

How Iraq's Minorities Can Secure a Future After ISIS

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With international assistance and a measure of justice and stability, Iraq's ancient minority groups may stand a chance

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Three years ago this week, the extremist Islamic State group stormed across north-central Iraq, launching a deadly assault on the Yazidi communities clustered around Mount Sinjar. Other minority groups, including Shabaks as well as Christians such as Chaldeans and Assyrians, also faced crushing oppression and destruction at the hands of ISIS. Today, as Iraqi and Kurdish forces recapture most territory from ISIS, the future of minorities in Iraq remains uncertain. To an even greater extent than Sunni and Shia areas destroyed by ISIS, minority communities face continuing security risks, humanitarian needs, a devastated economy and the imperative of reconciliation.



A camp for Yazidi refugees near Dohuk, Iraq. Photo credit The New York Times/Lynsey Addario

Three years ago this week, the extremist Islamic State group stormed across north-central Iraq, launching a deadly assault on the Yazidi communities clustered around Mount Sinjar. Other minority groups, including Shabaks as well as Christians such as Chaldeans and Assyrians, also faced crushing oppression and destruction at the hands of ISIS. Today, as Iraqi and Kurdish forces recapture most territory from ISIS, the future of minorities in Iraq remains uncertain. To an even greater extent than Sunni and Shia areas destroyed by ISIS, minority communities face continuing security risks, humanitarian needs, a devastated economy and the imperative of reconciliation.

The challenges of re-establishing minority communities—and the hope for overcoming the obstacles—were outlined starkly in a conversation at the U.S. Institute of Peace on Aug. 1. The speakers, addressing the issue from a range of perspectives, agreed that physical security is the first condition needed to bring back displaced people and keep others from leaving. To meet those and the other needs, panelists said, the critical question is where will the help come from. Without a financial and security commitment from the international community, the prospects for [Iraq's](#) historic minorities are bleak, they said.

It would not be the first failure by the international community to rescue Iraq's religious minorities, said Naomi Kikoler, the deputy director of the Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. and the moderator of the program. The [panel](#) was organized by USIP and the Kurdistan Regional Government.

These communities should never have had to flee.

Naomi Kikoler, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

“Three years ago, 700,000 Iraqis were driven from their homes with hours of notice as victims of ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and genocide,” Kikoler said. “These communities should never have had to flee. We are here because of the collective international failure to protect them.”

Vian Dakhil, a member of Iraq's parliament representing the Yazidi community, recalled those days and their aftermath in also pleading for international support.

When ISIS attacked Yazidi towns and cities in 2014, among the most shocking effects was that some Sunni Arabs joined the extremists and turned on their neighbors, she said. In the first day, 1,300 people were killed. Over time, 6,418 Yazidis were abducted, mostly women forced into sexual slavery. The extremists carried away 1,060 children between the ages of four and 10, destroyed 68 Yazidi shrines and demolished 85 percent of the communities' cities and villages, she said. [Research](#) published by the PLOS Medicine journal estimated total Yazidi deaths caused by ISIS at 3,100—half executed and the rest dying while fleeing on Sinjar Mountain.

The Question of Trust

The Yazidi population before the [ISIS](#) assault stood at 550,000, she said. Today, 400,000 are displaced within Iraq and 90,000 have fled abroad.

“We are asking the international community to recognize this as a genocide,” Dakhil said. “We need to rebuild our cities and then ask how we can rebuild trust in a neighbor when we were attacked by him. Justice is very important—all those [ISIS](#) people should be brought to justice,” she said, adding that Yazidis also must extend a hand to anyone who did not support ISIS's atrocities.

“I don't speak of restoring trust,” said Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, the Kurdistan Regional Government's representative to the U.S. “Trust was lacking even before ISIS came and is now, I would argue, out of reach in the near future.” Virtually no one in Iraq's Christian and Yazidi communities escaped losses in the ISIS onslaught and the wounds are raw, she said. More realistic is considering how to establish security, stability and protection, Rahman said.

For its part, the KRG has passed laws and draft constitutional provisions that protect rights of religious and ethnic minorities, opened what is perhaps Iraq's first center for treating rape victims, and provided some financial resources to Yazidis, Turkmen and Kurds in liberated areas, Rahman said.

Iraq more broadly must support an international commission to ensure justice and accountability for ISIS

perpetrators and remove militias that intimidate residents who want to return home, she said. The board also could spur economic development in areas neglected even before ISIS, and build an army that is professional and reflects all Iraq's people and faiths, she said.

What Schools Teach About Religion

In the longer term, public schools must teach about other religions, in addition to Islam, as the prime minister has ordered. Rahman called such education “a key to combatting [radicalization](#).”

“Peaceful [reconciliation](#) will be a long, painstaking process,” Rahman said. “There is no quick fix.”

The question of trust-building extends to governments, said William Warda, the chairman of the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities, a coalition of 13 civil society groups formed in 2011 with support from USIP. While AIM is working with USIP on ways to [reduce conflict](#) between members of the Islamic Shabak minority and Christians, an over-arching problem is that minorities are concentrated in areas contested by Baghdad and the KRG, Warda said, speaking by Skype from Iraq. Neither government can assure residents' safety, and an assortment of forces with differing capabilities remain in the minority areas, he said.

People are scared to return.

William Warda, Alliance of Iraqi Minorities

“This informs the sense of insecurity and, in fact, increased the vulnerability to ISIS when it attacked,” he said. “People are scared to return.”

Iraq's minorities are seeking some form of international protection, Warda said.

The United States is working with the Iraqi government and the KRG, as well as Spain and France, to provide assistance to Iraq's minority communities, said Knox Thames, the State Department's special advisor for religious minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia. Areas of concern to the U.S include diversifying police forces, encouraging legal reforms for equal citizenship and supporting reconciliation to foster the return of displaced people, which in turn will aid stabilization.

Religious Freedom – a Priority?

“Vice President Pence has said religious freedom will be a priority for this administration and it will work to assist persecuted believers in the Middle East and elsewhere,” he said.

Only a multifold strategy can begin to address [the situation of Iraq's minorities](#), said Sarhang Hamasaeed, USIP's director of Middle East programs. It will require varying levels of support from the international community, Iraq's government and the communities to create a sense of security. That is likely to involve self-defense, communications with the military and political authorities and resources, and the mix may differ from one village to the next.

Reconciliation is a practical objective distinct from simple forgiveness, he said. It could start with agreements on nonviolence that could form the basis for peaceful [co-existence](#) through links such as trade. The next step would be to resolve layers of conflicts that predated ISIS and helped open the way for the extremists in the first place. Saddam Hussein widened those fissures deliberately, creating distrust and insecurity as a means of furthering his control, USIP Executive Vice President William Taylor noted.

Iraq has produced results that are “nothing short of miraculous” since the dark days of 2014, when ISIS was within

mortar range of Erbil and fear grew that Baghdad could fall, said Iraq's ambassador to the U.S., Fareed Yasseen. He predicted that in a few years, journalists will write about Iraq's resilience rather than its strife, and that will include the country's minorities regaining their historic place.

"For most Iraqis, Iraq is not Iraq without its minorities," Yasseen said. "Their active preservation as vibrant members of society is vital."

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