



## COI QUERY

Country of Origin/Topic	Iraq
Question(s)	<p>What is the security context and treatment of Christians in Iraq?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. <a href="#">Background</a><ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1.1. <a href="#">Post-ISIL security context of Christian community</a><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- <a href="#">Targeted destruction of infrastructure and habitat</a></li><li>- <a href="#">Targeting of Christians by armed actors</a></li></ul></li><li>1.2. <a href="#">Ninewa governorate and ability to secure law and order</a><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- <a href="#">Governance, education and practice of Christianity in Iraq</a></li></ul></li><li>1.3. <a href="#">Missing, IDPs and returnees</a></li></ol></li></ol>
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<sup>1</sup> Network composed of specialised COI researchers and analysts from EU+ countries



## COI QUERY RESPONSE

### 1. Background

Christians are estimated to make up 1 % of the population of Iraq.<sup>2</sup> The Christian community in Iraq comprises:

- Armenians (Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox) – predominantly located in Baghdad, with past or limited presence in Mosul, Kirkuk and Basra; since the invasion of ISIL, they were displaced and have settled in Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI);<sup>3</sup>
- Assyrians (belong to one of five churches: the Ancient Church of the East, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church).<sup>4</sup> According to the Assyrian Policy Institute (API), ‘the majority of Assyrians who remain in Iraq today belong to the Chaldean and Syriac churches’.<sup>5</sup> ISIL’s capture of Mosul in 2014, led hundreds of Christian families to escape to the Ninewa Plains, an area controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).<sup>6</sup> From 6-7 August 2014, ISIL captured ‘all Assyrian areas in the Ninewa plains, including Tel Isqof, Bartalla, Karamles, Batnaya, Tel Keyf, and Iraq’s largest Christian town, Qaraqosh’. Minority Rights Group International estimated that this led to the displacement of 200 000 Assyrian Christians who fled to KRG-controlled region.<sup>7</sup> Assyrians consider the Ninewa Plains and Tilkaif to be their homeland.<sup>8</sup> The historic capital of Assyrian Christians is Nimrud<sup>9</sup>, whose destruction by ISIL was condemned by UNESCO as a war crime.<sup>10</sup> The largest Christian town in Iraq used to be Qaraqosh; 50 000 of its inhabitants were displaced during ISIL’s reign.<sup>11</sup>
- Chaldeans (Roman Catholic) – separated from the Assyrian Church of the East, and acknowledged papal supremacy in 18<sup>th</sup> century. The remaining Chaldean community is located in Baghdad, with displaced populations in Basra or in KRI.<sup>12</sup>
- Between 1.4 to 1.5 million Christians lived in Iraq prior to the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003.<sup>13</sup> The US Embassy in Iraq estimated that the overall Christian population in Iraq had decreased between 50-90 % since the fall of Saddam Hussein.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, prior to 2014, IOM estimated that 140 000 Christians lived in the Ninewa Plains, out of which one third in Al-Hamdaniya district (Batella and Qaraqosh subdistricts), Tilkaif district (Al Qoash and Tel Esqof and Batnaya subdistricts) and Markaz Mosul.<sup>15</sup> Following ISIL’s assault, Assyrians from Mosul

<sup>2</sup> Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), The World Factbook – Iraq, 6 October 2020, [url](#)

<sup>3</sup> Minority Rights Group International, World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous People – Iraq – Armenians, November 2017, [url](#)

<sup>4</sup> Assyrian Policy Institute (API), Contested control: the future of security in Iraq’s Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>5</sup> API, Contested control: the future of security in Iraq’s Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>6</sup> MRG, World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous People – Iraq – Assyrians, November 2017, [url](#)

<sup>7</sup> MRG, World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous People – Iraq – Assyrians, November 2017, [url](#)

<sup>8</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM) Iraq, Rural areas in Ninewa - legacies of conflict on rural economies and communities in Sinjar and Ninewa Plains, 28 November 2019, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>9</sup> MRG, World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous People – Iraq – Assyrians, November 2017, [url](#)

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Educational Scientific and Culture Organization (UNESCO), Director-General condemns destruction at Nimrud, 13 April 2015, [url](#); Deutsche Welle (DW), Still no progress in restoring ancient Nimrud, 24 July 2017, [url](#); ArcGIS Storymaps, The destruction of Nimrud and the ethical dilemma, 15 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>11</sup> MRG, World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous People – Iraq, June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>12</sup> MRG, World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous People – Iraq – Chaldeans, November 2017, [url](#)

<sup>13</sup> Minority Rights Group International, World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous People – Iraq, June 2019, [url](#); Atlantic Council, Three years after the Caliphate, Iraq’s Christians find little incentive to return, 4 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>14</sup> Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), The World Factbook – Iraq, [url](#)

<sup>15</sup> IOM Iraq, Rural areas in Ninewa - legacies of conflict on rural economies and communities in Sinjar and Ninewa Plains, 28 November 2019, [url](#), p. 14



found refuge north in Dohuk governorate, east of the Nineveh Plains, in the Assyrian-majority suburb of Ankawa in Erbil and in smaller proportion in Baghdad.<sup>16</sup> On 23 May 2019, BBC quoted the Archbishop of Erbil, the Right Reverend Bashar Warda, who estimated the current Iraqi Christian population at 250 000.<sup>17</sup> In 2019, Christian leaders estimated that the largest remaining population of Christians of about 200 000 lives in the Ninewa Plains (primarily in the districts of Telkaif, Sheikhan, and Hamdaniya), and in the north part of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), mostly in Erbil and Dohuk<sup>18</sup>. In May 2019, the Archbishop of Erbil, stated that 'Christianity in Iraq one of the oldest Churches, if not the oldest Church in the world, is perilously close to extinction'.<sup>19</sup> In June 2019, a media report estimated that 2 % or 118 000 of the KRI total population are Christians.<sup>20</sup> In June 2020, the US Department of State (USDoS) estimated that the Christian community in Iraq decreased to less than 250 000, with 200 000 living in the Ninewa Plains and in the northern part of Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).<sup>21</sup>

According to USDoS, 67 % of the Christian population belongs to Chaldean Catholics, 20 % to the Assyrian Church of the East, while the remainder consists of Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, and Anglican and other Protestants.<sup>22</sup> The August 2020 report by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), states that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) recognised 11 evangelical and other Protestant dominations. Furthermore, it reports that in KRI Christian groups may register with the Council of Iraqi Christian Church Leaders (i.e. an independent group formed by Christian church leaders, including six evangelical Protestant churches) that provides Christian churches and leaders with access to the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA) and KRG Christian endowment. Reportedly, leaders of established apostolic churches in KRI and the Ninewa Plains have voiced concerns about KRG MERA flexible approach enabling new Christian groups to become established in KRI, and 'accused the new groups of damaging the churches' relationships with local Muslims by proselytizing'.<sup>23</sup>

The lack of political power ethno-religious minority groups in Iraq enjoy is manifest in the number of parliamentary seats occupied by minorities in the Council of Representatives, which is currently 8 out of 329. Five seats are allocated to Christian candidates from Baghdad, Ninewa, Kirkuk, Erbil, and Duhok governorates.<sup>24</sup> Allocation for ethnic and ethno-religious minorities is similar in the Kurdish parliament where out of 111 seats, five are allocated to Turkmen, 5 to Christians and 1 to Armenians.<sup>25</sup> For other ethnic and ethno-religious minorities that KRG recognizes as ethnically Kurdish or Arab, such as Yazidis, Shabek, Sabean-Mandaeans, Kaka'i, and Faili Kurds, there are no seats allocated.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Assyrian Policy Institute (API), Contested control: the future of security in Iraq's Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 22

<sup>17</sup> BBC, Iraq's Christians 'close to extinction', 23 May 2019, [url](#)

<sup>18</sup> US Department of State (USDoS), Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 3; Assyrian Policy Institute (API), Contested control: the future of security in Iraq's Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), pp. 12-13

<sup>19</sup> BBC, Iraq's Christians 'close to extinction', 23 May 2019, [url](#)

<sup>20</sup> Kurdistan24, Christian leader calls for improved security in Iraq to facilitate return of IDPs to their areas, 9 June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>21</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 3; BBC, Iraq's Christians 'close to extinction', 23 May 2019, [url](#)

<sup>22</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Australian Government - Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), DFAT country information report - Iraq, 17 August 2020, [url](#), p. 29

<sup>24</sup> Freedom House, Freedoms in the world 2020 – Iraq, [url](#)

<sup>25</sup> Freedom House, Freedoms in the world 2020 – Iraq, [url](#); USDoS, 2019 Iraq - Annual Report on Human Rights, March 2020, [url](#), p. 41

<sup>26</sup> USDoS, 2019 Iraq - Annual Report on Human Rights, March 2020, [url](#), p. 42



### 1.1. Post-ISIL security context of Christian community

According to API, the Ninewa Plains and Kirkuk form what are ‘colloquially known as the the disputed territories of northern Iraq’, despite “no authoritative rendering of the disputed territories” existing.<sup>27</sup> These disputed territories have been contested by the Government of Iraq (GoI) and KRG, both prior to and after the fall Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003, post ISIL’s territorial defeat in 2017, and post the Kurdistan referendum for independence in September 2017.<sup>28</sup> In 2003, as part of military operations against the Saddam Hussein’s regime, KRG Peshmerga were allowed by the US military to deploy south of the “Green Line”, which was the 1991 de facto boundary separating the Iraqi central government-controlled territory and KRG.<sup>29</sup> KRG established control in Sinjar, and at the epicenter of the Ninewa Plains comprising Hamdaniya, Telkaif, Makhmour, and Sheikhan districts. Despite Ninewa Plain being one of Iraq’s poorest and underdeveloped areas, KRG sought control over its arable land, and supposedly substantial oil and gas deposits. Similarly, KRG sought control of Kirkuk for its oil deposits.<sup>30</sup>

Following the KRI independence referendum in 2017 and failed secession attempt, the Peshmerga forces withdrew from the disputed areas, and Iraq Security Forces (ISF) and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) were deployed in the region. This rotation created security gaps due to the inability of the GoI and KRG to reach an agreement to coordinate security tasks in the disputed territories, which has ever since been exploited by remnants of ISIL.<sup>31</sup>

In its 2019 Country Reports on Terrorism, USDoS reported on data compiled by the Federal Intelligence and Investigation Agency within Iraq’s Ministry of Interior about a decline in the number of civilian casualties and injured inflicted by ISIL as of 1 December 2019 compared to 2018.<sup>32</sup>

ISIL	Total attacks	Civilians killed	Civilians injured
2018	N/A	900	1 600
2019	844	534	1 121
05/2020 <sup>33</sup>	370	N/A	N/A

Although the potential of ISIL to wage large-scale campaigns has been significantly reduced to low-intensity insurgency, the UN Security Council had repeatedly throughout 2019 and 2020 highlighted ISIL’s continued targeting of civilians and asymmetric targeting of security forces in Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Kirkuk, and Salah al-Din governorates.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>27</sup> API, Contested control: the future of security in Iraq’s Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>28</sup> BBC, Iraqi Kurds decisively back independence in referendum, 27 September 2017, [url](#)

<sup>29</sup> API, Contested control: the future of security in Iraq’s Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>30</sup> API, Contested control: the future of security in Iraq’s Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), pp. 12-14.

<sup>31</sup> Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF), Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration - Briefing Notes, 9 March 2020, [url](#), p. 4; BAMF, Group 62 –Information Centre for Asylum and Migration - Briefing Notes, 4 May 2020, [url](#), p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> USDoS, Country Reports on Terrorism 2019 – Iraq, June 2020, [url](#), p. 118

<sup>33</sup> UN Security Council (UNSC), Implementation of resolution 2470 (2019) – Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/363], 6 May 2020, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>34</sup> UNSC, Implementation of resolution 2421 (2018) – Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/101], 1 February 2019, [url](#), p. 3; UNSC, Implementation of resolution 2470 (2019) - Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/903], 22 November 2019, [url](#), p. 5; UNSC, Implementation of resolution 2470 (2019) - Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/140], 21 February 2020, [url](#), p. 4; UNSC, Implementation of resolution 2470 (2019) – Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/363], 6 May 2020, [url](#), p. 4



The sources of insecurity for the Christian population in the Ninewa Plains stem both from local and Iran-backed militias, which are nominally under the command of the PMF Ninewa Operations Command, and conventionally subordinate to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), but de-facto operating outside of ISF control.<sup>35</sup> In particular, the PMF 30<sup>th</sup> (Liwa al-Shabak/Quwat Sahl Nineveh) and 50<sup>th</sup> (Kata'ib Babiliyun) brigades have been reported throughout 2019 and 2020 as refusing to follow legal orders from the Gol to redeploy from Christian areas.<sup>36</sup>

Long-running territorial disputes between the Gol and KRG in disputed areas result in Christians continually reporting skepticism in Gol capability to protect them from sectarian factions within PMF, Shia and Sunni armed groups, and ISIL.<sup>37</sup>

The post-ISIL mistrust of Christians predominantly living in the Ninewa Plains stems from the perception of being used as a buffer between Gol and KRG,<sup>38</sup> and being subject to “additional interference and exploitation by larger groups for political, economic, or security reasons”.<sup>39</sup> Until today, KRG Peshmerga failure to protect Christians during ISIL assault in 2014 in their areas of origin (Alqosh, Bartella, Bashiqa, Batnaya, Baquba, Qaraqosh, Karam-les and Tel Usk) is perceived by Christians as an act of abandonment and betrayal, irrespective of KRG acceptance of Christians IDPs from the Ninewa Plains.<sup>40</sup>

The security context as such continues to provide opportunities for ISIL to wage asymmetric, low-level insurgency in the disputed territories, in north and north-central Iraq (Ninewa and Kirkuk governorates), and along the Iraqi-Syrian border.<sup>41</sup> During 2019 and 2020, the UN Security Council continued to report that post-ISIL negotiations between Gol and KRG to close critical administrative and security gaps remain ongoing and unresolved.<sup>42</sup> In July 2020, US Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Kenneth McKenzie said that a low-level ISIS insurgency would remain endemic.<sup>43</sup>

### Targeted destruction of infrastructure and habitat

In the aftermath of ISIL territorial defeat in 2017, the property damage in the Ninewa Plains, particularly in the Christian towns of Qaraqosh and Bartella was significant. According to Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 75-80 % of the buildings in Qaraqosh and Bartella have been damaged to the

<sup>35</sup> Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Iran’s expanding militia army in Iraq: the new special groups, August 2019, [url](#); United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), 2019 Annual Report, April 2019, [url](#), p. 189; ; The Guardian, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis: Iraqi killed in US strike was key militia figure, 3 January 2020, [url](#); USCIRF, 2020 Annual Report, April 2020, [url](#), p. 72; Ban Connable, An enduring American commitment in Iraq – shaping a long-term strategy with Iraqi army partners, RAND Corporation, 2020, [url](#), pp. 11-12, pp. 22-23

<sup>36</sup> Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Iran’s expanding militia army in Iraq: the new special groups, August 2019, [url](#)

<sup>37</sup> USCIRF, 2019 Annual Report, April 2019, [url](#), p. 190

<sup>38</sup> International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Iraq, Rural areas in Ninewa – Legacies of conflict on rural economies and communities in Sinjar and Ninewa Plains, 28 November 2019, [url](#), p. 15; Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Otmar Oehring, Christians and Yazidis in Iraq: current situation and prospects, 2017, [url](#), p. 31

<sup>39</sup> CRS, Iraq: issues in the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress, 17 July 2020, [url](#), p. 30

<sup>40</sup> API, Contested control: the future of security in Iraq’s Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), pp. 24-26.

<sup>41</sup> UNSC, Implementation of resolution 2421 (2018) – Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/101], 1 February 2019, [url](#), p. 3; UNSC, Implementation of resolution 2421 (2018) – Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/101], 5 August 2019, [url](#), p. 4; UNSC, Implementation of resolution 2421 (2018) – Report of the Secretary General [S/2019/365], 2 May 2019, [url](#); p. 4; USDoS, Country Reports on Terrorism 2019 – Iraq, June 2020, [url](#), p. 119; CIVIC, “We just want someone to protect us” – Civilian protection challenges in Kirkuk, December 2019, [url](#), p. 9; CRS, Iraq: issues in the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress, 17 July 2020, [url](#), p. 30; International Crisis Group, Iraq: Fixing security in Kirkuk, 15 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>42</sup> UNSC, Implementation of resolution 2421 (2018) – Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/101], 1 February 2019, [url](#), p. 3; UNSC, Implementation of resolution 2470 (2019) - Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/903], 22 November 2019, [url](#), p. 5; Kurdistan24, 'Permanent coordination' between Iraqi, Kurdish forces in Nineveh: Governor, 21 December 2019, [url](#); UNSC, Implementation of resolution 2470 (2019) - Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/140], 21 February 2020, [url](#), p. 4; UNSC, Implementation of resolution 2470 (2019) – Report of the Secretary-General [S/2020/363], 6 May 2020, [url](#), p. 4; Kurdistan24, US-led Coalition ‘encouraged’ by Peshmerga-ISF coordination talks, 23 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>43</sup> Voice of America (VOA), US efforts to deal Islamic State ‘Enduring Defeat’ on hold, 16 July 2020, [url](#)



extent that they would need to be demolished and rebuilt.<sup>44</sup> According to 2020 data, 54 % of the destroyed and damaged properties have been rebuilt in Christian areas.<sup>45</sup> The United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) reported in February 2020 that in the last two years, its teams have removed over '62 000 explosive hazards in Mosul and the surrounding areas'.<sup>46</sup>

### Targeting of Christians by armed actors

Within the scope of the resources, limited sources and statistics were found covering the frequency of security-relevant incidents targeting Christians in Iraq, in the period from January 2019 to August 2020. In addition, incident reports occurring in the majority Christian areas often do not provide ethnic or ethno-religious breakdown of the victims.

List of armed actors and treatment of the Christian population in 2019 and 2020:

- **ISIL** - US Department of States (USDoS) reported that Christians were victims of abductions by ISIL in 2019<sup>47</sup>;
- **30<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> PMF brigades** - The PMF 30<sup>th</sup> brigade (Liwa al-Shabak/Quwat Sahl Nineveh) is estimated to comprise between 1 000 - 1 500 strong Shabak force, local to the Ninewa Plains, which is headquartered in the depopulated Christian town of Bartella.<sup>48</sup> The 30<sup>th</sup> brigade controls the main trade highway between Mosul and Erbil<sup>49</sup>. According to Christian community leaders, Shabak MPs, such as Hunain Qado, together with support of Shia counterparts in the Iraqi central government continue to instruct the PMF 30<sup>th</sup> brigade to harass and drive out Christians from their homelands to facilitate settlement of Muslims.<sup>50</sup> USDoS citing Christian sources reported that PMF's "30<sup>th</sup> Shabak Brigade, prevented Christian IDP returns and harassed Christian returnees in several towns in the Ninewa Plains, including Bartella and Qaraqosh. Members of the PMF 30<sup>th</sup> brigade refused to implement a decision of the prime minister to remove checkpoints".<sup>51</sup> Additional checkpoints operated by the PMF 30<sup>th</sup> brigade were in Karamles, while those operated by the PMF 50<sup>th</sup> brigade limiting the freedom of movement of Christians were in Batnaya and Tal Kayf.<sup>52</sup> API also reported that the PMF 30<sup>th</sup> brigade had committed multiple accounts of "physical intimidation, sexual harassment, religious discrimination, robbery, and theft of land or property".<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, API reported that the local population suspects that the 30<sup>th</sup> brigade is using post-ISIL instability to advance demographic change in Assyrian areas of origin, and establish stronger control over Bakhdida (Qaraqosh) and Bartella.<sup>54</sup> Christian priests that called for withdrawal of the PMF 30<sup>th</sup> brigade reported receiving threats via social media.<sup>55</sup> In May 2019, Shabak

<sup>44</sup> Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Otmar Oehring, Christians and Yazidis in Iraq: current situation and prospects, 2017, [url](#), p. 23.

<sup>45</sup> Nineveh Reconstruction Committee (NRC), Nineveh Plains Reconstruction Process, 6 April 2020, [url](#); NRC, Telekef Restoration Process and Returnees, 6 April 2020, [url](#); NRC, Bashiqa Restoration Process and Returnees, 6 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>46</sup> United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), UNMAS Newsletter Iraq, February 2020, [url](#)

<sup>47</sup> USDoS, 2019 Iraq - Annual Report on Human Rights, March 2020, [url](#), p. 22.

<sup>48</sup> The Washington Institute, Normalizing security in the Nineveh Plains, 5 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>49</sup> API, Contested control: the future of security in Iraq's Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 37

<sup>50</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 11

<sup>51</sup> USDoS, 2019 Iraq - Annual Report on Human Rights, March 2020, [url](#), p. 33

<sup>52</sup> USDoS, 2019 Iraq - Annual Report on Human Rights, June 2020, [url](#), p. 10, p.37

<sup>53</sup> API, Contested control: the future of security in Iraq's Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 37

<sup>54</sup> API, Contested control: the future of security in Iraq's Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 37

<sup>55</sup> USDoS, 2019 Iraq - Annual Report on Human Rights, March 2020, [url](#), p. 18



Shia men with links to the PMF 30th brigade assaulted two Christian women in Bartella due to their religious affiliation.<sup>56</sup>

Unlike the PMF 30<sup>th</sup> brigade that is composed of local minority, the PMF 50<sup>th</sup> brigade (Kata'ib Babiliyun) is 1 000 strong Shia force, composed of combatants from Baghdad's Sadr City, Muthanna, and Dhi Qar. The PMF 50<sup>th</sup> brigade is foreign to the Ninewa Plains, however it has self-imposed itself as a Christian militia.<sup>57</sup> It is headed by Rayan Kildani (Rian Salem Sadiq), a local Christian, enjoying very little support among the Christian population and clerics, and is perceived as "Iran's token figure in an attempt to broaden the political alliance's appeal".<sup>58</sup> Christians in Tal Kayf reported similar situation where PMF 50<sup>th</sup> Brigade continued to support the settlement of Sunnis and Shia Shabak, however it did not block the return of Christians.<sup>59</sup> In June 2020, API reported that the PMF 50<sup>th</sup> brigade initially operated throughout the Tel Keppe, Hamdaniya, Bashiqa Districts, and recently reduced its presence to Tel Keppe. According to API, areas commanded by the PMF 50<sup>th</sup> brigade had witnessed little or no repopulation by Assyrians.<sup>60</sup>

In July 2019, US Department of the Treasury sanctioned two PMF militia leaders in the Ninewa Plains, the head of the 30<sup>th</sup> PMF brigade Waad Qado, and the head of the 50<sup>th</sup> PMF brigade Rayan al-Kildani.<sup>61</sup> In 2019, USDoS noted numerous reports of Iran-backed PMF 30th brigade (Liwa al-Shabak/Quwat Sahl Nineveh) and the PMF 50th brigade (Kata'ib Babiliyun) carrying out unlawful detention of Kurds, Turkmen, Christians, and other minorities in western Ninewa and the Ninewa Plains.<sup>62</sup> These brigades were involved in "extortion, illegal arrests, kidnappings, and detention of individuals without warrants".<sup>63</sup>

- **KRG Peshmerga and Asayish** – During 2019, USDoS noted that certain Yazidi and Christian leaders kept reporting physical abuse and verbal harassment by KRG Peshmerga and Asayish forces in KRG dominated part of Ninewa governorate, however this behavior is perceived to be motivated by territorial disputes rather than religious targeting.<sup>64</sup>

In June 2020, Christians have reported that they were subjected to politically and territorially motivated movement restrictions.<sup>65</sup>

- **Turkish Army and PKK** - the extent to which Turkish airstrikes aimed at targeting the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) impact the security situation of Christians is not clear. In November 2019, UNSC reported that ever since May (Operation Claw), Turkey continued to launch airstrikes against PKK positions in Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah governorates.<sup>66</sup> In June 2020, Turkey

<sup>56</sup> USDoS, 2019 Iraq - Annual Report on Human Rights, March 2020, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>57</sup> The Washington Institute, Normalizing security in the Nineveh Plains, 5 July 2019, [url](#); Kurdistan24, Security is biggest challenge for minorities in areas liberated from ISIS, 20 August 2019, [url](#); Atlantic Council, Three years after the Caliphate, Iraq's Christians find little incentive to return, 4 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>58</sup> Atlantic Council, Three years after the Caliphate, Iraq's Christians find little incentive to return, 4 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>59</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 11

<sup>60</sup> API, Contested control: the future of security in Iraq's Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 36

<sup>61</sup> US Department of the Treasury, Treasury sanctions persons associated with serious human rights abuse and corrupt actors in Iraq, 18 July 2019, [url](#); International Crisis Group, Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°70, Iraq: Evading the Gathering Storm, 29 August 2019, [url](#), pp. 6-7

<sup>62</sup> USDoS, 2019 Iraq - Annual Report on Human Rights, March 2020, [url](#), p. 14; The Washington Institute, Normalizing security in the Nineveh Plains, 5 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>63</sup> USDoS, 2019 Iraq - Annual Report on Human Rights, March 2020, [url](#), p. 14; Kurdistan24, US sanctions Nineveh Plain's militia leaders for terrorizing population, blocking IDPs' return, and corruption, 19 July 2019, [url](#)

<sup>64</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 12

<sup>65</sup> CRS, Iraq: issues in the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress, 17 July 2020, [url](#), p. 30

<sup>66</sup> UNSC, Implementation of resolution 2470 (2019) - Report of the Secretary-General [S/2019/903], 22 November 2019, [url](#), p. 6



targeted rural parts in the Kurdistan's regions of Dohuk governorate, in vicinity of the Bersv community where 300 Christian families resided, with the fallout damaging the resident's properties.<sup>67</sup>

In May 2020, PKK attacked a Turkish military base in Kani Masi, a mixed Assyrian-Kurdish area in Dohuk province.<sup>68</sup> In June 2020, the Assyrian village of Sharanish in Dohuk province, was hit by airstrikes that destroyed village's electric and water distributors, and led to more than 200 villagers to flee fearing future attacks. Furthermore, it is reported that since June's airstrikes, nine out of the 11 Christian villages in the Zakho district have been evacuated.<sup>69</sup>

## 1.2. Ninewa governorate and ability to secure law and order

As many other ethno-religious minorities in Iraq facing uncertain future, the Assyrian Christian minority leaders have called for a political arrangement with the Government of Iraq that would provide guarantees of security and self-governance in the north Iraq by allowing creation of three new provinces: Ninewa Plains, Sinjar and Telafar.<sup>70</sup> The control over Ninewa governorate remains a contention point between the Gol and KRG, where in post-ISIL liberation setting, KRG continued to assert its intention to control areas such as Ninewa Plains, previously considered Iraqi territory, which obstructs ethno-religious minorities from pursuing self-governance.<sup>71</sup>

The 50<sup>th</sup> PMF brigade's political wing won two seats reserved for Christians during the 2018 legislative elections with the support of Shia votes on the Badr list. The political backing helped consolidate the 50<sup>th</sup> PMF brigade rule in Christian areas of origin. The perception that the PMF controls local institutions has deterred return of IDPs due to safety fears, and in the areas under the 50<sup>th</sup> brigade control (Telkef district, Tesqopa, Batnaya and Sharafiya villages in the Nineveh Plain), and according to the Atlantic Council, the return rate has been 7 % since 2017.<sup>72</sup>

Throughout 2019, USDoS noted that Christians continued to face verbal harassment and physical abuse by members of PMF at checkpoints, and both inside and outside PMF-controlled towns in the Ninewa Plains.<sup>73</sup> PMF is reported to be in control of the real estate in Christian areas, and to forcing Christian merchants to pay bribes to allow them to use trade roads in the Ninewa Plains.<sup>74</sup> There are also reports that some government officials have attempted to facilitate demographic change by allocating land and housing to Shias and Sunnis in predominantly Christian areas in the Ninewa Plains, such as Hamdaniya district and Bartalla sub-district.<sup>75</sup>

In the south and PMF controlled areas in the Ninewa Plains, Christians have been reported to refrain from celebrating religious feasts overlapping with the Shia Islamic Ashura period. Non-Muslim minorities, especially women, have been reported to be socially pressured to follow certain Islamic practices, such as wearing the hijab and all-black clothing during Muharram, and fasting during Ramadan to avoid harassment.<sup>76</sup> In November 2019, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women reported that Christian women are 'underrepresented in political and

<sup>67</sup> Kurdistan24, Turkish jet strikes areas near small community in Kurdistan's Duhok, 21 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>68</sup> Al-Monitor, PKK attacks Turkish military base in Kurdistan Region of Iraq, 14 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>69</sup> Al-Monitor, Assyrians caught in crossfire between Turkey, PKK fighting, 8 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>70</sup> Minority Rights Group International, World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous People – Iraq, June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>71</sup> Minority Rights Group International, World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous People – Iraq, June 2019, [url](#)

<sup>72</sup> Atlantic Council, Three years after the Caliphate, Iraq's Christians find little incentive to return, 4 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>73</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), pp. 1, 10

<sup>74</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 2

<sup>75</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), pp. 2, 9, 10

<sup>76</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), pp. 18-19





public life in the State party', and that they are among ethnic minorities in Iraq that are exposed to continued discriminatory stereotypes.<sup>77</sup>

Christians continued to report discrimination reducing their economic opportunities, in the form of taxation imposed by the PMF on goods transported from Mosul into the Ninewa Plains.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, despite possessing permits for import and distribution of alcohol and spirits, Christians reported fearing to engage in this trade.<sup>79</sup>

### **Governance, education and practice of Christianity in Iraq**

The Endowment of the Christian Diwan is one of three administrative governing bodies (i.e. Diwans) under the Office of the Prime Minister, tasked with administering matters for the recognized religious groups in Iraq. Similarly, Christianity is recognised and registered with the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA).<sup>80</sup>

Religions that may be listed on the national identity card are Christian, Sabeen-Mandean, Yezidi, Jewish and Muslim.<sup>81</sup> Since 2016, identity cards do not display religious denomination, although this information is requested in the online application and can be accessed via identity card data chip.<sup>82</sup> Options to distinguish between Shia and Sunni Muslim, or designation of Christian denominations is not available.<sup>83</sup> Only those in a possession of an official identity card are able to register a marriage, enroll children in public school, acquire passport and access certain government services.<sup>84</sup> Christian men cannot marry Muslim women, and children from mixed marriages or born of rape are automatically registered as Muslim.<sup>85</sup>

Islamic studies and study of the Quran in primary and secondary schools is not mandatory for non-Muslim.<sup>86</sup> Christian religious education is available in public schools in areas where there is concentrated Christian population.<sup>87</sup> In 255 public schools, Christian religious education is available, including 55 schools in KRG.<sup>88</sup> In August 2020, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), reported that Christian religious education is available in at least 150 public schools in Baghdad, Ninewa and Kirkuk.<sup>89</sup>

According to USDoS, religious practice of the Christian community has been largely respected, with occasional verbal harassment from local authorities.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>77</sup> UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women [CEDAW/C/IRQ/CO/7], Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of Iraq\*, 12 November 2019, [url](#), p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 17

<sup>79</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 17

<sup>80</sup> Australian Government - Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), DFAT country information report - Iraq, 17 August 2020, [url](#), p. 27

<sup>81</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>82</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 7; Puttick, M., email, 4 September 2020. Miriam Puttick is a specialist on human rights issues in Iraq and Head of Middle East and North Africa Programmes at the Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights.

<sup>83</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>84</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 7

<sup>85</sup> The Atlantic, The impossible future of Christians in the Middle East, 23 May 2019, [url](#)

<sup>86</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>87</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 8

<sup>88</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 14

<sup>89</sup> DFAT, DFAT country information report - Iraq, 17 August 2020, [url](#), p. 27

<sup>90</sup> USDoS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 2



### 1.3. Missing, IDPs and returnees

According to 2019 Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the majority of the Christian population remained displaced, and those that managed to return, estimated at 30-50 %, mostly coming from refuge in Erbil and areas in KRG, continue to face challenges due to harassment and threats from PMF factions.<sup>91</sup>

In August 2019, the overall situation of the Christian community in Iraq was assessed as conducive to and indicative of a tendency to permanent departure from Iraq, due to continued persecution, inability to return to their traditional areas of origin, “presence of ISIL sympathizers, continued security incidents, presence of sectarian militias, and the lack of vital infrastructure and services”.<sup>92</sup>

As of December 2019, according to the KRG’s Joint Crisis Coordination Center in KRG, 30 % of IDPs were Yezidis, and 7 % Christians.<sup>93</sup> At the end of 2019, estimated 150 Christians continued to be missing, following ISIL territorial defeat in 2017.<sup>94</sup>

In 2020, the Atlantic Council reported that according to the estimates made by director of API, since the recapture of Mosul in July 2017, out of the estimated pre-ISIL population of 20 000 Christians, only 100 have returned.<sup>95</sup> According to the USDOS Iraq 2019 Human Rights Report, Christian area of West Mosul and town of Batnaya remain ‘almost completely uninhabited’.<sup>96</sup> In April 2020, IOM reported that more than 262 548 individuals out of the total estimated returnee population of 1 750 896 have returned to the districts of Hamdaniya and Telkaif in the Ninewa Plain, which have been historic home to Christians, however IOM did not provide any details regarding the number of Christian returnees in this data cluster.<sup>97</sup> In May 2020 report produced by US AID and the Middle East Research Institute (MERI) it is mentioned that the most Christians from Telkaif district have emigrated to Europe, “with the exception of around 350 families who stayed behind and are currently living in IDP camps in the KRI or rest of Iraq (Local Authority KII:2019)”.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, the MERI/US AID report provides that “although the IOM-DTM records a relatively high rate of return of 83% to Telkaif, Christian key informants expressed that only a handful of Christian families have returned since liberation (Christian KIIs:2019)”.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>91</sup> USCIRF, 2020 Annual Report, April 2020, [url](#), pp. 72-73

<sup>92</sup> Kurdistan24, Former lawmaker says number of Christians leaving Iraq rising, 4 August 2019, [url](#)

<sup>93</sup> USDOS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 4

<sup>94</sup> USDOS, Iraq 2019 – International Religious Freedom Report, June 2020, [url](#), p. 13

<sup>95</sup> Atlantic Council, Three years after the Caliphate, Iraq’s Christians find little incentive to return, 4 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>96</sup> USDOS, 2019 Iraq - Annual Report on Human Rights, March 2020, [url](#), p. 37; BBC, Mosul: A city still in ruins, two years after defeat of IS, 3 April 2019, [url](#)

<sup>97</sup> IOM, Return Index Governorate Profiling – Return dynamics in Ninewa Governorate, April 2020, [url](#), p. 4; CRS, Iraq: issues in the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress, 17 July 2020, [url](#), p. 31

<sup>98</sup> USAID / Middle East Research Institute (MERI), Ninewa Plains and western Ninewa barriers to return and community resilience – A meta-analysis of existing studies and literature, May 2020, [url](#), p. 34

<sup>99</sup> USAID / Middle East Research Institute (MERI), Ninewa Plains and western Ninewa barriers to return and community resilience – A meta-analysis of existing studies and literature, May 2020, [url](#), p. 35

As of 1 June 2020, according to API, the rate of Assyrian Christian return to the Ninewa Plains was as follows<sup>100</sup>:

Village	Security arrangement	Pre-ISIL population	Current population	Current percent of return
Alqosh	Peshmerga / Asayish	6 000	4 500	75 %
Bakhdida (Qaraqosh)	Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) <sup>101</sup>	50 000	35 000	70 %
Baqopa	Peshmerga / Asayish	1 000	250	25 %
Bartella	NPU and PMF 30 <sup>th</sup> Brigade	10 000	3 000	30 %
Bashiqa	Iraqi Army; formerly PMF 50 <sup>th</sup> Brigade	4 500	1 250	28 %
Batnaya	Iraqi army, formally PMF 50 <sup>th</sup> Brigade	2 500	50	2 %
Karamlesh	NPU	3 000	1 500	50 %
Tel Keppe (Tel Kayf / Telkaif)	PMF 50 <sup>th</sup> Brigade	3 000	200	7 %
Tesqopa (Tel Eskof)	Peshmerga / Asayish	10 000	2 000	20 %
<b>All</b>		<b>90 000</b>	<b>47 750</b>	<b>53 %</b>

According to API, the Assyrian returns to KRG Peshmerga-controlled towns is low and ranges between 20 and 25 %, which is due to ‘deep distrust of these forces’ caused by their withdrawal in 2014 prior to ISIL assault; purposeful obstructing the return of minorities to the Ninewa Plains on condition of them supporting the Kurdistan Democracy Party (KDP); and since 2014 “deliberately hijacking humanitarian efforts for political gain and the control of local populations”.<sup>102</sup>

Similarly, irrespective of the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) presence in Bartella, the return rate remains low due to the co-presence of the PMF 30<sup>th</sup> brigade. In the period between 2017 and 2019, the presence of the PMF 50<sup>th</sup> brigade in Batnaya and Bashiqa resulted in almost no returns. ISF replaced the 50<sup>th</sup> brigade in Batnaya and Bashiqa in early 2019, while the 50<sup>th</sup> brigade continued its operations from only Tel-Keppe, where the rate of return is negligible.<sup>103</sup>

API reports that NPU is majority Assyrian Christian militia, which received some support and training from the US-led Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve, and was authorized to participate in

<sup>100</sup> API, Contested control: the future of security in Iraq’s Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 42

<sup>101</sup> In November 2014, residents of the Ninewa Plain and Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) formed the Ninewa Plain Protection Units (NPU), which was to facilitate a long-term presence of Assyrian Christians in their historic homelands. Territories administered by NPU experienced the highest return rates among Assyrian Christians – API, Contested control: the future of security in Iraq’s Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), pp. 34-35

<sup>102</sup> API, Contested control: the future of security in Iraq’s Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 45-47

<sup>103</sup> API, Contested control: the future of security in Iraq’s Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 48



anti-ISIL operations. NPU is nominally aligned to PMF, however it operates independently of PMF leadership and reports to the National Security Service (NSS).<sup>104</sup> According to API citing an article by the Associated Press, in the aftermath of the Ninewa Plains liberation, the NPU became “the dominant force in Bartella”, however its authority diminished as PMF 30<sup>th</sup> brigade outnumbered it through the backing of the Badr Organisation.<sup>105</sup> According to AP, in February 2019, NPU manned only two positions at the entry into Bartella.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> API, Contested control: the future of security in Iraq’s Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 34

<sup>105</sup> API, Contested control: the future of security in Iraq’s Nineveh Plain, 1 June 2020, [url](#), p. 35; Fay Abuelgasim, Correction: Iraq-Christian town story, Associated Press (AP), 13 February 2019, [url](#)

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