

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Minorities and Governance in Iraq

December 7, 2023

Chairman Cooper, Vice Chair Davie, and members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about some specific aspects of religious freedom conditions in Iraq. I am Dr Michael Knights and I am the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the co-founder of our Militia Spotlight program. My work focuses largely on the destructive role of Iran-backed militias in Iraq, a topic I have been working on now for twenty years straight, including six years working in Iraq.

In the last ten years, the [Popular Mobilization Forces](#) – a parallel army led by Iranian-backed militia politicians – has become a mechanism by which Iran and her partners have grown to dominate religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you about this growing menace to religious freedom in Iraq, which I notice the commission frequently referenced in its current [Country Update on Iraq](#).

Iraqi Christians under Militia Domination

The Washington Institute's Militia Spotlight program has been busier than ever this year in extending our coverage of abuses of the Iraqi Christian community by [Kataib Babiliyun \(50th PMF Brigade\)](#), a militia led by Rayan al-Kildani and his brother Osama that claims to represent Christians but which is actually [recruited from non-Christian areas](#)¹ and answers to the Iran-backed PMF leadership, which is studded with U.S.-designated serious human rights abusers (including [the sanctioned Rayan al-Kildani](#)) and U.S.-designated terrorists.

As your own Iraq coverage notes, Rayan al-Kildani has led an effort to undermine the Christian church leadership in Iraq, and to [physically dominate security and local governance in Christian-populated parts of the Nineveh Plains](#). This is very clearly an effort orchestrated in order to [gain custodianship of the properties of displaced Christians](#) by removing a presidential decree that held these assets under the protection of the church. Rayan al-Kildani has failed repeatedly to formally meet Pope Francis in Rome but has been shown disapproval for his actions by the Vatican, with Kildani even stooping so low as to [fake a personal meeting with the Pope](#) (actually an anonymous public event) in order to bolster his weak credentials to lead the Christian community in Iraq. Kildani's cabinet representative, Minister of Migration Evan Jabro, has similarly been serially rejected at the Vatican and by Nineveh Plains communities.

¹ Although Kildani controls four of the five quota seats allocated to Christians in the national parliament, his movement did not win these seats because of support from the Christian community. Close examination of electoral data from 2018 and 2021 suggest his candidates received thousands of votes from heavily Shia provinces that have only tiny Christian communities due to decades of displacement.

Exploitation of the Yazidis

Again, as noted in your Country Update on Iraq, the Iran-backed leadership of the PMF has also been very busy recruiting within the terribly-persecuted Yazidi community in northern Iraq. Desperate for protection and any source of income in their deprived Sinjar enclave, Yazidis have been exploited by a number of PMF brigades. These include a [Yazidi regiment within Kataib Imam Hussein \(53rd PMF Brigade\) and Yezidikan \(the newer 80th PMF Brigade\)](#). Young men from the Yazidi community have been targeted for recruitment by an Iran-backed faction called [Ahrar Sinjar](#) (which is a front for U.S.-designated terrorist organization, [Kataib Hezbollah](#)), which has used these recruits as their disposable proxies in [rocket attacks against Iraqi Kurds and the murder of fellow Yazidis in Kurdistan Region refugee camps](#). Yazidi areas have also been used in late 2023 by PMF elements such as [Hezbollah Harakat al-Nujaba](#) (which is also a U.S.-designated terrorist organization) to fire rockets at U.S. bases over the border in Syria, namely Shadadi (8 times) and Rmelan (6 times).

The PMF as a colonizing occupier of minority areas

In all of Iraq's minorities communities – Christian, Yazidi, Sunni Arab, Sunni and Shia Turkmen, Sunni and Shia Kurdish, and Kakai – the PMF has emerged as a mechanism by which an Iran-backed sectarian Shiite force can dominate local security and economic affairs. All across the so-called “liberated” areas of northern and western Iraq – liberated from the Islamic State but then immediately lost to militia rule – the PMF has taken control of land registries; occupied properties; leveraged control of the readmission of displaced peoples; and developed minority auxiliary forces to attempt to give their occupation a local face.

Though freedom of expression has come under serious and sustained attack since the Iran-backed militias took over Iraq's government in October 2022, word does still escape Iraq of the growing fear among minorities that allocated electoral seats and local power-sharing arrangements are giving way to the hegemonic control of Shiite militias. These militias are paid for by the Iraqi state – a state the U.S. itself subsidizes through aid provision – and at the same time they openly work with Iran's intelligence services and include U.S.-designated terrorists and serious human rights abusers in their ranks. In eastern [Syria](#) and in [Yemen](#), such Iran-backed militias have taken the next step, which is conversion of minorities to the Twelver school of Shiite Islam practiced in Iran, and it is perhaps a matter of time before this process becomes more widespread in northern Iraq also.

The U.S. government should be encouraged to take the following steps:

1. Warn the Iraqi government against enabling Rayan al-Kildani's effort to seize control of Christian community assets in Iraq. A U.S.-designated human rights abuser who is roundly rejected by the Vatican, the Iraqi Christian church, and Iraqi Christians is clearly not suitable custodian. Be prepared to further sanction the Iraqi government and Kildani's network if the effort persists.
2. Continue to seek a demilitarization of Sinjar under the October 2020 Sinjar Agreement, including the removal of PMF forces that exploit the area for terrorist recruitment purposes and to launch attacks on U.S. forces.
3. Pressure the Iraqi government to allow minority security forces to work directly to the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, not the PMF, in much the same way that some Shia PMF units do, in order to avoid connection to Iran-backed terrorists or human rights abusers.