

CRS Insights

Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Implications for Religious Minorities

Christopher M. Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs (cblanchard@crs.loc.gov, 7-0428)

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Conflict in Syria and Iraq is causing particular suffering for religious minorities in the countries' diverse societies, leading some Members of Congress to call for increased action by the U.S. government.

[Syria's civil war](#) has displaced half the population of 22.4 million and has placed extreme pressure on inter-communal relations. For decades, the country's authoritarian government has been led in large part by members of the [Alawite religious minority](#), who have sought to cultivate the regime's image as a guarantor of a non-sectarian society while manipulating group identities and stifling dissent to stay in power. [Syria's citizenry is mostly Sunni Muslim](#), but it includes a multi-denomination Christian minority, smaller Druze and Shiite Muslim communities, and members of other faiths. The political uprising that preceded the conflict in 2011 started in mainly Sunni Muslim areas but was not overtly sectarian in nature. However, the government labelled activists as extremists and terrorists and has [indiscriminately targeted](#) opposition-held areas populated mainly by Sunni Muslims, exacerbating sectarian tensions. Some armed Sunni Islamist opposition groups have used vicious sectarian rhetoric and carried out [violent sectarian attacks](#), driving some minority group members, including Christians, to support Assad. In some areas, violent Sunni Islamist extremist groups have [imposed harsh conditions on members of religious minority groups](#) and [continue to call for the destruction of the country's Alawite community](#). These acts, and the lack of dependable security guarantees for civilians on all sides, have encouraged some individuals and groups to adopt more exclusive identities and prioritize their own interests, complicating efforts to resolve the conflict.

In Iraq, the [security and political crises](#) triggered by the advance of forces affiliated with the extremist group known as the Islamic State (IS, formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL/ISIS) are directly harming religious minorities, in addition to the groups' murderous attacks on the large Shiite Arab population. Some Christians and members of other religious minority groups long resident in areas now under Islamic State control have been [forced from their homes](#) after refusing to accept demands made by IS personnel. Thousands of Christians have fled Mosul and towns in the Nineveh Plains region for the safety of Kurdish-held areas. IS fighters are reported to have kidnapped civilians and seized or demolished churches, shrines, and minorities' homes in a campaign of sectarian intimidation. Yezidis, Shabaks, and Turkoman Shiites also [have been targeted](#) and killed. The displacement and violence amplify trends [over the past decade](#) that have driven [hundreds of thousands](#) of Christians and other minorities out of the country in search of safety and religious freedom, greatly reducing communities whose presence in Iraq pre-dates Islam.

Recent Congressional Responses

Many Members of Congress have [long decried](#) the persecution of religious minorities, especially Christians and Jews, in the Middle East, and some have called for the executive branch to reassess and recalibrate U.S. relations with governments and groups believed to be responsible for the denial of religious freedom. Section 1243 of [P.L. 110-181](#) granted specific refugee resettlement status to "Iraqis who are members of a religious or minority community" officially identified as a persecuted group who have close family members in the United States. Appropriations committees have directed foreign assistance to aid vulnerable ethno-religious minorities in Iraq and required Administration reporting on related U.S. efforts. The 111th Congress adopted resolutions specifically on Iraqi minorities ([S.Res. 322](#) and [H.Res. 944](#)). Some related resolutions proposed in the 113th Congress include [H.Res. 663](#), which, in part, would urge the Administration "to expedite visa processing for Iraq's minority groups" and to alter visa allocations to accommodate more Iraqi Christians seeking refugee status; and [H.Res. 223](#), which would call on Syrian opposition groups to adopt inclusive policies and would urge the Administration to work to protect minority rights. Congressional hearings continue to focus on rights

violations in Syria and Iraq, and recent [congressional correspondence](#) has urged the Administration to take steps to protect minorities. The House and Senate also have adopted separate legislation to authorize the appointment of a Special Envoy to Promote Religious Freedom of Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia; these bills authorize support funding on differing terms ([H.R. 301](#), adopted on September 18, 2013, and [S. 653](#), adopted on July 10, 2014).

Prospects and Potential Issues for Congressional Consideration

Religious tolerance conditions remain fraught in [many Middle Eastern countries](#). Current politics and complex histories often shape local reactions to international expressions of concern about religious freedom and interreligious relations. Events in recent decades suggest that international advocacy efforts draw increased attention to the plight of threatened groups and individuals, but also may amplify tensions among local parties that resent or oppose what they view as foreign interference in their domestic affairs.

In responding to the conflicts and political crises in Syria and Iraq, U.S. policy makers seek to achieve critical national security objectives while defending human rights and religious freedom. Various options for responding to the suffering of religious minorities abroad have potential benefits and risks. Offering targeted humanitarian assistance or intervening militarily to protect groups at risk may reduce immediate threats to life and property and bolster the image of the United States in some quarters, but also may reinforce the image of religious minority groups as foreign elements in their societies. Offering targeted consular relief via refugee or temporary protection status determinations may help members of groups at risk flee conflict areas, but also may facilitate long-term expatriation. Establishing mechanisms to hold rights violators accountable through executive orders or legislation may help deter certain actors from persecuting minorities, but also may complicate U.S. efforts to pursue conflict settlement or other security-related objectives. Moreover, many religious freedom violators in Iraq and Syria already are subject to U.S. sanctions. Placing policy-based or legislative conditions on the provision of economic and security assistance may encourage governments to respond to threats to minorities if those governments consider U.S. assistance to be important. Aid conditionality also may complicate relationships with leaders with whom the United States seeks cooperation on other matters.