

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Iraq remained challenging despite some government attention to matters affecting religious minorities. Late in the year, the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) took some symbolic but insufficient public steps to curb the power of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a state-affiliated network of militias, some of which have links to Iran and abysmal [records](#) of religious freedom violations. In October, a federal order reportedly separated a Christian-majority defensive militia, the Nineveh Plains Protections Unit (NPU), from the 50th “Babylon Brigade” of the PMF, ostensibly restoring the former to the command of local Christian communities. However, in practice, the Babylon Brigade and other abusive militias continued to dominate the territories and usurp political representation of religious minorities in both federal Iraq and the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Babylon Brigade leader Rayan al-Kildani, an Iran-supported and U.S.-[designated](#) abuser of religious minorities, continued to co-opt the administrative and political power of Iraqis who shared his Christian background. In the November federal parliamentary elections, Kildani’s party once again leveraged votes from the Shi’a Muslim-majority electorate to win two of five seats reserved for Christians, contributing to the latter community’s political marginalization. Yazidis, Christians, and other religious minorities—survivors of the 2014 [genocide](#) under the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—reported that some PMF factions continued to use forced conscription, checkpoint harassment, physical abuse, and detention against their communities.

The IFG advanced additional systematic and ongoing threats to religious freedom. Officials reportedly continued to enforce

Article 372 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes insulting religion or divine entities. Early in the year, Parliament ratified controversial amendments to Personal Status Law No. 188 that require Muslim married couples to choose between separate frameworks of Islamic family law according to sect or school of jurisprudence, entrenching sectarianism between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims. The amended law infringes on the capacity of married Muslim women and religiously “mixed” families to make individual choices about inheritance, child custody, and divorce, and it codifies and religiously justifies the marriage of girls as young as 15. In March, the Media and Communications Commission banned broadcast of the Saudi Arabia-backed *Mu’awiya* television series, citing the historical drama’s potential incitement of sectarianism.

The continued failure of the IFG and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to settle their territorial disputes and to adequately [implement](#) the 2020 Sinjar Agreement left religious minorities in these areas vulnerable to an administrative and security vacuum. In parallel to the IFG, the KRG reportedly failed to rein in the religious freedom violations of armed forces under its jurisdiction, including KRG security officers (Asayish) and Kurdish militias that harassed religious minorities in both the KRI and the disputed territories. In April, an assailant in Duhok yelled Islamic slogans while waging an axe attack that wounded three Christians taking part in an Assyrian New Year parade. Some reports indicated that Asayish forces initially dismissed community members’ pleas for immediate intervention and, later, failed to adequately pursue an investigation.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Iraq on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose additional targeted sanctions on, freeze the assets of, and bar the entry to the United States of PMF and other militia members or leaders responsible for severe violations of religious freedom;
- Capitalize on the U.S.-Iraq strategic relationship to (a) continue raising concerns over PMF and other militias’ military, administrative, and political power across

Iraq, citing their abuses of religious freedom, including usurpation of religious minorities’ political representation; and (b) urge Iraq and the KRG to settle jurisdictional disputes and secure all territories for the return and reintegration of displaced religious communities; and

- Encourage Iraq to allocate adequate amounts of its federal budget for essential services and recovery projects for genocide survivors, including displacement camp residents, and authorize supplemental U.S. assistance as needed.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Commission reports or convene hearings on legislative and other systematic threats to FoRB in Iraq, including recent changes to personal status laws; and
- Conduct delegation visits in both federal Iraq and the KRI, highlighting increasing threats in each to the security, political representation, and continued presence in Iraq of religious and ethnic minority communities.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Iraq](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief** [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2

Background

Iraq's [population](#) is approximately 47 million. In November, officials announced the final results of the prior year's first nationwide census in decades; however, that census did not differentiate between religious sects, such as Shi'a and Sunni Islam, or collect information on ethnic and religious identity that would acknowledge the country's religious diversity. Past estimates suggested that the population is 95 to 98 percent Muslim, of which Shi'a Muslims may constitute 61 to 64 percent and Sunnis 29 to 34 percent. Christians, including members of Chaldean Catholic, Assyrian Church of the East, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, and Protestant communities, may constitute less than one percent, and "others"—encompassing Yazidis, Kaka'is, Sabaeen Mandeans, and more—may account for between one and four percent.

Iraq's constitution establishes Islam as the official religion and affirms, in Article 2, "the full religious rights to freedom of belief and religious practice." However, other laws and policies criminalize blasphemy, ban Baha'is, and restrict the sale or import of alcohol—to the detriment of religious minorities who depend on that industry.

Ongoing Challenges and Positive Steps for Religious Minority Survivors of ISIS

Eleven years since ISIS launched a [genocide](#) against religious minorities, the IFG and KRG took steps benefiting some of these communities, with mixed results. The IFG approved several reconstruction projects in Sinjar—including two much-needed hospitals—and [distributed](#) 1,338 ownership letters and approximately 100 title deeds to its Yazidi residents. Yet, some genocide survivors willing to return to the militia-dominated region remained unable to do so due to the government's reported delays in issuing return credentials. The IFG [accelerated](#) its repatriation of ISIS fighters and their families from detention camps in Syria, although some advocates doubted the effectiveness of these programs to rehabilitate returnees from their violent ideologies. While the KRG's Office of Rescuing Yazidis continued to help locate and reintegrate Yazidis from among the over 2,594 still missing since ISIS abducted them in 2014, advocates called on the KRG to improve its search and rescue collaborations with the Syrian Democratic Forces, IFG, and other state and nonstate actors. The KRG continued to tout its territory as a safe harbor of coexistence for displaced religious minorities, or "components"; however, authorities reportedly failed to stem and adequately investigate attacks on indigenous Christians, such as vandals' defacement of a church in Duhok Province and desecration of graves at a fourth-century Assyrian monastery in Erbil Province, both in December.

The federal parliamentary elections in November highlighted several disadvantages facing religious minorities in Iraq's electoral process. Advocates expressed dismay that the Muslim-majority general electorate remained eligible to cast votes for any of the nine quota seats earmarked for religious and ethnic minority candidates. In attempting to overcome such institutional obstacles, Yazidi and

Christian campaigners each formed unprecedented political coalitions to support their own candidates. The Yazidi political coalition successfully propelled prominent Yazidi activist Murad Ismael to his historic win of a non-quota seat despite officials' attempts to halt his longstanding activism on behalf of genocide survivors. However, Christian communities reportedly suffered from the federal Independent High Electoral Commission's likely pretextual exclusion of several candidates as well as from the loss of all five Christian quota seats to candidates affiliated with either Shi'a-supported PMF brigades or Sunni-majority Kurdish parties.

Key U.S. Policy

The administration of President Donald J. Trump [maintained](#) the United States' [Strategic Framework Agreement](#) with Iraq, emphasizing security and other spheres with potential ramifications for religious freedom. In July, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio [warned](#) Prime Minister Mohammed Shi'a al-Sudani of the PMF Authority Law's potential to "institutionalize Iranian influence and armed terrorist groups undermining Iraq's sovereignty." Some reports suggested this and other U.S. [resistance](#) to PMF dominance—in alignment with longstanding USCIRF [recommendations](#)—contributed to Rayan al-Kildani's reported departure from the Nineveh Plains in September as well as the IFG's removal in October of NPU fighters from under his command. Also in October, President Trump [named](#) Mark Savaya, an Iraqi-American of Chaldean Christian background, as special envoy to Iraq, prompting some Iraqi religious minorities to express hope for renewed U.S. attention to religious freedom concerns. In November, senior U.S. officials visited Baghdad for [technical consultations](#), potentially providing opportunities for the United States to offer [capacity-building](#) security sector assistance that would support religious freedom. In February, Vice President JD Vance delivered a [keynote](#) address at the civil society-sponsored IRF Summit in Washington, DC, in which he invoked the first Trump administration's decisive action advancing religious freedom for Iraqi Yazidis, Christians, and other survivors of the ISIS genocide. In April, several U.S. officials reportedly took part in the KRG-sponsored Kurdistan Prayer Breakfast, which brought together political figures, visiting U.S. leaders, and civil society and clergy from various religious communities. Rep. French Hill (R-AR) introduced [H.Res. 738](#) in September, with several bipartisan co-sponsors, which highlighted FoRB restrictions in USCIRF-recommended SWL countries including PMF abuses and blasphemy laws that threaten minority and majority religious communities in Iraq.

In 2025, the administration announced a [pause](#) or [cancellation](#) on foreign assistance across U.S. government agencies that impacted Iraq's religious minorities. While the U.S. Department of State retained some streams of assistance for certain programs benefiting Yazidis and other genocide survivors, the reduction in foreign assistance created a notable decline in critical services such as healthcare and basic infrastructure which allowed them to persevere as a distinct community in the country.