



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET

January 2023

# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN IRAQ

Nury Turkel  
*Chair*

Abraham Cooper  
*Vice Chair*

### Commissioners

David Curry

Frederick A. Davie

Sharon Kleinbaum

Mohamed Magid

Stephen Schneck

Eric Ueland

Frank Wolf

Erin D. Singhsinsuk  
*Executive Director*

### USCIRF's Mission

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

## Religious Freedom amid Iraq's Political Crisis

*By Susan Bishai, Policy Analyst*

### Introduction

Iraq has suffered an ongoing political crisis marked by alternating periods of volatility and gridlock since mass protests in 2019, when the government used lethal force to suppress Iraqis demanding regime change. In addition to fomenting intra-Shi'a and anti-Sunni sectarian political sentiment, this instability has stalled the government's progress on initiatives that would help address the pressing concerns of religious minorities such as Yazidis and Christians.

This factsheet examines religious freedom in Iraq in relation to the federal government's political crises in 2021 and 2022, analyzing both obstacles arising from Baghdad's political suspension and religious minority groups' hopes for the administration newly instituted in October 2022.

### Political Sectarianism

Religious and political sectarianism in today's Iraq has evolved following several decades of Shi'a Muslims' disenfranchisement under the regime of late dictator Saddam Hussein, as well as years of violent Sunni-Shi'a conflict and Shi'a ascendancy in the aftermath of his rule. The country, which has an estimated 61–64% Shi'a and 29–34% Sunni Muslims, is unique as a Shi'a-majority Arab nation with ties to both the Sunni-majority Arabic-speaking world and Iran, a non-Arab Shi'a country. Iraq is also home to numerous ethnic and religious minorities such as Kurds, Yazidis, Sabean Mandaeans, Kaka'is, Shabaks, and Turkmen, as well as Chaldean, Syriac, Armenian, and other Christian groups. In the years since 2003, political power has been distributed along religious lines between dominant Shi'a political parties, a Kurdish President, an Arab Shi'a Prime Minister, and an Arab Sunni President of parliament.

Far from stabilizing Iraq's political environment, the October 2021 elections engendered further division, as influential Shi'a Muslim cleric Muqtada al-Sadr won a large parliamentary contingent but proved unable to form a government with rival Shi'a factions backed by Iran, or with Sunni Muslims from both Arab and Kurdish backgrounds. A full year of political deadlock followed, punctuated by Sadrist protests in Baghdad in the summer of 2022 after al-Sadr's dramatic resignation from parliament and the nomination of Mohammed Shia al-Sudani as candidate for Prime Minister by his Iran-backed Shi'a rivals. In October, a new government emerged from the standoff following the parliament's election of Kurdish politician Abdul Latif



Rashid as President and his appointment of al-Sudani as Prime Minister-designate.

Although the [intra-Shi'a conflict](#) is ostensibly political in nature, some evidence suggests that a religious power play may also contribute to the tensions. For example, al-Sadr's [comparative lack](#) of advanced religious credentials has raised doubt among some Iraqi Shi'a Muslims about his legitimacy as spiritual leader to the Sadrist movement. Some observers have suggested that al-Sadr announced his political retirement in August 2022 in large part due to a [withdrawal](#) of support from Grand Ayatollah Kadhim al-Haeri, the one-time clerical successor to al-Sadr's late father and who, despite his exile to Iran, still commands the loyalty of many Sadrists. Regardless of whether al-Sadr's retirement proves permanent, his [populist appeal](#) remains strong, and intra-Shi'a tensions continue to pose a serious threat to both political and religious stability throughout Iraq.

These tensions extend to Kurdish-majority areas under the jurisdiction of the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Those areas, which contain many of Iraq's most vulnerable ethnic and religious minorities, had supported al-Sadr as a "[least-worst \[sic\] option](#)" potentially capable of mitigating the perceived threat to the KRG of the Iran-affiliated Popular Mobilization Force/Unit (PMF/PMU) and Shiite Coordination Framework. However, both Sunni Kurds and Sunni Arabs have, at least [superficially](#), cooperated with the new government, possibly due to pressure from Iran and its allies in Iraq.

The same pressures likely informed the parliament's [passage](#) in May 2022 of a Sadr-proposed law criminalizing any attempts by Iraqis to "normalize" relations with Israel as well as any ostensibly pro-Israel actions of foreigners within Iraq, with penalties ranging from temporary imprisonment to the death sentence. While the law does not target Judaism and makes provision for Iraqis' "religious visits" to Israel as preapproved by the Ministry of the Interior, it "[promot\[es\] an environment of antisemitism](#)" in a country where Jews were the [targets](#) of mob violence leading to mass emigration of the community in the 1940s and 1950s. Additionally, religious sectarianism appears to have shaped every stage of the law from inception to passage. Al-Sadr's proposal capitalized on anti-Sunni Muslim sentiment in Iraqi politics to shield his own party from [criticism](#) that its anti-Iran stances reflected collusion with Sunni Arabs and Kurds suspected to have secret ties with Israel. Indeed, he may have proposed the law partly in response to a controversial September 2021 [conference](#) in the KRG capital of Erbil, in which Sunni tribal leaders voiced their support for normalizing ties with Israel, possibly via Iraqi regions' potential participation in the [Abraham Accords](#). Accordingly, al-Sadr's anti-normalization law passed with wide support from various rival political factions—including Sunni Arab and Kurdish parties keen to [prove their loyalty](#) as al-Sadr allies—thereby casting into relief the anti-Sunnism embedded in Baghdad's political establishment.

## Political Crisis: Effects on Religious Minorities

In addition to intensifying religious division inherent in Iraq's political environment, the government paralysis and escalation of the crisis in the second half of 2022 has both frozen potential programs and funds to benefit religious minorities and diverted attention from critical issues affecting these groups.

### Yazidi Genocide Response Initiatives Stalled by Crisis

Recent political dynamics have had a marked impact on Iraq's Yazidis, an indigenous ethnic and religious group long targeted by militant Islamist groups, including the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In March 2021, almost seven years after ISIS launched its [genocide](#) against the Yazidis, the Iraqi parliament [passed](#) the [Yazidi Survivors Law \(YSL\)](#). The YSL received global attention as "[the first law](#) that provides reparations and support for victims of conflict-related sexual violence in Iraq" and for explicitly naming ISIS's crimes as genocide and crimes against humanity. The law's eligible [beneficiaries](#) include, among others, female survivors of Yazidi and certain other ethnic and religious minority backgrounds—Turkmen, Christians, and Shabak—whom ISIS targeted for abduction, rape, and systematic sexual slavery as well as forced marriage, pregnancy, abortion, and religious conversion. The YSL also makes provision for male Yazidi, Turkmen, Christian, and Shabak survivors of abduction and mass killings.

The YSL established the [General Directorate of Survivors Affairs \(GDSA\)](#) under the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs to facilitate YSL applications and implementation. However, it was not until a year and a half later, in October 2022—partly another casualty of the political stasis and related protests in Baghdad—that the GDSA [signed](#) a Cooperation Agreement with the United Nations' International Organization for Migration (IOM) to further assist in [implementing](#) the YSL. At the time of that agreement, IOM noted that "many survivors remain in protracted displacement, and those who have returned home are not significantly better off." "Protracted displacement" refers to the fact that ISIS carried out abductions and attendant rapes and sexual enslavement of an estimated more than 6,000 Yazidi women and girls. The United Nations Refugee Agency [estimates](#) that in 2022, almost 3,000 Yazidis— including many of those abducted women—are still missing, and over 200,000 remain displaced, with many living in "extreme poverty" in internal displacement camps and informal settlements within the KRG region.

Although the Council of Ministers agreed to [allocate](#) part of the 2022 financial budget for GDSA to implement the YSL, Baghdad's extended political limbo, through much of that year, meant applicants [could not access](#) the funds for which they were eligible. Human rights organizations have called on the GDSA to identify qualified service providers to help fill the government's continued "[service gaps](#)" in delivering reparation funds, salaries, and services to beneficiaries. Some civil society groups have also expressed concern that the government's inability to [implement](#) the YSL adequately has not only potentially blocked financial support to approved applicants but has also impeded some eligible survivors' ability to submit applications.

The Iraqi federal government's ongoing crisis has hindered the implementation of other initiatives intended to address the urgent needs of the wider Yazidi community, which includes people still displaced from the Sinjar district that formed the epicenter of ISIS's genocidal violence. Chief among these projects is the Sinjar Agreement, which the United Nations in 2020 [helped broker](#) between the central Iraqi government and the KRG—who have [conflicting claims](#) to the territory—in part to help stabilize and secure Sinjar for displaced Yazidis' return. USCIRF has [urged](#) the U.S. Government to encourage the Iraqi government and the KRG to comprehensively implement that agreement in consultation with Yazidi community members.

However, during Baghdad's year of political crisis, the terms of the agreement—including appointment of an independent mayor, the expulsion from Sinjar of all armed groups, and the creation of a local security force encompassing members of Yazidi militia the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS)—remained [substantially unfulfilled](#). As with implementation of the YSL, politicians stagnating in Baghdad demonstrated a [lack](#) of both "political will to invest in Sinjar" and "funding to enhance local law enforcement and capacity-building." Adding insult to injury, the Iraqi government's recent role in Sinjar has at times crossed from inactivity to harm. For example, in May 2022, an Iraqi [military operation](#) targeted YBS fighters and [displaced](#) an estimated 3,000 Yazidi civilians—many of whom were already-traumatized returnees suffering additional harm from [Turkish airstrikes](#) in the region—in their "[largest exodus](#)" since the 2014 genocide.

## Other Religious Minorities' Concerns

Other religious minorities across Iraq have raised requests to the Iraq federal government to enact measures advancing the interests of their communities, many of which have also been traumatized by years of attacks from ISIS and its remnants as well as Turkey, Iran, and those countries' allies in Iraq. As the dust settled in October 2022 following the resolution of Baghdad's political crisis, government agencies issued [eviction](#) notices to Christians in a displacement settlement in the city's Zayouna district, leaving the families facing homelessness in the impending winter. Chaldean Catholic patriarch Cardinal Sako [petitioned](#) the government to postpone the evictions and help rehouse the families, which include Chaldean and Syriac Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Assyrians, and others, many of whom ISIS had displaced from their Nineveh homelands in 2014. The evictees' own appeals attempted to reach beyond inattentive Baghdad officials, with community members—including children—[directing their pleas](#) to al-Sadr as a still-potent political force and populist leader, who before his resignation had reportedly [restored](#) several expropriated properties to their Christian owners.

Civil society leaders representing other indigenous ethnic and religious minorities have conveyed their hope that the newly formed government can overcome the apathy of previous administrations toward tackling their communities' unique challenges. [Sabaeen Mandeian](#) and [Shabak](#) women's organizations have communicated their intentions to lobby both international bodies for minority protections and the new government for constitutional and other "legal safeguards" for religious and ethnic minorities. Likewise, a [Kaka'i](#) scholar has pointed to constitutional language that Kaka'i communities hope the Rashid-Sudani administration can clarify and better implement. For example, Article 125 of the federal [Constitution](#) sets forth "administrative, political, cultural, and educational rights" for minorities but lacks mechanisms of enforcement. Other articles relate to disputed regions—which contain significant populations of religious minorities, some internally displaced—but Kaka'i community members say previous administrations have neglected to apply those constitutional provisions in ways that would protect minority groups. Some community members hope the new government will help hold a referendum to determine once and for all whether disputed regions will be subject to Kurdish or to Iraq central governance, leading to increased stability and security for vulnerable populations already terrorized by ISIS.

## Conclusion

Iraq's political crises have significantly complicated circumstances for religious minority groups and hampered the federal government's progress in improving religious freedom conditions throughout the country for all communities, including Yazidis, Christians, and other religious minorities living throughout the country. During and in part due to the prolonged political deadlock, the government demonstrated a lack of "[real will](#)" to address the significant and persistent challenges facing religious minorities, such as the glacial pace of practical support for survivors of the Yazidi genocide.

Some religious minority activists and scholars have expressed cautious optimism over the formation of a new government late in 2022 and have directed their future advocacy toward Prime Minister al-Sudani. As a strategic partner, the United States, too, has a role to play in encouraging Iraq to accelerate and intensify its efforts to improve religious freedom for all Iraqis—beginning with [full implementation](#) of the Sinjar Agreement, in consultation with Yazidis.



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

### Professional Staff

---

**Danielle Ashbahian**  
*Chief of Public Affairs*

**Keely Bakken**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Susan Bishai**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Mollie Blum**  
*Researcher*

**Elizabeth K. Cassidy**  
*Director of Research and Policy*

**Mingzhi Chen**  
*Senior Policy Analyst*

**Patrick Greenwalt**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Roy Haskins**  
*Director of Operations Management*

**Thomas Kraemer**  
*Chief Administrative Officer*

**Veronica McCarthy**  
*Public Affairs Associate*

**Hilary Miller**  
*Researcher*

**Dylan Schexnaydre**  
*Researcher*

**Jamie Staley**  
*Supervisory Policy Advisor*

**Zack Udin**  
*Research Analyst*

**Madeline Velluro**  
*Senior Policy Analyst*

**Scott Weiner**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Kurt Werthmuller**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Luke Wilson**  
*Researcher*

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.