The population of Iraq is approximately 37,548,000 (UN, 2016). The three largest demographic groups are Shi’a Arabs, Sunni Arabs and Kurds, most of whom adhere to Sunni Islam. Precise demographic breakdowns are impossible to come by, in the absence of recent census data and due to political sensitivities surrounding the issue. According to reliable estimates, 99 per cent of Iraqis are Muslim, of which 60-65 per cent are Shi’a and 32-37 per cent are Sunni. The remaining population is composed of various religious minorities. Prior to the ISIS advance, there were an estimated 350,000 Christians in Iraq, 500,000 Yezidis, 200,000 Kaka’i, less than 5,000 Sabean-Mandaeans and a small number of Bahá’í.

In terms of ethnicity, Arabs make up between 75 – 80 per cent of the population and Kurds a further 15-20 per cent. Ethnic minorities include Turkmen, Shabak, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Armenians, black Iraqis and Roma. Some Yezidis consider themselves a distinct ethnic group, while others identify as being Kurds.

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The armed conflict in Iraq has continued unabated as government forces and associated armed groups, supported by the international coalition, fight to take back control of territory captured by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) since 2014. The fighting has created additional waves of displacement as large numbers of people have been forced to flee their homes as a result of military operations to retake the cities of Fallujah and Mosul. As of early 2017, the total number of IDPs in the country was estimated at more than 3.1 million while 11 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance. The fighting has been accompanied by wide-ranging human rights violations and breaches of international humanitarian law, in which all sides to the conflict were complicit. Iraq’s minorities, which include Armenian and Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, Bahá’í, Kaka’i, Sabean-Mandaeans, Shabak, Turkmen, Yezidis and others, have been particularly targeted since the onset of the conflict in 2014.
While ISIS has been responsible for many of the worst atrocities in the country, other actors in the conflict have also carried out serious human rights abuses. During the Iraqi government’s military operations to retake the city of Fallujah in May and June 2016, which had been under ISIS control since January 2014, the retaking of the city – supported by police forces and militia units organized under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) – was rife with human rights abuses, drawing condemnation domestically and internationally. While ISIS attacked civilians leaving the city, targeting them by sniper fire and burning boats to prevent civilians from crossing the Euphrates River, at PMF-run checkpoints Sunni Arab families fleeing the city were intercepted, and men were separated from their families, detained in inhumane conditions, insulted, beaten, tortured and even executed. Moreover, both sides of the conflict were criticized for obstructing the passage of humanitarian supplies into the city, and for conducting hostilities in densely populated areas without taking adequate precautions to prevent civilian casualties and damage to civilian objects.

In October 2016, the government announced the beginning of the assault on Mosul, the last major city under ISIS control with a pre-war population of around 2.5 million people. The start of the Mosul operation raised fears that many of the shortcomings of the Fallujah operation might be repeated. In the first month of the assault, reports emerged of detentions, beating, torture and revenge killings of men and boys captured outside of Mosul by government forces and Sunni tribal militias. According to the UN, ISIS also executed hundreds of Iraqis in Mosul and rounded up civilians for use as human shields. As of August 2017, over 830,000 people had been displaced as a result of the Mosul operations, with a sharp increase of nearly 400,000 in just a few days at the beginning of July.

The displacement crisis, exacerbated by recent phases of fighting, has created multiple protection challenges for Iraq’s most vulnerable, including women and minorities. Access to basic needs such as shelter, food, water, and medical care remains uneven for IDPs and varies greatly by location. In addition to these humanitarian challenges common to all IDPs, minorities are also contending with the psychological impact of witnessing the destruction of their places of worship and other built cultural heritage, and in some cases their complete ejection from their historical homelands. Since most of those killed in the fighting have been men, thousands of women and girls have been made widows and orphans and thrust into the role of breadwinner. Women and girls without a male protector are more vulnerable to harassment, and are often pressured into marriages as a means of protection and financial support. Many of these marriages are concluded by a religious figure without being officially registered, which leaves women with no legal rights in cases of divorce or abandonment and means children born of the marriage will be undocumented.

While more and more territory has been recovered from ISIS, there has been comparatively little progress on critical issues such as reconstruction, reconciliation and resettlement of IDPs. The conflict since 2014 has produced deep divisions in Iraqi society, and was itself fuelled by years of marginalization, discrimination and sectarian governance. Iraq’s minorities in particular are intensely distrustful of both the Federal Government of Iraq and the Kurdish
Regional Government. Not only did both governments provide meager opportunities for minorities to participate meaningfully in governance in the years leading up to 2014, but they failed to protect them from the advance of ISIS in the summer of 2014.

Among the minorities who have suffered the worst treatment at the hands of ISIS are Iraq’s Yezidis, who have been subjected to massacres, abductions, forced conversion, forced conscription, and in the case of women and girls, rape and sexual slavery. In a report released in June 2016, the UN-appointed Commission of Inquiry on Syria concluded that ISIS tactics against the Yezidi minority in Iraq and Syria amounted to genocide. At the end of 2016, an estimated 3,700 Yezidis were still in ISIS captivity, most of whom are believed to have been taken to Syria. Meanwhile, many of those who returned from ISIS captivity remain deeply traumatized by their ordeals. However, the level of psychosocial care available for returnees has been inadequate by Western standards. Cultural norms and stigma prevented survivors of sexual and gender-based violence from accessing support. By mid-2016, it was estimated that around 120,000 Yezidis had sought asylum in Europe since 2014.

Other minorities continue to be adversely affected by the conflict. In March 2016, in an apparent chemical attack launched by ISIS on the Turkmen district of Taza south of Kirkuk, victims were admitted to hospital with symptoms that included breathing difficulties, skin irritation and vomiting, and at least two children died as a result. Turkmen leaders also reported in September 2016 that more than 600 Shia Turkmen women and children remained in ISIS captivity, with little information known about their whereabouts. ISIS carried out executions of Yezidi and Shabak men and women during the year and held auctions to sell property seized from Christians in Mosul. In Baghdad, Christians reported that Shi’a militia members from the Popular Mobilization Forces sent threats to Christians to deter them from celebrating Christmas and the New Year, and hung posters in their neighborhoods calling on Christian women to cover their hair. Such incidents adversely affect minority women in a context where their public participation is already conscribed due to discrimination and the poor security situation.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, which became a host region for many minority IDPs fleeing violence after 2014, many have accused the authorities of discrimination, suppression of civil liberties, and demographic engineering in service of Kurdish political aims. Turkmen IDPs report being subjected to humiliating and discriminatory treatment at Kurdish checkpoints when trying to enter the region. The Kurdish authorities have also continued to maintain a tight control over the flow of goods into the Yezidi area of Sinjar, curbing the flow of food, water and other essential supplies in and out of the region. There were also reports of Kurdish Peshmerga units destroying property and harassing and expelling civilians in areas recovered from ISIS.

As a result, inter-community relations in Iraq remain fraught with tension. Minorities from the Ninewa plains, including Yezidis, Christians, Turkmen and Shabak, continue to be distrustful of their Arab and Kurdish neighbors whom they accuse of being complicit in violations against them. Although many minority areas, including Sinjar, have been liberated from ISIS control, very few IDPs have returned. Minorities’ feelings of insecurity are compounded by the lack of infrastructure and basic services in their areas of origin. Even prior to the ISIS advance, many
minority villages in the Ninewa plains were neglected in terms of provision of public services, including education. This in turn contributed to the marginalization of minorities from the public life of the country, especially minority women, for whom rural patriarchal norms worked in tandem with poor service provision to restrict their access to education.

Many minority leaders insist that their communities’ future existence in Iraq depends on the emergence of a political arrangement that would provide minorities guarantees of security and self-governance. In this light, calls for the establishment of a safe zone in northern Iraq have grown more pronounced. This plan, which is supported by several prominent Assyrian Christian, Turkmen and Yezidi leaders, envisions the creation of three new provinces (Ninewa Plains, Sinjar and Telafar) to act as safe havens for Iraq’s minorities, with budgetary allocations from the central government. Other civil society activists campaigned for the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation, which would end legacies of exclusion and marginalization against minorities, but also women, who often suffer from double discrimination on account of their gender and their ethnic or religious identity.

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**Environment**

Iraq is located in the Middle East and is bordered by Iran to the east, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to the south, Jordan and Syria to the west, and Turkey to the north. The country has a small coastline along the Persian Gulf, extending approximately 58 kilometers. Iraq’s main geographical features include large expanses of desert in the west and southwest, fertile alluvial plains along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and mountainous regions in the north. With the second largest oil reserves in the world, Iraq’s economy is dominated by the petroleum sector. The capital, Baghdad, is located in the center of the country.

**History**

The area of land extending between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers was historically known as Mesopotamia, often referred to as the cradle of civilization for the important developments it spurred in agriculture, writing, mathematics, architecture, law and other fields. The region fell under the control of successive empires and civilizations over the course of history, including the Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek, Persian, Arab and Ottoman empires. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of World War I, the League of Nations carved out Iraq’s modern day borders and designated the country a mandate under British control. The British installed Faisal I of the Hashemite dynasty in power, and Iraq became a monarchy, then gaining independence from Britain in 1932. The monarchy lasted until 14 July 1958, when it was overthrown by a group of nationalist and anti-imperialist army officers who declared Iraq a republic.

Between 1968 and 2003, Iraq was governed by the secular Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party, initially under the presidency of Ahmed Hassan Al-Bakr, followed by Saddam Hussein from 1979 onwards. Iraq was characterized by one-party rule under this time period, with high-ranking
positions in the public sector reserved for Ba’ath Party members. The Revolutionary Command Council constituted the top decision-making body in the country. In terms of economic policy, the Ba’ath Party nationalized the oil industry, using the profits to build a state welfare system, and undertook a program of agrarian reform under which large plots of land were divided and redistributed to the peasants. However, the Ba’ath Party stopped short of advocating full socialism, allowing a small private sector and a third mixed sector to operate alongside the public sector.

Saddam Hussein faced strong opposition and even armed rebellion against his rule at many points, especially from the Kurds in the north and Shi’a in the south. Hussein maintained his grip on power through a massive and intricate internal security apparatus, through which he was able to silence his critics, often through brutal means. Hussein also undertook large-scale ‘Arabization’ campaigns in Northern Iraq that saw ethnic minorities, including Kurds, Yezidis, Assyrians, Shabaks and others, forcibly displaced and their villages destroyed or transformed into Arab villages. Between 1986 and 1989, in the midst of the Iran-Iraq War, Hussein carried out the genocidal Anfal campaign against Iraq’s Kurds, culminating in a chemical attack on the civilian population of Halabja in 1988.

Long-standing border disputes with Kuwait, fuelled by disagreements related to debt repayment and oil prices, led Iraq to invade and annex Kuwait in August 1990. The UN responded by imposing a financial and trade embargo on Iraq, and a US-led coalition intervened to repel Iraq from Kuwait, launching the short-lived Gulf War. US involvement also led to the creation of a no-fly zone in Northern Iraq, which provided the Kurds with a degree of safety from Saddam Hussein’s armies and allowed them to establish a semi-autonomous zone. Following Iraq’s withdrawal from Kuwait, sanctions on Iraq remained in place for more than a decade, leading to huge increases in malnutrition, disease and mortality rates among the civilian population.

In 2003, the United States and several of its allies invaded Iraq under the pretext that Saddam Hussein was producing weapons of mass destruction and providing support to Al-Qa’eda, accusations that were later proven to be baseless. US forces overthrew the Ba’ath Party, disbanded the Iraqi army, and established a military occupation led by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). Saddam Hussein was captured in December 2003, and later put on trial, sentenced to death and executed. The CPA oversaw the transfer of power to the Interim Iraqi Authority in 2004 and then the Government of Iraq following the ratification of a new Constitution and the holding of elections in 2005.

The US-led overthrow of the Ba’ath Party regime created a security vacuum, prompting a proliferation of insurgent armed groups and the outbreak of sectarian violence. During the worst two years of bloodshed from 2006-2007, more than 55,000 civilians were killed, according to the NGO Iraq Body Count. The United States also committed war crimes and human rights violations in Iraq, including, most notoriously, systematic torture and abuse of detainees. The American military presence in Iraq formally ended in December 2011 when the last US troops withdrew from the country.
Following the US withdrawal, the situation in the country remained unstable. In 2012, Sunnis organized large-scale protests to what they saw as their marginalization under the government led by Nouri Al-Maliki, which were met with violent repression. It was in this context that the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), an offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, rose to prominence, emboldened by gains it had made in neighboring Syria. In January 2014, ISIS took control of the Sunni-majority cities of Ramadi and Fallujah in Anbar governorate. On 10 June 2014, Iraq’s second-largest city of Mosul fell to ISIS control as the Iraqi Security Forces collapsed. ISIS renamed itself as the ‘Islamic State’ and announced the establishment of a caliphate, with Al-Raqqa in Syria as its self-declared capital. Over July and August the group swept across northern Iraq, committing atrocities against ethnic and religious minorities and prompting international intervention in the conflict, primarily through airstrikes. By late 2014, ISIS was in control of roughly one third of Iraqi territory.

In response to the collapse of the Iraqi Security Forces in Mosul, which sent shockwaves across the country, the Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani released a fatwa calling on Iraqis to take up arms to defend their country from the threat of ISIS. Following the fatwa, thousands of primarily Shi’a Iraqi men signed up as volunteer fighters, leading to the formation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which played a decisive role in the conflict. Following the advance of ISIS into Sinjar and the Ninewa plains, many minorities also formed their own militias, some of which were incorporated into the PMF. The Iraqi Security Forces, together with its allied militias, the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, and international support, launched a series of offensives over 2015 and 2016 and managed to retake much of the territory formerly controlled by ISIS. In October 2016, the Iraqi government announced the start of the military assault on Mosul, the last major city still under ISIS control.

Governance

Iraq is a federal parliamentary republic. The 2005 Constitution of Iraq provides a framework for democratic governance and guarantees a broad set of rights and freedoms in line with international human rights law, including recognition of minority rights for some communities. Executive power is shared by the Prime Minister, who heads the Council of Ministers, and the President, who acts as head of state. Iraq’s main legislative body is the 328-member Council of Representatives (CoR), the members of which are elected for four-year terms. The CoR includes a 25 per cent quota for women, and eight reserved seats of representatives of the Christian, Yezidi, Sabean-Mandaean and Shabak minorities. The judicial system combines elements of secular and Islamic law.

Appointments to ministries and other governing bodies are made according to the ‘muhasasa’ principle, an unofficial ethno-sectarian quota system which guarantees representation for Iraq’s three largest demographic groups: Sunnis, Shi’a, and Kurds. Although this system is not required by the Constitution or by law, it is a legacy of the American occupation that has been followed by successive governments ever since. The quota system has been criticized for fostering clientelism, encouraging appointment based on identity rather than merit, enshrining sectarian divisions and marginalizing minorities.
Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Shi’a Arabs have been politically dominant in Iraq. An order passed by the Coalition Provisional Authority banned former members of the Ba’ath Party from serving in public positions, excluding thousands of Sunnis from participating in government or working in the civil service, education and healthcare sectors. Nouri Al-Maliki, who served as Prime Minister between 2006 and 2014, was widely seen as exacerbating the marginalization of Sunnis by centralizing power for his own party and harshly repressing opposition. Since his appointment in 2014, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has made greater efforts to include Sunnis and Kurds in governance.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is recognized as an autonomous region under the 2005 Constitution, and is governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), based in Erbil. The KRG has its own Constitution and parliament, which is dominated by the two leading Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). In addition, 11 out of 111 seats are reserved for ethnic and religious minorities. The KRG receives a portion of Iraq’s revenues from oil exports, although it has also signed its own oil contracts in recent years, to the consternation of Baghdad.

Governance of the ‘disputed territories’, including Kirkuk, the Nineveh plains, Tal Afar and Sinjar, continues to be unsettled. The disputed territories are areas that were subject to Arabization policies under Saddam Hussein and over which both Baghdad and Erbil have claims. Article 140 of the 2005 Constitution stipulates that this status of these areas should be settled by referendum, which has up until now never been held. Since the advance of ISIS in 2014, many of these areas have come under the de-facto control of the KRG.

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Al Khoei Foundation

Assyrian Culture and Advice Centre

Culture and Mutual Aid Association of Iraqi Turks

Institut Kurde

Iraqi Minorities Council
Website: http://www.minoritiescouncil.org/

Kurdish Cultural Centre

Kurdish Human Rights Project
Website: http://www.khrp.org

Minority based and advocacy organisations

Sources and further reading