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2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iraq

Executive Summary

The constitution declares Islam to be the official religion, and states no law may be enacted contradicting the “established provisions of Islam.” The constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief and practice for Muslims, Christians, Yezidis, and Sabaeen-Mandeans. The law, however, prohibits the practice of the Bahai Faith and the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam. The constitution provides for freedom from religious coercion and requires the government to maintain the sanctity of religious sites. International human rights groups said the government failed to investigate and prosecute ethnosectarian crimes, including those carried out by armed groups in areas liberated from ISIS. International and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported the government continued to use the antiterrorism law as a pretense for detaining Sunnis and others without access to timely due process. Sunni Arabs reported some government officials used sectarian profiling in arrests and detentions and used religion as a determining factor in employment decisions. In response to concerns about controversial convictions based on information provided by secret informants, a new law allowed reinvestigation and retrial of detainees convicted under the antiterrorism law. Some Yezidi and Christian leaders reported continued harassment and abuses by Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Peshmerga and Asayish (internal security) forces. Media and government officials reported Peshmerga and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) prevented displaced Sunni Arabs, Yezidi, Turkmen, and others from returning to their homes in some areas liberated from ISIS. Community leaders said that forced conversion was the de facto result of the national identity card law which mandated children with only one Muslim parent be listed as Muslim. The KRG suspended 14 Islamic preachers for what it said was defamation and incitement against religious minorities. Representatives of minority religious communities reported while the government did not generally interfere with religious observances, and even provided security for places of worship, including churches, mosques, shrines, and religious pilgrimage sites and routes, minority groups continued to face harassment and restrictions from authorities in some regions. Members of religious minority communities, civil society organizations, and media continued to report some non-Muslims chose to reside in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) and areas under KRG control because they continued to consider these areas to offer greater security, tolerance, and protection for minority rights.

Throughout the year, the government fought numerous battles to regain control of significant terrain lost to ISIS. At the same time, ISIS pursued a campaign of violence against members of all faiths, but against non-Sunnis in particular. In areas under its control, ISIS continued to commit individual and mass killings, and to engage in rape, kidnapping, random detentions and mass abductions, torture, abduction and forced conversion of non-Muslim male children, and the enslavement and sex trafficking of women and girls from minority religious communities. ISIS also continued to engage in harassment, intimidation, robbery, and the destruction of personal property and religious sites. In areas not under ISIS control, it continued suicide bombings and vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks against all segments of society. ISIS also targeted religious pilgrims and pilgrimage sites for attack. The United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI) reported ISIS IEDs caused at least 5,403 casualties (1,167 killed and 4,236 wounded), amounting to half of all verified casualties in the first half of the year.

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

The U.S. President in a speech at the UN again called on the country’s political, civic, and religious leaders to take concrete steps to address the danger posed by religiously motivated extremists, to reject sectarianism, and to promote tolerance between religious groups. The Secretary of State said that in his judgment, ISIS was responsible for genocide against religious groups in the areas under its control, including Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims. Senior officials, including the Deputy Secretary of State, the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, and the Deputy Special Envoy, visited the country to urge the government to protect the country’s diverse religious communities. The U.S. Ambassador, embassy officers, and consulates general officials met regularly with government ministries and members of parliament to emphasize the need for the security, full inclusion, and protection of the rights of religious minorities. They also held regular discussions with government officials, *waqf* (religious endowment) leaders, and UN officials coordinating international assistance to address the distribution of humanitarian aid. The Ambassador, embassy officers, and consulates general officials issued public statements condemning ISIS abuses of religious freedom. Embassy and consulate general officials maintained an active dialogue with Shia, Sunni, and religious minority communities, emphasizing tolerance, inclusion, and mutual understanding. Embassy assistance programs supported minority religious communities and ethnosectarian reconciliation.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population of Iraq to be 38 million (July 2016 estimate). According to 2010 government statistics, the most recent available, 97 percent of the population is Muslim. Shia Muslims, predominantly Arabs but including Turkmen, Faili (Shia) Kurds, and others, constitute 55 to 60 percent of the population. Sunni Muslims make up approximately 40 percent of the population: approximately 15 percent of the total population are Sunni Kurds, while approximately 24 percent are Sunni Arabs, and the remaining 1 percent are Sunni Turkmen. Shia, although predominantly located in the south and east, comprise the majority in Baghdad and have communities in most parts of the country. Sunnis form the majority in the west, center, and the north of the country.

Christian leaders estimate there are fewer than 250,000 Christians remaining in the country. The Christian population has declined over the past 15 years from a pre-2002 population estimate of between 800,000 and 1.4 million persons. Approximately 67 percent of Christians are Chaldean Catholics (an eastern rite of the Roman Catholic Church); nearly 20 percent are members of the Assyrian Church of the East. The remainder are Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, Anglican, and other Protestant. Only 50 evangelical Christian families reportedly remain in the IKR, down from approximately 5,000 in 2013.

Yezidi leaders report most of the approximately 350,000 to 400,000 Yezidis reside in the north. Estimates of the size of the Sabaeen-Mandaean community vary. According to Sabaeen-Mandaean leaders, 10,000 remain in the country, mainly in the south with small pockets in the IKR and Baghdad. Bahai leaders report fewer than 2,000 members, spread throughout the country in small groups. The Shabaks constitute about 350,000-400,000 people, two-thirds to three-fourths of whom are Shia and the rest Sunni, and are mostly located in Ninewa. According to Kaka'i (also known as Yarsani) activists, their community has approximately 300,000 members, traditionally located in the Ninewa Plains, but also in villages southeast of Kirkuk, as well as in Diyala, Erbil, and Karbala. The Jewish representative in the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA) reports 430 Jewish families reside in the IKR. Fewer than 10 Jewish families are known to reside in Baghdad.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq was 3.06 million at year's end. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the IOM estimate one million citizens remain internally displaced as a result of sectarian violence dating from 2006 and 2008 before ISIS became active. During the conflict with ISIS beginning in 2014, up to 3.5 million persons were internally displaced. Difficulties in gaining access to IDPs in areas of conflict, as well as the government's limited capacity to register IDPs, means estimates of religious minorities among the IDPs are imprecise. According to international sources, more than 60 percent of Iraqi IDPs are Arab Sunni, approximately 17 percent are Yezidi, approximately 8 percent are Turkmen Shia, approximately 3 percent are Arab Shia and 3 percent are Kurdish Sunni. Shabak, Chaldean, and Assyrian Christians, Turkmen Sunni, and Kurdish Shia account for approximately 6 percent of the IDP population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares Islam to be the official religion of the state, and a "foundation source" of legislation. It states no law may be enacted contradicting the "established provisions of Islam," but also states no law may contradict the principles of democracy or the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in the constitution.

The constitution protects the "Islamic identity" of the Iraqi people, although it makes no specific mention of Sunni or Shia Islam. The constitution also guarantees the freedom of religious belief and practice for Christians, Yezidis, and Sabaeen-Mandaeans. The law, however, prohibits the practice of the Bahai Faith and the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam.

The constitution states each individual has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, and followers of all religions are free to practice religious rites and manage religious endowment affairs, and religious institutions. The constitution guarantees freedom from religious coercion, and states all citizens are equal before the law without regard to religion, sect, or belief.

In August the Council of Representatives passed an Amnesty Law, which includes a provision allowing for reinvestigation and retrial of detainees who were convicted under the antiterrorism law based solely on the information provided by secret informants.

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.

The following religious groups are recognized by the law and thereby registered with the government: Islam, Chaldean, Assyrian, Assyrian Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, Armenian Catholic, Roman Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Latin-Dominican Rite, National Protestant, Anglican, Evangelical Protestant Assyrian, Adventist, Coptic Orthodox, Yezidi, Sabaeen-Mandaean, and Jewish. Recognition allows groups to appoint legal representatives and to perform legal transactions such as buying and selling property. All recognized religious groups have their own personal status courts which are responsible for handling marriage, divorce, and inheritance issues. There are three *diwans* (chambers) responsible for administering matters for the recognized religious groups within the country: the Sunni Endowment Diwan, the Shia Endowment Diwan, and the Endowment of the Christians, Yezidi, and Sabaeen-Mandaean Religions Diwan. The three *waqfs* operate under the authority of the prime minister's office to disburse government funds to maintain and protect religious facilities.

Outside of the IKR, the law does not provide a mechanism for a new religious group to obtain legal recognition. Iraqi law allows punishment for anyone practicing the Bahai Faith with 10 years' imprisonment. For unrecognized religions other than Bahai – e.g., Wahhabi, Zoroastrian, and Kaka'i – the law does not specify penalties for practicing; however, contracts signed by institutions of worship for unrecognized religions are not legal or permissible as evidence in court.

In the IKR, religious groups obtain recognition by registering with the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious

Affairs (MERA). To register, a group must have a minimum of 150 adherents, provide documentation of the sources of its financial support, and demonstrate it is not anti-Islam. Eight faiths are registered with the KRG MERA: Islam, Christianity, Yezidi, Judaism, Bahai, Sabean-Mandean, Zoroastrian, and Kaka'i (Yarsan).

In addition to the Christian denominations recognized by the government of Iraq, the KRG has registered nine evangelical Protestant churches: Rasolia Church, Baptism Church, Kurd-Zman Church, Unite Evangelical Church, Mushikha Evangelical Church, Ashti Evangelical Church, International Church, al-Nahda Church, and Evangelical Free Church.

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

The KRG MERA operates endowments (*waqfs*) which pay salaries of clergy and fund construction and maintenance of religious sites only for Sunni Muslims, Christians, and Yezidis.

The constitution requires the government to maintain the sanctity of holy shrines and religious sites and guarantee the free practice of rituals for recognized religious groups. The penal code criminalizes disrupting or impeding religious ceremonies and desecrating religious buildings. The penal code imposes three years' imprisonment or 300 dinars (25 cents) for such crimes.

By law, the government provides support for Muslims outside the IKR desiring to perform the Hajj and Umrah, organizing travel routes and immunization documents for entry into Saudi Arabia. The Sunni and Shia *waqfs* accept Hajj applications from the public and submit them to the Supreme Council for the Hajj. The council, attached to the prime minister's office, organizes a lottery process to select pilgrims for official Hajj visas. According to the law for the high commission for Hajj and Umrah, the commission offers 3.5 million dinars (\$3,000) for Hajj travel by land, and 4.2 million dinars (\$3,600) for travel by air. The commission chooses pilgrims to receive the benefit based on a lottery system. The KRG also funds Hajj and Umrah travel, but individuals are only eligible to receive government assistance once.

The constitution guarantees minority groups the right to educate children in their own languages. While it establishes Arabic and Kurdish as official state languages, it makes Syriac, typically spoken by Christians within the country, and Turkmen official languages only in the administrative units in which those groups "constitute density populations." The constitution provides the federal Supreme Court be made up of judges, experts in Islamic jurisprudence, and legal scholars. The constitution leaves the method of regulating the number and selection of judges to legislation that requires a two-thirds majority in the Council of Representatives for passage.

The constitution guarantees citizens the right to choose which court (civil or religious) will adjudicate matters of personal status, including marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, endowments, and other personal matters. Islam takes precedence when one of the parties to the dispute is from a nonrecognized faith. The law states civil courts must consult the religious authority of a non-Muslim party for its opinion under the applicable religious law and apply the religious authority's opinion in court. In the IKR, the Personal Status Court adjudicates personal disputes between Muslims, and the Civil Status Court handles all other cases.

National identity cards denote the holder's religion. The only religions which may be listed on the national identity card are Christian, Sabaeen-Mandean, Yezidi, and Muslim, and there is no distinction between Shia and Sunni Muslim affiliation nor designation of Christian denominations. Individuals practicing other faiths may only receive identity cards if they self-identify as Muslim, Yezidi, Sabaeen-Mandean, or Christian. Without an official identity card, non-Muslims and those who convert to faiths other than Islam may not register their marriages, enroll their children in public school, acquire passports, or obtain some government services. Passports do not specify religion.

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

The Rights of National and Religious Minorities Protection Law in the IKR, which formally recognized the Bahai, Zoroastrian, and Sabean-Mandean faiths, promotes equal political, cultural, societal, and economic representation of all minority groups and 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, or religious or linguistic claims."

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

On October 22, the Council of Representatives passed a law which contained an article banning the sale, import, and production of alcoholic beverages. The law had yet to take effect as of the end of the year, however, as the president returned the law to the COR for further consideration.

Islamic education, including study of the Quran, is mandatory in primary and secondary school, except in the IKR. Non-Muslim students are not required to participate in Islamic studies. The government provides Christian religious education in public schools in some areas where there are concentrations of Christian populations, and there is a Syriac curriculum directorate within the Ministry of Education.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Government Practices

There continued to be reports that local police and Shia militia killed Sunni detainees. International and local NGOs reported the government continued to use the antiterrorism law as a pretext for detaining Sunnis without timely access to due process. Community leaders said forced conversion was the de facto result of the national identity card law. Some Yezidi and Christian leaders continued to report harassment and abuses by KRG Peshmerga and Asayish forces in the portion of Ninewa Province controlled by the KRG or contested between the central government and the KRG. Displaced members of certain religious groups report they were prevented from returning to their

homes after their cities were liberated from ISIS. Yezidi groups said the presence of armed affiliates of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Sinjar and the imposition of security restrictions on the district by the KRG hindered the return of IDPs. In May KRG representatives revoked permission for Yazda, the largest Yezidi-run humanitarian and political advocacy organization, to operate in IDP camps. Officials restored access in October. In some parts of the country, non-Muslim religious minorities, as well as Sunni and Shia in areas where they formed the minority, faced harassment and restrictions from the authorities. The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) continued to deploy police and army personnel to protect religious pilgrimage routes and sites, as well as places of worship, during Islamic and non-Islamic religious holidays. The KRG also offered support and funding to some non-Muslim minorities, but other minorities in the IKR, such as evangelical Christians, faced difficulties registering and proselytizing. Because religion, politics, and ethnicity were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International (AI) reported evidence of torture and ill-treatment of Sunni detainees by Iraqi Security Forces (including PMF fighters), as well as the deaths of Sunni men who were in custody, detained under the antiterrorism law.

In October, AI reported that men in Federal Police (a Shia-dominated organization) uniforms carried out multiple unlawful killings of Sunnis suspected of being ISIS militants or sympathizers in and around Mosul. In some cases, AI stated individuals were tortured before they were shot and killed execution style or run over with armored vehicles. In October in the Al-Shora subdistrict, men in Federal Police uniforms reportedly brutally beat and killed Ahmed Mahmoud Dakhil and Rashid Ali Khalaf, villagers from Na'na'a, as well as a third man from the village of Tulul Nasser.

In an October report, AI reported Sunni Arab IDPs from parts of Salah al-Din and Diyala Provinces feared attacks by Shia militias in control of those towns, and said the militias had committed gross human rights abuses against residents. AI documented what it referred to as "war crimes and gross human rights violations," including extrajudicial executions and other unlawful killings, torture, and enforced disappearances, committed against Sunnis fleeing Saqlawiya and al-Sijir and accused of being complicit in ISIS crimes or having supported the group. AI stated the violations were committed by Shia PMF militias and fighters wearing military or Federal Police uniforms. For example, AI reported the extrajudicial execution of at least 12 men and four boys from the Sunni Jumaila tribe in al-Sijir by armed men in various security force uniforms. The Iraqi Federal Police denied any involvement in the abuses.

Hundreds of men seized by the PMF on May 27 and June 3 remained unaccounted for at year's end. According to the testimonies of some survivors, ISF and the Shia militia group Kata'ib Hizballah had been close by when these individuals were captured. Iraqi forces had been stationed near the sites of crimes in Tarek's Military Camp (Mu'askar Tarek), located along the old Baghdad-Falluja road. On June 5, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi established a committee to investigate the May and June disappearances, vowing to punish those responsible, and announced the arrest of an unspecified number of individuals who had committed the crimes. The prime minister, however, said the abuses were not part of a systematic pattern, and should not overshadow the battlefield successes and the assistance provided by Iraqi forces to Sunni Arab IDPs. In many cases, Shia PMF units reportedly operated independently and without oversight or direction from the government.

International and local NGOs stated the government continued to use the antiterrorism law as a pretext for detaining Sunni men – and their female relatives – for extended periods of time without access to a lawyer or due process. In October courts in Basrah announced 1,251 Sunni detainees had been affected by the new Amnesty Law, which allowed some individuals convicted under the antiterrorism law to apply for judicial review, and 538 had already been retried. The Ministry of Interior's spokesperson reported that in June, 700 Sunni men were detained following the battle of Falluja based on their confessions of being ISIS supporters. According to the Anbar Police Command, out of 19,400 Sunni men initially arrested under the antiterrorism law for suspected connections to ISIS, 2,046 men were detained, while the remaining individuals were released. AI reported evidence of torture and ill-treatment of Sunni detainees, as well as deaths of Sunni men who were in custody, detained under the antiterrorism law. Religious organizations such as the Association of Muslim Scholars spoke publicly about human rights abuses in prisons in their annual report.

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

According to local human rights organizations, the KRG internal security service had temporarily detained Yezidi activists and demonstrators in Dahuk.

Yezidi groups said the presence of armed affiliates of the PKK in Sinjar and the KRG's impositions of security restrictions on the district have hindered the return of IDPs.

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

According to the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization and a Christian political leader, Peshmerga fighters removed generators and water pumps from the town of Tal Skuf after liberating it from ISIS in May, and restricted some Christians from entering the town.

Advocacy groups and representatives of religious minority communities reported continued emigration of minority community members subjected to ISIS violence in Mosul and across the Ninewa Plain.

Members of religious minority communities, civil society organizations, and the media continued to report some non-Muslims, including Yezidis and Christians, chose to reside in the IKR and areas under KRG control because they continued to consider these areas to offer greater security, tolerance, and protection for minority rights.

Christian, Yezidi, and Kaka'i community leaders said that forced conversion was the de facto result of the national identity card law, which stated that children of one Muslim parent would be automatically identified as Muslim. Christian leaders said, in some cases, families formally registered as Muslim, but actually practicing Christianity or another faith, reportedly fled to avoid being forced to register their child as a Muslim or to have the child remain undocumented.

The KRG MERA banned 14 Muslim preachers from preaching Friday sermons because of defamation and incitement against religious minorities, including Christians. The imams were placed on administrative leave, and drew salaries while undergoing required rehabilitation training. The KRG MERA announced as of September, the KRG had shut down 10 media outlets accused of promoting extremism; they also lacked proper licenses.

While the government continued to support the establishment of armed volunteer groups to counter ISIS, Prime Minister Abadi repeatedly called for these groups to place themselves under the command and control of the security forces. In 2015, the Council of Ministers announced the PMF was an official body reporting to the prime minister, but the prime minister's ability to control the PMF remained a source of disagreement and debate.

NGOs continued to state constitutional provisions on freedom of religion should override laws banning the Bahai Faith and the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam, but there continued to be no court challenges lodged to invalidate them, nor was legislation proposed to repeal them.

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

The KRG recognized two evangelical churches with Muslim-background membership; other evangelical Christian churches proselytizing to Muslims said the registration process was onerous, and their groups were subject to scrutiny and harassment by the internal security service.

The KRG provided several religious groups with offices within the KRG MERA following the passage of the KRG Rights of National and Religious Minorities Protection Law. In September Zoroastrians opened a temple in Sulaimaniya with KRG MERA approval and support. Additionally, representatives from the Zoroastrian and Bahai faiths were provided with offices housed within MERA.

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

Non-Muslims said they had difficulties persuading local authorities to take steps to resolve issues involving their holy sites, such as evicting squatters from the grounds of churches, temples, and cemeteries.

The government continued to provide increased protection to Christian churches during the Easter and Christmas holidays. Bahais reported they continued to celebrate the festivals of Naw-Ruz and Ridvan without government interference or intimidation. Provincial governments also continued to designate these as religious holidays in their localities. Followers of the Bahai and Yezidi faiths reported the KRG allowed them to observe their religious holidays. Yezidis used Kurdish, one of the languages officially sanctioned by the constitution, in their worship services. The Maysan Provincial Council reportedly continued to recognize a Sabaeen-Mandaean holiday as an official holiday, to provide physical protection for the Sabaeen-Mandaean community during times of worship, and to excuse the group from Shia Islamic dress codes during times of mourning.

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

In the IKR, private schools were required to pay a registration fee of 750,000 to 1,500,000 Iraqi dinars (\$640 to \$1,290) to the Ministry of Education or Ministry of Higher Education, depending on the type of school. To register with the KRG, private schools needed to provide information on the school's bylaws, number of students, size, location, facility and safety conditions, financial backing, and tax compliance, and undergo an inspection. In February the Catholic University in Erbil opened with KRG approval, open to students of all faiths.

While the government continued not to require non-Muslim students to participate in religious instruction in public schools, some non-Muslim students continued to report pressure to do so from teachers and classmates. There were also continued reports that some non-Muslim students felt obliged to participate because they could not leave the classroom during religious instruction. Christian and Yezidi leaders reported continued discrimination in education and lack of minority input into issues such as school curricula and language of instruction. By year's end, schools had not universally adopted the 2015 Ministry of Education curriculum incorporating lessons of religious tolerance. Many Christians who spoke the Syriac language stated it was their right to use and teach it to their children as a matter of religious freedom. The Chaldean church in Basrah, seeking to establish private Christian schools, said local authorities mandated the inclusion of Islamic religious instruction in their curricula for the Muslim students enrolled.

The KRG Ministry of Education continued to fund the religion curriculum for Islam and Christian classes for students of those faiths per ministry regulations. The KRG Ministry of Education continued to fund Syriac-language public schools (elementary and high school), intended to accommodate Christian students, in its territory; the curriculum does not contain religious or Quranic studies. In June Salahaddin University, a government-run institution in Erbil, approved the creation of a Syriac language department.

Christian leaders reported the KRG continued to provide land and financial support for construction of new, and renovation of existing, structures for use as educational facilities, although budget cuts halted some projects.

Non-Muslims have generally not held positions in the Iraqi Council of Ministers (COM), or in the KRG's COM, although there is no legal bar to ministerial appointments for members of religious minorities. Members of minority religious communities held senior positions in the national parliament and central government, as well as in the KRG, although minority community leaders said they were proportionally underrepresented in government appointments, in elected positions outside the Council of Representatives, and in public sector jobs, particularly at the provincial and local levels. Minority community leaders continued to say this underrepresentation limited minorities' access to government-provided economic opportunities. The federal Supreme Court continued to represent a cross section of ethnicities and religions in its nine-member composition.

Some Sunni Muslims continued to say they perceived an ongoing campaign of "revenge" by Shia government officials against them in retribution for the Sunnis' favored status and abuses against Shia during the Saddam Hussein regime. Sunnis continued to complain about discrimination in public sector employment as a result of de-Baathification, a process originally intended to target loyalists of the former regime. According to Sunnis and local NGOs, the government implemented the de-Baathification provisions of the law selectively and used the law to

render many Sunnis ineligible for government employment. The government established a committee to rectify sectarian imbalances in ministries, but to date have implemented no reforms. Sunni Arab government officials, particularly those from ISIS-stricken Ninewa Province, have complained about a political “witch hunt” against Sunni Arab ministers, led by allies of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The parliamentary Reform Front movement’s political targets have largely been Sunni Arabs from Ninewa, a proposition leading Sunnis stated came from Shia majoritarian sectarian tendencies.

Human rights NGOs and Yezidi leaders stated KRG authorities discriminated against organizations providing humanitarian assistance to Yezidi communities. Starting in April, KRG authorities maintained a blockade of goods into Sinjar District that prevented the return of most Yezidi families. While the KRG said the blockade was designed to constrain the PKK, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization that had established a presence in the Sinjar area, HRW stated that these restrictions caused “unnecessary harm to people’s access to food, water, livelihoods, and other fundamental rights.” Security forces restricted items such as food, medicines, and farming supplies needed for local livelihoods.

The 2015 national identity card law, adopted by the Council of Representatives, did not clarify whether the national identity card would continue to identify the holder’s religion. The law has prevented Yezidis (many of whom consider themselves to be a distinct ethnic group as well as a religious group) and Shabaks from self-identifying with their religious and ethnic group and from official government recognition through official documentation. President Fuad Masum returned the bill to parliament for further debate, however, following protests from minority communities.

Christian groups said the KRG did not consistently enforce court decisions regarding land disputes, many of which stemmed from the Saddam Hussein regime’s Anfal campaign. Many Christians left the country during the Saddam Hussein regime, they stated, and when these Christian families returned home, they found Kurdish families occupying their residences. On July 26, KRG security forces demolished buildings built on land illegally occupied by a Muslim Kurd and owned by Christians, pursuant to a court order. The demolition sparked violent reactions from Muslims in the neighboring town of Bakrman, who harassed some Christians in response.

In May KRG representatives revoked permission for Yazda, the largest Yezidi-run humanitarian and political advocacy organization, to operate in IDP camps. Officials restored access in October.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

ISIS continued to target victims on the basis of their religious identity, killing and subjecting people of all faiths to violence, abductions, and intimidation. Media reported the security situation remained precarious as a result of ISIS’s occupation of territory and the escalation of fighting between ISIS and government forces in Ninewa and Kirkuk; although the Iraqi military and progovernment forces retook large amounts in territory in both provinces, fighting continued in some areas of Anbar and Salah al-Din. In areas under its control, ISIS continued to commit individual and mass killings, and to engage in rape, kidnapping, and detention, including mass abductions and enslavement of women and girls from minority religious communities. ISIS also continued to engage in harassment, intimidation, robbery, and the destruction of personal property and religious sites. In areas not under ISIS control, it continued suicide bombings and VBIED attacks against civilians. ISIS also targeted religious pilgrims and pilgrimage sites for attack. ISIS enforced strict rules on dress, behavior and movement on the inhabitants who remained in the areas it controlled, and severely punished infractions. Its fighters carried out execution-style public killings and other punishments, including after its “courts” condemned people for transgressing its rules or its interpretation of Islamic law. ISIS fighters burned or destroyed Shia, Yezidi, and other religious shrines and cultural artifacts.

UNAMI reported in December that 12,038 people were killed during the year and another 411 were wounded as a result of bombings and acts of violence, mostly in Baghdad and in the northern and western provinces. ISIS claimed responsibility for the majority of these bombings.

After forcibly transferring large numbers of civilians from subdistricts of Mosul to Tal Afar, ISIS killed 172 civilians held in al-Jazeera secondary school in the Hay al-Khadraa neighborhood of Tal Afar, according to UNAMI. Reportedly, among those killed were 43 Yezidi and Shia girls and women who had been enslaved by the group since June 2014.

In November ISIS posted on its *Wilayat al-Jazeera* website photos of victims killed under the slogan *Iqamat al-hudud* (imposing legal penalties) for allegedly committing breaches of sharia, including smoking. One of the victims portrayed in the photos was reportedly a cigarette merchant. The exact dates of the killings are not known. In some photos, children are seen witnessing the executions.

ISIS posted a video on the *Wilayat al-Jazeera* website showing four children between the ages of 10 to 12 shooting and killing four civilians accused of spying for the ISF and Peshmerga. The video shows two children aiming their guns at the heads of two kneeling civilians and then shooting them. The other two children performed the same act against two other civilians in a location near a river. The video identifies two of the children as originally from Uzbekistan and Russia and the other two from Iraq, while the victims were identified as shop owners from the Baaj District of Ninewa Governorate. One of the children in the video was recognized by his Yezidi parents, having been abducted from his family by ISIS at an earlier date.

ISIS targeted all religious minorities who refused to convert to Islam or who opposed the terrorist group. ISIS also targeted Sunni civilians who cooperated with the ISF. The Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights reported cases of ISIS killing women for not wearing a veil. According to multiple reports from international NGOs and the local press, ISIS fighters continued to question members of detained groups to determine if they were Sunni, and then killed or abducted the non-Sunnis.

Coordinated ISIS bomb attacks continued to target Shia neighborhoods, markets, mosques, and funeral processions, as well as Shia shrines. On July 3, a coordinated bomb attack in Baghdad resulted in the deaths of more than 300 and injuries to hundreds more. A few minutes after midnight, a suicide bomber in a truck targeted the mainly Shia district of Karrada, busy with late-night shoppers for Ramadan. A second roadside bomb was detonated in the suburb of Sha’ab, killing at least five. On April 4, there were multiple coordinated suicide bombings, including two in the Shia-majority southern provinces of Basrah and Dui War. Five people died in Basrah and in Dui War, and 14 people were killed and 27 wounded at a restaurant popular with Shia PMF fighters. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attacks.

ISIS fired chemical weapons into the Salah al-Din villages of Tara and Basheer on March 16 and May 2, respectively. The attacks injured more than 400 victims, who were primarily Turkmen Shia civilians. ISIS fighters continued their practice of claiming responsibility for these attacks via social media postings.

Large celebrations of Ashura in Najaf and Karbala were violence free, in part because of extensive security efforts.

According to the mayor of Sinjar, as of September 27, mass graves containing the remains of ISIS victims were under investigation, others were located, and potentially dozens more remained in ISIS-controlled territory in Sinjar district. On April 26, Yezidi religious leaders in Lavish published an open letter to diplomats and human rights organizations reporting 410 Yezidi men had been missing for a year after the men were directed to a mosque in the ISIS-controlled city of Tal Afar and taken away by truck.

In August the Associated Press reported that analysis of satellite imagery identified a possible mass grave site at Badmouth Prison near Mosul, where more than 600 inmates died. The KRG exhumed 67 remains from a mass grave in Sinjar for DNA analysis.

According to the KRG MERA, 3,735 Yezidis captured by ISIS remained in ISIS captivity or were unaccounted for at year's end.

The Yezidi Organization for Documentation reported ongoing cases of rape, forced labor, forced marriage, forced religious conversion, material deprivation, and battery by ISIS. ISIS provided videos of its fighters continuing sexual assaults on captured Yezidi women. ISIS repeatedly said it had conducted the "large-scale enslavement" of Yezidi women and children because of their religious beliefs.

NGOs reported ISIS continued to kidnap religious minorities for ransom. According to officials from a Turkmen Women's Association, ISIS militants had kidnapped and held 500 Turkmen women and children from Tal Afar and Mosul since June 2014. A Shabak member of the Ninewa Provincial Council said ISIS held over 250 Shabak people (most of whom are thought to be Shia) captive, and had executed three Shabaks in October. UNAMI reported that between October 27 and the beginning of November, ISIS had relocated between 64 and 70 abducted Yezidi women from Aaliyah subdistrict of Tal Afar, Muhalabiya subdistrict of Mosul, and from Qayrawan subdistrict of Sinjar, to the Seventeen-Tamouz area in Mosul city. On November 4, ISIS allegedly brought an unspecified number of Yezidi women to Tal Afar and placed them in one of the schools. ISIS reportedly gave some of the women to its militants and sent others to Raqqa, Syria.

According to religious leaders, killings, forced conversion, threats of violence, and intimidation continued to motivate many minorities to leave ISIS-controlled areas. Yezidi civil rights activists reported 400,000 Yezidis were displaced to Dahuk Province in the IKR because of ISIS in 2014. Yezidi and Kaka'i IDPs largely remained in place during the year, with a limited number returning to liberated areas of Ninewa. Sources said between 10 to 15 Christian families were leaving the country daily.

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

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

ISIS fighters continued to attack mosques and other holy sites, including Sunni religious sites, rendering many of them unusable. They converted Christian churches into mosques, and looted and destroyed religious and cultural artifacts. In January UNESCO reported ISIS destroyed the Monastery of Saint Elijah, which was more than 1,400 years old, and the oldest Christian monastery in the country. In April ISIS destroyed Mosul's "Clock Tower Church" with explosives. Based on their interpretation of Islam, in June ISIS members removed Islamic motifs and Quranic verses on Mosul's mosques, and also converted churches to weapons storehouses or offices after destroying crosses and religious motifs in the churches. ISIS also damaged many churches and Yezidi temples located in the Ninewa plains during its occupation, including 17 Yezidi shrines in the towns of Bashiqa and Bahzani in the Bashiqa subdistrict. In addition, ISIS blew up the clock tower of the Roman Catholic Church of Al-Sa'a in Mosul city and the Church of Al-Qiyama in Bakhida city in al-Hamdaniya District. The terrorist organization also destroyed the Christian Shrine of Bahnam and Sara in the Nimrud subdistrict.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were continued reports of societal violence, mainly by sectarian armed groups in many parts of the country. Non-Muslim minorities reported abductions, threats, pressure, and harassment to force them to observe Islamic customs. In many regions, minority groups, whatever their religious adherence, said they experienced violence and harassment from the majority group in the region.

Sabaeen-Mandaean leaders reported threats and robberies. On November 27, an unidentified gunman shot and killed a Sabaeen-Mandaean goldsmith.

On July 21, an unknown group kidnapped the head of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the country, and released him on July 27. The leader believed he was targeted for both religious and economic motives.

Authorities made no arrests in the 2015 case of four Sunni clerics who were killed in a drive-by shooting in Basrah's Zubayr District, and observers stated there was no indication the case was being actively investigated.

Shia religious and government leaders urged PMF volunteers not to commit abuses.

Christians in the south and Sabaeen-Mandaeans in Basrah, Dhi Qar, and Maysan Governorates reported they avoided celebrating their religious festivals when those festivals coincided with Islamic periods of mourning.

There were continued reports that non-Muslim minorities felt obliged to adhere to certain Islamic practices, such as wearing the hijab or fasting during Ramadan. Non-Shia Muslim and non-Muslim women felt societal pressure to wear

hijabs and all-black clothing during the month of Muharram, particularly during Ashura, to avoid harassment. Shia Muslims consider it inappropriate and disrespectful to wear bright colors or to hold public celebrations during this month when they mourn the death of Imam Hussein, (who was killed, along with all of his followers, in Karbala in 680), holding funeral processions and gathering to mourn together publicly. According to representatives of Christian NGOs, some Muslims continued to threaten women and girls, regardless of their religious affiliation, for refusing to wear the hijab, for dressing in Western-style clothing, or for not adhering to strict interpretations of Islamic norms governing public behavior. Numerous women, including Christians and Sabaeen-Mandaeans, reported opting to wear the hijab after being harassed.

Minority religious leaders continued to report pressure on minority communities to cede land rights to their businesses unless they conformed to a stricter observance of Islamic precepts. This included demands to close liquor stores and nightclubs. At times, shopkeepers were subject to violence for noncompliance. Since 2012, Basrah's government has refused to renew liquor licenses for any stores and nightclubs that previously sold alcohol, and Basrah, Dhi Qar, Maysan, and Muthanna provinces have made it illegal to sell or transport alcohol, though southern Iraqis could legally consume and own alcohol. Christian churches continued to be allowed to have wine for communion, but they could not buy any locally and needed to rely on foreign contacts and coreligionists in the north to bring bottles of wine when they came south. Public reaction to the new national law banning the sale, import, and production of alcoholic beverages was overwhelmingly negative, with opponents declaring it violated language in the constitution that guaranteed the personal freedoms of minority groups.

Leaders of non-Muslim communities said corruption, uneven application of the rule of law, and nepotism in hiring practices throughout the country by members of the majority Muslim population continued to have detrimental economic effects on non-Muslim communities and contributed to their emigration. Sabaeen-Mandaeans said they continued to face discrimination that limited their economic opportunities, such as their inability to sell alcohol because of the law. Sunni Muslims also reported continued discrimination based on a public perception that the Sunni population sympathized with terrorist elements, including ISIS.

Zoroastrian activists stressed the importance of adopting the broad concept of freedom of religion or belief, giving them the right to choose their religion and the right to convert from one religion to another without harassment or discrimination from the government and society. Journalists reported Zoroastrians who converted from Islam to Zoroastrianism continued to carry their Islamic identity cards because of the additional rights afforded to Muslims.

During the year, civil society and religious institutions held numerous conferences and workshops to promote religious tolerance. In April an NGO in Samawa organized a workshop to train clergy, teachers, journalists, and civil activists to promote peaceful coexistence and religious tolerance in Muthanna Province.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

During a February 21-24 visit to Baghdad, Erbil, and Lalish, the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and the U.S. Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Asia urged the government to protect civil society, including the country's diverse religious communities. In meetings with various government officials, they underscored the U.S. commitment to defeating ISIS and its divisive ideology. The two U.S. officials also met with NGO representatives, civil society activists, religious minority leaders, students, and journalists to discuss the need for religious tolerance and dialogue. The Ambassador joined the Assistant Secretary's visit and discussion with Yezidi leaders at Lalish to hear the concerns of the Yezidi people and to convey ongoing U.S. support for the Yezidi community. It was the highest level U.S. delegation to visit Lalish.

In September the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS and Deputy Special Envoy consulted with a range of Iraqi leaders, including representatives of religious minority communities, to better understand the needs of communities liberated from ISIS. Also in September the Deputy Secretary of State led a delegation to Baghdad and Erbil, meeting with government officials, religious and ethnic minority leaders, and displaced persons to discuss efforts to defeat ISIS and respond to the urgent humanitarian and IDP crises in Iraq.

The Ambassador and embassy and consulate general officers continued to meet regularly with national and regional Ministries of Education, Justice (which includes the functions of the former Ministry of Human Rights), and Labor and Social Affairs, and with the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights, as well as with members of parliament, parliamentary committees, and minority group representatives serving in government positions, to emphasize the need for full inclusion of religious minorities and protection of their rights.

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

The Ambassador and the Consuls General in Erbil and Basrah met leaders of minority religious groups and civil society groups to address their concerns, particularly regarding security and protection. Embassy officers often met religious leaders and clergy to demonstrate U.S. interest and support for resolving issues with the provision of humanitarian assistance. In particular, they met with Yezidi, Christian, Shabak, Turkmen, and other religious and minority leaders to promote reconciliation within their communities and to advocate more effectively for minority needs with the government.

On March 17, the Secretary of State stated that, in his judgment, ISIS was responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control, including Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims. The embassy continued to support programs that support Iraqi and Kurdish organizations documenting ISIS atrocities. During an August visit to Erbil and Lalish, the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Asia commemorated the anniversary of the start of the Yezidi genocide and stressed the U.S. commitment to protecting minority communities in meetings with political, security, and religious leaders, as well as with coalition partners.

On July 28 and 29, the United States convened an international meeting on Threats to Religious and Ethnic Minorities under ISIS in Washington, in which the Deputy Secretary of State, Ambassador at Large for International Religious

Freedom, Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Asia, and a variety of Iraqi government and civil society leaders participated. In August the State Department and Smithsonian Institute convened a workshop at the Iraqi Institute for the Conservation of Antiquities and Heritage in Erbil to better understand the cultural preservation needs of religious and ethnic minorities in northern Iraq and to help them protect and preserve their religious and cultural heritage.

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

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