



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: IRAQ

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Overview

Since 2014, when the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) launched a [genocide against Iraqi and Syrian](#) religious and ethnic minorities, Iraq's diverse population has continued to suffer the ongoing aftereffects of the genocide. Iraqis also face increasingly institutionalized religious sectarianism and other emerging threats to religious freedom. While the Iraqi federal government (IFG) and semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) have each offered some forms of redress to genocide survivors, these and other communities and individuals throughout the country suffer from systematic and ongoing restrictions on religious freedom, albeit to varying degrees.

Over the course of 2025, many of these unfavorable conditions have persisted and in some cases escalated. This report provides an expanded overview of recent religious freedom conditions in Iraq, identifying areas in which the government has failed to ensure freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for Iraqis of all religious backgrounds and belief systems.

Political and Legislative Conditions Limiting Religious Freedom

Institutionalized Religious Sectarianism

Power sharing in the Baghdad-based federal system centers on the three largest political constituencies—Shi'a Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and Sunni Kurds—with certain smaller religious and ethnic minorities or "components" eligible for a limited number of legislative quota seats. In recent years, the political and legislative arenas have served as platforms for persistent [sectarianism](#) between and among Iraq's many religious and ethnic communities. Recent legislative and political developments in the IFG have reflected these sectarian dynamics, with concerning implications for religious freedom. Early in 2025, a package of controversial bills advanced through the federal Parliament, with certain religious and ethnic political constituencies negotiating reciprocal support for their favored pieces of legislation.

Personal Status Law Amendment

In 2024, influential Shi'a political leaders introduced controversial amendments to Personal Status Law No. 188, which administers several items related to [family law](#). Over protests from religious freedom and women's rights advocates, Parliament passed and ratified the new law early in 2025. Observers have regarded the original 1959 civil law as relatively favorable to Muslim women's and children's rights within



the family, irrespective of religious sect. By contrast, these amendments codify the divergence of various schools or sects of Islam, requiring Muslim families seeking a religious family law framework to specify Shi'a or Sunni clerical authority. Although the law retains a civil law option for married couples, its insistence on separate frameworks of Islamic family law according to sect or school of jurisprudence threatens to entrench the very social and political sectarian tensions that in the Iraqi context have too often encouraged marginalization, exclusion, and even violence. Some reports further suggest the amended law will allow religious endowment bodies to develop a “code of Shari'a rulings,” effectively making law without parliamentary review and creating a sectarian legal code parallel to the civil one. Additionally, religiously “mixed” families, married women, and children would likely be especially vulnerable to the amendment’s regressive impediments to individual religious choice.

Legal experts have expressed concern that the amended law allows for individual clerics’ interpretations of Shari'a to trump the existing civil code. Rights advocates have pointed to locally common interpretations of the Shi'a Ja'fari school of jurisprudence as devastating to women's property and parental rights within marriage and threatening to female minors who may face forced early marriage. After significant public outcry over the draft amendment's lenience toward child marriage, lawmakers modified the final law to specify a minimum marital age of 15 per judicial permission. Yet, objectors fear clerics may still use their ample discretion and influence to allow the forced marriage of girls younger than 15.

Popular Mobilization Forces Authority Law

Throughout 2025, the leading Shi'a political party has campaigned successfully for a law to further entrench in the state apparatus the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) or *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*—a network of militias with strong ties to the totalitarian theocracy in neighboring Iran. Since a global [coalition](#) achieved the territorial defeat of ISIS in 2019, several PMF brigades have assumed the role of Iraq's most prominent religious freedom violators. Among the approximately 70 brigades under the PMF umbrella organization, some have reportedly used checkpoint harassment, physical abuse, detention, torture, and murder against members of the local communities they dominate. Some brigades target religious [minorities](#) for these abuses, particularly across portions of northern Iraq, notwithstanding the token presence of some religious minority [fighters](#) among their ranks or leadership. As USCIRF has long reported, these PMF abuses have played a substantial role in preventing the full recovery and return of religious minority communities who tragically remain displaced since the ISIS genocide.

The proposed PMF Authority Law of 2025 would build on the already substantial state endorsement and federal budgetary support—currently an annual \$2.88 billion budget allocation—that the organization has accumulated in recent years. Far from curbing the increasing power of the most abusive brigades and [integrating](#) compliant defensive militias directly within the Ministry of Defense chain of command, as USCIRF has [recommended](#), the new law would in effect crystallize the PMF's status as an autonomous military body formally imbued with state authority. In July, U.S.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio [warned](#) Prime Minister Mohammed Shi'a al-Sudani of the legislation's capacity to "institutionalize Iranian influence and armed terrorist groups undermining Iraq's sovereignty." In September, the IFG reportedly requested that the Parliament—which includes many PMF members and affiliates—postpone its final vote on the bill.

Political Representation of Religious Minorities

The federal parliamentary elections, which took place on November 11, 2025, were the latest in a string of IFG and KRG elections exposing systemic deficiencies in Iraq's electoral system that severely limit—and in some cases actively usurp—religious minorities' participation and representation. Advocates for these communities continued to call for reforms to the quota seat system in both federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), which reserve an inadequate number of seats for candidates from only a few religious and ethnic backgrounds among many in Iraq. Even more concerning, the 2023 federal provincial [elections](#) and the 2024 KRI parliamentary [race](#) illustrated the harm to religious minority communities of a [system](#) that continues to allow a Muslim-majority electorate—in a society plagued with sectarian hostilities—to cast votes for minority quota seat candidates.

Some religious minority communities managed to secure representation in the 2025 federal parliamentary race despite systemic obstacles. For example, Yazidi communities formed their first unified campaign coalition, successfully electing Murad Ismael in the face of government pressure to discontinue his activism on behalf of displaced genocide survivors. However, malign actors to win minority quota seats they have exploited to the disadvantage of the communities they claim to represent. In March, Cardinal Louis Raphaël Sako, the patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, called for reform ahead of the elections, likely alluding to the exploitative electoral tactics of Rayan al-Kildani, the leader of the 50th PMF brigade, would-be political tactician, and U.S.-[designated](#) human rights and religious freedom violator. In September, some reports suggested that recent U.S. resistance to Iraq's PMF culture had led Kildani to temporarily retreat from Nineveh Governorate after a years-long military and political campaign to dominate Christian communities there.

In October, a federal administrative order reportedly ended Kildani's direct command of the Nineveh Plains

Protections Unit, a Christian-majority regiment he had coopted to make electoral and territorial gains. Yet, systemic deficiencies remain embedded in Iraq's political system. For example, Kildani's nominally Christian Babylon Movement has relied on the support of Shi'a constituencies allied with Iran—yet in 2025 it named candidates for each of the five parliamentary election quota slots reserved for Christians of the Assyrian, Chaldean, or Syriac, ultimately winning two seats. Assyrian advocates have criticized Kildani's persuasive influence on the federal Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), which in August disqualified multiple Assyrian opposition and independent candidates from challenging the Babylon Movement for Christian quota seats. The reported bases for some of these disqualifications—such as alleged administrative errors in one candidate's application paperwork—appear no more than pretextual, especially in light of officials' resistance to registering qualified replacements.

Mixed Government Responses to Aftereffects of Genocide

Positive Government Developments

In 2025, both the IFG and the KRG have continued to make public statements in support of religious and ethnic communities that ISIS devastated years ago. For example, in September, Prime Minister al-Sudani presided over the official reopening of ISIS-damaged churches and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)-reconstructed al-Nuri Grand Mosque, a major Sunni site, eight years after the terrorist group destroyed it. In April, the KRG hosted the inaugural Kurdistan Prayer Breakfast, bringing together leading political figures, visiting U.S. officials, and civil society and clergy from various religious communities. Both governments also continued taking some steps to address the ongoing material aftereffects of the genocide and other challenges. For example, in an April ceremony in the ISIS-ravaged Sinjar District, Nineveh Governorate officials [distributed](#) 1,338 ownership letters and issued approximately 100 title deeds to Yazidi residents, recognizing them as homeowners after several generations of government bars to property ownership. In August, the IFG began excavation of the Khasfa mass grave near Mosul, where ISIS reportedly buried the remains of thousands of Shi'a Turkmens and Arab, Yazidi, and other victims the terrorist group had executed.

Ongoing Displacement and Security Failures Affecting Religious Minorities

Despite those positive developments, both governments have broadly failed to implement comprehensive programs and policies to fully address the ongoing displacement, vulnerability to militia abuse, political marginalization, religious discrimination, and property appropriation that has long inhibited the recovery of religious minority genocide survivors. The IFG has inconsistently and inadequately implemented its two-year campaign to shut down all internal displacement camps, where a large proportion of the estimated 300,000 internally displaced Yazidis still languish 11 years after the genocide. Yazidi advocates have reported government-induced obstacles to the return or resettlement of eligible internally displaced persons (IDPs). For example, in 2025, the IFG reportedly stalled its issuance of “Books of Return,” a credential authorizing some Yazidi IDPs to return to Sinjar, while in August, the KRG Interior Ministry accused the federal Ministry of Migration and Displacement of hampering the voluntary return of displaced Yazidis and Christians from the camps.

Despite dismal camp conditions, many Yazidi IDPs feared returning to Sinjar due to its abysmal post-ISIS infrastructure, scarce employment opportunities, and tenuous security in a disordered administrative landscape dominated by competing militias. Each government has blamed the other for failure to adequately contribute to the joint implementation of the 2020 Sinjar Agreement, which requires them to jointly secure the Yazidi heartland and allow for the return of survivors. While both governments have contributed to Yazidi recovery and resettlement efforts, advocates have called for a renewed sense of urgency and better coordination among the IFG, the KRG, and the Kurdish-led, U.S. allied forces in Syria that lead rescue missions for the 2,600 women and children missing since the 2014 onset of the genocide.

The KRG continued to promote the KRI as a safe harbor for Yazidis, Christians, and other religious and ethnic minorities whom ISIS displaced during the genocide. However, some advocates expressed dissatisfaction with the degree of security both within the KRI and in the bordering territories disputed between the KRG and IFG and subject to the aggressive dominion of militias, including some affiliated with each government. In April, an assailant in Duhok yelled Islamic slogans while wielding an *axe* against Christian parade-goers celebrating the Assyrian New Year, wounding at least

three people. Assyrian activists decried the reportedly passive response of Kurdish security forces (Asayish) guarding the parade. Christians continued to report similarly inadequate security and, at times, harassment from both KRG-linked militias and PMF units active in parts of the KRI and disputed territories.

U.S. Foreign Aid Cuts Affecting Religious Minority Survivors of ISIS

Since 2014, the United States has provided over \$3.5 billion in *humanitarian assistance* in response to ISIS’s genocide of religious minorities. This aid has provided critical support for Iraq’s Yazidis, Christians, and other survivors and constituted a bipartisan cornerstone of the foreign assistance sector. In 2025, the sweeping *freeze* on foreign assistance across U.S. government agencies compounded the pressure on religious minorities in Iraq, prompting a demonstrable decline in critical services for Iraq’s internally displaced populations—among which Yazidis and other survivors of ISIS represent a disproportionately substantial segment.

Since the Iraqi government’s cessation in 2024 of many services in the remaining 20 displacement camps, Yazidi residents and other religious minority genocide survivors had relied almost entirely on aid from international and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), many of which received funding from the United States. In July, Yazidi civil society interlocutors reported that the loss of much of this U.S. funding forced many NGOs to stop renewing their contracts to service the camps. The pause on United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and United Nations International Organization for Migration (IOM) funding in particular triggered a corresponding suspension of relief programs in health, education, waste management, water, electricity, and psychological support for genocide survivors. In fact, by mid-2025, interlocutors reported that only six health centers serve the 15 IDP camps that are home to significant Yazidi populations and that these facilities now operated without appropriate medical staff. Prior to the U.S. aid freeze, Iraqi medics had staffed these health centers through NGOs administering USAID grants. NGO partners reported that only one regularly active IOM doctor—without the ability to prescribe medication—now provided care to these 15 camps.

Yazidis who have left the camps to return home have also reportedly borne the brunt of this loss of services. For example, healthcare such as maternity support has reportedly all but disappeared in Tel Afar, forcing



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pregnant women and other returnees to find unreliable transport into the KRI for critical care—risking PMF checkpoints and sometimes even hitchhiking to do so. While the IFG has touted the existence of certain services centers, such as the hospital in Sinun, near Sinjar, interlocutors reported that this facility is consistently devoid of doctors and services. The pause on USAID funding to the Recovery program early in 2025 reportedly dashed an Iraqi NGO’s plans for a new support center for disabled Yazidis—including many wounded in the fight against ISIS.

Conclusion

In 2025, both the federal and Kurdistan regional governments of Iraq have neglected several opportunities to improve religious freedom conditions in a country still fragmented amid the aftereffects of religious genocide and generations of sectarian tensions. The KRG and IFG have yet to fully implement existing statutes and agreements to adequately compensate genocide survivors and stabilize Sinjar for Yazidis’ return. The IFG has failed to purge the PMF of brigades that violate religious freedom—including appropriating political representation of religious minorities—even as its ruling party has advanced legislation that would surrender even more state authority to abusive PMF units, their leaders, and their ideological commitments. The Iraqi government and the KRG must take further action to address harmful legislation and ongoing threats to Iraqis of all religious backgrounds.

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