Kirkuk. For example, according to UNAMI, on January 4, checkpoint officials denied a 15-year-old Sunni boy displaced from al-Alam, Salah ad Din Province, permission to pass Maktab Khalid checkpoint to seek treatment at a hospital in Kirkuk. He returned to Hawija hospital where he died.

On August 23, the Kirkuk Provincial Council announced it would require IDPs, mainly Sunni Arabs from Diyala Province currently residing in Kirkuk, to leave within one month. Kirkuk Governor Najmaldin Karim subsequently told the UN he would not deport IDPs from his province. International organizations and NGOs continued to state the Kirkuk government was indirectly pressuring IDPs, many of whom were Sunni Arabs, to leave.

According to local reports, in January the KRG's MERA banned five Islamic preachers from giving Friday sermons in IKR. The authorities cited the clergymen for defamation and hostility against Shias, Yezidis, Christians, and other minorities. Although banned from delivering sermons and on administrative leave, all five preachers continue to receive a salary from the KRG MERA.

While the government continued to support the establishment of armed volunteer groups to counter Da'esh, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi repeatedly called for these groups to place themselves under the command and control of the security forces. On April 7, the Council of Ministers announced the PMF was an official body reporting to the prime minister. The prime minister's ability to command the PMF remained a source of disagreement and debate.

Official investigations of abuses by government forces, armed groups, and terrorist organizations continued to be infrequent, and the outcomes of investigations which did occur continued to be unpublished, unknown, or incomplete, according to NGOs.

Advocacy groups and representatives of religious minority communities reported continued emigration following the 2014 failure of the ISF, including the KRG Peshmerga, to ensure protection for minority communities against Da'esh in Mosul and across the Ninewa Plain.

Members of religious minority communities, civil society organizations, and media continued to report some non-Muslims chose to reside in the IKR and areas under

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KRG control because they continued to consider these areas to offer greater security, tolerance, and protection for minority rights.

NGOs reported the apparent contradictions between the constitution and other legal provisions remained unresolved. For example, although the groups said constitutional provisions on freedom of religion would seem to override laws banning Bahai and the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam, no court challenges had yet invalidated them, and there was no pending legislation to repeal them.

According to NGOs, in the IKR there were several cases of families affected by the law on conversion and the registration of religion on identity cards, which applied to all religious minorities. Families who had converted to Christianity from Islam were unable to change their religious affiliation on their own identification documents or register their children as Christian. In some cases, families formally registered as Muslim, but actually practicing Christianity or another faith, reportedly fled to avoid being forced to register their child as a Muslim or to have the child remain undocumented.

According to evangelical Christian representatives, evangelical Christian groups could not register with the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs in the IKR without first obtaining clearance from the KRG Ministry of Interior. Evangelical Christian pastors in Erbil stated other religious groups were not required to undergo this step. The evangelical Christians also reported they were unable to meet the minimum requirements for registration, resulting in their nonrecognition by the Council of Iraqi Christian Church Leaders. They said the inability to register also constrained the ability of evangelical Christians to proselytize and subjected them to unfair scrutiny by the government.

The KRG provided several religious groups with offices within the KRGMERA following the passage of the KRG Rights of National and Religious Minorities Protection Law. On October 11, the KRGMERA announced a representative of the Jewish community would join the Ministry to represent Jewish interests. Additionally, representatives from the Zoroastrian and Bahai faiths were provided with offices housed within MERA. While many observers applauded these steps and the passage of the new law, some critics stated their disappointment the law did not define how minorities would be represented in police and security services. The KRG reportedly provided funding to some religious groups without endowments. For example, Sabaeen-Mandaeans reported that the KRG provided a

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monthly government stipend to fund temple maintenance and cultural activities for their community in the IKR.

The ISF continued to deploy police and army personnel to protect religious pilgrimage routes and sites, as well as places of worship, during religious holidays. For example during the Shia holy ceremony of Arbaeen, ISF deployed security to protect pilgrims walking to Karbala. Even with added protection, many worshippers said they did not attend religious services or participate in religious events, because of the repeated attacks on religious pilgrims in the past and the continued threat of violence.

The spokesperson for the KRG MERA stated financial support for the Hajj and the Umrah pulled significant funds out of the region as devotees spent money abroad during their pilgrimage instead of in the IKR. In response, the ministry announced a policy requiring individuals wishing to perform consecutive Hajj and Umrah trips to donate 500,000 Iraqi Dinar (\$430) to Peshmerga troops.

Sabaeen-Mandaeans in Basrah, Dhi Qar, and Maysan Governorates reported they avoided celebrating Sabaeen festivals which coincided with Shia religious holidays, and some Sabaeen-Mandaeans felt community pressure on women to wear the hijab. Non-Muslims also said they had difficulties persuading local authorities to take steps to resolve issues involving their holy sites, such as evicting squatters from the grounds of churches, temples, and cemeteries.

The government reportedly continued its policy of not interfering with Christians' right to observe Easter and Christmas. The government continued to provide increased protection to Christian churches during these holidays. Bahais reported they continued to celebrate the festivals of Naw-Ruz and Ridvan without government interference or intimidation. Provincial governments also continued to designate these as religious holidays in their localities. Followers of the Bahai and Yezidi faiths reported the KRG allowed them to observe their religious holidays. Yezidis used Kurdish, one of the languages officially sanctioned by the constitution, in their worship services. The Maysan Provincial Council reportedly continued to recognize a Sabaeen-Mandaean holiday as an official holiday, to provide physical protection for the Sabaeen-Mandaean community during times of worship, and to excuse the group from Shia Muslim dress codes during times of mourning. The provincial council also granted land to the Sabaeen-Mandaean community for places of worship, according to provincial sources.

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An advocacy group reported the government maintained its ban on construction on the site where the former home of the founder of the Bahai Faith had been located, while the Ministry of Antiquities continued its investigation into the home's destruction. Discussions between the government and the advocacy groups involved in the possible reconstruction of the site remained ongoing as of year's end.

Government policy continued to require Islamic religious instruction in public schools, but non-Muslim students were not required to participate. In most areas of the country, primary and secondary school curricula included three classes per week of Islamic education, including study of the Quran, as a graduation requirement for Muslim students. Syriac and Christian religious education was included in the curricula of 152 public schools in Baghdad, Ninewa, and Kirkuk. Private religious schools continued to operate in the country, but had to obtain a license from the director general of private and public schools and paid annual fees.

While the government continued not to require non-Muslim students to participate in religious instruction in public schools, some non-Muslim students continued to report pressure to do so from teachers and classmates. There were also continued reports some non-Muslim students felt obliged to participate because they could not leave the classroom during religious instruction. Christian and Yezidi leaders reported continued discrimination in education and lack of minority input into issues such as school curricula and language of instruction. By year's end, schools had not universally adopted the new Ministry of Education curriculum incorporating lessons of religious tolerance. Many Christians who spoke the Syriac language stated it was their right to use and teach it to their children as a matter of religious freedom. Christian leaders in Basrah seeking to establish private Christian schools said local authorities mandated the inclusion of Islamic religious instruction in their curricula.

IDPs, including religious minorities, reported they continued to face obstacles completing their education. For example, Yezidi sources reported many children residing in IDP camps opted to terminate their studies because they lost, on average, a year of schooling, due to their displacement and the continued instability. Christian leaders reported the KRG provided land and financial support for construction of new, and renovation of existing, structures for use as educational facilities.

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Non-Muslims did not hold positions in the Council of Ministers (COM), or in the KRG's COM. Members of minority religious communities held senior positions in the national parliament and central government, as well as in the KRG, although minority community leaders said they were proportionally underrepresented in government appointments, in elected positions outside the Council of Representatives, and in public-sector jobs, particularly at the provincial and local levels. Minority community leaders said this underrepresentation continued to limit minorities' access to government-provided economic opportunities. The federal Supreme Court continued to represent a cross-section of ethnicities and religions in its nine-member composition.

Some Sunni Muslims continued to say they perceived an ongoing campaign of "revenge" by Shia government officials against them in retribution for the Sunnis' favored status and abuses against Shia during the Saddam Hussein regime. Sunni continued to complain about discrimination in public sector employment due to de-Baathification, a process originally intended to target loyalists of the former regime. According to Sunnis and local NGOs, the government implemented the de-Baathification provisions of the law selectively and used the law to render many Sunnis ineligible for government employment. Vice President Usama al-Nujaifi told local press the Ministry of Industry had fired 34 of 38 directors general during the year, all of whom were Sunni. The government had established a committee to rectify sectarian imbalances in the ministries but it reportedly had not implemented any reforms by year's end.

Human rights NGOs and Yezidi leaders repeated previous allegations that KRG authorities discriminated against some minority communities in providing humanitarian assistance in the IKR.

On October 27, the Council of Representatives passed a new national identity card law, which stated children of one Muslim parent would be automatically identified as Muslim. President Masoum returned the bill to parliament for further debate, however, following protests from minority communities. The new law did not clarify whether the national identity card would continue to identify the holder's religion.

On September 9, Council of Representatives Speaker Saleem al-Jabouri and the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights organized a conference with representatives of religious and other minority communities for the stated purpose of raising awareness of the rights of minorities, the protection needed by these

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minorities, and the action necessary to empower and include these groups in the government. Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish leaders also attended, as well as foreign embassy representatives. Speakers at the conference condemned Da'esh atrocities committed against all religious minorities in Iraq, and some characterized Da'esh's crimes against Yezidis as "genocide."

On November 16, a range of religious endowment leaders and government officials participated in the United Nations Day of Tolerance and called for the protection of all ethno-religious communities, and for unity in the fight against Da'esh.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Non-State Actors

Da'esh continued to target victims on the basis of their religious identity, killing and subjecting people of all faiths, non-Sunnis in particular, to violence, abductions, and intimidation. Media reported the security situation continued to deteriorate due to Da'esh's occupation of territory, and the escalation of fighting between Da'esh and government forces in Anbar and Salah ad Din. In areas under its control, Da'esh continued to commit killings and mass executions, and to engage in rape, kidnapping, and detention, including mass abductions and enslavement of women and girls from minority religious communities. Da'esh also continued to engage in harassment, intimidation, robbery, and the destruction of personal property and religious sites. In areas not under Da'esh control, it continued suicide bombings and VBIED attacks against civilians. Da'esh also targeted religious pilgrims and pilgrimage sites for attack.

UNAMI reported Da'esh IEDs caused at least 5,403 casualties (1,167 killed and 4,236 wounded), amounting to half of all verified casualties in the first half of the year.

Coordinated Da'esh bomb attacks continued to target Shia markets, mosques, and funeral processions, as well as Shia shrines. In July the media reported a Da'esh suicide bomber attacked a crowded marketplace in Diyala and killed 115 people. The victims were mostly Shia and had gathered in the market for the end of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. On August 13, a bomb-packed refrigeration truck detonated in a Baghdad market killing at least 45 people and injuring 72. Da'esh claimed the attack was intended to target Shia. On November 13, two separate bombings, one of which targeted a Shia funeral, killed 26. Da'esh fighters

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continued their practice of taking responsibility for these attacks via social media postings.

On October 22, local press reported a VBEID suicide attack killed three people and wounded 36 others during a Shia mourning procession in commemoration of Ashura in Tuzkhurmatu, Salah ad Din Province. Although the attack occurred during an Ashura ceremony, most of the attendees were Sunni and the three people who died from the attack were Sunni Arab, Kurdish, and Turkoman. Larger celebrations of Ashura in Najaf and Karbala were violence-free, in part, due to extensive security efforts.

Da'esh targeted religious leaders who opposed the terrorist group. According to UNAMI, on September 13, Da'esh killed three imams in Hammam Ali District of Mosul because they reportedly did not praise Da'esh in their sermons. On June 22, Da'esh abducted six Sunni clerics in Mosul for failing to follow Da'esh instructions forbidding evening Ramadan prayers; the whereabouts of the clerics remained unknown at year's end.

Da'esh also targeted Sunni civilians who cooperated with the ISF. UNAMI reported on January 1, Da'esh killed 15 members of the Jumaili tribe in the al-Shihabi area of Anbar Province for purportedly cooperating with the ISF by providing information on Da'esh members or offering food to ISF, or for being related to ISF members. On October 20, Da'esh reportedly executed the Mullah of Al Nabi Younis Mosque in Ninewa for criticizing the practice of selling and raping Yezidi women and refusing to release a fatwa sanctioning the practice.

The Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights reported cases of Da'esh executing women for not wearing the veil. According to UNAMI, on September 2, Da'esh cut off the hand of a 13-year-old boy in Bab al-Tob market in Mosul after accusing him of theft.

According to multiple reports from international NGOs and the local press, Da'esh fighters continued to question members of detained groups to determine if they were Sunni, and then killed or abducted the non-Sunni members.

In June the Ministry of Human Rights announced that the government had exhumed close to 1,000 bodies from mass graves in Tikrit, mainly Shia air force cadets whom Da'esh had executed at Camp Speicher in June 2014.

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In May media outlets reported the discovery of a mass grave in western Mosul containing the remains of 80 Yezidis. A representative from the Yezidi Affairs Council in the IKR reported these individuals were likely victims of Da'esh, and the remains showed signs of torture. Throughout the year authorities and returning civilians discovered several other mass graves containing the remains of Yezidi victims of Da'esh. As of the end of the year, approximately 35 mass graves had been reported.

According to the KRG MERA, 3,596 of the 5,818 Yezidis (3,192 men; 2,626 women) captured by Da'esh during its 2014 attacks on Sinjar remained in Da'esh captivity or were unaccounted for. In November during a Baghdad conference on countering gender-based violence, local NGOs and government human rights officials said Da'esh continued to force women and girls from minority religious groups into sexual slavery. Baghdad-based NGOs also stated Da'esh compelled Sunni women to marry Da'esh fighters in Anbar, Salah ad Din, and Diyala Governorates

According to numerous reports, as well as Da'esh's own videos, Da'esh fighters continued their sexual assaults on captured Yezidi women. Da'esh repeated its claim it had conducted the "large-scale enslavement" of Yezidi women and children because of the Yezidis' religious beliefs.

According to NGOs, Da'esh continued to kidnap religious minorities for ransom. According to officials from a Turkmen Women's Association, Da'esh militants had kidnapped 500 Turkmen women and children from Tal Afar and Mosul since June 2014. Of the 500 kidnapped, the association reported Da'esh had tied 25 of the women to electricity poles, then tortured and raped them in front of their family members. In October local media reported Da'esh militants had attacked Shabak villages in Mosul, taking seven civilians hostage and transporting them to an unknown location.

According to religious leaders, killings, forced conversion, threats of violence, and intimidation continued to motivate many minorities to leave Da'esh-controlled areas. Yezidi civil rights activists reported 400,000 Yezidis fled to the IKR because of Da'esh. They said 600 had died from illness and insufficient access to health care, while 890 were seriously injured. As a result of the incursion of Da'esh, Kakai sources said more than 2,500 Kakai families had fled to the IKR during the year. Several thousand Kakais reportedly remained displaced, most of

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whom were located in Erbil Governorate, in the Erbil and Khabat Subdistricts. Sources said between 10 to 15 Christian families were leaving the country daily.

In an April report UNAMI stated Da'esh's attacks against Christians, Faili Kurds, Kakais, Sabaeans, Shabak, Shia Arabs, Turkmen, Yezidis and others appeared to be part of a systematic campaign to suppress, permanently expel, or eradicate entire religious communities from their historic homelands now under Da'esh control. Da'esh continued to publish open threats via leaflets, social media, and press outlets of its intent to kill Shia "wherever they were found" on the basis of being "infidels."

In Mosul, Da'esh fighters reportedly continued to threaten with death local residents who did not convert to Islam. They also continued to punish those who failed to adhere to the group's strict interpretation of sharia. Da'esh continued to impose severe restrictions on women's movement and dress, and enforcement patrols by Da'esh forces were reportedly routine occurrences. According to local press reports, in June, Director General of the Yezidi Affairs at the Ministry of Waqf said Da'esh compelled captured Yezidis to fast during Ramadan, and beat those who refused to pray five times daily in Islamic prayer.

Da'esh fighters continued to attack mosques and other holy sites, including Sunni religious sites, rendering many of them unusable. They converted Christian churches into mosques, and looted and destroyed religious and cultural artifacts. According to Hammurabi Human Rights Organization, on March 2, Da'esh destroyed an Assyrian Christian cemetery in Tall Kayf town using bulldozers. On March 19, Da'esh destroyed three Shabak holy sites in Hamdaniya, south of Mosul, and one in Bashbita village. On March 19, Da'esh destroyed an ancient monastery and the archeological site of al-Jib, in Nimrud District. Over a six-month period, Da'esh destroyed several Yezidi pilgrimage sites, including Nasir ad Din and al-Saeed temples in Ba'ashiqa. In March Da'esh militants bombed a minaret in Shingal, a religious symbol for Yezidis. Kakais reported that Da'esh destroyed a holy site in Tel Laban in addition to a Kakai cemetery in Khazer. According to local media, on August 28, Da'esh destroyed the Sunni Abu Baker al-Sedeeq Mosque in al-Shora District of Ninewa province because there were graves at the mosque.

Media reported Da'esh sold Christian artifacts and relics to Western collectors to finance terrorist operations. In February a Christian media outlet reported Da'esh

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had opened special markets called “Spoils of the Nazarenes” to sell electronics, furniture, and other items looted from Christian homes.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were continued reports of societal violence, mainly by sectarian armed groups in many parts of the country. Media and human rights organizations reported armed groups continued to target Sunnis for abductions, execution-style killings, torture, and the destruction of homes and businesses. Non-Muslim minorities reported threats, pressure, and harassment to force them to observe Islamic customs. In many regions, minority groups, whatever their religious adherence, said they experienced violence and harassment from the majority group in the region.

AI reported a prominent Sunni tribal leader who had called for sectarian reconciliation, Sheikh Qassem Sweidan al-Janabi, was kidnapped on February 13, in Dura in Baghdad. Authorities found the bodies of the sheikh, his son, and his bodyguards a few hours later in Baghdad. Janabi had pressed for the return of 70,000 displaced Sunni residents of Jurf as Sakhr in Babil Governorate.

There were cases of killings of Sunni clerics in Basrah. On January 1, four Sunni clerics were killed in a drive-by shooting in Basrah’s Zubayr District. Local security officials said these attacks were criminal in nature, not sectarian. Religious leaders on both sides called for restraint, and the prime minister ordered an investigation which produced no results by year’s end.

The Shia religious establishment urged popular mobilization volunteers not to commit abuses. On February 12, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a fatwa instructing volunteers to take every precaution to avoid killing innocent civilians. He also instructed them not to inflict harm on non-Muslims, and said anyone who did was a “betrayal and a traitor.”

Sabaeen-Mandaean leaders reported threats and robberies. The former head of the Council for Sabaeen-Mandaean Affairs held a press conference in January to announce he and others in the Sabaeen-Mandaean community had received death threats. The threats reportedly related to an ongoing dispute over a Sabaeen-Mandaean graveyard on which members of the al-Bedhan tribe had been illegally parking their cars.

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There were increased reports of religious tensions within IDP camps throughout the IKR. For example, in September Yezidi IDPs from Sinjar and Arab IDPs from Mosul residing at Mamlian Camp in Dahuk province were involved in an altercation after Yezidis stated an imam insulted their religion during a Friday mosque service.

There were continued reports non-Muslim minorities felt obliged to adhere to certain Islamic practices, such as wearing the hijab or fasting during Ramadan. 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. Numerous women, including Christians, reported opting to wear the hijab after being harassed.

Minority religious leaders continued to report pressure on minority communities to cede land rights to their businesses unless they conformed to a stricter observance of Islamic precepts. This included demands to close liquor stores and nightclubs. At times, shopkeepers were subject to violence for noncompliance.

Leaders of non-Muslim communities said 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 emigration. Sabaean-Mandeans said they continued to face discrimination which limited their economic opportunities, but also reported continued support from the KRG. Sunni Muslims also reported continued discrimination based on a public perception the Sunni population sympathized with terrorist elements, including Da'esh.

According to local sources, on October 24, after liberating the areas of Qada and Al Seniyah in Bayji from Da'esh, armed groups (possibly members of the Shia paramilitary group Kata'ib Hezbollah, according to media reports) prevented local police from entering the city, and then bombed mosques, government buildings, and civilian homes, especially homes belonging to former officers of the army who had participated in the Iran-Iraq war. The government did not comment on this incident.

Christian organizations reported armed groups continued to confiscate homes abandoned by community members who had fled the country following the sectarian violence of 2006-2008. Additionally, Christian groups and political

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leaders accused members of the KRG, Peshmerga, and other security forces of taking over the homes abandoned by Christians as they fled to safety in Erbil and other areas of the IKR.

During the year, civil society and religious institutions held numerous conferences and workshops to promote religious tolerance. On August 30, the Sunni Endowment held a conference rejecting sectarianism and extremism in Umm al-Qura Mosque in Baghdad. In Najaf, Kufa University, Shia Waqf and local NGOs held conferences to support peace and tolerance between religions. In Salah ad Din, youth activists held a conference on interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence, and included representatives from academia and NGOs, as well as Yezidi, Christian, Shabak, Sunni, and Shia religious leaders.

On April 19, a local newspaper reported the establishment of a Secularism Center in Sulaimaniyah to advocate for secularism in the IKR.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

At the highest levels, the U.S. government continued to address the full range of religious freedom concerns in the country in speeches, meetings, coordination groups, and assistance programs. At the United Nations General Assembly, the President again called on the country's political, civic, and religious leaders to take concrete steps to address the danger posed by religiously motivated extremists, to reject sectarianism, and to promote tolerance between religious groups.

During a February 21-24 visit to Baghdad, the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor and the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Asia urged the government to protect civil society, including the country's diverse religious communities. In meetings with various government officials, they underscored the United States' commitment to defeating Da'esh and its divisive ideology. The two also met with NGO representatives, civil society activists, religious minority leaders, students, journalists, and residents of an IDP camp to discuss the need for religious tolerance and dialogue.

The Ambassador and embassy and consulate general officers continued to meet regularly with the Ministries of Education, Human Rights, Labor and Social Affairs, and with the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights, as well as with members of parliament, parliamentary committees, and minority group

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representatives serving in government positions, to emphasize the need for full inclusion of religious minorities and protection of their rights.

U.S. officials in Baghdad, Basrah, and Erbil also held regular discussions with government officials, *waqf* leaders, and UN officials coordinating international assistance to IDPs to address problems identified by religious groups with overall humanitarian aid distribution.

In November the Consulate General in Basrah organized an event with the provincial government, Shia and Sunni endowments, and leaders of religious minority communities to promote religious tolerance.

The Ambassador and the Consuls General in Erbil and in Basrah met leaders of minority religious groups and civil society groups to address their concerns, particularly regarding security and protection. Embassy officers often met religious leaders and clergy to demonstrate U.S. interest and support for resolving issues with the provision of humanitarian assistance.

In July the embassy coordinated a digital video conference for a U.S. expert on interfaith studies to address religious and civil society leaders on religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue and peace.

The U.S. government continued to develop, finance, and manage projects to support all religious communities, with special emphasis on assistance to IDPs. One example was a program to promote ethno-sectarian reconciliation by enhancing the institutional capacity of minority civil society organizations, improving their ability to conduct advocacy campaigns, and to mediate conflicts peacefully.