Home Office

Country Policy and Information Note
Iraq: Religious minorities

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Executive summary

Islam is the official religion of Iraq and around 97% of the population is Muslim. The country is also home to various religious minority groups, including Christians, Zoroastrians and Yazidis. Some religious minority groups are also distinct ethnic groups.

Members of religious minority groups are subject to various forms of discrimination and mistreatment from state authorities, hybrid actors, society and – in the cases of converts and atheists – their own families and tribes. Examples of discrimination and mistreatment include lack of legal recognition, difficulties accessing documentation, dispossession, restrictions on movement, extortion, threats, harassment (including sexual harassment), violence, detention, and murder.

The scale and extent of the treatment varies, with discrimination more prevalent than severe abuses such as violent attacks. In general, the treatment of religious minorities by state actors, hybrid actors and non-state actors is not sufficiently serious by its nature and/or repetition that it amounts to persecution or serious harm. The onus is on the person to demonstrate otherwise or show how, in their particular circumstances, they would be at real risk.

The situation for religious minorities is generally better in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) than in federal Iraq. However, state and societal discrimination still occurs in the KRI.

To obtain civil documentation, a person must register under one of the recognised religions. Members of religions which the state does not officially recognise, as well as atheists and converts from Islam, may be unable to do so, without which they are likely to be at risk of encountering treatment or conditions which are contrary to paragraphs 339C and 339CA(iii) of the Immigration Rules.

Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm from state or hybrid actors, they are unlikely to obtain protection. Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm from non-state actors, they are unlikely to obtain protection in federal Iraq but may be able to obtain protection in the KRI.

Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm from the state, they are unlikely to be able to relocate to escape that risk. Where the person has a well-founded fear or persecution or serious harm from hybrid or non-state actors, internal relocation may be possible but will depend on the individual circumstances of the person.

All cases must be considered on their individual facts, with the onus on the person to demonstrate they face persecution or serious harm.

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Assessment

Section updated: 8 August 2024

About the assessment

This section considers the evidence relevant to this note – that is the country information, refugee/human rights laws and policies, and applicable caselaw – and provides an assessment of whether, **in general**:

- A person faces a real risk of persecution/serious harm by state and/or non-state actors because they are a member of a religious minority, a convert or an atheist
- the state (or quasi state bodies) can provide effective protection
- internal relocation is possible to avoid persecution/serious harm
- if a claim is refused, it is likely to be certified as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

Decision makers **must**, however, consider all claims on an individual basis, taking into account each case's specific facts.

Other points to note

This note covers both the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) – Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Duhok and Halabja governorates and is under the control of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) – and federal Iraq, which includes all other governorates and is under the control of the Government of Iraq (GoI).

For the purposes of this note, (a) religious minorities include all non-Muslim communities in Iraq, and (b) the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) is considered a hybrid actor. While the PMF is officially part of the state apparatus, it has significant autonomy and is not necessarily accountable to state authorities.

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1. Material facts, credibility and other checks/referrals

1.1 Credibility

1.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see the instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status.

1.1.2 Decision makers must also check if there has been a previous application for a UK visa or another form of leave. Asylum applications matched to visas should be investigated prior to the asylum interview (see the Asylum Instruction on Visa Matches, Asylum Claims from UK Visa Applicants).

1.1.3 Decision makers must also consider making an international biometric data-sharing check (see Biometric data-sharing process (Migration 5 biometric data-sharing process)).

1.1.4 In cases where there are doubts surrounding a person's claimed place of origin, decision makers should also consider language analysis testing, where available (see the Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis).

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1.2 Exclusion

1.2.1 Decision makers must consider whether there are serious reasons for considering whether one (or more) of the exclusion clauses is applicable. Each case must be considered on its individual facts.

1.2.2 If the person is excluded from the Refugee Convention, they will also be excluded from a grant of humanitarian protection (which has a wider range of exclusions than refugee status).

1.2.3 For guidance on exclusion and restricted leave, see the Asylum Instruction on Exclusion under Articles 1F and 33(2) of the Refugee Convention, Humanitarian Protection and the instruction on Restricted Leave.

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2. Convention reason(s)

2.1.1 Actual or imputed religion or belief.

2.1.2 Establishing a convention reason is not sufficient to be recognised as a refugee. The question is whether the person has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of an actual or imputed Refugee Convention reason.

2.1.3 For further guidance on the 5 Refugee Convention grounds, see the Asylum Instruction, Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status.

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3. Risk

3.1 Risk from state and hybrid actors

3.1.1 In general, members of religious minority groups are subject to various forms of discrimination and mistreatment from state authorities and hybrid actors. Examples of discrimination and mistreatment experienced by different groups are outlined in the paragraphs below. The scale and extent of the treatment varies, with discrimination more prevalent than severe abuses such as violent attacks. In general, the treatment of religious minorities by state and hybrid actors is not sufficiently serious by its nature and/or

repetition that it amounts to persecution or serious harm. The onus is on the person to demonstrate otherwise or show how, in their particular circumstances, they would be at real risk.

3.1.2 Religious minorities generally face less mistreatment in the KRI than in federal Iraq.

3.1.3 Islam is the official religion of Iraq. The constitution provides freedom of religious belief and practice for Muslims, Christians, Yazidis and Sabean-Mandaeans, but not for adherents of any other religions or atheists. In addition to those stated above, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) officially recognises the Baha'i, Jewish, Kaka'i and Zoroastrian religions. Despite the constitution and laws, state authorities do not always respect freedom of religion in practice. In addition, several laws favour Islam over other religions. For example, non-Muslims can legally convert to Islam, but Muslims are unable to convert to another religion. In addition, Muslim men can marry non-Muslim women but Muslim women cannot marry non-Muslim men. The 2023 law banning the possession of alcohol impacts the ability of Christian, Yazidi and Sabean-Mandaean alcohol merchants to earn their living (see Legal context and Treatment of Christians by state actors in federal Iraq).

3.1.4 The practice of the Baha'i faith is prohibited by federal law, with a maximum penalty of 10 year imprisonment upon conviction, but the law is not enforced in either federal Iraq or the KRI, which has its own law recognising the religion. In the KRI, Baha'is are reportedly able to observe their religious holidays and festivals without interference or intimidation from state authorities (see Baha'is).

3.1.5 Members of religious minorities may face discrimination from government officials. For example, they may encounter obstacles or worse treatment when registering for public services. Sources also indicate that government officials have verbally harassed members of religious minorities. The available information does not indicate the scale and extent of discrimination from government officials (see Christians, Yazidis, Sabean-Mandaeans and Kaka'i).

3.1.6 In all of Iraq, members of religions not recognised by the federal Iraqi government, including Baha'is, Zoroastrians and Kaka'i, are unable to register their religion on civil documentation. Although the new national ID cards (issued since 2016) do not show a person's religion, the application process still requires citizens to state their religion, with unrecognised religions not an option. As a result, individuals in both federal Iraq and the KRI practicing other faiths may only receive ID cards if they self-identity as Muslims, Yazidis, Sabean-Mandaeans or Christians. In Iraq, civil documentation is necessary to access many basic services (see Documentation, the CPIN Iraq: Internal relocation, civil documentation and returns, and the Asylum Instruction on Humanitarian Protection).

3.1.7 Iraq's Christian population has decreased significantly over recent decades due to emigration. There are reports of state authorities intimidating Christians at checkpoints, restricting their freedom of movement and appropriating their property for military purposes. Sources did not make clear

the scale and extent of these violations. Although the treatment of Christians is reportedly better in the KRI, they may face mistreatment from KRG authorities, particularly with regard to evictions and the confiscation of property. In some cases, the mistreatment could amount to persecution or serious harm (see Christians).

3.1.8 The PMF has been widely accused of abuses of minority groups. Reports indicate that PMF militias have attempted to induce demographic change in parts of Nineveh governorate (in the north of federal Iraq) by preventing the return of internally displaced Christians to their areas of origin and encouraging Shia Muslims to settle, leaving a population more sympathetic to the PMF. PMF militias – particularly the 30th and 50th Brigades – are reported to have seized the property of Christians, restricted their freedom of movement, harassed them at checkpoints, kidnapped them for ransom, and extorted them. There are also reports of PMF militias and other groups disproportionately targeting Christians in kidnap-for-ransom incidents, as well as threatening Christian alcohol sellers (see Treatment of Christians by the PMF and, for more information on the PMF, see the CPINs Iraq: Actors of protection and Iraq: Security situation).

3.1.9 PMF militias have also mistreated members of other minority groups. For example, before the 2023 ban on the sale of alcohol, they reportedly blackmailed and attacked Yazidis and Sabean-Mandaeans involved in the alcohol trade. Baha'is have faced harrassment from the PMF, particularly in the Shi'a-majority city of Basra (see Treatment of Yazidis by non-state actors (the PKK) and hybrid actors (the PMF), Treatment of Sabean-Mandaeans in federal Iraq and Treatment of Baha'is).

3.1.10 Yazidis are generally able to practise their faith and attend religious sites without state interference but may face discrimination in relation to education, land and property rights in both federal Iraq and the KRI. In 2021, the Iraqi parliament passed the Yazidi Survivors Law, which declared that the atrocities perpetrated by Daesh against the Yazidis and other minority groups constituted genocide and crimes against humanity, and established a framework for reparations. Although full implementation of the legislation has not yet occurred, the first reparations payments to Yazidi genocide survivors were issued in March 2023. Yazidi women with children born as a result of rape by Daesh members encounter difficulties obtaining documentation for these children (see Treatment of Yazidis by state actors) and Female survivors of Daesh sexual violence).

3.1.11 Zoroastrianism is not recognised in federal Iraq, but is recognised in the KRI, where sources estimate that between 10,000 and 100,000 people have converted to the religion in recent years. However, Zoroastrians are only able to obtain civil identification documents if they register under a religion recognised by the federal government (see Zoroastrians and 3.1.6 above).

3.1.12 The law does not provide for conversion from Islam to another religion. Among other things, this means that converts are required to register their children as Muslim in order to obtain documentation for them, which is essential to access public services including school. Converts are also unable to register under their new religion when applying for or renewing their ID cards. Sources suggest that converts in the KRI may be able to

change their officially registered religion, and that KRG authorities are generally more tolerant towards converts than federal Iraqi authorities. In general, converts are unlikely to face persecution from state authorities (see Laws on religious conversion and Treatment of converts from Islam).

3.1.13 State authorities have used laws against blasphemy and the desecration of religions to prosecute atheists, who rarely acknowledge their beliefs openly for fear of persecution by state and society. However, CPIT could not find reports of atheists being arrested since May 2020, when a doctor was given a two-year prison sentence for promoting atheism and insulting the Prophet Muhammad online. Available information indicates that the state does not systematically pursue and prosecute atheists. However, outspoken atheists and those deemed to be insulting Islam may be at risk (see Atheists).

3.1.14 Many members of religious minorities in Iraq have become internally displaced persons (IDPs), a significant number of whom live in camps (for further information on IDPs, see the CPIN Iraq: Humanitarian situation).

3.1.15 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status.

3.1.16 In cases where the person would be discreet about their religion on return, the reasons for this discretion must be considered (see the Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status).

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3.2 Risk from non-state actors

3.2.1 Members of religious minorities are unlikely to face persecution or serious harm from non-state actors. The onus is on the person to demonstrate otherwise.

3.2.2 The level of risk faced by converts from Islam and atheists generally depends on their openness about their faith and the attitude of their family, tribe and community. A person may be subject to mistreatment after their rejection of Islam becomes known. The onus is on the person to demonstrate that this would amount to persecution or serious harm.

3.2.3 Religious minorities generally face less mistreatment in the KRI than in federal Iraq.

3.2.4 Members of religious minorities may face societal pressure to adhere to Islamic customs, behaviours and moral codes. For example, in some areas of Iraq non-Muslim women are reported to wear the hijab in public to avoid harassment, and non-Muslims may feel pressured to fast during Ramadan (see Overview: Treatment of religious minorities, Treatment of Christians by non-state actors and society, Treatment of Kaka'i, Treatment of Yazidis by non-state actors, hybrid actors (the PMF) and society, and Treatment of Sabaean-Mandeans in federal Iraq).

3.2.5 Members of religious minorities may be subject to various forms of societal discrimination, including negative nepotism, negative stereotyping, illegal property appropriation, discrimination in education settings, verbal and physical abuse and online threats. Some sources stated that the situation is worse in central and southern Iraq than in northern Iraq and the KRI.

Sources reported that the examples of discrimination listed above take place but did not provide a clear indication of the frequency or overall prevalence of these kinds of abuses against any given minority group. Sources often use vague or general terms, such as 'widespread' or 'pervasive', to describe the frequency of discrimination, and they lack detail on the number of people who have been directly impacted. This makes it difficult to assess the scale and extent of the issue (see Overview: Treatment of religious minorities, Christians, and Yazidis).

3.2.6 With regard to women and girls of religious minorities, and especially those who are visibly identifiable as non-Muslim, sources indicate that harassment – both verbal and physical, including sexual harassment – is very common (See Overview: Treatment of religious minorities, Treatment of Christians by non-state actors and society, Treatment of Kaka'i, Treatment of Yazidis by non-state actors, hybrid actors (the PMF) and society, and Treatment of Sabaean-Mandeans in federal Iraq).

3.2.7 Yazidi survivors of Daesh sexual violence are at risk of marginalisation. There are major barriers to reintegration into their communities, especially if they have children fathered by male Daesh members. The children can become entirely excluded from their mothers' communities, leaving their mothers with a choice between their community and their child (see Female survivors of Daesh sexual violence).

3.2.8 Converts from Islam to Christianity, as well as atheists, risk being targeted by their families, tribes and wider society. A person's rejection of Islam may be considered an affront to the collective honour of their family or tribe (see the CPIN Iraq: Blood feuds, honour crimes and tribal violence). Female converts face the prospect of being disowned by their families, house arrest, physical and sexual abuse and forced marriage. Male converts may lose their jobs and may also be subject to violence. Many converts practice their new faith in secret to avoid attracting attention from family and wider society. There have been instances of violence and harassment towards converts and atheists, including murders perpetrated by family members (sometimes called 'honour killings'), although the frequency of this type of murder is difficult to ascertain. In general, tolerance towards atheism and secularism is reported to be higher in the KRI than in federal Iraq. However, some sources indicate that tolerance is declining due to a recent increase in the prominence of conservative Islam in the KRI (see Treatment of Christian Converts and Treatment of Atheists).

3.2.9 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status.

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4. Protection

4.1.1 A person who has a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm from the state is unlikely to obtain protection.

4.1.2 A person who has a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm from hybrid actors is unlikely to obtain protection.

4.1.3 In federal Iraq, a person who has a well-founded fear of persecution or

serious harm from a rogue state actor and/or a non-state actor is unlikely to obtain protection from the state. This is because in general, the state is neither willing nor able to offer effective protection. Some minority religions are illegal or lack official recognition. It would be unreasonable to expect a person to seek protection for treatment they encounter due to their faith if practising their faith is criminalised (see Legal context and Protection).

4.1.4 In the KRI, a person who has a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm from a rogue state actor and/or a non-state actor may be able to obtain protection from the state. While CPIT did not find any direct examples of state protection of religious minorities in the sources consulted, the KRG generally exhibits more tolerance towards religious minorities than the federal Iraqi government, with protection more likely to be available than in federal Iraq. In addition, law enforcement is generally more effective in the KRI than in federal Iraq (see Protection and the CPIN Iraq: Actors of protection).

4.1.5 There are significant obstacles to accessing protection for the average Iraqi citizen in both federal Iraq and the KRI. For members of religious minorities, it is even more difficult to access protection due to discrimination when interacting with state authorities (see Protection).

4.1.6 For more information see the CPIN Iraq: Actors of protection. For further guidance on assessing state protection, see the Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status.

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5. Internal relocation

5.1.1 Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm from the state, they are unlikely to be able to relocate to escape that risk.

5.1.2 Where the person has a well-founded fear or persecution or serious harm from non-state or hybrid actors, internal relocation may be possible. Decision makers must demonstrate that internal relocation is reasonable (or not unduly harsh) having regard to the individual circumstances of the person.

5.1.3 Many members of religious minorities in Iraq are internally displaced. Decision makers must take into account the obstacles to return for internally displaced persons. In addition, religious minority groups in Iraq are often concentrated in certain areas, and so decision makers must consider the problems posed by returning a member of a minority group to an area where they do not have a community. Examples of these problems include the fact that some religions forbid marriage to members of other religions and a lack of family, tribal and social networks which can be vital to securing employment (see Geographic concentrations of religious minority groups as well as the CPINs Iraq: Humanitarian situation and Iraq: Internal relocation, civil documentation and returns).

5.1.4 Decision makers must also consider whether the person will have access to essential documentation. Members of religious minorities, converts and atheists may experience issues obtaining civil documentation (see Documentation and the CPIN Iraq: Internal relocation, civil documentation and returns).

5.1.5 For further guidance on considering internal relocation and factors to be taken into account see the Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status.

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6. Certification

6.1.1 Where a claim is refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

6.1.2 For further guidance on certification, see Certification of Protection and Human Rights claims under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 (clearly unfounded claims).

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Country information

About the country information

This section contains publicly available or disclosable country of origin information (COI) which has been gathered, collated and analysed in line with the research methodology. It provides the evidence base for the assessment.

The structure and content follow a terms of reference which sets out the general and specific topics relevant to the scope of this note.

This document is intended to be comprehensive but not exhaustive. If a particular event, person or organisation is not mentioned this does not mean that the event did or did not take place or that the person or organisation does or does not exist.

The COI included was published or made publicly available on or before **8 August 2024**. Any event taking place or report published after this date will not be included.

Decision makers must use relevant COI as the evidential basis for decisions.

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7. Religious demography and geography

7.1 Statistics

7.1.1 In June 2024, the United States Department of State (USSD) published its annual report on religious freedom in Iraq, covering events in 2023 (June 2024 USSD IRF report). The report stated that, according to statistics published in 2010 by the Iraqi government (the most recent statistics available), Iraq's population is approximately:

- 97% Muslim, of which:
  - 55 to 60% are Shia Muslims (Arabs, Turkmen, Faili Kurds)
  - 40% are Sunni Muslims (Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen)
- 3% are from other religious groups including:
  - Christian
  - Yazidi
  - Sabean-Mandean
  - Baha'i
  - Kaka'i (also known as Yarsani [and Ahl e-Haqq])
  - Jews[1]

7.1.2 CPIT was unable to find information about the accuracy of these statistics and the methodology used to produce them. It should also be noted that, due to events in Iraq since 2010, these figures may have changed. CPIT was unable to find more up-to-date statistics in the sources consulted (see Bibliography).

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[1] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious…' (Section 1), 30 June 2024

7.2 Geographic concentrations of religious minority groups

7.2.1 The table below lists the main locations of different religious groups. Members of these religions are also present in other locations in Iraq, but in smaller numbers (see Christians, Zoroastrians, Yazidis, Sabean-Mandaeans, Baha'is, Kaka'i and Jews for further details about each group's areas of presence).

Religious group	Main locations
Christians	Nineveh governorate, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Baghdad[2]
Zoroastrians	KRI[3]
Yazidis	Nineveh governorate, KRI[4]
Sabean-Mandaeans	Basra governorate, Dhi Qar governorate, Maysan governorate, Baghdad, KRI[5]
Baha'is	Small groups across the country[6]
Kaka'i	Kirkuk governorate, Nineveh governorate, KRI[7]
Jews	Number negligible[8]

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8. Legal context

8.1 Freedom of religion

8.1.1 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'The constitution … provides for freedom of religious belief and practice for all individuals, specifying Christians, Yezidis, and Sabean-Mandeans; it does not explicitly mention followers of other religions or atheists.

'… The constitution states individuals have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and belief. Followers of all religions are, according to the constitution, free to practice religious rites and manage religious endowment affairs and institutions. The constitution guarantees freedom from religious coercion and states all citizens are equal before the law without regard to religion, sect, or belief.

'… Federal law criminalizes the practice of the Baha'i Faith. Although not recognized by the federal government… Zoroastrianism and Yarsanism [Kaka'i]

[2] Open Doors, 'Iraq: Full Country Dossier 2024' (Page 23), January 2024
[3] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom…' (Section 1), 30 June 2024
[4] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom…' (Section 1), 30 June 2024
[5] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.15.6), 29 June 2022
[6] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 1), 30 June 2024
[7] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.15.5), 29 June 2022
[8] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom…' (Section 1), 30 June 2024

are not criminalized. Contracts signed by institutions of these unrecognized religious groups are not considered legal or admissible as evidence in court.'[9]

8.1.2 The same source also stated:

'The personal status law recognizes the following religious groups as registered with the government: Muslims, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Assyrian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Armenian Apostolic, Armenian Catholics, Roman Catholics, National Protestants, Anglicans, Evangelical Protestant Assyrians, Seventh-day Adventists, Coptic Orthodox, Yezidis, Sabean-Mandeans, and Jews. Recognition allows groups to appoint legal representatives and perform legal transactions, such as buying and selling property. All recognized religious groups in the country, except for Yezidis, have their own personal-status courts responsible for handling marriage, divorce, and inheritance issues. The law does not permit some religious groups, including Baha'i, Zoroastrian, and Kaka'i, to register under their professed religions, which, although the groups are recognized in the IKR, remain unrecognized under federal law and lack legal protections provided to the recognized religions.

'… In areas other than the IKR, the law does not provide a mechanism for new religious groups to obtain legal recognition.'[10]

For information about unrecognised and outlawed religious groups, see the following sections: Overview: Treatment of religious minorities, Treatment of Zoroastrians, Treatment of Baha'is, Treatment of Kaka'i.

8.1.3 The same source also stated:

'The penal code punishes with up to three years' imprisonment or a 300 dinar fine (less than $1) any person who "attacks the creed of a religious minority or pours scorn on its religious practices; willfully disrupts, prevents, or obstructs a religious ceremony, festival, or meeting of a religious minority; wrecks, destroys, defaces, or desecrates a building or sacred symbol set aside for the ceremonies of a religious minority; deliberately misspells texts to alter or make light of the meaning, tenets, or teachings of a book sacred to a religious minority; publicly insults a symbol or a person who constitutes an object of sanctification, worship, or reverence to a religious minority; or publicly imitates a religious ceremony or celebration with intent to deceive."

'… 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.'[11]

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8.2 Laws prioritising Islam

8.2.1 In January 2023, the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) published a country information report on Iraq. It stated:

'While freedom of religion is theoretically protected by the Iraqi Constitution, laws and customs tend to favour the Muslim majority. Article 2 (1) of the

[9] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024
[10] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024
[11] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024

constitution establishes Islam as the state religion and prohibits any law that contradicts established provisions of Islam. The 1959 Iraqi Law of Personal Status governs the settlement by religious courts of disputes involving marriage, divorce, custody of children, inheritance and so forth. All recognised religious minorities except the Yazidis have personal status courts. When one of the parties to a dispute is from an unrecognised faith, Islam takes precedence.'[12]

8.2.2 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated: '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." 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.

'… Civil status law allows women identified in their official documents as non-Muslims to marry Muslim men, but it prohibits Muslim women from marrying non-Muslims. Muslim men may only marry non-Muslim women of the Christian, Jewish, or Sabean Mandean faith.

'… Islam takes precedence when one of the parties to a personal status dispute, including over such matters as marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, and charitable donations, is from an unrecognized faith. The law states that in cases where no Muslim is a party, civil courts must consult the religious authority of the non-Muslim party or parties for an opinion under the applicable religious law and must apply the religious authority's opinion in court.'[13]

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8.3 Laws on religious conversion

8.3.1 In January 2022, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) published a report entitled 'Iraq: Targeting of individuals' which stated: 'Even though religious freedom is guaranteed by the Iraqi constitution, national laws continue to violate the rights of non-Muslim minorities, including Christians… Iraqi laws do not allow the conversion from Islam to another religion, however facilitate the reverse process of converting to Islam.'[14]

8.3.2 In June 2022, the EUAA published a report entitled 'Country Guidance: Iraq' which stated:

'Whilst civil laws provide a simple process for a non-Muslim to convert to Islam, conversion of a Muslim to another religion is forbidden by law. Converts from Islam to other religions cannot change their religion on their identity cards after conversion and must continue to be registered as Muslims. Children born to a Muslim and a non-Muslim parent are legally deemed Muslims… It has been reported that in the KRI the personal status laws forbidding Muslims to convert to another religion was rarely enforced. There are no reported cases of anyone being tried in the KRI for changing

[12] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.31), 16 January 2023
[13] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Executive Summary and Section 2), 30 June 2024
[14] EUAA, 'Iraq: Targeting of Individuals' (Sections 4.1.3), January 2022

religion.'[15]

8.3.3 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

'Civil laws provide a simple process for a non-Muslim to convert to Islam. However, personal status laws and regulations prohibit the conversion of Muslims to other religions, and require 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 the product of rape… Civil status laws allow non-Muslim women to marry Muslim men, but prohibit Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men. Conversion from Islam is reportedly easier in the KRI.' [16]

8.3.4 In April 2024, the USSD published its annual report on human rights practices in Iraq, covering events in 2023 (April 2024 USSD HR report). The report stated: 'The law also forbade Muslims to convert to another religion. In the IKR, this law was rarely enforced, and individuals were generally allowed to convert to other religious faiths without KRG interference.'[17]

8.3.5 It is unclear if it is possible for converts from Islam in the KRI to register for civil documentation under their new religion. The EUAA and USSD reports (paragraphs 8.3.2 and 8.3.4) state that the laws forbidding people from changing their officially registered religion from Islam to another religion are generally not enforced in the KRI, which suggests that it is possible (see Documentation for further details). However, CPIT was unable to find this stated explicitly in the sources consulted (see Bibliography).

8.3.6 For information about Muslims converting to Christianity, see Treatment of Christian converts.

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8.4 Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) - specific laws

8.4.1 The June 2022 EUAA report stated: 'In KRI, the Kurdistan Region Law of 2015 preserved the rights of the national components (Turkmens, Chaldeans, Syrians, Assyrians, and Armenians) and religious and sectarian groups (Christians, Yazidis, Sabean-Mandaeans, Kaka'i, Shabaks, Faili Kurds, and Zoroastrians).'[18]

8.4.2 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'Eight faiths are recognized and registered with the KRG MERA [Kurdistan Regional Government Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs]: Islam, Christianity, Yezidism, Judaism, Sabean-Mandaeism, Zoroastrianism, Yarsanism [Kaka'i], and the Baha'i Faith.

'… 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."

'… In the IKR, the Personal Status Court adjudicates personal disputes

[15] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.14), 29 June 2022
[16] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.34), 16 January 2023
[17] USSD, '2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Iraq' (Section 6), 23 April 2024
[18] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.15), 29 June 2022

between members of the same religion, while the Civil Status Court handles all other cases. Minority religious groups may request a non-Muslim judge to adjudicate their cases.

'… The KRG falls under the central government's anti-Israel laws but has its own separate IKR law that provides protections for the rights of members of religious minority groups, including Jews. The KRG MERA dedicates one of its eight departments to Jewish affairs.

'… 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, religious, or linguistic claims."'[19]

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9. Political representation of religious and ethnic minorities

9.1 Members of minorities in government

9.1.1 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

'In 2015… the KRG's Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs recognised the Kaka'i religion for the first time, and the community now has a reserved seat on the Halabja provincial council. Two Kaka'i won seats in the federal parliament in 2018.

'… The electoral law reserves one seat in the Council of Representatives for a representative of the Sabean-Mandean community. There are also Sabean-Mandean representatives on the Baghdad and Basra city councils.'[20]

9.1.2 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'The law reserves nine of the Council of Representatives' (COR) 329 seats for members of religious and ethnic minority communities: five for Christian candidates from Baghdad, Ninewa, Kirkuk, Erbil, and Duhok; one for a Yezidi from Ninewa; one for a Sabean-Mandean from Baghdad; one for an ethnic Shabak from Ninewa; and one for a Faili Kurd from Wasit. Usually one of the COR rapporteur (administrative) positions is designated for a Christian parliamentarian and the other for a Turkmen. The Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament reserved 11 of its 111 seats for members of ethnic and religious minority groups: five for Chaldeans, Syriacs, and Assyrians; five for Turkmen; and one for an Armenian, some of whom also belong to minority religious groups. No seats are reserved for members of other religious and ethnic minority groups… Several KRG district and subdistrict mayoral positions continued to be reserved exclusively for Yezidis and Christians.'[21]

9.1.3 The same source also noted that 'Political parties and coalition blocs tended to organize along either religious or ethnic lines, although some parties crossed sectarian lines.'[22]

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[19] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024
[20] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Sections 3.48 and 3.53), 16 January 2023
[21] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024
[22] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024

9.2 Obstacles to minority representation

9.2.1 Several sources indicated that dominant parties seek to manipulate the minority quotas by installing affiliated candidates[23] [24]. This issue led the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court to rule in February 2024 that the KRI's parliament must remove its 11 seats reserved for minorities[25]. The paragraphs below provide further information on the manipulation of minority seats and the recent supreme court ruling.

9.2.2 In May 2023, the USSD published its annual report on religious freedom in Iraq, covering events in 2022 (May 2023 USSD IRF report). The report stated:

'During protracted government formation negotiations, religious and ethnic minority leaders were largely sidelined from the national power-sharing discussions. After October 2021 parliamentary elections, many minority community leaders complained that larger and more powerful parties – predominately Shia and Kurdish parties – succeeded in bolstering their preferred candidates for parliamentary quota seats reserved for minority communities, so that nonminority parties had significant influence in electing representatives for minority communities.'[26]

9.2.3 An article published in December 2023 by the Centre Français de Recherche sur l'Irak (French Research Center on Iraq) (CFRI), 'an independent think tank' which seeks to 'produce impartial knowledge and make Iraqi geopolitics accessible to a larger audience'[27], noted that it is 'a common experience for most minority groups in Iraq' that 'their representation in various political roles does not always translate into effective fulfillment [sic] of their demands.'[28]

9.2.4 In May 2023, the USCIRF released its annual report on world religious freedom in the year 2022 (May 2023 USCIRF report). The report included a section on Iraq which stated: 'Political representation remained an important concern for religious minorities, with communities pointing out flaws in both the IFG's and KRG's quota systems for elected representatives from minority religious backgrounds. Some minority advocates suggested both the IFG and KRG amend their existing quotas to ensure minority representation is effective and meaningful rather than symbolic and vulnerable to dominant religious groups' political appropriation of minorities' seats. In February [2022], the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court further limited the political representation of Yazidis, Shabaks, and Feyli Kurds, forcing those minorities to campaign within the already severely circumscribed Christian and Mandaean components.'[29]

9.2.5 In February 2024, London-based news site[30] The New Arab published an article entitled 'Iraq's top court declares Iraqi Kurdistan parliament's minority

[23] USSD, '2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Executive Summary), 15 May 2023
[24] The New Arab, 'Iraq's top court declares Iraqi Kurdistan…', 23 February 2024
[25] The National, 'Why is the KRG losing so much autonomy to Baghdad?', 18 March 2024
[26] USSD, '2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Executive Summary), 15 May 2023
[27] CFRI, 'About CFRI', undated
[28] CFRI, 'The Feyli Kurds in Iraq…', 1 December 2023
[29] USCIRF, '2023 Annual Report' (Page 59), May 2023
[30] The New Arab, 'About Us', undated

quota seats 'unconstitutional'' which stated:

'The court's ruling stated that the Kurdistan region's parliament consists of 100 lawmakers, thus terminating the existence of eleven quota seats for the Turkmen, Christians and Armenian minorities in the region that have been enacted in the legislature since 1992. The court's decision stemmed from lawsuits filed by politicians from the ruling Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), challenging the constitutionality of the Kurdistan region's election Law 1 of 1992, particularly the provision allocating 11 seats to minorities under a quota system. The court ruled that this provision, along with others, was unconstitutional.

'… While the PUK and all opposition parties in the region welcomed the court's decisions, Masoud Barzani's ruling the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and parties representing the minorities have rejected the verdicts and described them as "unconstitutional". The KDP is often accused by PUK and the opposition parties of manipulating the minorities' quota through a carrot-and-stick policy. In all past elections held in the region, all the seats were allocated to Erbil province, while there are minority populations in other Kurdish provinces…'[31]

9.2.6 In March 2024, The New Arab published an article entitled 'Christian and Turkmen communities announce boycott of Iraqi Kurdistan's general elections' which stated: 'Political parties representing the Christian and Turkmen communities in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region announced on Monday [11 March 2024] their resolve to boycott the upcoming parliamentary elections in the region if Iraq's federal court did not guarantee their minority quota seats in the Kurdish legislature.'[32]

9.2.7 In March 2024, UAE-based news outlet[33] The National published an article entitled 'Why is the Kurdistan Regional Government losing so much autonomy to Baghdad?' which stated:

'The Federal Supreme Court's ruling eliminating the seats set aside for ethnic and religious minorities strikes at the autonomy of Kurdish political institutions, even if the seats themselves were controversial. Critics alleged that the 11 MPs – five Christians, five Turkmens, and one Armenian – did not reflect the authentic interests of the communities they ostensibly represented, but rather acted as de facto KDP MPs by voting in lockstep with that party. The action was initiated with a lawsuit filed by the PUK seeking reform of the system in hopes of gaining influence over some of the seats. By eliminating dedicated minority representation entirely, however, the federal court arguably overstepped its judicial authority and acted legislatively. This episode is part of the larger weaponisation and co-option of minorities in Iraq by Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish parties. Far from increasing the representation of smaller groups and promoting their interests, the court, the KDP, and the PUK sought to use them for political advantage.'[34]

9.2.8 In May 2024, the United States Commission on International Religious

[31] The New Arab, 'Iraq's top court declares Iraqi Kurdistan…', 23 February 2024
[32] The New Arab, 'Christian and Turkmen communities announce boycott…', 13 March 2024
[33] The National, 'About us', undated
[34] The National, 'Why is the KRG losing so much autonomy to Baghdad?', 18 March 2024

Freedom (USCIRF), 'an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government agency'[35], released its annual report on world religious freedom, covering events of 2023. The report included a section on Iraq which stated:

'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.'[36]

9.2.9 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'On December 18 [2023], minority candidates ran for 10 reserved seats out of the 285 seats in the Iraqi provincial councils in 15 provinces: four Christian seats (Ninewa, Baghdad, Kirkuk, and Basrah), two Faili Kurd seats (Baghdad and Wasit), two Sabean Mandean seats (Baghdad, Maysan), one Shabak seat (Ninewa), and one Yezidi seat (Ninewa). The Babylon Movement, the political wing of the 50th PMF Babylon Brigade [also known as Kataib Babiliyoun], secured all four Christian quota seats. In Basrah, the independent Christian winner was disqualified by the Supreme National Commission for Accountability and Justice, leading to the allocation of the seat to the Babylon Movement candidate. The Babylon Movement also obtained two quota seats in Ninewa and Baghdad, as well as two general seats through the al-Iraq Hawia Wataniya party, in addition to the Sabean Mandaean quota seat in Wasit.'[37]

9.2.10 The same source also stated:

'While there remained no legal bar to ministerial appointments for members of religious minority groups, in practice there were still few non-Muslims in the federal government's Council of Ministers or the KRG Council of Ministers, a situation unchanged from the previous three years. Members of minority religious communities, including Christians, Yezidis, Kaka'i, and Sabean-Mandeans, continued to hold senior positions in the national parliament, central government, and KRG, among them, Minister of Displacement and Migration Evan Jabro, a Christian, and KRG Minister of Transportation Communication Ano Abdoka, a Syriac Orthodox Christian… Minority leaders, however, said they remained underrepresented in government appointments and public sector jobs, which limited access to government-provided economic opportunities for members of minority groups. The leaders indicated appointing Sabean-Mandeans to senior government positions, including at the director general level, would facilitate directing relevant government resources to their

[35] USCIRF, 'About Us', undated
[36] USCIRF, '2024 Annual Report' (Pages 58-59), 1 May 2024
[37] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024

communities.'[38]

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10. Treatment of religious minorities

10.1 Overview

10.1.1 In December 2022, the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID), a research programme supported by UK aid funding[39], published a paper entitled 'Violence and Discrimination Against Women of Religious Minority Backgrounds in Iraq'. The paper was primarily based on focus group discussions with women and men from several religious minorities[40] (see the full paper for further details on its methodology). It stated: 'Among the challenges that affect minority women is the widespread phenomenon of harassment in Iraqi society, especially of minority women, because they are not covered with a hijab, and are therefore identifiable as being non-Muslim. This makes them more vulnerable to harassment.'[41]

10.1.2 The January 2023 DFAT report stated: 'While numerous laws support these freedoms [e.g., of expression, assembly, worship, association, thought], the government does not always respect them in practice, or adequately protect people exercising them.'[42] Other sections of the report provided various examples of the government's failure to respect these laws. Some are quoted in this CPIN (see, for example, paragraph 9.3.3).

10.1.3 The May 2023 USSD IRF report stated:

'Representatives of minority religious groups, including Christians and Yezidis, 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.

'… According to Yezidi and Kaka'i representatives, the federal government and KRG authorities continued to discriminate against members of minority groups, including Turkmen, Arabs, Yezidis, Shabak, and Christians, in areas controlled by both the KRG and the central government in the northern part of the country.'[43]

10.1.4 The same source also stated:

'Yezidis, Christians, and local and international NGOs reported members of the PMF continued to verbally harass and physically abuse members of religious minority communities. On September 27 [2022], a security force from the local police and a private security company connected with the Shia militia Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) [part of the PMF] threatened to evict the 130 Christian IDP families from the Mariam al-Adra IDP camp in Baghdad,

[38] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024
[39] CREID, 'About us', undated
[40] CREID, 'Violence and Discrimination…' (Page 23), 7 December 2022
[41] CREID, 'Violence and Discrimination…' (Page 170), 7 December 2022
[42] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 2.21), 16 January 2023
[43] USSD, '2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 2), 15 May 2023

totaling more than 400 individuals. The families had fled ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] atrocities in the Ninewa Plains in 2014. A Christian leader of camp residents said, "the security company belongs to KH and they want to use this location for money laundering activities." Camp residents complained that "the guards at the gates began harassing camp residents by delaying their entrance and searching their cars."

'… There were reports of Iran-aligned PMF groups also arbitrarily or unlawfully detaining Kurds, Turkmen, Christians, and other members of minority groups in Ninewa Province. There were numerous reports of the 30th and 50th PMF Brigades' involvement in extortion, unlawful arrests, kidnappings, and detention of individuals without warrants. Credible law-enforcement information indicated that the 30th PMF Brigade continued to operate secret prisons in several locations in Ninewa Province that held unknown numbers of detainees arrested on sectarian-based and reportedly false pretenses. Leaders of the 30th PMF Brigade allegedly forced families of the detainees to pay large sums of money in exchange for the release of their relatives.'[44]

10.1.5 The May 2023 USCIRF report stated:

'The IFG [Iraqi Federal Government] did not bring under control the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU or PMF [Popular Mobilisation Forces]) or al-Hashd al-Shaabi, a government-affiliated umbrella organization of largely Shi'a Muslim, pro-Iran militias. These groups used checkpoint interrogations and detentions, enforced disappearance, extortion, and physical violence and targeted Sunni Muslims and other religious minorities, including Christians and Yazidis. On the outskirts of Mosul and in the Nineveh Plains - areas with numerous indigenous religious minorities and subject to the IFG's and KRG's jurisdictional disputes - the PMF's aggressive use of checkpoints, seizure of Christians' land and businesses, and other targeted harassment deterred displaced Christians' return to the area and fueled further emigration. Iraqi military forces also targeted religious minorities, as in a May operation against Yazidi fighters, which displaced at least 3,000 Yazidi civilians - already traumatized by recent displacement and by recurrent Turkish airstrikes - in their "largest exodus" since the 2014 genocide.'[45] It should be noted that other sources did not identify religion as a reason for the clashes between Iraqi forces and the Yazidi militia fighters.[46] [47].

10.1.6 The May 2024 USCIRF report stated:

'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

[44] USSD, '2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 2), 15 May 2023
[45] USCIRF, '2023 Annual Report' (Page 58), May 2023
[46] Al Jazeera, 'Estimated 3,000 people flee armed clashes in northern Iraq', 2 May 2022
[47] Middle East Eye, 'Iraq: Yazidis flee as army launches offensive on Sinjar armed group', 2 May 2022

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... PMF brigades around the country also asserted their power via harassment, physical abuse, detention, extortion, and checkpoint interrogation of religious minorities.'[48]

10.1.7 The April 2024 USSD HR report stated: 'Outside the IKR, restrictions on freedom of religion as well as violence against and harassment of members of minority groups committed by the ISF remained widespread, according to religious leaders and representatives of NGOs.'[49]

10.1.8 The USSD and USCIRF reports cited here and in other sections of this CPIN did not provide clear and detailed information about the scale and extent of the mistreatment of religious minorities in Iraq. The reports are general in nature, giving an overview of the situation along with some examples, but do not give specific details about the frequency, repetition and severity of incidents affecting religious minorities.

10.1.9 In general, sources indicated that treatment of religious minorities is better in the KRI than in federal Iraq[50] [51]. However, a Foreign Policy article, published in May 2024 and entitled 'Iraqi Kurdistan's Ethnic Minorities Are Under Attack', stated:

'On Easter last year [2023], the prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) cited a "culture of coexistence and unity between the different communities." The frequently invoked line is a central plank of the KRG's pitch for political support and economic development aid to foreign partners and donors, including the United States.

'The situation on the ground was never as rosy as Kurdish officials claimed, however. The KRG "might claim coexistence, brotherhood, and peaceful living together, but none of this is true," said Toma Khoshaba, an official with the Assyrian political party Sons of Mesopotamia. "We still feel a lot of bias and prejudice." Christian communities, for example, regularly complain that their land is taken without compensation. Last year, Yazidis were subjected to attacks and abuse online after baseless rumours circulated on social media that a mosque had been burned in Sinjar.'[52]

10.1.10 The same source also argued that the federal government was attempting to reduce the autonomy of the KRI and speculated that this was likely to adversely affect minority groups. It stated:

'Since it gained semi-autonomous status in 1992, Iraqi Kurdistan has largely charted its own course, separate from the federal government in Baghdad.

[48] USCIRF, '2024 Annual Report' (Page 58), 1 May 2024
[49] USSD, '2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Iraq' (Section 6), 23 April 2024
[50] USSD, '2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices… ' (Executive Summary), 23 April 2024
[51] EUAA, 'Iraq: Targeting of Individuals' (Section 4), January 2022
[52] Foreign Policy, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's Ethnic Minorities Are Under Attack', 1 May 2024

But in recent months, increasingly organized federal authorities have attempted to impose greater control over the region. And ethnic and religious minorities are caught in the middle.

'… Now, Baghdad's steps to dismantle vehicles for minority representation and protection could imperil the KRG's global stature - and leave minorities in the Kurdistan Region even more vulnerable to discrimination. These communities are caught in the middle of a larger shift in Iraq's federal system that empowers Baghdad at the expense of the KRG in Erbil.

'… But it is minority groups that will suffer amid this escalating conflict between Iraq's federal government and the Kurdistan Region. "As long as this minority-majority mindset continues, we are going to be continuously persecuted," Khoshaba said. "We will not have a bright future here and everyone will leave."'[53] For further information, see Obstacles to minority representation.

10.1.11 In January 2024, UNHCR published a report entitled 'International Protection Considerations with Regard to People Fleeing the Republic of Iraq, Update I' which, citing various sources, stated: 'Depending on their geographic location, economic status and local power dynamics, members of religious minority groups hide their religious identity to varying degrees and seek to assimilate to majority behaviours and traditions. This particularly impacts women and girls of minority groups, who are regularly faced with harassment and violence if they do not abide by prevailing customs.'[54]

10.1.12 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'Restrictions on freedom of religion remained widespread outside the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR).

'… Yezidis, Christians, and local and international NGOs reported PMF members continued to verbally harass and physically abuse members of religious minority communities [repeated from previous iteration of the report[55] – see paragraph 11.1.3].

'… There were continued reports of societal violence by sectarian armed groups across the country, except in the IKR. Although media and human rights organizations said security conditions in many parts of the country continued to improve, reports of societal violence, by Iran-aligned militia groups continued. Members of non-Muslim minority groups reported abductions, threats, pressure, and harassment to force them to observe Islamic customs. Many Shia religious and government leaders continued to urge PMF volunteers not to commit these types of abuses. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as solely based on religious identity.

'… Representatives of minority religious groups, including Christians and Yezidis, continued to state that local authorities in some provinces continued to impose restrictions on their activities. Observers noted that movement restrictions remained in place between Christian areas in the Ninewa Plain and

[53] Foreign Policy, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's Ethnic Minorities Are Under Attack', 1 May 2024
[54] UNHCR, 'International Protection Considerations…' (Page 128), 30 January 2024
[55] USSD, '2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 2), 15 May 2023

at IKR and central government checkpoints during the year.' [56]

10.1.13 The same source also stated:

'The KRG MERA's Directorate of Coexistence held in October a meeting with religious leaders, syndicates, and political parties to discuss peace building and diversity and assess how to overcome the barriers and challenges to peaceful coexistence in the region.

'… Provincial and local governments in the IKR continued to designate some Muslim, Christian, and Yezidi religious feasts as local holidays.

'… On September 26 [2023], a fire broke out in a Christian wedding hall in Hamdaniya in Ninewa governate, causing the death of at least 125 persons including women and children. According to the Jesuit Refugee Service, most Hamdaniya residents had been displaced by ISIS and subsequently returned in waves between 2017 and 2021. Christian church leaders expressed their gratitude to the different religious communities that provided support following the fire, including the Shia Marjaiya in Najaf, the Shia clerical institution led by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, which shared its condolences, and the Sunni endowment in Ninewa that suspended all Birth of the Prophet celebrations in remembrance of the Hamdaniya victims. The Christian leaders also thanked Ninewa residents who donated blood and medical supplies for the victims.

'… During the year [2023], Dhi Qar Governorate in the south of the country continued to reconstruct a center for inter-religious dialogue, which it first announced in July 2022, to include places of worship for Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Sabeans. The complex is slated to be built near the ancient city of Ur, one of the most important archaeological sites in the country and linked to the Patriarch Abraham, the father of the three great monotheistic religions.'[57]

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10.2 Treatment of converts from Islam

10.2.1 The January 2022 EUAA report noted that 'open conversions [from Islam to other religions] are reportedly rare because of ostracism.'[58]

10.2.2 The June 2022 EUAA report stated: 'The situation for converts is reportedly worse in other parts of Iraq as compared to the KRI.'

10.2.3 For further information see Laws on religious conversion and Treatment of Christian converts.

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11. Christians

11.1 Christian denominations

11.1.1 In March 2021, Reuters published an article entitled 'Factbox: Iraq's Christian denominations' which stated:

'Iraq is overwhelmingly Muslim but hosts several ancient Christian communities, who now number an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 people

[56] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Executive Summary, Section 2, Section 3), 15 May 2023
[57] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious…' (Sections 2 and 3), 30 June 2024
[58] EUAA, 'Iraq: Targeting of Individuals' (Section 10.2) January 2022

from the 1.5 million who lived in the country before the U.S. invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003.

‘There are 14 officially recognised Christian sects in Iraq. Most live in Baghdad, the plains of northern Nineveh province and Iraq’s self-run Kurdistan region.

‘These are the most prominent Christian denominations in Iraq:

‘Chaldeans

‘Chaldeans are the most numerous of Iraq’s Christians, up to 80% of the group. The Chaldean Church is Eastern Rite affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church but allowed to keep its traditions and rituals.

‘It originated from the Church of the East in Mesopotamia, which emerged in the early centuries after Jesus Christ.

‘The church is based in Baghdad and headed by Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako. Most Chaldeans live in Iraq, the United States, Iran and Lebanon. They speak a version of Aramaic, a Semitic language spoken at the time of Jesus. There are 110 Chaldean churches across Iraq.

‘Syriacs

‘Syriacs make up about 10% of Iraqi Christians. They include Catholics, which are the majority, and Orthodox. The northern towns of Qaraqosh, Bashiqa and Bartella house the biggest Syriac community in the country.

‘The main Syriac Catholic church is based in Lebanon while the Orthodox church is based in Syria. There are 82 Syriac churches in Iraq, both Catholic and Orthodox.

‘Assyrians

‘Assyrians mainly following the Assyrian Church of the East comprise up to around 5% of Christians in Iraq. Some fled to Iraq following the massacres by the Ottoman army during World War One.

‘Assyrians refer to the killing of their people in 1915 as a genocide, which took place around the same time as the massacre of Armenians. There are 21 Assyrian churches in Iraq, 17 of them in Baghdad.

‘Ethnic Assyrians, a larger group that includes members of other Christian churches in the region, are originally from areas of former Mesopotamia including Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria.

‘Armenians

‘About 3% of Iraqi Christians are Armenian. After the Armenian genocide in 1915-1923 by the Ottoman Empire, many of them fled to Iraq. They speak ‘Armenian. There are 19 Armenian churches in Iraq, both Orthodox and Catholic.

‘Arabs, smaller groups

‘Arab Christians make up about 2% of the Iraqi Christian population.

‘There are also three Greek Orthodox and four Coptic Orthodox churches in Baghdad and 57 Roman Catholic churches across the country, as well as a

small number of Protestants.'[59]

11.1.2 The January 2023 DFAT report indicated that under 300,000 Christians are believed to live in Iraq, with the majority living in the Nineveh Plains and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)[60].

11.1.3 In September 2023, the USCIRF published a report entitled 'Country Update: Iraq'. The report noted that 'Iraq's Christian population, which includes members of the indigenous Assyrian Church of the East, Syrian Orthodox, Chaldean Catholic, and other churches, has declined precipitously over the past two decades – from more than 1.5 million to fewer than 200,000 – especially since ISIS launched its lethal 2014 campaign against religious minorities.'[61]

11.1.4 An article published in January 2024 by weekly Catholic journal The Tablet[62] and entitled 'Sako appeals for Church unity to save Iraq's Christian population' noted that 'the Chaldean Church is the largest of the 14 denominations and communities among Iraq's 250,000 Christians.'[63]

11.1.5 In January 2024, Open Doors, an NGO which supports Christians in over 70 countries[64], published its World Watch List 2024 (Open Doors WWL 2024 report), which covered the period from October 2022 to September 2023. The report stated: 'The majority of Iraq's Christians are Chaldean Catholics; almost 20% are members of the Assyrian Church of the East. There are approximately 2,000 registered members of Evangelical churches in the IKR.'[65]

11.1.6 Alongside its WWL 2024 report, Open Doors also published a detailed 'Full Country Dossier' (Iraq FCD 2024) for Iraq which stated:

'Most Christians in Iraq are concentrated in the IKR provinces. There is also a Christian concentration in Nineveh province. The Nineveh plains are among the so-called disputed areas between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Government of Iraq (GOI). After the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan in September 2017, most of the plains of Nineveh came back under the control of the Iraqi government. Very few Christians (non-converts) are left in Baghdad and only small numbers in Basra. Converts to Christianity can be found in all provinces of Iraq.'[66]

11.1.7 An article published in August 2023 by CFRI noted that leaders from minority communities, including Christians, may inflate the size of their populations for religious and political reasons. It stated:

'While some sources talk about around 1.5 million Christians in the nation prior to the American invasion, the 1987 census indicates that there were only over 286,000 Christians… the exact number of Christians remaining in Iraq is a matter of controversy, and it is usually not possible to confidently

[59] Reuters, 'Factbox: Iraq's Christian denominations', 1 March 2021
[60] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.41), 16 January 2023
[61] USCIRF, 'Country Update: Iraq' (Page 4), 18 September 2023
[62] The Tablet, 'About Us', undated
[63] The Tablet, 'Sako appeals for Church unity to save Iraq's Christian population, 17 January 2024
[64] Open Doors, 'How we support', undated
[65] Open Doors, 'World Watch List 2024: Iraq' (Pages 2-3), January 2024
[66] Open Doors, 'Iraq: Full Country Dossier 2024' (Page 23), January 2024

rely on the numbers cited by Christian organizations and churches, as they are subject to ecclesiastical considerations on one hand, and political ones related to the representation of Christians on another… However, some church sources, who preferred not to be named, told us that the number of Christians in Iraq does not exceed 100,000. Thus, the exact number is usually hidden to avoid both creating panic and losing the demographic weight-based political gains and rights.'[67]

11.1.8 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'According to Christian leaders as well as NGO and media reports, fewer than 150,000 Christians remain in the country, down from a pre-2003 estimate of approximately 1.5 million. 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. Leaders of the Armenian community report a population of approximately 12,000 Armenian Christians in the country, representing both the Armenian Apostolic Church (Armenian Orthodox) and Armenian Catholic Church, including in the IKR. The remainder are Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Anglican, and other Protestants and evangelical Christians.

'… According to the KRG MERA, individuals from 14 different Christian government-recognized denominations reside in the IKR, including denominations associated with the Chaldean Church, Assyrian Old Eastern Church, Syriac Orthodox Church, Syriac Catholic Church, Armenian Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Roman Catholic Church, Presbyterian Church, Assyrian Protestant Church, Coptic Orthodox Church, and Seventh-day Adventist Church.

'According to the KRG MERA's Directorate of Christian Affairs, 15 Protestant and evangelical Christian groups are registered in the IKR, several with multiple branches: Nahda al-Qadassa, Nasari Evangelical, Kurd-Zman, Ashti Evangelical, Evangelical Free, Baptist Church of the Good Shepherd, St. Mary's Episcopal Church, al-Tasbih International Evangelical, Rasolia (Pentecostal), United Evangelical, Assemblies of God, and Seventh-day Adventist.'[68]

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11.2 Overview: Treatment of Christians

11.2.1 The June 2022 EUAA report summarised the situation for Christians in Iraq since 2003 as follows:

'After the US-led military intervention, Iraqi Christians have been suffering from persecution and discrimination. Most Christians in Iraq had already fled before the 2014 ISIL [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant] advance. The ISIL occupation of Ninewa Plain in 2014 led to a massive exodus, as ISIL militants killed thousands of civilians and destroyed religious sites in their attempt of religious cleansing of the population and public spaces. Following ISIL's defeat in 2017, Christian [sic] have gradually begun to return, but at a low rate mainly due to fear by [sic] local and Shia militias that control the

[67] CFRI, 'Christians in Post-2003 Iraq: Fragmentation Dynamics…', 11 August 2023
[68] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious…' (Sections 1 and 2), 30 June 2024

territory.'[69]

11.2.2 The December 2022 CREID paper stated:

'It is also easy for those in the Muslim majority to identify Christian women in public because of the way they dress. Specifically, they do not wear a scarf or hijab to cover their head or face as most women from the Muslim majority do. Because of this, Christian women face intimidation from the majority to wear a veil (Hanish 2009). This threat of harassment restricts Christian women's movements as they become fearful of leaving their homes and travelling in public, especially after dark. Some Christian women have also changed their dress to not be so visible.'[70]

11.2.3 See pages 312-378 of the full paper for a detailed analysis of the major religion- and gender-related issues facing Christian women in Iraq. The paper also covers issues facing Christian men.

11.2.4 It should be noted that the Open Doors WWL 2024 report, as well as the Open Doors Iraq FCD 2024 report (see paragraph 12.2.5), often uses words like 'frequently', 'regularly', 'seriously' and 'most' without clearly defining what these words mean in terms of the actual number of reported incidents of mistreatment of Christians or the proportion of Christians who face a certain type of mistreatment (see Complete World Watch List Methodology for a discussion of the meaning of 'frequent' in the context of the persecution of Christians). This makes it difficult to judge the scale and extent of the mistreatment of Christians. The Open Doors WWL 2024 report stated:

'The historical churches (Assyrian Chruch of the East, Syrian Orthodox Church, Syrian Catholic Church, Chaldean Catholic Church and Armenian Orthodox Church) are seriously affected by violence, intolerance and discrimination, especially from militant Islamic groups and non-Christian leaders. They also face discrimination from government authorities. Evangelical churches in Baghdad and Basra are also targets of violence by radical Islamic groups and non-Christian leaders, and face discrimination by the authorities.

'… Christians are regularly subjected to smear campaigns online, on national TV stations and by radical Islamic groups. Most of the perpetrators of crimes against Christians are not held accountable… In spite of the large number of Christian properties being seized (an estimated 78% of all properties belonging to Christians who left the country), the number of those brought to justice is nominal.

'… In central and southern Iraq, Christians often do not publicly display Christian symbols like a cross as this can lead to harassment or discrimination at checkpoints, universities, workplaces or government buildings.

'… Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal churches in Baghdad and Basra are seriously affected by violations from radical Islamic movements and non-Christian leaders, including discrimination from the authorities. Outspoken Christians have regularly become targets in central and southern Iraq.

[69] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.15.3), 29 June 2022
[70] CREID, 'Violence and Discrimination…' (Page 275), 7 December 2022

Blasphemy laws can be used against them if they are suspected of carrying out outreach among Muslims.

'… government officials at all levels are reported to threaten Christians and "encourage" them to emigrate.

'… In many majority Islamic areas, Christians can often only sell their houses for 60% of their value. Land belonging to Christians has been seized and at least 70% of the properties left behind by Christians fleeing the country have been illegally seized by organized criminal groups, especially in Baghdad.'[71]

11.2.5 Alongside its WWL 2024 report, Open Doors also published a detailed 'Full Country Dossier' (Iraq FCD 2024 report) for Iraq which stated that, in the period October 2022 – September 2023, 'four Christians were killed for their involvement in Christian activities/ministry'[72]. The source also stated: 'There were reports of at least 35 Christians physically (or mentally) abused for their faith, most of whom were converts from Islam.'[73]

11.2.6 The same source also stated:

'Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal churches in Bagdad [sic] and Basra are also seriously affected by violence from radical Islamic groups and non-Christian leaders, and regularly experience discrimination from the authorities. Outspoken Christians have frequently become targets in central and southern Iraq. Blasphemy laws can be used against them too if they are suspected of carrying out outreach among Muslims.

'… Even during earlier waves of persecution, discrimination and intolerance [before Daesh], the Nineveh plains were never fully emptied of Christians as was the case starting in 2014 [because of Daesh]. It was expected that the defeat of IS [Islamic State, also known as Daesh] would improve the situation of Christians in Iraq. However, only when Christian IDPs successfully return to their former homes and cities can any improvement in their situation take root and the majority of Christian IDPs are still not resettled. Land disputes are making it very difficult for the majority of them to return. Iranian-backed militias, Kurds, Arabs and others continue to occupy or expropriate land previously belonging to minorities in the Nineveh plains, in a competition to gain control of the once multi-ethnic region. Christians are in the weakest position because of their now small numbers and lack of external support … The central government does little to ameliorate the situation and ignores pleas from community representatives.

'… In the entire country, by law, all schools (including Christian based ones) are required to hold regular Islamic classes and exams. Failing these exams means failing to move up in grades. Also, the national curriculum is geared towards Islam - this goes beyond classes for religious education and influences, for instance, lessons on history … In central and southern Iraq, children of Christian families who attend state schools are often discriminated against. Apart from getting lower grades than Muslim children, they are required to attend Quran lessons and are not allowed to explain their faith even when asked. Christian parents are careful what they share

[71] Open Doors, 'World Watch List 2024: Iraq' (Pages 1,3,4,7), January 2024
[72] Open Doors, 'World Watch List 2024: Iraq' (Page 6), January 2024
[73] Open Doors, 'Iraq: Full Country Dossier 2024' (Page 41), January 2024

about their faith with their children. If the children were to talk about their faith in school – especially during Islamic classes – the family could face accusations of blasphemy. Christian children who refuse to attend Islamic classes are often bullied and pressured into becoming Muslims. Also, Islamic dress can be forced on Christians in school. Some Christian girls have had to wear a headscarf at the university of Mosul.

'… [J]ob discrimination affects [Christian] men … especially those working in the public sector. Christians in central and southern Iraq have been put under pressure to leave their jobs, especially if they are working for foreign organizations or are employed at higher levels of society (e.g. government companies). In the north, Christians often struggle to get employment and allegedly feel vulnerable and prone to exploitation at their workplaces. Christian business owners also face discrimination, including closure, boycott and attacks on their business, causing many to emigrate.

'… There have been several incidents of the movement of priests being prevented, blocking them from delivering services to parishioners. Travelling through checkpoints is risky for Christians, who are often stopped or harassed. Further weakening the Church, priests and Christian leaders (the majority of whom are men) remain vulnerable to imprisonment, kidnappings and killings, particularly in the Nineveh plains region. A country expert shared that it is "very dangerous for pastors and priests these days". This may particularly be if they are considered to be speaking out against political leaders or militias, and (according to another expert) is "a common method used by Shiite militants to target Christians in Iraq". There is not only direct harm and distress to the individual who is kidnapped, but also ransom demands which impose severe financial pressure on their families . Further, a country expert observes how churches and church leaders (typically male) are targeted: "Before it was more a matter of evident and fierce act of violence by terrorist groups, now is becoming more subtle and tacitly understood as a general state of the affairs in a country severely hit by years of conflict."

'… A country expert summarizes: Overall, living in Iraq, "girls face social constraints and expectations that can make living out their faith particularly challenging". Christian women – especially converts from Islam - suffer from unequal treatment in all sectors of Iraqi society.

'… Finally, Christians and other non-Muslims have reported corruption, nepotism and uneven application of the rule of law in employment which negatively affected the economic situation of non-Muslim communities and was one of the reasons for them to emigrate.'[74]

11.2.7 In its 2024 rankings, Open Doors rated Iraq as the 16th worst country in the world to be a Christian (the full rankings included 78 countries deemed to be the worst in the world for Christians)[75]. For information on the methodology Open Doors used to determine this ranking, see Complete World Watch List Methodology.

11.2.8 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

[74] Open Doors, 'Iraq: Full Country Dossier 2024' (Pages 7 – 45), January 2024
[75] Open Doors, 'World Watch List 2024', January 2024

'In November [2023], Cardinal Sako addressed emerging threats facing Christians in Iraq, including their exclusion from the political process, and his ongoing concern over the continuing exodus of nearly 20 Christian families per month from a country that was once home to 1.5 million Christians. He also spoke out against the government's decision to evict displaced persons from a housing project in Baghdad. The repurposing of the government-owned Mariam al-Adra (Virgin Mary) Compound in Baghdad resulted in the forced eviction of 121 families (approximately 400 individuals) who had taken shelter there after having been displaced from the Ninewa Plain during the 2014 ISIS invasion. According to the Christian Department in the Minorities Endowment, 63 of the 121 families had been evacuated by the end of the year, with 14 families relocating to a building belonging to the Chaldean Church in Baghdad. The rest of the families relocated to the Ninewa Plain and Erbil, where they reportedly moved in with relatives or rented homes.'[76]

11.2.9 The same source also stated:

'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 were intended to accommodate Christian students. The curriculum in these schools did not contain religious or Quranic studies. In the IKR, there were 48 Syriac-language and 18 Turkmen-language schools.

'Christian religious education remained part of the curricula of at least 255 public schools in the country, including 55 in the IKR, according to the Ministry of Education. Christian and Yezidi leaders outside the IKR reported continued discrimination in education and the lack of religious minority input on school curricula and language of instruction.

'… Government regulations require Islamic instruction in public schools outside the IKR, but non-Muslim students are not required to participate. In most areas of the country, primary and secondary school curricula include three classes per week – two classes per week in the IKR – of Islamic education, including study of the Quran, as a graduation requirement for Muslim students. The government provides Christian religious education in public schools in some areas where there is a high concentration of Christians, and there is a Syriac curriculum directorate within the Ministry of Education.

'… In April, the government announced the launch of a new Syriac-language television channel, Al-Syriania, as part of an efforts [sic] to save Syriac, which is linguistically related to Aramaic. The Christian Syriac-speaking community historically has used the language in school and church services.'[77]

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11.3 Treatment of Christians by the PMF

11.3.1 Citing various sources, the January 2022 EUAA report stated:

'Since the liberation of Mosul and the rest of Ninewa Province in 2017, paramilitary groups which joined the state security forces during the assault against ISIL, known as the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), have

[76] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024
[77] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024

emerged as new stakeholders in the region… Partially converging with government institutions or even replacing them “de facto”, the PMF prevented the return of many displaced Christians as part of their attempt to induce demographic changes and secure illegal economic benefits. In the outskirts of Mosul and the Ninewa Plains, Christians have been confronted with discrimination as the Shiite militia groups seized large areas of residential, business and agricultural lands in the traditionally Christian regions with the help of local officials.

‘It is estimated that less than half of the population of displaced Christians has returned since ISIL was defeated… Local militias discouraged the returning of Christian IDPs [internally displaced persons] as they limited their movement by setting up checkpoints, imposed illegal taxes for business owners and refused to return the properties that were occupied during the war.

‘… In the cities of Batnaya and Tal Kayf, the PMF puts Christians at a disadvantage when it comes to buying property by imposing illegal approvals and bribes.’’[78]

11.3.2 The June 2022 EUAA report stated:

‘Harassment and intimidation against Christians by the PMF reportedly continued in the Ninewa Plain in 2020, particularly in the cities of Bartella, Bazwiya, and Bashiqa. They were reported to impose traffic restrictions in and between Christian-populated towns in the Ninewa Plains. It was also reported that PMF members attacked two Christians at Bartella main checkpoint and threatened via social media Christian priests who spoke against them. Furthermore, there is information that the PMF detained 1,000 people in secret facilities in Ninewa province on false religious motives and engaged in extortion, illegal arrests, kidnappings, and the detention of people without warrants. Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq [a PMF militia]… reportedly harassed Christian families in Bartella under false pretext by running investigations against them and trying to convince them to leave the city.’[79]

11.3.3 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

‘Once Daesh was defeated, Christians attempting to return to their homes frequently found Peshmerga [KRG military forces], PMF groups and other security forces had taken over their properties. Christians have generally been unsuccessful in reclaiming their former homes from these groups, and the state response has been inadequate. Sources told DFAT the Christian population in Mosul had dropped from 5,000 families to 70 as a result of this violence and subsequent displacement.

‘… Muslim businesspeople sometimes use Christians (and other religious minorities) as fronts to apply for permits to sell alcohol and operate liquor stores. These sellers receive threats from PMF groups and individuals opposed to the alcohol trade. Infrequently, Christians have been murdered for selling alcohol. According to the US Department of State, PMF groups carried out a series of attacks on minority-owned businesses in Baghdad in 2020-21, including against Christian and Yazidi-owned alcohol shops.

[78] EUAA, ‘Iraq: Targeting of Individuals’ (Section 4.1.2) January 2022
[79] EUAA, ‘Country Guidance: Iraq’ (Section 2.15.3), 29 June 2022

Christians are disproportionately targeted for kidnap-for-ransom and other violent crimes, including by PMF and tribal groups. Sources told DFAT this was because Christians were perceived as both wealthy and vulnerable. DFAT spoke to several Christians whose relatives had been kidnapped for ransom, in one case twice.'[80]

11.3.4 In March 2023, the Hungarian Conservative, 'a quarterly magazine on contemporary political, philosophical and cultural issues from a conservative perspective'[81], published an article entitled 'Christians in Iraq are on the Verge of Extinction'. It stated:

'Ms Taimoorazy [an Assyrian Christian from Iran living in the US who founded an NGO called the Iraqi Christian Relief Council] added that demographic change is also a direct result of the persecution of the Christian community in Iraq. She highlighted that forcing Assyrian Christian minorities out of Iraq's Nineveh Plains, the land of their ancestors, did not begin in 2014 when ISIS took over Mosul, but had been an ongoing process by Shabak Shia Muslims - backed by Iran - who are now moving more aggressively into Christian lands to confiscate them. Ms Taimoorazy also underlined that the Iranian infiltration of the Nineveh Plains resulted in Shiite Muslims now occupying the once Christian area, and influencing education there with schools like the Imam Khomeini School in the town of Bartella. Shiite militias also try to force Christian children to learn at the school named after the former Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini. One explanation for why Iran strengthened its influence in the Nineveh Plain might be that Iran uses it as a corridor to have easier access to Syria and Israel.'[82]

11.3.5 The May 2023 USSD IRF report stated:

'On June 25 [2022], a Syriac Catholic Church leader reported that the 30th PMF Brigade (Shabak Brigade) continued to seize and occupy Christian properties in Bartella City, a predominately Christian city. The church official explained how the 30th PMF Brigade seized land belonging to a Christian family in Bartella City over eight years earlier and later installed electric generators owned by brigade members on the property. This Catholic community leader said the case was one of many similar examples, adding that he alerted many Christian politicians, including in the Babilyoon Movement, but none were able to achieve the return of the seized land. Members of Bartella's Christian community asserted the PMF brigade was trying to alter the demographic makeup of the area and pressure Christians to leave their ancestral homelands and properties.'[83]

11.3.6 In September 2023, CFRI published an article entitled 'The Shabak in Iraq: Identity Shifts Amid Ethnic and Sectarian Divides'. It stated:

'A new dynamic has emerged following the liberation of the Nineveh Plains from the control of ISIS and the return of displaced Christians and Shabak [an ethnic minority whose members are mostly Muslim[84]] individuals. This

[80] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Sections 3.42 and 3.44), 16 January 2023
[81] Hungarian Conservative, 'About', undated
[82] Hungarian Conservative, 'Christians in Iraq are on the Verge of Extinction', 22 March 2023
[83] USSD, '2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 2), 15 May 2023
[84] Minority Rights Group, 'Shabak in Iraq', November 2017

new dynamic is characterized by the assertive presence of the Shabak minority, which reflects a newfound self-confidence. Particularly significant is the establishment of a Shabak military force supported by the central government (known as the 30th Brigade) and the withdrawal of Peshmerga forces from these areas. This shift has altered the power balance in the Nineveh Plains in favour of the Shabak community, while the Christians express feelings of injustice and marginalization due to what they perceive as "Shabak security dominance".

'… The shift in power dynamics has complicated relations and heightened tensions between Christians and Shabak individuals. Returning displaced people brought with them competing narratives and mutual accusations that triggered hate speech between the two sides.

'… The Christian-Shabak conflict in the Nineveh Plains threatens to erase the heritage of coexistence and, more dangerously, internalizes the conflict within the minority groups themselves. This includes minorities shifting to majorities within the Nineveh Plains (the Shabak) and other minorities finding themselves in a "marginalized minority" position within the region (the Christians)… Christians now feel that the Shabak, due to their military and economic strength, could facilitate significant displacement from villages to sub-districts and districts, particularly to Qaraqosh (where the Shabak Catholics are concentrated) and Bartella (where the Syriac Orthodox are concentrated). Internal Christian discussions revolve around concerns that this displacement might erase the Christian identity of these areas. They are also worried about the ongoing distribution of housing plots for Popular Mobilization Forces fighters (as compensation for their sacrifices against ISIS) and the allocation of land in areas historically considered Christian territories. This demographic shift is viewed differently from the Christian perspective.

'… In response to these concerns, the Shabak community argues that the lack of adequate healthcare, education, and road infrastructure in their villages forces people to migrate to sub-district centres that offer better services and government attention. They emphasize that there is no systematic policy on their part to deliberately alter the demographic composition of the region.'[85]

11.3.7 The Open Doors WWL 2024 report stated that 'Shia militias backed by Iran' (i.e, PMF groups) are the 'main source of the pressure on Iraqi Christians following the territorial loss of Islamic State'[86]. The Open Doors reports often mention 'pressure', which is distinguished from violence[87] and encompasses many kinds of mistreatment of Christians in the following 'spheres of life': 'Private life, Family life, Community life, National life and Church life.'[88]

11.3.8 The Open Doors Iraq FCD 2024 stated:

'The presence of such militias as al-Hashd al-Sha'bi (Popular Mobilization Units - PMU - loyal to Iran) are increasing insecurity and instability for all

[85] CFRI, 'The Shabak in Iraq: Identity Shifts Amid Ethnic and Sectarian Divides', 20 September 2023
[86] Open Doors, 'World Watch List 2024: Iraq' (Page 1), January 2024
[87] Open Doors, 'Complete World Watch List Methodology' (Page 4), October 2023
[88] Open Doors, 'Complete World Watch List Methodology' (Page 5), October 2023

categories of Christian communities and are a dangerous source of violations against converts from Islam to Christianity. There are some forty different militias of various sizes (nominally) under the control of the central government, some of which are very radicalized. In the Nineveh Plains some 32,000 Christians are having to live in areas controlled by Iran-backed PMU.'[89]

11.3.9 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'… Christian religious leaders continued to publicly accuse the 30th PMF Brigade of verbal harassment of Christians in Bartella and elsewhere in Hamdaniya District of Ninewa. Local residents continued to report militias posted pictures on shops in Bartella of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and former Quds Force Commander Qassim Suleimani, as well as of militia leaders… They also stated the 30th Brigade continued to disregard 2019 government orders to withdraw from checkpoints in the Ninewa Plain.

'… Christians said they continued to face discrimination that limited their economic opportunities, such as PMF "taxation" on goods transported from Erbil or Mosul into the Ninewa Plain.

'… The Syriac Catholic Church alleged that the 30th and 50th PMF Brigades facilitated land sales with the aim of reducing Christian demographics in the Ninewa Plain and that they had supported Shabaks in seizing at least three Christian properties.

'… Throughout the year, Christian officials reported federal and provincial-level political pressure to issue land grants in Christian-majority areas to the mostly Shia families of PMF fighters who fought ISIS.

'… Christian IDPs refused to return to the district of Tal Kayf, in Ninewa Province, citing fear of the PMF 50th Brigade.

'Hundreds of Christian soldiers of the 13th regiment of the 50th PMF Brigade, a regiment of approximately 450 Christians established by the Assyrian Democratic Movement, protested on March 11 [2023] in Qaraqosh, a city with a Christian majority in the Ninewa Plain, against the alleged abuses of the 50th Brigade's commanders. Those protesters accused the 50th Brigade commanders of mistreating and insulting the Christian soldiers under their command.'[90]

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11.4 Treatment of Christians by state actors in federal Iraq

11.4.1 The January 2022 EUAA report stated: 'In November 2020, Christians from the town of Tal Kayf have complained about the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) intimidating them by running searches, imposing movement restrictions and using some of their houses without offering compensations.'[91]

11.4.2 The May 2024 USCIRF report stated:

'In July 2023, the IFG revoked the administrative authority of the patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, Cardinal Louis Raphaël Sako, stripping him

[89] Open Doors, 'Iraq: Full Country Dossier 2024' (Page 18), January 2024
[90] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Executive Summary and Section 2), 30 June 2024
[91] EUAA, 'Iraq: Targeting of Individuals' (Section 4.1.2), January 2022

of his custodianship of Christian endowments. In November [2023], 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 [leader of the Babiliyoun militia which is the 50th Brigade of the PMF[92]]. 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 [2023]. 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.'[93]

11.4.3 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'On July 3 [2023], President Abdulatif Jamal Rashid revoked the presidential decree issued in 2013 recognizing Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako as the Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Iraq and establishing the patriarch as the sole administrator of the church's properties and financial affairs. President Rashid said he made the decision in order to correct a constitutional error since the president has no right to appoint or recognize religious leaders. President Rashid did not revoke the decrees related to any other religious leaders at that time. In a statement issued on July 15, Cardinal Sako called the president's action "unprecedented" and "unfair," stating the president was targeting him and the decision was part of the PMF 50th Brigade Commander al-Kildani's efforts to usurp his authority and gain control of church offices and assets. Cardinal Sako moved from Baghdad to a Chaldean monastery in the IKR in protest. In August, Cardinal Sako told an NGO that he lodged a complaint with the country's Federal Supreme Court (FSC) and called for the reversal of President Rashid's decision. On November 11, the FSC ruled against Cardinal Sako. On December 18, the Chaldean Patriarchate announced it would cancel Christmas activities citing the ongoing war in Israel, out of respect for the victims of a wedding hall fire in Hamdaniya, and to protest President Rashid's withdrawal of the decree.'[94]

11.4.4 In August 2023, New Lines Magazine, an American global affairs magazine[95], published an article entitled 'Iraq Goes Dry Despite Opposition' which stated:

'As of March [2023], when notification of a new law passed by Parliament was published in Iraq's official gazette, anyone in possession of alcohol could be fined a sum of between 10 million and 25 million dinars (about $8,000 to $19,000) [£6,014[96] to £15,037 GBP[97]]… The blanket ban and hefty fines apply not only to the majority Shiite and Sunni Muslim population but to non-Muslims, including Christians and Yazidis, who up until now have owned most of the liquor stores and rely on the income to feed their families. For years, these shopkeepers have suffered from persistent violence to their properties and threats to themselves and their families from those opposed

[92] The National, 'Head of Catholic Church in Iraq leaves Baghdad amid…', 16 July 2023
[93] USCIRF, '2024 Annual Report' (Pages 58-59), 1 May 2024
[94] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024
[95] New Lines Magazine, 'About New Lines Magazine', undated
[96] XE.com, '10,000,000 IQD to GBP – Convert Iraqi Dinars to British Pounds', 31 May 2024
[97] XE.com, '25,000,000 IQD to GBP – Convert Iraqi Dinars to British Pounds', 31 May 2024

to alcohol. Fanning the flames, a senior official from Kataib Hezbollah, an Iraqi Shiite militia backed by Iran, condoned the attacks on social media in 2020… The Kurds in the independent region in northern Iraq have declared that they will not follow the law. A group of Christians has filed a lawsuit.'[98]

11.4.5 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'On March 11 [2023], Iraqi authorities began to enforce a law passed on October 22, 2016, but not published in the official gazette until February 22, 2023, banning the importation, manufacturing, and sale of alcohol. The law specified a punishment for these offenses of a fine of not less than 10 million Iraqi dinars ($7,600) [6,003 GBP[99]] and not exceeding 25 million Iraqi dinars ($19,100) [15,007 GBP[100]]. According to the press, some observers saw the measure as a government attempt to head off political challenges from religious conservatives and to distract attention from ongoing economic problems. Christian politicians attempted in March to overturn the 2016 legislation, and Yezidi and Christian communities noted the detrimental economic and human rights impact the legislation had on the Yezidi, Christian, and other religious and ethnic minority communities. Members of the Babylon Movement said the legislation was unconstitutional because it ignored the rights of members of minority groups and restricted their freedom. Prior to the government's enforcement of the 2016 law, Sabean-Mandeans, Yezidis, and Christians continued to report fear of importing and distributing alcohol and spirits, despite receiving permits. Christian, Yezidi, and Sabean-Mandean store owners, especially those operating with alcohol sales licenses, reported PMF militias blackmailed and attacked them.'[101]

11.4.6 The Open Doors Iraq FCD 2024 stated:

'Some government officials (such as Bartalla District judge) are said to have tried to encourage demographic change by offering land and housing to Shia and Sunni Muslims in the historically Christian areas of the Nineveh plains, e.g. in Diyala and Babil provinces, including Jurf al-Sakhar district. Local authorities in some regions continued to verbally harass and restrict religious activities, according to representatives of minority religious communities… Government officials have been responsible for anti-Christian poster campaigns, e.g. telling Muslims to boycott Christmas festivals, not to wish Christians well at Christmas and not to use Christmas decorations; or (through posters fixed to church buildings in the GOI area) telling Christian women to wear the hijab. Government officials who belong to radical Islamic groups can make it very difficult for Christians to complete all necessary paper work. Considering the high level of conservatism and strong collaboration of Sunni elements with Islamist insurgents, it is often unclear who is radical and who is not. Government officials are known to have arrested Christians with an Islamic background and have been involved in violent incidents against them.'[102] The source did not provide details of these arrests and violent incidents or give a clear indication of their frequency.

[98] New Lines Magazine, 'Iraq Goes Dry Despite Opposition', 24 August 2023
[99] XE.com, '10,000,000 IQD to GBP – Convert Iraqi Dinars to British Pounds', 7 August 2024
[100] XE.com, '25,000,000 IQD to GBP – Convert Iraqi Dinars to British Pounds', 7 August 2024
[101] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024
[102] Open Doors, 'Iraq: Full Country Dossier 2024' (Page 29), January 2024

11.4.7 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'On September 23, Cardinal Sako released a statement accusing the Iraqi government of marginalizing the country's Christian minorities. The patriarch said the government had violated their human and national rights, excluded them from employment, and seized their properties. He said Christians had witnessed systematic demographic change in the Ninewa Plain, where the population had decreased from four percent to less than one percent of the Iraqi population, stressing Christians would continue to depart Iraq due to their economic exclusion.

'… According to press reports, in February, a post appeared on the Facebook page of Bishop Bahzad Mziri of the Anabaptist Church in Duhok, making comments about the Prophet Muhammad that were considered insulting and derogatory. Duhok's Directorate of Endowment and Religious Affairs and the public prosecutor filed a complaint in court against the bishop. Mziri apologized and said he was not responsible for the post, saying his account had been hacked, and was acquitted.'[103]

11.4.8 The same source also stated:

'Christian representatives reported the ISF continued to occupy Christians' homes in Tal Kayf District, Ninewa Province, and repurposed them as military barracks without compensation. Community members confirmed the ISF was using the youth center as an administration office and that the juvenile prison was transferred out of Tal Kayf. The leaders said some Christians had already left or planned to leave the area to avoid ISF inspections and limitations on the movement of residents. Local leaders added that the ISF continued to occupy many Christian houses without compensating the original owners.'[104]

11.4.9 The same source also stated: 'Prime Minister Sudani established a committee to examine the issue of coerced conversion of minors to Islam. The committee worked to identify solutions, but both the Sunni and Shia Endowments refused to make any changes or address any of the challenges facing Christians subject to coerced conversion.'[105]

11.4.10 The same source also stated: 'Local authorities had allegedly authorized illegal approvals for Muslims to increasingly rent property in Christian towns.'[106]

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11.5 Treatment of Christians by non-state actors and society

11.5.1 Citing various sources, the January 2022 EUAA report stated:

'In an interview with Agence France-Presse (AFP), the head of the Chaldean Catholic Church stated that while Christians are not subject to "direct pressure" from the society in the present, they face "day-to-day discrimination" as they remain outside state institutions. He added that this is mainly due to corruption and is one of the reasons why Christians continue to emigrate. Christians have been reported to be socially pressured to withhold from celebrating religious feasts overlapping with the Islamic

[103] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 3), 30 June 2024
[104] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 2), 30 June 2024
[105] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 2), 30 June 2024
[106] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 2), 30 June 2024

holidays like Ramadan or Ashura. Also, Christian women have been reported to be harassed for not following the Islamic practice of wearing the hijab.'[107]

11.5.2 In March 2023, Iraqi news outlet[108] Shafaq News published an article entitled 'Unknown saboteurs set fire to Mar Korkis church in Baghdad' which stated:

'Unknown perpetrators set fire to the door of the Mar Korkis Church in Baghdad on Wednesday, prompting an investigation by Iraqi security forces… This is not the first time that Christian sites or figures in Iraq have been targeted by acts of violence. In recent years, there have been numerous incidents of churches and other religious buildings being attacked, including a bombing at a Catholic church in Baghdad in 2010 that left dozens dead and scores injured… The latest incident at the Mar Korkis Church underscores the ongoing challenges faced by religious minorities in Iraq. The Iraqi government has vowed to protect the country's Christian population, but incidents such as this serve as a reminder that much work remains to be done to ensure their safety and security.'[109]

11.5.3 In September 2023, Syriac Press, which covers issues 'related to the Syriac-Aramean-Assyrian-Chaldean people'[110], published an article entitled 'IRAQ: Fire breaks out on grounds of Mar Gorgis Church in Bashiqa, no one injured'. It stated:

'A fire of unknown origin broke out on the grounds of the Syriac Orthodox Mor Gorgis Church in the Nineveh Plains town of Bashiqa. Civil Defense teams in the town were quickly able to extinguish the flames. No one was injured in the fire… Informed sources reported that the fire at Mor Gorgis broke out in the grass and warehouse of the church's kindergarten. There were conflicting opinions about the cause of the fire, with some saying that it broke out due to an electrical short circuit in the church complex, while others said that it was started intentionally.'[111]

11.5.4 The Open Doors Iraq FCD 2024 stated (referring to the whole of Iraq, including the KRI):

'Discrimination of Christians is pervasive in Iraq. The lack of accountability (caused by the civil war and numerous militias that are not controlled by the central government) has left persecutors unpunished. Discrimination takes place on a daily basis in Iraq, even in the IKR. Discrimination based on dress codes, crosses in cars etc. is commonplace. Christian women of all Christian communities are put under pressure to wear a head-covering in Baghdad and Basra. Even in the north of the country (Dohuk, Zakho and some areas of Erbil) there is a growing social pressure on Christian women to wear a headscarf.

'… The main disadvantage which Christians face in education is the Islamic focus of the religious education syllabus and the overall disregard of the contribution of "other" communities to the history of Iraq. This engenders a

[107] EUAA, 'Iraq: Targeting of Individuals' (Section 4.1.2), January 2022
[108] LinkedIn, 'Shafaq News', undated (to access, search 'shafaq news linkedin' on Google)
[109] Shafaq News, 'Unknown saboteurs set fire to Mar Korkis church in Baghdad', 8 March 2023
[110] Syriac Press, 'About', undated
[111] Syriac Press, 'IRAQ: Fires breaks out on grounds of Mor Gorgis Church…', 29 September 2023

mentality of Christians being subordinate to Muslims and causes Christians and other non-Muslim communities not to be considered an inherent, indigenous part of Iraq's history and culture. Some of the official teaching materials, in governmental schools and universities, even define Christians as infidels and enemies and incite jihad against them. Also, there are reportedly few Christians obtaining scholarships or higher positions within the education system and universities. Christian students have complained that some Muslim university professors (intentionally) set exams during Christian festivals (Christmas and Easter). Finally, Assyrian schools have reported that they face neglect and discrimination, not receiving the full funding they are entitled to or the textbooks they need.

'… Within the wider community, Christian women are often viewed as being loose and free. Women have reported that they have suffered sexual harassment and vulgar threats because of this perception, including in the workplace. There are ongoing reports that Christian Iraqi girls, especially teenagers, are at heightened risk of harassment, verbal and sexual abuse when travelling by public transport, because their faith is clearly visible. A country expert shared that "it is socially acceptable to harass women on the street who do not conform to dress codes". As a result, in some areas, Christian women and girls must wear veils (as Islamic women do) for their own safety.

'… Whilst not reported in this WWL 2024 reporting period, there remains a live risk that Christian girls without a convert background may be "lured" by Muslim men, who then harass them and coerce them into marriage. There have been reports in the past of even married Christians being targeted for seduction in such a way.

'… Apart from political parties and some militia groups, criminal networks have also been involved in the confiscation of more than 30,000 Christian properties in Baghdad and other areas. This has taken place with impunity in spite of commitments by the Prime Minister's office to launch inquiries into the seizures (Source: US State Department IRFR 2018 Iraq). Mafia-like groups are joining forces with real estate offices and confiscating Christian-owned properties by falsifying documents with relative impunity. In some cases, the Christian owners or tenants were threatened directly, which made them leave their homes.'[112] The source did not say how many cases of direct threats occurred.

11.5.5 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'On January 9 [2023], Sunni Sheikh Abdulrazaq al-Saadi from Anbar issued a statement that the construction of a Christian Chaldean Church in the ancient city of Ur in Dhi Qar was "catastrophic and against the teachings of the Quran", calling for the conversion of the church into a cultural center under the Ministry of Culture's supervision. A church official said the Iraqi government and local Dhi Qar government had authorized the construction of the church, which began in August 2022 and was still underway at the end of year.'[113]

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[112] Open Doors, 'Iraq: Full Country Dossier 2024' (Pages 30 – 44), January 2024
[113] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 3), 30 June 2024

11.6 Treatment of Christians in the KRI

11.6.1 The January 2022 EUAA report stated: 'Even though Christians in Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) have better living opportunities, they still face discrimination in terms of land disputes and property issues as they were subjected to expropriations for different reasons.'[114]

11.6.2 The August 2023 CFRI article stated: 'In general, the conditions and rights of Christians in the region are better than in the central Iraq, with a margin of respect for their freedoms.'[115]

11.6.3 In December 2023, The Christian Post, a US-based Christian news site[116], published an article entitled 'Iraqi Kurdistan: Fostering coexistence amid regional challenges'. The article, which displays a pro-KRG bias, stated:

'In the heart of Iraqi Kurdistan lies Ain Kawa, a Christian oasis where diverse Christian communities from regions plagued by adversity find a refuge of coexistence. The resilience of Ain Kawa's inhabitants, coupled with the visionary leadership of Mr. Messud Barzani [former KRG president[117]] and the Kurdish government, has created a haven for Christians amidst the challenges posed by neighboring countries… Families affected by terrorism in Syria and those who lost jobs in Lebanon due to political turmoil have found solace alongside Christians fleeing the perils of Baghdad and Mosul. Maronites, Syriac Orthodox, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Greek Orthodox, and Melkite Catholics coexist in harmony.

'… Crucial to Ain Kawa's success is the support and encouragement of Mr. Messud Barzani, whose policies restrict non-Christians from purchasing real estate in the neighborhood. This foresighted measure, supported by the tolerant Kurds of Erbil, safeguards Ain Kawa from suffering the fate of other Christian neighborhoods in the region, where forced sales and seizures of property occurred as native populations fled.'[118]

11.6.4 In January 2023, Michael Rubin, a senior fellow at public policy think tank the American Enterprise Institute[119], published an op-ed in news outlet The Washington Examiner entitled 'Stop giving Iraqi Kurds a free pass on religious freedom'. It argued:

'While land-grabbing by Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias impede [sic] the return of Christians to ancestral villages, Barzani's [KRG prime minister] political party and peshmerga do the same as they enrich themselves with land speculation. This fits a long pattern. When Pope Francis flew into Erbil, he appeared unaware that Barzani's government seized much of the lands surrounding the airport from Christians with neither warning nor reimbursement. Barzani cronies built many of the malls and housing projects on confiscated Christian property. To complain is to face arrest. Many Christians still hold deeds to land subsequently confiscated in and around the Barzani stronghold of Duhok and Zakho. Barzani's militias harass to

[114] EUAA, 'Iraq: Targeting of Individuals' (Section 4.1.2), January 2022
[115] CFRI, 'Christians in Post-2003 Iraq: Fragmentation Dynamics…', 11 August 2023
[116] The Christian Post, 'About CP', undated
[117] The National, 'Masoud Barzani visits Baghdad to settle disputes', 3 July 2024
[118] The Christian Post, 'Iraqi Kurdistan: Fostering coexistence…', 21 December 2023
[119] American Enterprise Institute, 'About', undated

compel eviction. For example, they moved a checkpoint to force Christians around Alqosh to drive two hours in order to access their own farmland five minutes away.

'Other discrimination is evident. Christian villages often have bad roads and no streetlights, while neighboring Kurdish communities have paved roads and ample electricity. The Barzanis refuse to grant permits for Christians to build or expand houses and businesses unless they first contract Barzani-loyalists and Muslim partners, and often overrule local governments on the construction of new water systems.

'Masrour's [Masrour Barzani, KRG prime minister] administration forces Assyrian children to go to Kurdish and Muslim schools by refusing to fund schools in Christian villages. He refuses to allow the Akitu and Nassiban Assyrian schools in Dohuk to expand on their own land. Most recently, Assyrian activists say Masrour's government now bans the word "Assyrian" in the name of new businesses. What the Barzanis describe as religious freedom is really the manifestation of a deeply inculcated sense of supremacy. They approach Yezidis and Christians as dhimmi, second class citizens whose freedom of religion depends upon a willingness to subordinate themselves to the de facto sultan's rule. Those who oppose the Barzanis politically, enjoy greatly diminished religious rights.'[120]

11.6.5 The May 2023 USCIRF report stated:

'[T]he KRG's "land grabs" of indigenous Christians' villages and sites constituted a form of targeted demographic change, prompting continued displacement and migration.

'… [S]ome Christian groups indigenous to the Nineveh Plains raised concerns over the KRG's failure to resolve longstanding grievances such as lack of KRG funding and other support for Assyrian-run schools; discrimination in employment and municipal services; and unresolved KRG-tolerated or -initiated misappropriation of Christians' land, businesses, and other property. Christian residents have cited their lack of security and threats from ISIS, the PMF/PMU, and the KRG as the main drivers of emigration from the area, bringing their ancient communities almost to the point of extinction.'[121]

11.6.6 The Open Doors Iraq FCD 2024 stated: 'In 2023, pressure on Christians in Iraqi Kurdistan increased further as two Christian converts from Islam were accused of blasphemy after posting online messages on social media. One of them was sentenced to prison, the other had to leave the country for his safety while a case against him was pending. The two cases were widely publicized online, leading to incitement of hatred against Christians in the region.

'… Many Christian IDPs in Kurdistan have experienced difficulties in integrating due to the language barrier. Christians have reported exploitation at the workplace and housing market, including having to pay higher rent than non-Christians. Many IDPs have returned to their villages and cities after years of displacement and are faced with very limited access to

[120] The Washington Examiner, 'Stop giving Iraqi Kurds a free pass…', 24 January 2023
[121] USCIRF, '2023 Annual Report' (Page 58), May 2023

community life as the social fabric of society has been destroyed. This has been a cause of depression, especially among the youth and women, impacting their capacity to improve community life and strengthen social cohesion.

'… Most of the Christians in the IKR usually display Christian symbols without any problems, although in rare cases some have reportedly removed the crosses from their cars so as not to attract unwanted attention.

'… According to a source in the region, prominent members of Kurdish parties or persons loyal to them have been responsible for stealing money, property, land and factories belonging to Christians in the IKR.'[122]

11.6.7 The May 2024 USCIRF report stated: '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.'[123]

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11.7 Treatment of Christian converts

11.7.1 The January 2022 EUAA report stated:

'International Christian Concern noted in March 2020 that the risk of being targeted by their families left many converts homeless, jobless, and with nowhere to go. Owing to the societal pressure and threats facing them from extended family members, clan leaders or wider society, Christian converts often keep their faith a secret. The Voice of the Martyrs noted on its website that those who convert from Islam to Christianity can be rejected and abused by their families and may be killed or persecuted by clan or tribe members, state authorities or extremist groups.

'… According to Christian leaders, Christian families who are registered as Muslim but practice Christianity or another faith in private are forced to either register their children as Muslims or have their children undocumented by federal authorities. If undocumented without a national identity card, families are ineligible for government benefits and children cannot enrol in school enrolment. Undocumented people without national identity cards are unable to access other rights and services, including healthcare and the property ownership.'[124]

11.7.2 The June 2022 EUAA report stated: 'Kurdish authorities are fairly tolerant of the Christian converts but it has not been possible for converts to, for example, change the official status of religion for their children… The number of Christian converts in the KRI is generally thought to be around a few hundreds [sic].'[125]

11.7.3 In March 2022, various news outlets reported the killing of a woman in Erbil by her own family after she publicly announced her conversion to Christianity on social media. Morning Star News, a 'news service focusing exclusively on

[122] Open Doors, 'Iraq: Full Country Dossier 2024' (Pages 7, 16, 24, 31), January 2024
[123] USCIRF, '2024 Annual Report' (Page 59), 1 May 2024
[124] EUAA, 'Iraq: Targeting of Individuals' (Sections 10.2-10.3), January 2022
[125] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.14), 29 June 2022

persecution of Christians',[126] published an article entitled 'Young Woman Who Left Islam Killed in Iraq', which stated:

'A young woman preparing to be baptized in Erbil, Iraq last week was instead killed in a possible "honor" killing for converting to Christianity, with Muslim family members reportedly suspected, according to local media. The body of Eman Sami Maghdid, 20, was found on March 7 [2022] bound with tape and discarded among the vacant, sandy fields surrounding Erbil International Airport… She had been stabbed multiple times… Arabic-language media reported that Maghdid's father is a prominent local mosque leader (imam). Her uncle was taken into custody in connection with the slaying, but it was unclear if he was charged or merely questioned… A few weeks before she was killed, she had announced her conversion to Christianity on one of her social media accounts… Maghdid, who went by the Christian moniker Maria, enjoyed a wide following across several social media sites where she extolled the values of equal rights and women's freedom to almost 50,000 followers… She had not only put her faith in Christ but also had been a longstanding, outspoken critic of Islam. Forced into an arranged marriage when she was 12, she somehow was able to flee the marriage after four years. Maghdid showed her break with Islam by appearing in some videos smoking cigarettes or dressed in outfits considered immodest in many Islamic countries, and she appeared in some of her videos wearing a cross on a necklace.'[127]

11.7.4 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

'Because conversion from Islam is prohibited by law, Christian churches in Iraq refrain from proselytising, and conversions from Islam to Christianity are generally performed in secret. Sources told DFAT that access to Christian evangelical material on social media was leading increasing numbers of young Muslims to convert, but that doing so placed them at risk of violence from their families and communities. Christian churches sometimes turn away would-be converts for this reason. In March 2022, a 20-year-old woman known as 'Maria' was murdered by relatives in Erbil for disobeying her family and publicly converting to Christianity.'[128]

11.7.5 In April 2023, the EUAA published a report entitled 'Iraq: Arab tribes and customary law' which, citing various sources, stated:

'According to a person working with converts to Christianity who was interviewed anonymously by the Finnish Immigration Service in 2021, the family of the convert decides on the attitude taken towards the convert, and authorities would not change a decision that the family or tribe makes concerning the convert. Ceasefire for Civilian Rights stated that the way that Christian converts are treated by tribes varies from tribe to tribe and place to place, and can depend on the extent to which the convert draws attention to themselves.

'… Publicly revealing one's conversion from Islam to Christianity "would likely put a person at considerable risk", according to Ceasefire Centre for

[126] Morning Star News, 'About us', undated
[127] Morning Star News, 'Young Woman Who Left Islam Killed in Iraq', 16 March 2022
[128] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.43), 16 January 2023

Civilian Rights. Al Ibrahimi stated that for Arab Muslim tribes, disavowal by one's tribe "provides a permission to kill since the person has become an infidel". OWFI [Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq] stated that Muslims who convert to Christianity are treated "in a terrible way" and that she was aware of cases of converts exiled by their families; noting that conversion is not accepted usually accepted by tribes [sic]." Open Doors reports that some tribal elders "have agreed to converts being killed". Christians with a Muslim background may face severe pressure from relatives who want the converts to return to Islam. According to Open Doors, sometimes this amounts to attempts to kill the convert. Open Doors also lists other forms of violations: "physical harm and abuse, detention, being disowned and expelled from the family home, being ostracized from clan, family and community, forced divorce (especially targeting women), forced marriage with a radical Muslim (especially targeting women) and loss of custody of children". According to an Iraqi pastor who was interviewed anonymously by the Finnish Immigration Service in 2021, a tribe may force a male Christian convert to divorce his wife and renounce his children.

'According to Al-Ibrahimi a family tries to hide the conversion of a family member because they know the consequences of conversion are very dire. Hiding the conversion is normally not successful. When that happens, the situation becomes critical for the family in question. There is no tribal code that says that the family should be eliminated but there is a code saying that they should be expelled from the territory. Al-Ibrahimi mentions that the meetings in which the decision to expel a family is made public are open with the date and venue made known in advance. Thus, basically anyone can attend them. The media are not invited, and information about the meetings is not published. Photos and videos may be leaked via social media particularly when tribes try to resolve the matter internally, trying to avoid a scandal and a stain to the reputation of the tribe. The meeting is documented in the tribal registry.

'According to a person who had worked with Iraqi Christians and who was interviewed anonymously by the Finnish Immigration Service in 2021, the attitude taken towards a convert by his/her family or tribe is of crucial importance. In a case where the tribe is assumed not to approve of the conversion, the convert's family and close relatives may decide on whether to convey information about the conversion to the tribe or not. If the family members choose not to convey this information to the tribe, they will take a calculated risk on the tribe's possible retaliatory measures being directed at the whole family. According to the interviewee, if the family members choose to talk about the conversion, the tribe will organize a meeting where a decision is made on who is responsible for the killing of the convert. The interviewee mentioned that the decision does not automatically lead to the killing of the convert. It is possible, that such a decision is only a formality and is left "floating in the air". It is also possible that the conversion is settled, and the decision of the tribe is annulled by the doing of favors and/or giving a monetary compensation to the tribe.

'Al-Ibrahimi was not aware of a family disavowing and distancing themselves from the convert publicly (e.g., in a newspaper). According to him, in almost all cases the family is against the conversion and consider it best that the

family member is expelled or punished.

'… According to a person who had worked with Iraqi Christians and who was interviewed anonymously by the Finnish Immigration Service in 2021, a convert with a Muslim background would aim to leave the country if the conversion came to light. This is because a tribal judgment on the matter would complicate job seeking, buying an apartment or make it difficult to deal with authorities such as the Kurdish security organization Asayish. According to the interviewee, a person who has fallen out of favor with his/her tribe is seen to be destabilizing society. According to a person working with Christian converts who was interviewed anonymously by the Finnish Immigration Service in 2021, losing the tribe's support is meaningful in situations where the person has to deal with authorities, e.g. when getting married, or needs a certificate from the tribal leader for some purpose, or requires assistance in dispute resolution.'[129]

11.7.6 According to the Open Doors WWL 2024 report, '[Female] [c]onverts from Islam are vulnerable to house arrest, beatings, sexual harassment and even "honor" killings… Female converts to Christianity from Islam are not recognized as Christian and cannot legally marry non-Muslim men.' The report also stated: '[Male] [c]onverts from a Muslim background are particularly vulnerable to violations. In a culture that prizes honor, they risk being ejected from their families, threatened or killed. These factors increase the already strong motivations for emigration.'[130]

11.7.7 The same source also stated:

'Several Shia parties have close relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran and Christian converts with a Muslim background, in particular, have reported being monitored by Iranian secret services in areas close to the Iranian border.

'… Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background are in danger if they reveal their faith or meet with other Christians. They would be accused of apostasy and treason… Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background are likely to lose their jobs as soon as their new faith becomes known.'[131]

11.7.8 The Open Doors Iraq FCD 2024 stated:

'Several Christian converts from Islam were detained for Christian activities… At least two converts to Christianity were reportedly forced to marry… For a long time, the atmosphere in Kurdish areas had been more tolerant of non-Muslims. However, according to a country expert, that tolerance is now decreasing with the growing influence of conservative Islam, which is mainly reflected in increased pressure being exerted on converts from Islam.' [132]

11.7.9 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'… According to Christian leaders, authorities continued to force Christian families formally registered as Muslim but privately practicing Christianity or

[129] EUAA, 'Iraq: Arab tribes and customary law' (Section 4.5), 14 April 2023
[130] Open Doors, 'World Watch List 2024: Iraq' (Pages 5-6), January 2024
[131] Open Doors, 'World Watch List 2024: Iraq' (Pages 4 and 6), January 2024
[132] Open Doors, 'Iraq: Full Country Dossier', (Pages 41 and 24), January 2024

another non-Islamic faith to either register their children as Muslims, or to have the children remain undocumented by federal authorities, thereby denying them the ability to legally convert from Islam. They said remaining undocumented affected the family's eligibility for government benefits, such as school enrollment and ration card allocations for basic food items, which are determined by family size. Larger families with legally registered children received higher allotments than those with undocumented children.'[133]

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12. Zoroastrians

12.1 Zoroastrianism

12.1.1 Zoroastrianism originated in ancient Persia. Estimates on its origins vary due to differing historical evidence about when Zarathustra, the religion's founder, lived. Some sources say it was in the 6th century BCE[134], while others trace its origins much further back, to around 1738 BCE[135].

12.1.2 In April 2024, National Geographic published an article entitled 'Heard of Zoroastrianism? The ancient religion still has fervent followers'. It stated:

'…. At its [Zoroastrianism's] core is humata, hukhta, hvarshta: "good thoughts, good words, good deeds." According to tradition, Zarathushtra – Zoroaster in Greek – was a disillusioned priest of an ancient polytheistic religion who, after immersing himself in a river, received a revelation from Ahura Mazda, the Supreme Being.

'… The Zoroastrian belief in one supreme being and good versus evil had a profound influence on the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam … [S]cholars note the similarity between Zoroastrian and Muslim practices of praying five times a day, and the ritual ablution that accompanies these prayers. The Zoroastrian god is not a negotiating or punishing deity. There's no notion of original sin that requires repentance. Rather, the Zoroastrian god is more like the force of gravity, indifferent to your daily well-being. Your job is to fight for asha (truth, righteousness, and order) and against druj (filth, lies, and chaos). After death, your soul, or urvan, reunites with your guardian spirit, or fravashi, and lives on in a world of song or a world of purgatory. Then comes the final battle, when good triumphs over evil and everyone is resurrected to live in a perfect world free of war, hunger, and earthly desires.'[136]

12.1.3 For more information on Zoroastrian history and beliefs see the Encyclopaedia Britannica article on Zoroastrianism.

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12.2 Zoroastrians in Iraq

12.2.1 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

'[Zoroastrianism] has experienced a resurgence in Iraq in recent years, especially in the KRI…Exact numbers are unknown, but Yasna, an Iraqi

[133] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 2), 30 June 2024
[134] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.66), 16 January 2023
[135] Fanack, 'Zoroastrianism in Iraq: Challenges and Misconceptions', 10 March 2023
[136] National Geographic, 'Heard of Zoroastrianism?...', 22 April 2024

Zoroastrian organisation, claims to have 15,000 registered followers.'[137]

12.2.2 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated: 'According to the KRG MERA, there are approximately 80,000 to 100,000 Zoroastrians in the IKR, while a Zoroastrian religious leader estimated there are approximately 50,000 Zoroastrians throughout the country.'[138]

12.2.3 Other sources consulted for this CPIN did not comment on the number of Zoroastrians in the country (see Bibliography).

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12.3 Conversions to Zoroastrianism in the KRI

12.3.1 In September 2020, Reuters published an article entitled 'Zoroastrians make a comeback in northern Iraq, but still face stigma' which stated:

'[I]n the country's Kurdish region, Zoroastrianism witnessed an unexpected revival after the extremist Islamic State group occupied vast swathes of northern Iraq… According to Awat Taieb, co-founder of the Yasna association that since 2014 has promoted Zoroastrianism in Kurdistan and also representative of the faith at the Kurdistan government, about 15,000 people registered with the organisation so far. Most of them were Kurds converting from Islam, but Arabs and Christians joined the movement as well, she said. Although the regional Kurdish government officially recognised Zoroastrianism in 2015, converts from Islam remain registered as Muslims at the central Iraqi government, something Taieb does not expect to change any time soon… The focus on the environment and on peaceful coexistence are key elements attracting young people from conservative backgrounds to the ancient faith. But Dohuk's Zoroastrians still have some way to go to gain universal acceptance – some local sheikhs have labelled Zoroastrians as infidels on social media.'[139]

12.3.2 The June 2022 EUAA report stated: 'Sources pointed to a rise in recent years of secularism and atheism in Iraq and the numbers of Muslims converting to Zoroastrianism in the KRI. This rising trend is supported by increased activism among young secularists as well as decreased mosque attendance.'[140]

12.3.3 The January 2023 DFAT report stated: 'Sources told DFAT the religion [Zoroastrianism] was a popular choice for Muslim converts disillusioned with Islamic extremism following the Da'esh occupation in 2014-17.'[141]

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12.4 Treatment of Zoroastrians

12.4.1 The January 2023 DFAT report stated: 'Zoroastrianism is an officially recognised religion in the KRI, but not in federal Iraq. Zoroastrians are generally registered as Muslim on their identity documents, enabling them to access the same rights and public services as other Iraqis. There are some

[137] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.66), 16 January 2023
[138] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 1), 30 June 2024
[139] Reuters, 'Zoroastrians make a comeback in northern Iraq…', 30 September 2020
[140] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.14), 29 June 2022
[141] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.66), 16 January 2023

reports of online harassment and discrimination within families against Zoroastrian converts, but DFAT is unaware of Zoroastrians being subjected to violence or systemic discrimination.'[142] See Documentation for more information on the inability of Zoroastrians to register their religion on identity documents.

12.4.2 CPIT was unable to find further information about state and societal treatment of Zoroastrians in federal Iraq and the KRI in the sources consulted (see Bibliography).

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13. Atheists

13.1 Atheism in Iraq

13.1.1 The June 2022 EUAA report stated:

'Sources pointed to a rise in recent years of secularism and atheism in Iraq…This rising trend is supported by increased activism among young secularists as well as decreased mosque attendance… While atheism is rare in Iraq, the number of atheists is reportedly growing. There are many Iraqi websites and blogs that cater to atheists, but membership lists are kept secret for fear of persecution by extremist religious groups or the surrounding society. In October 2021, a judicial order enabled the monitoring of social media sites, included [sic] those who promote atheism.'[143]

13.1.2 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

'Sources told DFAT increasing numbers of young Muslims had become disillusioned with their faith, including because of atrocities carried out by Da'esh in the name of Islamic extremism. Some choose to retain their Muslim identity but abandon practices such as attending prayers and wearing hijab. Others choose to convert to religions such as Christianity or Zoroastrianism. Some become atheists. There is no official recognition of atheism in Iraq, but since atheists are generally registered as Muslim on their identity documents they are able to access the same rights and public services as other Iraqis.'[144]

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13.2 Treatment of Atheists

13.2.1 The January 2022 EUAA report stated:

'According to a May 2021 report published in the Review of Nationalities, politicians and the clergy publicly labelled atheists as enemies of the state and traitors to God who threaten to destroy tradition and destabilise society, calling for their punishment.

'… Whilst atheism is not prohibited by law, Humanists International noted that atheists have been prosecuted for blasphemy and other related charges. An article published in the Review of Nationalities stated that non-believers can fall into the category of Article 372 [part of the penal code

[142] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.67), 16 January 2023
[143] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.14), 29 June 2022
[144] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.68), 16 January 2023

about 'offences that violate religious sensibilities'[145]] because of the lack of precise legal provisions and the freedom of interpretation amongst the judiciary. Freedom House noted in their annual report for 2020 that although blasphemy laws are rarely enforced, the judiciary is influenced by corruption, political pressure, tribal forces, and religious interests.

'According to a February 2021 report by the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, humanists, atheists and secularists are considered apostasisers and blasphemers and, as a result, face repression across Iraq, in a climate of impunity or collusion in violence by state actors.'[146]

13.2.2 The June 2022 EUAA report stated:

'Atheism is not illegal in Iraq, but atheists have been prosecuted for blasphemy and other related charges. Although there are no articles in the Iraqi Penal Code that provide for a direct punishment for atheism, the desecration of religions is penalised. In March 2018, arrest warrants were issued in Dhi Qar against four Iraqis on charges of atheism. In May 2020, in Al-Qadissiyah province, a doctor was sentenced to two years imprisonment for promoting atheism and insulting the prophet of Islam online. According to COI sources, no recent examples of prosecution of atheists in the KRI have been reported.

'In Iraq, atheists are reportedly viewed with disdain and face threats. It is reported that persons who openly admit they are not religious would risk arrest, for example, in Baghdad and the South, whereas in the KRI there would be more freedom of expression with regards to religious beliefs.

'… Atheism is in general not well perceived in the KRI. However, according to some sources, it is somewhat more acceptable to be an atheist than an apostate. As of end of October 2021, no recent examples of prosecution of atheists in the KRI have been found. Criticism of religious functionaries in general is quite widespread in KRI and is not looked upon as something scandalous. Criticising Islam on social media, particularly on Facebook, has become something of a social trend in the KRI, whereas up until recently it was not acceptable. It has been reported that the KRI had the largest number of atheism supporters in Iraq. The historical brutality of ISIL, Al-Qaeda and Ansar al Islam have reportedly created increasing rebellion against the presence of religion in social and political life in Iraq. However, proclaiming oneself as an atheist publicly could cause problems in Iraq. There have reportedly been cases in which atheists have been physically threatened, harassed or rejected by their families. According to COI sources, atheists who suffer harassment due to their beliefs prefer to hide than to report to the police. Although the Kurdish government is secular, society in general… is conservative and people are generally expected to respect Islamic norms.'[147]

13.2.3 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

'Atheism is not well-accepted by conservative Iraqis. Former Prime Minister

[145] Refworld, 'Iraq: Penal Code' (Pages 67-68), July 1969
[146] EUAA, 'Iraq: Targeting of Individuals' (Sections 10.2-10.3) January 2022
[147] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.14), 29 June 2022

Nouri al-Maliki called atheism a “dangerous conspiracy” and in 2017 a prominent Shi’a cleric [and politician], Ammar al-Hakim, called for atheists in Iraq to be confronted with “an iron fist”. Some activists publicly proclaim atheist beliefs, but harassment and violence against atheists by family members, religious groups and militia groups sometimes occurs. Known atheists reportedly have difficulty securing employment. Sources told DFAT they were aware of atheists being murdered by family members because of their denial of religion, but that these crimes were generally reported as “honour killings” or as due to “refusal to obey the family”.’[148]

13.2.4 The January 2024 UNHCR report stated: ‘Given society’s conflation of atheism with secularism, communism, feminism, immorality and anti-Islamic attitudes, atheists, even if they are not open about their views, may be targeted on account of their political/secular views (e.g., as participants in the Tishreen protests, which advocated for a secular State and rejected influence of religion in politics), their “westernized” appearance and/or liberal lifestyle (e.g., refusal to wear the hijab).’[149]

13.2.5 CPIT was unable to find any recent examples of atheists being mistreated in the sources consulted (see Bibliography).

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14. Yazidis (or Yezidis)

14.1 The Yazidi people

14.1.1 The June 2022 EUAA report stated: ‘The Yazidis are a minority ethnoreligious group autochthonous to the governorate of Ninewa. Estimates on the Yazidi population differ significantly and vary from fewer than 300,000 in the entire world to about 700,000 in northern Iraq alone. Prior to the presence of ISIL in 2014, the largest Yazidi community (approximately 400,000 people) resided in the area of Mount Sinjar in Ninewa. Yazidis identify first by religion and then by ethnicity.’[150]

14.1.2 On 30 August 2022, NGO Polish Humanitarian Action (PAH), which provides ‘humanitarian aid and assistance to the people who need it most’[151], published an article entitled ‘Who Are the Yazidis?’ which stated:

‘The Yazidis are a small minority indigenous to Mesopotamia who are united by their ethnic and religious identity. “As an ancient monotheistic religion, Yazidism shares elements with other Middle Eastern traditions (e.g. elements of Islam (Shiism, Sufism); Christianity (Nestorianism); Proto-Indo-Iranian religion; and Kurdish, Judaic and Gnostic mythologies) but is set apart by its prayer rituals, a belief in reincarnation, and the central role of the Peacock Angel, Tawusi Malek, who is worshiped as messenger to the Yazidi god.”

‘“Considering themselves as Adam’s only real descendants, Yazidis tend to only live among themselves and do not allow conversions or interreligious marriage, not even with Muslim Kurds. The most serious punishment for a

[148] DFAT, ‘Country Information Report Iraq’ (Section 3.69), 16 January 2023
[149] UNHCR, ‘International Protection Considerations…’ (Page 142), 30 January 2024
[150] EUAA, ‘Country Guidance: Iraq’ (Section 2.15.2), 29 June 2022
[151] PAH, ‘About’, undated

believer is to be expelled from the community."

'Yazidi religion is underpinned by the belief in one demiurge (Allah), who created the world but, becoming disinterested in it, ceased direct involvement post-creation. Instead he created seven divine beings, angelic emanations of Himself, with the supreme leader among them being the Peacock Angel, Tawusi Malek.'[152]

14.1.3 A query response published by the European Asylum Support Office (now known as EUAA) in September 2020 and the August 2022 PAH article noted that 'Tawusi Melek' ('Melek Tawwus'), which translates to 'Peacock Angel', is the main deity and the primary focus of Yazidi prayer. Both sources indicate that Yazidis' worship of the Peacock Angel is one of the reasons why they have faced persecution from Muslims and Christians due to perceptions that Tawusi Melek is a manifestation of Satan[153][154].

14.1.4 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

'The Yazidis (also spelt Yezidis) are a religious group historically concentrated in Sinjar [also known by its Kurdish name, Shingal], 150 kilometres west of Mosul. Their religion is distinctive and highly syncretic, influenced by beliefs and practices of Zoroastrianism, Islam and Christianity. The Yazidis maintain a more closed community than do other ethnic or religious groups in Iraq. It is impossible to convert to being a Yazidi and marriage outside the community is forbidden. Some Yazidis identify as ethnically Kurdish, while others view themselves as having a distinct ethnic identity. Yazidis are reportedly distinct in appearance from other Kurds, and sources told DFAT they would have no trouble identifying a Yazidi by appearance alone.'[155]

14.1.5 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated: 'Yezidi leaders stated most of the 400,000 to 500,000 Yezidis in the country are located in Ninewa Province and the IKR.'[156]

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14.2 Internally displaced Yazidis

14.2.1 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

'Before the rise of Da'esh there were an estimated 500,000 Yazidis in Iraq. The advance of Da'esh into Sinjar in August 2014 led to the displacement of almost the entire Yazidi community… As of 2022, about 92,000 displaced Yazidis had returned to their homes in Sinjar, with many more reluctant or unable to do so because their properties have been taken over or they fear intimidation by Shi'a Arab and Kurdish militias. Many are also concerned about inadequate state protection in case of a future Da'esh resurgence. Public services in Sinjar are extremely limited, including healthcare and education, and many homes and public buildings remain unusable since being damaged in the fight against Da'esh.

[152] PAH, 'Who Are the Yazidis?', 30 August 2022
[153] EASO, 'What is the security context and treatment of Yazidis?' (Section 1), 30 September 2020
[154] PAH, 'Who Are the Yazidis?', 30 August 2022
[155] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.57), 16 January 2023
[156] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom…' (Section 1), 30 June 2024

'About 196,000 Yazidis remain in 15 refugee camps in Duhok Governorate, while a further 25,000 or so live in Duhok outside the camps. Sources described the living conditions of those outside the camps as "terrible", with shanty-style accommodation and limited access to basic services. Conditions in the camps are challenging... supplies of both electricity and drinking water are intermittent, there are insufficient toilets, and the cost of food and other essentials is reportedly very high... Communicable diseases including hepatitis and COVID-19 are common, as well as non-communicable diseases such as cancer, which locals blame on contaminated water… Mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety and PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] are prevalent, especially among trauma survivors. Suicide rates are high. Some professional counselling services are available, but they are inadequate to meet demand.'[157]

14.2.2 In January 2023, USCIRF published a report entitled 'Religious Freedom amid Iraq's Political Crisis' which stated: 'The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that in 2022, almost 3,000 Yazidis – including many of those abducted women – are still missing, and over 200,000 remain displaced, with many living in "extreme poverty" in internal displacement camps and informal settlements within the KRG region.'[158]

14.2.3 In March 2023, Brandeis University's Crown Center for Middle East Studies published a study entitled 'Navigating Dispute and Displacement: The Yazidi Experience in Post-ISIS Iraq' which stated:

'As internally displaced persons (IDPs) of a disputed territory, Yazidis have fallen into a protection gap whereby they are recognized neither as refugees by humanitarian organizations nor as full citizens by the Iraqi and Kurdish governments.

'… Three options are presented as durable solutions to internal displacement in the current guidelines of the UNHCR and other major aid organizations: return to the place of origin, local settlement in the areas where displaced persons have taken refuge, or settlement elsewhere within the country. Owing to unstable security conditions and a lack of infrastructure and livelihoods, however, many displaced Yazidis have been unable or unwilling to return to Sinjar. Most displaced Yazidis have also been unable to settle in the Kurdistan Region because they have limited access to basic government services, such as education and healthcare. Displaced Yazidis also face challenges finding a job in the Kurdistan Region's public sector, which is the main source of income for most Kurdish families. To gain access to the KRG's patronage system, Yazidis must be members of one of the Kurdish political parties (the KDP [Kurdistan Democratic Party] or the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), which requires them to identify as ethnic Kurds and show support for the Kurdish cause. The process of obtaining permits for private businesses is also challenging, since it requires a significant amount of investment, which is not available to most displaced Yazidis.

'Over the last eight years, humanitarian organizations, in coordination with the governments of Baghdad and Erbil, have implemented a range of

[157] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Sections 3.58-3.61), 16 January 2023
[158] USCIRF, 'Religious Freedom amid Iraq's Political Crisis', January 2023

measures that discourage Yazidis from feeling any sense of stability outside of their homeland and make return to Sinjar the only viable alternative to displacement. These measures include constant surveillance of Yazidis residing in IDP camps; strict restrictions on their movement in and out of the camps, as well as limitations on their travel within Iraqi Kurdistan; the provision of tents as the only accommodation, along with the prohibition of building long-lasting shelters; limitations on their participation in public gatherings; and even restrictions on their ability to speak with foreign journalists. The implementation of these measures constitutes an implicit strategy to force displaced Yazidis to view displacement as a temporary phenomenon. As a manager of one of the IDP camps in Iraqi Kurdistan stated during an interview with me: "We want to support Yazidis, but also discourage them from thinking that they can stay here forever. They should not think that aid is always available, or [that] living in the camp is permanent.'"[159]

14.2.4 In March 2024, Iraqi Kurdish 'independent media establishment'[160] Rudaw published an article entitled 'Dozens of Yazidi families return home from IDP camps after nearly a decade'. It stated:

'There are still around 100,000 Yazidis in camps across Duhok province. Those who have opted to stay in the camps say their return is contingent upon the restoration of services and security in Shingal [also known as Sinjar]… According to the IOM [the UN's International Organization for Migration], around 80 percent of Shingal's public infrastructure and 70 percent of civilian homes were destroyed during the years of the ISIS war from 2014 to 2017. Fundamental services such as electricity and water are not consistently available, and numerous health and education facilities have yet to be reconstructed after having been destroyed during the war.'[161]

14.2.5 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'On October 6 [2023], the Prime Minister's office said more than 185,000 Yezidis remained in internal displacement camps. International organizations, however, said there were 132,000 total IDPs in camps, of which 118,000 are Yezidi… Only a very small number of the country's population of 400,000 to 500,000 Yezidis had returned to their homes, with Sinjar having an estimated return rate of only 35 percent, including non-Yezidis. IOM reported more than 5,000 Yezidi IDPs returned to Sinjar during the year [2023]. Many chose to stay in IDP camps or informal settlements in Duhok, saying inadequate security as well as a lack of reconstruction plans, public services, and economic opportunities discouraged them from returning home… On November 6, Minister of Displacement and Migration Evan Jabro announced the voluntary return of 487 Yezidi IDPs (116 families) from Shariya camp in Duhok Province [in the KRI] to their place of origin in Sinjar District in Ninewa Province. Jabro observed that in coordination with IOM, the IDPs received financial support upon their return and transportation for individuals and their belongings. Dian Jafar, the head of the Directorate of Migration and Crisis Response in the IKR Ministry of Interior, said this was the

[159] Crown Center for Middle East Studies, 'Navigating Dispute…' (Pages 5-6), March 2023
[160] Rudaw, 'About Us', undated
[161] Rudaw, 'Dozens of Yazidi families return home…', 12 March 2024

sixth group of Yezidi families included in the IOM's safe return program, bringing the total number of beneficiaries to 321 families. Jafar added IOM had previously constructed homes and helped with job opportunities for IDP returnees.'[162]

14.2.6 The same source also stated: 'The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) reported Yezidis comprised 30 percent of approximately 700,000 IDPs present inside and outside camps in the IKR.'[163]

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14.3 Overview: treatment of Yazidis

14.3.1 Yazidis suffered extensively at the hands of Daesh – in 2021 the UN decided that Daesh's crimes against the Yazidi community constituted a genocide[164]. The January 2022 EUAA report stated:

'In March 2021, Al-Monitor reported that "in total, at least 10,000 Yazidis were killed or abducted by the Islamic State". The Irish Times and DW [Deutsche Welle] stated that 10,000 Yazidis were killed. Moreover, approximately 7,000 Yazidi women and girls were abducted according to DW, Reuters and The Irish Times. The New York Times… wrote that ISIL captured 6,000 women and girls. Reuters and the New York Times mentioned that 3,000 Yazidis were killed… Both DW and the Irish Times noted the discovery of "more than 70 mass graves"… The USDOS [United States Department of State] reported in October 2021 that "the number of [Yazidi] people […] [ISIL] killed remains unknown, and discoveries of mass graves continue."'[165]

14.3.2 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

'DFAT assesses that Yazidis in Sinjar face a moderate risk of official discrimination in the form of harassment and displacement by state-sponsored militias. They also face a residual risk of violence by Da'esh in the absence of effective state protection. Like other minorities, Yazidis face a moderate risk of societal discrimination and violence in areas where they are a minority. Those living in areas where violence continues or who have been displaced, face a risk of societal violence similar to that faced by other groups living in those areas or situations. Yazidi women survivors of Da'esh sexual violence face a high risk of societal discrimination in the form of exclusion, stigma and being forced to give up children fathered by Da'esh fighters.'[166]

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14.4 Treatment of Yazidis by state actors

14.4.1 The June 2022 EUAA report stated: 'In the KRG, Yazidis reportedly faced discrimination if they did not identify as Kurdish, as only those Yazidis who identified publicly as Kurdish could obtain senior positions in the KRI leadership. A number of religious minority communities, including the Yazidis

[162] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom…' (Sections 1 and 2), 30 June 2024
[163] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Executive Summary and Section 2), 30 June 2024
[164] EUAA, 'Iraq: Targeting of Individuals' (Section 4.3.2), January 2022
[165] EUAA, 'Iraq: Targeting of Individuals' (Section 4.3.2), January 2022
[166] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.65), 16 January 2023

have reported cases of discrimination from KRG authorities in territories claimed by both the central government and KRG, particularly in relation to land and property disputes.'[167]

14.4.2 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated: 'A Yezidi activist critical of KRG policies towards the Yezidis noted continued harassment by KRG security forces that he attributed to his policy views. The activist said the KRG Asayish (internal security service) confiscated his and his colleague's cell phones and laptops at a checkpoint between Sinjar and Duhok Province without presenting a warrant or official documentation.'[168]

14.4.3 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

'In 2021, the Iraqi parliament ratified the Yazidi Survivors Law, intended to provide reparations to Yazidis who suffered under the Da'esh occupation. While an office had been established to implement the law, it was not effectively operating as of September 2022, and no Yazidis survivors had received compensation or other support under the law. In December 2022, the Iraqi Government approved a decree granting ownership of residential lands and houses to the Yazidi occupants of 11 residential collective townships in Sinjar. An official statement said the decision would benefit thousands of Yazidi families who had been deprived of owning their residential lands since 1975, under Ba'athist-era policies.'[169]

14.4.4 The January 2023 USCIRF report stated:

'[D]uring Baghdad's year of political crisis, the terms of the [Sinjar] agreement – including appointment of an independent Mayor, the expulsion from Sinjar of all armed groups, and the creation of a local security force encompassing members of Yazidi militia the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) [Kurdish acronym] – remained substantially unfulfilled. As with implementation of the YSL [Yazidi Survivors Law], politicians stagnating in Baghdad demonstrated a lack of both "political will to invest in Sinjar" and "funding to enhance local law enforcement and capacity-building." Adding insult to injury, the Iraqi government's recent role in Sinjar has at times crossed from inactivity to harm. For example, in May 2022, an Iraqi military operation targeted YBS fighters and displaced an estimated 3,000 Yazidi civilians – many of whom were already-traumatized returnees suffering additional harm from Turkish airstrikes in the region – in their "largest exodus" since the 2014 genocide.'[170]

14.4.5 The May 2023 USSD IRF report stated:

'On October 26 [2022], Prime Minister Sudani promised in a meeting with Yezidi members of parliament to preserve the rights of residents of Sinjar, reconstruct Sinjar, and resolve the IDP crisis there. He also promised to implement the 2020 Agreement on the Restoration of Stability and Normalization in Sinjar (Sinjar Agreement). Components of the Sinjar Agreement include appointing a Mayor, fielding a 2,500-member local

[167] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.15.2), 29 June 2022
[168] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024
[169] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.62), 16 January 2023
[170] USCIRF, 'Religious Freedom amid Iraq's Political Crisis', January 2023

security force, removing PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party[171]] forces from Sinjar, rebuilding Sinjar, and supporting Yezidi IDP returns. Community members and NGOs stated that lack of progress on implementing the Sinjar Agreement was compelling many Yezidis to pursue emigration.'[172]

14.4.6 The September 2023 USCIRF report indicated that the first reparations payments to Yazidi genocide survivors were issued in March 2023. The report also noted, however, that 'significant obstacles to full implementation of the related Iraqi legislation' remained[173].

14.4.7 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'In June 2021, the COR allocated 25 billion dinars ($19 million) [15 million GBP[174]] to support implementation of the Yezidi Survivors Law to provide support to Yezidi and other survivors of the 2014 genocide by ISIS. On March 1 [2023], the General Directorate of Survivors' Affairs (GDSA) distributed the first reparation disbursements under the Yezidi Survivors Law to 24 Yezidi survivors (21 women and three men). The survivors received debit cards that they could use to withdraw their monthly disbursements from the government. On August 1 [2023], the GDSA confirmed 635 beneficiaries were receiving monthly payments under the Yezidi Survivors Law. On December 1 [2023], the GDSA announced the total number of beneficiaries had reached 1,381. GDSA officials stated the GDSA was capable of processing up to 100 survivor applications each month; however, they pointed to challenges including staff shortages and an insufficient number of offices in the directorate, which limited their processing capacity.

'In early 2023, the government imposed a new requirement for survivors to file a criminal complaint to be eligible for reparation. In an April joint public statement, a group of 13 international NGOs, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, raised concerns about the new requirement. In their statement, the groups said that new evidentiary standards were burdensome, risked overloading judicial mechanisms, and could delay or hinder prompt and effective reparation.'[175]

14.4.8 The same source also stated:

'There have been limited efforts to implement the comprehensive 2020 Sinjar Agreement, signed by the government and the KRG, which included expanded reconstruction efforts to support voluntary returns of Yezidis still displaced in the IKR and abroad. Yezidi leaders and community members continued to criticize the agreement – although they agreed with its components – saying they did not have enough participation in the negotiation of the Sinjar Agreement and remained apprehensive about the progress of implementation. Yezidi leaders and activists also cited the lack of progress in implementing the Sinjar Agreement or improving the security situation in Sinjar as major impediments to the ability of internally displaced Yezidis to return to their homes.

'… According to Yezidi activists and officials, Yezidis continued to fear returning

[171] Britannica, 'Kurdistan Workers' Party', last updated 5 June 2024
[172] USSD, '2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 2), 15 May 2023
[173] USCIRF, 'Iraq: Country Update' (Page 2), 18 September 2023
[174] XE.com, '25,000,000,000 IQD to GBP…', 7 August 2024
[175] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024

to Sinjar because of poor infrastructure, the lack of empowered local government, and the presence of Iran-aligned militia groups as well as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, which Turkish airstrikes targeted. Several times during the year [2023], Turkish airstrikes struck facilities used by Sinjar Resistance Unit (YBS) Yezidi fighters affiliated with the PKK in Sinjar District. ISIS remnants also threaten the security of Sinjar.

'… On April 17, Yezidi MP Shareef Suliman, a member of the Migration Committee in the Iraqi COR, said that the 2023 budget had allocated 50 billion Iraqi dinars ($38 million) for the reconstruction of Sinjar and the Ninewa Plain and, in accordance with the Sinjar Agreement, also included funding to recruit 2,500 members of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) from the local population in Sinjar.'[176]

14.4.9 The same source also stated:

'The law characterizes certain actions that ISIS committed against Yezidis, Christians, Turkmen, and Shabak as crimes of genocide and crimes against humanity. The law grants rights to Yezidis and other survivors of ISIS. These rights include restitution for damages and access to social and medical services, including services that provide for the rehabilitation and integration of victims into society. Those eligible for benefits include Yezidi, Christian, Shabak, and Turkmen women and girl survivors who were kidnapped by ISIS; Yezidis, Christians, Shabak, and Turkmen who survived mass killing operations that ISIS carried out; and Yezidi children who were kidnapped by ISIS. The law does not specifically reference children born as a result of sexual violence committed by ISIS members.'[177]

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14.5 Treatment of Yazidis by non-state actors, hybrid actors (PMF) and society

14.5.1 The December 2022 CREID paper stated:

'Yazidi girls are very restricted in their clothes when going to university, and in some cases, it is imposed on them to wear headscarves, which Yazidi women do not wear as part of their religion or culture. Young women are forced to wear headscarves by their families so that they won't be different from others and recognised as being Yazidi. If they were to be recognised as being Yazidi, they would be exposed to marginalisation and verbal harassment. When applying for academic or governmental jobs, even where Yazidis may be among the most intelligent students and among the top of their cohort, because of racism and discrimination they are not able to fully realise their rights and they are not employed by many in universities and colleges. Yazidi women are exposed to this problem more than other women who have no religion.

'… [In focus group discussions, Yazidi] women selected clothes as a problem as they have a lot of restrictions placed on them in this regard. Although they wear multiple layers of clothing, the Muslim majority consider them to be infidels because they do not wear a headscarf. In the

[176] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024
[177] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024

marketplace, the Yazidi woman is subjected to verbal harassment because of her traditional clothes, which don't incorporate a headscarf. Some Yazidi women are afraid to go to Mosul without a hijab as they would be exposed to verbal harassment and unkind looks from others. This contributes to the restriction of Yazidi women's freedom.'[178]

14.5.2 See pages 260-312 of the full paper for a detailed analysis of the major religion- and gender-related issues facing Yazidi women, including education, employment, health and security. The paper also covers Yazidi men.

14.5.3 The May 2023 USSD IRF report stated: 'In April [2022], the Yezidi community in Sinjar District reported that the PKK had kidnapped hundreds of Yezidi children from Sinjar and the al-Hol camp in Syria and subjected them to ideological "brainwashing" since the group had assumed control of parts of the area in 2015, with the aim of recruiting them. It was unclear how many of the kidnappings occurred during the year [2022].'[179]

14.5.4 In July 2023, US-based think tank[180] the Middle East Institute published a report entitled 'Addressing challenges to tolerance and religious diversity in Iraq' which stated:

'In April 2023, Yezidis became the target of a campaign of hate speech and false accusations, which included rhetoric that condoned the crimes committed against them by IS. The proliferation of hate speech on social media started after Yezidis were wrongly accused of burning a mosque in Sinjar district during a peaceful demonstration against the return of families suspected of being affiliated with IS. In the ensuing days, despite reassurances from government officials and religious authorities, old pictures continued to circulate online. The photos showed the mosque after it was damaged in the 2016 military operation to liberate Nineveh from IS and incorrectly attributed the damage to the recent protests. Thousands of posts on social media incited violence against Yezidis, calling them infidels and repeating harmful tropes about devil worship. The incident reinvigorated debates about the lack of tolerance and respect for diversity, the manipulation of popular sentiment, and the deliberate use of misconceptions and myths to instill distrust and hatred toward minorities.'[181]

14.5.5 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'On May 1 [2023], the Yezidi religious leader Qawal Bahzat called on IKR leadership to put an end to hate speech against Yezidis and urged the IKR Parliament to pass a law criminalizing it. Members of the Yezidi community reported shop owners refused to sell merchandise to Yezidi IDPs near the IDP camps. On May 2 [2023], the Yezidi Director of the Migration Directorate in Duhok Province, Dian Jafar, said more Yezidi families had returned to Sinjar after Muslim individuals in the KRG accused Yezidis of burning a mosque in Sinjar during protests after Sunni Arab families had also returned

[178] CREID, 'Violence and Discrimination…' (Page 275), 7 December 2022
[179] USSD, '2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 2), 15 May 2023
[180] Middle East Institute, 'About Us', undated
[181] Middle East Institute, 'Addressing challenges to tolerance…', 5 July 2023

to that area.'[182]

14.5.6 The same source also stated:

'On February 6 [2023], Yezidi representatives reported that Iran-aligned militias maintained private real estate offices to buy Yezidi and Arab Sunni real estate and properties in order to change the demography of the Sinjar district in favor of Shia. Yezidi observers also accused Iran-backed militias and the PKK of using the Sinjar district as a passage for drugs and weapons through the Iraqi-Syrian border… A Chatham House report documented how the PKK transports small arms and light weapons between Iraq and Syria, via Sinjar, through a network comprising PKK fighters and local smugglers. The PKK and IAMGs, Chatham House concluded, have turned Sinjar into a "military corridor," which negatively affects stability and security of the region. Yezidi IDPs feel compelled to join one of the two armed factions to provide for their families. PKK and IAMGs, according to Yezidi leaders, attempted to fill spots in the local police force meant to include Yezidis.'[183]

14.5.7 The same source indicated that Yazidi alcohol merchants faced violations at the hands of the PMF, while other sources stated that they may be adversely affected by new anti-alcohol laws (see paragraphs 12.4.4 and 12.4.5).

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14.6 Female survivors of Daesh sexual violence

14.6.1 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

'Thousands of Yazidi women and girls were abducted for the purpose of forced marriage or sexual slavery. Large numbers of women were subsequently transported to be sold or forcibly married to Da'esh fighters in Syria, where an estimated 3,000 Yazidi women and children from Iraq remain captive. Da'esh's treatment of the Yazidis has been labelled a genocide by the United Nations and recognised as such by the Australian Government.'[184]

14.6.2 The same source also indicated that 'Yazidi women survivors of Da'esh sexual violence are among the most vulnerable populations in Iraq', adding that 'some have reportedly found it impossible to reintegrate with their communities due to trauma and stigma.' Particularly vulnerable are those with children who are the product of rape by Da'esh fighters – 'the Yazidi community has frequently forced' women of this description 'to give up their children on threat of expulsion'. The report noted that 'some survivors had been able to successfully reintegrate with their communities, but generally not those with children fathered by Daesh fighters', adding that 'Yazidi women who cannot reintegrate with their communities are highly vulnerable to sex trafficking and other forms of exploitation.'[185]

14.6.3 The May 2023 USSD IRF report stated:

'Yezidi community leaders reported that the government continued to require Yezidi women captives of ISIS, who were repeatedly raped and bore

[182] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 3), 30 June 2024
[183] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024
[184] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.58), 16 January 2023
[185] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.63), 16 January 2023

children, to register those children as Muslims and convert to Islam themselves to obtain identification cards, passports, and other governmental services. They reported that obtaining civil documentation for children born of ISIS atrocities in the country, absent paternal presence, continued to be very challenging, if not impossible. Women without a male guardian continued to commonly experience a delay of more than one year to secure their own citizenship documentation, the delay reportedly attributed to government processing time. Yezidi leaders said that delaying issuance of such documentation for Yezidi children born during ISIS captivity increased risks to their safety and security. Some Yezidis did not consider these children born during ISIS atrocities to be Yezidi and some survivors reported being shunned by their home communities.'[186]

14.6.4 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'Yezidi officials estimated the number of children born of Yezidi mothers and ISIS fathers ranged from several dozen to several hundred. Yezidi leaders said societal stigma made it difficult to obtain accurate numbers. According to Yezidi community members, Yezidi leaders had excommunicated some Yezidi women who had children born of sexual violence committed by Muslim men when the women were captives of ISIS. Some Yezidi religious leaders and community members deemed children born of sexual violence during ISIS captivity were neither welcomed nor recognized as Yezidis. Many Yezidi women survivors of ISIS atrocities said they were compelled to leave their children in orphanages in Syria or abandon their children so they could rejoin their community. According to Yezidi leaders, these children were also under threat of so-called "honor" and retribution killings. Many Yezidis feared the children would grow up radicalized due to the possibility of their exposure to violent radicalization in displaced persons camps or informal settlement areas and because they had experienced rejection. Reports from the al-Hol displaced persons camp in Syria stated some Yezidi women preferred remaining in the camps with their children rather than leave them behind, despite the harsh conditions there.'[187]

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15. Sabean-Mandaeans

15.1 The Sabean-Mandaean religion

15.1.1 It should be noted that sources use various different spellings for Sabean-Mandaeans, who are also known simply as Mandaeans.

15.1.2 The January 2023 DFAT report stated: 'The Sabean-Mandean religion is a form of Gnosticism, descended from ancient Mesopotamian worship, with rituals that resemble those of Zoroastrian and Nestorian worship. John the Baptist is its central prophet. Sabean-Mandeans practise baptism in flowing water, and generally live near rivers as a result. Sabean-Mandean faith bars the use of violence or the carrying of weapons.'[188]

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[186] USSD, '2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 2), 15 May 2023
[187] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 3), 30 June 2024
[188] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.52), 16 January 2023

15.2 Sabean-Mandaeans in Iraq

15.2.1 The June 2022 EUAA report stated: 'The Sabean-Mandaeans are one of the smallest ethno-religious minority [sic] in Iraq, with an estimated number of less than 5,000. Their area is in southern Iraq, including Basrah and the southern governorates of Dhi Qar and Missan, but small numbers also live in Baghdad and the KRI.'[189]

15.2.2 The January 2023 DFAT report stated: 'Today there are an estimated 5,000-10,000 Sabean-Mandeans in Iraq. The community is primarily located in the southern Marshes or on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, at al-Amara, Qal'at-Salih, Nasiriya, Suq al-Shuyukh and Qurna. There is also a small community in Baghdad.'[190]

15.2.3 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated: 'Estimates of the size of the Sabean-Mandean community vary, but according to Sabean-Mandaean leaders, 10,000 to 15,000 members remain in the country, mainly in the south, with between 450 and 1,000 living in the IKR and Baghdad.'[191]

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15.3 Treatment of Sabean-Mandaeans in federal Iraq

15.3.1 The June 2022 EUAA report stated:

'Sabean-Mandaeans have fled ISIL-controlled areas and have become internally displaced, while many are said to have departed the country. They have also faced violence by both Shia and Sunni Islamic groups and continue to be actively targeted. Numerous attacks have taken place against community members, their property and places of worship, including targeted killings of individuals. They have been extorted and pressured to conform to Islamic principles by financially supporting Shia rituals, parades and public events.

'Sabean-Mandaeans were perceived as rich because they were associated with the jewellery trade. Because of this, they became a target for extortion by extremist groups and criminal gangs. Especially in Baghdad, members of the Sabean-Mandaean community are often associated with wealth since many of its members work within the jewellery and gold-silversmith businesses. In addition, the Sabean-Mandaeans are by their religion prohibited to resort to arms, even in self-defence. Thus, community members were especially exposed to face robberies of their goldsmith, silversmith, and jewellery stores.

'… Sabean-Mandaeans experience discrimination and negative stereotyping in all aspects of public life. Outside the KRI, Sabean-Mandaean women have been reported to opt to wear the hijab after continuous harassment.'[192]

15.3.2 The December 2022 CREID paper stated:

'Sabean-Mandaean women experience a great deal of harassment as a result of the way they dress, specifically not wearing the hijab. This makes

[189] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.15.6), 29 June 2022
[190] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.53), 16 January 2023
[191] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 1), 30 June 2024
[192] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.15.6), 29 June 2022

them identifiable as non-Muslim and opens them up to threats and verbal abuse. Sabean-Mandaean women, both young and old, also suffer from sexual harassment in public, because of not wearing the hijab, and in the workplace because of the precarious nature of their employment. As discussed in the employment section, employers know they can harass them as they are less likely to leave one of the very few positions open to them. The targeted harassment of Sabean-Mandaean women also means that fewer Sabean-Mandaean women feel able or comfortable to apply for or accept jobs – especially in private companies – as they know this is a challenge they might face. The harassment the women face is not only from other communities, but also from within their own community, especially if they are unmarried.'[193]

15.3.3 See pages 156-193 of the full paper for a detailed analysis of the major religion- and gender-related issues facing Sabean-Mandaean women, including harassment, discrimination, access to services and employment. The report also covers issues facing Sabean-Mandaean men.

15.3.4 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

'The Sabean-Mandean community has reduced considerably in number from a high point of around 30,000-50,000 in the mid-1990s. After the March 2003 US-led military action, Shi'a and Sunni militant groups targeted the community, accusing Sabean-Mandeans of committing witchcraft, impurity and adultery, and committing hundreds of killings, abductions and incidents of torture. Sabean-Mandean women are targeted for harassment for not covering their heads, while Sabean-Mandean goldsmiths, silversmiths and jewellers (traditional community occupations) are reportedly targeted for theft and murder at much higher rates than their Muslim counterparts.

'Sabean-Mandeans were also affected by the rise of Da'esh after 2014, with many fleeing Da'esh-controlled areas to avoid forced conversions or death. The community experiences discrimination, slurs and negative stereotyping, as well as being targeted for attacks and kidnappings due to their perceived wealth and vulnerability.'[194]

15.3.5 The May 2023 USSD IRF report stated: 'On June 25 [2022], Sheikh Sattar Jabbar al-Hilu, the head of the Sabean-Mandaean community, said the Sabean-Mandaeans "faced discrimination practices based on sect and ethnicity in all Iraqi government institutions." Hilu added that the number of Sabean-Mandaeans in the country had declined from 75,000 in 2003 to around 20,000 today, due to displacement.'[195]

15.3.6 The same source indicated that Sabean-Mandaean alcohol merchants faced violations at the hands of the PMF, and other sources stated that they might be adversely affected by new anti-alcohol laws (see paragraphs 12.4.4 and 12.4.5).

15.3.7 In August 2023, the Journal of Babylon Center for Humanities Studies (JBCHS), an 'international, peer-reviewed, open-access scientific journal'

[193] CREID, 'Violence and Discrimination…' (Page 185), 7 December 2022
[194] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Sections 3.54-3.56), 16 January 2023
[195] USSD, '2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 2), 15 May 2023

issued by the University of Babylon in southern Iraq[196], published an article entitled 'The Mandaeans in Iraq Today: Perceptions, Stereotypes, Prejudices, and Exclusion'.

The article explained that a lack of knowledge about the religion has led to negative stereotypes which have put Sabean-Mandaeans at risk. One prominent false stereotype is that Sabean-Mandaeans practice witchcraft and black magic, although in reality magic is forbidden by the religion. The article mentions several fake Facebook pages purporting to belong to Sabean-Mandaean clergymen with photos and posts about false religious practices including magic, homosexuality and incest.

The article stated that the mistreatment of Sabean-Mandaeans has led them to conform to the Islamic norms and customs of society in order not to draw attention to themselves. Sabean-Mandaean women wear the hijab in conservative cities in central and southern Iraq, and Sabean-Mandaeans in Shi'a-majority areas (where most Sabean-Mandaeans live) participate in Shi'a religious occasions. Some Sabean-Mandaeans reportedly know more about Islam than their own religion. Sabean-Mandaeans generally give their children Arabic Islamic names as well as their Arameic Sabean-Mandaean names.

The weakness of law enforcement and the lack of political representation has compelled many Sabean-Mandaeans to build affiliations with Arab tribes which can offer them protection.

The article also indicated that Sabean-Mandaeans have little or no input into school and university curriculums[197].

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15.4 Treatment of Sabean-Mandaeans in the KRI

15.4.1 The June 2022 EUAA report stated: 'Being Arabic speakers, Sabean-Mandaeans who fled to KRI faced a language barrier when interacting with the Kurdish majority, experiencing racism and sometimes discrimination or verbal abuse on account of being perceived as "Arabs from the south". Being displaced into the KRI with a weak social network, the community lacks access to employment and economic opportunities.'[198]

15.4.2 The December 2022 CREID report stated:

'The Erbil [focus] group ranked religious discrimination as the primary issue they face, which is what has driven Sabean-Mandaean families, particularly those in southern Iraq, to settle in the region. This affects Sabean-Mandaean women through the imposition of social and religious restrictions, such as the imposition of the veil, the call to change religion (often communicated in an intimidating way), and a refusal by the majority to mix with Sabean-Mandaean people. These women all came to Erbil from different governorates of Iraq because of their concern about the religious discrimination they experienced whilst working. They considered Erbil to be relatively safe in comparison to Baghdad, and therefore safe enough for

[196] JBCHS, 'About the Journal', undated
[197] JBCHS, Vol. 13 No. 1, 'The Mandaeans in Iraq Today…' (Pages 68-72)
[198] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.15.6), 29 June 2022

women to work. Unfortunately, they felt that this increased the religious discrimination they experienced as they were spending more time out of the Sabean-Mandaean community and interacting with the wider society.'[199]

15.4.3 See pages 156-193 of the full paper for further information on the treatment and experiences of Sabean-Mandaean women and men in the KRI.

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16. Baha'is

16.1 The Baha'i religion

16.1.1 The June 2022 EUAA report stated:'[T]he number of Baha'i currently in Iraq are believed to be around 1,000.'[200]

16.1.2 The January 2023 DFAT report stated: 'Bahá'ism is a monotheistic faith founded in 19th-century Iran. It has roots in Shi'a Islam and emphasises pacifism and the unity of humanity. There are an estimated 1,000-2,000 Bahá'is in Iraq. Because they deny the finality of the prophet Mohammad, some Muslims consider Bahá'is apostates.'[201]

16.1.3 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated: 'Baha'i Faith leaders report fewer than 2,000 members, spread throughout the country in small groups, including approximately 100 families in the IKR.'[202]

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16.2 Treatment of Baha'is

16.2.1 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

'Bahá'is experienced persecution under the Ba'athist regime, including arbitrary detention and executions. The Ba'athist Law No. 105 (1970) prohibits their faith, while Rule No. 358 (1975) proscribed the recording of Baha'i as a religion in the civil status records. Consequently, the Bahá'i cannot acquire identity documents, passports, or birth, death or marriage certificates. The Ministry of Interior repealed Rule No. 358 in 2007, but Law No. 105 remains unrevoked and prescribes 10 years' imprisonment for anyone practising the Bahá'i faith. While authorities reportedly do not enforce Law No. 105, they have reportedly cited it and the Law on Civil Affairs (1959; amended 2017) which prohibits conversion away from Islam, as a justification to refuse to issue Bahá'i identity documents, including to those who had previously obtained identity documents stating Islam as their religion. Without identity documentation, Bahá'is cannot access rights and services related to citizenship such as education, property ownership and medical care. The majority of Bahá'i marriages are not registered officially, so the children of such marriages cannot obtain identification.

'Authorities confiscated Bahá'i administrative buildings after the passing of Law No. 105, and have not returned them to the community. In July 2013, a Bahá'i holy site in Baghdad was demolished to make way for a Shi'ite congregation hall. Authorities have not responded to Baha'i demands for the

[199] CREID, 'Violence and Discrimination…' (Page 169), 7 December 2022
[200] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.15.7), 29 June 2022
[201] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.37), 16 January 2023
[202] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 1), 30 June 2024

restitution of the site. Bahá'i reportedly also face harassment from PMF groups, including being called by the slur 'kaffir' (infidel), especially in the Shi'a-majority city of Basra.'[203]

16.2.2 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated: 'Federal law prohibits the practice of the Baha'i Faith and provides a penalty of 10 years in prison for anyone convicted of practicing it, although the law is not enforced as a matter of informal policy. The KRG also does not enforce the federal ban as a matter of practice and policy, and the KRG recognizes the Baha'i Faith as a religion.'[204] See Legal context for further details on laws relating to religion.

16.2.3 The same source also stated: 'Followers of recognized religious groups, including Baha'is (recognized only in the KRG) and Yezidis (recognized by both the central government and the KRG), reported the KRG allowed them to observe their religious holidays and festivals without interference or intimidation.'[205]

16.2.4 CPIT was unable to find any reports of Baha'is in federal Iraq being arrested for practising their religion in the sources consulted (see Bibliography).

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17. Kaka'i (also known as Yarsanis, Ahl e-Haqq)

17.1 Kaka'i in Iraq

17.1.1 The June 2022 EUAA report stated:

'The Kaka'i are a religious minority consisting of between 110,000 and 200,000 persons [in Iraq] and located mainly in the southeast of Kirkuk and in the Ninewa plains near Daquq and Hamdaniya, and in Diyala and the KRI. The Kaka'i are followers of a syncretic religion, which contains elements of Zoroastrianism and Shia Islam. According to the Special Rapporteur on minority issues to the UN Human Rights Council, the Kaka'i are ethnically associated with the Kurds while maintaining a distinct religious identity.'[206]

17.1.2 In December 2022, Fanack, a Netherlands-based 'independent online media organization' which provides 'balanced and informed analysis about the Middle East and North Africa'[207] published an article entitled 'Kakaism in Iraq: Long History and Ongoing Persecution'. It stated:

'The Kakaism minority lives as a non-missionary religious group in Iraq, a country known for its rich ethnicities and multiple religions. Kakaism is trying to preserve its identity amid the transformations and changes that the world and the region are witnessing. At a time when Iraq's religious and ethnic diversity faces multiple threats, Kakaism has had its share of these pressures. Kakaists suffer from significant stresses that threaten their faith and existence. Kakaism dates back to 3000 BC. While this sect is called "Kakaist" in Iraq, its followers in Iran refer to it as "Yarsanist," meaning "lovers of the Creator." The followers of this sect are not limited to Iraq and Iran, but their presence extends to Pakistan, India, Turkey and other

[203] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Sections 3.38-3.39), 16 January 2023
[204] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 1), 30 June 2024
[205] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 1), 30 June 2024
[206] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.15.5), 29 June 2022
[207] Fanack, 'About Fanack', undated

countries.'[208]

17.1.3 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

'The Kaka'i, also known as Ahl-e Haqq or Yarsani, are followers of a syncretic religion which dates to the 14th century in western Iran and contains elements of Zoroastrianism and Shi'a Islam. Some Kaka'i identify as belonging to a sect of Islam, while others consider themselves a separate religious group. Kaka'i are reportedly highly secretive about their rituals and religious beliefs.

'There are an estimated 200,000 Kaka'i in Iraq. They live mainly southeast of Kirkuk and in the Ninewah Plains near Daquq and Hamdaniya, with others also based in Diyala, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. The Kaka'i are generally considered as Kurdish in ethnicity, speaking a dialect [of Kurdish] known as Macho, although there are also some Arabic-speaking communities. Kaka'i men are easily identifiable by their characteristic prominent moustaches, which can make them vulnerable to harassment and discrimination.'[209]

17.1.4 In June 2023, CFRI published an article entitled 'The Kaka'is of Iraq, from US-Invasion to Confronting the ISIS Invasion'. According to the article, 'There are estimated to be about 120,000 Kaka'i people, with the majority residing in the center of Kirkuk and villages in the Nineveh plain'.[210]

17.1.5 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated: 'According to Kaka'i (Yarsani) activists, their community has approximately 110,000 to 120,000 members located in the Ninewa Plain and in villages southeast of Kirkuk, as well as in Diyala, Sulaymaniya, Halabja, and Erbil.'[211]

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17.2 Treatment of Kaka'i

17.2.1 Under federal law, the Kaka'i religion remains unrecognised, and individuals are unable to register Kaka'i as their religion[212]. The KRG, however, recognised the religion in 2015 and provisionally reserved a seat for a Kaka'i on the Halabja provincial council, which has not yet been established[213]. Despite the KRG's recognition of the religion, Kaka'i living in the KRI are still unable to register their religion when applying for civil documentation, since this is issued by the federal Iraqi authorities[214].

17.2.2 In March 2022, Rudaw published an article entitlted 'Kakais in Kirkuk decry years of neglect' which stated:

'Fear and uncertainty are a prevailing notion among the small religious minority of Kakais in southern Kirkuk, living amid the absence of security actors in the area and the looming threat of a potential Islamic State (ISIS) attack. Scattered across the villages of oil-rich Kirkuk, the Kakais are located directly along the confrontation lines where members of the Iraqi security

[208] Fanack, 'Kakaism in Iraq: Long History and Ongoing Persecution', 1 December 2022
[209] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.46-3.47), 16 January 2023
[210] CFRI, 'The Kaka'is of Iraq…', 9 June 2023
[211] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 1), 30 June 2024
[212] Minority Rights Group, 'Kaka'i in Iraq', last updated November 2017
[213] CREID, 'The Kaka'is marginalized and excluded in decision making in Iraq', 5 August 2020
[214] USSD, '2023 Report on International…' (Section 2), 30 June 2024

forces and ISIS often clash, endangering the lives of the minority group.

'Kakais in southern Kirkuk has been living under extremely unsafe and uncertain conditions ever since ISIS controlled swathes of Iraq in 2014. The terror group was territorially defeated but continues to carry out bombings, hit-and-run attacks, and kidnapping across several provinces while taking shelter in areas disputed between Erbil and Baghdad.

'… Now, almost 8 years later, the situation is little improved for the Yarsan followers, as they are unable to return to their ancestral homes due to the lack of security actors and the overall uninhabitable nature of the region. Rajab Assi Kakayi, a notable Kakai activist and representative, shared the concerns surrounding Kakais, adding that the threat of ISIS in the area continues to pose a significant security threat to locals.

'The activist also claimed that instating the Iraqi police in the area since 2018 has yielded no results either, due to the fact that the forces took over schools and people's houses, turning them into their headquarters, and striking disappointment in the hearts of Kakais. He went on to mention that his own family had a large piece of land in the area which has since been invaded and taken over allegedly by the Iraqi army. The piece of land has a lot of sentimental values due to the fact that it was passed down to them from their ancestors, he noted.

'Local Kakais decried the lack of freedom in conducting their religious practices claiming that they are allowed to practice their daily religious acts inside their homes only.'[215]

17.2.3 The June 2022 EUAA report stated: 'The Kaka'i had suffered historic persecution, including under the Saddam Hussein regime, with their lands and villages confiscated. USDOS reported that outside the KRI, the Kaka'i are an unrecognised religious group, noting that the law does not prescribe penalties for practicing it, but that contracts signed by unrecognised religious groups are not legal or permissible as evidence in court.'[216]

17.2.4 A June 2022 report published by the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (MAITIC), an Israeli government-affiliated organisation[217], stated: 'On May 24, 2022, ISIS operatives set fire to grain owned by the "infidel" Kaka'i sect in the village of Zanqar, south of Daquq, in the southern part of the city of Kirkuk, and destroyed a transformer (Telegram, May 24, 2022).'[218]

17.2.5 The December 2022 CREID paper stated:

'Moreover, they [Kaka'i] try to pretend in front of their neighbours that they are fasting during Ramadan, by entering the house at the time of breaking the fast or getting up during the pre-dawn meal (Suhoor) and making some noise, so that their Muslim neighbours hear that their Kakai neighbours are awake. Nevertheless, the women realised that these attempts to hide their identity and mimic another religion do not work, because their Muslim

[215] Rudaw, 'Kakais in Kirkuk decry years of neglect', 11 March 2022
[216] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.15.5), 29 June 2022
[217] MAITIC, 'About Us', undated
[218] MAITIC, 'Spotlight on Global Jihad (May 26 – June 1, 2022)', 2 June 2022

neighbours know the truth about them having rituals and ceremonies of their own and are not convinced by their acting and their attempts to conceal their reality.'[219]

17.2.6 See pages 193-260 of the full CREID paper for a detailed analysis of the major religion- and gender-related issues facing Kaka'i women, including education, harassment, discrimination at work and poverty. The report also covers issues facing Kaka'i men.

17.2.7 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

'Many Kaka'i were displaced from their traditional homes around Kirkuk as a result of Ba'athist regime policies. Following the rise of Da'esh in 2014, the Kaka'i were targeted for threats and violence by the militant group. When Da'esh began its advance in northern Iraq, most Kaka'i living in villages east of Mosul fled to Erbil. In response, the Kaka'i formed their own armed forces, and one 600-member contingent was incorporated into the Kurdish Peshmerga.

'Following the return of central government control in Kirkuk in October 2017, Iran-aligned PMF groups allegedly intimidated Kaka'i communities and dispossessed some Kaka'i of their homes. In July 2022, four PMF militants kidnapped a Kaka'i man in Saladin Province, beat him, broke his nose and forcibly shaved off his moustache, allegedly for insulting their group. In March 2018, the tomb of a Kaka'i religious leader in Daquq was destroyed by an explosion allegedly carried out by a PMF group. Kaka'i leaders have also reported that the central government's Shi'a Endowment forcibly took over several places of Kaka'i worship in Kirkuk and converted them into mosques. Kaka'i remain a target for Da'esh. According to the US Department of State, Da'esh militants killed one Kaka'i and attacked several Kaka'i villages in 2021.'[220]

17.2.8 The May 2023 USSD IRF report stated:

'Kaka'i leaders reported that members of the Kaka'i community remained in only three out of 15 formerly Kaka'i villages in Kirkuk province, the decline due to feelings of general insecurity.

'… Kaka'i community members again said the federal government's Shia Endowment seized Kaka'i worship sites in Diyala and Baghdad and later converted them into Shia mosques. According to Kaka'i representatives, the government had still not responded to their request for the return of the Baba Mahmud House of Worship, which was transferred to the Shia Endowment in 2019. Kaka'i representatives also reported that the Sunni Endowment also seized Kaka'i houses of worship in Kirkuk.'[221]

17.2.9 The June 2023 CFRI report stated:

'The Kaka'i people have not been spared from extremist Islamic groups attacks. The Kaka'is were targeted because of their religious identity, but also to seize their lands. They have been threatened, intimidated and assassinated, which led them to be displaced. The Kaka'is also witnessed

[219] CREID, 'Violence and Discrimination…' (Page 215), 7 December 2022
[220] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.49-3.50), 16 January 2023
[221] USSD, '2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 2), 15 May 2023

the bombings of their religious sites and villages.

'… In the district of Khanaqin, extremist groups deliberately burned houses and killed farmers and villagers from the Kaka'i community. Villages such as Mikhast, Bahari Taza, Mubarak, and Ramadan were frequently attacked by armed militants, and some were completely evacuated. This was the case with Mubarak village whose inhabitants were displaced in 2019. One tragic incident that occurred in the agricultural lands belonging to Mikhast village was on the night of May 10, 2020, during the harvest season. A farmer named Nabard Nasser used a combine harvester driven by Arabs to harvest their crops when suddenly, four ISIS members appeared and captured the farmer and the Arab drivers. They released the Arabs and held the Kaka'i farmer at gunpoint, forcing him to call his cousin, Barhan Hatem, the village headman, to bring them dinner. After Hatem arrived, the ISIS militants captured him and both farmers, and burned the agricultural machinery, crops, and surrounding area. There were several incidents which occurred in the area during that period, in villages such as Bahari Taza, Kalhor, but the village of Mikhass had the largest share in terms of the number of attacks, victims, and losses. One of the tragedies of this village was also the martyrdom of two brothers, Omaran Namik Baba and Rokan Namik Baba, as well as their brother-in-law Adnan Ghaib Hasan on May 27, 2019.'[222]

17.2.10 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'Kaka'i (Yarsani) community members again said the federal government's Shia Endowment seized Kaka'i worship sites in Diyala and Baghdad and later converted them into Shia mosques… According to Kaka'i representatives, the government had still not responded to their request for the return of the Baba Mahmud House of Worship, which was transferred to the Shia Endowment in 2019. Kaka'i representatives also reported the Sunni Endowment seized Kaka'i houses of worship in Kirkuk during the year.'

'… On January 15 [2023], local observers said that Kaka'i individuals affiliated with the Babylon Movement, the so-called political wing of the 50th PMF Brigade – an ostensibly Christian militia operated primarily by Shia militants – harassed a Kaka'i activist's family and relatives after the activist criticized an Iran-aligned political party's alleged campaign to assert that the Kaka'i religion was part of the Shia faith.'[223]

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18. Jews

18.1 Jews in Iraq

18.1.1 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated: 'According to media organizations, only a handful of Jewish citizens remain in federal Iraq. According to unofficial statistics from the KRG Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA), there are possibly from 100 to 250 Jewish individuals in the IKR. Jewish leaders report most do not openly acknowledge their religion for fear of persecution or violence by extremist actors.'[224]

[222] CFRI, 'The Kaka'is of Iraq…', 9 June 2023
[223] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious....' (Executive Summary, Section 2), 30 June 2024
[224] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 1), 30 June 2024

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18.2 Treatment of Jews

18.2.1 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'The law imposes penalties up to the death sentence on activities that promote the normalization of relations with Israel. The law applies to citizens, officials, entities, and companies; foreigners are also prohibited from promoting normalization with Israel inside the country. The law also prohibits Jews from joining the military or holding jobs in the public sector.

'… The constitution guarantees the reinstatement of citizenship to individuals who gave up their citizenship for political or sectarian reasons; however, this does not apply to Jews who emigrated to Israel and were forced to renounce their citizenship under a 1950 law.'[225]

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19. Documentation

19.1 Religion on national ID cards

19.1.1 The June 2022 EUAA report stated:

'Individuals practicing other faiths may only receive identity cards if they self-identify as Muslims, Yazidis, Sabean-Mandaeans, or Christians. The ID card is described as the most important personal document for Iraqis, because it is required for all contacts with authorities, and to obtain services, such as healthcare, social welfare, education, and when buying and selling property, including houses or vehicles. It is also necessary for the issuance of other official legal documentation, such as passports. Without an official identity card, Iraqis cannot register their marriages, enrol their children in public school, acquire passports, etc. The 2015 National Identity Card Law also requires children from mixed religion marriages to be registered as Muslims. Although registering children born of rape is difficult in practice, when one of the parents is Muslim and the child is registered, they are automatically registered as Muslims. The 2015 Law also reinforces restrictions that Muslims cannot change their religious identification on their identity cards after conversion to any other religion. A new electronic and biometric ID card system is being introduced in Iraq, where information about the person's religion is stored on the chip, but it does not appear on the ID card.'[226]

19.1.2 The January 2023 DFAT report stated:

'Unlike previous identity documents, the national ID cards do not denote the bearer's religion, but the online application still requests this information. The only religions that may be listed on the national identity card application are Christian, Sabean-Mandean, Yazidi, Jewish and Muslim. There is no distinction made between Shi'a and Sunni Muslim, or any designation of Christian denominations. Individuals practising other faiths may only receive national ID cards if they select one of the religious options provided.'[227]

[225] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 2), 30 June 2024
[226] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.15), 29 June 2022
[227] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 5.31), 16 January 2023

19.1.3 The May 2023 USSD IRF report stated:

'During the year [2022], the NGOs [non-governmental organisations] Christian Aid Program Nohadra for Humanitarian Aid in Iraq and the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization continued to seek amendments to the national identification card law requiring children to be listed as Muslim on the identification application form if one parent had converted to Islam. The NGOs said the law was a "flagrant violation" of the rights on non-Muslims in the country.

'… In November [2022], media reported that a Christian woman said she had converted to Islam to obtain a divorce because it was difficult as a Christian to obtain church permission to divorce. At the time of her conversion, her sons and daughters were minors. When she tried to renew their official papers, she discovered that her children had also been converted to Islam by law.'[228]

19.1.4 The June 2024 USSD IRF report stated:

'Zoroastrian, Kaka'i, and Baha'i Faith adherents again reported their religion was listed as "Islam" on their federal identification cards, a continuing problem reported by members of unrecognized religious groups due to the country's constitution and personal status law.

'… National identity cards issued after 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. The only religions that may be listed on the national identity card application are Christian, Sabean-Mandean, Yezidi, Jewish, and Muslim. There is neither a distinction between Shia and Sunni Muslims, nor a designation of specific Christian denominations. Individuals practicing other faiths may only receive identity cards if they self-identify as Muslim, Yezidi, Sabean-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.'[229]

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19.2 Lack of documentation among minorities

19.2.1 The June 2022 EUAA report stated:

'Numerous Iraqi families, and particularly IDPs and minority groups, are unable to access civil registration procedures because they lack the documentation that would prove their identity. Many Iraqis from the areas that fell under ISIL control lost their civil documentation during forced displacement or because of confiscation of the documents by ISIL and/or other parties to the conflict. Lack of knowledge of the legal requirements and procedures to obtain or renew civil documentation was reported to frequently constitute a barrier to access documentation. Other obstacles comprise high transportation cost to reach government offices in areas of origin, lengthy processing times … as well as complex court procedures and administrative

[228] USSD, '2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 2), 15 May 2023
[229] USSD, '2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iraq' (Section 2), 30 June 2024

fees.'[230]

19.2.2 CPIT was unable to find information about the proportion of members of unrecognised religions who lack essential documentation in the sources consulted (see Bibliography). It is unclear whether members of unrecognised religions generally register under one of the recognised religions or choose to forgo documentation instead.

19.2.3 In October 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees published a report entitled 'Iraq Statelessness study: Statelessness and Risks of Statelessness in Iraq: Faili Kurd and Bidoon Communities'. It stated:

'A Marriage Certificate is… required to prove that the child comes from a formal union of either one or two Iraqi nationals. Without a recognized marriage, a Birth Certificate cannot be issued for a child born of that union (at most, the child would receive a proof of birth document). This is problematic for minority groups, such as the Baha'is, whose religious rights are not recognized by the Constitution. Accordingly, marriages of religious minorities not recognized by the Constitution are not recognized by the Iraqi government and their marriage contracts cannot be endorsed by the Iraqi civil status courts.'[231]

19.2.4 Religious minority groups particularly affected by lack of documentation include Baha'is (see Baha'is), Feyli Kurds (see Feyli Kurds) and Yazidis (see Yazidis).

19.2.5 For further information about the importance of documentation in Iraq, including the impact of not having documentation on children, see the CPIN Iraq: Internal relocation, civil documentation and returns.

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20. Protection

20.1.1 The June 2022 EUAA report provided the following assessment about federal Iraq: 'State protection [in federal Iraq] is generally not considered available for members of minority religions and ethnicities.' [232]

20.1.2 The same source provided the following assessment about the KRG: 'In general, the KRG is considered to be an actor of protection meeting the requirements of Article 7 QD.'[233]

20.1.3 The same source also stated: 'Although the KRG supports the Christian converts residing in the KRI, state authorities cannot provide the converts constant protection against the possible threat posed by their own tribe.'[234]

20.1.4 The January 2023 DFAT report assessed that: '[C]ertain groups in Iraq… experience discrimination on racial/ethnic grounds, and state protection is often inadequate.'[235]

20.1.5 CPIT was unable to find further information about state protection for

[230] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.15), 29 June 2022
[231] UNHCR, 'Statelessness and Risks of Statelessness in Iraq…' (Page 8), 26 October 2022
[232] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 4.1.1), 29 June 2022
[233] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 4.1.2), 29 June 2022
[234] EUAA, 'Country Guidance: Iraq' (Section 2.14), 29 June 2022
[235] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iraq' (Section 3.2), 16 January 2023

members of religious minorities in the sources consulted (see Bibliography).

20.1.6 CPIT was unable to find information about protection provided to members of religious minorities by hybrid actors (i.e., PMF militias) and non-state actors in the sources consulted (see Bibliography).

20.1.7 The December 2022 CREID paper provided examples of members of religious minorities facing verbal harassment and discriminatory treatment from the authorities, as well as other difficulties, when attempting to access protection. Examples included discriminatory treatment when reporting a crime, refusing to file complaints because of fear of retaliatory violence at the hands of perpetrators, and facing long administrative delays when filing lawsuits against Muslims. The paper stated:

'One of the men in the focus groups … from Erbil, but originally from Maysan, shared his experience of trying to obtain justice when his store was robbed, and finding obstacles at every step of the process, because he is Sabean-Mandaean.

'[He said:] My store was robbed. I reported the theft to the authorities first. They did not take health measures, did not collect fingerprints. One of the officers told me in one of the interrogation sessions, "You should not stay in the country"... They went out to investigate but didn't take any fingerprints or camera footage. Everyone they asked for CCTV camera footage from would say that the cameras are not working and they don't know who the robber is. Then, they were sentenced to seven years in prison. I stood in front of the judge and told him that the person who stole pigeons had been sentenced to six years in prison. And you judged criminals who stole half a billion dollars for seven years?

'… Even when justice is achieved, participants discussed how many Sabean-Mandaeans are left scared of the repercussions, even choosing to migrate out of the country in order to protect their families. One man … 72 years old from Erbil, but originally from Maysan where the incident took place, explained how:

'One of the Mandaeans was also killed, and the town's police head happened to be a friend of mine, so when I told him about this, he followed up on the matter, and they identified the culprit, arrested him, and got his confession to the crime. So, he told me to inform the victim's relatives and ask them to file a complaint. I contacted the victim's siblings and told them to do so because the perpetrator confessed, but they refused, and they all migrated to the south, fearing the perpetrator's relatives would oppress them.

'… [P]articipants [in focus groups] discussed how the legal system is also enacted with bias against Assyrians. For example, a 37-year-old man described the following case:

'In terms of law and community services, I'd like to relate this to a case in Duhok. A Christian girl filed a lawsuit against a Muslim person, without mentioning their name, and it was found in the official documents and the investigation that the person at fault is this Muslim man, but the court has procrastinated a lot and, so far, has not issued a verdict against this person and in favour of this Christian girl. Thus, automatically, we feel that there is

injustice against Christians, because what happened in this story is a clear marginalisation against this girl, because after a year and a half of filing the lawsuit, she did not receive any court decision in her favour. In my opinion, this is among the most important threats that we as Assyrians are facing.'[236]

20.1.8 For information on protection in general, see the CPIN Iraq: Actors of Protection.

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[236] CREID, 'Violence and Discrimination…' (Pages 177, 187, 351-2), 7 December 2022

Research methodology

The country of origin information (COI) in this note has been carefully selected in accordance with the general principles of COI research as set out in the Common EU [European Union] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information (COI), April 2008, and the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation's (ACCORD), Researching Country Origin Information – Training Manual, 2024. Namely, taking into account the COI's relevance, reliability, accuracy, balance, currency, transparency and traceability.

Sources and the information they provide are carefully considered before inclusion. Factors relevant to the assessment of the reliability of sources and information include:

- the motivation, purpose, knowledge and experience of the source
- how the information was obtained, including specific methodologies used
- the currency and detail of information
- whether the COI is consistent with and/or corroborated by other sources

Commentary may be provided on source(s) and information to help readers understand the meaning and limits of the COI.

Wherever possible, multiple sourcing is used and the COI compared to ensure that it is accurate and balanced, and provides a comprehensive and up-to-date picture of the issues relevant to this note at the time of publication.

The inclusion of a source is not, however, an endorsement of it or any view(s) expressed.

Each piece of information is referenced in a footnote.

Full details of all sources cited and consulted in compiling the note are listed alphabetically in the bibliography.

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Terms of Reference

The 'Terms of Reference' (ToR) provides a broad outline of the issues relevant to the scope of this note and forms the basis for the country information.

The following topics were identified prior to drafting as relevant and on which research was undertaken:

- Legal context
    - Legal recognition of minority religions
    - Laws concerning religion
- Extent of political representation of religious minorities
- Different religious minority groups: presence, numbers and treatment
    - Christians
    - Zoroastrians
    - Yazidis
    - Sabean-Mandaeans
    - Bahai's
    - Kaka'i
    - Jews
- Treatment of converts from Islam and atheists
- Religious minorities' access to documentation
- Religious minorities' access to state protection

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Changes from last version of this note

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