



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Minorities and Governance in Iraq

December 7, 2023

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Abraham Cooper, USCIRF Chair

Good morning, and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing today on *Religious Minorities and Governance in Iraq*. Thank you also to our distinguished witnesses for joining us.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

Today's hearing will take stock of recent conditions affecting freedom of religion or belief in Iraq, including in areas administered by the Kurdistan Regional Government, or KRG.

Religious freedom conditions in Iraq have stabilized since the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 and its genocidal campaign against religious minorities such as Yazidis and Christians. Thankfully, ISIS's presence has diminished. Nevertheless, freedom of religion or belief for Iraqis remains precarious in the face of recent political instability and religious division; the increasing power of government-affiliated militias and other armed groups; and the continued displacement and political disenfranchisement of vulnerable religious minorities.

Baghdad's political environment is gripped by the rivalry of Shi'a Muslim-led political parties—some with strong links to militant Iranian political and religious forces. Recent legislative campaigns present concerning potential restrictions on the ability of all Iraqis to freely express their religious beliefs or lack thereof.

While we welcome the recent overtures the administration of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani has made to the Yazidi community, we are concerned that the government's implementation of the Yazidi Survivors Law has stagnated. In addition, neither the Iraqi government nor the KRG have substantially fulfilled the Sinjar Agreement to secure that district for Yazidis' full-scale return. Hundreds

of thousands of Yazidis remain displaced from their homes in Sinjar, which suffers ongoing security threats by competing militias and Turkish strikes. Approximately 2,700 Yazidi women and girls kidnapped by ISIS during the genocide are still missing, some believed to remain within their enslavers' families in camps across the border in Syria.

For Christian communities, longstanding concerns over property appropriation and poor political representation under both the federal government and the KRG have escalated in the wake of a fatal wedding fire in September and the Iraqi government's restriction of the Chaldean Catholic Church's authority to administer Christian properties. Other religious and ethnic minorities such as Kaka'is, Sabaean Mandeans, and Shabaks have expressed similar dissatisfaction with their political representation and the lack of enforcement of the rights set forth in Iraq's constitution.

In short: life in Iraq is still not stable or secure for hundreds of thousands of Yazidis; Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syriac Christians; and others. That is the reason Iraq's religious minorities either remain in internal displacement or reluctantly decide to permanently emigrate from Iraq. Today, we look forward to hearing more about what the United States can do to encourage the Iraqi government and KRG to ensure genuine freedom of religion or belief for all Iraqis.