



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Minorities and Governance in Iraq



Dr. Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, where he specializes in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria. Dr. Knights has traveled widely in Iraq and the Gulf states and regularly briefs U.S. government policymakers, congressional committees, and U.S. military officers on regional security affairs. He has worked extensively with local military and security agencies on the ground in Iraq, the Gulf states, and Yemen. Dr. Knights holds a doctorate from the Department of War Studies, King's College London.



Salah Ali is the General Coordinator of the Iraq Religious Freedom and Anti-discrimination Roundtable and a Fellow with the Middle East Action Team at the Religious Freedom Institute. Mr. Ali is also an Advisor to the Minister of Endowment and Religious Affairs in Iraq's Kurdistan Region, focusing on critical areas such as peacebuilding, religious freedom, and fostering peaceful coexistence. Additionally, he is the co-founder of the recently established Middle East and North Africa Platform for Religious Freedom and Coexistence (MENAP). Mr. Ali is pursuing a PhD in Politics and International Relations at Leeds Beckett University, and a master's degree in Peace and Development Studies from the same institution. He holds a certificate in politics from the University of Oxford and a Bachelor of Arts in International Studies from The Open University in the UK.



Dr. Alda Benjamen is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Dayton where she teaches courses on the modern history of the Middle East. Formerly, she served as Avimalek Betyousef Faculty Fellow in the Department of History and the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of California, Berkeley; Fellow at the John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress; and a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Pennsylvania Museum and the Smithsonian. Dr. Benjamen has conducted extensive archival research related to and published scholarly analyses of Iraq’s indigenous Assyrian community. These include *Assyrians in Modern Iraq: Negotiating Political and Cultural Space* (Cambridge University Press, February 2022); a special issue of “Narratives of Co-existence and Pluralism in Northern Iraq” for the *Journal of Contemporary Iraq and the Arab World* (June 2020); and a roundtable, “Pluralism and Mineralization in the Middle East” for the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (November 2018).



Abid Shamdeen serves as the co-founder and strategic advisor at Nadia’s Initiative, a nonprofit organization committed to both rebuilding communities in crisis and advocating for survivors of sexual violence on a global scale. Hailing from Sinjar, Iraq, Shamdeen is an accomplished global development specialist whose entire career has been dedicated to enhancing the lives of marginalized communities and preventing acts of violence against them. In his current capacity with Nadia’s Initiative, Shamdeen passionately champions the cause of Yazidi Genocide survivors, while also overseeing vital reconstruction and redevelopment endeavors that have delivered essential aid and support to the Sinjar region. Furthermore, he played a pivotal role as a member of the Sinjar Crisis Management Team, effectively providing invaluable insights and feedback to U.S. officials concerning the well-being of Yazidis in Iraq. Before his current commitments, Abid Shamdeen lent his expertise to the United States Army in Iraq as a cultural advisor and translator. His academic background includes a master’s degree in political science from the School of International Service at American University, as well as a bachelor’s degree obtained from Nebraska University. Notably, he also contributed to the Nebraska State Legislature in an Administrative Assistant capacity during his time at Nebraska University.