

April 26, 2021

Statement on the Annual Report of U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

On April 22, 2021, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom released its annual report on violations of religious freedom. The report assesses many countries in this regard. Iraq and the Kurdistan Region are also included in the report.

The report focused on the opportunities and obstacles to the elimination of violations of religious freedoms, while praising Kurdistan Region in preserving its outstanding status for protecting freedom of religion.

The Kurdistan Region is where all minorities feel safe and witness integration and reconciliation. Kurdistan Region, and the regional government continues to support religious and ethnic coexistence.

Being a region that has suffered through economic troubles, domestic conflict and grieved through the terrors of ISIL, Kurdistan Region has managed to remain committed to preserving values related to peace and coexistence. Article 6 in the draft constitution of KRG clearly states that the Kurdistan population is composed of Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Chaldeans, Assyrian, Armenian and other people living in the region. Those who practice other religions are not considered minorities, but they are rather considered as constituents in the society since the Kurdistan Region is a multi-ethnic and multi-religion region.

The doors of the Kurdistan Region are open towards people from all backgrounds such as Christians, Yazidis, Turkemans, and Arabs who come from central and south Iraq and seek protection and refuge in the Kurdistan Region.

Concerning the situation of Yazidis, they are now victims of the fragile security and humanitarian situation in the Sinjar area. In any case, the regional government, through the Yazidi kidnapping office, was able to rescue 3537 abductees, of whom 1201 were women and 339 were men and the rest were children. To date, 2880 people remain under the custody of Daesh, and efforts are underway to rescue them.

The KRG has provided them with all basic necessary needs and they live peacefully free from any pressure or constraints.

In terms of political participation, upon the establishment of the Kurdistan National Assembly in 1992, a quota of 5 seats, out of 100 main seats, were dedicated to Christians. In 2005, this quota number was increased to 11 seats for minorities, with five seats reserved for Turkemans, five for Chaldeans and Assyrians and one seat for Armenians.

Furthermore, the KRG has put great significance to eliminate any racial and religious discrimination among all the people of Kurdistan. In 2007, Kurdistan Parliament changed the name of the Ministry of Endowment and Islamic Affairs to the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs. This implied that the ministry does not only belong to Muslims but also to other religious components in the region.

In the beginning, the ministry only included departments for Muslims, Christians, and Yezidi. Now, eight religions have their representatives in the ministry. Religious believers that are practicing their own faith have the absolute right to exercise their religious rituals and ceremonies and have been given full encouragement by the KRG. They also have received provisions and backing from the KRG.

To further ensure the protection of all the components living in the Kurdistan Region and ensuring that all their rights are granted, Kurdistan Parliament passed Law No. (5) of the protection of the rights of all components with an absolute vote. The law protects the rights of ethnic components like Turkmen, Assyrians and Chaldeans, Syriacs, and religious components such as Christians, Yezidis, Sabea-Mandeans, Kakayis, and Zoroastrians. The law works to hinder direct and indirect efforts by individuals or groups of people intended to raise hatred, discrimination, and violence on the basis of ethnic, religious, racial or language backgrounds.

The legislation is one of the most crucial accomplishments by the KRG towards protecting ethnic and religious components. In an additional similar effort, the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs issued Decision No 1910 on July 9, 2017 to establish the Directorate of Religious Coexistence. The main objective of this directorate was to protect and intensify the spirit of religious coexistence in the Kurdistan Region.

The KRG provides financial support to various cultural or artistic groups and centers that focus on the Turkmen, Chaldean, Assyrian, and Yezidi cultural units. Thus, these attempts are made for the preservation of their distinctive culture. For instance, these endeavors also include the establishment of Assyrian museums and the printing of thousands of books in Kurdish, Arabic, Assyrian, and Turkmen languages.

It is worth mentioning that all the religions practice their religious ceremonies, rites, and rituals in a peaceful environment that is free from any restrictions.

Correspondingly, all major religious celebrations such as Eid, Christmas, and Yezidi New Year are considered official public holidays throughout the region. They also have cultural directorates and offices in all the provinces in the KR. There are numerous schools that teach in the Assyrian language, predominantly in Christian-populated areas like Erbil/Ainkawa, Shaqlawa, Koya, Dyana, Harmota, and Hawdyan.

Concerning the Shingal Agreement - as referred to in the report - KRG supports a swift and full implementation of the agreement in a way that it yields benefits to the Yezidi community.

