



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

May 2024

### RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND GOVERNANCE IN IRAQ

Abraham Cooper  
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Frederick A. Davie  
*Vice Chair*

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David Curry

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Mohamed Magid

Stephen Schneck

Nury Turkel

Eric Ueland

Frank Wolf

Erin D. Singhsinsuk  
*Executive Director*

#### USCIRF's Mission

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

On December 7, 2023, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)) held a virtual hearing on [Religious Minorities and Governance in Iraq](#). The hearing, led by Chair Abraham Cooper, examined current religious freedom conditions in Iraq under both the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) and the semiautonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The hearing also identified ways the U.S. government can work with the IFG and the KRG to address religious freedom concerns, especially for the country's vulnerable religious minorities. Expert witnesses highlighted several issues on which USCIRF reported in its September 2023 [Iraq Country Update](#).

[Chair Cooper](#) provided an overview of precarious conditions for freedom of religion or belief in Iraq, particularly for religious minorities, as the IFG struggled with ongoing religious and political sectarianism and the increasing power of government-affiliated militias and other armed groups. He noted the security concerns of Yazidis and other religious minorities as both the IFG and KRG have failed to substantially implement their 2020 agreement to secure the Sinjar district for the return of many displaced survivors of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) genocide.

[Vice Chair Fred Davie](#) expressed USCIRF's concern over the increasing power of Iran-linked brigades of the state-sponsored Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and their leaders, such as Rayan al-Kildani, a U.S.-designated human rights abuser, to violently target religious minorities. Vice Chair Davie also called attention to the federal parliament's consideration of draft freedom of expression and cybercrimes laws that would restrict freedom of religion or belief for religious minorities, including Sunni Muslims, atheists, and Shi'a Muslims with dissenting beliefs.

[Commissioner Frank Wolf](#) described his own visits to religious minority communities in northern Iraq and addressed the increasingly difficult conditions for Iraq's many religious and ethnic minorities, such as Kaka'is, Shabaks, Sabeen Mandaeans, Yazidis, and members of the Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syriac Christian churches. His remarks identified individual and joint actions the IFG and KRG can take—for example, implementing the 2020 Sinjar Agreement—to limit the escalating security threats forcing Yazidi, Christian, and other genocide survivors to remain in internal displacement or consider permanent emigration.

[Victoria Taylor](#), Deputy Assistant Secretary for Iraq and Iran in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, identified the promotion of universal respect for freedom of religion or belief as a key U.S. foreign policy priority. Deputy Assistant Secretary Taylor acknowledged the challenging state of freedom of religion or belief in Iraq, especially for communities targeted by Iran-aligned, sectarian armed

groups and forces affiliated with the Iraqi government, including the PMF, federal police, and National Security Service. She remarked on the IFG's recent decision to revoke the administrative authority of the Chaldean Catholic patriarch and conveyed several other policy priorities on which the State Department and USCIRF are aligned, including urging the IFG and KRG to fully implement the Sinjar Agreement and the Yazidi Survivors Law.

Gretchen Birkle, Team Lead for Religious and Ethnic Minority Programs in the Bureau for the Middle East at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), shared USAID's commitment to religious freedom around the world as a strategic U.S. national interest and a key foreign policy objective. She offered examples of USAID's work supporting religious and ethnic minority communities in Iraq as part of the Middle East Bureau's goal of supporting sustainable self-reliance and multisector prosperity-building. She highlighted U.S. humanitarian and reconstruction assistance to Iraq in response to ISIS's genocide, which since 2014 has totaled more than \$459 million, and outlined future phases of support that will focus on longer-term development objectives such as strengthening civil society and mobilizing a range of actors to prevent future atrocities.

[\*Michael Knights\*](#), Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, gave evidence of the PMF's increasing power in the Iraqi government and its Iran-backed brigades' domination of indigenous religious minorities, including Christians and Yazidis. Knights described al-Kildani's intensification of his campaign to supplant the administrative authority of Cardinal Sako, the Chaldean Catholic patriarch; take over Christian property and other assets; and pressure young Yazidi men into the service of Iran-backed sectarian militias. Knights offered several policy recommendations for ways the U.S. government can help prompt the Iraq government's action on these issues. These include "pushing back strongly" on al-Kildani's efforts to usurp Christian properties and political representation, urging the demilitarization of Sinjar under the Sinjar Agreement, and pressuring the IFG to decisively remove local religious minority security forces from the control of the PMF.

[\*Salah Ali\*](#), General Coordinator of the Iraq Religious Freedom and Anti-Discrimination Roundtable, gave an overview of the roundtable, established in 2021 in Iraq to bring together religious and ethnic communities, religious leaders, and civil society organizations to advance

religious freedom in the country. Ali identified several factors impeding religious freedom in Iraq: discriminatory laws such as legacy prohibitions against Bahai's; the government's reluctance to create or fully implement crucial laws, such as the Yazidi Survivors Law; and an alarming rise in hate speech. As such, the roundtable advocates for the government to create a "legal framework supporting the development of inclusive religious institutions" as a pivotal first step.

[\*Alda Benjamen\*](#), Assistant Professor at the University of Dayton, described findings from her research that suggest Iraq's "minoritized" indigenous religious and ethnic communities face ongoing loss of property and lack of genuine political representation. Benjamen highlighted the struggles of Iraq's indigenous Christians—members of the Assyrian, Chaldean, Syriac, and other churches—who have lost land and houses not only to ISIS and other nonstate groups but also to both KRG- and IFG-affiliated actors, including Iran-backed militias. Further, Christians' political representation has been usurped by malign actors such as Rayan al-Kildani's Babylon Movement, the political arm of his PMF brigade, which continues to win political quota seats reserved for the Christian minority due to votes from the Shi'a Muslim majority. Benjamen noted the need for the Iraqi government to fully implement existing constitutional protections for religious and ethnic minorities as well as pass amendments to electoral laws and create other legislation to ensure the property rights and fair representation of Iraq's indigenous religious and ethnic communities.

[\*Abid Shamdeen\*](#), Cofounder and Strategic Advisor at Nadia's Initiative, testified on behalf of Iraq's indigenous Yazidi community, which continues to suffer the aftereffects of the genocide ISIS launched in 2014. Shamdeen documented numerous current threats to Iraqi Yazidis, such as anti-Yazidi hate speech campaigns; the continued disappearance of over 2,700 women and girls kidnapped and enslaved by ISIS; and mass internal displacement, including over 200,000 people still living in unsustainable camps. He pointed out the KRG's and IFG's repeated failures to implement the 2020 Sinjar Agreement and encouraged the United States to offer more resources to help rebuild Yazidis' home district of Sinjar. Shamdeen offered other recommendations to the U.S. government, including helping establish an international mechanism to hold ISIS accountable for its genocide and monumental crimes of sexual violence.



After offering their testimonies, the four expert witnesses answered Commissioners' questions. Commissioners asked witnesses about how ongoing political strife in Iraq is affecting religious minorities and what policy options are available to the United States government to address these challenges. Witnesses spoke about the state of religious freedom in the KRG and steps the Iraqi government and KRG could take collaboratively to advance the wellbeing of religious minorities.

Vice Chair Davie concluded the hearing by thanking the witnesses for their testimony on behalf of the communities who rely on their work.

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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.