

IRAQ 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for religious freedom and the government generally respected religious freedom in practice. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. The constitution recognizes Islam as the official religion, mandates that Islam be considered a source of legislation, and states that no law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam. However, it also states that no law may contradict principles of democracy or the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in the constitution. The constitution guarantees freedom from intellectual, political, and religious coercion. Some apparent contradictions between the constitution and other legal provisions were tested in court during the year; the courts upheld full legal protection for religious freedom in those cases. Other contradictions remain untested. Officials sometimes misused their authority to limit freedom for religious groups other than their own. However, the government continued to call for tolerance and acceptance of all religious minorities, provided security for places of worship such as churches, mosques, shrines, and religious pilgrimage sites and routes, and funded the construction and renovation of places of worship for some religious minorities. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and other terrorist and illegally armed groups committed violent attacks that restricted the ability of all believers to practice their religion.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Sectarian violence occurred throughout the country, although to a lesser extent in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), and restricted religious freedom. No reliable statistics on religiously motivated violence were available. The overwhelming majority of mass casualty terrorist attacks targeted Muslims. A combination of sectarian hiring practices, corruption, targeted attacks, and the uneven application of the law had a detrimental economic effect on minority non-Muslim communities, and contributed to the departure of non-Muslims from the country.

Senior U.S. officials worked closely with the government to promote religious freedom, urging the government to protect members of religious minorities and to include them in the political process. The U.S. embassy also funded programs to address minority concerns, such as economic development, essential and humanitarian services, and capacity development. Embassy officials maintained

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an active dialogue with Shia, Sunni, and religious minority populations and urged better mutual understanding.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to a July 2012 U.S. government estimate, the population is approximately 31.1 million. Religious demography statistics vary due to violence, internal migration, and governmental tracking capability. Numbers are often estimates from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and community leaders, as the government has not yet taken a census.

According to 2010 government statistics, 97 percent of the population is Muslim. Shia Muslims, predominantly Arabs but including Turkmen, Faili (Shia) Kurds, and others, constitute 60 to 65 percent. Arab and Kurdish Sunni Muslims make up 32 to 37 percent of the population. From 18 to 20 percent are Sunni Kurds, 12 to 16 percent are Sunni Arabs, and the remaining 1 to 2 percent are Sunni Turkmen. Approximately 3 percent of the population is composed of Christians, Yezidis, Sabean-Mandaeans, Bahais, Shabaks, Kakais (sometimes referred to as Ahl-e Haqq), and a very small number of Jews. Shia, although predominantly located in the south and east, are the majority in Baghdad and have communities in most parts of the country. Sunnis form the majority in the west, center, and the north of the country.

Christian leaders estimate there are between 400,000 and 850,000 Christians. Approximately two-thirds are Chaldeans (an eastern rite of the Catholic Church), nearly one-fifth are Assyrians (Church of the East), and the remainder are Syriacs (Eastern Orthodox), Armenians (Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox), Anglicans, and other Protestants. Evangelical Christians reportedly number approximately 5,000.

Yezidi leaders report that most of 500,000 to 700,000 Yezidis reside in the north, with 15 percent in Dahuk Province and the rest in Ninewa Province. Shabak leaders state there are 200,000 to 500,000 Shabaks, who reside mainly near Mosul in Ninewa Province. Estimates of the size of the Sabean-Mandaean community vary widely; according to Sabean-Mandaean leaders, about 4,000 remain in the country, generally along the Tigris and its tributaries. According to a leader in the Sabean-Mandaean community in Basrah, the Sabean-Mandaean population in Basrah has fallen dramatically over the last decade to an estimated 500-750 people. The Bahai leadership report fewer than 2,000 members, spread throughout the country in small groups. The Kakai community around Kirkuk is estimated at

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24,500 people. Fewer than 10 Jews reportedly reside in Baghdad, and there are unconfirmed reports that very small Jewish communities exist in other parts of the country.

UNHCR reports that 82,260 Iraqi refugees and 218,800 internally displaced persons (IDPs) registered returns in 2012. The Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MOMD) reports that 304 of those returns were minorities. A majority of these refugees originally fled Iraq and sought asylum in Syria and Jordan due to sectarian violence triggered by the 2006 bombing of the Samara shrine. According to UNHCR's 2012 monitoring report, the majority of the Iraqi refugees who sought asylum in Iran were Shia families who had fled Iraq before 2003; those who returned in 2012 mostly settled in Najaf and Karbala.

In addition to Iraqi refugees, an estimated 1.1 million people of diverse religious backgrounds remain internally displaced due to sectarian violence between 2006 and 2008. The number of religious minorities internally displaced by violence remains uncertain because many stay with relatives and friends. An international NGO reports that 6,156 Christian families remain internally displaced in the country's northern governorates. The NGO largely attributes the high number to Iraqi Christians fleeing Syria where they had previously found refuge. The NGO attributes the decision of families to resettle in northern Iraq due to the area's relative security compared with elsewhere in the country. Humanitarian organizations working with displaced Christian families note that this vulnerable population is often unable to sell their homes at a reasonable price if they choose to migrate. They also face increasing rental costs in their area of displacement.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for religious freedom. The constitution recognizes Islam as the official religion, mandates that Islam be considered a source of legislation, and states that no law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam. However, it also states that no law may contradict principles of democracy or the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in the constitution. The constitution also guarantees freedom from intellectual, political, and religious coercion. Apparent contradictions between the constitution and other legal provisions remain, although some court decisions during the year upheld the constitutional protection of religious freedom.

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Government laws and regulations prevent the conversion of Muslims to other religions, require conversion of minor children to Islam if either parent converts to Islam, outlaw the practice of some faiths, and override religious tenets of individuals adhering to non-Muslim faiths. The country's civil and penal codes do not contain legal remedies or penalties for conversion from Islam.

The law prohibits practice of the Bahai Faith and practice of the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam. Although constitutional provisions on freedom of religion may supersede these laws, no court challenges yet invalidate them, and there is no legislation proposed to repeal them.

The constitution guarantees citizens the right to choose which court will adjudicate matters of personal status, including marriage, divorce, custody of children, inheritance, endowments, and other personal matters. Until parliament enacts implementing legislation, the 1959 Personal Status Law remains the de facto legal authority. It stipulates that cases of all citizens will be adjudicated in accordance with Islamic legal principles unless they are specifically exempted by a special law. It also stipulates that civil courts must consult the religious authority of a non-Muslim party for its opinion under the applicable religious law and apply that opinion in court.

The constitution requires the government to maintain the sanctity of holy shrines and religious sites and guarantee the free practice of rituals. The penal code protects members of minority religious groups by criminalizing disruption or impedance of their religious ceremonies and desecration of their religious buildings. Members of all religious groups are free to practice religious rites and manage religious endowments, endowment affairs, and their religious institutions.

The constitution protects all citizens by birth from having their citizenship withdrawn, establishes their right to demand reinstatement of their citizenship, and allows them to hold multiple citizenships.

Of the 325 seats in the Council of Representatives, the law reserves eight seats for members of minority religious groups: five for Christian candidates from Baghdad, Ninewa, Kirkuk, Erbil, and Dahuk; one Yezidi representing Ninewa; one Sabean-Mandaean representing Baghdad; and one Shabak representing Ninewa.

The Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament (IKP) reserves five seats for Christians and one seat for Yezidis.

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The Council of Iraqi Christian Church Leaders, a quasi-governmental group consisting of representatives from each of the 14 officially recognized churches, requires Christian groups to register. To do so, the group must have a minimum of 500 adherents in the country.

National identity cards denote the holder's religion, but do not differentiate between Shia and Sunni Muslim. Passports do not specify religion. Bahais and Kakais may only receive identity cards if they self-identify as Muslims. Without an official identity card, Bahais and Kakais cannot register their children for school or acquire passports.

The government maintains three waqfs (religious endowments): the Sunni; the Shia; and the Christian, Yezidi, Sabean-Mandaean, and Other Religions Endowments. Operating under the authority of the prime minister's office, the endowments disburse government funding to maintain and protect religious facilities.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) also maintains three waqfs: the Sunni, the Christian, and the Yezidi Endowments. The KRG Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs operated the endowments, which pay the salaries of imams and fund the construction and maintenance of religious sites. Funding is available for Christian religious establishments, but many churches prefer to fund themselves.

The constitution provides that the Federal Supreme Court shall be made up of a number of judges, experts in Islamic jurisprudence, and legal scholars. However, the constitution leaves the the method of regulating the number and selection of judges to legislation that requires a two-thirds majority vote in the Council of Representatives. Because several attempts to pass implementing legislation failed during the year, the Federal Supreme Court's composition continues to be governed by the 2005 Federal Supreme Court Law, which does not require that Islamic jurisprudence experts be included on the court.

The government provides support for Muslims desiring to perform the Hajj, organizing travel routes and assisting pilgrims with obtaining immunization documents for entry into Saudi Arabia. The government also provides funding to Sunni and Shia waqfs, which accept Hajj applications from the public and submit them to the Supreme Council for the Hajj. The council is attached to the prime minister's office. It organizes a lottery process that selects pilgrims for official Hajj visas.

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The government requires Islamic religious instruction in public schools, but non-Muslim students are not required to participate. In most areas of the country, primary and secondary school curriculum includes three class periods per week of Islamic education, including study of the Quran, as a graduation requirement for Muslim students. Private religious schools operate in the country. To operate legally, private schools must obtain a license from the director general of private and public schools and pay annual fees. The Ministry of Education includes an office for Kurdish and other language education, which ensures that minority communities are taught in their native language.

The KRG Ministry of Education funds Aramaic-language public schools (elementary and high school) in its territory, and the curriculum does not contain religion or Quranic studies. The KRG provides some services, including salaries for Yezidi religious instruction, at certain state-funded schools.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Ashura, Arbaeen, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Maulid al-Nabi. Ashura and Arbaeen are not observed in the IKR. The official work week is Sunday to Thursday, in deference to the Muslim day of prayer on Fridays.

Government Practices

There were reports of government abuses of religious freedom, including arrests and detentions, as well as reports of restrictions and discrimination based on religion by both the central government and the KRG. Sectarian misuse of official authority continued to be a concern. However, the government and the KRG continued to respect the religious freedom of the vast majority of citizens.

Many Sunni Muslims alleged an ongoing campaign of revenge by the Shia majority in retribution for the Sunnis' favored status and abuses of Shia under the former regime. They reported that government security forces targeted them for harassment, illegal searches, arbitrary arrest and detention, and torture and abuse. In March government security forces reportedly made mass arrests in predominantly Sunni areas of Baghdad before the Arab League Summit. Government officials denied the arrests were preemptive or targeted Sunni Muslims. Upon release, detainees and witnesses reported to NGOs they were not shown arrest warrants and some detainees reported that they were tortured in custody.

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Shabak and some Yezidi political leaders allege that Kurdish Peshmerga and Asayish forces regularly harassed and committed abuses against their communities in the portion of Ninewa Province controlled by the KRG or contested between the government and the KRG. Other Yezidi leaders alleged that the Iraqi Security Forces harassed and committed abuses against their community in portions of Ninewa Province under the central government's authority and in disputed areas.

In September security forces raided dozens of minority-owned businesses, including restaurants, bars, social clubs, and nightclubs in Baghdad. Eyewitnesses reported security forces destroyed property and beat staff and patrons with the butts of their guns and batons; several people were hospitalized for their injuries. Local authorities claimed the raids were court-ordered and targeted business owners selling alcohol without a license, but a court judicial spokesperson denied there was a court order.

Official investigations of abuses by government, illegal armed groups, and terrorist organizations were infrequent, and the outcomes of investigations were often unpublished, unknown, or incomplete.

The KRG compensated Chaldean, Syriac, and Yezidi victims of the December 2011 Dahuk riots in the IKR. On December 2, 2011, 300 to 1,000 rioters attacked Christian and Yezidi businesses in Dahuk Province, burning and destroying 26 liquor stores, a massage parlor, four hotels, and a casino. The riot followed midday prayers at the Rasheed Mosque in Zakho where a Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) party-affiliated imam allegedly incited the attacks against members of minority religious groups by denouncing their businesses as anti-Islamic. IKR President Masoud Barzani promised to compensate the victims and formed a committee to investigate the attacks. The committee concluded that KIU followers "emboldened the violence" against Christian and Yezidi businesses, Kurdistan Democratic Party leaders "failed to control their members from attacking KIU organization centers" in retaliatory counterattacks, and Dahuk Province security and administrative officials were "negligent" in their control of the situation.

There were allegations that both the central government and the KRG discriminated against members of minority religious groups. Many Christians reported that the central government and KRG unreasonably delayed the return of church land and land confiscated from members of their community under the former regime. Additionally, some university professors reported that the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) dismissed qualified, experienced personnel based on religious affiliation and that positions were sold to the highest bidders.

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To receive assistance from the KRG Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, religious groups are required to register with them. Some Christian pastors not registered with the KRG Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs reported pressure to desist from proselytizing and to provide information about their congregations to the KRG, under the perceived threat of imprisonment and threats to their congregants and family. In July 2011 KRG security forces arrested a pastor and charged him under the KRG's 2006 Anti-Terrorism Law; family and supporters alleged he was detained and prosecuted because of proselytizing. The pastor had access to legal representation and his family during the trial proceedings, which UN officials monitored. On December 17, the court convicted him of espionage, a lesser charge than terrorism, and sentenced him to five years and one month in prison.

Evangelical churches continued to report they were unable to obtain official registration from the government and that registration requirements were too onerous, including that they have at least 500 members in their congregations.

The KRG denied allegations it discriminated against Christians and other minorities. Despite such allegations, many non-Muslims chose to reside in the IKR because of its reputation of offering greater security and tolerance.

Members of minority religious groups were underrepresented in government appointments, public sector jobs, and elected positions outside of the Council of Representatives. Although members of minority religious groups held senior positions in the national parliament and central government, as well as in the KRG, they were proportionally underrepresented in the unelected government workforce, particularly at the provincial and local levels. This underrepresentation limited their access to government-provided security and economic development. Non-Muslims, particularly Christians and Yezidis, complained of being politically isolated by the Muslim majority because of their religious differences, although to a lesser extent in the IKR.

The government and the KRG continued to provide political representation and support to members of minority religious groups during the year. The Iraqi Council of Ministers (COM) has one Christian member (environment), as does the KRG's COM (communication and transportation). The previous KRG COM included a Yezidi member (agriculture and water) until his tenure ended in April.

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On April 30, the Baghdad-Rusafa Federal Court of Appeals upheld a lower court's ruling that an 18-year-old could change his religion from Islam to Christianity. The plaintiff's father converted from Christianity to Islam in 2002 when the plaintiff was under 18, thereby changing the plaintiff's religion to Islam by operation of law. The plaintiff subsequently petitioned to change his religion back to Christianity on his national identity card when he turned 18. The court ruled in the plaintiff's favor based on a provision in the Civil Affairs Law (Law 65 of 1972), which allows children who come of age to independently choose their religion.

Although Easter and Christmas were not national holidays, government policy recognizes Christians' right to observe them, and Christian groups reported they were able to observe Christmas and Easter without interference. The government also provided increased protection to Christian churches during these holidays.

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

Terrorist groups continued to victimize citizens of all ethnicities and religious groups, as well as religious pilgrims and pilgrimage sites, including through suicide bombings and attacks with improvised explosive devices. Terrorists also committed acts of harassment, intimidation, robbery, kidnapping, and murder.

In January AQI targeted Shia pilgrims in a wave of attacks during the Shia holiday of Arbaeen. In one such attack a suicide bomber detonated next to a group of pilgrims near Nasiriyah, in Dhi Qar Province, killing at least 48 people and wounding more than 20. The same day, five other bombings targeted mainly Shia neighborhoods in Baghdad, killing 24 and injuring at least 65. On January 9, a roadside bomb south of Baghdad killed at least one pilgrim and wounded at least nine, and another roadside bomb near Hilla, in Babel Province, wounded 15.

On January 16, AQI was also responsible for an attack that killed nine Shabaks when a car bomb targeting a residential complex inhabited by displaced Shabaks exploded in the Bartalla neighborhood of Mosul, in Ninewa Province.

In June and July AQI claimed responsibility for a wave of attacks, including a truck bomb that exploded near a Shia mosque in Diwaniya and killed at least 25 pilgrims on their way to Karbala to celebrate the July 3 birthday of Imam al-Mahdi. A bomb blast the same day killed four additional pilgrims near the city of Karbala.

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On August 19, in another AQI attack, a car bomb critically injured the Emir of Salafi Sunnis in Iraq, Mahdi al-Sumaidi, and three of his security staff as they departed the Omar al-Mukhtar Mosque, in the al-Yarmouk neighborhood west of Baghdad, after Eid al-Fitr prayers.

On September 7, three separate bomb attacks by AQI targeting Shia mosques in Kirkuk killed eight people and wounded at least 400. The deadliest attack occurred when a car bomb exploded in the southern Domiz area of Kirkuk while worshippers exited the mosque after Friday prayers. A second bomb exploded after police and rescuers arrived at the scene.

Terrorist attacks on many mosques, churches, and other holy sites rendered some of them unusable. The September 16 bombing of the Chaldean Christian Sacred Heart Cathedral in Kirkuk resulted in no injuries but damaged the building extensively, rendering it unusable. A local human rights organization reported four attacks on Christian churches, including the attack on Sacred Heart Cathedral, during the year. Many worshippers reportedly did not attend religious services or participate in religious events because of the threat of violence, despite the government's continued provision of additional security to holy sites and funding for repairs.

On July 26, the government announced the office of the presidency ratified execution sentences against the convicted perpetrators of the deadly Our Lady of Salvation Church terrorist attack in 2010, which resulted in 52 fatalities, including the deaths of two priests. The prime minister spoke at the December 14 grand reopening of the church and urged unity among Christians and Muslims to build a new, more peaceful Iraq.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In September the Basrah Provincial Council Committee for Religious Minorities called on the central government to provide support for Iraqi Christians who wanted to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, equating these trips with the Muslim Hajj.

Throughout the year, Iraqi Security Forces deployed police and army personnel to protect religious pilgrimage routes and sites, as well as places of worship during religious holidays. In late September, the Iraqi Security Forces deployed 20,000 police and army personnel to Karbala to protect land routes pilgrims take to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj; and in late October, the Iraqi Security forces deployed 12,000

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police and army personnel to the holy city of Karbala to protect hundreds of thousands of religious pilgrims to the city for Eid al-Adha.

The Ministry of Human Rights reported that it took several steps to protect members of minority religious groups and address their concerns. They conducted an investigation into the phenomenon of suicides of Yezidi young people; provided humanitarian assistance to internally displaced minority groups, including Christians; and held over 200 workshops throughout the country on minority rights.

The Ministry of Human Rights reported that during the year Iraqi Security Forces escorted 1,300 Christian students from al-Hamdaniya to Mosul to attend school each day, and increased the number of night patrols in Christian neighborhoods in Mosul.

The KRG continued to welcome Christians from outside the IKR who moved to the region due to perceived discrimination and threats to their safety elsewhere. Armenian Church of America archbishop Vicken Aykazian said in December that the IKR “has become a safehaven for Christians, [and] the [regional] government is building churches, schools, and community centers for them,” adding that “Christians today feel very comfortable [in the the IKR].”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Violence by sectarian and illegally armed groups in many parts of the country restricted religious freedom, although to a lesser extent in the IKR. Some Islamic elements continued to exert pressure on society to conform to their interpretations of Islam’s precepts. Although these efforts affected all citizens, non-Muslims were especially vulnerable to this pressure and violence because of their minority status.

Illegally armed groups regularly targeted many individuals from all ethnicities and religious groups because of their religious identity, although the overwhelming majority of the mass-casualty attacks targeted the majority Shia population. Although no reliable statistics on religiously motivated violence were available, acts committed against religious groups included harassment, intimidation, robbery, kidnapping, murder, suicide bombs, and attacks with improvised explosive devices.

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On January 29, unidentified gunmen shot and killed a Yezidi couple inside their home in Mosul, in Ninewa Province. According to press reports, the assailants also cut off the husband's tongue and placed it in his hand.

On March 21, unidentified armed attackers broke into a Shia family's home in southeastern Baghdad and slit the throats of a mother and her three children. According to press reports, the family had returned to their home in the predominantly Sunni neighborhood of Zafaraniyah, ten months prior to their deaths, after having fled sectarian violence in 2006 and 2007.

On August 10, a suicide bombing targeting a Shabak mosque killed two people and wounded more than 50 in an attack carried out by unknown actors.

On December 30, an unidentified armed group shot and killed a Sabeen-Mandean goldsmith inside his store south of Baghdad.

Sunni Muslims continued to allege an ongoing campaign of revenge by the Shia majority in retribution for the Sunnis' favored status and abuses of Shia under the former regime. Sunni Muslims also reported discrimination based on a public perception that the majority of the Sunni population sympathized with illegally armed Sunni extremist groups and former regime elements.

Shia in Sunni-dominated neighborhoods, Sunnis in Shia-dominated neighborhoods, and members of minority religious groups in both Sunni- and Shia-dominated neighborhoods reported receiving anonymous death threat letters demanding they leave their homes. After the release and media amplification of a controversial amateur Internet video in September, Christian groups reported an increase in death threats. Though no direct attacks on Christians occurred as a result of the video, one militant group called the Brigade of the Straight Path issued a threat to Christians in Mosul to leave or be killed. The government temporarily provided additional security in Christian neighborhoods following the threat. There were no deaths or attacks related to the threat. Religious intolerance motivated some threats, but some reports also noted the possibility of economic reasons, specifically from persons trying to acquire Christian-owned property.

There were some reports that non-Muslim minorities felt obliged to adhere to certain Islamic practices, such as wearing the hijab or fasting during Ramadan. Some Muslims threatened women and girls, regardless of their religious affiliation, for refusing to wear the hijab, for dressing in Western-style clothing, or not adhering to strict interpretations of Islamic norms governing public behavior.

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Numerous women, including Christians, reported opting to wear the hijab after being harassed. Two Christian female government employees reported forcible transfer to another section of their employing ministry without notice or consent because they refused to wear headscarves.

While non-Muslim students are not required to participate in religious instruction at public schools, some non-Muslim students reported they felt pressured to do so from teachers and classmates. There were also reports that some non-Muslim students were obligated to participate because they could not leave the classroom during religious instruction. Christian and Yezidi leaders reported that discrimination in education continued to be a challenge, as was the lack of minority input into issues such as school curricula and language of instruction. However, on April 27 an international NGO reported that the Ministry of Education approved a curriculum reform proposal developed by the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities, a consortium of minority civil society organizations.

The combination of corruption, attacks against non-Muslim businesses, uneven application of rule of law, and nepotistic hiring practices by members of the majority Muslim population had a detrimental economic effect on the non-Muslim communities and contributed to the departure of non-Muslims from the country.

During the year Christian, Yezidi, and Shabak leaders reported their communities continued to be targets of harassment and violence. Some Muslims targeted shopkeepers for providing goods or services considered inconsistent with Islam, and sometimes subjected them to violence after they did not comply with warnings to stop such activity. These societal elements especially targeted liquor store owners, primarily Christian and Yezidi. By law, only Christians and other non-Islamic groups are licensed to sell alcohol.

On October 16, a car bomb detonated in front of a liquor store belonging to a Christian man in Kirkuk, across the street from a day care reportedly run by evangelical Christians, causing extensive structural damage to surrounding buildings and businesses, but no deaths or injuries. The local government posted six additional police officers in the area following the incident, but there was no official investigation by year's end.

Throughout the year, Muslim religious leaders (both Sunni and Shia), pilgrims, and religious congregants at shrines, places of worship, and private homes suffered fatal attacks and injuries. On August 31, after Friday prayers, unidentified gunmen shot and killed the Shia imam of the al-Shorouq mosque as he walked home after

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delivering his sermon. In a separate attack the same day, another Shia cleric was seriously wounded and his driver killed in a drive-by shooting in eastern Baghdad.

On September 18, a group of gunmen robbed and set fire to a house belonging to a Christian family in Baghdad. The family reportedly left Iraq after the incident and had not returned at year's end. A local human rights organization reported five armed home invasions by unidentified gunmen targeting Christian families during the year.

A local human rights organization reported five killings, five kidnappings, 12 unsuccessful assassination attempts, and 17 other attacks against Christians; two killings, four kidnappings, and two other attacks against Yezidis; two killings of Sabeen-Mandaeans; and 26 killings of Shabaks during the year. Police and human rights organizations asserted that most kidnappings went unreported due to fear of retaliation. Investigations remained open at the end of the year.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government promoted religious freedom and continued to work closely with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. officials from the Department of State, the embassy, and the consulates met regularly with representatives of all of the country's religious and ethnic communities, including its minority communities, and maintained an active dialogue with them.

The deputy assistant secretary of state for Iraq in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs served as the State Department's special coordinator for the country's religious and ethnic minority groups. The special coordinator visited minority refugee populations in the United States and minority groups in Iraq to discuss the political, economic, and security challenges they face. The U.S. ambassador at large for religious freedom also met with Iraq's Christian diaspora community in the United States. The assistant chief of mission for assistance transition traveled throughout Iraq and engaged with minority religious and political leaders, including those from the provinces of Ninewa, Erbil, Baghdad, and Basrah. He also engaged the Iraqi government on minority community concerns and on the government's protection of minority religious groups. In addition, he visited religious minority diasporas in the United States and met with U.S. religious leaders to discuss their concerns, interests, and possible assistance for Iraqi minority groups. He also chaired the embassy's working group on minority issues, designed to bring a coordinated focus to U.S. activities related to minorities during

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the year. At the end of May, with the abolishment of the assistant chief of mission for assistance transition position, the minister counselor for political affairs assumed these responsibilities.

The U.S. ambassador, the consul general in Erbil, the consul general in Basrah, and the consul in Kirkuk also engaged with minority religious groups, and the mission worked with representatives of the international community, and with U.S. and Iraqi government officials to address minority concerns.

As of December, the U.S. government funded more than \$73 million cumulatively in new initiatives and continuing projects to support minority communities. These projects focused on both the immediate and longer-term needs of the communities, including economic development, essential and humanitarian services, and capacity development.