



Advancing International Religious Freedom: **USAID Supports Vulnerable Religious and Ethnic Communities**



USAID
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International Religious Freedom at USAID

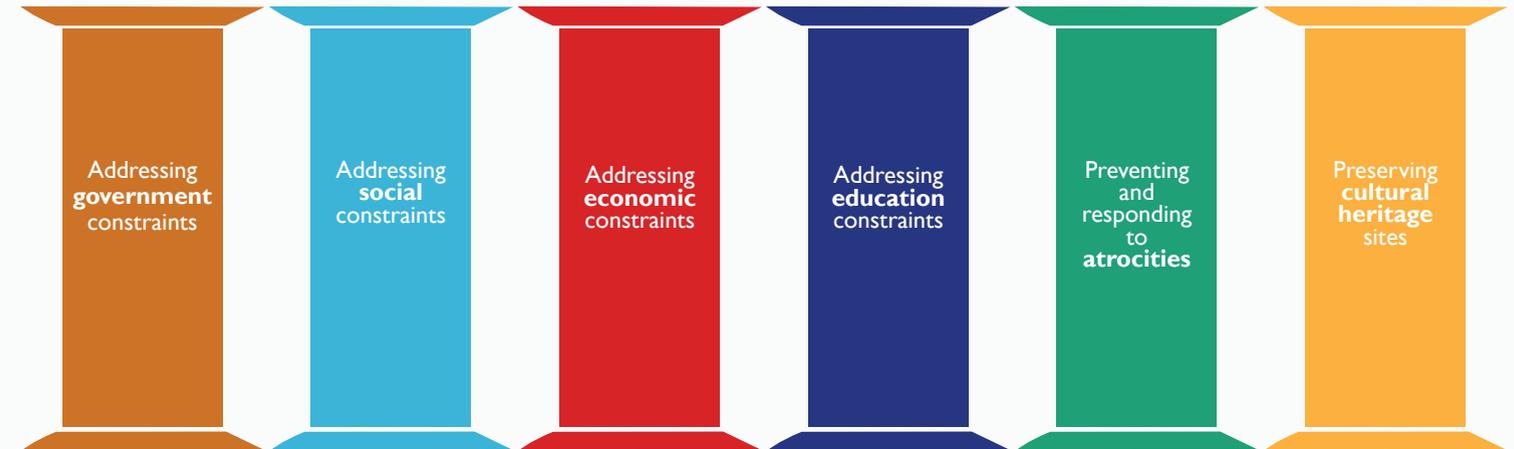
Advancing international religious freedom is a major foreign policy priority of the United States with bipartisan support. The United States seeks to reduce levels of religious persecution, bias and discrimination; reduce faith-related violent extremism and terrorism; and track and prevent potential mass atrocities through early warning systems. USAID's support for religious and ethnic pluralism is an essential part of these efforts to advance human rights and foster self-reliant and inclusive societies.



Yazidi women who are survivors of violence inflicted by ISIS participate in an art therapy session organized by a USAID-funded program.
International Organization for Migration for USAID



SUPPORT FOR RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC MINORITIES



USAID's Bureau for the Middle East, in partnership with the intra-agency and the Department of State, established a Key Issue on the Support for Religious and Ethnic Minorities (REM) in June 2019, with six "pillars" for designing and reporting on REM programming.

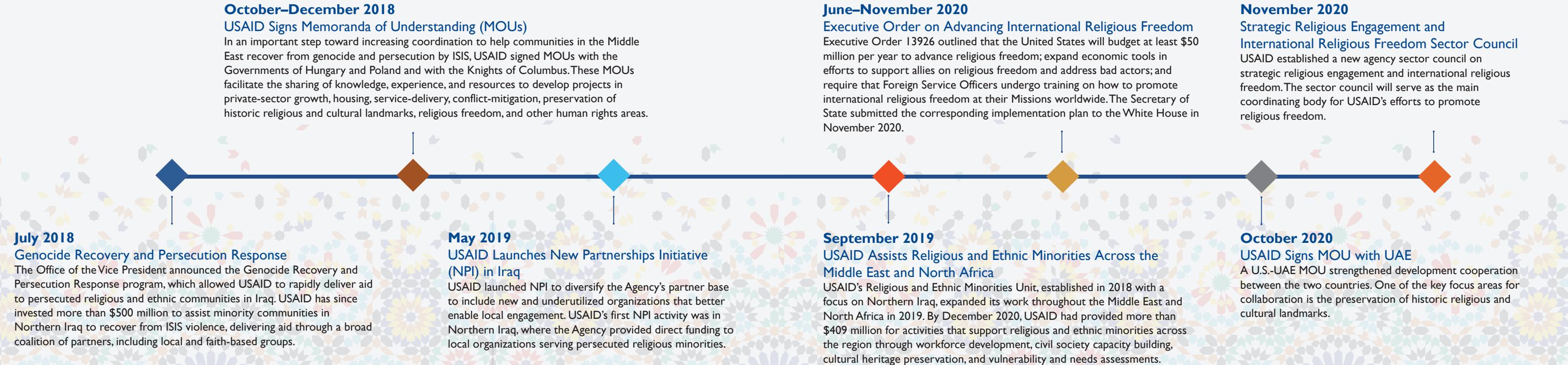
In 2019, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives installed 17 electrical transformers across six districts in Sinjar, Iraq, to improve public services in communities targeted by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Improving electricity is a key recovery priority for families living in or hoping to return to Sinjar, many of whom are Yazidis who were targeted by ISIS for genocide.



Women participate in a negotiation and mediation training in Plateau State, Nigeria in January 2020. The Community Initiative to Promote Peace (CIPP) program in Nigeria trained 549 women who now intervene in conflicts in their communities and play key roles in peacebuilding work. Photographed by Taye Rufai for Mercy Corps

Milestones in Advancing International Religious Freedom at USAID

The bipartisan International Religious Freedom Act (IRF Act) of 1998 was the first step toward institutionalizing America's commitment to advancing religious freedom worldwide. The bipartisan Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016 updated the IRF Act by providing the legal framework for religious freedom programming. The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy emphasized the importance of advancing international religious freedom as a top foreign policy priority to protect U.S. national security interests.



New Partnerships Initiative (NPI)

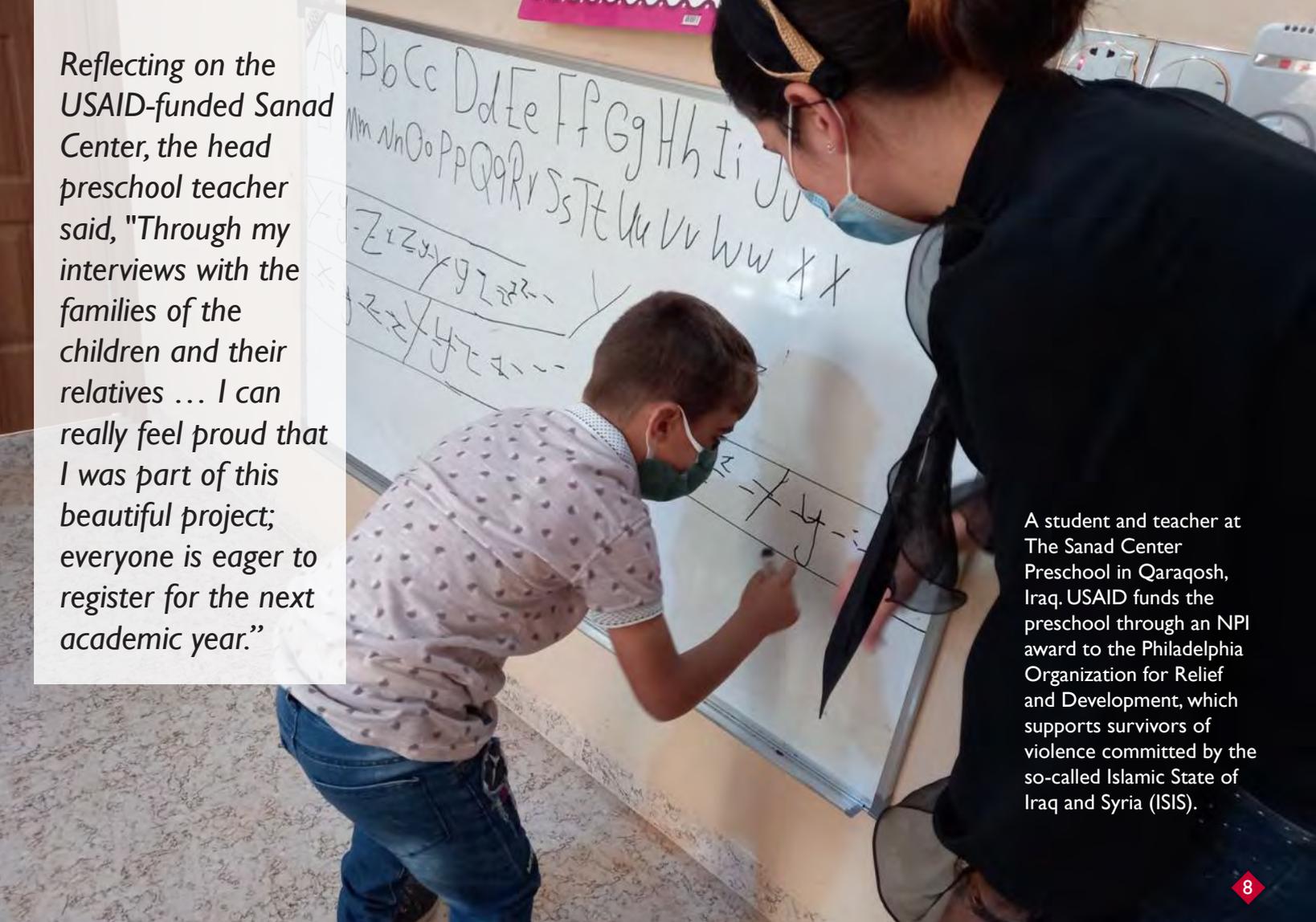
NPI is USAID's focused effort to diversify the Agency's partner base by removing barriers to work with USAID directly. By working with local partners, USAID is able to bring innovative approaches to U.S. foreign assistance, tap into existing networks to reach new populations, and strengthen the capacity and commitment among local populations and faith-based organizations to serve their communities.

The first NPI awards were \$4 million in grants to six local groups in Northern Iraq to help persecuted minorities targeted by violence. These awards support a variety of local needs, including:

- Job skills training
- Solar power installation
- Local organization capacity building
- Trauma-rehabilitation, resilience, and judicial services to survivors of genocide
- Community center services

Community and Beyond!

NPI grantee Top Mountain runs a business incubator and employment program for Iraqi youth in Erbil to promote entrepreneurship, provide business training, and build commercial networks. Top Mountain hosts networking opportunities and training sessions on topics such as writing CVs, interview skills, communications, project and business management, and computer skills. In the midst of COVID-19, Top Mountain has been extremely agile and managed to continue operations and provide training to clients virtually via FaceTime and pre-recorded webinars.



Reflecting on the USAID-funded Sanad Center, the head preschool teacher said, "Through my interviews with the families of the children and their relatives ... I can really feel proud that I was part of this beautiful project; everyone is eager to register for the next academic year."

A student and teacher at The Sanad Center Preschool in Qaraqosh, Iraq. USAID funds the preschool through an NPI award to the Philadelphia Organization for Relief and Development, which supports survivors of violence committed by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom

On June 2, 2020, Executive Order (E.O.) 13926, “Advancing International Religious Freedom,” enshrined religious freedom as a key priority in U.S. diplomacy and foreign assistance. The E.O. directs the Department of State and USAID to expand existing efforts and realign foreign aid to better reflect individual country circumstances regarding international religious freedom. The E.O. allows USAID to engage robustly and continuously with civil society to meet the needs of vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities. More importantly, it provides a strong foundation to continue advancing international religious freedom as a moral and national security imperative.

In November 2020, the Secretary of State approved an implementation plan that details the Department of State’s and USAID’s approaches to prioritizing international religious freedom within the broader U.S. government interagency. Within USAID, overseas missions and regional bureaus assembled technical teams and accountable points of contact on international religious freedom. These teams will be critical to carrying out the Executive Order. USAID now also requires every country’s strategy to address international religious freedom, especially in Special Watch List countries and Countries of Particular Concern, as required by Section 4 of the Executive Order.



Youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina participate in the “Open Door Day” event, which enables Serb, Croat, Bosniak and other youth to jointly visit all houses of worship.



USAID funded a \$15 million groundwater lowering project to draw groundwater away from several important monuments in the historic area of Old Cairo, including the Ben Ezra Synagogue, the Greek Orthodox Church of St. George, the Mosque of Amr Ibn El-Aas, the Roman Tower, the Abu Serga Church, and the Hanging Church. The project, which was completed in 2006, preserved the monuments' foundations and made the ground floor level of the previously flooded buildings accessible. The photo shows the Ben Ezra Synagogue.
American Research Center in Egypt

USAID Trains Foreign Service Officers in Promoting Religious Freedom

Under the Executive Order and in accordance with the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, all USAID Foreign Service Officers are required to complete an online training on promoting religious freedom during their overseas assignments.

GOING GLOBAL

Latin America & the Caribbean

In Colombia, USAID's Inclusion for Peace Activity (IPA) fosters the social and economic inclusion of Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities that have been disproportionately affected by armed conflict. IPA:

- Works with private sector actors to develop job opportunities
- Partners with ethnic communities to preserve cultural heritage
- Aids ethnic communities during crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic

Africa

In Nigeria, the Community Initiative to Promote Peace (CIPP) program—implemented by Mercy Corps with sub-partners Interfaith Mediation Centre; Pastoral Resolve; Savannah Centre for Diplomacy Democracy & Development; and African Radio Drama Association—strengthens inter-faith, inter-ethnic and other local conflict mitigation. CIPP trains community and religious leaders in mediation for issues that trigger communal violence and violent extremism. CIPP's radio programs, which reached nearly 15 million listeners in the first year, promote peaceful coexistence and sustainable conflict mitigation.

Europe & Eurasia

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), USAID supports the Inter-Religious Council (IRC), which works directly with local religious communities to hold an “Open Door Day” event. The activity provides the opportunity for youth of different religions to jointly visit one another's sacred spaces, recognize their similarities and common values, and break down stereotypes and barriers.

Prior to the event, IRC meets with religious leaders to discuss the importance of the peacebuilding and reconciliation process in BiH. Religious leaders then invite youth from their communities to attend the event, which increases the attendance of youth who otherwise would not participate.

Middle East & North Africa

In Iraq, USAID is supporting the return of displaced populations from ethnic and religious minorities in Ninewa Plain and western Ninewa by tailoring services to the needs of the historically Christian, Yazidi, and other minority communities that call this region home.

This \$27.5 million project—implemented by the International Organization for Migration with sub-awardees Samaritan's Purse and Yazda—includes activities to support livelihoods, community peacebuilding, education, and psychosocial services. Through the project, USAID is also helping to rehabilitate destroyed or damaged homes for internally displaced persons (IDPs)—many of whom are religious and ethnic minorities.

Asia

In Indonesia, USAID's \$11.5 million Empowering Access to Justice project works with legal aid organizations and civil society organizations to serve religious minority groups. The project trains human rights defenders (including paralegals and lawyers) to provide legal representation and human rights awareness to members of minority religious communities. The organizations also conduct advocacy on discriminatory regulations, such as Indonesia's blasphemy law.

The mosaic motif throughout this brief is inspired by the vibrant cultural mosaics of pluralistic societies. As a traditional mosaic requires diverse tiles, societies too are incomplete without the faith traditions and ethnic communities that make up their national mosaics. USAID aims to reinforce and strengthen religious and ethnic pluralism where it has historically existed. Preserving countries' cultural mosaics and promoting pluralism are essential to preventing future atrocities, securing more peaceful nations, and providing a foundation for economic advancement.



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