



COI QUERY

Country of Origin/Topic	Iraq
Question(s)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Information on the prevalence of atheism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).2. Information on the treatment of atheists in the KRI, especially during the period 2017-2018. Treatment by authorities such as the Peshmerga, Asayish; treatment by non-state actors such as family/community and tribes.3. Information on state protection for atheists in the KRI.4. Information on the prevalence of conversion in the KRI.5. Information on the treatment of converts in the KRI, especially during the period 2017-2018. Treatment by authorities such as the Peshmerga, Asayish; Treatment by non-state actors such as family/community and tribes.6. Information on state protection for converts in the KRI.7. Is it possible for atheists/converts in the KRI to change religion affiliation in the population register and on the ID card?
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The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policy makers, and decision making authorities. The answer was finalised on the 15 March 2019. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this answer.



COI QUERY RESPONSE

General information on the prevalence and treatment of atheism and conversion/apostasy in Iraq, including in the Kurdistan region, can be found in the latest EASO Country of Origin information Report Iraq – Targeting of Individuals, published in March 2019¹, as well as in an EASO COI Query response published in April 2018.²

Atheism

1. Information on the prevalence of atheism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

Atheism and apostasy are very sensitive issues in Iraq, and therefore there are not reliable statistics available relating to their prevalence in Iraq, including in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI).³ However, general information pertaining to atheism in the Middle East on the whole suggests that atheism is a growing phenomena, including in the KRI. Growing political instability, economic hardship and backlash to the religious climate are considered to be the main reason for a surge in atheism. Iraq and the Kurdish Region are no exception.⁴ A poll released in 2011, by the Erbil-based Kurdish news agency AKnews recorded that 67 % of Iraq's population answered that they believe in God, 21 % answered probably, whilst 7 % answered that they did not believe in God.⁵

While researching his book 'Arabs without God', Brian Whitaker, a British journalist and Middle East editor of the Guardian, stated that those who abandoned Islam did so because they rejected the basic tenets of the faith, mainly deriving from what they had been taught in school or by government approved clerics. People who take on atheism usually describe a gradual process from religion, often by questioning aspects of religious teachings they find illogical, or due to irrational deity driven by leaders or a family patriarchs.⁶

On 19 April 2015 in Sulaymaniya, a group of academics, intellectuals, trade unionists, political and human rights activists established the Kurdistan Secular Centre (KSC), a community organisation promoting secularism and calling for the separation of religion from the state and governing systems. The KSC drafted a 'Charter for Secularism in Kurdistan', arguing for the complete removal of religion from the constitution, one law for all, gender equality and the protection of 'freedom of speech, expression, criticism, research and thought, creativity and invention', as well as a secular education system and cessation of funding of religious institutions by the state.⁷

¹ EASO Country of Origin Information Report - Iraq - Targeting of Individuals, 7 March 2019, [url](#)

² EASO COI Query Response – Atheism in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, 11 April 2018, [url](#)

³ Al Monitor, Islamic parties intimidate, fear atheists in Iraq, 22 June 2017, [url](#); Rudaw The changing face of Islam in Kurdistan, 7 February 2016, [url](#)

⁴ Albawaba, Imagining atheists in the Middle East: if you're a non-believer, you are not the only one, 13 December 2012, [url](#); Rudaw The changing face of Islam in Kurdistan, 7 February 2016, [url](#)

⁵ Your Middle East, Without God in Bagdad, 4 February 2014, [url](#)

⁶ Whitaker, B., Atheism in the Arab World. The dictators' scourge: of 'heresy and humanists', Qantara 13 September 2017, [url](#)

⁷ Kurdistan Secular Centre, Official website, [url](#); Clarion Project, An Appeal to Support the Kurdistan Secular Centre, 21 June 2016, [url](#); National Secular Society, Kurdish secularists appeal for international support, 16 July 2015, [url](#); Niqash, Secular Parties in Iraqi Kurdistan Can't Get It Together To Confront Islamists, 11 May 2017, [url](#)



2. Information on the treatment of atheists in the KRI, especially during the period 2017-2018. Treatment by authorities such as the Peshmerga, Asayish; treatment by non-state actors such as family/community and tribes.

A 2014 article published on Your Middle East⁸ and featuring interviews with young atheists in Iraq, indicated that the Kurdistan region of Iraq 'portrays itself as a tolerant place, with a semi-secular system' and that young Kurds there 'often feel they have more freedom to express their views'. However, the same source quoted an Erbil-based Canadian-Kurdish photographer and staff member at a local NGO, as stating that it is 'easier to say that one doesn't believe in God in Kurdistan than in the rest of Iraq, but adds that in the Middle East - like in the rest of the world - people [do not have the mindset] to accept others who have no religion'.⁹

In a 2015 article, the Kurdish news agency Kurdistan24 stated that Kurds have always identified themselves primarily in terms of their ethnicity and not their religious affiliation. Secularism is seen as a by-product of the multitude of religions that have coexisted in the Kurdish areas for over two thousand years, whereby Aryan religions such as Zoroastrianism and Yezidism dominated the area before for example Judaism, Christianity and Islam.¹⁰

Atheism is in general not well perceived in the KRI. However, according to some sources, it is somewhat more acceptable to be an atheist than an apostate. This is because people would like to think that you are still a Muslim deep inside, as one source told Landinfo and DIS in April 2018 in Sulaymaniya, but you have only lost your path. In other parts of society, just stating that you do not longer believe in God may be dangerous.¹¹

Interviewed by the Research Directorate of the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) of Canada in 2016, a professor emeritus at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Utrecht University, stated that criticism of the Islam and religious functionaries in general is quite widespread in KRI and is not looked upon as something scandalous. However, proclaiming oneself as an atheist publicly could cause problems. Although the Kurdish government is secular, society in general, especially in Erbil, is conservative and expects everyone to respect Islamic norms. The same source added that the city of Sulaymaniya has always been the most liberal and most open to non-Muslim lifestyles, but as a result of heavy urbanisation, the 'atmosphere has considerably changed there'.¹²

An assistant professor of politics and public policy at the American University of Kurdistan, in 2016, told the IRB that the Kurdistan region and particularly Erbil is a relatively conservative society when it comes to discussion on religion, further adding that Erbil is 'more conservative' than Sulaymaniya, but

⁸ Your Middle East is a Swedish non-profit media foundation that publishes stories from a curated selection of news sites, blogs, think tanks and magazines focusing on the Middle East. Your Middle East was founded in 2011 and is currently funded by grant from PostkodLotteriets Kulturstiftelse. It also has a partnership with Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University. For more information, see: Anna Lindh Foundation, Your Middle East Foundation, n.d., [url](#); and Your Middle East, About us, n.d., [url](#)

⁹ Your Middle East, Without God in Baghdad, 4 February 2014, [url](#)

¹⁰ Kurdistan24, Secularism. Essential to Kurdish identity, 22 November 2015, [url](#)

¹¹ Denmark: DIS and Norway: Landinfo, Women and men in honour-related conflicts, 9 November 2018 [url](#), p. 57 Norway: Landinfo, COI Query Response Iraq: Apostasy and atheism, 29 August 2018, [url](#); Unofficial translation provided by Landinfo.

¹² Canada: IRB, Iraq: Information on the treatment of atheists and apostates by society and authorities in Erbil; state protection available (2013-September 2016), 2 September 2016, IRQ105624.E, [url](#)



that the latter is also where ‘more extremist[s]... are gathered’. The same source explained that it is very difficult for atheists and apostates to openly declare their opinions in public. Two atheists in Erbil interviewed by the professor during his research stated that they can only declare their views as atheists among their very educated friends, some atheists said they express their opinions via social media networks (i.e. Twitter and Facebook).¹³

The assistant professor further stated there have been cases in which atheists have been physically threatened, including one of his interviewees who had a gun pointed at him during a gathering in Erbil when the armed individual learned that he was an atheist. The same source further noted that, in the last two decades, he has ‘seen and heard direct threats of Fatwa expressed by some Islamic extremists and religious leaders against atheists and apostates, particularly writers who explicitly criticize Islamic principles and values’.¹⁴

Speaking to the IRB in 2016, a representative of the Kurdistan Secular Centre stated that ‘the general public opinion is that you do not speak against a religion’ and that people with secular views ‘are generally very scared’ to openly declare their views on religion. According to this source declaring themselves as atheist in public can be fatal. Atheists and other ‘free-thinkers’ can be targeted by groups of young people in the streets if their opinions are known. Furthermore, the KSC representative noted that atheists ‘suffer psychologically as they can be rejected by their families’. The same source stated that the police and judges share the same beliefs as society in being against atheism, adding that atheists who suffer harrasement due to their beliefs would prefer to hide than to report to the police. The KSC representative further indicated that social media is considered the ‘only safe place’ where atheists and agnostics can express their opinions.¹⁵

An article published by Iraqi news website Niqash in 2018 informed that criticising Islam on social media – particularly on Facebook – has become ‘something of a social trend’ in the KRI, whereas up until recently it was not acceptable. Such phenomenon is partly considered to be a reaction against the religious extremism in the wake of the Islamic State (IS) conflict. However, the same source added that the criticism often comes from Iraqi Kurds living abroad, or individuals who hide their identity because of the controversial nature of the criticism.¹⁶

According to an academic interviewed by the DIS-Landinfo during their 2018 fact-finding mission to the KRI, persons who openly say they are not religious would risk arrest in Baghdad and the south of the country, whereas in the KRI there would be more freedom of expression with regards to religious beliefs.¹⁷ In April 2018, Al-Monitor reports the Dhi Qar province's Garraf district judiciary announced issuing arrest warrants for four Iraqis on atheism charges, leading to the arrest of one of them.¹⁸

Landinfo informed EASO that they have not been able to find new examples of prosecution of atheists in the KRI during their 2018 fact-finding mission.¹⁹ However, in 2014 a student was arrested at a school

¹³ Canada: IRB, Iraq: Information on the treatment of atheists and apostates by society and authorities in Erbil; state protection available (2013-September 2016), 2 September 2016, IRQ105624.E, [url](#)

¹⁴ Canada: IRB, Iraq: Information on the treatment of atheists and apostates by society and authorities in Erbil; state protection available (2013-September 2016), 2 September 2016, IRQ105624.E, [url](#)

¹⁵ Canada: IRB, Iraq: Information on the treatment of atheists and apostates by society and authorities in Erbil; state protection available (2013-September 2016), 2 September 2016, IRQ105624.E, [url](#)

¹⁶ Niqash, Doubters going public: In Iraqi Kurdistan, Number of critics of religion growing on line, 25 January 2018, [url](#)

¹⁷ Denmark: DIS and Norway: Landinfo, Women and men in honour-related conflicts, 9 November 2018 [url](#), p. 69.

¹⁸ Al-Monitor, Iraqi courts seeking out atheists for prosecution, 1 April 2018, [url](#).

¹⁹ Denmark: DIS and Norway: Landinfo, Women and men in honour-related conflicts, 9 November 2018, [url](#).



in Darbandihan in Sulaymaniya province for criticising Islam. The boy had first been threatened by fellow students after he had given a presentation at school on the Big Bang theory. According to his lawyer he had also received death threats after having posted critical statements of Islam on Facebook. When the boy reported the threats to the police, he was himself arrested. He was released on bail after pressure from human rights activists.²⁰ Landinfo has not found any information on whether the case eventually reached the court, which was supposed to occur on 13 July 2015.²¹

3. Information on state protection for atheists in the KRI.

Neither the Iraqi Penal Code, nor other special laws contain articles providing punishment for atheism. On the other hand, the Iraqi constitution does not guarantee free exercise of faith for atheists. In March 2018, arrest warrants were issued in Dhi Qar against four Iraqis on charges of atheism.²²

In April 2018 political and legal analyst Ali Jaber al-Tamimi informed Al-Monitor ‘there aren’t any articles in the Iraqi Penal Code that provide for a direct punishment for atheism, nor are there any special laws on punishments against atheists.’ However, ‘there are articles that punish the desecration of religions.’²³ An article on growing atheism in the Muslim world, published by the Washington Times in August 2017, noted that atheism is not illegal in Iraq; however state actors equate atheism with blasphemy.²⁴

In 2010, a well-known Kurdish author and poet, Qubady Jalyzada, was accused of blasphemy for a poem he wrote. Sales of the book were banned and copies of the book were seized by the Kurdish security. Jalyzada was summoned to court on numerous occasions in relation to the book but was eventually pardoned. The book, however, remains banned.²⁵

Conversion and Apostasy

4. Information on the prevalence of conversion in the KRI.

The Kurdish population is approximately 94 % nominally Muslim. Some sources have reported a growing phenomenon of Kurds leaving Islam or converting to other religions, mainly as a result of the extremism religious views of ISIL.²⁶ A 2016 article by Kurdish news site Rudaw reported that the Kurdish Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs could not confirm these claims, adding that they do not publish figures of people who convert from one religion to another.²⁷

²⁰ Canada: IRB, Iraq: Information on the treatment of atheists and apostates by society and authorities in Erbil; state protection available (2013-September 2016), 2 September 2016, IRQ105624.E, [url](#)

²¹ Landinfo, COI Query Response Iraq: Apostasy and atheism, 29 August 2018, [url](#), p. 6

²² Austria: BFA, Country of Origin Information Report Iraq, 22 November 2018, [url](#); Unofficial translation provided by BFA.

²³ Al-Monitor, Iraqi courts seeking out atheists for prosecution, 1 April 2018, [url](#)

²⁴ Washington Times (The), Atheists in Muslim world: Silent, resentful and growing in number, 1 August 2017, [url](#)

²⁵ Niqash, Doubters going public: In Iraqi Kurdistan, Number of critics of religion growing on line, 25 January 2018, [url](#)

²⁶ Rudaw, The changing face of Islam in Kurdistan, 2 February 2016, [url](#); Gospel Herald, Thousands of Muslims in northern Iraq converting to Christianity after witnessing ISIS horror, ministry reveals: ‘they are just sick of Islam’, 30 October 2015, [url](#); New Arab (The), Quest for Identity. How Kurds are rediscovering Zoroastrianism, 5 February 2018, [url](#)

²⁷ Rudaw, The changing face of Islam in Kurdistan, 2 February 2016, [url](#)



Other sources refer to a growing trend amongst Kurds converting to Zoroastrianism, particularly since the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) passed legislation officially recognizing the Zoroastrian religion.²⁸ The first Zoroastrian temple was opened in the KRI in 2016.²⁹ According to the news site Niqash, around 4 000 persons in Erbil Governorate are believed to have filled out forms expressing their desire to convert to Zoroastrian.³⁰ A spokesman from the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs in KRI maintained in 2015, that there are 100 000 Zoroastrians living in KRI.³¹ The spokesman attributed the rise to extremism.³²

5. Information on the treatment of converts in the KRI, especially during the period 2017-2018. Treatment by authorities such as the Peshmerga, Asayish; Treatment by non-state actors such as family/community and tribes.

Discussing apostasy at EASO's practical cooperation meeting on Iraq in April 2017, Mark Lattimer observes that apostasy is uncommon in Iraq: 'generally speaking, you are considered to be born into a religion and you will die in that religion – it is not just in Islam, but also in most other religions in Iraq, that apostasy is not just frowned upon as an offence, but seen as unnatural.'³³ NGO representatives interviewed by DIS during its 2015 mission to KRI noted that 'there are cases of people being killed for converting' noting the case of Priest Abdullah who had sought asylum in Europe after three attempted assassinations.³⁴

Between 2017 and 2018, the Finnish Immigration Service conducted interviews with international and local experts concerning the situation of converts in different parts of Iraq. All sources below expressed the wish to remain anonymous for security reasons.

A representative of an international organisation informed the Finnish Immigration Service that the status of Christians belonging to traditional denominations is relatively stable whereas the situation of persons converted to Christianity from Islam is comparatively more challenging. The converts encounter hardship in relation to their families as well as authorities. Yet, the situation for converts is worse in other parts of Iraq.³⁵

While converts may encounter difficulties with the authorities the main source of problems is the community and the family. According to a source who works with issues concerning Christian converts in the Iraq/KRI, the converts may face rejection or even hostile treatment from their families and relatives. The situation and status of the convert may vary somewhat depending on his/her social status or familial and tribal background. Kurdish tribes could be more permissive towards the convert compared to Arab tribes. For women it is harder to make independent choices. How the family members or relatives react to the convert may differ from region to region. The reactions are harsher

²⁸ New Arab (The), Quest for Identity. How Kurds are rediscovering Zoroastrianism, 5 February 2018, [url](#)

²⁹ Rudaw, Converts must die: Kurdistan's Zoroastrians outraged by Islamic preacher, 5 February 2017, [url](#)

³⁰ Niqash, Cross cultural love: what happened when a Christian falls in love with a Muslim, 14 December 2017, [url](#)

³¹ EKurd Daily, Iraqi Kurds abandon their religion to Zoroastrianism to escape Islamic extremism, 3 May 2015, [url](#)

³² EKurd Daily, Iraqi Kurds abandon their religion to Zoroastrianism to escape Islamic extremism, 3 May 2015, [url](#)

³³ Lattimer, M., cited in: EASO, Practical Cooperation Meeting on Iraq, 25-26 April 2017, [url](#), p. 23.

³⁴ Denmark, DIS, The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI); fact finding mission, 26 September to 6 October 2015, 12 April 2016, [url](#), pp. 174.

³⁵ Representative (A) of an International organisation active in the region working with issues concerning Christian converts in Iraq/KRI. The source wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons. Interview with the Legal Service and Country Information Unit, Finnish Immigration Service, 28 August 2017



in the countryside.³⁶

According to the same source, there are differences between churches' position towards converts. Traditional Christian churches in Iraq don't always accept people who convert from Islam and have instead referred them to Evangelical Christian groups. In the KRI Evangelical churches have been accused of baptizing Muslims and the source mentioned that other churches have made a written complaint in which they accused the Evangelicals of converting people. Also, in this context a request has been made to get lists of names and addresses of the members of the Evangelical churches. The source is not sure whether the request was made by the Kurdish authorities or the Catholic Christians. In the 1990s, according to the source there was "actual persecution" against the Evangelicals by the Catholics.³⁷

The majority of the members of Christian churches in the KRI consist of Chaldean Christians, which are considered traditional Christians. It is difficult to make precise estimates about the number of Christian converts in the KRI. Generally their number is thought to be around a few hundred.³⁸

The evangelical Assemblies of God church has both former Chaldeans and Muslim converts as members. There is also a small congregation of Kurdish converts (mainly of Muslim origin) in the KRI. The source informed the Finnish Immigration Service that Chaldeans are very critical towards converts, particularly of Chaldean origin. The source also states that some members of the Chaldean church have ties to Hashd al-Shaabi groups which might affect these groups' position towards converts.³⁹

According to a local source working with Christian converts in Iraq/KRI, in general, men who have converted to Christianity have more opportunities than women in the Iraqi society. Women are under more pressure from the society and not allowed to state their opinion. They are also targeted more easily and even killed with impunity. Converted men have difficulties finding a spouse and this is one of the reasons why they are leaving the country. There are regional differences in regard to the reaction of family members and other relatives to conversion. Some families are more open-minded but there can always be someone in the family who can react differently. The source states that the problems usually start within the extended family and this is the reason why converts keep their conversion a secret.⁴⁰

An international source working with Christian converts in Iraq/KRI confirmed that the situation of Christian converts varies from one family to another. In some families the family members do not

³⁶ Representative (A) of an International organisation active in the region working with issues concerning Christian converts in Iraq/KRI. The source wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons. Interview with the Legal Service and Country Information Unit, Finnish Immigration Service, 28 August 2017

³⁷ Representative (A) of an International organisation active in the region working with issues concerning Christian converts in Iraq/KRI. The source wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons. Follow up interview with the Legal Service and Country Information Unit, Finnish Immigration Service, 27 November 2017

³⁸ Representative (A) of an International organisation active in the region working with issues concerning Christian converts in Iraq/KRI. The source wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons. Interview with the Legal Service and Country Information Unit, Finnish Immigration Service, 28 August 2017

³⁹ Representative (B) of an International organisation active in the region working with issues concerning Christian converts in Iraq/KRI. The source wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons. Interview with the Legal Service and Country Information Unit, Finnish Immigration Service, 19 December 2017

⁴⁰ A local source working with Christian converts in Iraq/KRI contacted by an IO active in the region. The source wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons. Interview via email questionnaire with the Finnish Immigration Service, 10 October 2017



react to the conversion in any way. In other families the convert will receive death threats from his/her family members. In the last three years (2017) the source has heard of cases of family members/relatives disowning or killing the converts or keeping them in house arrest. The source stated that the treatment of female converts is much worse than the treatment of men. In addition, the treatment is much worse in case of converts from rural areas whose family members have connection in the armed forces.⁴¹

An article published in the Iraqi news site Niqash in December 2017, maintained that it is difficult for couples from different sects or religions to marry in the KRI. Despite difficulties, local authorities have reported a number of Muslim locals who have been willing to convert to Christianity in order to marry. The authorities have no exact numbers of converts, since the authorities do not record ethnicity or religion of married couples.⁴²

According to several sources, since 2015, there have been reports of Kurds in the Kurdistan region that have converted to Zoroastrianism. They have not been prosecuted by the authorities, however some have been harassed and threatened by other non-state actors.⁴³ A 2017 article by Kurdish media outlet Rudaw informed that a Zoroastrian community in the Kurdistan region had filed a lawsuit against a Kurdish Islamic preacher who had allegedly issued a decree stating that all converts from Islam to Zoroastrianism must be killed. The preacher made his remarks during a BBC interview when asked about the phenomenon of Kurdish youth converting to Christianity and Zoroastrianism from Islam. The Preacher stated that converts would be given three days to reconsider and those who refused to return to Islam would be considered as apostates and therefore killed.⁴⁴

An academic interviewed by the DIS-Landinfo during their 2018 fact-finding mission to the KRI stated that 'people who convert from Islam to Christianity are in risk of being killed', adding that people who converted from Islam to Christianity cannot declare their opinion publicly.⁴⁵ The source further stated that conversion from Christianity in KRI would cause more problems for the person than being an atheist.⁴⁶

6. Information on state protection for converts in the KRI.

Article 26 of the National Identity Card Law states the right of non-Muslims to convert to Islam but does not grant the same rights to Muslims to leave Islam and convert to another faith. Children born to both Muslims and non-Muslims parents are legally deemed Muslim.⁴⁷ If either parent converts to Islam or if one parent is a Muslim, the child born is deemed Muslim, even as a result of rape.⁴⁸

⁴¹ An international source working with Christian converts in Iraq/KRI contacted by an International organisation active in the region. The source wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons. Interview via email questionnaire with the Finnish Immigration Service, 10 October 2017

⁴² Niqash, Cross cultural love: what happened when a Christian falls in love with a Muslim, 14 December 2017, [url](#)

⁴³ New Arab, The quest for identity: How Kurds are rediscovering Zoroastrianism, 5 February 2018, [url](#); USDOS, 2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iraq, 29 May 2018, [url](#)

⁴⁴ Rudaw, Converts must die: Kurdistan's Zoroastrians outraged by Islamic preacher, 5 February 2017, [url](#)

⁴⁵ Denmark, DIS, Norway, Landinfo, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI): Women and men in honour-related conflicts, 9 November 2018, [url](#), p. 57

⁴⁶ Denmark, DIS, Norway, Landinfo, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI): Women and men in honour-related conflicts, 9 November 2018, [url](#), p. 69

⁴⁷ MRG, Crossroads: The future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS, 7 June 2017, [url](#), p. 33

⁴⁸ USDOS, 2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iraq, 29 May 2018, [url](#)



In 2015, the KRG passed a law to protect the rights of different religious groups.⁴⁹ According to a February 2017 article by Rudaw news site, there are no reported cases of anyone being tried in the KRI for changing religion.⁵⁰

A representative of a local organisation working with Christian converts in Iraq/KRI informed the Finnish Immigration Service that, although the KRG supports the Christian converts residing in the KRI, the state authorities cannot provide the converts constant protection against the possible threat posed by their own tribe. The source added that the KRG cannot control the affairs settled on the basis of tribal laws in the KRI.⁵¹

7. Is it possible for atheists/converts in the KRI to change religion affiliation in the population register and on the ID card?

Converts from Islam to other religions cannot change their religious identification on their identity cards after conversion and must continue to be registered as Muslims.⁵² The US International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) report for the year 2017 noted that converts to faith other than Islam may not register their marriages, enrol their children in public schools, acquire passports, or obtain some government services.⁵³

A report published in 2015 by the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior explained that 'In all four quadrants of the Kurdish homeland, religious identity is assigned at birth by the state based on the identity held by the infant's father'.⁵⁴ This source further stated the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, however, has made significant progress in the effort to protect religious freedom. For instance, it allowed the opening of a Kurdish Protestant church, Kurdziman Church of Christ, in 2000. According to Church representatives this was 'the first registered church of Muslim-background Christians in the whole Middle East'. However, the same source also noted that although the KRI has reached significant accomplishments, it has not made efforts to change the Iraq system to assign each new-born a state-recognised religious category.⁵⁵

In 2017, a representative of an international organisation informed the Finnish Immigration Service that, while it is estimated that as many as one-fourth of all Iraqis have left Islam, they cannot change the religion status in their IDs.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ ICSSI, Reading for the Law of Protecting Minorities in Kurdistan Region – Iraq, August 2015, [url](#)

⁵⁰ Rudaw, Converts must die: Kurdistan's Zoroastrians outraged by Islamic preacher, 5 February 2017, [url](#)

⁵¹ A local source working with Christian converts in Iraq/KRI contacted by an IO active in the region. The source wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons. Interview via email questionnaire with the Finnish Immigration Service, 10 October 2017

⁵² USCIRF, 2018 Annual Report; Country Reports: Tier 2 Countries: Iraq, April 2018, [url](#); Denmark, DIS, Norway, Landinfo, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI): Women and men in honour-related conflicts, 9 November 2018, [url](#), p. 57

⁵³ USDOS, 2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iraq, 29 May 2018, [url](#)

⁵⁴ Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior, The Kurds: History, Religion, Language, Politics, 2015, [url](#) pp. 26-27

⁵⁵ Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior, The Kurds: History, Religion, Language, Politics, 2015, [url](#) p. 28

⁵⁶ Representative (A) of an international organisation active in the region working with issues concerning Christian converts in Iraq/KRI. The source wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons. Follow up interview with the Legal Service and Country Information Unit, Finnish Immigration Service, 27 November 2017



A representative of an international organisation that works with issues concerning Christian converts in Iraq/KRI informed the Finnish Immigration Service that the Kurdish authorities are fairly tolerant of the Christian converts but, for example, it has not been possible for converts to change the official status of religion for their children.⁵⁷ In a follow up interview the source said that some years ago the Kurdish authorities registered a Kurdish Christian group that had converted from Islam.⁵⁸

According to the 2018 Landinfo fact-finding mission to KRI, those who converted to Zoroastrianism have allegedly not tried to change their ID-cards.

⁵⁷ Representative (A) of an International organisation active in the region working with issues concerning Christian converts in Iraq/KRI. The source wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons. Interview with the Legal Service and Country Information Unit, Finnish Immigration Service, 28 August 2017

⁵⁸ Representative (A) of an International organisation active in the region working with issues concerning Christian converts in Iraq/KRI. The source wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons. Follow up interview with the Legal Service and Country Information Unit, Finnish Immigration Service, 27 November 2017



SOURCES USED

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