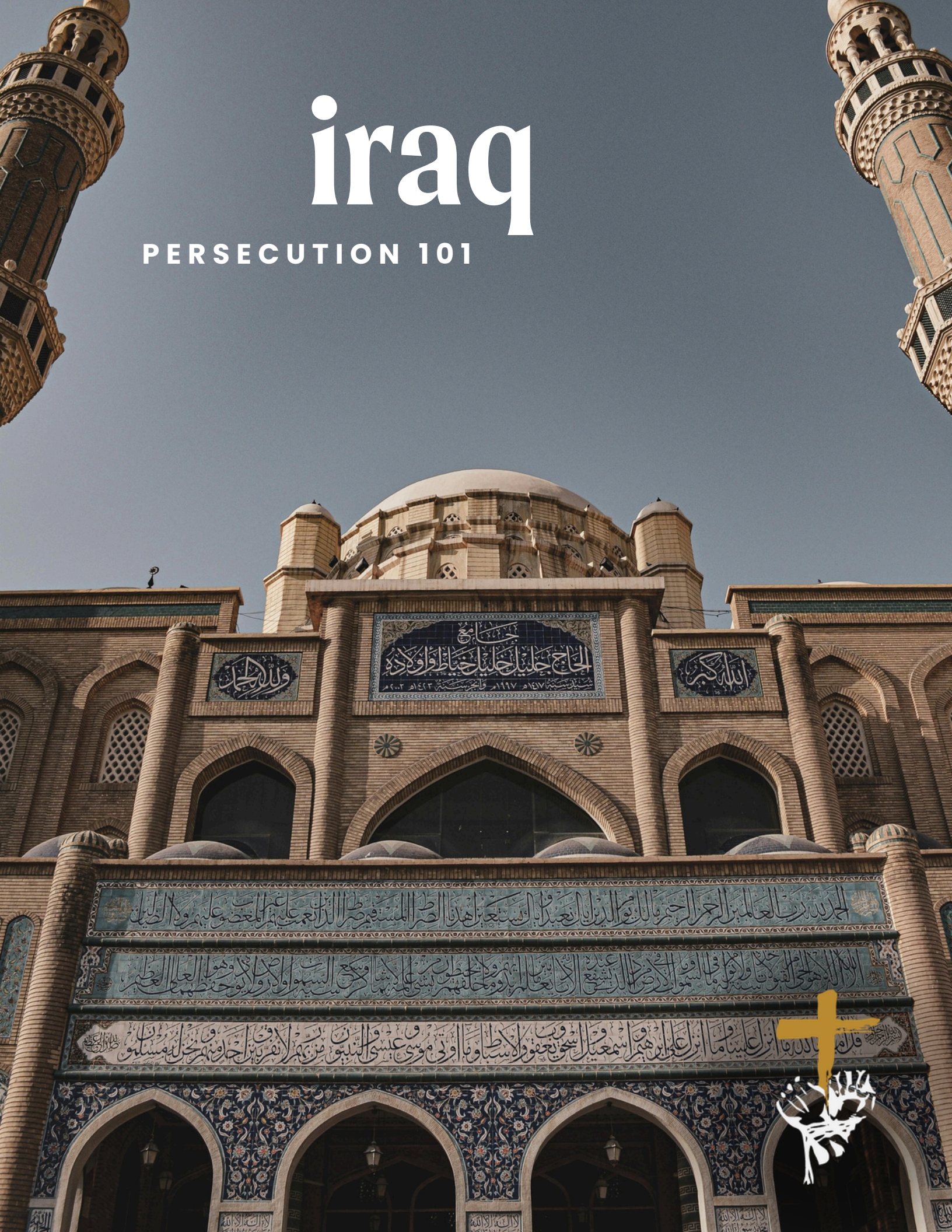



iraq

PERSECUTION 101



Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minority communities in Iraq continue to face existential threats from militants and regional governments, including their own.

With the threat of Islamic State abated across Iraq—the terrorist group was largely defeated in 2019 and has since refocused its efforts in Africa—the casual observer may be tempted to dismiss modern threats to religious freedom in the fractious Middle Eastern state. In the place of Islamic State, though, today a broad range of actors threaten religious freedom. Dozens of warring militias attack minority communities with relative impunity, neighboring governments in Turkey and Iran operate extensive military operations striking vulnerable communities in Iraq, and the Iraqi government has repeatedly proven itself incapable and unwilling to protect the free practice of religion within its borders.



QUICK FACTS



Type of Government

Federal
Parliamentary
Republic



Head of Government

Prime Minister
Mohammed Shia'
Al Sudani



Total Population

41.26 million
(2023 estimate)



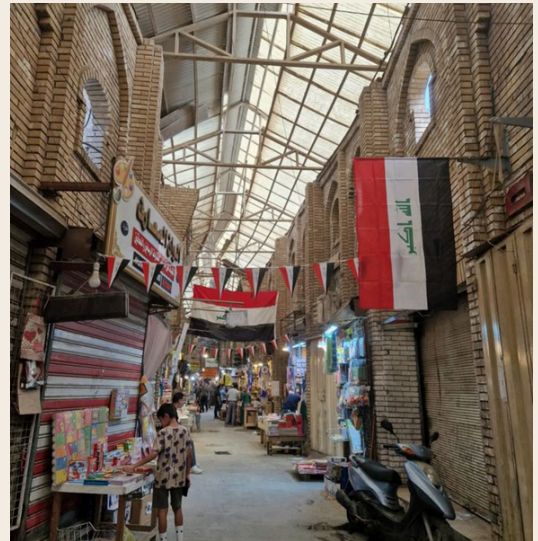
Religious Demography

95-98% Muslim
1-4% Other
<0.5% Christian



Ethnic Demography

75-80% Arab
15-20% Kurdish
5% Other



TYPES OF PERSECUTION



Militant Terrorism

Fighters associated with the country's dozens of militias, including groups associated with Turkey, Iran, and the Iraqi federal government, continue to abuse religious minorities



Government Failure

Iraq's government has repeatedly failed to implement meaningful protections for religious groups still reeling from Islamic State violence.



ICC IN IRAQ

ICC has long worked in northern Iraq, where a significant population of Christians was decimated by the rise of the Islamic State in the region in 2014. Today, the displaced survivors are slowly returning to their homelands and stand in dire need of assistance as they take on the difficult task of rebuilding broken communities from the ashes of violent extremism.

Livelihood assistance is a major pillar of ICC's development work in the Nineveh Plains region, an effort designed to provide sustainable income for individuals and communities for years to come. Whether by financially supporting a new restaurant or providing funding for the restoration of industrial-level chicken farms, ICC is committed to providing survivors with solutions that restore not only their income but a sense of dignity as well. In many cases, the projects ICC support mirror life before 2014 and a restoration to some sort of normalcy for Christians living with the scars of genocide.



Backgrounder on Religious Freedom in Iraq

Grown from an al Qaeda offshoot in 2004, the now-infamous terror organization Islamic State (IS) began quietly growing in power in 2011, taking advantage of instability in Iraq and Syria to grow its forces and prepare for large-scale attacks. Most notably, the group captured Mosul, a major city in northern Iraq and the capital city of the Nineveh governate. About 500,000 civilians fled the city during and after the six-day battle, with many still displaced to this day.

Other cities also fell to the IS onslaught, prompting an international military campaign that continued for years. In each of its territorial advances, IS ruled with Islamist extremism, imposing draconian restrictions on civilians under their control and leaving no room for ideological disagreement—particularly from the many historic religious minority communities caught in its path.

Under IS rule, Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities fled for their lives by the hundreds of thousands. Housed in squalid refugee camps in many cases, the escapees were the lucky ones—reports from back home contained gruesome accounts of torture, rape, and killings. The international community later recognized the IS campaign against the Yazidis as a genocide. Many other communities experienced much the same fate as their Yazidi neighbors.

By 2017, the international military campaign, led by the United States, had succeeded in recapturing about 95% of territory from IS in what was considered at least a territorial defeat for the terrorist group. Some, including Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi and U.S. President Donald Trump even went so far as to declare total victory. Under Trump, the U.S. largely pulled out of the conflict by February 2019. In March 2019, Syrian Democratic Force troops captured the town of Baghuz, IS's last stronghold, and finally ended the group's claim to any territory.



Though IS was defeated in Iraq and Syria, it lives on in a franchised form throughout Africa and much of the rest of the world and its continued impact on minority communities in Iraq continues to be very real. In addition to the trauma wrought on individuals and communities, the violence of 2014-2019 continues to pose practical questions for the many displaced persons now trying to find a way to return to their ancestral homelands with little support from the Iraqi government which has proven itself incapable of or unwilling to implement rigorous reparations for those returning from displacement.

Additionally, minority groups report that they continue to be harassed and physically abused by members of the state-sponsored Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). The PMF is composed of about 60 militia groups with varying ethnic and religious affiliations. Though Christians do operate a few small and local PMF units, the largest and most powerful are led by Shia Arabs and are widely reported to physically abuse Christians and others outside of their faith.

Unfortunately, the Iraqi government has not used its oversight of the PMF to combat these abuses and they continue to occur at an alarming rate. Regular Iraqi military forces have been implicated in rights violations against religious minority communities as well, further complicating their return and perpetuating an era of violence and intimidation that continues to restrict the free practice of religion across Iraq.

Resources and Reports

[Rising to Rebuild in the Nineveh Plains](#)

[State Department 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom – Iraq Chapter](#)

[USCIRF 2023 Annual Report – Iraq Chapter](#)

