

ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY
GROUP FOR INTERNATIONAL
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR
BELIEF



IRAQ REPORT

2026

This is a report of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for or International Freedom of Religion or Belief. This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its committees. All-Party Parliamentary Groups are informal groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this report are those of the group.

CONTENTS

Table of Contents

About	2
Foreword	3
Executive Summary	4
Background on Iraq	6
Geography, State Formation, and Religious Context.....	6
Kurdistan Region of Iraq	7
Religious Context.....	8
Constitutional and legal provisions ...	10
Freedom of Religion or Belief in Iraq	10
International FoRB Agreements.....	12
UK Engagement with Iraq	13
Scale and nature of crimes against minorities	15
Yazidis	15
Christians	16
Religious Minorities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq	17
Delegation to Iraq	18
Recommendations	22
UK Government:.....	22
Federal Government of Iraq	23
Kurdistan Regional Government...	24



About

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for International Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is a cross-party group of more than 100 parliamentarian members who champion the right to FoRB, as outlined in Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

The APPG FoRB mission statement reads: *“We are to raise awareness and profile of International Freedom of Religion or Belief as a human right amongst parliamentarians, media, government and the general public in the UK; and to increase effectiveness and awareness of the UK’s contribution to international institutions charged with enforcing this human right.”*

Article 18 of the UDHR states: *“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his 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.”*

The APPG FoRB was established in 2012 and benefits from the expertise of more than 20 human rights and faith-based stakeholder organisations. This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its committees. All-Party Parliamentary Groups are informal groups of members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues.

The views expressed in this report are those of members of the delegation to Iraq. The work of the APPG is also made possible by financial support from the APPG’s stakeholders, whose names can be found on the APPG’s website via <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/stakeholders/>.

Foreword



It is my honour and privilege to present this report following our recent delegation to Iraq, conducted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief. From 16th to 20th March, I was privileged to witness firsthand the situation for faith communities and human rights in the region. For over a decade, I have stood in defence of individuals persecuted for their faith or beliefs, both here in the

UK and across the world. I remain deeply committed to the conviction that no one should ever face violence, imprisonment, or discrimination for their faith—or indeed for choosing not to follow any faith at all.

During our visit, we met with Church leaders, members of diverse faith communities, and government representatives who demonstrated a strong commitment to protecting the rights of all individuals, particularly in the Kurdistan region. While no government is without challenges, the Kurdistan Regional Government is making notable strides to ensure freedom of belief and to foster a society where people of all backgrounds can live in security and dignity. The conversations we had and the examples we witnessed are a testament to the positive steps being taken, as well as a reminder of the work still to be done to safeguard religious liberty. This report captures both the progress observed and the ongoing challenges faced by communities in Iraq. It reflects our continued commitment to highlighting not only state-sponsored persecution but also the everyday barriers and threats that can restrict freedom of belief. I am grateful to my colleagues, the organisations who supported this delegation, and all those who welcomed us with openness and honesty. Together, we must continue to champion freedom of religion or belief, ensuring that everyone, regardless of their faith or conviction, can live without fear or oppression.

Jim Shannon

Democratic Unionist Party MP for Strangford

Chair, APPG FoRB

Executive Summary

In February 2026, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief (APPG FoRB), led by Jim Shannon MP and supported by Aid to the Church in Need (ACN UK), undertook a delegation to Iraq, with a focus on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The purpose of the visit was to assess the current state of freedom of religion or belief following the defeat of ISIS, to meet minority religious communities, and to evaluate ongoing humanitarian and security challenges.

Across meetings with senior Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) officials—including Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, ministers, diplomats, and community leaders—the delegation observed a strong commitment to coexistence and the protection of religious minorities. Officials highlighted that the majority of Iraq’s remaining Christian population now resides in the KRI, reflecting the region’s relative stability and efforts to support pluralism.

The delegation met Yazidi and Christian leaders, receiving detailed briefings on barriers preventing Yazidi return to Sinjar, including the stalled implementation of the Sinjar Agreement, militia activity, insecurity, and slow reconstruction. Yazidi representatives emphasised the plight of approximately 350,000 displaced Yazidis, the presence of 96 mass graves, more than 2,500 missing persons, and the ongoing need for justice and accountability for ISIS crimes.

Christian leaders expressed appreciation for the security and cooperation extended by the KRG while highlighting serious social and economic pressures—particularly youth unemployment—which continue to drive migration. Visits to Ankawa’s educational and medical institutions demonstrated significant community-led progress in rebuilding social infrastructure.

Throughout the visit—from Erbil to Lalish, Al Qosh, and Duhok—the delegation encountered consistent themes: resilience among minority communities, the value of interfaith cooperation, and the need for renewed international support. UK diplomatic and development engagement was repeatedly identified as vital, particularly in

stabilising Sinjar, strengthening justice mechanisms, and supporting displaced persons amid the withdrawal of key NGOs and funding streams.

The delegation left with strengthened relationships, clear avenues for future UK advocacy, and a reinforced commitment to supporting vulnerable religious minorities in Iraq.

Its recommendations call for intensified UK and Iraqi government action, enhanced international cooperation, and sustained support for minority communities across the KRI and federal Iraq.



Meeting with Prime Minister Masrour Barzani of the Kurdistan Regional Government. Left to the Right: John Pontifex (ACN), Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, Jim Shannon MP, Julie Jones, Director of the APPG, Elliott Banks (ACN)

Background on Iraq

Geography, State Formation, and Religious Context

The Republic of Iraq is a country in the Middle East. Iraq is bordered by Turkey to the north, Iran to the east, Syria and Jordan to the west, and Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to the south¹.

The modern-day country of Iraq emerged following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. In 1916, the British and French governments concluded the Sykes–Picot Agreement, which divided the Middle Eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire into areas of British and French influence, assigning Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) to Britain². This division was confirmed by the League of Nations, who granted Britain a mandate to administer Iraq in 1920³.

The 1920 Iraqi Revolt, a major uprising against British rule, prompted Britain to alter its approach to governing the territory. In response, Britain installed Faisal I as monarch, creating a nominally sovereign kingdom that remained under the British mandate. The country became a monarchy under the Hashemite dynasty, awarded the throne in recognition of their support for Britain during the Great Arab Revolt against the Ottomans.

Iraq gained formal independence from Britain in 1932 with the ending of the mandate, although British influence in the country persisted. During the Second World War, British forces reoccupied Iraq due to the pro-Axis stance of the government of Rashid Ali al-Gaylani.

¹ Iraq - The northeast | Britannica. (2019). In: Encyclopædia Britannica. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Iraq/The-northeast>.

² Zeidan, A. (2018). Sykes-Picot Agreement. In: *Encyclopædia Britannica*. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Sykes-Picot-Agreement>.

³ Lewis, B. (1950). *The Arabs in History*. [online] p.192. Available at: https://islamic-study.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Bernard_Lewis_The_Arabs_in_History.pdf

On 14 July 1958, the Hashemite monarchy was overthrown by Iraqi army officers led by Abd al-Karim Qasim who were inspired by the Arab nationalism of Nasserist Egypt. King Faisal II was killed during the coup, resulting in the proclamation of the First Iraqi Republic.

On 17 July 1968, the First Republic was itself overthrown in a bloodless coup organised by the Iraqi branch of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. Iraq then came under Ba'athist one-party rule, which evolved into a totalitarian dictatorship under Saddam Hussein. The country fought a brutal war with Iran in the 1980s, and in 1990, Iraq invaded the neighbouring country of Kuwait sparking international intervention by 42 nations, led by the United States, including the UK, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt known as the First Gulf War.

Saddam Hussein's regime was known for human rights abuses against minority groups within Iraq, particularly the Kurdish minority in northern Iraq. His regime was overthrown by US led coalition forces in 2003 during the Second Gulf War. Today, Iraq is a federal parliamentary representative democratic republic with a multi-party system, in which executive authority is exercised by the Prime Minister⁴.

Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is an autonomous region located in northern Iraq, governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

The region gained its autonomy in the wake of the First Gulf War, following severe repression by Saddam Hussein's regime, who used chemical weapons against the Kurds during the 1987-88 Anfal Campaign⁵. The UN Security Council resolution 688

⁴ IRFAD (n.d.). *Iraq Government*. [online] www.irfad.org. Available at: <https://www.irfad.org/iraq-government/>.

⁵ Loft, P. (2025). *Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Introductory profile*. [online] p.2. House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10398/CBP-10398.pdf>.

(1991) ordered an end to the repression of the Kurds by the Iraqi state. The international coalition led by the United States, United Kingdom, and France implemented a no-fly zone to protect Kurdish communities from Saddam Hussein's regime.

The no-fly zone implemented allowed the Kurds to gain de-facto regional autonomy, with regional elections taking place in 1992. Following the downfall of Saddam Hussein after the 2003 invasion, Article 117 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution formally established the KRI as Iraq's only regional government and it has its own regional presidency, ministers, and parliament.

Political life in the KRI is dominated by two Kurdish political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Both organisations maintain separate security forces, the Peshmerga.

Following a failed independence referendum in 2017, there have been tensions with the Federal Iraqi Government over budget allocation and disputed territories. The last regional elections took place in October 2024, the KDP won 39 of the 100 seats, with the PUK winning 23 seats but to date no government between the KDP and PUK has been formed⁶.

Religious Context

Iraq's geopolitical position and its relationships with neighbouring states have contributed to persistent insecurity, particularly for religious minorities. The influence of regional actors, including Iranian-backed Shi'a militias operating within Iraq, has exacerbated sectarian dynamics and contributed to targeted threats against minority communities, including Christians⁷.

⁶ Loft, P. (2025). p.7.

⁷ Open Doors (2025). *Iraq: World Watch List*. [online] [www.opendoorsuk.org](https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/world-watch-list/iraq/). Available at: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/world-watch-list/iraq/>.

Iraq has a population of approximately 42.08 million, around 97 per cent of whom identify as Muslim. Latest estimates place the number of Shi'ite Iraqis at between 60-65% of the population⁸. This makes Shi'a Islam the largest religious group in Iraq. There is a significant Sunni minority, approximately 29-34% of the population broadly located in the west and north of the country⁹.

While Islam is the official religion of the state, Iraq has historically been characterised by significant religious and ethnic diversity. In addition to Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, the population includes Yazidis, Christians (including Chaldean, Syriac, and Assyrian communities), Sabeen-Mandaeans, Baha'is, Turkmen, and other minority groups¹⁰. Christians and other non-Muslim communities together now constitute approximately three per cent of the population, reflecting a sharp decline over recent decades¹¹.

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, successive Iraqi governments have formally committed to greater tolerance and inclusion of religious minorities. However, despite these stated commitments, religious freedom conditions have continued to deteriorate. In 2025, Iraq was ranked 19th on the Open Door's World Watch List, identifying it as one of the most challenging countries in which Christians and other religious minorities can live¹². Minority communities continue to face persecution by extremist armed groups, ongoing insecurity, and a lack of effective accountability or redress from state institutions.

It was within this context of weakened governance, sectarian fragmentation, and insecurity that Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Daesh), a Sunni-Salafist group seized large areas of north-western Iraq in 2014. ISIS carried out a systematic campaign of violence targeting Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities. Hundreds of thousands of people were forcibly displaced, and many remain displaced more than a decade later.

⁸ States., U. (2018). *The CIA World Factbook 2018-2019*. New York, Ny: Skyhorse Publishing.

⁹ States., U. (2018).

¹⁰ BPUR International (2026), *Iraq briefing*.

¹¹ IRFAD (n.d.).

¹² Open Doors (2025).

Constitutional and legal provisions

Freedom of Religion or Belief in Iraq

Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is formally protected within Iraq’s constitutional and legislative framework, though these protections are significantly constrained in both law and practice. Islam is the official religion of the state and is designated as a “foundational source of legislation” under Article 2 of the Iraqi Constitution (2005)¹³. While the Constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief and practice, it simultaneously prohibits the enactment of laws that contradict the established principles of Islam¹⁴, creating an inherent tension between religious freedom guarantees and the primacy afforded to Islam within the legal order. Despite this constitutional hierarchy, Iraq’s criminal law includes provisions intended to protect religious minorities from discrimination and abuse. Article 372 of the Iraqi Penal Code (1969) criminalises a range of acts targeting religious minorities, including¹⁵:

- Attacking the creed of a religious minority or scornfully insulting its religious practices
- Wilfully disrupting, preventing, or obstructing a religious ceremony, festival, or meeting
- Wrecking, defacing, or desecrating buildings, symbols, or sacred objects designated for religious use
- Publishing material that deliberately distorts or mocks the teachings, tenets, or texts of a religious minority
- Publicly insulting a symbol or person held sacred or worthy of reverence by a religious minority

¹³ BPUR International (2026).

¹⁴ Aid to the Church in Need International (2025). *RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE WORLD REPORT 2025 Executive Summary*. [online] Available at: <https://www.churchinneed.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Religious-Freedom-Report-2025.pdf>.

¹⁵ Aid to the Church in Need International (2025).

- Publicly imitating a religious ceremony or celebration with intent to deceive

Violations under Article 372 are punishable by a period of detention not exceeding three years or by a fine. On paper, these provisions reflect a legislative intent to protect religious minorities from harassment, incitement, and desecration.

In addition to these legal protections, Iraq has established mechanisms intended to ensure minority representation within its political system. By law, nine of the 329 seats in the Council of Representatives are reserved for minority groups: five seats for Christians (allocated across Baghdad, Nineveh, Kirkuk, Erbil, and Dohuk), and one seat each for Yazidis, Sabeen Mandaeans, Shabaks, and Feyli Kurds¹⁶. These quota arrangements are presented as evidence of the Iraqi state's commitment to safeguarding the political participation and legitimate interests of religious minorities.

The Iraqi Constitution further affirms principles of equality and non-discrimination. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law "without discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, origin, colour, religion, sect, belief or opinion, or economic or social status."¹⁷ In theory, this provision reinforces the right of all citizens to profess, practise, and manifest their religion or belief without interference.

In the post-2003 political order, sectarian frameworks became embedded within Iraq's governing institutions. Islamist political parties, including the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), positioned themselves along sectarian lines, contributing to the institutionalisation of religious identity as a defining feature of political participation. This sectarianism within the state has marginalised religious minorities such as Assyrians, Yazidis, and Sabeen Mandaeans, as well as secular Iraqis, relegating them to peripheral roles within a political system increasingly shaped by religious affiliation rather than equal citizenship¹⁸.

¹⁶ BPUR International (2026).

¹⁷ Aid to the Church in Need International (2025).

¹⁸ Assyrian International Council (2026). *Endangered Assyrians: The Struggles of the Indigenous Assyrian Christians in their Homelands*. [online] Assyrianinternationalcouncil.org. Available at: <https://www.assyrianinternationalcouncil.org/reports>.

As a result, the lived reality for religious minorities diverges sharply from the protections guaranteed in law. Although the Constitution provides for minority representation in parliament, quota seats have become largely symbolic. Minority communities have criticised what they describe as “token” candidates affiliated with dominant Muslim-majority parties, undermining genuine representation. Political capture and external interference have further weakened Christian political participation¹⁹.

Christians have also reported systemic failures by authorities, including allegations that officials within the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) have refused to resolve claims related to confiscated or embezzled property, permitted militia harassment at checkpoints, and restricted Christian farmers from transporting goods between villages²⁰.

Moreover, Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution, adopted in 2005 to guarantee administrative, political, cultural, and educational rights for Assyrians and other minorities, remains largely unimplemented nearly two decades later²¹. This lack of implementation has resulted in minimal tangible protection, while the Assyrian population continues to decline due to displacement, insecurity, and lack of state support.

The failure to effectively apply and enforce laws protecting religious minorities constitutes a denial of their right to freely profess and practise their religion, as well as to live and thrive within their historic regions without undue state interference. This gap between law and practice highlights a clear conflict with Iraq’s constitutional guarantees and represents a violation of its international human rights obligations.

¹⁹ BPUR International (2026).

²⁰ UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM (2025). *United States Committee for International Religious Freedom Annual Report 2025*. [online] p.55. Available at: <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf>.

²¹ Assyrian International Council (2026).

International FoRB Agreements

At the international level, Iraq has undertaken binding commitments to uphold freedom of religion or belief and related human rights. Iraq ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1971²², which protects freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and expression, alongside guarantees of due process and fair trial rights. Iraq also voted in favour of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, including Article 18²³, which affirms the right to freedom of religion or belief.

However, despite these constitutional guarantees and international commitments, religious freedom conditions in Iraq continue to deteriorate. Civil society organisations have urged Iraq to amend its constitution to ensure that “all Iraqis enjoy equal rights regardless of their religion or belief by removing stipulations mandating Islam as a source of legislation.”²⁴ This decline has been driven by persistent insecurity, the unresolved legacy of ISIS atrocities, entrenched impunity for perpetrators of religiously motivated crimes, and contested governance in minority areas²⁵.

UK Engagement with Iraq

On 12 February 2026, the APPG FoRB met with representatives from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to discuss the UK Government’s current engagement with the Government of Iraq and the integration of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) within its foreign policy strategy.

Iraq is one of the UK’s ten designated FoRB focus countries under the current three-year strategy, intended to strengthen bilateral engagement and inform policy through

²² OHCHR (2019). *Ratification Status for CCPR - International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. [online] Ohchr.org. Available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?Treaty=CCPR.

²³ United Nations Human Rights Council (2026). *Summary of stakeholders’ submissions on Iraq*. [online] Un.org. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/WG.6/48/IRQ/3>.

²⁴ United Nations Human Rights Council (2026). p.3.

²⁵ Christian Solidarity Worldwide (2026). *Iraq Briefing*.

sustained dialogue. The FCDO explained that FoRB considerations are integrated into both its political engagement and programme delivery in Iraq. At the political level, this includes raising minority protections at senior levels of government and engaging regularly with minority Members of Parliament and community representatives to support meaningful participation. Programmatically, support includes stabilisation and reintegration initiatives, particularly for Yazidi communities; assistance with the implementation of the Yazidi Survivors Law; funding for local peacebuilding projects; and facilitating dialogue between minority communities and security actors.

The APPG FoRB raised concerns expressed by stakeholders regarding land registration disputes, particularly in the Kurdistan Region; rising hate speech in the context of elections; the risk of renewed displacement of Yazidi communities; and the continued influence of militias operating outside full state control. The APPG FoRB emphasised that minority protections must be implemented in practice, and that participation must be substantive rather than symbolic.

The FCDO emphasised the importance of structured, solution-focused dialogue and indicated a willingness to provide a further written assessment of progress. The APPG will continue to monitor measurable developments, particularly in relation to land rights, implementation of legislation, de-escalation of hate speech, and safeguards against displacement and militia intimidation.

We look forward to continued engagement and to supporting the Government in ensuring that FoRB remains fully integrated within UK policy towards Iraq.

Scale and nature of crimes against minorities

Yazidis

Since 2014, ISIS has committed genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes against religious minorities in Iraq²⁶ as part of its effort to establish an exclusivist Islamic state. Among the most severely affected communities were the Yazidis. Yazidism is an ancient, monotheistic faith indigenous to northern Iraq, with distinct beliefs and practices that predate Islam. Despite this, Yazidis have historically been mischaracterised and stigmatised, including being falsely labelled as heretical by extremist actors. ISIS exploited these misconceptions to justify the systematic targeting of Yazidis.

In 2016, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry concluded that ISIS committed genocide against the Yazidi people. Documented crimes included mass killings of men and elderly women, widespread sexual slavery of women and girls, forced conversion, and the forcible transfer of children²⁷. These acts were carried out with the explicit intent to destroy the Yazidi community as a religious group.

Despite ISIS's territorial defeat, the consequences of these crimes remain ongoing. In June 2023, six Yazidi women were rescued from ISIS captivity in Syria and returned to Erbil, underscoring the continued presence of trafficking and enslavement-related harms²⁸. In response, the Yazidi Female Survivors Act was promulgated to address the consequences of the crimes of the Da'esh terrorist

²⁶ Jones, M. (2026). *Iraq Briefing*

²⁷ United Nations Human Rights Council (2016). *'They Came to destroy': ISIS Crimes against the Yazidis*. [online] Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf.

²⁸ Christian Solidarity Worldwide (2023). *Iraq: Six Yazidi Women Rescued from Islamic State Captivity*. [online] Csw.org.uk. Available at: <https://www.csw.org.uk/2023/06/06/press/6010/article.htm>.

organization and to provide financial and moral compensation to victims²⁹. However, more than 2,500 Yazidi women and children remain missing since the 2014 attack on Sinjar, with many believed to be held in Syria or Turkey³⁰.

Christians

Christians have also experienced severe and sustained persecution in Iraq. Long-standing Christian communities have been subjected to targeted violence, intimidation, and forced displacement, leading to a dramatic reduction in the Christian population since 2003. The UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh (UNITAD) has collected extensive evidence, including forensic documentation of mass graves in Sinjar and other minority areas³¹.

In some areas, Christian women report adopting Islamic dress, including wearing veils, as a protective measure against harassment or violence. Converts from Islam to Christianity face particularly acute risks, including threats of sexual violence, “honour” killings, and social ostracisation³².

Children born to Christian women as a result of rape by ISIS militants face additional legal and social harms. Under Iraqi law, children born to Muslim fathers are automatically registered as Muslim, and Christians are legally prohibited from raising Muslim children. Survivors who refuse to relinquish their children to state institutions or orphanages risk having them forcibly removed by authorities, compounding trauma and violating family unity³³.

²⁹ United Nations Human Rights Council (2026a). p.5. *National Report Submitted in Accordance with Human Rights Council Resolutions 5/1 and 16/21* Iraq*. [online] Un.org. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/WG.6/48/IRQ/1>.

³⁰ Christian Solidarity Worldwide (2024). *Syria: Yazidi woman freed and reunited with family*. [online] Csw.org.uk. Available at: <https://www.csw.org.uk/2024/11/08/press/6351/article.htm>.

³¹ Jones, M. (2026).

³² Open Doors (2025).

³³ Assyrian International Council (2026).

Christian, Yazidi, and other minority communities have been subjected to forced displacement, destruction of religious and cultural heritage, extortion, and systematic attempts at identity erasure. While Iraqi authorities report significant numbers of returns, UN data indicate that displacement remains widespread. As of August 2024, over 176,000 families remained displaced outside camps, despite the closure of 154 camps nationwide³⁴.

Despite constitutional guarantees and ISIS's military defeat, religious minorities continue to face pervasive insecurity, discrimination, and barriers to return, reconstruction, and justice. Many harms remain unremedied, perpetrators largely enjoy impunity, and minority communities continue to live in fear for their safety and future.

³⁴ United Nations Human Rights Council (2026a). p.8.

Delegation to Iraq

In February 2026, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief (APPG FoRB), led by Jim Shannon MP, undertook a delegation to Iraq—primarily within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)—in partnership with Aid to the Church in Need (ACN UK).

The purpose of the visit was to assess the status of freedom of religion or belief in the period following the defeat of ISIS, and to engage directly with minority religious communities across the Region.

The delegation met senior representatives of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), including Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, ministers, officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the British Consulate-General in Erbil. Throughout these engagements, discussions focused on coexistence, the protection of religious minorities, the enduring impact of ISIS atrocities, and the urgent need to stabilise Sinjar to enable Yazidis to return home safely and sustainably.

On Monday, 16th February, the delegation commenced its programme with a meeting with Mr Safeen Dizayee, head of the KRG Ministry of Foreign Affairs, followed later that morning by an audience with Prime Minister Masrour Barzani. During the meeting, Prime Minister Barzani highlighted the work of the Kurdistan Regional Government and its commitment to religious pluralism, noting that approximately 90 per cent of Iraq's remaining Christian population now resides in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, and presented initiatives such as the National Prayer Breakfast and state-supported church reconstruction as evidence of a functioning model of interfaith coexistence.

A meeting was also held with Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, the Prime Minister's Special Advisor for Foreign Affairs. In the evening, the delegation met Mir Hazim Tahsin Beg, Prince of the Yazidis who discussed the issues facing Yazidi IDPs, and the failure to implement the Sinjar Agreement. He also invited the delegation to visit Lalish Temple.

On Tuesday, 17th February, the delegation received a briefing from Mr Pshtiwan Sadiq, Minister for Endowments and Religious Affairs, who is responsible for strengthening and implementing religious freedom in the Kurdistan Region. The delegation was impressed by the minister's candour and the work undertaken to ensure hate speech against religious minorities was promptly dealt with by local authorities.

Throughout the day, the delegation then spent significant time in Ankawa, a Christian-majority suburb of Erbil, visiting the Mar Qardakh International School, Maryamana Hospital, and the Catholic University in Erbil, all founded by Archbishop Basha Warda of the Chaldean Catholic Church. These visits allowed the delegation to examine the social infrastructure constructed in the past 15 years to support christian communities in Ankawa, especially with education, employment and training opportunities.

The delegates were also able to hear testimony from Archbishop Bashar Warda of the Chaldean Catholic Church and Archbishop Nizar Semaan of the Syriac Catholic Church, who both praised the relative peace and security provided by KRI.

A meeting was also held with Andrew Bizley, the UK Consul-General in Erbil to hear the work that the UK Consulate-General in Erbil and the British Embassy in Baghdad were doing on FoRB issues and human rights.

On Wednesday, 18th February, the delegation travelled to Lalish Temple—one of the holiest sites in the Yazidi faith—at the invitation of Prince Hazim. The delegation is very grateful to Prince Hazim for his invitation.

Later that day, the delegation proceeded to Al Qosh, a Christian-majority town, to meet Bishop Felix, Bishop of Zahko and Apostolic Administrator of Al Qosh, to discuss the situation facing Christians in Mosul and the surrounding areas. Bishop Felix highlighted economic challenges facing Christians leading to increased migration, with at least 100 people leaving Al Qosh in the past 12 months..

The delegation then continued to Duhok to meet with Yazda, a Yazidi advocacy and human rights organisation, where members heard harrowing testimony from survivors of ISIS' invasion. Yazda staff and survivors provided detailed accounts of

the continued displacement of approximately 350,000 Yazidis, the existence of 96 mass graves, more than 2,500 missing persons, and the incomplete implementation of the UN-brokered Sinjar Agreement. Serious concerns were raised regarding the ongoing presence of militias, insufficient security guarantees, limited political representation for Yazidis in Baghdad, and the slow progress of reconstruction efforts in Sinjar.

On Thursday, 19th February, the delegation met Patriarch Mar Awa III of the Assyrian Church of the East, whose Patriarchate is based in Erbil, as well as Archbishop Nicodemus Daoud Sharaf, the Syriac Orthodox Archbishop.



Meeting with Patriarch Mara Awa III, Assyrian Church of the East. Left to the Right: John Pontifex (ACN), Jim Shannon MP, Chair of the APPG FoRB, Patriarch Mar Awa III, Julie Jones, Director of the APPG FoRB, Elliott Banks (ACN)

All the senior christian leaders expressed appreciation for the relative security and cooperation afforded by the KRG, while also emphasising the acute challenge of youth unemployment, which continues to drive emigration from the Region.

Across all meetings, the delegation observed tangible examples of resilience, interfaith cooperation, and community rebuilding. Students at the Catholic University in Erbil—Muslim, Christian, and Yazidi—described an atmosphere of mutual respect and spoke of how the institution had broadened their understanding of other communities.

Throughout the visit, there were consistent calls for increased diplomatic engagement from the United Kingdom and international partners to support the normalisation of Sinjar, ensure accountability for ISIS crimes, and enhance psychological and humanitarian assistance, particularly in the context of a reduced presence of NGOs and USAID-funded programmes.

The delegation was warmly received, with several faith leaders noting that the visit itself was “a sign of hope”. Overall, the engagement was considered highly constructive, strengthening relationships, identifying practical action points for future UK advocacy, and reaffirming APPG FoRB and ACN UK’s commitment to supporting vulnerable religious communities in Iraq.

Kurdistan Regional Government policies towards religious minorities

During the visit, the delegation was briefed about the impact of the Kurdistan Regional Government’s policies to support co-existence and freedom of worship.

These include:

1. Support for the IDP camps, despite the severe financial constraints on the Kurdistan Regional Government due to a dispute over the Federal budget allocation.
2. The delegation was pleased to hear that land disputes between religious minorities and the KRG are no longer an issue. Land has been provided without charge for the construction of religious buildings as well as social infrastructure including schools, universities and health clinics. The delegation visited the Chaldean Catholic Church of St Peter and Paul in Ankawa as well as the Syriac Orthodox Church, both built with assistance from the KRG.

3. The construction of schools, hospitals and other facilities was seen by witnesses as a useful source of employment for minority religious groups enabling them to stay in the region.
4. The KRG has supported religious buildings and churches by providing free utilities.

Recommendations

UK Government:

1. The UK Government, working with partners and allies, including the United States, should redouble its diplomatic efforts to see the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement, or a similar agreement, to allow the Yazidi community to return to their historic lands.
2. The UK Government, through our diplomatic footprint in Iraq, should provide regular reporting on the success in holding ISIS fighters accountable for crimes against humanity perpetrated against minority religious communities.
3. Economic factors are leading to an increase in migration across Iraq, this is especially more acute for minority communities. The Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, working with the Department for Trade and Business should explore the feasibility of a trade promotional campaign to encourage economic development and foreign direct investment into Iraq. This campaign would align with the Government's strategic goal to promote Britain's economic interest; but it will also serve to provide economic opportunities for young Iraqis, thus reducing the push factor of migration. Historically it should be noted that Iraqis were one of the largest cohorts represented by irregular migration into the UK.
4. In line with the recommendations in the Truro Review, periodic continuous engagement with Church leaders and other religious leaders, including Yazidi organisations, recognising the unique challenges that religious minorities face. This is to maintain a dialogue and help supplement the UK government's commitment as outlined by the FoRB Strategy 2025.
5. The delegation encourages the UK Government to work with international partners and Non-Governmental Organisations to provide direct support to Internally Displaced Persons' Camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The delegation heard heartfelt concerns from officials that the withdrawal of USAID had led to an exodus of NGOs operating the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, placing additional pressure on the KRG's budget.

6. The delegation encourages the UK government to continue prioritising the full implementation of Article 18, in line with the UK FoRB Strategy, working closely with the KRG and Iraqi Federal Government to embed freedom of religion or belief in all diplomatic engagements.

Federal Government of Iraq

7. Urge the Iraqi Federal Government to work with the Kurdistan Regional Government to resolve the budget dispute, to unlock funding not only for economic development but also to relieve the financial burden generated by the Internally Displaced Persons Camps in the KRI.

8. Work towards the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement, or similar, to allow the Yazidi people an opportunity to return to Sinjar. This includes:

I. Work to disarm the militias operating in the area, and ensure that legitimate state authority has a monopoly on arms in the region

II. Work with the Yazidi community to enable them to become co-responsible for security in Sinjar, with representation in the security services and policing of Sinjar

III. Work on the reconstruction of Sinjar, including with the international community, to allow the Yazidis to have a chance to rebuild their lives through reconstruction of basic infrastructure

9. Ensure that justice and accountability is achieved for victims of ISIS's invasion of northern Iraq, including accountability for the crime of genocide against all religious minority communities.

10. Ensure every effort is made to excavate the mass graves of the Yazidi and other victims of ISIS, to preserve and collect evidence, identify victims and allow proper burials to take place.

11. Improve minority religious representation in Federal Government ministries. The delegation heard evidence that there is limited representation for Yazidis in government departments responsible for the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement and accountability for ISIS crimes.

12. Improve the security situation for Christians in Mosul and Baghdad. Evidence collected from multiple sources during the delegation's visit, indicated a real fear expressed by Christians from Baghdad and Mosul for their safety. We encourage the Federal authorities to uphold the Iraqi Constitution and address hate speech and extremism targeted at minority religions.

13. The delegation encourages the Federal Government of Iraq to implement in full Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

Kurdistan Regional Government

14. In all engagements with the Kurdistan Regional Government, the delegation was impressed with the significant work undertaken by the KRG to promote co-existence and integration of religious minorities into society. The delegation received evidence that in the wake of the ISIS invasion, the region became a safe haven for the hundreds of thousands displaced people fleeing ISIS extremism. We recommend that the KRG continues this work, noting the support that the KRG has already provided to religious minorities.

15. The delegation was impressed by the work of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs for their work in combating extremism and promoting co-existence. It is clear to the delegation that significant political capital has been expended by the Ministry in tackling hatred and intolerance. We encourage the Ministry to continue this work at pace and ensure that all instances of hate speech are addressed quickly when they arise.

16. Urge the Kurdistan Regional Government to work with the Iraqi Federal Government to resolve the budget dispute, to unlock funding not only for economic development but also to relieve the financial burden generated by the Internally Displaced Persons Camps in the KRI.

17. Recognising the financial constraints on the KRG, the delegation heard evidence of hardship in the Internally Displaced Persons' camps. We call for every effort to be made to meet their basic needs including development of external partnership to address the psychological and physical trauma caused by ISIS crimes. This should be done with the support of the international community, and in line with Recommendation 5.

18. Recognising the issue of unemployment affects all communities in Iraq, the delegation heard evidence that religious minorities are disproportionately affected. Recognising the major strides taken in education and training by minority communities, we encourage the KRG to work with community groups and representatives to unlock employment opportunities across all sectors of the economy.

19. The delegation encourages the Kurdistan Regional Government to continue their work on the full implementation of Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights, in line with the KRG's stated policy objectives.

We would like to acknowledge the people and organisations who contributed to this delegation.

We thank you for your continued support in our efforts to promote and advocate for international freedom of religion or belief.



All Party Parliamentary Group
For International Freedom of
Religion or Belief

www.appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org



Aid to the
Church in Need

ACN UNITED KINGDOM

www.acnuk.org



www.iclrs.org