

Minorities in Iraq Pushed to the brink of existence

SUMMARY

Iraqi minorities (Turkmens, Yazidis, Christians and other smaller communities) have long been discriminated against in Iraq. Violence against them has increased dramatically in areas of Iraqi territory that have fallen under the control of the Islamist terrorist group that has declared itself 'the Islamic State' (known variously as IS, ISIS or ISIL, and by the Arabic acronym 'Daesh' or 'Da'esh'). After coming into power, this terrorist group called into question the very existence of several of these minorities, not least non-Muslim minorities, subjecting them to murder, rape, slavery and organ trafficking.

Fearing for their life, people have been fleeing in unprecedented numbers: mass killings have led to the displacement of more than 2 million people, mainly to refugee camps in the Kurdistan region, these displacements are tangible evidence that the country is going through a process of reconfiguration and fragmentation. Past experience has shown that few displaced people ever return to their homes.



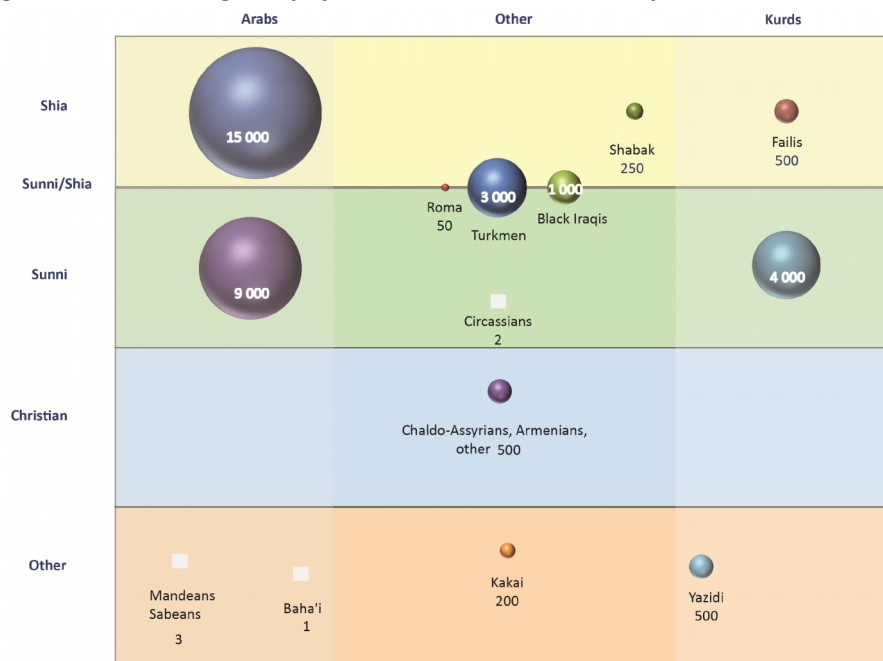
In this briefing:

- Iraq's ethnic and religious diversity
- The situation before the ISIL/Da'esh attacks
- Humanitarian catastrophe in the wake of the ISIL/Da'esh onslaught
- EU response

Iraq's ethnic and religious diversity

Iraq's population is predominantly Muslim. Nearly two thirds are Shia and the other third is mainly Sunni.¹ Compared to its neighbours, Iraq has a unique ethnic and religious diversity, mainly because tribal organisation still plays an important role in social life. The distribution of the population along ethnic and religious lines is illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1: Ethnic/religious population distribution in Iraq



Figures in thousands

Main sources: [Minority Rights](#) 2014 – [IILHR](#) 2013.

The matrix makes it easier to see which parts of the population – non-Sunnis as well as non-Arab Sunnis – are the main targets of ISIL/Da'esh² assaults. The extreme nature of the violence exercised upon them depends on their religious beliefs. ISIL/Da'esh has a very rigid and controversial interpretation of the Qur'an, which distinguishes between 'religions of the Book' (Jews, Christians and Sabean-Mandeans), and 'mushrikun' (polytheists, such as the Yazidis). It may spare the lives of the former if they agree to recognise the superiority of Islam and pay a fee, although the conditions imposed for such acquiescence are harsh. The latter, however, are faced with the choice of either fleeing or almost certainly being killed.

An approach to be nuanced

Nevertheless, it must be recognised that this matrix is a simplified reflection of reality:

- First, 'ethnicity' is not a biological concept. It relates either to a sense of belonging to a group or to assignment to a group. There can be tensions between the two concepts. For example, Chaldeans and Assyrians share an origin, but the former have assumed Arab identity, while the latter have not.
- In some areas the communities live quite apart from each other, but in cities like Baghdad or Mosul they have been pretty much intertwined, which includes worshipping in the same shrines.
- The population in the territories at the core of the dispute between the central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), is under strong

assimilative pressure, both from Arabs and Kurds, in view of a census and referendum (foreseen in Article 140 of the Constitution, but to date never carried out) to determine which government should have authority over them. This, in particular, is the case of the Shabaks and the Turkmens, who try to resist 'Arabisation' or 'Kurdisation'.

- After decades of repression and prohibition, religious minorities such as the Kaka'i, the Baha'i and the Sabeen-Mandean, have been reluctant to declare themselves as such (even to NGOs or UN organisations) for fear of losing some of their rights or of being persecuted.

Table 1: Short descriptions of the main ethnic/religious Iraqi groups

The six largest are presented first, the others follow in alphabetical order

Shia Arabs	Sunni Arabs	Turkmens
<p><i>Population*</i>: 15 million</p> <p><i>Main locations</i>: Baghdad, Najaf, Karbala, south-eastern Iraq</p> <p>Iraq is one of the few countries in which Shia Muslims are a majority. Oppressed under Saddam Hussein's Sunni-led government, Shias have been in power since the US-led invasion.</p>	<p><i>Population</i>: 9 million</p> <p><i>Main locations</i>: Baghdad, western and northern Iraq</p> <p>Former Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki's Shia-led government repressed Sunnis, explaining some Sunni tribes' initial favourable disposition towards ISIL/Da'esh, although they did not share the Salafist³ beliefs. A number have now taken up arms against ISIL/Da'esh to stop its attempts at establishing hegemony.</p>	<p><i>Population</i>: 3 million</p> <p><i>Main locations</i>: northern Iraq, (disputed territories), south-east of Baghdad</p> <p>Within this predominantly Islamic community, Sunnis and Shias are in almost equal proportion. A few thousand are Christians.</p> <p>They are under strong assimilative pressure, both from the Kurds and the Arabs.</p>
Sunni Kurds	Black Iraqis	Christians
<p><i>Population</i>: 4 million</p> <p><i>Main locations</i>: autonomous Kurdistan region; Ninewah, Kirkuk, Salah ad Din and Diyala governorates</p> <p>Most Kurds identify themselves primarily as Kurdish, although some groups have their own languages. Mainly Sunni, their practices and beliefs are very similar to those of Sunni Arabs.</p>	<p><i>Population</i>: 1 million</p> <p><i>Main location</i>: southern Iraq</p> <p>Black Iraqis are thought to be descendants of African slaves from the 6th century.</p> <p>Most of them are Shia Muslims, and a very few are Christians.</p>	<p><i>Population</i>: 0.5 million</p> <p><i>Main locations</i>: Baghdad, Mosul, Ninewah (<i>Ninawà</i>) Plains, Kurdistan region</p> <p>The majority of Iraqi Christians belong to Eastern Catholic Churches (Armenian, Chaldean and Syriac Catholics) but there are other denominations, in particular among the Assyrians (Nestorians, members of the Syriac Orthodox Church).</p>
Baha'i	Circassians	Faili Kurds
<p><i>Population</i>: 1 000 individuals</p> <p><i>Main location</i>: Sulaymaniyah and Erbil (<i>Arbîl</i>)</p> <p>This religion was founded in Iraq in the mid-19th century by Baha'u'llah (1817-92).</p>	<p><i>Population</i>: 2 000 individuals</p> <p><i>Main location</i>: throughout Iraq</p> <p>Circassians are descendants of a people expelled from the Caucasus by the Russians in the first half of the 19th century. Most are now Sunni, depending on the area they live in.</p>	<p><i>Population</i>: 500 000</p> <p><i>Main locations</i>: Baghdad, Kirkuk, Kurdistan region</p> <p>They are a Shia Kurdish people.</p>

Jews	Kaka'i	Sabean-Mandaeans
<p><i>Population:</i> only a few dozen individuals</p> <p><i>Main location:</i> Baghdad</p> <p>An important community in Iraq at the beginning of the 20th century, Jews were nearly completely exterminated in the 1950s.</p>	<p><i>Population:</i> 200 000</p> <p><i>Main locations:</i> Kirkuk, Ninewah Plains</p> <p>A Kurdish people whose religion dates back to the 14th century and is considered a syncretism between Shiism and Zoroastrianism.</p>	<p><i>Population:</i> 3 000 individuals</p> <p><i>Main location:</i> <i>throughout Iraq</i></p> <p>Descended from the Arameans in the 2nd century, this population adheres to the Gnostic religion.</p>
Roma	Shabaks	Yazidis
<p><i>Population:</i> 50 000 individuals</p> <p><i>Main location:</i> mainly southern Iraq</p> <p>The Roma in Iraq are either Sunni or Shia, depending on the area they live in.</p>	<p><i>Population:</i> 250 000</p> <p><i>Main locations:</i> Mosul, Ninewah Plains</p> <p>Mostly Shiite. Although the Kurdistan Regional Government is trying to assimilate them, most Shabaks do not consider themselves as Kurds or Arabs.</p>	<p><i>Population:</i> 500 000</p> <p><i>Main locations:</i> northern Iraq (disputed territories), Kurdistan region</p> <p>An ancient community in Iraq with a very specific religion, which some believe is rooted in Zoroastrianism.</p>

*Due to the lack of a reliable census, all population figures are approximate.

Main sources: [Minority Rights 2014](#) – [IILHR 2013](#)

The situation before the ISIL/Da'esh attacks

Iraq's 2005 [Constitution](#) describes it as a federation (Section 1: [Article 1](#); [Section 3](#)) and guarantees the rights of minorities (Section 1: [Article 2](#); Section 2: [Article 14](#), [Article 41](#)) in particular freedom of worship (Section 1: [Article 10](#); Section 2: [Article 43](#)). In reality, minorities have been discriminated against by central and local government in all areas of life: access to public services, employment, property ownership, to name a few.⁴ Violence between the different ethnic groups has also been documented.

Minority groups have very few political means to express their will or concerns. The national Parliament, for instance, reserves no more than eight seats for some minorities (Christians: 5, Sabeans: 1, Shabaks: 1, Yazidis: 1) and none for others, including the Turkmens, Iraq's third largest community.

On the contrary, various forms of pressure are exerted on them to support the 'mainstream' political parties, in particular in the territories disputed between the KRG and the central government.

Humanitarian catastrophe in the wake of the ISIL/Da'esh onslaught

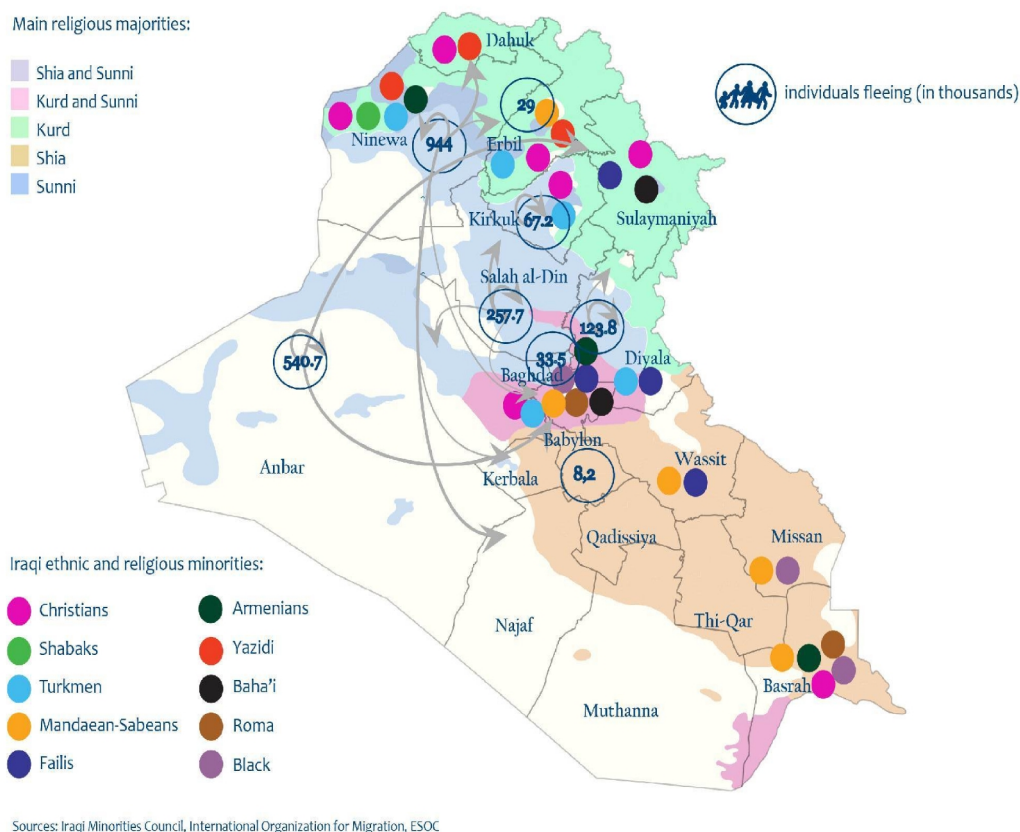
Precarious as the situation of minorities in Iraq had been before June 2014, it deteriorated massively following the occupation of Mosul by ISIL/Da'esh, and its steady advance into the north of the country.

An Amnesty International report⁵ and a joint report by the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) and the UN Mission in Iraq,⁶ both based on testimonies gathered between June and the beginning of September 2014, expose the abuses committed by ISIL/Da'esh (and Iraqi forces). They show that minorities have been the most affected by the violence, which goes far beyond what they had suffered in the past. Mass killings and desperate attempts to escape have put the most fragile groups at risk of extermination.

More than two million persons displaced

The number of displacements (figure 2) alone shows the scale of the humanitarian crisis triggered by the ISIL/Da'esh attacks.

Figure 2: 2 million refugees since January 2014



Minorities most strongly affected by the ISIL/Da'esh attacks

ISIL/Da'esh seeks to set up a Caliphate – hegemony of Islamic Sharia law – over all of the territories that succumb to its control. Accordingly, wherever it goes, it tends to put in place its own administration using coercion and violence, but also by spending money and filling the forcibly vacated administrative and clerical posts with its own workforce.

Because of the locations of the attacks launched in 2014, minorities seem to have been the most strongly affected by them.

- Mosul, the main city within the governorate of Ninewah, and Ninewah Plains, had been home to a host of religions, but upon the arrival of ISIL/Da'esh on 10 June 2014, most of the non-Sunnis, including the Shias, who are considered by ISIL/Da'esh as heretics, were forced to recant their belief or leave, or were killed.
- In Mosul, ISIL/Da'esh took over the main administrative posts and imposed rules based on the toughest interpretation of Islam, one that is closely related to Saudi Wahhabism. According to these rules, robbers have one or both hands cut off, while women must cloak their entire bodies and heads in public. These rules apply to all citizens, whatever their religious background may be. Religious minorities worship in secret, as meetings not organised by ISIL/Da'esh are forbidden.
- ISIL/Da'esh has attempted or succeeded in destroying the major symbols of other religions, including Shia mosques and even shrines revered by Sunnis. Minority students have been evicted from the University of Mosul.

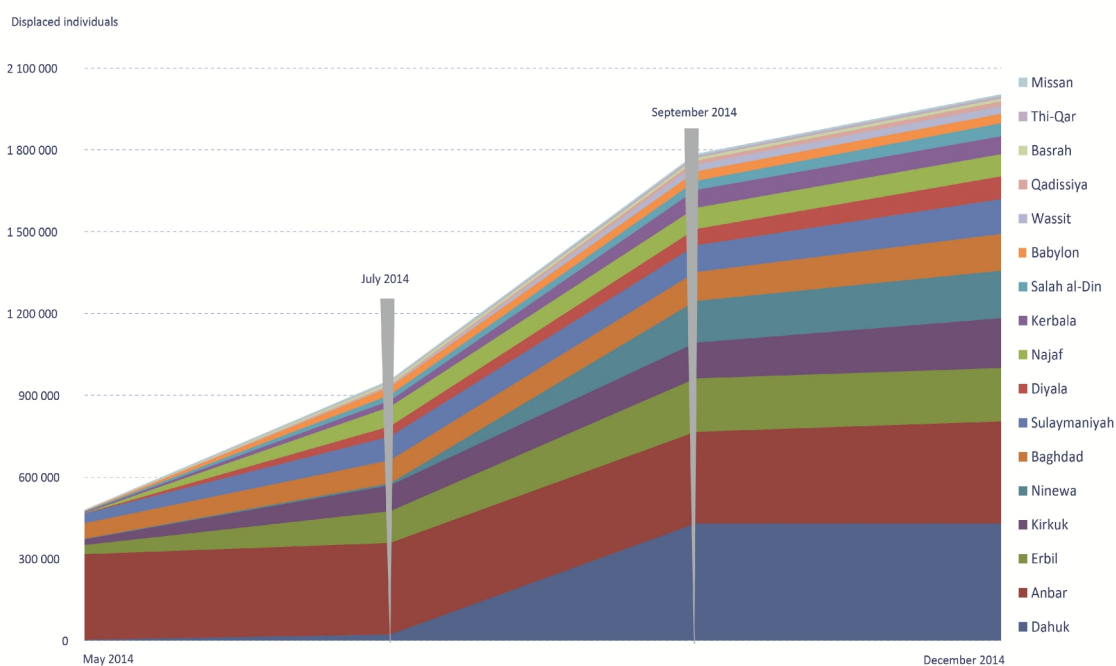
- From mid-June to late August 2014, attacks south of Kirkuk and west of Mosul targeted mostly Turkmen villages.
- Almost all of the Yazidi population (at least 200 000 persons) fled the Sinjar region after the attack on 3 August.
- Around 200 000 Christians fled the Ninewah Plains in August 2014, after ISIL/Da'esh seized important Christian villages such as Qaraqosh.
- In November, ISIL/Da'esh reportedly expropriated Shabak properties in the surroundings of Mosul and handed them over to Arab families.

A precise breakdown by communities of the 2.4 million people displaced across Iraq is not possible, as all populations, even those Sunnis who refuse to abide by the ISIL/Da'esh rules, have been hit, in particular in the multicultural city of Mosul.

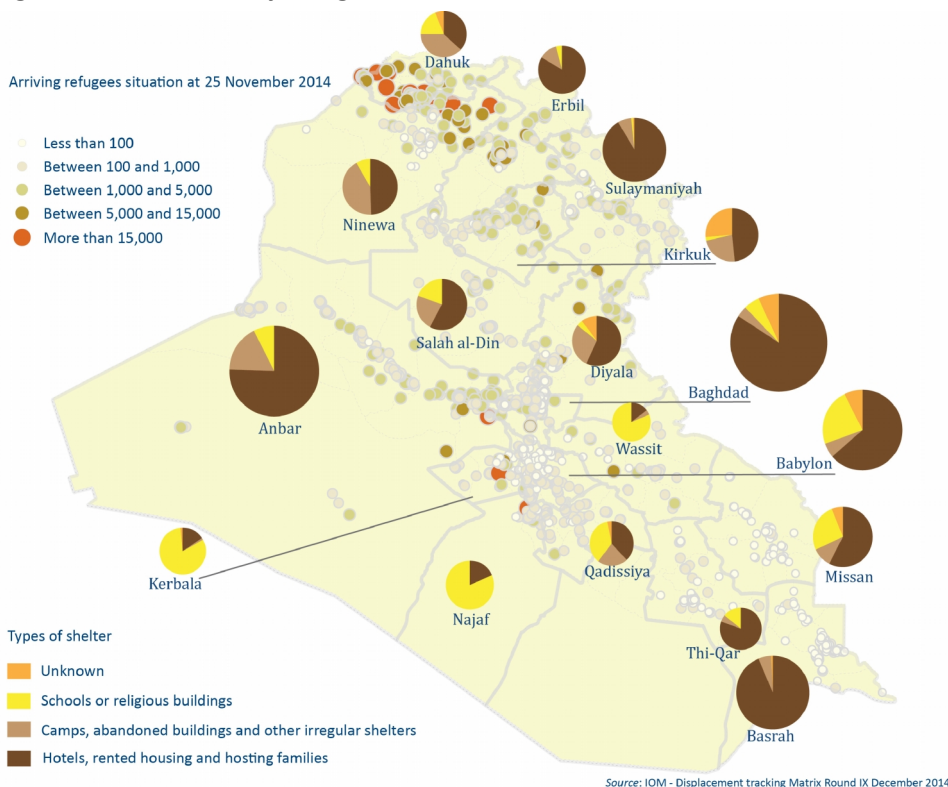
Refugee camps bursting at the seams

Displaced persons have been received in several refugee camps and host communities within Iraq and in neighbouring countries, especially in the Kurdistan region. Those facilities have had to provide accommodation to a growing number of refugees within a very short time.

Figure 3: Displaced persons as of 25 November 2014, by governorate of destination



Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre ([IDMC](#))

Figure 4: Most minority refugees have fled eastwards

Refugee camps and other shelters are now in a precarious situation. Most of them are overpopulated, given that they are also hosting Syrian refugees, and struggle to meet the basic needs of refugees and to combat epidemics. According to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Aid (OCHA), less than a third of the €1.77 billion needed for the 2014-15 humanitarian response had been raised by 9 December 2014. This is compounded by the threat posed by the advance of ISIL/Da'esh from within Iraq or Syria.

European Union response

The European Council and the Foreign Affairs Council have condemned the human rights abuses committed by ISIL/Da'esh, 'in particular against Christian and other religious and ethnic minorities'. The EU is also opposed to a partitioning of Iraq, and 'firm[ly] commit[ed] to Iraq's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity'. National reconciliation is supported as a mean to tackle ISIL/Da'esh influence.⁷

The European Parliament has long condemned⁸ the discrimination and violence targeting Iraqi minorities.

As concerns the EU's humanitarian response, on 12 August 2014, Kristalina Georgieva, then Commissioner for international cooperation, humanitarian aid and crisis response, announced that the Commission would increase its humanitarian aid to Iraq by €5 million, bringing the EU total to €17 million for 2014. The EU's commitment to humanitarian assistance was reconfirmed by the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, during her visit to Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, on 3 December 2014.

The aid extended by the Member States is coordinated by the EU [Emergency Response Coordination Centre \(ERCC\)](#). In addition to increasing aid for the camps, no further opening of the EU borders to Iraqi refugees has yet been envisaged, but this could

happen, following the pledge concerning Syrian refugees made on 9 December 2014 by some Member States before the [UNHCR Resettlement Conference](#).

Main references

The sources used for this briefing and further references can be found in our online 'keysource': *The situation of minorities in Iraq* <http://epthinktank.eu/the-situation-of-iraqi-minorities/>



Endnotes

¹ 'Sunni-Shia divide': Soon after the Prophet Muhammad's death (632 AD), a conflict erupted over the appointment of his successor, or Caliph. While some of his companions were in favour of his nephew and son-in-law Ali, the majority decided to nominate a successor – Abou Bakr – whom they considered better fit for the task, although he was not a member of Muhammad's family. The dissension was not appeased and after successive battles, Ali was eventually designated as the fourth Caliph in 656, but was killed in 661 near Kufa (in present-day Iraq) and his rival took his place as Caliph. Ali's son and Muhammad's grandson, Hussein, waged war against his father's successors but his army was defeated, and he was beheaded in 680 by the Caliph's partisans. Since then, Muslims are still divided between Sunnis, for whom the Caliphs in place after Muhammad were legitimate, and Shiites, the partisans of Ali, who believe the real leaders ('imams') should have been his descendants. [Sunnis and Shiites](#) live together in peace in many parts of the world, but their religious divergences also have long been an instrument of power conflicts, particularly in Iraq where the oppression of the Shiites under Saddam Hussein was followed by the oppression of the Sunnis by a Shia-led government.

² The effort to give this organisation a name is likened to a 'political and linguistic minefield', as the *Guardian* explains in an article from 21 September 2014, entitled [The Islamic State: is it ISIS, ISIL – or possibly Daesh?](#).

³ Sunni Salafis believe that the only way to be a good Muslim is to behave as much as possible like Muhammad and his first successors. But only a fraction of them – often referred to as 'jihadists' – consider it a duty to fight against those who believe otherwise.

⁴ Minority Rights Group International and Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights. [From Crisis to Catastrophe: the situation of minorities in Iraq](#). MRG, 14/10/2014, 36 p.

⁵ [Iraq: Ethnic cleansing on historic scale: the Islamic State's systematic targeting of minorities in northern Iraq](#). Amnesty International, 02/09/2014, 30 p.

⁶ Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) Human Rights Office. [Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Iraq: 6 July – 10 September 2014](#). OHCHR, 02/10/ 2014, 40 p.

⁷ Special meeting of the European Council, [30/08/2014](#); Foreign Affairs Council [15/08/2014](#), [20/10/2014](#), [15/12/2014](#)

⁸ For resolutions adopted in the seventh and eighth parliamentary terms: Resolutions [2014/2971\(RSP\)](#), [2014/2843 \(RSP\)](#), [2014/2716 \(RSP\)](#), [2013/256\(RSP\)](#) [2012/2850\(RSP\)](#), [2010/2964\(RSP\)](#)

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