

A Kurdistan for All

Embracing Faith and Diversity



A Kurdistan for All Embracing Faith and Diversity

Uniting communities of different faiths with a common vision and conquering challenges with steadfast shared values: Diversity and peaceful coexistence are at the heart of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Special thanks

The Presidency of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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A Kurdistan for All Embracing Faith and Diversity

This book is dedicated to victims of religious persecution around the world.



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foreword

A Kurdistan for All

Kurdistan, our land of inclusiveness, is home to people of many ethnicities and religions. Respect among all our communities defines our culture. Our ancient history and rich cultural heritage distinguish our land where multicultural and multilingual people of many faiths live in peace and harmony. We are not only Muslim, we are also Christian, Jewish, Yazidi, Sabeen-Mandean, Zoroastrian, Kaka'i, and Baha'i.

Developed over generations, our culture of coexistence is not new. The seeds of multiculturalism were planted many centuries ago by our forefathers who paved the way for the harmonious society we live in today. In my ancestral village of Barzan, Jews, Christians, and Muslims peacefully lived side-by-side for hundreds of years. There was a church, a mosque, and a synagogue alongside each other. Regrettably, this religious diversity was tragically upset during the late 1970s by the Iraqi regime's aggression against the rights of everyone in our area. To honor the history and heritage we shared with our Christian and Jewish neighbors, we have begun to restore the church and synagogue.

When the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) was established in 1991 we followed in the footsteps of our founding fathers. Recognizing the common values that unite us, our vision and mission were clear: "ensure equality of social and political rights for everyone regardless of their ethnicity or religion; guarantee freedom of religion, language, and education; and preserve our cultural heritage by safeguarding sacred places of all religions."

Since the first Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was formed in 1992, our governments have abided by the vision and mission of our founding philosophy. In protecting and promoting religious freedom, we are proud of the progress we have made.

In 2006, our Ministry of Islamic Affairs was renamed the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Special departments staffed by officials serve the interests of Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, Jews, Zoroastrians, Sabeen-Mandean, Kaka'is, and Baha'is. Religious communities manage their affairs independently without intervention of our authorities.

In addition to schools that teach in Kurdish and Arabic languages, we also fully fund those that teach in Aramaic, Armenian, and Turkmani. Our government supports representatives and staff of all religions, operating costs of places of worship, and maintenance of religious sites.

All our communities are urged to participate in the political process and are welcomed to hold official positions at all levels of our government. With all citizens enjoying voting rights, eleven seats in our Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament (IKP) are reserved towards ensuring all communities are represented.

Our commitment to pluralism is reflected in several laws to promote and protect the rights and freedoms of all our communities. For example, our IKP passed The Minority Rights Law that guarantees equality of all religions with penalties against religious discrimination.

Our land is part of ancient Mesopotamia, the oldest cradle of civilization where societies and their religions began and evolved over thousands of years. Since 1991 when the doors to our future opened wider, we have begun to examine our origins from the dawn of history and to value the evolution of our rich cultural heritage.

Our struggle against oppression has been intense and long. More recently, we opened our doors wide to every ethnic and religious group in the country. Nearly two million threatened people, including refugees from Syria, sought refuge in our Region. We have welcomed and assist them to the extent we are able. We have protected them from the ISIS threat with the lives of more than 1,800 of our Peshmerga and thousands more wounded.

On the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, we offer our message to the world: Kurdistan, our ancient home of diversity with its proud history of sheltering the oppressed, stands as an oasis of religious freedom in the Middle East.

We are committed to pluralism, dignity, respect, and religious freedom. We shall continue to stand against all forms of religious discrimination. We respect, appreciate, and value our differences and promote our shared values.

We know that we are stronger when we embrace diversity and encourage inclusion, which is why I reaffirm our commitment to freedom and equality, regardless of faith or affiliation. Kurdistan will always be a safe home for those seeking peaceful coexistence.

Nechirvan Barzani

President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq



We are Brothers in Humanity

This book is designed to be a window to introduce the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Despite decades long conflict, war and persecution, the Region has been successful in protecting and developing one of its most important traditions and culture; co-existence and tolerance.

During those tough times, President Masoud Barzani’s message to Christians was always to encourage them against migration and to remain in their homes, adding that Kurdistan is home to all who live here.



The Kurdistan Region is a historical and ancestral land of various religions and nations who have been living in harmony, side by side for a long time. Conflicts and catastrophes have done immense harm with their religious temples and places of worship being targeted. Yet, on the basis of humanity and brotherhood, they have stayed together and protected their presence. The people of the Kurdistan Region never bowed down nor did they abandon their culture of coexistence to the cruel conducts of the former Baath regime as well as the policies and strategies of other dictators and chauvinists.

The major objective of the Kurdistan liberation movement throughout the 20th century was to achieve democracy for Iraq and to reject injustice, inequality and oppression and to boost the basis of coexistence and harmony. Kurds, Turkmen, Christians and Yezidis all participated in the Kurdish September Revolution and other freedom movements to bring about democracy, equality and freedom. This culture of coexistence resulted in the Kurdish popular uprising of 1991 and then the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government and subsequently the Kurdistan Parliament. Following the 1991 uprising against the former Iraqi regime, Kurdistan began a new page and they showed an unprecedented example of togetherness. Despite the fact that almost all territories of Kurdistan had been subjected to the infamous and genocidal Anfal campaign as well as the chemical bombing of Halabja, among other places, the Kurds did not seek revenge and on the contrary they saved the lives of thousands of

Iraqi soldiers who had surrendered to the Kurdish forces. That was the same army that had committed atrocious crimes against the people of Kurdistan. President Masoud Barzani played a pivotal role in issuing a general amnesty so nobody would seek retaliation.

Following the Iraqi liberation in 2003, the Kurdistan Region played a decisive role in the rebuilding of a new Iraq. The people of the Kurdistan Region were ready to begin yet a new page with Iraq in the hope of establishing a new and federal Iraq where all the rights of the Kurdistan Region are secured.

Immediately prior to the toppling of Saddam Hussein during a crucial meeting of the Iraqi opposition parties in December 2002 in London, the Kurdistan parties in pursuit of a new beginning with Iraq, where President Masoud Barzani focused on his message that nobody would work to seek revenge. He stated that if the path of the new Iraq was revenge against each other, nobody would be left to live in the new Iraq.

During the process of drafting the Iraqi constitution in 2005, the basis of partnership and the rights of the ethno-religious groups were included in the constitution following determination and serious efforts from the Kurdistan political leadership, notably President Masoud Barzani. In the Region's governing bodies, the same rights and entitlements have been given to them including allocating quota seats for minority groups in the Kurdistan Region Parliament. This decision has been described as a major pillar in building a partnership and to

“We are ready to defend the land and dignity of our Yezidi brothers and sisters with our souls and we will do what we can to help and save the refugees and liberate the land of Kurdistan from the terrorists. Yezidis shall remain as long as Kurdistan remains.”

President Masoud Barzani



further help the process of co-existence among all groups. Unfortunately, soon after the establishment of the new Iraq, the constitution was violated and the country was plunged into a dangerous sectarian conflict. This instability led to the rise of terrorism.

During the conflict with ISIS, the Kurdistan Region continued on its path of coexistence principles. Yezidis and Christians had fallen victims of the brutality of the terrorist group. Their territories and belongings were invaded in Sinjar and Nineveh Plains. The brave Peshmerga forces were once again present to protect them. Thousands of Peshmerga forces were martyred and injured during the conflict with ISIS, most of those sacrifices occurred while liberating Yezidi and Christian territories that had been invaded by. Meanwhile, the Kurdistan Region became a safe haven for thousands of refugees and IDPs who had fled to Kurdistan following the oppression of ISIS.

Following the invasion of Sinjar and the atrocious crimes that followed, on August 5, 2014, Baba Sheikh, one of the main Yezidi religious figures visited President Masoud Barzani where he was told by President Barzani “this disaster has not only happened to you, your grief is ours and the grief of the entire Kurdish nation. What has happened is an extension of the series of disasters that are being done against the Kurdish people. We are ready to defend the land and dignity of our Yezidi brothers and sisters with our souls and we will do what we can to help and save the refugees and liberate the land of Kurdistan from the terrorists. Yezidis shall remain as long as Kurdistan remains.”

Similar visits to President Barzani were made by Christian leaders across Kurdistan, by Louis Raphael Sako the Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans in Iraq and the world, delegations of Kurdistan's archbishops and Mar Dinkha IV President of the Assyrian Church of the East in the world, among many others. During those tough times, President Barzani's message to Christians was always to encourage them against migration and to remain in their homes, adding that Kurdistan is home to all who live here. He continuously stated that we all shall either live or die together, that this land ought to be shared by all of its components.

The Kurdistan Region is a successful example of coexistence of different religions and ethnic groups. This mosaic in Kurdistan is well noted and respected by the international community. In spite of numerous efforts to damage that, most recently by the terrorists of ISIS, Kurdistan remains a place where coexistence is crucial to the very identity of the Region.

Tolerance and Human Fraternity: A Global Imperative

By Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan,
UAE Minister of Tolerance and Coexistence



In the Holy Qura'n, The All-mighty God says to all people, in translation:

Had God willed, He could have made you a single community—but in order to test you in what He revealed to you. So, vie with one another in virtue and good works.

God also directs us in the Holy Qur'an that **"There must be no coercion in matters of faith."**

No nation, no society will peacefully convert everyone to a single religious belief, nor would they attempt it. The best we can do—and it is very good—is to vie with one another in virtue and good works. In the Qur'an, God also tells all human beings:

"O people! We have created you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another."

I am pleased to observe that the Kurdish people in Iraq are clearly committed to understanding that explanation of difference and to respond to that command to **"know one another."** As a result, their community is a bastion of tolerance, coexistence, and religious freedom – a community that values prosperity, peace, and harmony among all of its citizens.

In the United Arab Emirates, we share in this spirit of tolerance, coexistence, and religious freedom. Religion must

never be an excuse for hate, violence, or extremism. Religious differences must always promote appreciation for our common quest for spiritual fulfillment. They should be the basis for mutual respect and the common ground for problem solving. We are all members of a global society where all live and work together as brothers and sisters in harmony, peace, and goodwill.

As the Kurdish people of Iraq and all people of good will around the world do, we in the UAE also believe that individuals

with different religious beliefs, while vying with one another in virtue and good works, share a common quest for tolerance. They habitually act as good human beings. Good human beings work for peace and cooperation, prosperity, and the well-being of society. Good human beings respect one another and seek to understand each other's good motives, whatever their religious differences and personal beliefs may be.

In 2019, the UAE hosted His Holiness Pope Francis and His Eminence the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Dr. Ahmad El Tayeb. Together, and with the strong support of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, they issued the Abu Dhabi Declaration on Human Fraternity. That document asks everyone to commit themselves (and I quote); **"to work strenuously to spread the culture of tolerance and of living together in peace, putting an end to wars, environmental decay and moral and cultural decline"**. We in the UAE strongly believe that human fraternity will sustain us and will provide us with the energy, dedication and resolve to persevere and to succeed.

In a society endowed with tolerance and human fraternity, as in the UAE and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, we can clearly see the effects of tolerance and human fraternity on all aspects of society. We observe that tolerance and human fraternity complement good government. Tolerance and human fraternity help us stay truly moral societies. Tolerance and human fraternity encourage and enable empathy and compassion. Tolerance and human fraternity promote dialogue among all members of society. Tolerance and human fraternity lead to an informed understanding of the identity and difference of human beings.

Tolerance and human fraternity solidify one's confidence and pride in their own heritage and culture.

The United Arab Emirates has the only Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence in the world. Through this unique ministry, we confidently and proudly declare that tolerant behavior is a hallmark of our Arabic and Islamic heritage. We also declare that tolerance in the UAE is tolerance for all, regardless of gender, age, nationality, religion, culture, language, ability, or status in life. Tolerance in the UAE involves living peacefully with others and respecting diverse cultures and beliefs. In the UAE, we view ourselves as members of one diverse human society working together to eradicate extremism, and to ensure peace, dignity, and prosperity for all. The mission of the Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence aligns exactly with the values and ideals elaborated in the the Abu Dhabi Declaration on Human Fraternity.

We live in difficult times with new and unforeseen challenges confronting local and global communities. As societies around the globe strive to improve their quality of life, they confront a myriad of challenges. Issues such as global climate change, waste management, recycling, adequate food, potable water, and renewable energy sources become increasingly important

to sustaining the quality of our environment. Many adults around the world, most of them women, lack even the most basic literacy skills, and many children currently are not in school. Further, and sadly, there are many conflicts over geography, resources, water, religion, or political beliefs in many parts of the world. We strongly believe that tolerance and human fraternity possess the power to deal with all these challenges. Tolerance and human fraternity enhance our responsibility to work together to take up the banner of peace and preservation of human dignity and development of our local and global communities. Tolerance and human fraternity will help eradicate religious and cultural misunderstandings. Tolerance and human fraternity will help demonstrate that pluralism within diverse human societies is a positive and creative force for development and stability everywhere.

We must work together to emphasize our strong common belief in the power of tolerance and human fraternity to shape our future and to help solve many of the world's great global challenges. Together, God willing, we will unleash the power of tolerance and human fraternity to solve the great global challenges that confront our very humanity.

Religious Diversity Map





Religious Diversity Map

The Muslims

The overwhelming majority of Muslims in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq adhere to the Sunni sect of Islam.

The Profile

The overwhelming majority of Muslims in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) adhere to the Sunni sect of Islam. Sunni Muslims are very well represented in the executive, legislative, and judiciary bodies of the KRI. While Kurdistan's major political parties are secular, there are several Islamic parties in the Region and Sunnis Muslims do not face any restrictions to their freedom of religion.

ISIS terrorism caused a large influx of Sunni internally displaced persons (IDPs) into the KRI. According to official data, Sunni Arabs constitute around 20% of the KRI's population. IDPs chose to come to the KRI because of the tolerance and stability for which it is known throughout the region. At the same time as safeguarding their rights and providing them shelter, KRG has never curtailed religious freedoms of its large IDP population.

The KRI also has a small number of Shi'a Muslims. Unlike other parts of Iraq, the KRI has never experienced sectarian conflict between communities.

Historically inhabiting in the Nineveh Plains, the Shabak are mostly Shi'a, with a minority that is Sunni. Estimates of the size of Iraq's Shabak population range from 350,000 to 400,000.

The Shabak were forced to flee the Nineveh Plains, alongside other ethno-religious minority communities, when the area was under ISIS occupation. According to official sources, majority of Iraq's Shabak population has relocated to the KRI since 2014. During the struggle against ISIS terrorism, the Peshmerga established a Shabak division, which was tasked with defending its own community.

Unlike other parts of Iraq, the KRI has never experienced sectarian conflict between communities.



Erbil Citadel Mosque



Jalil Khayat Mosque, Erbil

Feyli Kurds are also Shi'a Muslims, who live on both sides of the Zagros Mountains near the Iran-Iraq border. It is estimated that 2.5 million Feyli Kurds live in Iraq, with only about 10,000 living in KRG-controlled areas. Their religious identity singled them out for persecution under the Ba'athist regime, during which their citizenship was revoked, and their property was seized under the orders of Saddam Hussein.

It is estimated that around 65% of Iraqi Turkmen are Sunni, while the remainder are mostly Shi'a. Turkmen are represented at ministerial level in the KRG, with five seats in the Kurdistan Parliament reserved for their representatives. They also serve in the Peshmerga.

According to data from the KRG Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs, there are 5,560 mosques in the KRI. In accordance with its policy of combatting extremism, the Kurdistan Regional Government and its relevant institutions regularly train the imams of these mosques on the peaceful message of Islam, to help reach the objective of effective and sustained coexistence in the KRI.

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Great Mosque of Akre, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

O mankind! We have created you male and a female; and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another.

Holy Quran

Shrine of Sheikh Abdulaziz Gilani

Sufism, a mystical movement of Islam, has existed in Iraqi Kurdistan for several centuries. Sheikh Abdulaziz Gilani, founder of the Qadri Sufi dervish order, was a respected Sufi leader who died in 1205. The Sheikh Abdulaziz takiye (dervish lodge) functions as the ritual center, attracting dervishes from the region. The dervish lodge, which attracts tens of thousands of pilgrims annually, is the most important center of pilgrimage and ritual life for Sufis in Iraqi Kurdistan.



Shrine of Sheikh Abdulaziz Gilani, Duhok, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Islam and Religious Freedom

————— Dr. Abdulla Mala Saeed

Dr. Abdulla Mala Saeed, the President of Union of Islamic Scholars of Kurdistan, shares his insights on peaceful coexistence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



As Islamic scholars, we showed our solidarity with our Christian brothers by participating in demonstrations against the aggression of ISIS. When ISIS turned on the Yezidis, Muslim scholars and imams were the first to condemn its atrocities.

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What is the cornerstone of the peaceful coexistence that defines the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)?

Respecting the rights of all religious and ethnic groups is the foremost characteristic of our culture. Kurdish leaders and Islamic scholars have played a significant role in preserving our diversity.

It is true that Kurdistan is a Muslim-majority society. However, we do not think of any religious or ethnic groups as minorities. Rather, all religious and ethnic communities in Kurdistan are considered equal components of our society. As such, citizens of all religious groups have stood shoulder to shoulder to protect Kurdistan and these very freedoms several times in our long history.

All representatives of different religious groups have strong relationships with each other in Kurdistan. We constantly exchange ideas, congratulate each other on holy days, and even participate in each other's ceremonies. If ever misunderstandings between communities or individuals' surface, they are resolved through dialogue.

The most striking example of our peaceful coexistence is how leaders of different religious communities work together on shared challenges. For instance, as Islamic scholars, we showed our solidarity with our Christian brothers by participating in demonstrations against the aggression of ISIS. When ISIS turned on the Yezidis, Muslim scholars and imams were the first to condemn its atrocities. The Kurdistan Islamic Scholars Union paid a visit to High Spiritual Yezidi Council in August 2014 to offer our help. We opened our mosques to displaced Yezidi and Christian families, who lived there until the KRG, working together with international organizations, established camps for them to settle in.



If a Muslim leader makes a discriminatory statement against any other religious group, can legal action be taken against him?

In 2015, the Kurdistan Parliament passed legislation known as the Minority Rights Law, which lists all religious groups as components of the KRI's citizenry. The law guarantees equality to the KRI's religious communities, and also mandates that religious discrimination be punished.

In case of any discriminatory remarks made towards any religious group, the Kurdistan Islamic Scholars Union, in cooperation with the KRG's Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, would set up a committee to investigate the case. If they find out that an Imam used any sort of defamatory remarks against any religious group or individual, legal action will be taken against him, and he will be barred from preaching in any mosque in the KRI.

Do you believe that Islam is compatible with religious freedom?

Islam protects the values of freedom of worship and human rights. However, these principles are sometimes misunderstood or even violated by members of the Muslim community. Any action that hurts another human being is against Islam. We implement the principles of religious freedom in Kurdistan specifically because we consider them to be in harmony with Islamic teachings.

We as the Union of Islamic Scholars of Kurdistan are strongly supporting religious freedom and the peaceful coexistence that it is based on. We will never tolerate sectarian aggression between religious groups. In Kurdistan we have great respect for all religious communities, and we believe that protecting our multiculturalism and passing these values on to the next generation should be our ultimate goal.

Any action that hurts another human being is against Islam. We implement the principles of religious freedom in Kurdistan specifically because we consider them to be in harmony with Islamic teachings.





Religious Diversity Map

The Christians

Christianity is the second-largest religion in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which Christians have seen as a safe haven since its establishment in 1991.

The Profile

—A rich mosaic

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) includes a rich mosaic of Christian communities. Christians in Kurdistan take pride in being able to trace their roots to the ancient Mesopotamian and the Assyrian Empire. They identify themselves by both religion and ethnicity. Assyrians are the descendants of the ancient Aramaic-speaking population of Northern Mesopotamia that converted to Christianity in the first century AD.

Kurdistan’s Christian population falls into six denominations:



Kurdistan is home to an estimated 245,000 Christians.

—A Safe Haven

Christianity is the second-largest religion in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). While Iraq’s Christian population dropped from around 1.2 million in 2002 to around 275,000 in 2021, Kurdistan has kept its doors open to all Christian communities.

Since the establishment of the KRI in 1991, Christians have seen Kurdistan as a safe haven. Christians living in the territories controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) remain a prominent part of politics and society, and enjoy robust religious freedoms.

Today, the KRI is home to an estimated 245,000 Christians. Around 65% of these are Chaldeans, 20% are members of the Assyrian Church of the East, and 10% are members of the Syriac Catholic Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church. Armenians along with other small groups constitute most of the rest of the Christians living in the KRI.

Kurdistan played a crucial role in protecting Christians from the aggression against them perpetrated by ISIS. The terrorist organization’s invasion of large swathes of the Nineveh Plain, where many Christians live, was another heavy blow inflicted upon Iraq’s Christian communities. Large numbers of Christians fled from other parts of Iraq to Kurdistan during and after the ISIS occupation. This was particularly significant following the fall of Mosul in 2014, when over 160,000 Christians were forced from their homes.

Kurdistan played a crucial role in protecting Christians from the aggression against them perpetrated by ISIS.

More than 30 Christian villages and churches have been rebuilt or renovated by the KRG since 2003.

—Places of Worship

Some 135 churches, 92 shrines, and 13 monasteries are scattered across the KRI, and the KRG regularly allocates land and funds to build new Christian cultural centers and places of worship. However, this represents but a fraction of Kurdistan's timeless Christian architectural heritage. More than 30 Christian villages and churches have been rebuilt or renovated by the KRG since 2003.

—Representation

Christians are a prominent political force in Kurdistan, and constitutionally hold six seats in the Kurdistan Parliament. The Directorate for Christian Affairs forms an official part of the KRG's Ministry of Religious Affairs. Currently, Mr. Khalid Jamal Alber is the Director General of Christian Affairs in the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Christians are a prominent political force in Kurdistan, and constitutionally hold six seats in the Kurdistan Parliament.

—Legal Protection

Article 2 of the Iraqi constitution establishes Islam as the state's religion and part of the foundation of legislation. It further stipulates that no law can contradict Islamic guidelines. It has been argued that this state of affairs provides justification for discrimination against non-Muslims across society. The Iraqi Personal Status Law allows conversion to but not from Islam and legally considers the children of half-Muslim families to be Muslims.

Christians consider the reverence for the rule of law in Kurdistan to be the basis of the peaceful coexistence.

However, Kurdistan's Christian community is well protected by legal provisions and enjoys equal business and employment opportunities. Christians consider the reverence for the rule of law in Kurdistan to be the basis of the peaceful coexistence and good relations that they enjoy with other communities, as well as the fair treatment, representation, security, and equality that have allowed their own communities to flourish.



Khalid Jamal Alber

Director General of Christian Affairs
Ministry of Religious Affairs

Thanks to the Kurdish leadership, the door is wide open to Christians who want to come to Kurdistan, where they are protected by legal provisions. Therefore, most of Iraq's Christians are living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The relationship between Christians and Muslims goes back to hundreds of years, and there is mutual respect between our communities. We celebrate our religious days freely here, and you can see Christian symbols all over the place. Moreover, local media provide fair and unbiased coverage of our holy days, and we have never been targeted by any part of the Kurdish media. There is a Christian minister in the current cabinet, and many general directors and deputy ministers are Christians.

Vahik Kamal Sughumun

Armenian Member of the Kurdistan Parliament

Everyone is free to choose and practice their religion in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. People are never afraid to express their religious identity. No one hides their religious beliefs in Kurdistan. We as Christians are responsible for our own religious ceremonies, rituals, and affairs. We have never been obstructed or threatened by any person or organization. We have always felt part of this community because we have never been treated differently from Muslims or any other groups. Mutual respect is the basis of the strong bond that hold all religious groups residing in Kurdistan together. We live peacefully in both the good times and the bad.



Robina Oimalek Aziz

Member of the Kurdistan Parliament
Deputy Head of Shlama Group for Christian Affairs

I believe that Kurdistan is a true example of peaceful coexistence in a region often riven by division. Religious freedom is the right of all people in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. People of many religious and ethnic backgrounds have paid a high price for these freedoms. Today, we are enjoying the results of their efforts and sacrifices. Thus, every religious group in Kurdistan is considered an equal part of our society. Cultural ties between different religious groups are very strong and there is no difference between us as citizens. Muslim, Christians, Jews, Kaka'is, Baha'is, and Yezidis live in the same neighborhoods in peace. In towns like Sumel, Barzan, and Akre, mosques and churches have been built next to each other. This is a land of peaceful coexistence, diversity, and mutual respect.



His Holiness Pope Francis' visit to Kurdistan

His Holiness Pope Francis is the first pope to visit the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). During his historic visit to the KRI on March 7, 2021, His Holiness expressed his gratitude to the President Nechirvan Barzani for protection of displaced Christians and other minorities.

I am grateful that, despite being in war, you received the displaced Christians and other minorities from Mosul, Nineveh Plains, and Qaraqosh. You opened your arms to Christians.

His Holiness Pope Francis



You are pure in heart. You have been compassionate towards all. Thank you for everything that you do for all the faiths and communities. Freedom is in place in Kurdistan.

His Holiness Pope Francis



I have come to bless this land and its soil. I thank you for all you have done and are doing with all the religious groups.

His Holiness Pope Francis



Kurdistan's Culture of Coexistence

Bashar Matti Warda

Bashar Matti Warda, Chaldean Archbishop of Erbil, talks about the peaceful coexistence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



How would you describe the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's (KRI) support for Christians displaced by ISIS?

In August 2014, Christian communities were forced to leave their villages in the Nineveh Plains. Erbil alone received 13,200 families, and the economic burden on the KRI was huge. The church worked together with then Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to take them in. It was risky to have such a large part of the population crossing borders without security check points, and there were fears that ISIS would take advantage of the situation. However, the KRG did everything possible to help them enter and settle in Erbil.

The KRG started raising international awareness about attacks on Christians, which helped a lot. We also used our connections with Catholic and Orthodox churches around the world to raise funds to provide refugees with food, housing, and medical care. The church, working together with the KRG, provided everything that the IDPs needed.

The KRG has also helped to expediate bureaucratic paperwork for the establishment of schools, for example, which meant that most of the IDP children were enrolled in schools by 2015. When we needed to open a school, all we had to do is call the Governor of Erbil and tell him that we had the funds and the land, and he approved it immediately. Thanks to the support of the KRG's leadership, and the Ministry of Education's help in securing buildings, we have been able to establish eight schools in one year.

This sort of coordination makes life much easier for the IDPs and helps them settle. Around 8,000 Christian families have returned and settled in the Nineveh Plains, thanks to the KRG's approach.

Do Christians enjoy the same legal rights as the KRI's Muslim majority?

Legally, we share same rights and as citizens, are equal before the law. Inclusion and coexistence in the KRI assure Christians that they are safe here. As long as the courts and justice system exist, Christians feel an important degree of safety and security.

We have a unique culture of coexistence in Kurdistan, which accepts different communities’ beliefs and allows them to express their identities freely.

Have Christians always felt that they are part of the broader society?

We have always felt that we belong on this land and are a part of broader society. We have a unique culture of coexistence in Kurdistan, which accepts different communities’ beliefs and allows them to express their identities freely. Resultingly, there is a lot of interaction among different faiths.

Christians enjoy the right to worship and celebrate their holidays freely, just the same as the Muslim community. For instance, Christmas in Erbil is quite special. Our relatives in Baghdad and other parts of Iraq often travel here for Christmas and Easter. In fact, Erbil is known to celebrate Christmas at least as much as Christian areas like Ankawa. You will even see Christmas lights decorating market stands and high streets.

Around 16,000 Christian families moved to the KRI between 2003 and 2010 and settled in historically Christian areas. With the help of the KRG, Christian villages were rebuilt through a special commission established by then-PM Nechirvan Barzani in 2003. By 2010, 50 villages had been rebuilt, and Christians began to return from Baghdad and Mosul.

Anyone who wants to see a working example of an inclusive, diverse society should come to Kurdistan. Of course, there are occasional incidents, but these are between individuals rather than communities. Kurdistan’s society is synonymous with coexistence.

Anyone who wants to see a working example of an inclusive, diverse society should come to Kurdistan.



Cathedral of Saint Joseph, Ankawa, Erbil

What was the vision that led you to found the Catholic University in Erbil in 2015?

The Catholic University is as much a culture as it is an academic institution. We are part of a global network of Catholic universities. The objective was to establish a liberal academic center, and the Italian Bishops Conference provided financial backing for our plan.

The idea is to have a center where students from all religious backgrounds can study together. We want to prioritize critical thinking in all areas. Having a good academic degree is a priority, because of our high educational standards in architecture, civil engineering, international relations, and English departments. We also want to expand into new academic and professional areas, all the time working together and thinking as a united, multi-faith community.

One might assume that a Christian university would only be open to Christians, but we welcome all beliefs and perspectives, as long as they share our passion learning together. This is an investment in our future. It gives students a place to study together and earn a recognized qualification. We currently have around 170 students from all religious backgrounds, and we look forward to seeing their contributions to the KRI in the coming years.

Respecting Different Faiths

Mar Abris Yokhanna

Mar Abris Yokhanna, Archbishop of the Assyrian Catholic Church of the East, talks about the Kurdish authorities’ support and Christian-Muslim relations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



How do you define your relations with the Kurdish leadership here?

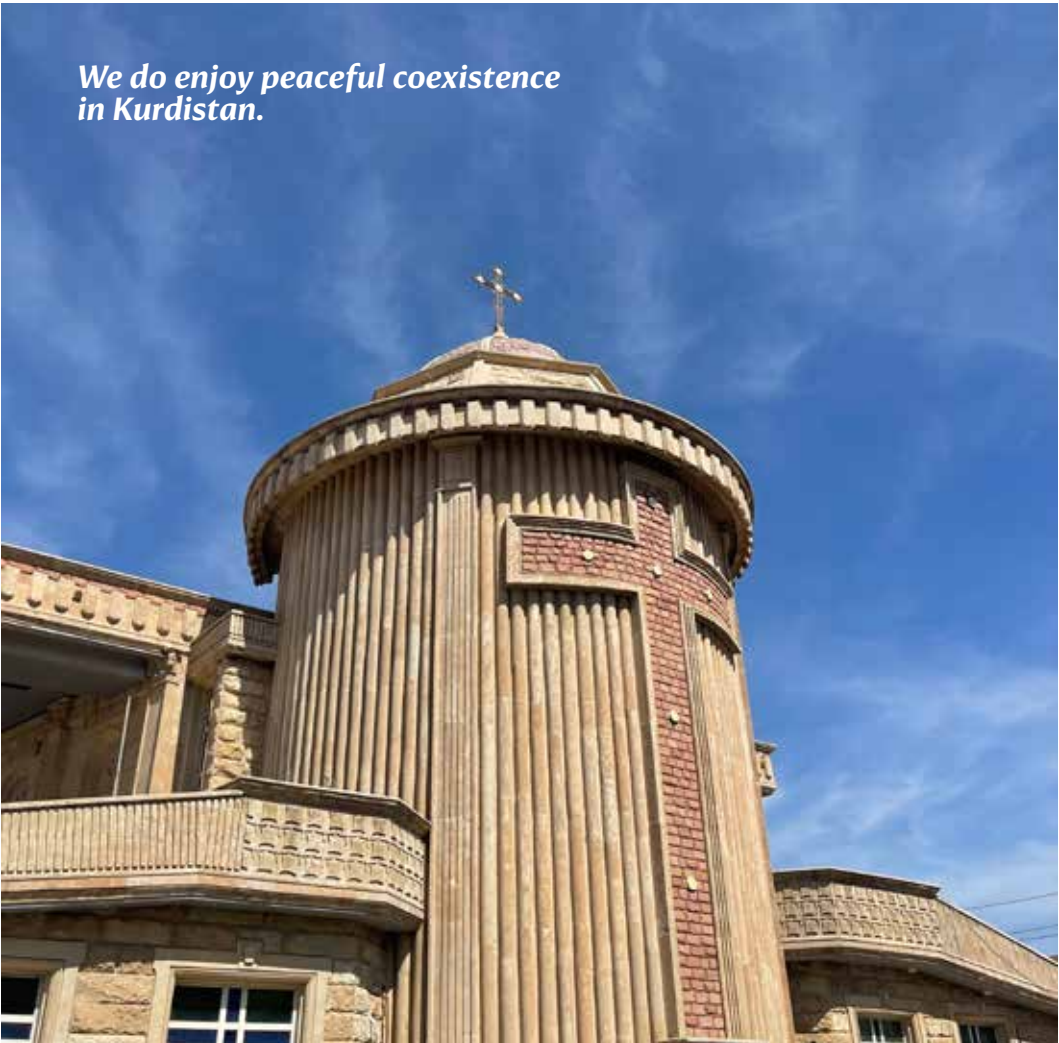
We have a special, long-standing relationship with the Kurdish leadership. For instance, Mala Mustafa Barzani was personally close to the bishops of our church. Even in the time of Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV, who relocated the patriarchate to Chicago in 1980, the relationship remained strong. Dinkha IV was the first to propose reestablishing the patriarchate here in Erbil, which was the first step in bringing the patriarchate back to its origins. These close ties still prevail today.

How would you assess Christian-Muslim relations in Kurdistan?

We have a very good relationship with the Kurdish people. I was born in Erbil and grew up among Muslims, so I had more Muslim friends than Christian ones. When I was going to school, the neighborhood where we lived was like a single family. I don't recall any sort of discrimination against me or my faith during that time. Our religious identities were not even a topic of discussion. Here, everyone accepts each other as they are and there was mutual understanding between us.

Nowadays, we still have this mutual respect between communities. However, there are social elements who are not happy with multi-culturalism in Kurdistan. We need to keep an eye on them, and not allow them to poison our society with their fundamentalist ideas. The Kurdish government is doing everything it can to curb their radicalism, and we do enjoy peaceful coexistence in Kurdistan, but the government must take the initiative to build more bridges between different faiths. We should not allow fundamentalists to disturb the peace we have found in Kurdistan. At the end of the day, we are one family.





We do enjoy peaceful coexistence in Kurdistan.

What is the importance of education to peaceful coexistence?

Education plays an important role in stopping the spread of radicalism. The KRG's Ministry of Education is working on a new curriculum that will incorporate the teaching of different religions. However, the Ministry of Education cannot reach all people in Kurdistan. There are many villages where a proper education is simply not available. As such, the mullah's role is very important. The mullahs should be better educated, not just in Islam but also in matters relating to other religions. Mullahs should then instill in their own people the spirit of peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, and coexistence, which will strengthen the bonds between our communities.



Mar Youkhanna Assyrian Church, Ankawa, Erbil

The Kurdistan Regional Government has always been very supportive, and we have never had any issues with the authorities here.

Do you receive support from the KRG?

The KRG has offered us a land to build our patriarchate in Erbil. They even offered to build it for us. The building is currently under construction, and we have already finished building a kindergarten with a small church on the second floor. The Kurdish government has always been very supportive, and we have never had any issues with the authorities here.

A Feeling of Belonging

————— Nicodemus Daoud
Matti Sharaf

Nicodemus Daoud Matti Sharaf, Metropolitan Archbishop of Syriac Orthodox Archdiocese of Mosul, Kirkuk, Kurdistan Region, on religious freedom in Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



The extent of religious freedom in Kurdistan is unheard of in most countries.

————— **You were the Archbishop of Saint Ephrem cathedral in Mosul when ISIS took over the city in 2014. Can you tell us what happened that time?**

In June 2014, there was a curfew because of fighting between the Iraqi armed forces and ISIS. Because we could not leave our home, we had no idea what was going on in the city. I received a call from the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) then-Minister of the Interior, Mr. Karim Sinjari, on June 9th. He warned me that I should leave Mosul immediately because ISIS was approaching the Cathedral and the archdiocese house. I told him I couldn't abandon my people. Minister Sinjari insisted and even offered to send somebody to get me out safely.

After I put the phone down, I talked to one of the generals of the Iraqi army who was responsible for western Mosul. He sent an officer to help me leave the city. The officer told me to be ready to leave in five minutes. I called the priests and other people I knew. I informed them that we needed to leave Mosul immediately. The only things I brought with me were the eight oldest of our 300 early Christian manuscripts, some of which date to the seventh century. I first went to Duhok, and then came here, to Erbil, at the end of June 2014.

ISIS took the cathedral and converted it to a mosque and used it as such for 18 months. In that time, they started systematically to destroy everything that indicated it was a church. Today, it is still a ruin. The churches of Saint Thomas, Saint Joseph, Saint Mary, Saint Ahoadamah, and others met the same fate. I will never forget Mr. Sinjari's call and warning. If he hadn't convinced me to leave Mosul that day, I don't know what would have happened to me or my people.

How do you feel the Syriac Orthodox community is treated in Kurdistan?

We have 1250 Syriac Orthodox families in Erbil, around 600 in Duhok, 200 in Qaraqosh, 100 in Kirkuk, and 15 in Slemani. Thanks to the leadership of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), we feel at home here in Kurdistan. The Kurdish authorities give us a feeling of belonging. They treat us like everyone else. The leadership here always tells us that this is our land too, and that we are not guests in this country.

We left Mosul four times between 2003 and 2014. ISIS then made us flee for a fifth time. But in Kurdistan we are protected by the law. We can't live in an environment without order, security, or protection. Because of the security and freedom here, many Christians from Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra came and settled in Kurdistan, even before ISIS emerged. Our life is much better under the KRG than in other parts of Iraq.

We don't see any security problems for Christians here. If you want to judge a society, you should observe how its minorities are treated. And Kurdistan attracts more minorities than any other part of the country.

The Kurdish leadership has always been very helpful and supportive of our faith and our community.

Do you think you receive enough support from the KRG?

The KRG was experiencing severe economic hardship during the fight against ISIS. But the government still helped us as much as they could. When the Syriac community left Mosul, most of it came to Kurdistan. They opened the border for our people and accepted all of us. When Kurdish soldiers see the crucifix in our cars at checkpoints, they welcome us.

We built the new center for my diocese in Erbil in 2018 with a support of the UK-based Barnabas Fund and the KRG. I requested around 10,000 square meters of land close to our church to build an international school. Then Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani allocated us the land immediately. We also received financial support for this project from the Hungarian government, directly from Prime Minister Viktor Orban. We are planning to open the school in a year. The KRI's leadership has always been very helpful and supportive of our faith and our community.



His Holiness Mor Ignatius Aphrem II inaugurated the new archdiocesan residence in Erbil in January 2019.

How would you describe the degree of religious freedom in KRI?

The extent of religious freedom in Kurdistan is unheard of in most countries. When my friends, many of them bishops in other parts of the world, hear that the Kurdish government is building a church and allocating us the land to build our schools or centers, they don't believe it. We receive more government support than religious minorities in many wealthier countries. We don't even pay for our water or electricity, which is also provided by the government.

Because of the sincere support that we receive from the leadership here, I made a request to the Holy Synod to include the name "Kurdistan" in my diocese. My dominion is now called "the Archdiocese of Mosul, Kirkuk and Kurdistan". I once organized a meeting of the Holy Synod here in Erbil. His Holiness, our Patriarch, came along with bishops from the US, Germany, Lebanon, and Syria. It was a world first, which we are still very proud of.

Armenians in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Around 3,000 Armenians live in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

The majority of Kurdistan's Armenian population belongs to the Armenian Apostolic Church, while a small percentage belongs to the Armenian Catholic Church.

Armenians practice their religion without any restrictions. Armenians are recognized as an ethnic minority of the KRI, and one seat is reserved for Armenians in the Kurdistan Parliament. There are two Armenian schools and five churches in the KRI, for which the KRG has provided land and financial support.

The first Armenian Apostolic Church has been opened in Erbil in April 2019. The Church has been built and supervised by the KRG's Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs.



Respect for Religious Freedom

————— *Archbishop Musa Al-Shamani*

Archbishop Musa Al-Shamani, Archbishop of Syriac Orthodox Diocese of Deir Mar Mattai on the Nineveh Plains and Aqrah, on the extent of religious freedom in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



The Kurdish leadership provides us with everything we need. For this reason, the Kurdish leadership and Kurdistan’s peace and prosperity are always in our prayers.

—————
How would you define Kurdistan’s role in protecting the monastery of Mar Mattai against ISIS terrorism?

During the ISIS occupation, we were on a mountain close to the monastery, and were really concerned about ISIS advancement. Brave Peshmerga forces stopped the ISIS assault on the monastery and protected our people. We will never forget what they have done for us. The Peshmerga defended the area and maintained their presence here all through the ISIS occupation. If it wasn't for the Peshmerga we wouldn't be here today.

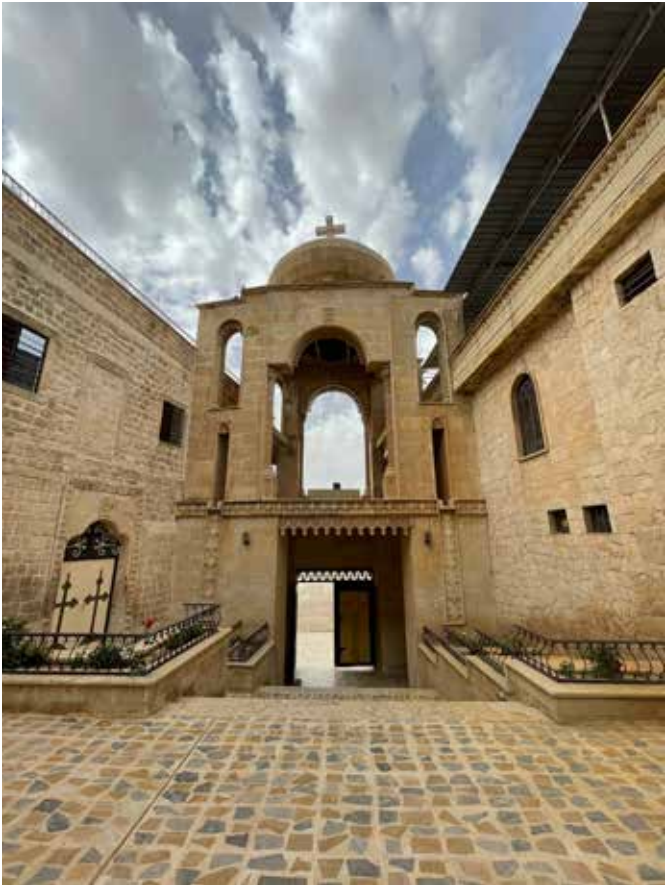
—————
How is your relationship with the Kurdish leadership?

The Kurdish leadership has always been good to us. They provide us with vital protection and security, including the Peshmerga that saved our monastery from certain destruction. President Nechirvan Barzani's door is wide open to Christians. He is always helpful and shows us respect. We receive congratulatory messages from the President during our holy days. We hope that Kurdistan will continue to thrive and support all religious groups. The Kurdish leadership provides us with everything we need. For this reason, the Kurdish leadership and Kurdistan's peace and prosperity are always in our prayers.

—————
Are you happy with the level of religious freedom in Kurdistan?

We have great religious freedom here, which is why you can see people practicing their faith openly and without fear of persecution. Places of worship are being built for different religious groups, and they are flocking to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq from the rest of country because of the safety and security they can enjoy here. So, we are very happy with the level of religious freedom in Kurdistan.

Founded in the fourth century, Mar Mattai Monastery is nestled into the Mount Alfaf, 20 kilometers from Mosul. The Syriac-Orthodox Monastery is considered one of the oldest Christian monasteries in existence. The Monastery holds a wide range of collection of Syriac Christian manuscripts.



Historical Ties

Fawzi Hariri

Fawzi Hariri, Chief of Staff of the Kurdistan Region Presidency, talks about Christian rights in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



When we look at the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), we see Christians holding several high-ranking positions in political life. They are also successful businesspeople and serve in Kurdistan’s security forces. We do not see this level of influence in other Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East. What is the historical explanation for this situation?

The Christian community in the KRI has been here for as long as the Kurdish community. We live together, fight together, and suffer together. Both Kurds and Christians have faced repression throughout Iraq’s history. Therefore, the aspirations of Christians are very similar to those of Kurds which is why many Christians joined Kurdistan’s political movement. For instance, my late father left his job as a primary school teacher in 1963 and joined the Kurdistan Democratic Party. He was followed by many other Christians across Kurdistan. Over the years, they worked for Kurdistan as an equal component of the Kurdistan nation under the late Mustafa Barzani, then under the late Idris Barzani, and now under President Masoud Barzani. Christians have always played an important role in decision-making in the Kurdish political movement.

Thanks to the peaceful environment created by successive generations of Kurdish leadership, many Christian denominations have established a base in Kurdistan, making it an oasis for people from other parts of Iraq. Therefore, like a magnet, Kurdistan has attracted Christians from the other parts of Iraq who came here to live, work, and study. On the strength of its unique social cohesion, Kurdistan has excelled not only in the region but also in the world.

How have Christian rights been improved since the establishment of the KRI?

Thanks to President Masoud Barzani’s leadership, Christians’ political and cultural rights have improved since the establishment of the KRI in 1991. Christians are represented in parliament, and Christian holy days, including Christmas and Easter, are recognized as an official holiday across the country. The Syriac and Assyrian languages are recognized as official languages in the KRI. There are schools whose syllabus is in Assyrian. Christian students study in their mother tongue up to university level. Kurdistan also provides security to its Christian community, and the Kurdistan Regional Government financially supports a team called the Church Guards, which provides security in Christian areas.

When Mr. Nechirvan Barzani was the Prime Minister, he allocated budget to rebuilding Christian villages and renovating churches, and also provided financial support for the construction of new churches. No government in the world offers this kind of financial support for church building. We are proud of our successes in preserving and strengthening multi-culturalism and religious freedom in Kurdistan.

Multiculturalism in Kurdistan

————— Ano Abdoka

Ano Abdoka, Minister of Transport and Communications, talks on the basis of multiculturalism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



The culture of coexistence in Kurdistan is genuine. It is our national treasure.

—————
How would you define peaceful coexistence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)?

The diversity and inclusion that defines Kurdistan is unique not only in the Middle East, but in the world. For hundreds of years, there has been peaceful coexistence between different religious and ethnic groups here. The Middle East, like other regions, has many dark chapters in its history. Ethnic and religious groups have faced massacres and genocide. However, never in Kurdistan's past have ethnic or religious communities turned on each other. The culture of coexistence here is genuine. It is our national treasure.

—————
Do you think that the Christian community in Kurdistan receives enough support from the government?

Kurdistan is the only place in the Middle East where so many Christians come to settle. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Christians were targeted all over Iraq. An estimated 111 churches were attacked, and more than 1,300 Christians were killed. Then, under ISIS occupation, another 65 churches were destroyed, and many more citizens killed and kidnapped. Another 160,000 Christians were displaced. The majority of them came to Kurdistan, which speaks for itself.

On the other hand, more than 30 Christian villages and churches have been rebuilt or renovated by the KRG since 2003. President Nechirvan Barzani was the first Middle Eastern leader to fund the construction of a church from his own pocket. He opened the church and planted its first olive tree. He also issued a prime ministerial decree that non-Christians could not buy a land in the Christian district of Ankawa in order to protect its Christian heritage, which has allowed it to become the largest Christian district in Iraq today, and one of the largest Christian districts in the Middle East. PM Masrour Barzani also formed an inter-ministerial committee consisted of seven ministers to resolve the issues of Christians all over the region. Due to this wise policy, Christianity in Kurdistan is thriving, and Christians who have moved here will never leave because they consider the KRI their sanctuary. We receive a lot of support, so we will always be here, and we will always thrive.



Have you ever felt like second-class citizen in Kurdistan?

I have not. But if I ever did, I could freely go to the media and speak out without any fear. Christians, be they Chaldean, Assyrian, Syriac, Armenian or Kurdish, have shed blood together. More than 300 Christian villages were destroyed during the time of the revolutions by Saddam and other Iraqi regimes. Our people were wounded or killed during uprisings, and we have tirelessly been building the KRI ever since. Today, we feel fairly treated and equal to any of Kurdistan's other constituent groups.

What is the basis of this multi-culturalism?

The foundation of our diversity was established centuries ago, starting in villages then moving to cities. Different religious and ethnic groups lived in harmony throughout the KRI's modern history. The most significant and groundbreaking model for religious and ethnic pluralism started in the province of Barzan. Sheikh Ahmed Barzani, known as Khodan ('the Guardian') to his followers, is well known for his spiritual teachings there and for establishing a school of thought for his multi-ethnic and multi-religious people to follow. During that time, Muslims, Christians, and Jews coexisted peacefully and were treated equally within Barzan province. There was a church, a mosque, and a synagogue built alongside each other near Sheikh Ahmed Barzani's house. His values and thoughts even preceded the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and formation of the League of Nations, the forerunner of the United Nations. In Barzan, according to Sheikh Ahmed's teachings all members of religious and ethnic groups have equal rights, women and men are equal, women cannot not be married without their approval, and animals and nature must be treated with respect. He even preached the sustainable use of water and the importance of environmental protection.

This movement became the foundation of Barzani's values, which were translated into other languages under the revolutionary leadership of Mullah Mustafa Barzani. But these were not only Kurdish ideals. Chaldeans, Assyrians, Syriacs, Jews, Yezidis, Kakais, and Armenians joined our cause.

Following the granting of autonomy to the KRI in 1991, these values became institutionalized during Mr. Masoud Barzani's presidency. Since 1992, Christians have been granted five of the seats in our parliament, representing Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Syriacs. Many important political positions in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) have been given to Christians, including those of Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Tourism, Minister of Finance, Minister of Communication and Transport, and Governor of Erbil, as well as various directorial roles. There are also several high-ranking Christians serving in Kurdistan's security forces. This vision of peaceful coexistence, as founded in a small village 100 years ago, still guides us today.



Religious Diversity Map

The Jews

Jewish settlements in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq date back to 8th century BC. Amedi and Zakho were important centers of Jewish life for centuries.

The Profile

The renowned 12th-century Sephardic chronicler, Benjamin of Tudela, found more than 100 Jewish communities in what is now the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) around 1170 AD.

The Jewish population of Iraqi Kurdistan dates back to the Assyrian Captivity, when several thousand Jewish families were forcibly relocated by the Assyrians from Samaria near the Sea of Galilee, to the Nineveh Plain north of present-day Mosul in the 8th century BC. And there they stayed, unlike their counterparts from the southern Kingdom of Judea, who were allowed to return to Israel from the Babylonian Captivity. In time, they became known as the Ten Lost Tribes.

Thereafter, Jews played an important role in the history of the region until the creation of the State of Israel. Erbil, the capital of current-day Kurdistan, was once the heart of the ancient kingdom of Adiabene, whose leaders converted to Judaism in the 1st century AD. Their queen, Helena of Adiabene, even moved to Jerusalem and contributed to the construction of the temple and the war against Rome.

Erbil, the capital of current-day Kurdistan, was once the heart of the ancient kingdom of Adiabene, whose leaders converted to Judaism in the 1st century AD.

The renowned 12th-century Sephardic chronicler, Benjamin of Tudela, found more than 100 Jewish communities in what is now the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) around 1170 AD. According to his famous account, there were more than 25,000 just in Amedi, an ancient mountain-top city in today's Kurdistan governorate of Duhok. Amedi was an important center of Jewish life for centuries and boasted two synagogues at the time of Tudela's visit. As they do today, they spoke Aramaic, the lingua franca of the region before the Arab conquests of the 7th century AD. Another important center of Jewish life in Kurdistan was Zakho, once known as "The Jerusalem of Mesopotamia" because of its synagogues and historically large Jewish community. The Jews of the city had a unique and rich oral tradition famous for its legends, epics, and ballads, with heroes inspired by both Jewish and Muslim traditions.



Zakho, once known as "The Jerusalem of Mesopotamia" because of its synagogues and historically large Jewish community.

Prior to the creation of the State of Israel, there were roughly 25,000 Jews in Iraqi Kurdistan, and another 130,000 in the rest of Iraq, mostly concentrated in Baghdad. The 1941 Farhud Pogrom in Baghdad, which left at least 200 Jews dead, accelerated the migration of Kurdish Jews to Palestine, which had claimed 10,000 of the region's Jews since the 16th century. With tensions running high following the creation of the Jewish State, the Iraqi government froze the assets of most its Jewish population and all synagogues were shuttered. By 1952, 96% of Iraq's Jews had emigrated, including practically all its Kurdish Jews, many in the famous Operation Ezra and Nehemiah airlifts.

In the context of a departure of almost all Jews from Iraq, Jewish being in Kurdistan even tough small numbers somewhat noteworthy. Today, around 400 Jewish families live in the territory. This tiny community has committed itself to restoring historical sites, building a synagogue and cultural center. Most of Kurdistan's Jewish population lives in Zakho, Akre, Amedi, and Erbil. Inhabitants of Halabja and Koysinjaq also still routinely refer to their respective Jewish quarters.

In 2015 the Kurdistan Parliament passed the Minority Law, which entitled Judaism to official representation in the KRG's Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs. Mr. Sherko Abdullah Lasok is the current Jewish Representative.

The tomb of Jewish Prophet Nahum

Prophet Nahum's tomb is located in the Christian town of Alqosh in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Though politically not under KRG administration, Alqosh is protected by KRG's security forces. While the Prophet Nahum lived in the seventh century BCE, his legendary tomb dates to 1173 CE. The tomb is housed in Alqosh's historic synagogue. For centuries it was a major site of Jewish pilgrimage during Shavuot. Over the years, part of the roof of the synagogue has collapsed and the walls are crumbling. An American NGO recently funded the restoration of the synagogue by professional archaeologists from the Czech Republic, who have already expertly restored the Choli Minaret in Erbil.



Unrestricted Freedom

Sherko
Abdullah Lasok

Sherko Abdullah Lasok, Director General of Jewish Affairs in the KRG’s Ministry of Religious Affairs, talks about religious freedom and Kurdistan’s Jewish community.



There are no recorded cases of anti-Semitic abuse or threats in the history of the KRI.

- **How do you define coexistence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)?**
I believe Kurdistan serves as the model to the world when it comes to acceptance, diversity, and multiculturalism. The KRI has proved to be a beacon for interreligious relations. Different religious groups live together in peace, respect, and harmony here. When foreigners visit Kurdistan, they are incredibly impressed with the hospitality and openness they find.
- **Do Jews ever feel threatened in Kurdistan?**
We live in peace in the KRI, and we have never felt threatened. There are no recorded cases of anti-Semitic abuse or threats in the history of the KRI. Communities do not live-in isolation from each other, and Jewish families are an integral part of many cities’ societies. The DNA of our culture is very open minded, which ensures that there is always mutual respect between us and our fellow citizens.
- **Can you freely celebrate your religious holidays in the KRI?**
The KRI offers unrestricted freedom for all different religious groups to practice their religion as they wish, so that we can celebrate our holidays freely.
- **How would you assess the KRG’s policies to protect religious minorities?**
The KRG leadership is doing everything in their power to strengthen Kurdistan’s plurality. Importantly, they instil the notion of coexistence and multiculturalism in younger generations, which is very encouraging. We are profoundly grateful to the KRG for spearheading interfaith dialogue in the region.

THE WHOLE
OF THE
TORAH IS
FOR THE
PURPOSE OF
PROMOTING
PEACE.

The World's First Female Rabbi

————— Osnat Barzani

The life of one of Kurdistan’s idol reflects the rich history and overlapping cultures that define the Kurdistan Region of Iraq today.



Osnat Barzani
– an assumed portrait

For a historian, there is no greater thrill than uncovering the life and achievements of long-forgotten but remarkable people whose ideas and actions helped form the world we know today. This explains the current fascination with Osnat Barzani, whose story demonstrates the timeless diversity of her native Kurdistan, while shedding light on murky part of Middle Eastern history.

Born in 1590 in Mosul, Osnat (also known as Asenath) Barzani has the distinction of being the first Kurdish woman mentioned in recorded history. But posterity's interest in her stems from an even more remarkable fact: that she has a strong claim to being the world's first female rabbi.

Rival claims to the title come from Ukrainian Hannah Rochel Verbermacher (1815-1888), who was the first woman consulted as a rebbe (Jewish religious leader similar to a rabbi), and Regina Jonas (1902-1942), who was fully ordained as a rabbi in Berlin in 1935. But in the minds of many historians and Jewish scholars, the historical context of Barzani's life wins her the title.

Her title was that of tanna'it, rather than rabbi, but this seems to reflect local dialect and tradition rather than a separate position within the Jewish faith. The male form of the title, tannai, had been used by her father, Samuel ben Nethanel HaLevi Barzani, who, while ethnically Kurdish, was head of the yeshivah (a school for Jewish religious education) in Mosul, and regarded by contemporary fellow Jews as a saint.

Despite the prevailing gender roles of the day, her accession appears to have been quite smooth, suggesting the depth of her knowledge of the Torah, as well as the respect and admiration she commanded in the community.

Osnat was probably his only child and her father lavished care and education on her, allowing her to be recognized as a scholar in her own right at an early age following her mastery of Hebrew, Torah, Talmud, Midrash, and Kabbalah. Barzani married one of her father's students, Jacob Mizrahi, who inherited the title of tannai when his mentor and father-in-law passed away.



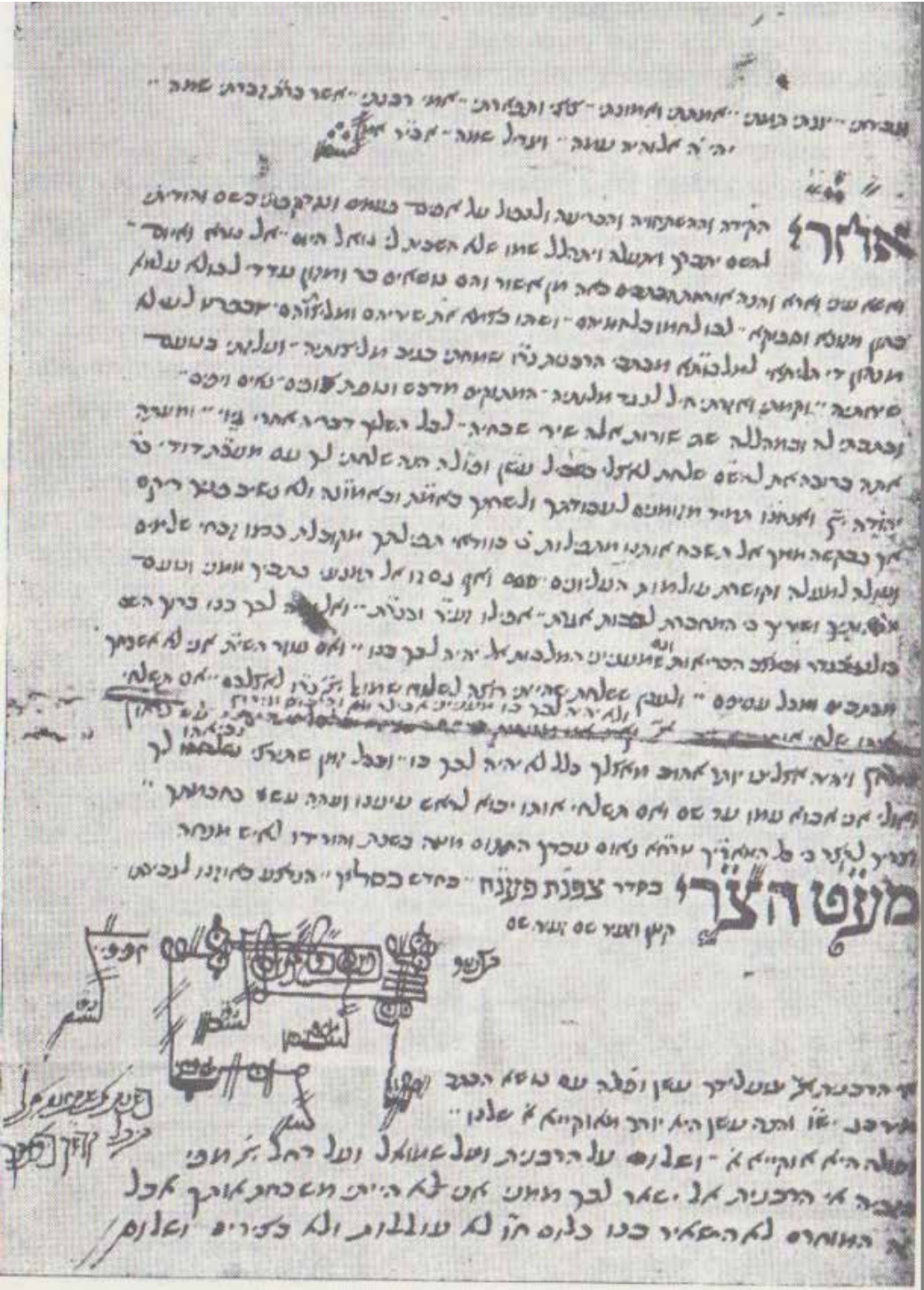
Tomb of Osnat Barzani, Amedi, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.
Photo courtesy of Joseph Samuel.

When he also died, the position of tannai and leader of the Mosul yeshivah naturally passed to Osnat Barzani. Despite the prevailing gender roles of the day, her accession appears to have quite smooth, suggesting the depth of her knowledge of the Torah, as well as the respect and admiration she commanded in the community. Indeed, her gender would become part of local folklore, which tells of her ability to limit her childbearing to two children so that she could devote herself to study.

Her abilities were confirmed by her continued leadership of the yeshivah, which produced many important scholars, including her own son, who went on to study in Baghdad. Her abilities are also attested to by the remaining writings that are attributed to her. These were written in several languages that Osnat spoke fluently, including Hebrew, and include ambitious poems written in Kurdish, such as Ga'agua L'Zion (Longing for Zion).

After her death in 1670, she was laid to rest alongside her father in Amedi in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Their shrine is a place of pilgrimage for the region's few Jewish followers.

But her memory lives on in the form of stories about her piety and miracles. Foremost among these is a legend about the synagogue in Amedi being set on fire by an angry mob during a local holiday while Barzani was visiting. After speaking a sacred prayer, a flock of angels descended from heaven to put out the flames and protect the worshippers and their sacred texts from the fire. The synagogue was renamed in her honor.



A letter from rabbi Pinhas Hariri to Rabbi Osnat Barzani, 1664.
From the book “The Jews of Mosul” by Ezra Laniado.
Courtesy of the National Library, Jerusalem



Religious Diversity Map

The Yezidis

Yezidism is one of the ancient monotheistic religions of the East, and combines customs, rituals, and symbols from Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Mithraism.

The Profile

The name Yezidi comes from the word Ized, meaning 'servant of god', itself derived from the Sumerian word 'Ee-zi-di', meaning pure or righteous. Baptism, circumcision, prayer, and fasting are the main pillars of the Yezidi religion. They worship Tawusî Melek, referred to as the peacock angel, who serves as a messenger between God and the world. One of the central aspects of the Yezidi faith is a belief that people's personal choices, guided by the heart and the mind, is the source of all good and evil exists on earth. Therefore, the power of choice is the main feature of Yezidism.

Organized into a caste system, at the top of the Yezidi social pyramid sits the (e)mir, a hereditary prince and secular leader, who in turn appoints the Baba Sheikh, or spiritual leader. Below them are 40 sheiks divided into the Adani, Achammsana, and Qatani factions, in addition to forty pirs tasked with regulating religious affairs. Ordinary followers are known as mureed.

Followers are forbidden from marrying into different castes, and from marrying outside the religious community, which does not accept religious converts. Yezidis abstain from pork and believe in the reincarnation of the soul.

—Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir

Sheikh Adi bin Musafir was born in present-day Lebanon in 1078. He is not a prophet or the founder of the Yezidi religion, but oversaw its renaissance by uniting the Yezidi tribes, and reorganizing them spiritually and socially. He is greatly revered by Yezidis, many of whose rituals and symbols are named after him. His tomb at Lalish has long been the Yezidis' holiest site.

—Lalish

Yezidis share a strong connection to their land and monuments, especially their main temple in Lalish, which features the tomb of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, and is also where they believe creation first began after the Great Flood. 14 kilometers from Sheikhan District, the small mountain village of Lalish is also thought to have also been sacred to ancient Sumerians. Lalish is uninhabited apart from the resident emir and visiting pilgrims, who can stay in the village's deserted houses.



—Mushafs

For most of their history, Yezidis relied on orally conveying their beliefs and practices through poetry, hymns, and stories. In time, these were recorded and compiled into the Mushafs. The language of Yezidi religious texts, songs, and prayers are in Kurmanji, the most-spoken Kurdish dialect.

—Holy Days

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) officially recognizes Yezidi religious holy days, and the Yezidi new year's celebration, Seri Sali, is considered an official holiday in all institutions throughout Kurdistan. Seri Sali is celebrated on the first Wednesday of April to commemorate when Tawusî Melek first came to earth. It is celebrated by painting eggs to represent the spreading of his colorful peacock wings. The Feast of the Sacrifice, known to Muslims as Eid al-Adha, is marked by the Baba Sheikh making a pilgrimage to Lalish. The Feast of Seven Days starts at the beginning of October, and is when many Yezidi families attempt to make the pilgrimage to Lalish. Yezidis believe that in Upper Heaven the Seven Great Angels gather at this time to show their blessings.

—Population

Thought to number around 550,000, Yezidis are the largest religious minority in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), as well as in Iraq. Though most are Kurdish speakers who consider themselves ethnically Kurdish, many also speak Arabic as a result of Ba'athist Arabization policies. Yezidis are concentrated in the Kurdistan districts of Sheikan, near Sinjar, and in villages scattered across the Tel Keppe and the Bashiqa district of the Nineveh and Duhok governorates.

—Representation

Although their ancestral home in the Sinjar and Nineveh Plains lie within Baghdad's remit, it is persistently unclear whether Iraq's largest minority falls under the jurisdiction of Baghdad or Erbil. Baghdad grants them one seat in the parliament as a minority. The KRG considers Yezidis to be Kurdish, and thus expects them to express their political aspirations through one of the region's established Kurdish political parties. The Directorate for Yezidi Affairs forms an official part of the KRG's Ministry of Religious Affairs.



—Oppression

Central to the Yezidi experience has been centuries of oppression and attempts to convert or ethnically cleanse them. According to their count, there have been 72 such efforts. Yezidis were singled out under the Arabization campaigns of Saddam's Ba'athist regime. In the 1970s many were relocated from the mountains into ready-made camps in the lowland city of Sinjar. They were not protected by law, and their religious rights went ungranted.

Unlike Abrahamic monotheism, where an archangel, Satan, rebels against God, is caste out of heaven, and in revenge tempts humans into sin, Yezidis revere the archangel Tawusî Melek, with a different trajectory. Though he too was cast out of heaven, Yezidi tradition has it that he cried for 7,000 years until his tears of redemption quenched the fires of hell. Thus redeemed, Tawusî Melek now serves as an intermediary between humanity and God. Misinterpretation of Yezidi faith and the fact that parts of the story of Tawusî Melek bears similarity to that of Satan in other Abrahamic religions, has inspired large-scale discrimination and violence against Yezidis.

Central to the Yezidi experience has been centuries of oppression and attempts to convert or ethnically cleanse them. According to their count, there have been 72 such efforts.



Lalish Temple, Sheikhan

—Genocide

After ISIS swept through northern Iraq and Syria in the summer of 2014, they prioritized the extermination of the Yezidis. Whereas Christians were given the choice between reverting to Dhimmi status (subjecting them to a tax for non-Muslim 'peoples of the book'), conversion, or death, Yezidis were given only the latter two options.

Fleeing the town of Sinjar for the mountains, an estimated 5,000 Yezidi men were executed by ISIS, while some 7,000 women were taken as slaves. The campaign has since been recognized as an act of genocide and is thought to have created 2,745 orphans. 84 mass graves have been discovered, each containing an average of 35 bodies. The violence prompted a wave of Yezidi migration into the KRI, with 360,000 people from Sinjar, and 60,000 from smaller centers like Bashiqa and Bahzani. Their safe passage from their town was provided by the Peshmerga.

Today, most of Iraq's Yezidis live in Kurdistan. The majority of Yezidi survivors were brought to safety by the Yezidi Rescue Office, which is itself part of the Special Office of KRI President Nechirvan Barzani, and which coordinates with the security establishment and Peshmerga forces.

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The Power of Choice

————— **Hazim
Tahsin Beg**

Hazim Tahsin Beg, the spiritual leader of Yezidis, on religious freedom in Kurdistan, misconceptions about Yezidi religion, and the Yezidi genocide.



Religious freedom in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is absolute.

—————
On religious freedom in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) does not interfere in the religious affairs of any group residing in Kurdistan. We exercise our faith, observe our holy days, and manage our internal affairs freely. Substantial measures have also been taken to protect religious freedom in KRI's law. Religious freedom in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is absolute.

—————
On misconceptions about the Yezidi religion

Our religion is misunderstood in some parts of the country. Some claim that we are not monotheists, and that we worship multiple gods, but that is not the case. Yezidis are monotheists. Because of this misconception, our community has experienced 72 attempted genocides in our history. The most recent one was part of ISIS's occupation.

—————
On Yezidi religion in Kurdish textbooks

The Yezidi religion is represented in Kurdish textbooks. Our academics have been working closely with the Ministry of Education to make sure that what is written about our religion in textbooks is accurate and represents our religion fairly. Everything that is taught is from our perspective.

—————
On the Yezidi genocide

The acts of terrorism that ISIS unleashed on the Yezidis is recognized as a genocide. The KRG helped to raise awareness about the Yezidi genocide across the world. President Nechirvan Barzani created a committee to document atrocities that were committed. Thanks to the KRG's support, Yezidi survivors were brought to the safety of the KRI, where we received international support. The international community here in Kurdistan regularly visit us, and we are able to brief them on Yezidi genocide and the needs of our people.

Rescuing the Yezidis

Hussein Al Qaidi,

Hussein Al Qaidi, Director of Yezidi Rescue Office, talks on his office's missions.



ISIS abducted 6,417 people. Of these, 3,548 were female, and 2,869 were male. A total of 3,545 people has been rescued to date.

When was the Yezidi Rescue Office established?

After ISIS attacked Sinjar in August 2014, a large number of men, women, and children were abducted by the terrorists. It was then that then-Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani decided to open Yezidi Rescue Office to locate and rescue Yezidis abducted by ISIS. Our mission is to rescue abducted children and reunite them with their families. Thanks to the outstanding support from our leadership, we've reunited many lost family members over the past six years.

How many people have been rescued so far?

ISIS abducted 6,417 people. Of these, 3,548 were female, and 2,869 were male. A total of 3,545 people has been rescued to date. Of these, 339 are men, 1,205 are women, and another 2,001 are children under the age of 18, including 1,045 boys and 956 girls. Today 2,768 people are still missing that we know of. We also know that a lot of women and children who were taken are still living in the houses of their abusers.

Around 400,000 Yezidis became internally displaced persons (IDPs) in areas under the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) control. 68 Yezidi places of worship were destroyed, and 100,000 Yezidis became refugees abroad. 2,745 children lost their parents. 83 mass graves have been found to date, but only five have been excavated. They revealed the remains of 104 people. 78 mass graves remain to be excavated.

Does your office help survivors to receive professional help for rehabilitation?

Most of the survivors have faced various forms of physical, mental, and sexual abuse. A lot of them have experienced trauma and are in need of a lot of assistance and professional help. Our office helps to convey their needs to the international NGOs that are willing to help. We work closely with them and the UN to help these people as best we can.

In 2015 the KRG made an agreement with German state of Baden-Württemberg to send around 2,500 of these patients for treatment, and this office provided a lot of the information on their experiences and conditions. There is a mental health clinic in Kurdistan that has opened specifically to treat women and children that have been rescued from ISIS.

Aside from your rescue mission, which services does your office provide for Yezidis?

We aid in the issuance of passports for victims who have fled without any paperwork. To date, we have issued 4,000 passports for them. We also help them to distribute food packages. With the help of the Ministry of Immigration, we have been able to provide nearly 14,000 food packages to these victims and their families.

How would you define the KRG's support to Yezidis?

Kurdistan has provided shelter to over 400,000 of Yezidi IDPs in Duhok. There are 21 IDP camps in the KRI, where our people have been living for the past seven years. The KRG has been providing them with all basic necessities, like water, electricity, and food. Our duty is to help and serve the Yezidi community in the KRI. Opening this office was a big step forward for them. The KRG has shown unwavering support to the Yezidis.

Did you receive any help from any other government for rescue operations?

Rescuing these people was very difficult, and there was no assistance provided by either the Iraqi government in Baghdad or international NGOs. The only body that facilitated these operations was the KRG.

Female ISIS Survivors

Then-Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani decided to open Yezidi Rescue Office to rescue Yezidis abducted by ISIS. Until 2021, Kurdistan Yezidi Rescue Office (KYRO) rescued a total of 3,545 people. We have talked some of these survivors rescued by the KYRO.

1

I am 20 years old. ISIS held me captive in Mosul for one year. My brother and eight sisters were also abducted. We were first kept in a school for about a month. After that ISIS members came and separated us, and we were taken to different houses with different families. I was constantly abused, both sexually and mentally. My last captor was an ISIS fighter. Once, when he was away, I escaped the house and met a middleman working for the Kurdistan Yezidi Rescue Office. With the help of this man, I made it to Duhok. Of my eight sisters, four are still missing. According to some of my friends they have been killed by airstrikes. The rest have been rescued. I live in a camp near Zakho.

2

ISIS abducted me in Tal Afar, Syria. I was imprisoned by ISIS for two and a half years. I was rescued in Raqqa, Syria. When ISIS came, they arrested men, women, and children. They separated the men. We did not see them again. They put all the women and children in a house. ISIS members would come and pick out the females that they wanted. I was living with my six-year-old son that time. One day, they came and they took my son from me. I have not seen him since. At that time, I was pregnant with my daughter. After these two months I was taken to the private residence of an ISIS member. There were four other Yezidi girls living there. Other ISIS members regularly came and stayed in the house. After a week, I was sold to another family as a maid. I had been sold ten times by the time I was rescued. I was sexually abused by seven of my owners. They used my three-month-old daughter to manipulate me. Somedays, they took my daughter away from me for a whole day and told me that if I ever ran away I would never see her again. The last time I was bought by someone, he told me that he would sell me to someone that would rescue me. I was paid for by the Kurdistan Yezidi Rescue Office. He put me in a car and took me to a house, where I was handed a fake ID, and then driven to the border. I live in a camp with my daughter now.

I was held captive for two years and nine months. When we were fleeing to Sinjar Mountain, we were abducted. They loaded us onto big trucks and took us to a village where they locked us in a prison. At the time of my abduction, I had one daughter and one son. They took my son and I have not seen him since. My eldest daughter, who was seven years old at the time, was taken from me and sold. She was rescued in 2020 and is 11 years old now. I was rescued by the Kurdistan Yezidi Rescue Office at the Iraqi-Syrian border. I live in the camp with my daughter now.

3

I am 25 years old. I was abducted in 2014 with my husband and son. An ISIS fighter came and imprisoned me in a house. I have not seen my husband or son again. I was abducted by an ISIS man. I was sexually abused. I had three children with him. They took all the children and sold me to another family. I was rescued by the Kurdistan Yezidi Rescue Office in the Iraqi desert in 2019.

4

I am 16 years old. ISIS killed my father, three brothers, and my sister. I was held captive for three years by ISIS, during which I was sold 15 times. Two of these times were to families. The rest were to ISIS fighters. The last ISIS member I was sold to died in an air strike, after which I fled. I met with a man who was secretly working for the Kurdistan Yezidi Rescue Office. He brought me to Kurdistan, where I was re-united with my mother in Kurdistan. Now we are living together in a camp.

5

6

I was arrested and held captive for two and a half years by ISIS. My son was taken from me when I was abducted. I never saw him again. I spent almost one year in an underground prison in Raqqa. There were over 50 women and children at the prison. They sold me three times. I was sexually abused. I was rescued by the Kurdistan Yezidi Rescue Office, which set me free.

7

ISIS killed my husband and put me and my two sons and two daughters in an underground prison. I was held captive for two years. One day, ISIS fighters came and took my sons. I have not seen them since that day. I was then sold four times, and I was sexually abused by all the men who bought me. At that time, my two daughters were four years old and one year old. Every day, I begged my last owner to free me. He tortured me and took improper photos of me. I was rescued by the Kurdistan Yezidi Rescue Office and was brought to Kurdistan.

8

When ISIS abducted us, they put women and children in a house and arrested the men. After some time, an ISIS man came and took my son and daughter from me. My son was 12 years old and my daughter was 13 at the time. My son was rescued in 2019. I don't know anything about my daughter's whereabouts. I was sexually abused and tortured. A man who was working for the Kurdistan Yezidi Rescue Office bought me and took me to the border.



Religious Diversity Map

The Zoroastrians

Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions in the world and is often regarded as the world's first monotheistic belief.

The Profile

—**Good thoughts. Good words. Good deeds.**

Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions in the world and is often regarded as the world's first monotheistic belief. It was the official religion of Persia from 600 BCE to 650 CE. The monotheism that Zoroastrianism pioneered believes is one universal god, Ahura Mazda. His message was revealed through the prophet Zoroaster, who then used them to unite and reform a set of related, polytheistic, bronze-age religions across Central Asia. These revelations are described in the book of holy scriptures of Zoroastrianism, the Avesta. Zoroastrianism has three main principles: good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.

When the Achaemenid Empire was founded by Cyrus the Great, Zoroastrianism was a well-established religion in the Middle East and Central Asia. According to Herodotus, the Persians were forced to adopt Zoroastrianism following a revolt against the rule of Cambyses II, Cyrus' son. It remained the religion of successive Persian dynasties until the Muslim Conquest of the Sassanian Empire in the 7th century.

The Zoroastrians have remained a scattered minority ever since. Modern-day followers are roughly divided between traditionalists, who forbid marrying outside the community and don't accept converts, and reformers, who want to promote their religion's relevance to modern issues by emphasizing its message of individual responsibility and inclusion.

—**Population**

Today, Zoroastrians number fewer than 200,000 faithful spread across the Middle East, India, and increasingly the US, where its message of individualism, gender equality, and environmentalism is often in tune with modern social values. Similarly, Zoroastrianism is surviving and often thriving in its historical heartlands in the Middle East. There are thought to be around 15,000 Zoroastrians in Iraq, the majority of which reside in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

—**Duhok & Slemani**

Kurdistan's Zoroastrians are mainly live in the governorates of Duhok (especially in the city of Zakho), and Slemani. Duhok Governate was an important center of Zoroastrianism during its first golden age, as attested to by the recent discovery of Zoroastrian tablet dating to the 2nd century BC just outside Duhok City. Today, the city hosts a branch of Yasna (meaning devotion in Avestan), an international Zoroastrian association. Another important Zoroastrian center is Slemani, which is home to the Zoroastrian Cultural and Heritage Center, as well as the Kurdistan's only functioning Zoroastrian temple.



—**Representation**

Zoroastrians enjoy religious freedom and recognition in the KRI under the Minority Rights Law of 2015. Kurdistan's Zoroastrian community has a representative in the KRG's Ministry of Religious Affairs. Ms. Awat Hussamaddin Tayyib is the current Zoroastrian Representative.

A mosaic of different religious and ethnic groups has peacefully lived side by side in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq for many years. In this time, Kurdistan has never known sectarian violence, and there are no recorded cases of hate crimes between communities. We are lucky to live in the KRI, where Muslims and others join our holidays and festivals, and we are free to practice our religion and culture freely and without fear. An important value that communities share here is mutual respect for one another.

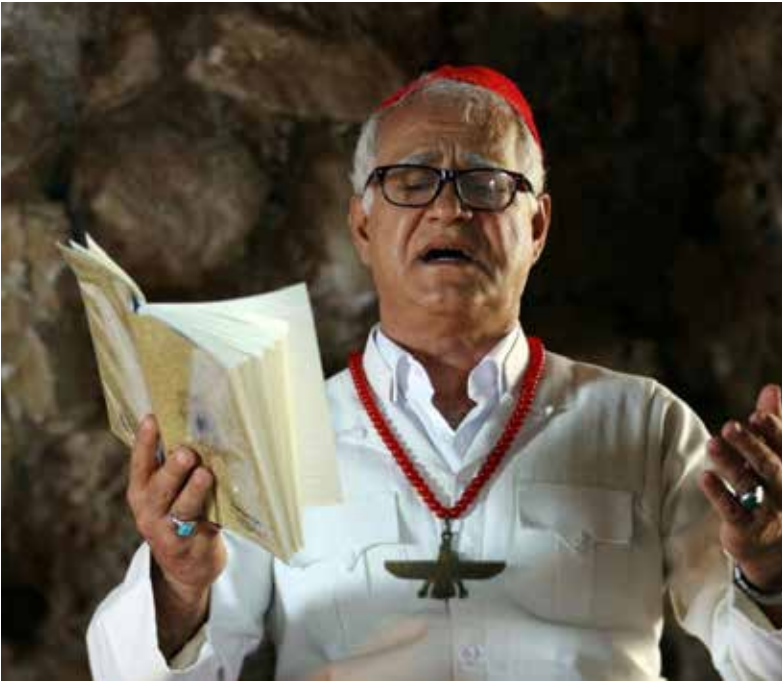
Awat Hussamaddin Tayyib

Zoroastrian Representative
KRG Ministry of Religious Affairs



—Zoroastrian temple in Kurdistan

The Zoroastrian temple was opened in Slemani in September 2016. The rituals held here are the first in Iraqi history.





Religious Diversity Map

The Baha'is

Kurdistan remains the only part of Iraq where Baha'is enjoy official status and protection, exercise their faith freely and without restriction.

The Profile

—Baha’u’llah

Baha'is are followers of a monotheistic faith founded by Mirza Hussein Ali Nuri (known within the faith as Baha'u'llah, meaning ‘Glory of God’), in 19th-century in Iran, who experienced divine visions between 1853 and 1863. Baha'is believe his resulting works to be divine revelation. He announced his mission in the mid-1860s through a series of letters written to world leaders. Baha'u'llah's teachings are centered on the oneness of God, the unity of humankind, freedom from prejudice, the progressive revelation of religious truth, gender equality, education, and harmony between religion and science. Baha'u'llah's resting place is Bahjí Palace, near Acre in Israel.

—Sar-Galu Cave

The most important holy site in Kurdistan for the Baha'i community is Sar-Galu Cave, located northwest of the city of Slemani. It was here that Baha'u'llah spent much of his two-year spiritual retreat in Kurdistan. The revelations he experienced there would form the basis of his works Seven Valleys, Hidden Words, and the Kitāb-i Īqān (Book of Certitude), which he wrote after his return to Baghdad.

—Persecution

The Baha'i community in Iraq was founded in 1931. However, Baha'is were heavily repressed by the Ba'ath Party, which declared their religion illegal in 1970. Their properties were confiscated, and members of the community faced prison or execution. Just five years later the bill (Rule No. 358) was passed that barred the recognition of Baha'is as a religious group. This deprived its adherents of basic social services, thereby forcing them to apply for Muslim identity cards just to be able to get passports or birth and marriage certificates.

Although the removal of the Ba'athist regime in 2003 ended some of the more bluntly repressive measures, the Baha'is remain widely discriminated against by the central government in Iraq. Despite (Rule No. 358) being abolished by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior in 2007, the Ministry again halted the issuance of Baha'i identity cards that same year. Their reasoning was that they ran counter to another law that prohibits conversion from Islam, which applied to Baha'is who had previously obtained Muslim identity documents. Therefore, even today, Baha'i cannot register their faith on their ID cards in Iraq. Their unrecognized status leaves them in a legal limbo that often doesn't allow them to register births and marriages, or access services related to education, healthcare, and property.

Even though Baha’is are a small community of around 100 families residing across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Baha’is are recognized as a religious minority by the Kurdistan Regional Government's Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs.

—Immigration to Kurdistan

In contrast, Baha'is who migrated from the southern part of Iraq to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have received a warm welcome from the local people and authorities. Baha'is are a small community of around 100 families residing across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. They are recognized as a religious minority by the Kurdistan Regional Government's Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs. As such, Kurdistan remains the only part of Iraq where they enjoy official status and protection, exercise their faith freely and without restriction.

Baha'is also retain the freedom to carry out community services, and also participate in social gatherings with other religious and ethnic groups across Kurdistan. In 2018, the US State Department announced that, “Followers of the Baha'i faith reported that the Kurdistan Regional Government allowed them to observe their religious holidays and festivals without interference or intimidation”.

Baha'is follow the KRI's laws but refrain from engaging in partisan political activity. They devote themselves to the betterment of their character and behavior, as well as the society they live in. The experience of Kurdistan's Baha'i community provides an excellent model of openness that characterizes Kurdish society. Today, Baha'is strive to contribute to the development of Kurdistan, a land they call home.

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Kurdistan is a Model

————— Sarmad Kaykasraw

Sarmad Kaykasraw, Baha'i Representative in the KRG's Ministry of Religious Affairs, talks about coexistence and the respect shown towards the Baha'i community in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



Bahauallah, the founder of our faith, arrived in Baghdad in 1853 and lived in Iraq until 1863. Between 1854 and 1856, he lived in Kurdistan, and later declared that the time he had spent among the Kurds was the happiest of his life.

—————
What is the significance of Kurdistan for followers of the Baha'i faith?

Bahauallah, the founder of our faith, arrived in Baghdad in 1853 and lived in Iraq until 1863. Between 1854 and 1856, he lived in Kurdistan, and later declared that the time he had spent among the Kurds was the happiest of his life. Kurdistan and the Kurdish people are important to the Baha'is because of the formative experiences Bahauallah had here.

Another reason for the Kurdistan's importance to Bahai's is the respect we receive from the leadership in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Even though we are a small community of around 100 families residing across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the KRG treats with respect and dignity. They officially recognized our faith in 2012, and our right to freedom of religion is secured through our citizenship. We didn't even have to ask for help; they approached us, and asked what we needed, which came as a surprise since we are often treated differently in other parts of Iraq and the region. When we travel, we want people to know that we are from Kurdistan, and that we are free to worship as we wish here.

—————
Can you celebrate your religious days freely?

One of the most important dates for Baha'is is called Ridvan. It is usually held on the 20th or 21st of April, and commemorates the manifestation of Bahauallah. As a Baha'i representative, I receive messages from the President Nechirvan Barzani. He always congratulates us on our holy days. We will never forget the kindness and support he has shown towards us.

Another important feast is the birthday of Bahauallah. The global Baha'i community celebrated the 200th anniversary Bahauallah's birth in 2017. We celebrated this event in the biggest congress hall in Erbil, provided for us by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. As such, we do not only celebrate our days freely, we also receive respect and active support from the Kurdish authorities.

I believe Kurdistan is a model that could inspire the whole region. The extent of multiculturalism that we have here is unique, and fascinates outside observers.

Does the Baha'i community ever face discrimination from the local public?

The Baha'i community in the KRI feels that it is a key part of the Kurdistan community. We have friends from all segments of the society, including Islamic political representatives. The religious parties of Kurdistan are different from those of Baghdad. Kurdish Islamic Party representatives join our celebrations, and we count them among our close friends. This mutual respect and understanding are the basis of social cohesion here in Kurdistan.

The main reason for this is the good nature of the Kurdish people, who are very open minded and have coexisted with other cultures and peoples throughout their history. They embrace all different ethnic and religious groups, so we do not feel any sort of discrimination from the public in Kurdistan.

How would you describe the state of intercultural understanding in Kurdistan?

I believe Kurdistan is a model that could inspire the whole region. The extent of multiculturalism that we have here is unique, and fascinates outside observers. Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, on the first day that primary schools opened, told the students to love each other regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds. I believe this is the strongest message that a leader can give to his people, and instilling that attitude in the next generation is very important to the future we want to build. Thanks to the leadership's constant efforts and the Kurdish people's openness, we feel at home. People do not see Baha'is as 'others' here in Kurdistan.

THE EARTH
IS ONE
COUNTRY,
AND
MANDKIND
ITS CITIZENS.

BAHA'U'LLAH



Religious Diversity Map

The Sabeian Mandaeans

The Kurdistan Region is the only place in Iraq where Sabeian-Mandaeans feel they can practice their ancient faith in peace, an experience common to many of the Region's minorities.

The Profile

Thought to date back 2,000 years, the Sabean-Mandean faith is one of the world's oldest. The religion is a form of Gnosticism, descended from ancient Mesopotamian traditions, with rituals inspired by those of Zoroastrian and Nestorian worship. Of the 60,000-70,000 Mandeans thought to be scattered around the world, fewer than 15,000 remain in Iraq today.

Referred to as both Mandeans (which derives from the Aramaic word for knowledge, manda), and Sabeans (the Aramaic word for baptism or Şabi), Sabean-Mandeans follow the teachings of Yahia Yuhana, known to many as John the Baptist. Water and baptism (masbuta) are central to their belief system. According to their gnostic faith, there are two worlds: The World of Light and the World of Darkness. Though a spiritual realm, the World of Light has its starting point at the River of Jordan. Water, and rivers in particular, are holy to Sabeans, who originally sprung up in the deltas of lower Iraq. To be baptized in the river is to re-immense oneself in the World of Light.

Having faced persecution and even extinction several times in their history, many Sabean-Mandaeans have either fled Iraq or been killed. They faced intense discrimination under Ba'athist regime.

Systematic harassment and oppression forced this inherently peaceful community to migrate north to the safety of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

The first existential threat to their community began in the 1970s, when Saddam Hussein began to drain the country's southern marshes, forcing the Sabeans out of their southern Iraqi homelands.

The threat to the community worsened following the 2003 Iraq War. Sabean-Mandean communities came under frequent attack by both Shia and Sunni militias in the chaos following the US invasion, and were left to choose between conversion, expulsion, or death.

Traditionally specializing in gold and silver smithery, Sabean-Mandaeans were often targeted for kidnapping and extortion across southern Iraq. They were also regularly accused of witchcraft, impurity, or systematic adultery, which subjected them to killings, abductions, and torture. Sabean-Mandaeans' religion forbids the use of violence or the carrying of weapons, even in self-defense. Therefore, their strictly pacifist faith left them defenseless against militants. Systematic harassment and oppression forced this inherently peaceful community to migrate north to the safety of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.





In Kurdistan, they are finally free from religiously motivated attacks, and their faith has been recognized by the Kurdistan Parliament since 2015.



In Kurdistan, they are finally free from religiously motivated attacks, and their faith has been recognized by the Kurdistan Parliament since 2015. They are also represented in the Kurdistan Regional Government's Ministry of Religious Affairs, and opened their first mandi, or place of worship, just west of Erbil. Kurdistan is the only place in Iraq where Sabeen-Mandaean feel they can practice their ancient faith in peace, an experience common to many of the region's minorities.



I have been the Sabeen-Mandean representative in the Ministry of Religious Affairs since 2015. The main reason that Sabeans moved from southern Iraq to the Kurdish Region of Iraq was the oppression that our community suffered elsewhere in the rest of the country. We live here in Kurdistan comfortably and feel very secure. We have not faced any sort of disrespect from the public, and we have very good relations with the representatives of other religious groups and government authorities.

Khaled Al-Roumi
Sabean Mandeian Representative
Ministry of Religious Affairs

Safe Haven

By Satar Jabar Helo,
Head of the Sabean Mandaean community in Iraq



The Kurdistan Region of Iraq has always embraced different religious and ethnicities, which together characterize the culture and identity of the region.

Sabean-Mandaean is one of the world's oldest religions. Their first prophets were Adam and his son Seth. They also revere Idris, Shem (the son of Noah), and John (the Baptist) son of Zakaria.

The Sabean Mandaean's religion is based on six pillars:

- Monotheism
- Baptism
- Prayer and ablution
- Fasting (36-day cycles)
- Charity
- The Last Day and Our First Book (Ginza Rba)

The history of the Sabeans goes back to ancient Mesopotamia. They migrated to the region in search of refuge from religious discrimination. The Sabeans'

ethnic roots are Aramaic. The Sabeans settled on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is now central and southern Iraq. The Sabeans preserved their language, Eastern Aramaic. There are currently estimated to be around 15,000 Sabeans residing across Iraq's governorates.

The political representation of minorities in Iraq has been a casualty of widespread polarization along religious and ethnic lines. Exclusion, marginalization, and persecution still exist in Iraq, and the Sabean Mandeans are deliberately frozen out of the political process.

In Iraq, minorities were often mistreated through the granting of parliamentary quotas that did not match to the size of their communities. The other issue for minorities in Iraq was the election law, which did not protect them from the influence of the larger parties. Electoral laws that did not leave any room for the emergence of independent entities or individuals outside the traditional partisan constituency prevailed after 2003.

As a result, various Iraqi religious social components, including the Sabeans, sought refuge, safety, and recognition in the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI).

The Sabeans have acquired a house of worship and a cultural center in the KRI. They have received financial support for years, and are able to grant goldsmiths' licenses to practice their profession.



The status of these minorities has been strengthened politically, socially, economically, and culturally, and they have become accepted in the KRI's institutions. The KRI has embraced refugees and displaced people, and helped meet their daily needs. The KRI also played a big role in combating terrorism and denouncing violence, which is why Kurdistan has become a safe haven for all, where minorities do not feel that they are strangers.

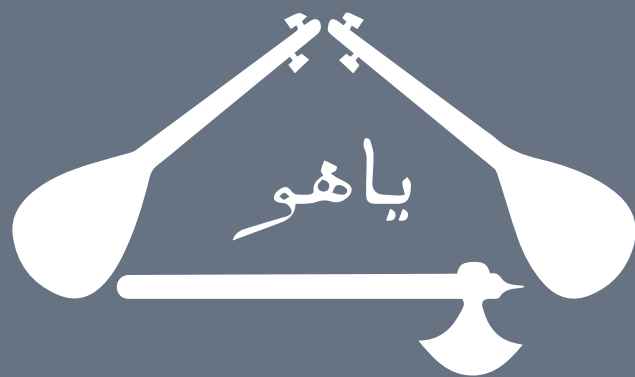
The Sabeans have acquired a house of worship and a cultural center in the KRI. They have received financial support for years, and are able to grant goldsmiths' licenses to practice their profession.

The draft constitution of Kurdistan is more straightforward and transparent than the constitution of Iraq, and enshrines the rights of Kurds and other ethnic groups like Turkmen, and Arabs, of other religious groups like Christians, Yezidis, Jews, Sabeans, Zoroastrians, Kaka'is, and Baha'is.

Certainly, the guarantee of these rights in the draft constitution will be an important factor for the KRI's long-term stability. The draft constitution presents an umbrella that gives minorities a sense of security by including them all, which strengthens their trust. It also enhances their status with equal rights and duties without exclusion.

Thanks to the Kurdish leadership, Kurdistan is promoting peaceful coexistence and serves a model in the region.





Religious Diversity Map

The Kakais

Still subjected to threats, kidnappings, and boycotts in southern Iraq, they fare far better in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

The Profile

The Kaka'i religion, known as Ahl-e Haqq or Yarsan, emerged from Western Iran in the 14th century from the teachings of Sultan Sahak, who was born in present-day Slemani Governorate in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). They are followers of a syncretic religion that contains elements of Zoroastrianism and Shi'a Islam. Kaka'i religious ceremonies are conducted in a Jamkhane (often referred to as Jam), during which adherents sit in a circle facing the Pardivar, or memorial to Sultan Sahak. Kaka'is believe in the transmigration of souls. Their religion does not accept converts.

There are an estimated 120,000 to 200,000 Kaka'is in Iraq, of which 30,000 live in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

There are an estimated 120,000 to 200,000 Kaka'is in Iraq, of which 30,000 live in Kurdistan, according to the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). They live predominantly in the KRI governorates of Slemani, Erbil, and Halabja, as well as in Kirkuk and the Nineveh Plain, which are governed by Baghdad. Mostly ethnic Kurds, the Kaka'i speak a dialect of Kurdish known as Macho.

Kaka'i are secretive about their faith because their distinct beliefs have attracted persecution in Iraq in the past. Under Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party, thousands of Kaka'is were forcibly displaced from the south of Iraq and sent to the Erbil and Slemani

Kaka'is have a reserved seat on the provincial council of Halabja and have one Member of Parliament in the Kurdistan Parliament.

governorates, while Kaka'i villagers along the eastern border were stripped of their citizenship and exiled to Iran. Still subjected to threats, kidnappings, and boycotts in southern Iraq, they fare far better in the KRI.

The Kaka'is, like other religious groups, were targeted by the ISIS terrorist group from 2014. During its invasion and subsequent reign of terror, up to 250 Kaka'i were murdered on the charge of being apostates (those who have left the fold of Islam). ISIS destroyed several Kaka'i shrines in Al-Hamdaniya district and forced the inhabitants of several villages in the Nineveh Plain to convert to Islam on pain of death. To protect themselves, the Kaka'i raised a fighting force of 600 men that was incorporated into the Peshmerga.

Kaka'is have not been able to cement their role in political life in Iraq. One reason for this is a rift within the community over whether Kaka'i is a sect of Islam or an independent religion. This question and resulting divide have prevented the group from being recognized as a religious minority in both the Iraqi constitution of 2005 and Kurdistan's draft constitution. However, the Kaka'i religion mentioned for the first time in Law No. 5, which was passed by the Kurdistan Parliament in 2015. Kaka'is have a reserved seat on the provincial council of Halabja and have one MP in the Kurdish Parliament. They can freely and publicly practice their beliefs and do not face any discrimination by the authorities in the KRI.



Kakai religious shrine

Kaka'is can freely and publicly practice their beliefs and do not face any discrimination by the authorities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Commitment to Preserve Religious Freedom

Fundamental Guarantee: Kurdistan’s Draft Constitution on Religious Freedom

*The Kurdistan Region of Iraq
is committed to an affirmative
pluralism that offers dignity and legal
protection for all religious groups.*



The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has a heterogeneous population that consists of various religious communities. Since its establishment in 1991, the KRI has been committed to guaranteeing freedom of belief for different religious and ethnic groups. Today, in addition to the Muslim community, the KRI recognizes seven other religious communities: Christians, Yazidis, Jews, Baha'is, Zoroastrians, Sabeans, and Kaka'is.

Religious freedom is viewed as a fundamental principle of the KRI's law. In particular, the right to build and worship at holy places and the equal rights given to different religious groups have been protected and preserved by the legislature. These freedoms are based on the draft constitution, legislative acts, and court decisions.

— **The Draft Constitution of Kurdistan**

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq has not formally adopted its constitution, which still remains in draft form. There are clear articles in the proposed document that explicitly promote and defend religious freedom. The draft constitution declares that Kurdistan will ensure complete equality of social and political rights for all its inhabitants, regardless of their religion or ethnicity. It will also guarantee freedom of religion, language, and education, while preserving cultural heritage and safeguarding holy places of all religions in the KRI.

The component aspects of religious freedom:



01

The equality of rights for members of different religions

Article 18 of the draft constitution establishes equality before the law, regardless of faith.

From a legal standpoint, there is no difference between different religious communities in the KRI. Provisions in the KRI's draft constitution are intended to guarantee protection and equality for members of all religious groups.

There is no article in Kurdistan's draft constitution requiring courts to include religious legal experts.

Although Article 7 of the draft constitution establishes Sharia law as the primary point of legal reference in the KRI, it gives members of other religious groups freedom of belief and the right to practice of their religion. Article 7 does not prohibit legislation that is incompatible with established Islamic principles.

Article 49 All forms of discrimination in society, family, and school in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are banned.

According to Kurdistan's draft constitution, all citizens of the KRI are equal before the law. Discrimination of any kind is essentially banned. Respect for religious pluralism and the desire to preserve the identity and traditions of different communities is the basis for laws that reject indiscriminate equality for the entire population. Thus, discrimination on the grounds of religion is not tolerated in Kurdistan. For instance, the dismissal of employees based on ethnicity or religion is banned by Article 66 of the draft constitution.

02

The freedom of belief

Religion is not compulsory, and everyone has freedom of religion, belief, and thought in Kurdistan.

According to the draft constitution of Kurdistan, religion may not be imposed on other religious groups. Article 65 of Kurdistan's draft constitution holds that religious affiliation is not compulsory and gives citizens freedom of religion, belief, and thought. Kurdistan also recognizes the right to convert to other religions.

Incitement, intolerance, and degradation of others' religious beliefs are outlawed by provisions of Kurdistan law.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) allows all religious groups to continue administering their institutions and celebrations autonomously. In addition, the draft constitution also allows for non-Muslim religious groups to establish their own spiritual communities and practice their beliefs. As such, all religious groups in Kurdistan enjoy autonomy over internal affairs in their communities.

03

The status of holy places

•—————•
Kurdistan respects freedom to access and worship at holy places, and ensures the protection of these sites.

Protecting holy sites is a core policy of the KRG. Kurdistan has never attempted to abolish any religious place since its establishment.

All religious groups in Kurdistan enjoy full freedom to practice their religion and to build and attend their places of worship. Maintenance of holy places is carried out by religious communities as part of their responsibility to their own congregations.

The KRG has been very careful to respect the holy places of all religions. Violations of the sanctity of sacred sites are not tolerated. In line with this policy, Kurdistan's draft constitution ensures freedom of access and of worship, as well as providing security for holy buildings.

•—————•
The KRG has been very careful to carry out its policy of respect for the holy places of all religions.

Religious freedom in the KRI has been legally ensured, which has made outraging religious sentiments, disturbing ceremonies, and desecrating places of worship punishable offenses by criminal law. These freedoms and accompanying legal protections have been granted to members of all religions without distinction.

04

The protection of the rights of all religious groups

•—————•
Turkmen, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Syriacs, and Armenians are listed as ethnic groups, and Christians, Yezidis, Jews, Sabian Mandaean, Kaka'is, Zoroastrians, and Baha'is are listed as religious groups that together constitute of the citizenry of the KRI.

In 2015, the Kurdistan Parliament passed the Minority Rights Law, which lays out a series of rights, including the freedoms of thought, religion, speech, and culture. According to this law, Turkmen, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Syriacs, and Armenians are listed as ethnic groups, and Christians, Yezidis, Jews, Sabian Mandaean, Kaka'is, Zoroastrians, and Baha'is are listed as religious groups that together constitute of the citizenry of the KRI. The law provides legal protection of these groups and grants them equal rights.

The Minority Law, which unequivocally grants rights and religious freedoms to all, mandates the KRG to guarantee equality for all component groups of the region, while requiring that religious discrimination be punished.

05

The equality of civil and political rights

Article 80
The structure of the Kurdish Parliament will reflect a fair representation of nationalities and religious organizations in Kurdistan, regardless of members’ constituencies.

Ethnic and religious minorities have an influence on the political life of the KRI. According to the Kurdistan National Assembly Elections Law, enacted in 1992 and amended in 2009, 11 seats in the Kurdistan Parliament are automatically assigned to parties representing minority groups in the KRI. Five seats are allocated to Turkoman representatives, five to Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Syriacs, and one to the Armenian community. Equality for all citizens is a basic tenet of Kurdistan law. Kurdistan’s draft constitution secures complete equality of civil and political rights for all its inhabitants, irrespective of religion or ethnicity.

06

The right to religious education

Every Kurdistan parent has the right to choose between a public or a religious school for his or her children

The right to religious education is enshrined by Kurdistan law. Essentially, this right is secured by governmental support and recognition of the autonomy of the KRI’s many religious communities. In the KRI, religious education exists as a separate, autonomous educational system within the framework of general education. Every Kurdistan parent has the right to choose between a public or a religious school for his or her children. Private religious schools are also recognized.

Diversity Enshrined

Pshtiwan Sadq Abdullah

Pshtiwan Sadq Abdullah, Minister of Endowment and Religious Affairs, talks about the religious freedom in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



What are the Ministry’s key policies for boosting religious freedom in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)?

The basis of our policy is shaped by the framework of the Minority Rights Law, which was enacted by the Kurdistan Parliament in 2015. This law demonstrates our vision of religious freedom and peaceful coexistence in the KRI. All activities under the Ministry’s remit are carried out in line with this law. All religious groups residing in Kurdistan are represented in our Ministry. We keep in constant contact with them to develop joint activities, while also supporting their own projects and trying to find solutions for any problems or needs they have.

Do non-Muslims enjoy the same legal rights as Kurdistan’s Muslim majority?

Non-Muslims are respected, and their rights are protected by law. Religious freedom remains robust in Kurdistan. Internally displaced people who have been persecuted in other parts of the country now see Kurdistan as their home. All and any religious groups live freely here, due to the respect of the local people, and thanks to the security provided by the Kurdistan Regional Government.

Where can you see challenges to religious freedom arising in the KRI?

We oppose the spread of religious fundamentalism, which could pose a grave threat to our stability and peaceful coexistence in the future. Religious education and religious leaders’ sermons play a crucial role in preventing the spread of fundamentalism and promoting peace. Therefore, we work closely with religious leaders to raise awareness and educate our people about the value and principles of coexistence and inclusiveness.

What are the most striking examples of multi-culturalism in the KRI?

Kurdistan has multi-religious population. As such, you will see people from different religious backgrounds mingling in both public and private life. Different religious groups live alongside each other in the same neighborhoods peacefully. Strong bonds and absolute respect hold our society together.

We closely monitor discrimination against any religious groups, and I can proudly say that until now we have not received or recorded a single complaint from any religious group facing discrimination or religiously motivated assault. I believe this is the most striking example of the multiculturalism and inclusiveness that exists in Kurdistan.

The Directorate of Coexistence

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq’s multicultural approach treats all faiths impartially. The vision of the Kurdish leadership is based on boosting inter-ethnic and inter-religious culture to encourage people of different ethnicities and religions to live together in peace.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is one of the most religiously diverse places in the Middle East. The KRI has worked hard to lay the foundations of religious harmony and maintain them over the years. One noteworthy example of the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) efforts to preserve and promote the peaceful coexistence is the establishment of the Directorate of Coexistence (DoC) in 2017 under the KRG's Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs. The directorate's main objective is to highlight the KRI as a model of peaceful coexistence in the region.

—Helping to meet the needs of religious groups

The DoC directly reports to the Minister of Endowment and Religious Affairs regarding the state of coexistence in the KRI and religious groups' expectations of the Ministry. Therefore, DoC staff members are in touch with the leaders of religious communities on an almost daily basis to record their requests and complaints in order to help meet their needs and keep them safe.

—Protecting youth from extremism

One of the mandates of the DoC is to discourage intolerance and curb extremism. Therefore, the DoC team closely monitors religiously motivated violence, discrimination, and hate speech across Kurdistan. According to the DoC Director Amir Mawlud, Kurdistan has experienced zero cases of hate speech or religiously motivated violence.

—Promoting the spirit of peaceful coexistence

The DoC plays a crucial role in improving harmony and social cohesion in the KRI. The Directorate's team believes that creating awareness of peaceful coexistence is of high ethical value and crucial for raising a generation that is capable of building bridges between communities. Therefore, the directorate is tirelessly working on raising awareness to introduce peaceful coexistence and diversity as a concept that represents the lifestyle and culture of the KRI's citizens.

—Improving the religious education curriculum

The DoC is working closely with the KRG's Ministry of Education to draw up a new curriculum for religious studies in primary and secondary schools. The DoC team, in coordination with the Ministry of Education, intends to reform teaching methods and consolidate the idea that religion should be understood through analytical tools and universal values.

—Preserving religious sites

There are numerous holy sites belonging to eight different religions in the KRI. Preserving the KRI's cultural and religious heritage is part of the mission of the DoC. The DoC is constantly in touch with the leaders of different religious groups to monitor any threats to their religious sites. Fortunately, there are no recorded incidents of intolerance or violence by extremist groups or individuals against any religious sites in Kurdistan. The DoC team, in coordination with the KRG's relevant institutions, is doing its utmost to preserve sacred sites and the freedom of worship in the KRI.

We aim to elevate the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as a model of coexistence, regionally and globally.

Amir Mawlud, Head of the Directorate of Coexistence, Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs

Protecting Minority Rights

Aydin
Maruf Selim

Aydin Maruf Selim, Minister of State for Minority Affairs, on the status of minorities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



Can you brief
us regarding
the Ministry
of Minority
Affairs?

Our Ministry was established in 2019 during the ninth cabinet. The establishment of our Ministry is the most important indicator that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is committed to upholding the rights of minorities.

The main mandate of our Ministry is to protect the rights of minorities and to help solve their problems. Any nefarious activities against any of our constituent communities disturbs our social harmony and peace, which we consider unpardonable. Our government takes appropriate action against any group or individual that is involved in such activity.

I have always been in touch with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's (KRI) stakeholders to ensure that all minority groups can navigate the path of development in their own way and with dignity. I personally meet with representatives of different minority groups to promote awareness of the issues they are facing so that we can better protect their rights. We are proud that all ethnic and religious communities live in peace in the KRI. There has not been a single incident of discrimination against any group of our society.

How would
you define
the peaceful
coexistence in
the Kurdistan
Region of Iraq?

Coexistence is a key value of the KRI. All ethnic and religious groups live in peace in the KRI. There is an important and ingrained social and cultural harmony that exists here. Our government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Masrour Barzani is doing everything in its power to protect the rights and freedoms of all ethnic and religious groups to maintain peaceful coexistence across the KRI.

What is your
vision?

The social, economic, religious, and educational rights of every minority group are safe and secure in the KRI. All different groups of our society are committed to our message of 'development with dignity'. The KRI's multi-cultural approach treats all ethnic and religious groups impartially. Our vision is to maintain the KRI's atmosphere of peace, prosperity, and harmony. We will never let anyone subvert these core values.

Highlights from the US Department of State’s International Religious Freedom Report

Religious Freedom in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The International Religious Freedom Report covers government policies violating religious belief and practices of groups, religious denominations and individuals, and U.S. policies to promote religious freedom around the world. The U.S. Department of State submits the reports in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

The International Religious Freedom Act requires countries that commit systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom be designated “countries of particular concern”.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq was considered separately from the rest of Iraq, it also would not meet the necessary standard for designation as a “country of particular concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act. There are no ongoing or systematic violations of religious freedom in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

- There are no reports of religiously based violence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.
- The KRG Ministry of Education continued to fund religious instruction in schools for Muslim and Christian students. The Ministry also continued to fund Syriac-language public elementary and secondary schools, which were intended to accommodate Christian students. The curriculum in these schools did not contain religious or Quranic studies.
- Kurdistan Regional Government does not enforce the federal ban on the Baha’i faith and recognizes it as a religion, while in other parts of the country the law generally is not enforced.
- Iraqi Kurdistan Region law forbids religious, or political, media speech individually or collectively, directly or indirectly that brings hate and violence, terror, exclusion, and marginalization based on national, ethnic, or religious or linguistic claims.
- The KRG’s Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs operates endowments that pay salaries of clergy and fund construction and maintenance of religious sites for Muslims, Christians, and Yezidis but not for the other five registered religions.

- Followers of recognized religious groups reported the Kurdistan Regional Government allowed them to observe their religious holidays and festivals without interference or intimidation.
- The Kurdistan Regional Government provides increased protection to Christian churches during the Easter and Christmas holidays.
- Christian leaders reported the KRG continued to provide land and financial support for new construction and the renovation of existing structures for use as educational facilities.
- Several KRG district and subdistrict mayoral positions were reserved for members of religious minority groups, in particular for Yezidis and Christians.
- Outside the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the law does not provide a mechanism for a new religious group to obtain legal recognition. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, religious groups obtain recognition by registering with the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA). Eight faiths are recognized and registered with the MERA: Islam, Christianity, Yezidism, Judaism, Sabean-Mandaeism, Zoroastrianism, Yarsanism (Kaka’i), and the Baha’i faith.

Religious Freedom in Education

The Kurdish education model safeguards the principles of peaceful coexistence

Since the establishment of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in 1991, the Kurdish education system has attached special importance to the virtues of peaceful coexistence in strengthening social ties, emphasizing similarities, and eliminating prejudices between different faiths. As such, religion has never been a source of tension or marginalization in Kurdistan’s multicultural society or its composite communities.

The KRI’s education system has been designed to nurture a peace-loving nation. Kurdish leaders realized many years back that education is the most effective means of ensuring peaceful and functional coexistence, and of combating extremism. Therefore, education in Kurdistan expand the knowledge of students about different faiths, without indoctrination, and to build positive relationships with youth from different faiths and cultures.

To aid the role of education as a catalyst in ensuring pluralistic coexistence, the KRI’s Ministry of Education has constructed a model that revolves around the concept of peace education. Teaching of religions other than Islam through balanced, inclusive, and impartial teaching has been placed at the core of this model. Moreover, training teachers in interfaith tolerance and adopting a curriculum that complies with human rights standards has been incorporated into the Kurdish model.

Article 26(2) of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights

“Education shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations and racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.”

When the KRI’s education laws and regulations are examined, it is revealed that all documentation guarantees human rights and freedom of religion, as well as introducing a mechanism that prevents all forms of discrimination against religious or ethnic communities.

Article 3 of Law No 4, KRG Ministry of Education

The education institutions in the KRI must create awareness of human rights and democratic values to further the principles of peaceful coexistence.

The KRI provides equal education opportunities to all religious and ethnic minorities. Through the 1992 Law No 4 of the Education Ministry, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) formally recognized that all minority communities in the KRI have the right to learn their own languages, religions, histories, ceremonies, and cultures. While Kurdish and Arabic language education is mandatory, Turkmen, Syriac, and Armenian language education is provided in accordance with the KRI’s educational regulations. Moreover, all religious or ethnic groups have the right to open their schools in accordance with the KRI’s education laws.

Article 14, Kurdistan Draft Constitution

Kurdish and Arabic are the official languages, but all citizens have the right to teach their children their native tongue, and children have the right to learn their native languages in educational institutions.

Curriculum

Different religions, ethnicities and cultures have always intermixed in the KRI. Therefore, adoption of an appropriate educational model is central to reaching the goal of effective and sustained coexistence in the KRI. In order to maintain social cohesion, the Ministry of Education has created a framework to improve curricula and textbooks as a catalyst for peace building, and to promote the idea that religion should be understood through universal values.

Article 5, Law No 4,
KRG Ministry of Education

The Ministry of Education aims to promote religious education based on tolerance and intercultural dialogue, and to establish respect among different religious groups.

According to the Article 3 of Law No 4 (1992), the education institutions in the KRI is dedicated to creating awareness of human rights and democratic values in accordance with the principles of peaceful coexistence. In line with the Article 3, the curricula and textbooks in Kurdish education institutions provide human rights-based teaching and draws attention to the benefits of religious diversity. Instead of a one-sided religious education model, Kurdish textbooks aim to expand the students' understanding of different belief systems and practices.

In order to protect freedom of religion in the field of education, there is no compulsory religion course in the KRI's laws for the teaching of Islam to non-Muslim students.

International trends and rapid social change require new approaches to teaching inter-religious tolerance in the school system. In recent years, significant progress has been made in the field of religion and education in the KRI to foster students' understanding on the importance of interfaith tolerance and respect of the rights and values for every individual. The most important step taken in this field was to review and update the religious courses, curricula, and textbooks. These revisions aimed to reform teaching methods and teach interfaith tolerance for the next generation of global citizens.

The KRG's institutions have assigned a group of education experts, and have organized a series of sessions with the participation of academics, non-governmental organizations, and representatives from different communities to ensure that curricula and textbooks accurately represent different religions. The new religious teaching curriculum is in the process of preparation and approval, and is slated for completion in 2021-22 education year.

Teacher Training

Teacher training plays a crucial role in the KRI's careful adherence to a policy of promoting religious freedom in educational institutions. Classroom environments set an important tone in fostering interfaith tolerance. To ensure fair treatment of students from different religious backgrounds, teachers are continuously instructed about how to manage multi-faith classroom in a respectful manner.

Education in Kurdistan expand the knowledge of students about different faiths, without indoctrination, and to build positive relationships with youth from different faiths and cultures.

Committed to Promoting Religious Freedom

Alan Hama
Saeed Salih

Alan Hama Saeed Salih, Minister of Education, on the role of education as a catalyst of peaceful coexistence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



How would you describe the relationship between education and peaceful coexistence between communities?

Education is the most important tool in building a society where people with different religious backgrounds live in peace, without discriminating against any group or individual based on color, ethnicity, or religion. Our aim is to nurture a generation that believes in peaceful coexistence. In this regard, primary education, which is instrumental in instilling empathy and understanding from an early age, should be the starting point. Therefore, building social cohesion and fostering peaceful coexistence is incorporated into our school system. We highlight the importance of religious diversity in our school events and education programs, including through guidelines, manuals, and teachers' guides.

Do you think that the current curriculum supports the vision of pluralistic KRI?

Knowledge is understanding, and understanding leads to diversity in any society. We do not want to see any form of religious intolerance or lack of understanding of other religious groups that could disturb the peaceful environment that exists in Kurdistan.

We see diversity not as a barrier but rather as a source of enrichment. And it can only be so if we equip younger generations with the knowledge of comparative religion to erase ignorance and build understanding among us as a nation. Therefore, our basic education system adopts a style of teaching that imparts to our youth the values of mutual respect and dialogue. However, the comparative study of religion could still play a greater part in the educational system than it does in the present.

We constantly update our teacher's guide and textbooks to be more accommodating of different religious groups living in Kurdistan. We also train even primary school teachers in the principles of peaceful coexistence. We are also working on a special program to teach human rights in public schools.

Can minorities freely open their schools and teach their own faith and language in the KRI?

All religious groups in Kurdistan have the right to study and learn about the principles, values, and history of their own religions. Their rights have been enshrined in law by the Ministry of Education and have been promoted in all education institutions in Kurdistan. In this regard, the Ministry of Education provides religious minority schools with all necessary facilities and equipment. These schools are doing their work freely and independently, from curriculum development to management.

The Syriac Language is Flourishing in Kurdistan

Kurdistan's efforts to keep the Syriac language alive are especially commendable since it is vanishing elsewhere in the world.

The Syriac language, known for being the language of Jesus, is one of the oldest languages in the world. Syriac is the classical written version of Neo Aramaic, and its roots go back to the original Aramaic language. Syriac has been the language of most Christian churches and the language of religious texts in Mesopotamia.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is one of the few places in the world where Syriac is still spoken. Around 30,000 people world-wide speak Syriac today, the majority of which live in the KRI.

Following Saddam Hussein's policy of Arabizing Iraq's minorities, the Syriac language faced extinction. However, following the establishment of the KRI in 1991, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) recognized that all minority communities in Kurdistan have the right to learn their own languages through the Ministry of Education Law No 4. Since then, Syriac language education has been included in the KRI's educational curricula.

Article 4 of Law No 4, KRG Ministry of Education

The educational and cultural needs of ethnic and religious minorities in the KRI must be taken into consideration.

The first Syriac primary school was opened in the KRI in March 1993. The General Directorate of Syriac Education was established within the KRG's Ministry of Education in 1996. Syriac instructors oversee education processes and the translation of materials and syllabi into the Syriac language via the Education Ministry's Translation Committee. Schools instructing in the Syriac language have regularly participated in educational activities, organized annually by the Ministry of Education, along with other schools in the KRI.

Syriac Schools in the KRI

According to the latest data, there are a total of 49 Syriac schools providing both elementary and secondary school education in the KRI.

There are 27 schools in which all instruction is in the Syriac language (19 elementary schools and 8 secondary schools). Alternatively, there are 22 schools where the Syriac language is taught as a subject or as part of Christian studies (17 of which are elementary schools and another 5 are secondary schools). There is also one kindergarten in the KRI where the primary language of education is Syriac.

7,506

Students in total:
7,506 students

19

Syriac schools in Erbil:
12 elementary schools
and 7 secondary schools

5,563

Students in elementary schools:
5,563 students

30

Syriac schools in Duhok
24 elementary schools and 6 secondary schools

1,943

Students in secondary schools:
1,943 students

815

Number of teachers:
815 teachers

Catholic University in Erbil

Nurturing the next generation
of global citizens



The student population is 72% Christian, 18% Yezidi, and 10% Muslim

The Catholic University in Erbil (CUE) was opened during the displacement of over 160,000 Christians from their homes in Mosul and the Nineveh Plains to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in 2015. Establishing CUE during these tough times was a powerful message to extremists everywhere that Kurdistan is a home of peace where Christians live in harmony with Muslims and other communities.

The CUE is a great example of Kurdistan's diversity and harmony. Pupils from various cultures and faiths (the student population is 72% Christian, 18% Yezidi, and 10% Muslim) study at the CUE, where the values of peaceful coexistence are promoted. The CUE currently has around 170 students, 54% of which are female. The CUE aims to increase the number of enrolled students to 1,000 in the next five years. The CUE currently offers degrees in engineering, IT and computer science, economics, international relations, and art.





Establishing CUE during these tough times was a powerful message to extremists everywhere that Kurdistan is a home of peace where Christians live in harmony with Muslims and other communities.

As a member of the worldwide community of Catholic universities, the CUE is dedicated to forming the next generation of global citizens, and equipping them with the required competences to serve their communities in the KRI, and the common good in the international community.

The CUE has crucial importance for Christians who wish to stay in and contribute to the KRI. The university also reaches out to migrants and encourages them either to return to their homelands or to contribute to solving the problems facing our rapidly changing society.



Maryamana School

Fahmy Sliwa Babka, Director of Education for Erbil Outskirts, talks about Maryamana School.

What is the story behind the establishment of Maryamana School?

After ISIS took control of Nineveh in 2014, there was an influx of ethnic and religious minorities into Erbil. Ankawa, in particular, received the bulk of the Christian internally displaced persons (IDPs) and acquired close to 100,000 new residents. This created a humanitarian crisis, as we were not ready to provide shelter and necessities for that many people. All public areas and facilities, such as schools and parks, were suddenly filled with IDPs. As situation started to become a long-term reality, we began to think about schooling. Our own children were unable to attend school because the schools were serving as shelters, and IDPs' children were also not able to attend school for a number of reasons. It was these events that lead to our efforts with humanitarian NGOs to open a few schools for the children of IDPs. One of these schools was Maryamana, set up specifically for IDP students in Ankawa and neighborhoods of Erbil, which was made possible with the assistance of the Hungarian Consulate General in Erbil in 2014.

Why did the Hungarian Consulate General take on the project of building the school?

At that time, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) did not have the capacity to meet the educational needs of all the new IDPs because of the economic crisis. There was no assistance from Baghdad. Local schools didn't have the capacity to teach our own student population and the IDP students who needed to continue their schooling. So, the Hungarian government decided to assist the KRI with the IDP crisis that we were facing at the time. The establishment of this school has been a huge contribution to our community, and it has taken a huge academic burden off our shoulders. We are grateful to the Hungarian government for its support.



What does the curriculum of the school consist of?

We follow the same curriculum as other schools in the KRI. The only difference is that it is taught in English. Because the IDPs come from different ethnic minorities and speak a variety of different languages, we wanted to have one uniform language to facilitate communication. Keeping in mind that these students will one day return to their own communities, English seemed to be the best choice.

Does the curriculum include religious studies?

The whole purpose of opening this school is to provide pluralistic, multi-religious, multi-ethnic schooling that teaches tolerance and humanist values first, and addresses spiritual matters second. Students have one religion class, just as they do in other schools in the KRI. Which religion classes they attend depends on students' individual religious identities. Muslims take an Islam, and Christians take a Christianity.

The religious harmony and coexistence you see in Kurdistan is very visible at Maryamana School. The students have thrived and are very much able to get along regardless of which religion they practice.



How many religious groups are represented at the school?

We have 336 students at the moment, including Yezidis, Sabeans, Christians, and Muslims. The majority are Christian, but only because the school is located in a majority-Christian neighborhood. The religious harmony and coexistence you see in Kurdistan is very visible at Maryamana School. The students have thrived and are very much able to get along regardless of which religion they practice.

Are the current students at Maryamana School mainly IDPs and refugees?

Currently about 50% of the student body consists of IDPs. Many of the IDPs have returned to their homes or have emigrated. Since we had the capacity, we were able to accept local students as well. However, these so-called 'local' students are also former IDPs who were forced out of Baghdad and other Iraqi cities between 2003 and 2005. Apart from Maryamana School, I am overseeing another five schools that cater to current and former IDPs from Mosul and Baghdad. These IDP students outnumber the local students in Ankawa.

Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Cultural Diversity

————— **Mohammad
Said Ali**

Mohammad Said Ali, Minister of Culture and Youth, talks about the role of culture in promoting peaceful coexistence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



Preserving our cultural diversity – which is our ultimate duty – has helped us to promote peace at home. Therefore, I think of diversity as our most important tool in stimulating peaceful coexistence and social cohesion in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

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How would you define cultural diversity in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq?

Kurdistan’s different ethnic and religious groups live in peace and are united by shared history and common values. Our multiculturalism has harmonized relations between all different communities throughout our history. We have created the necessary conditions for dialogue between different cultures, as well as for facilitating their mutual enrichment. Preserving our cultural diversity – which is our ultimate duty – has helped us to promote peace at home. Therefore, I think of diversity as our most important tool in stimulating peaceful coexistence and social cohesion in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

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Which minority cultural events are supported by the Ministry?

We are currently setting up a solid program to promote culture, sport, and literature, as well as youth empowerment activities for all ethnic and religious groups in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. We have approved publication of 55 books on culture written in the Syriac and Arabic languages. We organize annual festivals and produce documentary films about Syriac cultural heritage, and are also opening a painting exhibition for Syriac art.

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What is the Kurdish cultural vision in terms of peaceful coexistence?

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq has always kept its door wide open to all ethnic and religious groups. Kurdish people have embraced the values and principles of peaceful coexistence throughout their long history. Ethnic and religious differences have not produced hatred in Kurdistan; on the contrary, our differences have become the source of our strength and wealth. As a nation, we share our happiness and sadness together. All minorities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have contributed to society and solidarity through their differences. As such, our multicultural identity has shaped our cultural vision more than anything else.

The General Directorate of Syriac Culture and Arts

The General Directorate of Syriac Culture and Arts plays a crucial role in contributing Kurdistan's diverse cultural ecosystem.

The General Directorate of Syriac Culture and Arts was launched in 1998 in line with the Ministry of Culture's policy of preserving Kurdistan's cultural mosaic. The Directorate offers a wide range of cultural, artistic, educational events, exhibitions, and festivals on Syriac arts, fashion, and literature. The Directorate strives to foster Syriac culture by supporting researchers and artists to deepen their understanding of Syriac cultural heritage in Kurdistan. As part of its mandate, the Directorate publishes books and produces documentaries on Syriac cultural identity. As of today, 57 books have been published on Syriac cultural heritage in different languages.



The Syriac Heritage Museum

In order to preserve and promote Syriac cultural heritage in Kurdistan, the Directorate opened the Syriac Heritage Museum in 2015. Opened in Erbil, the Syriac Heritage Museum showcases the rich history and cultural heritage of different Christian denominations of Iraq. Most of the items displayed in the museum were donated by the Chaldean, Assyrian, and Syriac communities during a field survey that took place between 2009 and 2015. The library of the museum has over 5,000 books on Christian cultural heritage in Iraq.

Bedial

Bedial is a small Christian village in the Barzan area of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The village, along with its ancient church, was destroyed by the regime of Saddam Hussein. After the KRI was established in 1991, the villagers returned to rebuild their traditional stone houses and their church.

President Nechirvan Barzani, then prime minister, funded the construction of a dozen homes, a school, and a new church in Bedial. The ancient church was also reconstructed. The iconic church of Bedial is a favorite among visitors, as one of the KRI's most-visited churches.



Akitu

The first of April marks Akitu, the Assyrian New Year. Akitu is the most important Assyrian national holiday which marks the start of Spring. Akitu is celebrated every year in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



Mar Bena Qadisho

Located in the Christian village of Armota at the edge of Koya, Monastery of Mar Bena Qadisho was first built in the fourth century by Saint Banham's followers. The monastery was destroyed by Saddam Hussein's forces in 1988. Using original stones, the chapel was rebuilt in 1996. The first Friday after Easter is the big feast of Mar Bena, and the entire area is filled with people celebrating.





Barzan: A True Symbol of Peaceful Coexistence

Barzan is a small village in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which for centuries was home to Jews, Muslims, and Christians, who lived together in harmony. The village's synagogue, mosque, and church were built side by side. However, in the 1970s the Ba'ath regime ended that harmony, demolishing Barzan's synagogue, church, and mosque.

The remains of these ancient places of worship, the cornerstone of the village's heritage, have been preserved by the Kurdistan Regional Government. Today, Barzan remains a symbol of the peaceful coexistence that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is known for.

The Role of Media in Promoting Peace

Media organizations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq adopt an approach that strengthens mutual understanding between different religious groups.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has a clear anti-discrimination legislative framework to preserve its religious diversity and peaceful coexistence. Kurdistan's Minority Law of 2015 mandates the government to guarantee equality before the law for all component groups of the KRI, while requiring the punishment of religious discrimination. The media plays a critical role in these ambitions. In line the laws and regulations, Kurdish authorities encourage local media organizations to provide accurate, unbiased information to foster a culture of understanding between different ethnic and religious groups in the KRI.

In the last decade, the KRI has witnessed rapid development in its media landscape. The number of media outlets increased considerably, with increased access to satellite and local television channels, while new radio stations, newspapers, and magazines have been established. Religious minorities have established their own media outlets in the KRI in recent years, most notably Ishtar TV, which provides news coverage in the Syriac language and constitutes the first Christian satellite channel in the country, broadcasting from Ankawa in Erbil. Ishtar TV has a world-wide audience, broadcasting across several different satellite networks.

Religious minorities have established their own media outlets in the KRI in recent years.

Kurdish media are required to avoid derogatory or stereotypical depictions of members of ethnic or religious communities.

Media organizations in the KRI adopt an approach that strengthens mutual understanding between different religious groups. Mainstream media inform the public about intercultural issues, and the religious holidays, celebrations, and cultural events of different religious groups. The leaders of different religious groups can freely express themselves and share their insights and concerns on different topics through the KRI's ecosystem of television stations, newspapers, and magazines.

Media's portrayal of minorities is closely monitored in the KRI to make sure that they convey accurate information about religious minorities. Kurdish media are required to avoid derogatory or stereotypical depictions of members of ethnic or religious communities. During our survey, members of different religious communities stated that they are satisfied with the accuracy and portrayal of their religions in the KRI's media.

Discrimination against any religious groups is met with zero tolerance in the KRI to ensure that its media organizations do not broadcast content that incites discrimination or discord. Thus, there are remarkably few complaints about discrimination or hate speech in the local media.

In line with the KRI's laws and regulations, Kurdistan's media organizations understand and honor their obligations to religious minorities, as well as their role in protecting them against discrimination. However, some members of different religious communities have raised concerns about websites and social media entities that have been accused of spreading misinformation about minority communities.

During our survey, members of different religious communities stated that they are satisfied with the accuracy and portrayal of their religions in the KRI's media.

The Peshmerga

The Peshmerga, the armed forces of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, represents a composition of the KRI's various religious and ethnic minorities, and is formed by members of the Christian, Yezidi, Kaka'i, Shabak, and Turkmen communities, as well Sunni and Shi'a Muslims.

Kurdistan has long served as a safe haven for oppressed or persecuted groups, regardless of their ethnicity or religious identity. Upholding these values in the face of ISIS aggression cost the lives of over 1,700 Peshmerga, with thousands more wounded.

During the occupation of ISIS, the terrorist organization destroyed 43 churches and burned their crosses and religious symbols. Over 160,000 Christians were forced from their homes during the offensives of 2014, fleeing Mosul and the Nineveh Plains for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



Ahmad Hussein is a Zeravani Peshmerga, carrying the cross to restore it in the Assyrian Orthodox Church in Bashiqa in November 2016.



In November 2016, Peshmerga forces restored the crucifix the Assyrian Orthodox Church in Bashiqa, which had been desecrated by ISIS.



Being Part of a Religious Minority in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq



Being **Christian** in the KRI
Mirna Henry

I am 21 years old. I was born and grew up in Erbil. I have a BA degree in politics and international relations from the University of Kurdistan Hewlêrê (UKH). In the course of my education, I have never experienced discrimination. In fact, my friends and teachers always showed me respect when they found out that I was Christian. My best friends are Muslims. Religion has never been a distinguishing factor or barrier. The diversity among my friends and I were always something to celebrate. At elementary and secondary school, I studied with classmates who were mainly Kurds from different religious backgrounds. There were only a few Christians

in the class. I studied in the same school until grade 12. We were very close, and my school friends became central to my life. Attending UKH was no different. I found myself again surrounded by students that came from different backgrounds. Being a member of a different religion has never been an issue among us. We celebrate each other's religious holidays, including Easter and Christmas. During Ramadan we would often go for iftar. There is a total social cohesion in Kurdistan. Most Christians here have migrated to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) from other parts of Iraq. Erbil's Ankawa district has Iraq's biggest Christian population.

This demonstrates how comfortable and secure people of all backgrounds feel within the KRI. There is definitely religious freedom in Kurdistan and respect for all faiths.

I do plan to pursue my master's abroad. I do want to serve my community. I do hope that I will be able to be a force for good and make some sort of change here in Kurdistan. I feel like everybody has a role in here. It is up to each one of us to decide what that role should be and how to fulfil it.



Being **Kaka'i** in the KRI
Elias Kakai

I was born in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and my religious identity has never been an issue. We are ethnically Kurdish, but our religion is Kaka'i.

We live peacefully here, and we can freely practice our religion, apply for any job we want, and serve in the Kurdish security forces, or Peshmerga.

We are completely free to observe our religious holidays and celebrations. There are no restrictions. But our religious worship is done privately and secretly, as our religion prescribes. No Kaka'i will tell you on which days they are fasting

or celebrating a holiday, which is strict requirement within the community. President Masoud Barzani and President Nechirvan Barzani always send their congratulations to the Kaka'i community on its holidays. The leadership here is respectful of our faith. We were the victims of ISIS's terror attacks. In trying to repel them, a brigade of Peshmerga was formed of Kaka'is to defend their communities and their lands. Kaka'is are recruited to the security forces, as well as the Peshmerga. There are a couple of changes we want to see in the KRI. We want that the Kaka'i religion is mentioned in the KRI's draft constitution and is also

represented by a parliamentary quota. We have an MP. But she was nominated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party and they have no quota for Kaka'is. Kaka'i is a recognized religion by the KRI, and we would like to see this reflected in the draft constitution.



Being **Yezidi** in the KRI
Riyam Dhahir Hayder

I was born in Baghdad. In 2007 my family moved to Bashiqa, where I finished my elementary and secondary schooling. I graduated from the American University of Sulaimani, where I majored in business administration and have two minors in international studies and English literature.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq has been successfully promoting peaceful coexistence between different religious communities. The recognition of different ethno-religious groups is the best example of Kurdistan's social cohesion. We do not see this kind of social harmony in other parts of Iraq. ISIS terrorism has caused the Yezidi community deep pain. We felt insecure in Iraq. We don't

know what the future holds for us elsewhere in the country, where we could be in a real danger for expressing our religious identity. However, we don't feel threatened in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Kurdistan provides legal protection for all religious minorities, who can freely express their religious identities and practice their religions.

However, the laws should be implemented properly to boost the environment of acceptance. Moreover, there are 11 seats reserved for ethno-religious minorities in Kurdistan's parliament. But Yezidis are excluded.

We want to see a quota for Yezidi political representation as well. Furthermore, no matter how capable you are, you cannot become a judge in the KRI if you are not Muslim. I feel this needs to be changed as well.

I have always felt at home in Kurdistan. I am applying for a Fulbright Scholarship next year. In future, I hope to go to abroad to continue my studies, but will come back to Kurdistan to contribute the development of my community.



Being **Sabean Mandaean** in the KRI
Salwan Hussein Nazar

I was born in Amarah, in southern Iraq. We moved to Erbil when I was 12 years old. We as Sabeans never felt safe in the south of the country. We constantly faced discrimination, harassment, and hate speech, and our lives were very difficult. So, my family decided to move to the north, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. I completed high school and university here in Erbil. I am a graduate of computer engineering. I recently set up my travel agency with two of my friends.

Our community is very small in Kurdistan. All the Sabeans live in the Ankawa district of Erbil. Everyone knows each other here. None of us have experienced any sort of disrespect, hate

speech, or discrimination in Kurdistan. The respect that we receive in Kurdistan is something unique, especially considering the situation elsewhere in Iraq. We have a temple in Erbil, and we can freely practice our religion and celebrate our holy days. Moreover, members of all religious groups are equal before the law in Kurdistan, so our rights are protected.

We feel very secure and respected in Kurdistan, which we think of as our home now.



Being **Baha'i** in the KRI
Bayan Hekmat

I'm 28 years old. I was born in Erbil. I finished my bachelor's and master's degrees in petroleum engineering at the University of Kurdistan Hewler. Now I'm working with an NGO.

My family moved to Erbil in 1986. My dad is from Baghdad and my mom is from Basra. My family moved here because they felt it was their duty to serve the Kurdish community. Kurdistan is a place where Baha'u'llah lived for two years and where he found peace and prosperity.

Before 2003, during the Saddam regime, we had to be discrete. We weren't telling people that we were Baha'i because of the regime's discriminatory laws. However, after 2003 things suddenly changed and I was able to freely express my religious identity to my friends, colleagues, or anybody I met on the street.

I never encountered any sort of discrimination because of my faith in Kurdistan. I am free to

express myself, my identity, and my beliefs. I can be open about when I am fasting or praying. If I go into a market and strike up a conversation with someone and mention that I'm Baha'i, they are happy to hear more about my faith. This is how we start building relationships between each other and begin to feel closer. We accept one another and embrace our diversity.

The Kurdish government is always providing assistance and opportunities. They protect my right, as a Baha'i living in Kurdistan, to practice my own religion and support me in every way.

I am involved in social projects. My main focus is youths between the ages of 11 and 15. They are in a transitional period in their lives. They have hidden abilities and skills, but they need someone to direct them for the

benefit of the community. The youth paint an image for the future. We organize events and establish youth centers for them. There's a special three to four-year program they go through until they are around 15 years old. After that they join us and help us with the next generation of youth programs. I'm optimistic about the future of Kurdistan because I see hidden potential in the community.

I could go abroad to pursue my PhD, but this would only be to gain knowledge and experience that I can then bring back and implement it in Kurdistan. I'm a part of this community. If everyone left, who would remain here! I know things are challenging right now, but we need to face reality. If we run away from our problems, we cannot expect them to solve themselves. We have a future here. This is where I belong and where I'm happy. Kurdistan is the place I call home.



Being **Baha'i** in the KRI
Raheek Nashat

I'm 30 years old. I was born in Erbil but spent my childhood in Baghdad. When I was 12 years old, I returned to Erbil. After I got married, I returned to Baghdad for one year, but we came back to Erbil because both my husband and I felt that Kurdistan was our home. We have had opportunities to move abroad, we chose to stay and see our daughter to grow up here in Kurdistan.

Kurdistan is a very special place for Baha'is. When Baha'u'llah was here 170 years ago, Kurdish people supported and protected him. Tolerance is in the nature of Kurdish culture.

Kurds have embraced anyone who has suffered discrimination or misfortune regardless of their ethnicity or faith. They do not treat us as strangers.

When we lost my dad, we mourned and prayed with my friends, many of whom are Muslims.

Muslim Imams came to our house to perform their own ceremonies to mark my father's passing. This is the reality of coexistence in action. They came to our home, prayed with us, and supported us.

Most of my friends are Kurdish Muslims and Christians. None of us feel that there are any differences between us apart from our faiths, which we all know are respected.

We as Baha'is in Kurdistan appreciate that the Kurdistan leadership is doing its best to make us feel at home. I have never experienced any discrimination, hate speech, or harassment here.

Kurdistan is a very special place, and we want to stay here and contribute to our society and its tolerant, pluralistic values.

Being **Jewish** in the KRI
Saman Naseh



I was born in Kirkuk but moved to Erbil in 2005. I studied business administration at Salahaddin University in Erbil. I am currently working on setting up a trade and investment company in Erbil.

Me and my family moved to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq due to the security reasons. It was very dangerous for us to disclose our Jewish identity to anyone in the south. It was also impossible for us to practice our religion there. However, we do not feel any sort of threat towards the Jewish community or Jewish way of life in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. We observe our religious holidays freely here. Therefore, I am very comfortable with my identity as a Jew in Kurdistan, and I have not experienced any discrimination because of my religion.

We have established an organization to preserve Jewish traditions and support our community. We follow our religious rituals, and even brought a rabbi from Israel to oversee the practice of our religion. We hope to establish a Jewish cultural center in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in the future.

We want to stay and thrive in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq where we feel optimistic about the future.

Being **Zoroastrian** in the KRI
Faiza Foad



I was born in Kirkuk, but my family were forced to move to Slemani during the rule of Baath Party. I graduated in biology from the College of Science. I am now working as a translator.

Zoroastrians were persecuted throughout Iraq's history. Even today, outside of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Zoroastrians don't dare to reveal their religious identity. There are Zoroastrians in Najaf, Basra, Amara, and Kirkuk, but they keep their religious identity to themselves.

However, there is a Zoroastrian renaissance happening in the KRI, where we already enjoy robust religious freedoms. We have temples in Kurdistan where we can freely practice our religion without any restriction from the authorities.

Zoroastrians have long argued for a reform of textbooks in the KRI. We have made many gains in this field. The Ministry of Education is currently working on a reform that will allow our religion to be studied in schools.

President Masoud Barzani mentioned many times that all religious groups, including Zoroastrians, are equal components of the KRI. Different religious groups live in peace in Kurdistan. We collaborate and help each other, and there are no barriers between different communities.

Zoroastrianism isn't just a religion; it is a philosophy. Zoroastrianism is about the search for light for all humanity. In the KRI we are free to practice our faith and explain to others what Zoroastrianism is really about.

Regional and International Perspective on Religious Freedom in Kurdistan

Equality for all

By *Jeanine Plasschaert*,
Special Representative of the Secretary-General for
the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq



The rich cultural heritage of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is exemplified by the numerous minority groups that have contributed to it over many generations. The KRI is home to a colourful mosaic of different religious communities, including Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, Jews, Sabean Mandaean, Zoroastrians, Kakais, and Bahais. Each group has a unique history and connection to the area, and their deep-rooted presence and resilience attests to the KRI's significance as a centre of social, religious and ethnic diversity.

The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in international law is far reaching. It protects, without discrimination, the right to have, adopt, or change a religion or belief of one's choice; protects the right to manifest one's religion or belief, either individually or in community with others; and upholds the liberty of parents and guardians to provide a religious and moral education for their children in accordance with their convictions. Just as importantly, the full enjoyment of the right

to freedom of religion or belief also requires states to ensure that individuals do not experience discrimination in the exercise of any other human rights based on their religion or belief.

In order to protect minority groups, the KRI has enacted legislation that promulgates equality for all components in the Region and forbids discrimination on the basis of religion.

Furthermore, members of minority groups have been appointed to senior positions in the Kurdistan Regional Government, and 11 seats out of the 111 seats in the Kurdistan Parliament are allocated to minority groups, including the Turkmen, Chaldean, Assyrian, Syriac, and Armenian communities.

However, for these representatives to be effective, their communities should feel genuinely represented by them. And throughout Iraq, unfortunately, many minority groups continue

to face discrimination and marginalization on the grounds of their identity, including belief or religious identity, impeding their ability to access critical rights.

The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) is therefore actively supporting both the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government in their efforts to protect and promote freedom of religion for all Iraqi citizens, and to ensure that no one suffers discrimination based on their religion or belief.

It is said that tolerance is the only real test of civilization: as long as different groups are embraced with tolerance, the KRI will remain a promising model for social, religious and ethnic pluralism.

A Microcosm of Iraq's Religious Diversity

By *Matthew H. Tueller*,
United States Ambassador to Iraq



Religious freedom is a value the United States has held dear since its founding. Beginning with George H.W. Bush in 1993, the President of the United States has proclaimed January 16 National Religious Freedom Day annually in recognition of the Virginia General Assembly's adoption of Thomas Jefferson's landmark Virginia Statue for Religious Freedom on January 16, 1786. The Virginia Statute became the basis of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, guaranteeing that Congress will not make any law "respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Religious freedom has made the United States stronger as a country, attracting a diverse array of immigrants from across the world.

The United States' strength in its diversity is also reflected in its national motto, "E pluribus unum," Latin for, "Out of many, one."

The Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) is a microcosm of Iraq's religious diversity.

That the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs (MERA) recognizes so many religions, including Islam, Christianity, Yazidism, Judaism, Sabean-Mandeanism, Zoroastrianism, Yarsanism, and the Baha'i Faith, is a testament to the IKR's rich history of religious pluralism. The United States government is proud to support religious diversity in the IKR and Iraq as a whole through initiatives such as the renovation of the Lalish Temple in Sheikhan and the Tomb of Nahum in Alqosh.

ISIS is an extreme example of the havoc religious intolerance can wreak on civilized society. The group raped, killed, tortured, and plundered. ISIS committed genocide against religious minorities. The people of the IKR have demonstrated tremendous compassion by welcoming hundreds of thousands of

Yezidi and Christian internally displaced people (IDPs) and Syrian refugees. The United States supports the voluntary and dignified return of IDPs and

refugees to their homes if they so choose; however, we also encourage their integration and settlement in their places of displacement if they wish to remain.

The United States applauds the KRG's efforts to highlight and celebrate its religious pluralism.

We continue to follow KRG plans regarding the inauguration of a multifaith community center with great interest and anticipation. The IKR's religious pluralism can be a source of strength for its people as it has been for the United States, boosting foreign direct investment and tourism in the region, and most importantly, unlocking the IKR's full potential. Iraq is a religiously diverse country. The IKR has the potential to serve as a beacon for the rest of Iraq as well as the broader region by making religious pluralism a core value.

Religious Freedom: A Right Worth Protecting

By **Sam Brownback**,
*Former U.S. Ambassador at Large for
International Religious Freedom*



On December 10, 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This seminal document asserted that all people are inherently entitled to certain freedoms, among them freedom of religion or belief. As Article 18 states, “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his [or her] religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Religious freedom has deep meaning and resonance in America’s own story. Many of the first settlers who came to the United States were searching, in part, for a place where they could freely exercise their religious beliefs. Religious freedom is enshrined in the U.S. Constitution.

Our open discourse on religion, coupled with new ideas and beliefs from immigrants protected from religious discrimination, has helped the United States become a very culturally diverse and prosperous nation. Today, for example, we are honored to have vibrant communities of Iraqis – including Iraqi Kurds – across our country, including Iraqi Christians in the states of Michigan and California, and Iraqi Yezidis in Nebraska, who are making important contributions to our culture and economy. Our country – like all others – is imperfect, and we continue to nurture freedom of and respect for all religions, but that nurturing also informs and inspires our commitment to advocate for religious freedom for all people around the world.

When ISIS emerged in 2014, threatening all of Iraq with its violent extremist ideology, the Iraqi Kurdistan Region welcomed thousands of displaced people, including vulnerable members of religious minority groups.

Religious freedom is fundamental to human existence and flourishing. Religious beliefs affect our perception of the world and the value systems we adopt that structure our lives. Religious beliefs affect our interaction with the world, the relationships we embrace, and the personal and professional choices we make. All people should be free to follow their consciences and peacefully practice their beliefs so they can live a good life and achieve their full human potential. Beyond the moral imperative to protect religious freedom, governments and societies that protect this human right are more likely to be secure and prosperous and to protect other human rights. Those that do not protect religious freedom risk sowing division and discord that can lead to instability. Nations cannot reach their full potential unless their people are free to follow their innermost moral and religious beliefs.

The Iraqi Kurdistan Region has set a positive example in embracing religious freedom and diversity.

The Iraqi Kurdistan Region has set a positive example in embracing religious freedom and diversity. When ISIS emerged in 2014, threatening all of Iraq with its violent extremist ideology, the Iraqi Kurdistan Region welcomed thousands of displaced people, including vulnerable members of religious minority groups. Many of those people still reside in Iraqi Kurdistan and have become a part of the region’s diverse society. Today, the Iraqi Kurdistan Region is home to many faiths, including Sunni and Shia Muslims, Yezidis, Christians, Kaka’is, Sabean-Mandeans, Zoroastrians, and Jews. The Kurdistan Regional Government’s Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs leads efforts to promote coexistence between these various groups. In recent years, the Kurdistan Regional Government launched an initiative to reform religious studies in schools by including information about a variety of faiths.

In the future, a key challenge for the Iraqi Kurdistan Region will be to continue advancing religious freedom and harmony, particularly given the political, economic, societal difficulties facing Iraq and the broader region. Religious freedom and other human rights are closely linked and mutually reinforcing, so efforts to protect other human rights, such as freedom of expression, will help create an environment conducive to greater religious freedom. I hope that the Iraqi Kurdistan Region will become a bastion of religious freedom and diversity, where members of all religious communities can express their beliefs and reject violence and intolerance. If the Iraqi Kurdistan Region can fully realize this vision, it will not only bolster its security and prosperity but also serve as a model to the world of the value of protecting religious freedom.

Finding Durable Peace The Lesson of Religious Freedom in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

By Michael Waltz,
Congressman, U.S. House of Representatives

Those who might question the role religious freedom holds as an element of national security, need only ask the Kurds. They constitute a people of multiple faiths who stand like an oasis surrounded by desert neighbors whose histories are founded on religious intolerance and whose regimes are emboldened by religious or ethnic persecution. In the face of such horrors, the Kurds provide their most recent counterpoint: the black flag of ISIS has never flown on Kurdish-controlled soil.

There's a lesson here – a glorious reality of religious coexistence, as lived every day in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), is a powerful motivator towards unified action against the forces of hate. What the Kurds have achieved in their home in Northern Iraq is a shining example for the rest of the country.

When Abu Bakr al Baghdadi uncorked his great evil upon the citizens of Iraq in the summer of 2014, the Iraqi Army collapsed. Yet the Kurdish peshmerga forces, comprised of a spectrum

of religious beliefs, rushed forward and held the line. They then became the main effort in the war to defend humanity.

Tragically, large portions of Iraq succumbed to the agents of terror. ISIS took Mosul and then sliced deeply across the country and nearly cut it in half. They seized 1,000 kilometers and held ground along an arc that stretched from the Syrian border to within 100 kilometers of the Iranian border. Every step of the way they planted their black flag into soil soaked by the blood of innocents whose only crime was adherence to faiths other than that professed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

As a result, religious minorities from across Iraq fled to the KRI for safeguard. Two million refugees imposed a heavy economic cost on the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), but the Kurds did not shirk from the duty to provide sanctuary to threatened masses. It's a price of peace, and the Kurds place a high value on peace.

In contrast, my combat operations as a U.S. Army Special Forces officer have taken

me to places where religious intolerance is the rule. Not coincidentally, these are also places experiencing a constant state of war, where the only freedom is submission, and the only peace is that of the afterlife.

This is not so in the KRI where people of all faiths and religious orders, whether Sunni, Shia, Yezidi, Kakai, Christian, Jewish, Sufi (both Naqshbandi and Qaderi), and Zoroastrian and more, find common ground in peace. They work in concert to make today better than yesterday, and tomorrow better than today.

This is why I now proudly serve as Co-Chair to the Kurdish Caucus of the U.S. House of Representatives, where I work to ensure our great allies in the KRI are also stronger allies. I am grateful for their sacrifices for peace, and I look forward to helping bring their lesson of a lasting peace founded on religious coexistence to other seemingly intractable conflicts that challenge humanity. Upon that foundation we can set our sights on a brighter future for the entire region.



Building a Stable and Prosperous Society

By Fiona Bruce,
UK's Special Envoy for Freedom of
Religion or Belief

As the UK's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), I strongly believe that protecting and promoting FoRB is one of the most pressing issues of our generation. The freedom to practice any Religion or Belief, without fear of consequence, is a vital foundation for building a stable and prosperous society And there are few people on Earth who know more about this vital struggle than the Iraqis.

Since 2003, Iraq's religious and ethnic minority populations have significantly declined due to exclusion, sectarianism and conflict. The urgency to protect Iraq's religious diversity is why FoRB is a human rights priority for the UK in Iraq and the KRI. The world witnessed the most repugnant atrocities committed by ISIS, which often targeted religious minorities. These cannot go unaccounted for, and the UK is supporting the United Nations Investigative Team's efforts in delivering justice. We also welcome the recent passing of the 'Yezidi Survivors Bill', which is essential in formally recognizing ISIS crimes against minority communities, including Turkmen, Shabak and Christians, and supporting survivors of sexual violence in conflict.

Ensuring that obligations to FoRB are upheld is crucial to ensure a stable, inclusive society that

delivers for all of its citizens.

The UK is working with the Government of Iraq and the KRG, to promote FoRB and to improve the lives of religious minorities. So far, we have contributed £31m to the UN Development Programme: Funding Facility for Stabilization, which works to restore vital services across areas of Iraq that have been liberated from ISIS, with 72 out of 87 projects implemented in the historically Yezidi areas of Sinjar and Sinuni, including the rehabilitation of 23 schools, and three primary healthcare centers. More widely, the UK has committed £272m in humanitarian support to Iraq since 2014, providing a vital lifeline of emergency food, shelter, medical care and clean water to the most vulnerable in the country, including those who have been displaced from their homes, many of whom are Yezidis and Christians.

Protecting the cultural heritage of religious minorities is another crucial element of the UK's approach to protecting FoRB. With financial support from the UK's Cultural Protection Fund, the British Council has delivered multiple projects to preserve the identity of different religious minority communities, including a partnership with Oxford University, the AMAR Foundation and the Yezidi Spiritual Council to record

and document over 100 sacred songs from the Yezidi community, and the establishment of a Yezidi women's choir. Cultural heritage and identity have also featured prominently in the British Council's TAHAWER programme, a youth-led dialogue and debate initiative that explores the relationship between religion, local customs and peace building, involving young people from all of Iraq's different communities including religious minorities such as Christians, Yezidis, Shabaks and Yarsanis.

During His Holiness the Pope's visit to Iraq, he too sent a welcome message of peace and reconciliation to Iraqis of all faiths, and reminded us all of the importance of dialogue and understanding between religions. I hope that the legacy of his visit will be to remind us of the pressing need to protect and promote the vital freedom to worship, and build a future in which all ethnic and religious groups are able freely to express themselves and thrive. As the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson summarized recently: "We all know that wherever freedom of belief is under attack, other human rights are under attack as well."



Creating a Respectful and Diverse Society

By Lord David Alton,
Member of the UK House of Lords

In 1991 John Major's Government intervened in Iraq, established a no-fly zone, stopped a Genocide, and paved the way for Kurdistan Regional Government.

Kurdistan today is a Muslim-majority region that enjoys a high degree of autonomy. It has its own army, police force, government and parliament. Kurdistan is also home to a number of non-Muslim religious groups, including a small Jewish community, all of whom enjoy a reasonable level of religious freedom compared with the rest of Iraq.

Since August 2014, an increasing number of religious minorities have sought safety in KRG-controlled areas.

The KRG has taken positive steps toward minorities by introducing the Minority Rights Law (to protect the freedom of religion and prohibit religious discrimination), appointing

religious representatives, and attempting to diversify the Peshmerga. KRG officials reassured me that they will continue to work to modernise and enforce these laws to ensure fair participation and equality of citizenship.

Religious and ethnic diversity is demonstrated in the regional Parliament, with members from the Yezidi, Turkmen, Christian and Armenian minorities reflecting a welcome of difference.

The Kurds, Assyrians, Syriacs, Chaldeans and Yezidis all have their own suffering, pain and betrayal. But they also have an indomitable spirit, and you cannot encounter them without hoping that the future - with international support - will help their peoples create a respectful and diverse society which is the antidote to the visceral hatred offered by the ideologies of racism, sectarianism and religious extremism.



Learning to live together in respect for one another's traditions and beliefs is the great challenge of our times - and the KRG is to be commended for actively promoting that spirit of coexistence.

Pluralist Mosaic

By the Rt Hon Robert Halfon,
Member of UK Parliament

The Middle East is the birthplace of the three religions of the book, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, but the Christian faith is moving towards extinction as people flee persecution in many countries.

But one Muslim-majority country respects Christians and could be the equivalent of David Attenborough in saving Christians from extinction in a wider pluralist mosaic.

I refer to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). In my visits there, I have met many people of many different religious denominations, both free and encouraged to practice their religion. Some of these religions would have been threatened with extinction, were it not for the safety and tolerance of Kurdistan.

Most people are Muslims, mainly Sunni in the KRI. The call to prayers is a feature of daily life and their mosques are well attended. Their schooling and

public institutions are secular. Religious discrimination is against the law, religious and ethnic groups have a reserved list of 11 out of 111 parliamentary seats, the regional authority builds churches, all religious holidays are public holidays, and all religious leaders are consulted by ministers. As well as Christians, there are Yezidis, Jews, Sabean Mandais, Zoroastrians, Kaka'is and Bahais.

None of this exemplary peaceful co-existence is notional or superficial. There is a deep and natural respect for religious pluralism. I suspect this comes from a long history at the heart of competing and conflicting empires and from the many times the Kurds have been forced into exile or have been refugees.

This generosity of spirit extends to other nations in the Middle East. The Kurds have long been victims in Iraq of a virulent variant of chauvinism that sees them as lesser citizens. That has driven discrimination and then genocide under Saddam Hussein. Yet the Kurds are commendably open to



Arabs, Persians, Turks, and Jews whenever possible.

Their openness to others is not an academic matter. The population of the KRI is about 6 million but that soared by about a third when up to two million people fled from Mosul and surrounding areas when ISIS captured Mosul in June 2014. This was in addition to about a quarter of a million Syrians who had fled from the civil there since 2011.

These refugees and internally displaced people, Sunni Arabs, Christians, and Yezidis found sanctuary in Kurdistan in camps and in towns. About a million remain in Kurdistan and many cannot yet return to their homes. The economic impact has been considerable but there is no question of forcing their return by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Sadly, the KRG's commendable hospitality is often overlooked because it is a sub-sovereign nation and the federal authorities in Baghdad have fewer such problems. The international community should fully acknowledge the KRG's record.

Harmony in Religious Diversity

By Bishop of Coventry,
the Rt Revd Dr Christopher Cocksworth,
Member of the UK House of Lords



During my visits in 2016 and 2017 to the region it was very clear that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) had generously opened its arms to large numbers of refugees fleeing unspeakable violence in other parts of Iraq and in Syria. Most of them had been targeted by Da'esh because of their religion or ethnicity. They had found security from threat, safety from danger and space to practice their religious faith in freedom.

I was aware that KRI's population had swollen greatly and that this was putting the fabric of society under stress. I was conscious, as well, that not all of the aspirations that I heard from the KRG about religious diversity and the coexistence were being fulfilled. Yes, the situation was not perfect, and concerns were raised with me from religious and ethnic leaders that more needed to be done then – as now – for their security and safety, so that all of KRI's inhabitants could have genuine space to practice

their religion and take a full part in society. Nevertheless, what I saw in KRI – when there was so much cruelty and intolerance in neighboring areas – was impressive. There is always more to be done everywhere for people's human right to religious freedom, but it is not for nothing that the US Commission on International Religious Freedom declared in 2016 that, 'In recent years the KRI has been a haven for minorities fleeing the turmoil and sectarian violence in the south of Iraq', and that it 'offers robust religious freedoms compared to those of regional neighbors'.

Freedom of Religion and Belief is important to me as a basic right belonging to all people as set out in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. But I put it more theologically. God loves us freely and wants us to respond to him freely and to live freely. I may tell others about my faith – that too is an expression both of freedom of religion and my religious duty

– but it would be an affront to God if I forced people to believe what I believe and required them to worship God in ways with which they disagree.

My interest in the Freedom of Religion and Belief is also rooted in my experience of the English city of Coventry, where my Cathedral is to be found. Coventry Cathedral – and much of the city – was destroyed during the Second World War when, for the second time that century, the 'spirit of co-existence' was shattered in Europe and millions died. From the moment of its destruction the Christian spirit of the Cathedral prevailed over the darker forces of hatred and revenge. A prayer rose up from the rubble of the ruined Cathedral – the prayer of Jesus, actually – Father, forgive! Forgive us all for allowing war to happen and for the destruction that it causes. And a great work of peace and reconciliation began so that enemies could be turned into friends.

That work continues now throughout the world, through the Community of the Cross of Nails. In 2017 a priest from the Cathedral joined other members from the Community on an interfaith pilgrimage of peace. Beginning at the Ashdi Christian Refugee center, they visited villages in the region newly liberated from the grasp of Da'esh. Christians and Muslims praying together for peace.

The reconciliation work of Coventry Cathedral is built around three principles: healing the wounds of history, learning to live with difference and celebrate diversity, and building a culture of peace. As I mentioned, there is, of course, more that needs to be done to fulfil the KRG's aspirations to safeguard religious diversity and increase the spirit of coexistence in KRI. Perhaps I may offer these three principles from Coventry as an encouragement to that vital work.

In recent years the KRI has been a haven for minorities fleeing the turmoil and sectarian violence in the south of Iraq, and that it offers robust religious freedoms compared to those of regional neighbors.

- Understanding the history of different communities and how we may have hurt each other in the past will help to heal the wounds that history has inflicted and give us compassion and a desire for justice for everyone.
- Getting to know our neighbors in all their humanity, with all that they hold dear, will enable us to see everything that is good in our differences as human beings and everything that is worth celebrating in our ethnic and religious diversity, so that everyone can thrive.
- Through honesty with each other and through common endeavor to improve the lives of our families, community and land, we will create trust and – slowly but surely – build a culture of peace in our neighborhoods and communities.

May the visit of His Holiness Pope Francis bring further encouragement and add renewed strength to KRI's aspirations for harmonious religious diversity and co-existence, so that it will be a beacon of light – not only to neighboring lands, but to the whole world – of how human beings can live peacefully and happily together on God's good earth.

Kurdistan — A Bastion of Religious Freedom

By Alicia Kearns,
Member of UK Parliament



The British people, like many people across Europe, know all too well how hard-fought religious freedoms can be. British history is littered with conflicts and compromises driven by religious feeling, and its interaction with the state. That history is often bloody and tragic, but it is also a history full of human achievement – from the Kings James Bible to the arrival of the Huguenots, to the welcoming of the Kindertransport that rescued Czechoslovak Jews in 1939.

The history of the Kurdish people is similarly one of tragedy and triumph. Since the 1920 Treaty of Sevres, the Kurdish people have experienced incalculable loss at the hands of both the international community and its neighbours. In that environment, it would be easy to have drawn inward, to double down on religious and ethnic tensions and wear them as a defensive shield.

Kurdistan is a haven of religious tolerance and remains an island of hope in a region blighted by sectarian conflict.

Instead, Kurdistan is a haven of religious tolerance and remains an island of hope in a region blighted by sectarian conflict. Home to Chaldean, Assyrian and Syriac Christians, as well as other Christian denominations, Yezidis, Sunni and Shia Muslims, Sabean Mandeans, Zoroastrian families and Jewish families, and the only part of Iraq to refuse to enforce a prohibition on the Baha'i faith.

As a British Member of Parliament, who knows only too well her own country's fraught history with religious questions, I am delighted to write in support of all that the Kurdish Government is doing and has done to build and sustain a tolerant and peaceful Kurdistan.

I wish to pay particular tribute to all that the Kurdish people have done to provide refuge to thousands of Yezidis. As ISIS overran Nineveh, hundreds of thousands of Yezidis were welcomed to Kurdistan, to a new home. The KRG met that profound human challenge with care and compassion, and in the midst of extremely difficult circumstances, it continues to fund rescue and rehabilitation services at Duhok representing an extraordinary act of collective humanitarianism.

According to a 2016 report by the Commission for International Religious Freedom, major religious groups are regularly consulted by the KRG on major political decisions, and efforts continue to be made to integrate religious minorities in the political process. Buttressed by some of the most robust legal protections in the region, and a strong commitment to the rule of law, Kurdistan continues to take the right steps to protect all those, from whatever faith background, under its care. Having survived the Anfal genocide, it is no surprise that the Kurdish people are shaping a society in which discrimination and hatred have no place.

That doesn't mean, however, that our work is done. We can always strive in our societies to ensure that all individuals have equal access to economic and social opportunities, free from

Buttressed by some of the most robust legal protections in the region, and a strong commitment to the rule of law, Kurdistan continues to take the right steps to protect all those, from whatever faith background, under its care.

discrimination and persecution. That means more investment in Kurdish court systems to ensure all have access to justice, to educational opportunities, opportunities to represent communities in public life, development of economic support for all members of the community, and continued engagement to break down any barriers between communities.

In that effort, the KRG will find a willing and able partner in the United Kingdom. I know I speak for the overwhelming majority of my colleagues when I say we support every endeavour the KRG takes to build a more prosperous and fair society for its people and the benefits that will reap for the region. As a friend the UK must stand by our allies, without whom the defeat of ISIS would not have been achieved, and do all we can to bolster and secure opportunities for our

Kurdish friends and celebrate the Kurdish people for the open and tolerant society they strive each day to protect. I for one am committed to do so.

Religious freedom has been described as a 'gateway freedom'. When you get let your people think and worship as they choose, more freedom and prosperity will often follow. The Kurdish people know the power of this fundamental truth, and they will find it echoed in all the free peoples of the world, who stand with them as, together, we build a brighter future for all people, of every faith and none.

The Future Has Begun in Iraqi Kurdistan

By *Tristan Azbej*,
State Secretary for the Aid of Persecuted
Christians and the Hungary Helps Program

It will always be memorable to me that I have been able to personally share the joy and hope that the historic event of the Pope's visit brought in the lives of the much-suffered people of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. I am convinced that a new chapter has also begun in Iraqi Kurdistan, reaffirming the decades-long path of peace and development. As the head of Hungary's humanitarian program, the Hungary Helps Program, I personally experienced this commitment, which has contributed to the realization of a historic turning point that gives the local communities a strong cause for hope. Before the first lines of a new chapter, the question is always what are the foundations that are capable of seizing the opportunity of a historical future. These foundations are also compass.

Hungary and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) are not only connected by the red-white-green tricolor but also our fruitful relationship of the recent decades isn't a coincidence, which has lasted for decades. Mutual respect is based on shared values and similar thinking, such as the commitment to religious freedom.

At the international level, Iraqi Kurdistan deserves respect, gratitude, and recognition for its significant efforts and sacrifices to protect the religious communities living with them like Christians, Yazidis, and other minorities against the devastation of ISIS.

The Government of Hungary is committed to the free practice of religion, as freedom of religion is inherent in human dignity. Freedom of religion is not only a fundamental human right but also a guarantee of peaceful coexistence, development, and brotherhood. Religious communities enrich and strengthen the moral foundation of society and thus contribute to spiritual upliftment. This principle is highlighted both at the constitutional level and in our international humanitarian policy. We believe in the separation of the state and the churches, but we also see the churches as partners and strategic allies. That is why we directly involve religious organizations in our humanitarian aid and work effectively with them. Their social and health work is irreplaceable for the benefit of the public, thus contributing to the preservation of social diversity.



And what the prevention of migration is from our point of view, also means the preservation of social diversity for our Kurdish friends. Migration is not the solution, but the problem itself. Stopping migration is therefore in our common interest, therefore, the Hungarian government does not help to dispatch those in need, but to ensure that no one has to leave their homeland. The KRG is a strong ally in our mission. Local and direct assistance is the right and sober way of solidarity in which the KRG can count on Hungary.

Peaceful coexistence, in which Iraqi Kurdistan is a great example, is a culture of mutual respect and dialogue, free practice of religion, equality between men and women, and perseverance in the homeland.

It is a community-building culture because brotherhood is stronger than hostility, unity is stronger than dissension, and peace is stronger than war. This culture has a great future for Iraqi Kurdistan. And this future has begun.

Religious Freedom and Canada

By *Ulric Shannon*,
Canadian Ambassador to Iraq



Canada holds the view, supported by a growing body of evidence, that societies that embrace diversity and protect fundamental freedoms and human rights are typically more inclusive, resilient, prosperous and peaceful. As a multicultural, multi-faith and multi-ethnic society, with a vibrant indigenous community and heritage, linguistic duality, and long history of immigration and integration, Canada actively seeks opportunities to share the lessons we have learned, and continue learning, with others. We know that freedom of religion or belief cannot be advanced in isolation from other human rights, such as freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, or freedom of assembly.

Canada is pleased that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) likewise has articulated the importance of religious freedom. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has worked hard to create a safe environment for practitioners of all religions.

It has welcomed refugees and internally displaced persons fleeing ISIS terrorism and has helped them rebuild their lives. This generosity is a tribute to the spirit of Kurdistanis' peaceful co-existence.

Canada has long been a defender of human rights and of religious freedom in Iraq, including in the KRI. Following the widespread human rights

abuses perpetrated by ISIS against religious and ethnic communities in Iraq, our government has implemented a comprehensive, integrated, and sustained policy to address the ongoing crises in Iraq.

The Government of Canada has provided support to NGOs working to empower religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq, Syria, and the surrounding region. One such project worked to help foster engagement with youth, religious leaders, relevant authorities and community members in Iraq to encourage inter-religious dialogue. Following broad consultations with these stakeholders, students and teachers were taught practical strategies for increasing social cohesion and identifying and combating instances of religious intolerance.

The Government of Canada has also been working with partner organizations to build the capacity of Iraqi civil society organizations to better protect the human rights of vulnerable religious minorities threatened by an increase in extremist activity. Canada, in partnership with Minority Rights Group International, developed an online reporting system, providing civil society organizations and other civilian activists with a tool that is instrumental in reporting grave human rights violations and abuses against vulnerable religious minorities.

Canada actively advocates for the protection of minority rights in Iraq, which has included recognition and support for Yazidi survivors of genocide. In June 2016, Canada formally recognised that ISIS was committing genocide against the Yazidi community and called on the UN Security Council to establish a mechanism to investigate crimes committed by ISIS; the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by ISIS was established in 2019. Canada has resettled more than 1,400 survivors of ISIS. Of those who have arrived, more than 85% are Yazidis.

The International Contact Group (ICG) on Freedom of Religion or Belief was established by Canada in 2015 to encourage and deepen coordination between like-minded countries on promoting freedom of religion or belief globally, including in Iraq. A number of areas of focus have been identified by the ICG, including violent extremism, blasphemy laws, legal discrimination against religious/secular minorities, and sectarian violence. Canada will continue to exercise leadership in the ICG to ensure it remains a relevant forum for international cooperation and joint action in support of the protection and promotion of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Defending the Weakest

By Bruno Antonio Pasquino

Italian Ambassador to Iraq



Freedom of religion or belief - i.e. the right to change religion or not to profess any, to manifest it in practice, in adoration and observance, while preserving the same rights as citizens who have different faiths - is one of the fundamental rights recognized by the Italian Constitution, which our Government has always promoted through bilateral and multilateral initiatives, such as the ad-hoc fund created in 2019 in order to support Christian communities.

In this regard, the most vulnerable Iraqi families, belonging to the Chaldean community hosted in Lebanon refugee camps, are the beneficiaries of a specific project, launched at the end of 2020 and still in progress.

Likewise, the contribution of the Autonomous Region of Iraqi Kurdistan, its governing authorities as well as its population, stood out for the support and protection of the

different communities - living outside its territory - who were under the threat of the terrorists of ISIS.

This commitment, which the entire international community recognizes to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), deserves indeed a worldwide praise, especially in a historical moment when, on a global level, freedom of religion or belief seems to be an increasingly mistreated right, a time when numerous conflicts prevent many people and populations to profess their faith freely, or not to profess any.

This credit should be particularly emphasized in the case of the highly praiseworthy work conducted by the KRI, protecting communities at risk of extermination by ISIS. Authorities, Peshmergas, common people intervened in favor of the most vulnerable ones: women, the elderly, children fleeing the deadly presence of the terrorists in those terrible days. By its example, the KRI has called upon everyone - governments, communities of faithful, volunteers, non- governmental organizations- to act bravely and take responsibility for defending the weakest.

In line with these very basic human values, the authorities of the KRI have defended, protected and welcomed thousands of Christians, Yezidis, members of other communities, who have contributed over the centuries to the cultural, social and economic development of the region, facilitating their escape from the threat,

allowing their permanence in the refugees' camps, providing them with shelters. One of the greatest merits of the Kurdish commitment was therefore to maintain a Christian and Yezidi presence in this region, a presence which constitutes an element of wealth for the region, in light of the message of peace and tolerance they carried throughout the history.

The war - as it was fought in the years 2015 - 2017 - is fortunately over: now, we must all focus on reconciliation and reconstruction. There are still hundreds of thousands of refugees who must return home, enjoy physical security, rebuild their homes, acquire jobs, as well as education for their children.

The task of the international community is therefore not finished, but we will always remember the enormous effort so courageously and generously offered by the Iraqi Kurds in times of extreme need to women and men who risked everything.

In order for this catastrophe to never happen again, the international community is asked to strengthen the instruments of non-discrimination in religious matters, to respect, protect and promote this fundamental freedom enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Thanks to the commitment of the KRI, the international community recognizes with greater awareness the importance of freedom of religion or belief; the need to take on specific projects dedicated to the protection of the members of religious minorities' rights; to adopt measures which preserve believers and not-believers from persecution, to avoid them the suffering of social hostility, intolerance, discrimination and harassment at the hands of government agencies or non-state activists.

By its example, the KRI has called upon everyone - governments, communities of faithful, volunteers, non- governmental organizations- to act bravely and take responsibility for defending the weakest.

Religious Diversity in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

By Suzuki Kotaro,
Japanese Ambassador to Iraq



Freedom of religion is one of the key features that characterizes a free and modern society. Ethnic and religious diversity is a source of social dynamism that will bring about development and progress to our life.

Being home to a variety of different ethnic and religious communities, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) stands in a leading position in realizing diversity and coexistence in Iraq in the continuing process of the country's post-2003 national reconstruction efforts.

As the country is gearing up for national elections in October 2021, there is no doubt that the publication of this book is a timely undertaking to shed light on the fundamental values of modern Iraq, reemphasizing their importance to its people.

The KRI is uniquely located at the historic junction of cross-religious and ethnic interaction in the Eurasian continent from time immemorial. As President Nechirvan Barzani recently said, the vision of peaceful coexistence is one of the key

guiding principles for Kurdistan, which has become the driving force behind steady social and economic progress in the region. It is also worth mentioning that the aspirations of the people form an essential platform in ensuring diversity in society, but it also needs to be backed by a sense of tolerance in each community and an overarching legal system that help them walk the democratic path respecting each other. In this light, Kurdistan's minority rights law and its draft constitution that enshrines religious freedom are the pioneering work of its people in their efforts in building diverse and thriving society in Iraq for a long time in the future.

The people of Iraq are still enduring the tremendous violence of religious fundamentalism within the country in the last two decades. Seen from this perspective, the KRI that strives to achieve stability and prosperity through the democratic process within their domain, bravely opposing pervasive religious intolerance is a strong force in Iraq in building peaceful and diverse society

firmly based on the unwavering sense of coexistence. In this sense, the decision taken by the regional government to provide a safe refuge for thousands of refugees and internally displaced people from various locations in and around Iraq regardless of their faith and ethnicity even under most trying conditions deserves every commendation.

If we want peace, we need to encourage universal respect for religious freedom and the spirit of coexistence among different communities, trying to eliminate all forms of intolerance, discrimination and violence based on belief. We have witnessed that the people of Iraq have had a painful history in the past though still maintaining a fragile balance between different communities and faiths. I therefore believe that it is with the sense of mutual tolerance and forgiveness that we will be able to achieve the ultimate goal for all human being. I can assure you that the Government of Japan will spare no efforts to help build vibrant democracy in the Kurdistan region and overall Iraq.

Free to Believe, to Love God and to Love the Neighbour

By Archbishop Mitja Leskovar,
Apostolic Nuncio in Iraq, Vatican Ambassador



Religious freedom is one of the fundamental human rights that affect all other freedoms. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights - adopted in 1948 - states that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion".

The Catholic Church, in turn, decisively adhered to this principle in the Second Vatican Council Declaration, *Dignitatis humanae* (1965), which states: "This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits. The council further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person."

According to this declaration, every human being has the duty, and therefore the right, to seek the truth in religious matters, in order to form a right and true conscientious judgement.

He should not be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters. At the same time, it is necessary that for all citizens and all religious communities, the right to freedom in religious matters be recognised and respected.

Pope Francis, in a speech delivered in Rabat on 30 March 2019, stressed in front of thousands of Moroccans and King Mohammed VI, that "freedom of conscience and religious freedom – which is not limited to freedom of worship alone, but allows all to live in accordance with their religious convictions – are inseparably linked to human dignity."

In the same year, Pope Francis approved a text prepared by the International Theological Commission titled "Religious Freedom for the Good of All. A Theological Approach to Contemporary Challenges". This text reminds us that religious freedom must not favour hegemony or privileges, but the good of all.

In his third encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, published on October 4, 2020, Pope Francis calls on believers to "live as brothers". He proposes

a powerful and very concrete reflection on human fraternity and social friendship in a world fractured by conflicts, not only on the scale of our existence but also in a more global way, between peoples, cultures and States.

There are numerous good examples of how same principles are put into practice in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. To name only two, let me recall the fact that ten thousand of Christians and members of other religious minorities, who fled the terror of ISIS in the Nineveh Plain in 2014, have found refuge there.

Further, many of them found not only a refuge, but also a new place to live, where they can feel relatively safe, well accepted and appreciated, and where they can contribute to the well-being of their fellow citizens regardless of their creed. Such examples show that with some good will and mutual respect, followers of different religious traditions can live and work together in peace, and even pray for each other, imploring on all the Blessing of the Almighty.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, a Model for Coexistence and a Path to Recovery



By Salem Issa Qattam Al Zaabi,
UAE Ambassador to Iraq

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) believes that one of the best defenses against extremism is an environment of tolerance and exposure to diverse ideas. Through interfaith cooperation and engagement, our societies can build resilience against the destabilizing forces of intolerance and fanaticism while fostering a safer and more secure world for generations to come.

The UAE is committed to freedom of worship and coexistence between all religious traditions. In fact, the UAE constitution guarantees the freedom to practice any faith. People of over 200 nationalities live and peacefully practice their faith in the UAE, and our country hosts approximately forty Christian churches, two Hindu temples, a Sikh temple, and a Buddhist monastery that welcome multi-

national congregations. A Jewish community meets and practices in Dubai. In February 2019, the UAE announced that it would construct the “Abrahamic Family House,” a building dedicated to interfaith harmony. The site, which will host a mosque, church, and synagogue, is emblematic of the UAE’s firm commitment to strengthening interfaith engagement and sending a message of peace to the world.

We lead the region by example in championing a tolerant society that respects all faiths and beliefs and grants them space to practice. In February 2019, His Holiness Pope Francis visited the UAE in the first-ever visit by a sitting pope to the Arabian Peninsula. This momentous occasion reflected the UAE’s openness and commitment to inclusivity and freedom of worship. The visit led to the signing of the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, which set out a roadmap of interfaith cooperation that

has since inspired countless international actors to build bridges of understanding between the world’s leading faiths.

The March 2021 visit by Pope Francis to Iraq, in which His Holiness advocated that peace is more powerful than war, sent a similar message on the importance of cooperation between faiths in service of humanity.

Interfaith cooperation has also been granted the highest priority of the UAE leadership. With the creation of the Ministry of Tolerance and the designation of 2019 as the “Year of Tolerance,” the UAE has exerted significant effort to cultivating an environment of tolerance at home.

With its international partners, the UAE has set out to further reinforce this culture of tolerance. The UAE is host to the Sawab Center, a bilateral initiative between the UAE and US to counter extremism propaganda and terrorist messaging online. Headquartered in Abu Dhabi, this joint digital media hub utilizes social media platforms to amplify credible voices speaking out against ISIS and counter false extremist claims.

In recent years, the world has witnessed the horrific violence and terror that have resulted from extremist religious interpretations. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq in particular has suffered immensely due to the persecution of religious minorities at the hands of ISIS, leading to the displacement of tens of thousands of families.

The UAE sees valuable, experienced partners in the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government, as Iraqi Kurdistan in particular has

long remained a safe haven for those fleeing religious persecution.

As such, the UAE was honored to assist the Kurdistan Regional Government in providing humanitarian support to those in need through the Emirates Red Crescent by establishing major refugee camps, opening schools for orphaned children, renovating water, electricity, and sanitation systems, and dispatching COVID-19 vaccines to vulnerable populations throughout Iraqi Kurdistan. And following Mosul’s destruction, the UAE is partnering with UNESCO and the Government of Iraq to help rebuild the city’s iconic landmarks and restore its cultural heritage. This historic \$50 million project will reconstruct the Leaning Minaret, the Al-Nouri Mosque, and Al Tahera Church as part of ongoing efforts to promote peace and religious pluralism in the region.

Tolerance is one of the most important guarantees of harmonious coexistence

between the diverse peoples of Iraq. The international community has much to learn from this model of rebuilding society in the wake of unimaginable violence.

The UAE stands ready to boost cooperation with the Kurdistan Regional Government in all efforts to strengthen religious tolerance and interfaith cooperation.

In order to prevent the atrocities of tomorrow, we must act in concert to stop extremism in its tracks today.

The Spirit of Coexistence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

By *Fernand de Varennes*,
UN Special Rapporteur

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is one of these examples of inclusive approaches to diversity and coexistence which deserve to be recognised, encouraged and supported.

At a time when the world is experiencing a rise of intolerance, hate speech and violence against religious minorities in many regions, good examples and practices to inspire and motivate are more important than ever. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is one of these examples of inclusive approaches to diversity and coexistence which deserve to be recognised, encouraged and supported. While no approach is perfect, nor can it simply be copied and pasted to quite different contexts in other parts of the world, this cannot and should not negate the extent the KRI is, as some others have pointed out, 'a haven for minorities fleeing... turmoil and sectarian violence'.

As the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, I have had the privilege of being able to familiarise myself with the situation and efforts in parts of the KRI while visiting and participating in a number of conferences and other events in recent years. It's clear that the KRI is home to considerable religious and ethnic diversity, and generally this is seen positively, even with pride.

Efforts to effectively guarantee and protect freedom of religion or belief for all, including minorities, makes the KRI a welcoming and inclusive beacon in the region for members of religious or belief minorities and internally displaced persons (IDPs) including Turkmen, Christians of Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syriac descent, Yezidis, Kaka'i, Shabak, and others.

Diversity in the KRI is therefore increasing, bringing its own unique challenges since authorities must conduct a difficult balancing act of interests and resources whilst addressing concerns of perceived or real bias or exclusion. The KRI has moved and is continuing to explore how to better protect and include ethnic, linguistic and religious or belief minorities, through legislation recognising and protecting them, for the appointment of representatives for them, and with attempts to diversify the Peshmerga.

Religious minorities, as well as other minorities, need to feel they are able to fully participate in, and be part of, society. Minorities must also sense that the rule of law and law enforcement applies to them fairly and equally. The KRI has to continue to ensure that freedom of religion or belief as well as the principle of non-discrimination do not erode over time, and in particular that it



commits to strengthening the protection of and the institutions that ensure to implementation of these fundamental pillars for inclusive and just societies which we can see in the spirit of coexistence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.w

The KRI is making continuing to comply with its international human rights obligations, and the United Nations can and should be offering technical support to assist as much as possible in addressing these challenges.

The KRI should be proud and celebrate its religious diversity and the spirit of coexistence in the region. It must however not stop there.

Improvements can always be made, as well as learning and sharing with others. The KRI should see and respond to the difficulties and challenges it faces as opportunities: opportunities to celebrate and raise awareness of and pride in its own experience and successes in inclusive approaches to religious diversity and coexistence here and abroad, as well as opportunities to share and learn from the experiences of other regions in other parts of the world.

A Deeply Rooted Desire for Pluralism

By *Gary Kent*,
Secretary All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Kurdistan Region in Iraq

International popular interest in and support for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) waxes and wanes, as it does for other countries, but one widely recognised constant is that its religious and ethnic tolerance are superior to most of its neighbours and exemplary in the Middle East.

Back in 2015, the influential Foreign Affairs Committee of the British Parliament undertook a major inquiry into the KRI. It concluded that Kurdistan is "a beacon of tolerance and moderation in a wider region where extremism and instability are on the rise".

It examined the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) self-image as "a haven of tolerance and moderation in the wider Middle East" and found it largely confirmed in the evidence received.

The bipartisan report also noted that "Islam is a background presence in the law and in the conservative culture of wider

Kurdish society" but highlighted a general respect for the separation of religion and state, particularly among the political elite, who made clear that they view the intrusion of literalist and ultra-conservative versions of Islam into party politics as toxic.

Many reports of APPG delegations since 2008 have made the same point and MPs from various parties have proudly amplified that in the British Parliament. At a roundtable in Erbil with an APPG delegation some years ago, Christians and Turkmen volunteered their enthusiastic support for Kurdistan's tolerance and warned MPs that some diaspora organisations were making much noise on the internet but that their complaints did not reflect reality.

Arab Christians fleeing from the rest of Iraq before 2014 sought sanctuary in Kurdistan and were warmly welcomed. A Kurdish Christian Deputy Prime Minister received a papal knighthood for his efforts.

Christians fled from ISIS after it captured Mosul and added



to the substantial Christian community in Ankawa, Erbil where APPG delegations have often visited St Joseph's Cathedral. The beautiful St Matthew's monastery on Mount Altaf has also been a regular part of our itinerary.

The recent visit by the Pope to Kurdistan is a great symbol of its importance to the Vatican, which was also of great assistance in helping Kurdistan overcome the diplomatic blockade against it after the independence referendum in 2017.

Kurdistan's primary and inclusive identifier is nationality, which embraces a deeply rooted desire for pluralism. It is central to what makes modern Kurdistan a potentially pivotal power for enlightenment in the Levant.

Anyone who wants to increase the prospects for peaceful co-existence and reducing the appeal of extremism in the Middle East should recognise that Kurdistan's strength and security are vital parts of that project.

Memories of Enlightened Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan

By Bernard-Henri Lévy
Philosopher and public intellectual



That I have devoted so much of my life—and for so long—to defending the cause of the Kurds is due in part, no doubt, to their incomparable courage.

My devotion owes something to the fact that my country, Europe, the West, and the free world writ large have had, particularly in the recent past, no stauncher friend than the Kurds in the struggle against the Islamic State.

It owes something to the fact that they are a great people endowed with a magnificent culture.

To the fact that this culture is carried forward by admirable men and women whom I have had the good fortune and the signal honor of meeting and often befriending.

But foremost among the reasons for my attachment and commitment to the Kurds have been the religious freedom, the spirit of tolerance, and the love of diversity championed by the Kurds.

I think of the Christians I encountered while shooting my documentary, Peshmerga—people still living a stone's throw from the catacombs dug into the cliffs by the contemporaries of the first fathers of the church; people who told me with tears in their eyes that if the rampart of the Kurds were to fall those catacombs could well become the last refuge of a people threatened with extermination in the last place on earth where the language of Jesus is still spoken; people who without exception

ended their conversations with me by confiding that “after the hell of ISIS, and to protect our children and our churches, we place our confidence solely in the Kurdish fighters.”

I think of the Yezidis—they, too, survivors of the darkest depths (in their case, the depths of genocide), who knew, as they recounted to me, that they could not hope to have, in time of need, more reliable allies than the Kurds to plead their cause, and the cause of their martyrs, before the court of the planet's peoples and nations.

And then there is the remembrance of the Jews that, across Kurdistan, is a matter of deep respect and piety.

I remember the village in the Barzan mountains where Sirwan Barzani brought me to meet residents who prided themselves in the almost miraculous proximity of a mosque, the ruins of a church, and the remains of a synagogue.

But foremost among the reasons for my attachment and commitment to the Kurds have been the religious freedom, the spirit of tolerance, and the love of diversity championed by the Kurds.

the stony soil, but yet another proof of the long and enduring association, transcending the vicissitudes of history, of the Jewish and Kurdish destinies.

Are there many other Muslim countries—is there any other country in the region—where this lived connection with the spirit of Judaism is a source of pride?

Are there many other cases of Islamic lands whose inhabitants are so attentive to all of the roots—without exception or reservation—of the Abrahamic tree?

And what to make of the Jewish tomb, the gravesite of the Prophet Nahum who, two thousand years ago, announced the end of the reign of the idolators of evil and criminality in Nineveh? That was a holy site of Judaism on the order of the mausoleums of Daniel and Jonah. The descendants of the present-day Ninevites were busy burning and pillaging. But here

boys were praying in Aramaic, palms turned up to heaven in the Muslims way, watching over this part of humanity's heritage! And that, for me, is what makes the Kurds exceptional.

Samaritan’s Purse

By Franklin Graham,
President and CEO of Samaritan’s Purse



Samaritan’s Purse is an aid organization committed to serving in areas afflicted by human suffering, regardless of culture, religion, or ethnicity.

Samaritan’s Purse started working in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in 2008. Over the last 12 years, the people of Iraq have faced tension, insecurity, conflict, and displacement, while the KRI has provided a safe haven for many different religious groups from across the region. Samaritan’s Purse has been on hand to reduce suffering and demonstrate God’s love for all mankind.

In Northern Iraq, Samaritan’s Purse has worked in four different camps predominantly for internally displaced people (IDPs) to provide food, screen for malnutrition, and offer child-friendly spaces, as well

as providing trauma-healing counseling groups for adults. Since 2016, Samaritan’s Purse distributed more than 19,000 tons of food at various IDP camps. Since 2017 it has also operated nutrition centers where more than 35,000 children under the age of five have been screened, and 3,000 of them have been treated for acute malnutrition.

Further north, outside the mountain town of Dohuk, Samaritan’s Purse runs Grace Community Center (GCC) for Yazidi families living in and around the Khanke IDP camp. This minority group was specifically targeted by ISIS and continues to suffer from the

experience. At the community center, our staff offers livelihood classes for the whole family, ranging from carpentry and sewing to computer literacy. There are also activities for children. In addition to offering trauma counseling, the center has a medical clinic that treated 1,933 patients in 2020.

During the ISIS occupation of the Nineveh Plains, many Christian families fled to the security of the KRI.



Samaritan’s Purse is helping them return home. Since 2017 we have restored over 1,200 homes in Qaraqosh, Bashiqa, Bartella, Bahzani, and Namrud. A homeowner named Bara’a returned to Qaraqosh from displacement to find himself unemployed and his home burned. “I was very sad and hopeless, but when Samaritan’s Purse came and assisted us in the reconstruction of our house, this was a great motivation for me to love my life again, especially when I found work with them,” he said. “Not only did my physical condition improve, but also my psychological and spiritual sides.”

Further west in the Yazidi homeland of Sinjar, Samaritan’s Purse is also working to provide shelter and livelihood assistance. By the end of 2020, 600 home repairs should be completed in the region. To help provide sustainable income for families who have lost nearly everything, Samaritan’s Purse has distributed sheep to 165 families and beehives to 175 households.

In addition, Samaritan’s Purse worked to rebuild the Al Zab irrigation scheme, which brought agricultural water to 15 communities and an estimated 16,000 people. One farmer named Omar vividly recalls his

land being occupied by ISIS. “Life was so cruel,” he said. “But after the water project started running, large areas of land could be irrigated by the canals. The farmers began growing summer crops, such as tomatoes, potatoes, and peppers.” This brought life back into their communities.



The Kurds have suffered so much throughout history, and many families have long-term physical and spiritual needs. As Christians, we are grateful to work with the KRG as we try to help people survive the storms that they find themselves engulfed in.

The Kurdish people have been our true friends, and the KRI has long been an important place of refuge for religious and ethnic minorities. Kurdistan's commitment to religious diversity has allowed many people with different backgrounds and beliefs to live peacefully together. The Kurds have suffered so much throughout history, and many families have long-term physical and spiritual needs. As Christians, we are grateful to work with the KRG as we try to help people survive the storms that they find themselves engulfed in.

Rwanga's Role in Promoting Religious Freedom

By Idris Nechirvan Idris,
President and Founder, Rwanga Foundation

Rwanga seeks to strengthen all of Kurdistan's communities regardless of ethnicity and religion.



Rwanga's vision is of a land where the wellbeing of its people is rooted in the preservation, protection, and promotion of all of Kurdistan's constituent cultures and communities. Since its establishment in 2013, Rwanga has been meeting the needs of displaced people while also providing assistance to host communities. Rwanga continues to support vulnerable families, especially women and children, by implementing 233 projects to assist and support over three million beneficiaries, representing every ethnicity and religion in Iraq.

Rwanga continues to support vulnerable families, especially women and children, by implementing 233 projects to assist and support over three million beneficiaries, representing every ethnicity and religion in Iraq.

Among its characteristics, Kurdistan is especially proud of its diversity. From welcoming Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons of every religious and ethnic background, to celebrating their holidays with them, Kurdistan continues to embrace everyone. In pursuing its mission as a youthful and relatively young organization, Rwanga has collaborated and partnered with likeminded international and local organizations. As it continues to develop its role, Rwanga seeks to strengthen all of Kurdistan's communities regardless of their ethnicity and religion.



Over the centuries, Kurdistan has been a land where diverse communities have peacefully coexisted side by side; no community has been a fortress against others.

Over the centuries, Kurdistan has been a land where diverse communities have peacefully coexisted side by side; no community has been a fortress against others. Before the peoples of the world were divided among nation-states, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Yazidis, and others lived together within or near communities of other religions. Rwanga continues to promote this message through equitable food distribution to disadvantaged families, renovating places of worship including installing a prominent Christian cross in Bedial village, and providing educational support to all communities.

Kurdistani society has been enriched by its diverse cultural heritage. Kurdistan's Christians and Jews speak modern dialects of Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ. Before emigrating to Israel, Europe, and America, Jews lived peacefully in Kurdistan long before Christianity took root and found its way to the West. Churches built centuries ago continue to function, as well as a prominent monastery Mar Mattai that dates to the 4th century CE.

With nearly half the local population under 20 years of age, Rwanga's primary focus is on Kurdistan's youth. We aim to improve training, education, and employment opportunities to enable learning, creative and critical thinking, and problem solving. For Kurdistan's youth, appreciating where they have come from is critical to knowing where they are and where they are heading. Rwanga's activities aim to inspire and encourage younger generations to discover, preserve, and protect their culture as they pursue their future.



Rwanga was the first to deliver urgently needed aid to Yezidis trapped by ISIS on Mount Sinjar in 2014.



Today, Kurdistan's multifaceted cultural heritage is expressed through the peaceful coexistence of its many communities. The lessons of our past point us toward an inclusive, promising future. A relatively young organization, Rwanga continues to collaborate and partner with many international and local organizations in pursuing its mission. We will continue our efforts to provide assistance to

the most vulnerable. Religious freedom, cultural diversity, human rights, sustainability, youth empowerment, access to education, economic development, and environmental protection are at the core of the Rwanga Foundation's mission.

Help has no boundaries for Rwanga Foundation.



The largest cross in Iraq was built by the Rwanga Foundation in the village of Bedial in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in 2017.

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