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Economic Integration and Political Reconciliation in Iraq

By Peter S. Henne April 2018

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

After years of fighting, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant’s (ISIL) control over territory in Iraq has crumbled.¹ Yet the fate of Iraq’s religious minorities remains unclear. When it was in control, ISIL treated all populations under its rule with great brutality, but the jihadist group specifically targeted Iraq’s Christian and Yazidi communities for enslavement and violence, leading to widespread death and displacement among these two religious groups.² And although ISIL has been driven out, the Christian and Yazidi communities, both with roots in Iraq going back thousands of years, are still at risk of extinction.

There is naturally an altruistic reason to support targets of genocide—of which Christians and Yazidis unquestionably are—but there are strategic and practical reasons as well. Restoring these communities to Iraq may enhance the development and stability of the country, which in turn would benefit the entire region. Restoring persecuted religious minority communities in Iraq can specifically benefit the country in three ways:

1. Religious minorities can directly contribute to Iraq’s economic growth by pursuing economic activities, some of which are unavailable to the Muslim majority.
2. Religious minorities can encourage a nonsectarian national identity by serving as a buffer between larger ethnoreligious communities in political debates.
3. Religious minorities may be particularly effective in establishing dialogue across sectarian lines.

Restoring religious minority communities can help Iraq only if they are not seen as competitors for international resources to majority communities. Instead, religious minorities must be integrated into the broader society. With this in mind, the United States should adopt a dual-track approach to aiding religious minorities in Iraq. The policy suggestions presented in this report are meant to provide a framework for U.S. policy, keeping in mind that further work will be required to develop the policy tools Iraq will need to implement them. Specifically, U.S. policy must:

- **Avoid policies that harden divisions.** Religious minorities will help stabilize Iraq only if they are seen as part of a diverse and pluralist Iraqi society. U.S. policies that increase the distinctions between Christians, Yazidis, and the Muslim majority will be counterproductive. At the same time, the United States should direct the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department to monitor and ensure that aid is reaching religious minority communities. The United States should accompany development aid with efforts to create economic opportunities that both target religious minorities and grow the overall economy.
- **Promote the integration of religious minorities.** The United States should continue monitoring religious freedom abuses in Iraq to ensure religious minorities are protected. The United States should promote interfaith dialogue efforts in Iraq between Christians, Yazidis, and Muslims as well as implement political capacity-building programs intended to enable religious minorities to engage in the political process.

Religious minorities and stability

There are moral reasons to aid victims of genocide such as Iraqi Christians and Yazidis. At the same time, there are pragmatic reasons. Restoring religious minority communities in Iraq can help stabilize and develop the country. Religious minorities can aid the community in three ways: boosting economic activity; encouraging a nonsectarian national identity; and promoting interfaith dialogue.

Under attack by ISIL and other extremist groups, the Middle East's religious minority communities—particularly Christians and Yazidis—are suffering. As ISIL gained control of portions of Iraq and Syria, it implemented extremist interpretations of Islamic law in the territory it ruled.³ This included brutal punishments for Muslims who did not follow ISIL's guidelines. They subjected Christians to forced conversion, with expulsion or violence if they refused. Many Christians felt betrayed by their own neighbors and by Iraqi and Kurdistan region security forces that failed to protect them as ISIL advanced, raising questions about their security post-ISIL.⁴

There are between 7.5 million and 15 million Christians in the Middle East.⁵ And while the Christian population in terms of numbers has increased since 1900, the faster growth rates of Muslims in the Middle East has meant that the Christian share of the population decreased from 10 percent in 1900 to 5 percent in 2010, according to research from the Pew Research Center.⁶ Data on deaths and displacements of Christians by ISIL are inconclusive, but the jihadist group has devastated Christian communities, leading some to fear Christians' presence in the region will be permanently diminished.⁷

The Yazidi community—a population that ranged between 300,000 to 700,000 in Iraq as of 2012—faced repression under former President of Iraq Saddam Hussein, which was followed by waves of violence that broke out after the United States overthrew him in 2003.⁸ With the rise of ISIL, the Yazidis endured widespread massacres and sexual slavery that have nearly wiped out this ancient community. As with Christians, exact numbers of Yazidis affected by ISIL are unknown. But according to a study by the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, ISIL's campaign in Iraq's Ninawa province—where many religious minorities lived—displaced more than 800,000 people and left few religious minorities remaining in the area.⁹

This included Christians and Yazidis, as well as other minority groups such as the Turkmen, Sabeen Mandean, Shabak, and Kaka'i.

There have been some efforts to redress these wrongs, but they are incomplete. Iraqi religious minorities have begun to return to the communities from which ISIL displaced them.¹⁰ The United Nations runs numerous aid programs in Iraq through the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP), including some intended to promote dialogue across religious divisions.¹¹ Additionally, the United States has announced that it will provide aid directly to Iraqi Christians due to concerns about whether the United Nations distributes sufficient aid specifically to Christians; private groups are helping to rebuild communities as well.¹² Despite these efforts, religious minority communities in Iraq remain devastated.

The fate of Iraq's Christians and Yazidis is tragic but unfortunately not uncommon. The modern Middle East—formed from the breakup of the Ottoman Empire and European colonies—has experienced several periods where religious minority populations have been displaced.¹³ This seems to echo several scholarly warnings that religious diversity makes instability and underdevelopment more likely.¹⁴ Yet highlighting the perils of religious diversity for the region overlooks the potentially greater benefits such diversity may bring.

There are some indications that having multiple religious groups in a country can increase economic development and social stability. And while religious diversity can complicate politics and lead to destructive conflict—evidenced by the Sunni-Shia civil war in Iraq—it can also benefit society under certain conditions. Across all countries, those with greater religious diversity experience stronger economic growth.¹⁵ Religious diversity also corresponds with greater economic competitiveness, entrepreneurship, and social tolerance.¹⁶ There are a few possible explanations for this pattern.

Boost economic growth

Religious minorities may boost economic growth directly through their entrepreneurial activities. These communities have played important roles in many Middle Eastern economies—including in Iraq. For example, Iraqi Christians have historically been well-educated and prominent in trades such as weaving and professions including medicine.¹⁷ Their displacement is thus not only a human rights concern; it also undermines Iraq's economic vitality. Vibrant Christian communities in Iraq would contribute to Iraq's economy and improve the situation for all Iraqis.

Additionally, religious minorities have contributed to Middle Eastern economies for centuries by undertaking economic activities that are forbidden to Muslims¹⁸—a practice that continues in the present day. One of the most visible examples of this sort of economic activity are Iraq’s liquor stores. Iraqi Muslims are not allowed to sell liquor, which leaves this important segment of the retail market to Christians and Yazidis. These stores are very popular—even among Iraqi Muslims, who reportedly crowd them after the fasting month of Ramadan—and depend on religious minorities to run them.¹⁹ If these communities are not restored, an important element of the Iraqi retail economy will disappear, and their customers will turn to disruptive black-market alternatives.

Promote a nonsectarian national identity

Iraq is one among many countries with sectarian politics. Tensions among Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds complicate political debates, as each group worries about the others gaining an advantage.²⁰ The presence of smaller religious minority groups in Iraq may actually ease these tensions, because these minorities could serve as a buffer between rival groups. If a country is polarized between two or three large ethnoreligious groups, all politics become a zero-sum game. However, when political negotiations involve smaller groups—such as Christians and Yazidis—each group’s fear of the others’ gains will be diminished. Leaders will have to satisfy multiple communities with any policy, incentivizing them to appeal to those beyond their own sectarian group.²¹ This makes it more likely that political initiatives are effective at improving welfare. Rather than assuming a given government policy benefits one ethnoreligious group at the expense of others, Iraqis may trust that it benefits the whole country. This type of dynamic could eventually contribute to the lessening of sectarian tensions and to a greater sense of national unity.

Admittedly, the development of a nonsectarian national identity is a long-term process, and the tough conditions Iraq’s religious minorities face have made it difficult for them to participate actively in Iraqi politics. But their potential to promote a nonsectarian identity by serving as a buffer between larger groups is already apparent. Iraqi Christians and Yazidis serve as neutral voices in Iraqi political disputes and frequently present an intermediate perspective to balance tensions between opposing sides and to resolve conflict.

Christian politicians, for example, have pushed back on efforts by their own community that they saw as divisive. Iraqi Christians have raised concerns about some international efforts to support their community, as they may promote sectarian tensions in Iraq. In 2017, for instance, a Swedish politician hosted a conference that brought together Western Christian leaders and representatives of Iraqi communities. Yet the Patriarch of the Chaldean Church—of which many Iraqi Christians are members—

and a political party representing overwhelmingly Christian Iraqi Assyrians opposed the conference. The former argued that the “future of Christians in Iraq is linked to all Iraqis,” and should be discussed within Iraq; likewise, the Assyrian party’s spokesperson said the conference “was promoting a partisan and sectarian agenda.”²² The international community can debate the desirability of efforts like this conference, but Iraqi Christians’ concerns over the risk that similar efforts would increase sectarian tensions suggest they may be useful voices for an inclusive national identity in Iraq.

Another way religious minorities can promote a nonsectarian identity is by reminding Iraqi politicians of their responsibility to protect all Iraqis—not just their own ethnoreligious group. Iraq’s lone Yazidi member of Parliament—Vian Dakhil—has been a powerful voice calling on the Iraqi government to protect religious minorities. She has been instrumental in bringing attention to the suffering of the Yazidis under ISIL.²³ Dakhil has also pressured the Iraqi government to ensure that it rescues captured Yazidis as it retakes territory from the terrorist group.²⁴ By ensuring the central Iraqi government helps religious minorities such as Yazidis, these efforts may also encourage Iraqis to think beyond narrow sectarian identities.

Promote intersectarian dialogue

Religious minorities may also promote dialogue among larger rival groups. In a country with multiple religious communities, all members of society will feel compelled to interact with those outside their group, promoting moderation and inclusion.²⁵ Likewise, faith leaders have been effective in a variety of peacebuilding efforts, including in East Timor, South Africa, and Northern Ireland.²⁶ Clerics from Christian and Yazidi communities may thus be able to work with Muslim religious leaders to overcome distrust between the groups. Because they are relatively nonthreatening to the much larger Sunni and Shia Muslim communities, Christians and Yazidis may be able to spearhead interfaith efforts.

Iraq’s religious minorities have not yet had the chance to promote dialogue in Iraqi politics, but recent events suggest that this is a role they could fulfill. Iraqi Christians demonstrated their ability to effect dialogue in their response to the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum. Iraqi Kurds were overwhelmingly in favor of independence, while Iraqi Sunni and Shia Arabs opposed it. By contrast, Iraqi Christians’ reactions were mixed. Some Christian leaders argued for dialogue between the Iraqi government and Kurds to resolve their differences, while others were supportive of independence.²⁷ The impact of Christians’ efforts—both for and against independence—was unclear, but the fact that Iraqi Christians did not approach this issue as a sectarian bloc suggests they may be able to promote dialogue in future debates.

Recommendations

U.S. efforts to restore Christian and Yazidi communities is the right thing to do in response to ISIL's genocide, and it would also help stabilize and develop Iraq's economy and national identity. Yet these benefits will accrue only if the United States formulates its policies in the right way. Religious minorities can improve a society through interaction and engagement with majority communities; therefore, U.S. policies must focus on enabling this engagement—not undermining it. To do so, the United States must initiate a two-pronged approach: U.S. policymakers must avoid policies that harden divisions, and at the same time they must promote actions to integrate religious minorities into Iraqi society. Further work will also be needed on the part of the United States to ensure that the Iraqi government implements these policies effectively.

The following recommendations can provide a framework for U.S. policy on restoring and integrating religious minorities in Iraq.

Avoid policies that harden divisions

Religious minorities will help stabilize Iraq only if they are seen as part of Iraqi society. U.S. policies that increase the distinction between Christians, Yazidis, and the Muslim majority will be counterproductive.

Work with international organizations

The United States should provide aid for religious minorities through a broad range of international organizations, such as the UNDP and nongovernmental organizations, rather than setting stabilization aid aside exclusively for Iraqi Christians. In response to some U.S. religious freedom advocates' concerns, the Trump administration recently shifted its aid policy, cutting off support for the UNDP in favor of providing aid exclusively to Iraqi Christians.²⁸ This may be misguided, as it could increase resentment toward religious minorities and does little to help stabilize Iraq outside of Christian communities. Instead, as CAP has argued previously, the United States should adopt a needs-based approach to development aid and should work with international donors.²⁹

Some exceptions for work targeted specifically at religious minorities is acceptable. The United States, however, should send a clear message that these are in addition to—and not instead of—the larger pool of stabilization funds.

Ensure aid reaches minorities

The United States should direct USAID and the State Department to ensure aid is reaching religious minority communities. Concerns raised about aid reaching Iraq's religious minorities are not unfounded; studies by CAP and others have highlighted persistent discrimination against religious minorities in the Middle East.³⁰ When the United States develops a needs-based approach to aid, it must also pay close attention to how the aid is dispersed. USAID and the State Department should monitor all aid dispersal to ensure that corruption at the federal and local levels does not harm religious minority communities.³¹

Create economic opportunities

The United States should accompany development aid with economic opportunities that both target religious minorities and grow the overall economy. As CAP has argued previously, both the threat of violence and the lack of economic opportunities lead religious minorities to flee the Middle East.³² Indeed, the economic situation of Iraqi Christians had been declining for some time before the emergence of ISIL.³³ Restoring these communities to Iraq requires expanding job opportunities and economic security in addition to development aid. One important area in which the United States can help is the restitution of property to Christians and Yazidis post-ISIL. As CAP has argued, ongoing property restitution issues make it difficult for religious minorities to participate in the economy. The United States should provide assistance to Iraq on resolving these issues. Additionally, development aid intended to promote economic growth can directly help religious minorities. Funding from the UNDP, for example, allowed a group of displaced Yazidi women to start a bakery in the Kurdish area of Iraq; the business has since grown and employs numerous displaced Iraqis.³⁴ The United States should support similar UNDP efforts to provide economic opportunities to religious minorities.

Promote the integration of religious minorities

In addition to integrating into society, religious minorities must also be protected from abuse and be given the opportunity to engage in politics. As CAP has argued previously, the United States should endeavor for more inclusive Iraqi politics.³⁵ U.S. policy should thus ensure that religious minorities are not discriminated against and are able to engage in Iraqi politics.

Monitor religious freedom abuses

The United States should continue monitoring religious freedom abuses in Iraq to ensure religious minorities are protected. The State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF) and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom report on religious freedom abuses around the world. These offices should be fully funded and staffed so that the United States is aware of abuses against religious minorities. The State Department must also be willing to place diplomatic pressure on Iraq in the case of any abuses—even if it complicates other initiatives.

Promote interfaith dialogue

The United States should promote interfaith dialogue efforts in Iraq between Christians, Yazidis, and Muslims. The IRF tracks religious dialogue efforts, while the Office of Religion and Global Affairs endeavors to promote such dialogue around the world. Both offices must be fully staffed. Additionally, the latter should work closely with Christian, Yazidi, and Muslim religious leaders in Iraq to set up interfaith dialogue efforts.

Politically engage minorities

The United States should implement political capacity-building programs to enable religious minorities to engage in the political process. The National Endowment for Democracy and the State Department have provided funding for capacity-building programs, which train civil society to engage in the political process.³⁶ Both offices should direct funding and personnel to Iraqi religious minorities to ensure that they have the tools to interact with other communities and advocate for their interests.

Conclusion

As CAP has argued in previous reports, the United States should focus its efforts in Iraq on sustained engagement and stabilizing competition to ensure that the country develops after the territorial defeat of ISIL.³⁷ Restoring religious minority communities—such as Christians and Yazidis—to Iraq can contribute to this strategy as well as the overall cohesion of Iraq. Yet this will only occur if the United States emphasizes integrating these communities into Iraqi politics and society as part of post-ISIL reconciliation. Policies that harden divisions between religious minorities and the rest of society will prove counterproductive. Vice President Mike Pence declared that protecting religious freedom is a “foreign-policy priority” for the Trump administration.³⁸ If that is true, then the administration must adopt a smart and consistent approach to defending persecuted religious minorities in Iraq, as this report presents. Otherwise, the United States will be promoting the very sectarian tensions it claims to oppose.

About the author

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