



دامه زراوهی فیژن بۆ لیکۆلینه وهی ستراتیجی
مؤسسة رؤية للدراسات الاستراتيجية
Vision Foundation for Strategic Studies

Modern Coexistence Enhances a more Beautiful Sulaymaniyah

The Solutions are to Support the Coexistence of Christians in
the City of Sulaymaniyah



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Topic:

History

Type of publication:

Field Research

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Modern Coexistence Enhances a more Beautiful Sulaymaniyah

A Study of the Factors and Solutions Related to Christian Coexistence in the City of Sulaymaniyah, Based on their Personal Narratives

Introduction

The issue of minorities and coexistence is one of the most significant challenges in today's world, especially in the Middle East and Iraq, due to the region's historical background, which has long been home to numerous peoples, ethnicities, religions, and sects. Each of these groups has its own distinct history, beliefs, language, and culture. And in every state or political entity, there are dozens of major challenges in economic, social, cultural, and political life.

This reality has given rise to political and military crises, pulling the entire region into cycles of violence, killing, displacement, migration, and profound political and societal instability. As a result, this subject has become one of the world's most critical issues today, drawing the attention of academic institutions and research centers for study and analysis.

Since its founding, Sulaymaniyah has served as a shared space for various groups that became part of the region's ethnic fabric. From the early days, Christian and Jewish families lived urban lives in the city and gradually became integrated into its economic and social spheres. This has made the issue of minorities and coexistence one of the city's fundamental concerns, a subject truly deserving of numerous academic and scholarly studies, given its increasing significance in both local and regional contexts.

Despite the importance of this topic, no scientific research has been conducted on it so far, nor has it been systematically addressed by any academic or research institution. Therefore, this topic was chosen as the central issue of this study. The research seeks to investigate the current state of coexistence and the living conditions of Christians in Sulaymaniyah today, especially in light of recent developments in the region, such as religiously motivated conflicts, the rise of extremist ideologies, and the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

These developments have once again brought the issue of intercommunal coexistence to the forefront of public and scholarly attention. As a result, the Vision Foundation for Strategic Studies decided to focus on this subject by organizing a panel attended by the Deputy Prime Minister, the Governor of Sulaymaniyah, and several senior officials from relevant municipal departments. Following the panel and the presentations made by the Deputy Prime Minister, the Governor, and other city administrators, it became clear that a number of important questions remain unanswered and require thorough and scholarly investigation. This realization led to the decision to undertake this study.

Purpose of the study

The aim of this work is to assess the level of coexistence among minority groups in the city of Sulaymaniyah, particularly the Christians. Its primary objective is to identify the challenges they face in this regard and subsequently propose solutions, with the goal of directing them to the relevant authorities so that comprehensive efforts can be made at all levels to reduce those challenges. This would help support coexistence in Sulaymaniyah and offer a practical solution to the issues faced by minorities in the city.

At the same time, the work seeks to contribute to a more vibrant city life and to elevate the city's rich historical legacy in this area. It also aspires to serve as a model for similar initiatives across other parts of the Kurdistan Region and even across Iraq.

The Importance of This Study

The Importance of This Study:

This study is significant because it is the first of its kind to conduct field-based and documented research focusing on minority groups, examining the challenges they face in achieving coexistence. It aims to present a scientifically grounded and realistic picture of their daily lives and then propose academic solutions to be submitted to the relevant authorities. Its importance also lies in the fact that it is the first study to address marginalized areas that, until now, have not received adequate attention in academic research.

For Which Party is it Important?

This Work and its Results are Important for the Following reasons:

1. For the Kurdistan Regional Government in general, and the executive authority in particular, to use these findings as a foundation for taking practical steps toward organizing peaceful coexistence. The aim is to engage with the issue of coexistence and minority protection in a realistic and effective manner, presenting a constructive and compelling image both internally and externally. Furthermore, it will help build proper relationships with other cities, organizations, and institutions around the world on a scientific basis.
2. For the Kurdistan Parliament, so that it can take future actions in this field with a clearer and more informed vision.
3. For ministries such as Education, Endowments, Culture, and Interior, to facilitate their work when dealing with minority-related matters.
4. For political parties and professional organizations, to provide them with a scientific reference for engaging with minority issues. For instance, the local office of the ruling party in Sulaymaniyah can use this data to support recent decisions regarding minorities in the context of elections.

Additionally, these results can be used to gain international support in the area of governance by submitting the findings to human rights organizations, civil society groups, and United Nations agencies. This would help raise awareness about the situation of minorities in Sulaymaniyah and help showcase the differences in their living conditions compared to other regions, thereby reinforcing international support.

Key Research Problems and Questions

The main issue addressed by this project concerns the case of coexistence in the city of Sulaymaniyah among its various communities, particularly the Christian minority and the challenges they face, as well as the potential solutions. This involves working on the following questions:

1. What is the current percentage of Christians in Sulaymaniyah compared to the past?
2. What are the reasons behind the Christian migration, and how do these differ from the general population? Has this affected the cultural presence and position of Christians in the city? What are the possible solutions?
3. What is the daily life of Christians like in the streets, at workplaces, and in public spaces? Can they openly declare their Christian identity? How does the local population treat them? What challenges do they face, and how should those challenges be addressed? For example, when they face specific problems, is there a need for special legal protection or penalties?
4. What obstacles do they face in cultural life (religious/social events, use of their own language, clothing, religious symbols)? To what extent do they face challenges in: streets, public institutions, schools? And if so, how should these be handled?
5. What issues do churches and clergy face? What are the causes and solutions? What problems exist with the Ministry of Endowments? What are the possibilities for resolution?
6. What challenges do they face in the field of culture? How should the Ministry of Culture and Information address these issues?
7. In the fields of commerce, professions, and employment, do they feel discrimination? If so, what are the solutions?
8. Regarding personal safety and security, what are the challenges? Are there any threats? If yes, how should they be addressed?
9. In the education system and school curricula, do they experience discrimination? If so, what are the remedies?
10. Do they feel targeted on social media through attacks on their identity or sacred symbols? What is the solution? Which body should respond?
11. Do they face issues related to confiscated or encroached land and property? If so, what is the solution?
12. Do they feel excluded from political participation, activism, or party membership? If yes, what are the solutions?
13. In terms of citizenship rights, do they experience discrimination? Do they feel unsupported socially and politically? If this issue exists, what is the appropriate solution?

Method used

The methodology employed in this study is the qualitative approach, specifically using the exploratory descriptive method, which involves collecting as much information as possible about the issue, followed by analyzing and comparing the data to obtain accurate answers to the research questions. The tool used to collect the data was direct interviews with Christians in the city, as the primary community of this study consists of Christians residing in this city. These interviews were conducted as follows:

The city's longstanding Christians, those who moved to the city following the events in the region and in southern and central Iraq, those who are originally Christians from this city but have since relocated, and those who have recently converted to Christianity. To obtain the data, reliance was placed on the discussions of the panel, the decisions of the Kurdistan Parliament, and the researcher's questions addressed to ordinary Christian residents of the city. Several questions were distributed through three specific forms [1]. The researcher conducted interviews, both electronically and in person, using audio, video, and in-person formats, with (20) individuals, with individuals selected from all three groups. These participants included ordinary citizens from various professions and occupations, Christian clergy in the city, longstanding residents, those who came from outside Sulaymaniyah, and individuals who had converted to Christianity.

The scope of this study, in terms of subject, focuses on issues of coexistence; in terms of location, it focuses on Sulaymaniyah; in terms of time, the year 2025; and in terms of individuals, it focuses on the Christians of Sulaymaniyah.

The main obstacle encountered in the research was that some Christians were unwilling to participate in interviews, particularly their former representative in the Provincial Council. The researcher spoke with him to clarify the subject of the study, and he responded, "I will get back to you." However, despite multiple follow-up attempts, the researcher received no reply. Similarly, some individuals from outside the city center and surrounding neighborhoods were also uncooperative in the same manner.

First: Definition of the Key Conceptual Terms of the Study

The population composition in countries around the world consists of diverse peoples, nations, religions, tribes, languages, ethnicities, and genders. Peaceful coexistence between the majority and minority is the key to the advancement of any such society or state. In this regard, human rights are also considered protected and respected. The most notable example is the Swiss federal system. Conversely, if the majority fails to recognize the status of the minority, the prospect of peaceful living and societal progress becomes nearly impossible (Surmé, 1998, pp. 132–133).

The emergence and development of the concept of societal and ethnic diversity gained prominence following the rise of events associated with the rights of minority groups, particularly in the European context. This development led several countries to give increasing importance to resolving minority-related issues and regulating their rights and responsibilities. For this purpose, most states resorted to addressing such matters through international agreements. From the 17th century onwards, European states began to sign treaties, especially those pertaining to the regulation of religious and ethnic pluralism, long before the establishment of the United Nations. Later, the expansion and legal codification of this concept, after the formation of the United Nations, became a matter of global significance (Fattah, 2016, p. 13). On December 18, 1992, UN General Assembly Resolution No. 47/135 was issued concerning minorities, in which Article 27 specifically outlined the international civil and political rights of minority groups. The United Nations considers the empowerment and protection of minorities to be an essential component of political and social stability within states, and a contributor to the fostering of friendship and cooperation among peoples. The UN actively works on this issue and observes it with great attention (Ismail, 2012, p. 40).

In general, the types of components consist of religious, linguistic, ethnic, and racial groups. Accordingly, after the establishment of the Iraqi state in 1921, Iraq became a country composed of various religious and ethnic components, among them the Christian community. Christians in Iraq made up around 5% of the population, but following the events of 2003, this percentage declined to 3% due to migration. Christianity is the second-largest religion in Iraq, with its followers distributed across most governorates, including Sulaymaniyah Governorate (Hiwa Mohammed Karim, 2023: 39).

The Christians of Sulaymaniyah, from the very beginning of the city's founding, settled there as they did in many other regions of Kurdistan. According to the accounts of travelers, those who arrived in the city after its founding spoke of it. For example, in 1812, the Armenian traveler)Serofin Karnisban(, who held British nationality, visited the city of Sulaymaniyah and stated that its population was estimated at 14,000, the majority being Kurds, with only 15 Nestorian families, 12 Armenian families, and 8 Jewish families (Al-Waeli, 2008: 146–147). (William Heude), the British traveler who passed through Mesopotamia on his way to Constantinople, arrived in Baghdad and from there went to Kifri, and then traveled through the mountainous regions toward Sulaymaniyah. He wrote: "I arrived in Sulaymaniyah, the capital of Kurdistan," adding that the city's population ranged between 12,000–15,000, mostly Kurds, with only a few Armenian and Jewish households (2011: 168–175). In 1878, the French missionary (Jean Retoré), who spent considerable time in the Mesopotamian region, made a special visit to Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah. After leaving Kirkuk, he went to Chamchamal and then to Sulaymaniyah. He stated that the population of the city was about 15,000 people, including only 20 Christian families and 250 Jewish families (2008: 39–41). Although these figures are unofficial and only based on observational estimates, what matters to us is that from the outcomes of these travels, it becomes clear that several Christian families lived in the city from the very beginning. Later, based on the interviews conducted in this research, it became evident that they had a specific neighborhood called "Goyzha," which was known among the general public as "Gawran."

Second: The Level of Coexistence in Terms of Social, Economic, and Cultural Life

Regarding the questions that pertain to equality and mutual participation in economic, social, and political life, along with disparities in daily life and the obstacles faced in cultural and religious life, these issues were addressed to all three groups. The responses were, to a large extent, close to one another, indicating that, in general, and particularly from the perspective of governance and administration, they did not perceive significant conflict. They view the city of Sulaymaniyah and its residents as being at a high level of openness and intellectual enlightenment in terms of accepting other groups.

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"At that point, one must expect a stereotypical reaction, either it will be very positive and respectful, or it will lead to questioning and the emergence of strange attitudes. The issue itself is religious in nature, because unless I explicitly state it, no one would know I'm a Christian. Therefore, we constantly find ourselves between those two forms of stereotyping, which might not be apparent at first glance. For this reason, we do not always want our Christian identity to be publicly visible everywhere. For instance, we may wear a cross necklace, but we tuck it underneath. Women do the same, and we protect ourselves from that problem. This creates a kind of boundary around yourself, and you limit your relationships. I can say that you build a kind of private community with those who you know and will understand you, who are open-minded, and whose attitudes are respectful. You engage and interact, but you don't want to become too close to others, and you maintain a sense of self-protection. You do not fully trust that you can reveal yourself openly everywhere, because even if it's just one incident in a year, it can have an impact on me. That's why I won't put a cross on my car, because someone might react, get offended, and I would be the one to suffer the consequences. Of course, this is pure discrimination, because if Sulaymaniyah hadn't accepted our presence and way of life, we wouldn't have been able to stay here. Truly, Sulaymaniyah is special in this regard, but the existence of such an issue is a reality and must be acknowledged. (Interview: 2025).

This proportion of stereotyping also exists in the Qasha Ayman community, who serves at the Mar Yousif Church, and in a way, it was also referenced. In response to our question, he said: "Regarding the Christians of the city of Sulaymaniyah, there is a good relationship between Kurds and Christians. History bears witness to this, and there is no form of discrimination; on the contrary, when people find out you're a Christian, they tend to treat you even better. However, there is a specific issue: some Muslims do not want to work with Christians or deal with them. Often, when they go for work and find out it's a church, they won't do the job, or if the business owner is a Christian, they won't accept the job. But this is very rare. Therefore, I can generally say that things are good, and there is harmony." (Interview: 2025).

Likewise, Qasha Alwand Shekhan, pastor of the Evangelical Church in Ranya, confirmed the same view and said: "In terms of our social and political rights, we do have certain rights, but they are limited. What is particularly sensitive is the issue of personal status law, which poses a challenge for us. Although the government is very cooperative, this problem originates from the Iraqi legal and constitutional framework. Since the Kurdistan Regional Government operates within that framework, the issue remains unresolved. As for discrimination, it is limited. Most people do not face problems, but a small number do, and that depends on the individual. Some are very respectful, but one must always expect that there may be individuals with negative stereotypical reactions. (Interview: 2025).

The reflections of Aram Issa, a member of the long-established Christian community in Sulaymaniyah, who is a government employee and also works in the arts, largely echoed the same themes. He reaffirmed the issue of self-protection and noted that negative stereotyping at the individual level still exists to a small degree. He stated: "Equality and mutual participation, well, it's not true equality. Especially in the political sphere, our numbers are small, and we haven't been able to have a representative voice. However, in terms of discrimination, no, it cannot be called discrimination, because we do not place ourselves in positions where we would provoke or encounter it directly. But we do observe some instances of negative stereotyping."

We avoid going to places where we are not welcomed. To remain protected, we keep ourselves away from such places, especially in recent years, following the emergence of political Islam. That's why we refrain from being present in such spaces. However, as for traditional Kurdish Islam, we have no problem; the issue arises only when it is politicized. Therefore, I would say that having a visible identity or expressing oneself does not always cause problems, but one must constantly expect stereotyping, and there is always some fear. Deep down, there is never complete trust. He also pointed out that there are legal and constitutional issues in Iraq, especially regarding personal status laws, and that it would be better for these problems to be addressed so that Christians could live more securely and without such concerns." (Interview: 2025).

Samira Hana, who was previously a civil servant and a well-known figure among the Christians of Sulaymaniyah, expressed sentiments that, in one form or another, consistently conveyed the same message: "The people of Sulaymaniyah treated me very well. I used to work at the university, and they had great trust in me. I was appointed as a member of every active committee, and they showed me much respect. I had excellent relationships, and even officials treated me with special regard. I used to freely say that I was a Christian, and, contrary to expectations, they respected me even more. I also avoided engaging in arguments or controversial matters. Since then, I've faced no issues in Sulaymaniyah. However, in recent times, after certain religious trends emerged, they have had an impact on an individual level, leading to a rise in negative discriminatory behaviors. Even those who previously had very good relations with us began to distance themselves. That is truly regrettable." (Samira)

Alan Pari, who is also from one of the well-known Christian families of the city and currently living abroad, said the following regarding this issue: "We didn't face problems in Sulaymaniyah, because even recently, Christians in Sulaymaniyah have remained integrated into the neighborhoods due to the city's culture and intellectualism. The Christians did not cause any problems; on the contrary, Christians and Kurds lived together in a very natural way. Many times, unless I introduced myself, people wouldn't even realize I was a Christian, because the city itself gives the impression that being from Sulaymaniyah comes before anything else. I never faced any issues at work or in public places. Though during childhood and adolescence, there were rare instances when someone would say things like, "why don't you become a muslim?" which later on, stopped. We must also acknowledge that nowadays there are a few minor religious sides that reject us and cause a degree of discomfort, but they are both rare and mostly from extremists. While I do feel, to some extent, that we haven't had the opportunity or been allowed political expression, economically and socially, there have been no problems. However, in terms of politics and intellectual recognition, there is a degree of marginalization. That's why more work needs to be done in this regard, because we've always been part of the city's life and history. (Pari, Interview: 2025)

Araz Najib Sarraf, a member of one of the old-established families of Sulaymaniyah, responded to these questions in the following way: "There was no discrimination in Sulaymaniyah. It would be very wrong to say otherwise. After we moved out of the Goyzha (Gawran) neighborhood, we have been living in the Darogha neighborhood since 1967. We were the first family to settle there, and we never faced any issues. In the beginning, some children used to tease us, but the teachers intervened and stopped them. Later on, we gained a great deal of respect. There was never any restriction regarding our culture, customs, clothing, or religious symbols. Only after the uprising period, during the time when the law was weak, did some religious trends attempt to create that kind of discrimination. Otherwise, before that, such issues simply didn't exist. We always lived quietly and peacefully, integrated, and without facing any problems. At that time, it wasn't that I personally experienced anything, but there were occasional incidents of hostility toward Christian symbols in certain places or from certain individuals, things like breaking glass or similar acts. Even though neither I nor our family directly experienced such incidents, after the emergence of ISIS and extremist ideologies, once again, a sense of fear swept across the area as a whole. However, compared to other areas, Sulaymaniyah has remained far better." (Sarraf, Interview: 2025)

Francis Dawudi Yousif, a teacher and educational supervisor who also comes from one of the long-established families of Sulaymaniyah and is one of the city's prominent artists, has worked in the field of education both as a teacher and, for a time, as an educational supervisor. Regarding this matter, he described the city of Sulaymaniyah as a pioneer when it comes to coexistence. However, he did have some observations. In detail, he stated: "So far, the opportunities in general have been good. However, when it comes to political opportunities, they are very limited, and we don't advance in that area. As for discrimination, we have not experienced any in our everyday lives in Sulaymaniyah. In practicing our culture, traditions, and clothing, we have had no problems. We actually consider ourselves part of the Kurdish traditions as well. We never viewed ourselves as different. In the past, everything was very normal. But nowadays, political Islam has undermined some aspects. That is to say, until the point when religion became politicized, things were much better." م(Interview: 2025)

Shwan Jamal Isa Toma, a member of one of the old-established families of Sulaymaniyah and currently a civil servant at the Directorate of Culture in the city, responded in the following way: "We haven't faced any such problems. However, as a component of this city, we are relatively underrepresented despite our historical presence in Sulaymaniyah. Regarding discrimination, no, we don't feel it. We're like any other citizen of this city. In fact, sometimes, when people know that we are Christians from the city, they show us even more respect, especially when it comes to our clothing, language, and cultural symbols. We don't face any issues. We practice our traditions normally through the church. Occasionally, someone with a certain mentality may appear on a street or place, but such cases are rare and cannot be generalized." (Interview: 2025)

Is Pitzol, a Christian priest originally from Germany, is currently serving at the Church of Mary the Virgin in Sulaymaniyah. He has been in Iraq and Sulaymaniyah since 2012, and based on his experience in the area, he offered the following reflections on the lives of Christians in the region, drawing comparisons with the Christians of Sulaymaniyah. He said: "In Iraq, and more broadly across the Middle East, Christians have long been an integral part of society and belong to the very fabric of the region. Even during the time of the caliphates, Christians were an important component of these communities. However, today, Christians are generally under threat, particularly because, over the past century, there has been tremendous pressure on minorities, especially under dictatorial regimes like the Assad family in Syria and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. These regimes claimed to protect Christians, but in reality, they treated them in a very contradictory manner. As a result, many minorities, including Christians, lost trust even in their fellow citizens. Though this may not fully apply to Sulaymaniyah, where Christians are in a relatively better condition and even lack a distinct neighborhood of their own, many of them live peacefully with their neighbors. Yet, internally and emotionally, Christians, as well as most other minorities, do not feel truly secure. This is understandable because the broader Middle East is built on narrow ideological foundations. That is why there must be a form of enlightened thinking that accepts pluralism. Efforts must be made to rebuild this lost trust both from governments and from society as a whole." As I mentioned, the situation here in Sulaymaniyah regarding relations with everyone around us is much better compared to other parts of Iraq, and even Syria, as far as I know.

Christians in Sulaymaniyah can freely say, "I am a Christian." They feel secure both from the government and the people, because in Sulaymaniyah, Christians are part of the city's history and culture. That's why they enjoy much greater freedom in this city. (Interview: 2025)

This comparison between Sulaymaniyah and other areas may clearly resonate with those Christians who have come to Sulaymaniyah from elsewhere, and even some from the old-established families of the city. They acknowledge that, despite the marginalization that minorities have faced, which is relatively minimal and largely the result of certain historical, demographic, and recent developments across the wider region, they have come to settle here. Yet, they feel that Sulaymaniyah offers a unique model of coexistence, free of major problems. One example is Liviyaar Muzaffar Mata, who has been living here since the 1990s and whose ancestors originally came from Erbil. She says, "On the contrary, people in Sulaymaniyah are very respectful toward us. We have no problems, and our rights are protected. I can say that, compared to other minorities, we enjoy greater protection of our rights. Discrimination is more positive than negative, and since the 1990s, we've been treated well. Social and cultural life for us flows very naturally. Personally, I have never had any issues, not even when wearing a cross." (Interview: 2025)

At the same time, several of us have spoken to people who, due to the situation in their own regions, have moved to Sulaymaniyah from outside the Kurdistan Region and even from outside Iraq. They also view life in Sulaymaniyah very positively. One of them is Majd Shahada, originally a Christian from Damascus, Syria, who has been living in Sulaymaniyah for nearly six years. He said: "In Sulaymaniyah, there is a great deal of openness, and people are very accepting of one another. This awareness is essential, and it's a beautiful aspect of the city. I can say very openly that I am a Christian, and I've never encountered any form of negative discrimination. Wherever I go, I'm treated with respect, especially when I say I'm a Christian, because people trust us and view us with esteem. That's partly because others have previously had negative experiences with people, so when they interact with Christians, they feel a sense of comfort. As for the people of Sulaymaniyah, they are kind, sincere, and naturally accepting. The authorities also treat us well. Through the church here, I've developed friendships and recognition that I wouldn't have had elsewhere. Yes, for Christians, there is a notable difference in terms of respect and social standing in Sulaymaniyah compared to other areas. Here, we are respected. No one crosses our personal boundaries. Instances of disrespect are very rare. I can confidently say I've experienced this personally, it's not just something I've heard." (Interview: 2025)

Rafel Amir Zaid Al-Khouri, who came from Baghdad and has been living in Sulaymaniyah since 2006, said: "We came here because of the dangers we were facing and the threats made against Christians. We left Baghdad behind. Although we, as a family, were not directly threatened, my father said, for our protection: 'Let's go to Sulaymaniyah.' Through some of my father's friends, we came to Sulaymaniyah and began living a normal life.

We attended school, gradually moved on to college, started working, and eventually settled here without returning to Baghdad, because we no longer had acquaintances or relatives there, and we felt emotionally detached. That's why we didn't go back. As for how the people of Sulaymaniyah treat us, they are very kind. I believe this is the best place for Christians compared to anywhere else. Here, I can openly say that I am a Christian. Sulaymaniyah is more respectful of Christians than any other place, and we feel safe. We celebrate our religious occasions freely, and we can very openly say that we are Christians. In comparison, I can say that the Kurdistan Region overall is better than other parts of Iraq. However, due to the presence of Ankawa as a Christian community in Erbil, one feels a greater sense of belonging there. In Sulaymaniyah, that element is missing; otherwise, the city is very good." (Interview: 2025)

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Father Ayman also confirmed the same perspective, stating that the city of Sulaymaniyah has warmly embraced those Christians who arrived from other regions. He said: "After the Christian migration to the city, Sulaymaniyah welcomed them in a very positive and generous manner. They felt settled, accepted, and integrated with the people of Sulaymaniyah. The stance of Mam Jalal was admirable after the destruction of the Sayyida Najat Church; he provided a house with rent covered for two years so they could have a place to stay. That's why, after the situation stabilized, some of them returned to their original areas, some emigrated abroad, but many remained here. Later, after ISIS, around 180 families arrived; again, some returned, and others stayed, and they were very satisfied with how the Kurds treated them. This is a truly commendable attitude from the people of Sulaymaniyah. It confirms that this city stands for coexistence and compassion. I hope that the Christians of Sulaymaniyah remain rooted in this city and that this historical coexistence continues. It is a beautiful cultural legacy for both Kurds and Christians in this city. It should be a reason to support the settlement and permanence of Christians here. It is also a testament to the respect this city has for coexistence and for its Christian citizens. There are many places in Iraq where Christians used to live, in even greater numbers than the ones in Sulaymaniyah, but they are now gone. No one remains. This is a deeply unfortunate and tragic marker in history. (Interview: 2025)

The account of Lucy Baho Jibrail Shushandi, originally from Hamdaniya and displaced to Sulaymaniyah in 2014 due to ISIS events, recounts a different experience. She said: "I had first come to Sulaymaniyah in 2006 and saw that people treated me with great kindness and humanity, and they respected Christians. That's why I tried to transfer my official registration to Sulaymaniyah and bring my family here, but they said it wasn't allowed. I've never gone back to my home area because I no longer feel safe there. Regarding life in Sulaymaniyah, when I arrived, the treatment I received was very positive. In fact, some people, once they realized I was Christian, showed me even more respect. As for negative discrimination, I did experience one incident: I was walking down Orzdi Street, and I had a cross around my neck. A man, who was wearing a short Kurdish sharwal and had a beard, saw me, turned his face away, and said 'crusader.' But I want to say that in recent years, the city has changed. Under the influence of certain new ideologies promoted by some channels, sects, and especially social media that say things like 'don't congratulate them on their holidays' or 'don't mix with them,' the attitudes of some people have shifted, even if just a little." At the same time, Gashaw Hussein Abdulkarim, one of the Kurds who recently converted to Christianity, also stated that: "Yes, in recent years there has been discrimination especially against those like me who have changed their religion. We haven't been able to be fully open about it, because it creates problems, especially after those extremist religious trends took hold. That's when the attacks and harassment became much more frequent." (Interview: 2025)

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Many of the interviewees made it clear that the emergence of discrimination in Sulaymaniyah is a relatively new phenomenon. In the past, things were not like this. Most of them attributed this change to the politicization of religion and the rise of extremist religious discourse, particularly after the events of 2003. Some believed that the city's rapid expansion and demographic transformation also played a role in this regard. Dylan Sarraf said, "Sulaymaniyah wasn't like this before. This is the result of a politicized religious discourse that gained ground especially after the 1990s. What we're experiencing now did not exist before. It's not necessarily the government or those in power; this is something within society itself. But the government should still address it." (Interview: 2025) Likewise, Araz Sarraf, who had previously commented on the role of politicized religious trends, said: "The expansion of Sulaymaniyah has had an effect as well. Things used to be much better. This rapid expansion has had an impact. The level of integration we had in the past is no longer the same. We didn't use to feel any difference. We were always in each other's homes, sharing meals with Muslim families. Our friendships were deep and genuine, especially with intellectuals and open-minded individuals. (Interview: 2025) Shwan Jamal also said: "The increase in the city's population has definitely had an effect. Now, people from outside the city have come in, and many of them do not share the traditional open-mindedness of Sulaymaniyah. (Interview: 2025) Abdulmasih Yousif also noted: "Sulaymaniyah used to be even better. There was more respect. But after the overcrowding and the influx of people from outside, to some extent, things have changed. Otherwise, the city wasn't like this in the past." (Interview: 2025)

Although Alan Pari rejects this view, he said: "No, the expansion of Sulaymaniyah has not affected its nature as a city of coexistence. Religious ceremonies and holidays have always been celebrated together, and that continues to this day." However, he added: "Still, after I returned, I did feel a kind of fear, especially from those who have come from the south because they haven't lived in the city and don't know it. It takes time for them to understand it." (Pari, Interview: 2025) On the other hand, Lucy Baho, as mentioned earlier, one of the Christians displaced from the Hamdaniya region due to ISIS attacks and residing in Sulaymaniyah since 2014, confirmed this shift in perceptions. She said, "When we came to Sulaymaniyah in 2014, people treated us very well, and the experience felt unique. I truly felt at ease. I even decided to stay in this city and not move elsewhere. But honestly, after 2018, things changed. Perceptions shifted to the point where, in the neighborhood where I live, I had a close friend who used to come every year to wish me a happy holiday. We used to exchange sweets and holiday greetings. But now, for the past two years, nothing. They've completely changed, and no longer do these things. Even when I offer sweets, they no longer accept them. So I've now decided that, if an opportunity arises, I will leave. I attribute this to the growing influence of certain rigid ideologies, which came along with the influx of people from the southern and central Arab regions into Sulaymaniyah. Their views and the promotion of attitudes hostile to other groups have had an impact on the Kurds as well. As a result, even the nature of coexistence itself has begun to deteriorate. (Interview: 2025)

When you compare the newcomers to those who had already lived in the city and are familiar with its past social life, it becomes evident that things were better before. For instance, Sabah Qaddouri, who was born in 1943 and comes from one of the families that lived on Goyzha Street, recalled the relationships during his time with Muslim neighbors: "In our neighborhood, which was called 'Gawran,' I never felt any difference. Life was very good. Most of us lived near the church, and others lived in other neighborhoods. In our own alley, we were constantly intermingled with our Muslim neighbors; we visited each other's homes, shared meals, and ate together. Most of us were breastfed by the same women we were like brothers through milk kinship. At no point did we ever feel a sense of difference. We celebrated our holidays very peacefully, and our religious symbols were respected. We would go on their holidays, and they would come to ours, and we would congratulate each other. From what I know, many Christians came to Sulaymaniyah, and most Christians have remained in the city and even acquired land here. I feel like there's no real problem. We even joined political parties and held positions. Christians live freely across the whole region. Relations are very good, there are churches, they are protected, and the government doesn't pose any issues. We consider ourselves Kurdish. True, we are not ethnic Kurds, but we are people of Kurdistan. I've never heard of any serious incident happening. And if it had happened, I would have documented it." (Interview: 2025)

Sargon Simanos Thomas, who comes from one of the old Christian families of Sulaymaniyah and now lives abroad, also stated: "We never felt discriminated against in Sulaymaniyah because we were Christians. On the contrary, we were treated even better, and that was because of the beauty of the city of Sulaymaniyah itself; it was always diverse and inclusive. As our relatives have always recalled, Sulaymaniyah paid more attention to minorities than other cities in the region and in Iraq. Throughout our lives, in our religious holidays, the use of our symbols, and our celebrations, we never face any restrictions or interference, and no one ever said anything against us. People would constantly come and join our celebrations with joy, whether in our homes or in the church. After the 1990s, Sulaymaniyah became more crowded, and we, as Christians, moved out of the Gawran area and dispersed throughout the neighborhoods of the city. We ourselves were originally not from Gawran, we lived in Sabunkaran, and our neighbors were Muslims. We had no problems, and our relationships were even closer than those among some Christian families themselves." (Interview: 2025)

Therefore, in comparison with previous generations, this emerging form of segregation referred to here is a reflection of recent political and demographic transformations. If such dynamics existed in Sulaymaniyah in the past, they were minimal and not widely perceived. This new phenomenon has become more noticeable, particularly after the emergence of certain radical religious trends in southern and central Iraq, as well as in some parts of the Kurdistan Region, where religion has increasingly been instrumentalized for political purposes and turned into a tool of mobilization.

One topic that emerges from the interviews is that although the majority of Sulaymaniyah's Christians previously lived in the Gawran neighborhood, there were also some who lived in other parts of the city. Those who lived in other neighborhoods often did so due to proximity to the church, especially at a time when there was little reason to relocate. However, unlike in the past, Christians in Sulaymaniyah today, like Muslims, are dispersed across the city. There is no neighborhood or geographic area that separates them. This fact has again become a point of debate among the interviewees. Some regarded it as a positive sign of integration, considering the absence of segregation to be a reflection of peaceful coexistence in Sulaymaniyah. Others, however, expressed concerns, interpreting it as a threat to the community's cohesion and a cause for the weakening of Christian identity, culture, and language continuity. In this regard, Dylan Sarraf stated: "There are two perspectives. Some say it reflects integration and peaceful coexistence, but others argue it threatens our language and cultural endurance. Even if it's a form of coexistence, it inevitably has a negative impact on language, because in such a setting, the language is no longer used within a community and remains confined to religious spaces. He added that this situation limits the emotional connection and shared experiences typical of communities where all members are Christian. Likewise, Huda Shammass raised the same concern and noted: "The problem for Christians in Sulaymaniyah is that we are scattered and distant from one another. That makes it difficult to build a specific, joyful Christian communal life. We long for the kind of Christian neighborhoods we see in Ankawa or Duhok, but here in Sulaymaniyah, we only see each other at church or during religious holidays. So that sense of community does not develop here." (Interview: 2025)

Samira Hanna also said, "That's why we remain in Sulaymaniyah, because overall, Sulaymaniyah is a city of peace and coexistence a city of enlightenment. Even after the arrival of displaced persons from southern and central Iraq, they too lived in the neighborhoods without any problems." She continued: "But it's also true that this might not give us the same feeling we would have in other areas where there are exclusively Christian neighborhoods." (Interview: 2025)

Dylan Sarraf stated: "That's why we, as Christians of Sulaymaniyah, are currently under two pressures. One is the general societal pressure stemming from the lack of services, unpaid salaries, and a host of other issues. The other is the pressure of preserving our language, culture, and very existence as Christians. Like everyone else, we have a whole set of problems in addition to this pressure to preserve ourselves, our culture, and our language." (Interview: 2025)

Overall, the interviews made it clear that, although all participants generally expressed satisfaction with the state of coexistence, they still had certain observations and reservations. These observations mostly pertain to individual behaviors and some specific incidents rather than representing a systematic issue within governmental or societal structures. However, the presence of such cases, though limited in number, appears to be a relatively new phenomenon in the context of coexistence in Sulaymaniyah.

If such cases existed in the past, they were marginal and unperceived. Most interpretations trace this situation back to recent political and demographic shifts, as well as to the violent events that have affected the region as a whole. This, in turn, has produced a lingering sense of insecurity among members of the Christian community, prompting some of them to reduce their public visibility or refrain from openly expressing their identity. While this issue does not stem directly from governmental policy, if left unaddressed, it may intensify psychological distress and gradually push the group to socially withdraw and cease participation in public and religious events, as partially evidenced by this year's two incidents in Duhok during the Akitu festival. Hence, although the government may be supportive to a certain extent, protecting this community and preserving peaceful coexistence requires broader and deeper efforts. This includes concrete actions to deter individuals or groups that cause psychological or social harm in different environments or institutions. Even if the law applies equally to all, the particular sensitivity of this group demands more effective and focused protection measures because the issue has broader implications for governance processes in the Kurdistan Region and in the city of Sulaymaniyah specifically. The findings also revealed that some community members feel unequal in terms of political representation and intellectual engagement. Thus, the government should not address this solely based on population ratios but also consider their historical presence and cultural contributions to the city's public life. Furthermore, there were complaints regarding constitutional challenges, especially in relation to the Iraqi Constitution and personal status law, placing responsibility on the KRG government, local authorities, and the Kurdistan Parliament to adopt more serious and targeted interventions. Although the issue is technically tied to the Iraqi Constitution, the Region should leverage its historical pluralism to seek legal exceptions through parliamentary advocacy and pressure. Additionally, the government should issue specific decrees aimed at expanding the scope of this community's rights.

Language

Regarding the question of language and the role of the government in preserving their language and the existence of schools in their language in the city, the entirety of the responses emphasized the absence of a public school specifically in their language within the city. All of them attributed this to their small population size and dispersal throughout the city. They stressed that the church bears most of the responsibility in this regard. Even the presence of the school run by nuns in Sulaymaniyah is officially part of the public framework of the Ministry of Education and does not operate in their own language, being open to all components of Sulaymaniyah. As for the concern over the loss of their language, most of them said that since they use it at home, the risk of extinction is minimal. For example, Samira Hanna said: "We do not have a school in our own language. Only on Fridays, we have a class at church to learn our language. We also use it among ourselves, so I don't feel it's at risk." (Interview: 2025) Qasha Ayman expressed a similar view: "There is no school in our own language, but the church assumes that role. Because our numbers are few, we use them within our own circles. It is one of the ancient languages of the region that still survives. Therefore, I believe it is not in danger." (Interview: 2025) Each of Shwan Jamal, Livyar Muzaffar, Huda Shamas, and Khalid Jamal Albert also held the same opinion.

Francis Dawood, a schoolteacher, had a different opinion regarding the absence of schools in their own language. He stated: "We do not have our own school because we have always, from the very beginning, attended public schools. As for the threat to our language, we continue to use it at home and among ourselves. There is no danger of its extinction; even the younger generations still use it. This language has a long and rich history and has survived to this day. True, we cannot compete with Kurdish or Arabic, but I firmly believe it will not disappear." (Interview: 2025)

Aras Sarraf similarly reaffirmed the same information, while also adding: "In the past, we used to speak only Kurdish at home, because we identified ourselves as Kurds. But now, this happens less frequently. At the same time, there is no longer freedom to speak in your own home the way you want." (Interview: 2025) This was precisely the concern raised by Qasha Pitzol, who described it as a unique characteristic of the city of Sulaymaniyah. Despite his belief that their language is at risk, especially among the younger generation, he pointed out that many Christians in Sulaymaniyah no longer speak Aramaic among themselves. They instead use the language of the region they came from. He further stated: "There is a particularly striking and unusual phenomenon here in Sulaymaniyah: Christians say 'we are Kurds' and speak Kurdish at home. That is a distinct feature of Sulaymaniyah, and I haven't heard anything similar elsewhere." (Interview: 2025)

In another regard, some individuals feel that their language is currently under threat of erosion, especially among the younger generation. For instance, Dilan Sarraf stated: "We do not have a school for our language. There is a school run by nuns, but it does not use the Christian language; it is a general school open to everyone. The only thing about it is that it is administratively run by the nuns. During religious instruction, the Christian children leave the classroom. This, in itself, plays a role in putting our language at risk." (Interview: 2025) Elsewhere, Dilan expressed concern that the language may not be able to withstand all these modern pressures, and that the new generation might gradually forget it. These pressures include the dominance of the English language, the necessity of Arabic, and the need to study in Kurdish.

As a result, within this environment, the younger generation may end up using the language only at home, if at all, without assigning it significant value.

Abdulmasih Yousif expressed the same concern. He said: "Although there is a general principle that wherever there is a large Christian population, there should be a school specific to them, in our case, when we went with my uncle to the Director of Education, he told us that instead of opening a public school, we should establish it within the church, since our numbers were too few and we were scattered. There was only one Christian student in the official school, so it was not feasible to open a formal school. That's why we agreed to open one in the church. Approval was granted, and for a time, we taught the Chaldean language. But it didn't last, because the children themselves stopped attending.

Other languages were more important to them. The number of students dropped, and the character of Sulaymaniyah and its Christian community didn't align with sustaining such a program.

The government itself was not the problem. Our language has drastically declined in recent years and is nearing extinction. Christians no longer know their language fully, since, unlike before, they don't even come to the weekly language classes held at the church on Fridays. However, I must say: in Sulaymaniyah, there has never been a problem using our language in public spaces." (Interview: 2025)

Aram Isa shared the same perspective. He said, "We are struggling to ensure that our language is preserved. This is not about whether we are Kurds or not, because our language is only used among ourselves, it is not employed in political, commercial, or other public domains. Therefore, it is the government's responsibility to protect these languages. Regarding schools, there is no school for our language in Sulaymaniyah, unlike in other places. This role is left to the church here. Another linguistic challenge is the influx of displaced people. Arabic has entered our community, and among the younger generation, English has as well. That's why, in order to preserve the faith, many times we resort to using their languages, Arabic, and sometimes English. The century-old Aramaic voice is no longer heard. Now we speak Arabic and English. Migration, low birth rates, and the large number of displaced people have led to their languages dominating. So yes, our language is under serious threat." (Interview: 2025)

This situation indicates that there are no restrictions on the use of their language, nor is the government preventing the establishment of schools in their mother tongue. However, the nature of their presence and pattern of settlement in the city is not supportive. As a result, they strive to compensate through the role of the church. It would therefore be better if the government could support the church's role, both financially and morally, in maintaining its language instruction. Relevant authorities should be made aware of this situation and take it seriously. Although the language is still used among themselves, the confinement of its use to the household poses a risk of gradual erosion over time. Thus, the government should once again take action through media and other platforms to elevate the presence of their language, including in songs and the arts, just as English, Arabic, and Turkish are broadcast daily on multiple channels. If there is genuine intent to preserve what remains of the Christian community in Sulaymaniyah, it would be best for them to have at least one independent broadcasting outlet, even if only a radio station.

Employment Opportunities and Challenges in Land and Agriculture

Regarding the question addressed to them about employment opportunities, most of them believed that there are no obstacles. On the contrary, they even stated that sometimes being Christian makes things easier (Aras Sarraf, Livyar Muzaffar, Shwan Jamal, Abdulmasih Yousif, Huda Shamas, Francis Dawood, Aram Isa). However, both Dilan and Priest Alwand believed that this issue depends on individuals. They indicated that while Christians do not face systemic or governmental discrimination, individual behavior and bias can still cause problems. For instance, if someone harbors negative views toward other religions, that could lead to difficulties. In this regard, Dilan Sarraf said: "For example, the church repeatedly submitted requests to the district administration to obtain a permit, but since the head of social affairs at the time belonged to an Islamic political party, the request was denied." Others pointed out how personal connections can influence outcomes: "If you want to progress further, you don't have the necessary backing to overcome certain barriers. Even in everyday dealings and work, you need to be more cautious than a Kurd, because there's a chance that someone might say, 'he's Christian and has no authority,' and then attempt to deny you your rights more often from non-Kurds than from Kurds" (Interview: 2025).

At the same time, Priest Alwand also said: "In my case, I haven't personally experienced such issues, nor have I heard of any problems arising from government institutions. However, it is still possible that if someone is aware that you are Christian, they may use that to create an obstacle" (Interview: 2025). Therefore, in this regard, it is necessary for the government, local authorities, and especially members of parliament, particularly those representing Christian constituencies, to be vigilant and consistently follow up on such cases, even if they seem minor, so that they are not neglected or dismissed.

However, regarding the issue of land and property confiscation, all of them emphasized that no such incidents have occurred in Sulaymaniyah. They all stressed that this is due to the fact that Christians in Sulaymaniyah have not traditionally lived in rural or village areas, so they do not own large agricultural lands that could place them within the scope of such problems as seen in other regions.

Aspects of Security and Safety

Regarding the question of safety and security in their lives, the majority again stated that they face no security-related problems and that, in general, they feel safe (Majd Shahada, Livyar Muzaffar, Shwan Jamal, Abdulmasih Yousif, Francis Dawood, Aram Isa). Even Priest Pizzol said, "In terms of security, from what I know, we have no problems." He added, "Although we have guards, even during the attack on Saida Najat, Mam Jalal asked the Christians, 'Do you need protection? I myself will provide your security.'" So for a while, his own guards protected them. Later, they were assigned a police force specifically for Christians and their religious sites. He said, "I recall telling the Lieutenant Governor in 2014 that now was not the time, but when ISIS came, I said, 'Now it is time.'" However, generally speaking, we have not faced any security problems in Sulaymaniyah. Nothing like that has happened to us. (Interview: 2025)

Priest Ayman also said: "In terms of security, we are doing very well. From 2003 until today, there has not been any security problem. Even though I was in a tense area, the region overall has been stable, especially Sulaymaniyah. This has been reassuring." (Interview: 2025)

Although Priest Alwand Shekhani said, "In terms of security, overall, we have no issues. But as individuals, for example, just yesterday in Duhok during the Akitu festival, someone assaulted a few people. In situations like this, we feel a sense of insecurity. Otherwise, we generally have no problems. And so far, such an incident has not occurred in Sulaymaniyah." (Interview: 2025)

From this perspective as well, Majd Shahada said: "I see no threat to the Christians of Sulaymaniyah, whether the long-established ones or those who are displaced. If there were any danger in Sulaymaniyah, it would affect everyone, not a specific group. I speak from the experience of living in this area. We, as a Christian family, have lived here for a long time and have no issues. On the contrary, what we fear is the possibility that Sulaymaniyah might collapse. I sincerely hope that Sulaymaniyah will always remain safe." (Interview: 2025)

Here again, it becomes clear that, in general, they face no security issues, just like the rest of society. However, what does exist is once again connected to individual behavior, which requires closer attention from the government. It is not only a matter for security institutions and agencies, but there is also a need for education and other sectors that will be discussed later, as they too can have an impact on shaping such types of attitudes and mindsets.

Education

Education in a pluralistic world is fundamentally about shaping the human being. The role of educational subjects, particularly those of a social nature, is to develop the human being as a cooperative member of society, capable of responsibility, aware of their own rights and those of others, and trained to respect the achievements and values of society. That is why one of our questions was about the role of educational subjects in providing a basis for coexistence and for reflecting the historical roots and religious identity of these groups within the region. All responses on this topic emphasized that education is weak in this regard and has failed to meet expectations. In this regard, Abdulmasih Yousif stated: In school textbooks, we are largely ignored. Christian history is barely mentioned; only Islam and Kurdish identity are discussed. There should be some mention of Christianity as well, so that Muslims would also learn about Christians (Interview: 2025). Similarly, Samira Hanna believed that education is the primary issue, and that there should be curriculum content about peaceful coexistence, so that children are raised to love one another, but that does not exist. Likewise, nothing is included about the religions and histories of minorities, even though constitutionally, we are all equal under the law. Therefore, this should be instilled in children from an early age, so they learn to love one another. The Ministry of Education should take responsibility for ensuring that people are shaped holistically (Interview: 2025).

In general, the rest of the responses were in this direction, emphasizing that education has excluded them in terms of content. The educational materials must be designed in such a way that they introduce the history and religion of all groups with educational intent and teach children to accept one another and live in peaceful coexistence (Aras Najib, Livia Muzaffar, Shwan Jamal, Francis Dawud, Dylan Saraf).

The priest Alwand also elaborated on this point and said: "Education has not managed in an appropriate way to familiarize people with religions. The curriculum's content of history and religion only covers Kurdish and Islam. Religions should be introduced to students not as a process of Islamizing children, but as a way for them to get to know these religions so that, in the end, the child understands what these religions are and their historical context in this environment. Sometimes, our children face certain stereotypes, where they are looked at differently by their peers. Children must be taught to respect diversity and accept difference." (Interview: 2025) The priest Ayman said: "If you want to understand what education has done in this regard, just go to the market and talk to someone. Immediately, they'll ask you, 'Where are you from?' They don't even know that this language exists in this environment." (Interview: 2025) Aram Isa, in this context, said: "No, education is very weak in this area. One of the problems is that I personally cannot relate to my own history in the education materials; the texts never mention it. Therefore, the curriculum should reflect that these minorities are part of civilization and the history of this place." (Interview: 2025) Khalid Jamal held the same view. Although he mentioned that there had been an effort to reform those curriculum subjects with consideration for the rights of minorities, and that a formal request for data had been submitted to his directorate, he added: "The work at the Ministry of Education has been suspended." (Interview: 2025)

Therefore, all of their reflections point to the fact that the religious and social subjects they are taught in the education system do not include content about the religion and history of Christians, and thus cannot effectively contribute to their understanding of their own religious and historical background in the region. As a result, such education fails to play a meaningful role in promoting coexistence and mutual acceptance. Accordingly, they believe it would be beneficial for the school curricula to give more importance to the history and religion of other components as well. At the same time, they recommend that topics related to coexistence and mutual acceptance should also be emphasized within awareness-raising programs. Therefore, it is necessary for the government and parliament especially those institutions and parliamentary members connected to these minority groups to make this a priority issue, because only through a proper educational approach can a large part of the previously and subsequently discussed problems in society be reduced, particularly those discriminatory personal behaviors which have been identified as the root cause of many of these challenges.

Social Networks

In reality, all those previously mentioned risks, including discriminatory personal behaviors by certain individuals, are compounded by an even more concerning issue: social media. That is why this topic became one of the key questions in our investigation. All respondents, without hesitation or ambiguity, affirmed that: yes, on social media and often from other platforms and forums as well, unjust attacks are directed at them. They emphasized the necessity of regulating this issue through law and setting clear boundaries. At the same time, they stressed that social media, instead of serving as a platform for inciting discrimination, should become a space for promoting normal coexistence, peaceful interaction, and mutual love among communities. Accordingly, the ministries of Culture, Education, Communication and Media, and Interior should take more serious and practical steps to protect minority groups and foster an environment of peaceful coexistence. In this regard, Sarjon Toma expressed his opinion clearly, saying: "Social media is unregulated in Sulaymaniyah and the region in general, and that's why attacks against Christians are ongoing, especially after the rise of political Islamic movements." This also reflects a degree of negligence on the part of the Ministry of Culture and Interior. Therefore, in addition to this, both ministries should coordinate with one another and channel social media toward serving coexistence, rather than inciting hatred. The Ministry of Endowments should also play a role in organizing religious platforms to promote peaceful coexistence within the city. (Interview: 2025)

Aram Isa, in a similar remark, said: "What is currently being spread through media and social networks by extremist religious groups, if not dealt with properly, will eventually slip out of the government's control and go beyond limits. Even if it's just one incident per year, over time, it can have destructive consequences. Therefore, this issue must be addressed. A small lapse should never be allowed to snowball into a catastrophe that ultimately leads to migration." He added, "Controlling this is, in fact, the responsibility of the government. You arrest TikTokers just because two women danced together, but when some individuals jeopardize the security of others' lives, you remain silent or even go as far as featuring them in media and portraying them as heroes." He concluded: "Thus, the judiciary and all institutions must take the lead and adopt a firm stance against such ideologies, because this issue not only harms minorities, it also sows confusion and internal conflict within Islam itself." (Interview: 2025)

Although Pastor Ayman believed that social media is a fabricated world, he still considered it a dangerous issue and said: "Yes, in that fabricated world of social media, everything exists. Attacks may happen there, even if they don't occur face-to-face. However, over time, this can still have harmful consequences. That's why there must be oversight from the relevant institutions. At the same time, efforts must be made by religious figures themselves to reduce the logic behind promoting division and polarization. All platforms from pulpits to institutions and tools must be used not for incitement or spreading hatred and resentment, but to promote love and peaceful coexistence." He added, "We've repeatedly heard people say: 'Don't celebrate Christian holidays.' Even if these incidents are rare, they still end up having a long-term effect." Therefore, he stressed that it is important for the Ministries of Education, Culture, and Endowments to each have specific programs focused on fostering peaceful coexistence. (Interview: 2025)

Dilan Sarraf, in the same vein, believed that yes, social media platforms are out of control and that they cause harm. She said, "Social media hurts us a lot. That's the result of this new wave of extremist Islamic discourse that has recently emerged, which is even dangerous for Muslims themselves. However, minorities are always more affected, and the government must protect them, take a firm stand, and implement specific measures. These people attacked a Christian girl, while I have never spoken to them or had any conflict with them." Therefore, all ministries must play a role in this area and develop specialized programs on coexistence. (Interview: 2025) Each of the following: Shwan Jamal, Pastor Alwand, Samira Hanna, Pastor Pizzol, Abdulmasih Yousif, Livyar Muzaffar, Alan Pari, Huda Shamas, and Francis Dawood held the same opinion. Although some noted that this is related to individual behaviors and depends on the person involved, any such negative impact must still be addressed. Even Pastor Alwand stated: "If such behavior doesn't exist, why would a Christian girl leave school?" (Interview: 2025)

Therefore, even though this issue is personal and largely belongs to a world of defamation and fabrication, it is clearly evident that it has psychological effects on those individuals. At the same time, the matter of social media undoubtedly influences the thoughts and perceptions of some people, which also reflects a lack of awareness and indicates the weakness of the educational system in this regard. However, it is certain that a lack of control will not serve the cause of coexistence. Hence, all relevant authorities within the government and the legislative powers must step forward and impose boundaries for this lawlessness and regulate it through specific legal frameworks.

From this point on, a part of the issue is related to extremist religious rhetoric, which without any understanding of the history of Kurdistan and the city of Sulaymaniyah, and without any educational foundation regarding the importance of coexistence and mutual acceptance, has left a negative impact on the culture of peaceful coexistence in the region through their politicized and aggressive discourse. Although, according to some of the responses, this may be less pronounced in Sulaymaniyah, the persistent possibility of harmful effects remains and should not be seen as a positive sign. Therefore, all responses to this question agree that politicizing religion and pushing toward extremism does not serve the path of peaceful communal life, not only between different religions, but even within Islam itself. (Rev. Pizzol, Rafil Zaid, Alwand Sheikhan, Araz Najib, Shwan Jamal, Rev. Ayman).

The Government and the Directorate of Culture and Them

Another question in the study concerned how the local government and state institutions interact with them. It also included the question of whether the Directorate of Culture has any role in their events and what it has done in this regard. In general, their responses indicate that the government and its institutions do not present a problem; on the contrary, some even say that Christians are sometimes treated better. However, regarding the Directorate of Culture, most of them said that there is no such relationship between them and that no special ceremonies have been held for them, nor have their distinct identities been acknowledged (Dialan Saraf, Rev. Pitzol, Livyar Muzaffar, Alwand Sheikhani, Samira Hanna, Abdulmasih Yousif, Huda Shamas, and Francis Dawood). Nevertheless, some did not direct this issue solely at the Directorate of Culture but felt that the neglect of Christians is also due to their own lack of initiative, because they neither make demands nor come forward. For example, Huda Shamas said: "As for the cultural sector, I believe Christians do not take action for themselves or make any requests. Otherwise, I do not believe the cultural authorities would refuse to cooperate." (Interview: 2025)

Aram Isa also stated: "The issue of cultural representation is dual-sided. One aspect is the neglect of Christians, and the other is ourselves. I believe that they (government bodies) made some effort and called on Luqman (a relevant figure) to organize activities or events specifically for us as well. But we ourselves did not step forward to make any requests. If you don't ask, the government won't do it on its own. The Christians of Sulaymaniyah do not want to separate themselves or emphasize their distinctiveness. We've always acted together with the Kurds. Being Kurdish is even stronger among us Christians of Sulaymaniyah." (Interview: 2025) The truth of this statement that they see themselves as part of the wider society and as Kurds was something most of them repeated.

Aram Isa's remarks about the reestablishment of a specific department or unit for Christians were echoed by Shwan Jamal, who is himself an employee within the Directorate of Culture. He stated: "In 2016, a decision was made in Sulaymaniyah by the general directorate that I should be transferred to the General Directorate of Chaldean and Syriac Culture in Erbil. I was officially assigned to that post, but due to financial crises and budgetary problems, that department was never reestablished. After the financial collapse and efforts to reduce public expenditures, one of the things that was eliminated was precisely that department." Regarding the cultural activities dedicated to Christians, he added: "The Culture Directorate here (in Sulaymaniyah) has never had anything specific for them. In fact, there have been very few events for others too; very few commemorations or celebrations have taken place. The only thing I remember was a single event held in 2017 or 2018 for Karim Alaka. After that, nothing else was done." (Interview: 2025) Khalid Jamal similarly said: "This all comes down to the person who is in charge of the Culture Directorate. They should at least allocate something for the Christians. For instance, in Erbil, there are several activities organized every year. Even though the budget and financial capacity may be limited, it's still something. That's why I say Sulaymaniyah should have a Chaldean and Syriac Culture Department, it would be much better." (Interview: 2025)

In general, two key issues stand out here: The first is that the government and public institutions do not create any particular problems for Christians and treat them normally. However, the second is that the Culture Directorate has somewhat neglected them. As some participants indicated, this reflects a dual-sided issue and partially stems from the community's own lack of proactive engagement. Regardless of the cause, the government must recognize that its responsibility toward social groups is not limited to respecting them during electoral periods; it must also actively protect their culture, heritage, and visibility in the cultural sphere. Therefore, just as linguistic rights have been acknowledged, cultural institutions must also give importance to the cultural and intellectual contributions of Christians. It is true that these institutions primarily operate within the Kurdish framework, but when one holds a public seat on behalf of a specific group, they must also recognize and reflect the presence of that minority from all perspectives. This includes organizing dedicated cultural events and initiatives so that these communities can feel seen and acknowledged. Hence, it would be better for the government to revisit the idea of reestablishing that specific department and to seriously pursue more dedicated activities and events for Christians. The government should also work to provide space for programming and initiatives in the Christian language and about Christian figures and their roles in this city.

Their Issue and the Endowment

Although many Christian clergy are less inclined to rely on the cooperation of the Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf), administratively, they fall under the Directorate of Christian Affairs within the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. In this regard, they face several issues with that directorate, which is largely underfunded. Many of them believe that this directorate has not been able to go beyond bureaucratic routines or effectively respond to the needs of the church clergy.

Qasha Ayman, in this context, said: "I ask: What can the Ministry of Endowments actually do? What is its budget? How much does it allocate for renovation and for meeting our needs? That institution has not been able to assist us. Most of the time, it is unable to do anything or meet our requirements. So, apart from administrative functions, it has done nothing else. For example, we are part of this wealthy region, why doesn't the state allocate funding for us? We are part of this society. Why should our support come from foreign organizations? Even for the renovation of the Church of Mary the Virgin, they tried several times, but none of their efforts succeeded" (Interview: 2025).

Priest Pizzol said: We have more of a budget issue with the Endowments. For example, we have been requesting the renovation of the church for over ten years. Last year, we submitted another request, and four months ago, we submitted it again, but there has been no response. Perhaps this is related to the financial crisis. He also said: We have a good relationship with the Islamic Waqf, and we have had many visits and exchanges of views, but this is related to our own Christian Waqf, which is part of the Endowments Directorate (Interview: 2025).

Abdulmasih Yousif, who has lived through some of the church's challenges, said: "The Endowment is not very active and is unable to truly serve us. Although from early on, our priests did not want anyone interfering in their affairs, none of our priests has ever received a salary from the government or had an official service history. But during Mam Jalal's tenure, some support was arranged it was informal, but the church was being assisted. When the church was burned, Mam Jalal had it rebuilt, and the Mary Yousif Church was also built by Mam Jalal. Later, during Dr. Barham's term, we requested to establish an official service history for our priests, and it was approved to be provided through the 'Two Treasuries' fund. However, more recently, when the Mary al-Azra Church collapsed, I wrote a petition to Kak Qubad's office to allocate some funding for it. They agreed, but after a second attempt, we didn't receive anything, even though the expenses for this church are higher than others. As for the Christian Waqf, they only help when it comes to letters of residency. If not, they don't cover any expenses. All the expenses here are charitable and have been covered by the priests themselves. We have submitted multiple requests to receive funds for the renovation of parts of this church, but we haven't received anything so far. Even though recently, the Endowment has started showing some movement again." (Interview: 2025)

At the same time, Priest Alwand also said: "We belong to the Christian Waqf, and we received our license from them, but this is only administrative. In terms of financial or material support, we have received nothing from them." (Interview: 2025)

In general, the responses indicated that yes, they have their own designated office within the Ministry of Endowments, but it is merely an administrative matter, and, financially, the support has not been sufficient. However, in response to this question, Khalid Jamal (General Director of Christian Affairs at the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs) explained the matter in such a way that it depends on proportion, and that Sulaymaniyah, based on its proportion, has not been neglected. He also pointed out that the financial crisis has played a major role in this regard. Additionally, he clarified that the issue of renovating the Church of Mary the Virgin partly relates to the local administrative directorate, and coordination with them is necessary. Furthermore, he explained that the financial issue is not just about constructing or renovating buildings, but that they also provide funding for the equipment and other essential needs inside the church, and in this regard, outside of Sulaymaniyah, they also cover areas like Duhok, Erbil, and Koya, where the Christian population is considerably higher than in Sulaymaniyah. The reality he highlighted is that the financial crisis and related difficulties indeed have had an impact here. Nevertheless, regardless of the circumstances, the government must pay attention to this issue in order to prevent the Christian community from feeling excluded and forced to rely solely on their own communities or external organizations. They should feel that they are part of the income generated in this region. Therefore, members of parliament should take this issue into account in their work, because this would strengthen the loyalty and love of Christians for their city and region. It would also make them feel that they are genuinely represented in the parliament, and in the future, they would be more likely to vote for their true representatives.

Social and Political Support

One issue that may be a fundamental problem across the society of the Kurdistan Region in terms of livelihood and the social, political, and economic role is the matter of political and social support, influence, and backing from the military or armed forces. This could be especially more consequential for minorities. Therefore, the entirety of the respondents believed that although this is a general problem, it affects them more, because they neither have strong backing within political parties nor rely on influential networks or armed groups. They themselves are not part of any force, nor do they have military figures supporting them, since in one respect, they are less involved in politics, and from a security standpoint, they are often recognized as peaceful individuals without militant affiliations. They are city dwellers and do not belong to any tribal or armed structures. Thus, even though this is a general issue in Kurdistan, given that the law has not been able to fully assert its authority, it has much greater consequences for minorities. From this perspective, Shwan Jamal said: "The absence of political and social support significantly affects our ability to access our rights. This is a result of the absence of the rule of law and is one of the reasons that pushes minorities like us to emigrate." (Interview: 2025). Abd al-Masih Yousif also stated: "Support from networks and society is necessary, because when the law is weak, if you have weapons or a network, you can do anything. This applies to everyone, but more so to Christians because we are a minority." (Interview: 2025). Huda Shamas similarly said: "Yes, the absence of political and social backing plays a major role, because the law lacks authority, and you need someone to support you and advocate for you. That's why, as a minority, we feel it more. This is a key reason for migration, because we perceive it as a constant threat to our lives due to being a minority. When the law cannot function properly, we are the first to be harmed. Only the strong survive, and Christians are peaceful people. Especially in recent years, this pattern is clear even within the Christian community; the wealthier ones are better off." (Interview: 2025). Samira Hanna also reaffirmed the same point that political and social support play a role, but she added, "Ultimately, there needs to be a law and a constitution. Even when it comes to simple matters like passports, we receive no service. We do not need political power or tribal networks; we need laws that protect us." (Interview: 2025). All others shared this same view.

Therefore, what can be concluded is this: it is true that, in general and for everyone, this issue plays a role in the realization of rights. And this goes back to the fact that the law has not maintained its authority. However, the group for whom this issue has a greater impact are the minorities and Christians in particular because they neither have influential backing nor support from other sources. They consistently think of matters in a peaceful manner. Thus, the solution is to adopt more specific decisions for them in this context, or to place them in a more protected position. Because, as it became evident in the interviews, this is one of the causes behind their migration. Therefore, this also somewhat reduces the issue of migration.

Second: Migration: Causes and Effects

Migration, considered one of the key threats to the continued existence of Christians in the region in general and in Sulaymaniyah in particular, as previously mentioned, has become a prominent cause of the decline in their population in Iraq. Therefore, addressing and identifying the root causes of migration must be one of the main concerns of the Kurdistan Regional Government, local self-governing bodies, and the Kurdistan Parliament. Accordingly, the issue of migration was also one of the questions in this study. On this matter, respondents provided varying answers, especially concerning the reasons behind their migration. Some believed it was merely a result of the general situation and not specifically because they were Christians, arguing that, as with migration in general, it is related to the absence of justice, equality, and the fair application of the law in distributing the resources of the state. As such, "I, as a Christian citizen of the city, did not leave because of persecution, but because of discrimination and lack of fairness," said Abdulmasih Yousif (Interview: 2025). In fact, we mentioned several individuals who have emigrated and now live abroad, each of whom left at a different time. About thirty of them emigrated during the Kurdistan Regional Government era, and two of them specifically after the events of 2003. One of them is Kurdish and had converted from Islam to Christianity.

One example is Sabah Qadduri, who emigrated in the late 1990s. Initially, he went abroad to pursue his studies, but later chose not to return due to dissatisfaction with the prevailing government policies at the time. He stated that the reason for his emigration was political. Most of them fled during the Iran-Iraq war due to conscription and the conflict, so military service was a key reason for migration. Once they settled abroad, the poverty that spread throughout Iraq in the aftermath of both wars, including the Kuwait war, made living conditions significantly harder. Later, as people increasingly fled toward Europe, including Muslim university professors, these emigrants found stability. They encouraged others to follow them, pulling their communities along, while others fled due to civil war and internal instability. Religion was not the main reason for their departure; rather, the root causes were political and economic, especially after the younger generation began to leave, opening the way for more to follow (Interview: 2025). This was also the view of Shwan Jamal (Interview: 2025). Khalid Jamal, however, traced the issue back to the Baath regime era. Nevertheless, he also mentioned another reason directly related to Christians. He stated: "Since childhood, Christians are raised in the church and in their families to value peace, future-oriented thinking, calm, and educational development." Therefore, Christian families generally tend to be more cautious and place great importance on the future. They always strive to raise their children in stable environments and have a stronger sense of planning for their children's future. Thus, in times of instability, conflict, or when the future seems uncertain, they are more likely to leave and seek safer places. This aligns with what happened in Iraq post-2003 and the chaos that followed, which caused many of them to emigrate, especially after the emergence of ISIS. Many Christians who left their hometowns did not wish to remain in a state of displacement. Although many were betrayed, this led them to lose confidence in the future and begin to question: What will our future be? Who guarantees an end to ISIS? Could ISIS come to Kurdistan too? Therefore, a broad wave of emigration began, and Christians in Sulaymaniyah were also affected by the same factors. Even if the issue wasn't directly tied to their Christian identity or related living problems in Sulaymaniyah (Interview: 2025).

Alan Pari, who emigrated in 1999, stated: "The reason for my emigration was mostly due to the civil war, hopelessness, lack of employment, and absence of stability. We had no hope for a better life, not because I felt threatened for being a Christian, but rather because we had less economic opportunity and freedom, and it is more available elsewhere" (Interview: 2025).

Sargon Simanos Tomaš, who emigrated in 2011, stated: "Our emigration was by no means due to marginalization or to difficulties caused by being Christian. Rather, it was related to the general situation of the region. On the contrary, if Christians had not left, it would have been because of the beauty of the city of Sulaymaniyah. The emigration dates back to the 1970s and later the Iran-Iraq wars, which led people in general to start leaving due to Iraq's policies. So it wasn't something exclusive to Christians like everyone else, we emigrated too. Later in the 1990s, economic hardship and political instability, like elsewhere, were the reasons. This remained the case until 2003" (Interview: 2025).

However, when examining the reflections of Pastor Pizzol more closely especially concerning the emigration of minorities in general, and Christians in particular it becomes evident that although the majority state that Christians in Sulaymaniyah do not emigrate due to religious reasons, a closer look at the details and many of the responses to other questions reveals that, indeed, in some cases, religion eventually plays a role in their emigration. As Pastor Alwand stated: "Migration is a political, social, and economic issue, which more strongly affects Christians unless a Christian individual no longer feels safe and is constantly worried, then he inevitably emigrates" (Interview: 2025).

Indeed, if you examine Pastor Pizzol's reflection more closely, you'll understand it better. He states: "Migration for Christians is a historical issue in the Middle East, dating back to the end of the 19th century, due to Ottoman pressure as well as certain Arab and even Kurdish intellectuals. Later, after the formation and subsequent liberation of the region's states, fascist states emerged based on nationalist foundations and European fascism. This further disrupted the lives of those affected, rather than improving them." He adds: "Perhaps part of the failure also lies with the Church and Christian clerics, who have not been able to engage properly with the situation and work toward a shared life. Now, things have changed partly due to the teachings of the Catholic Church, and we must live with others, not reject them. Meaning, if someone possesses virtue in this life, it is because of their faith, not anything else. Unfortunately, this hasn't yet reached everywhere, although it is very important in the new Christian guidance." "But the issue here is the historical trajectory, alongside the later arrival of radical Western ideologies and racist ideologies that were unwelcoming to either Christians, Muslims, or any other minorities. These ideologies promote homogeneity under the banner of nationalism. For example, in Germany, all groups exist, but the desire was for everyone to become 'German,' which was unrealistic, because today the world is no longer uniform.

That's why we must pursue coexistence meaning you stand beside this community in both blessing and hardship. So you are our fellow citizen and a part of us." (Interview: 2025) Thus, what emerges is this: even if for those who emigrate the issue may not explicitly be their Christianity, implicitly, due to the historical experience the region has gone through, it remains etched in their consciousness, even if they are not fully aware of it. A different kind of fear lingers within them and continues to live on through every undesirable situation and the outcomes of any form of disorder, whether political, economic, or social, throughout the region. This reinforces their desire to escape by migrating and abandoning the places they deem unstable. Therefore, when you ask them about the reason for their migration, they immediately refer to the general condition of the area. However, at its core, they sense that certain characteristics of their identity make them more likely to migrate. As Lucy Bahu pointed out, those who came to Sulaymaniyah because of the ISIS situation, seeing that there was safety and respect for them here, wanted to remain and not return to their original areas or leave the country again. But after 2018, due to the conditions that affected the entire region, including Sulaymaniyah, even if less severely, they began considering migration abroad again, and if possible, would leave as soon as they could (Interview: 2025). This was also the view of Gashaw Hussein, who left Sulaymaniyah in 2017 and now lives in Germany. He indicated that because he is Christian, and given the dangers of recent years, he no longer felt respected as a Christian, so he left (Interview: 2015). Therefore, any deterioration in the situation, even if minor, reactivates those fears and raises questions like: what will the outcome be? What awaits us in these anticipated conditions? So for them, leaving becomes the better option. This is also evident in the statements of Shwan Jamal. Even though he attributes it to the region's historical, political, and economic context, he ultimately said: "That context grants Christians more freedom there than here" (Interview: 2025). Similarly, Araz Najib said: "It's true, our migration from Sulaymaniyah wasn't because we're Christian and faced threats, but due to general conditions." He added: "Life there is more secure not because they are Christians, but because there is a system that protects everyone" (Interview: 2025). Likewise, Huda Shammasi, although stating that migration from Sulaymaniyah isn't due to being Christian, said that the post-ISIS situation has created deep internal anxiety among all Christians in Iraq, including those in Sulaymaniyah. They live constantly wondering: Will another ISIS return? Where is the political situation headed? So until things are resolved, they prefer to leave, and those already abroad try to encourage others to follow them (Interview: 2025). Samira Hanna stated: there are many reasons for migration, religious ones, the absence of security, and the conditions that resulted from falling under ISIS control. She also mentioned that many of her husband's relatives left, likely in part due to fear at a time when they were unprotected. There is also a fear that the previous regime's policies might return. Economic factors, she said, also definitely played a role (Interview: 2025). Both Rafil Zaid and Francis Dawood believed that the deteriorating situation in other regions created fear among the Christians of Sulaymaniyah too, leading to more migration (Interview: 2025). At the same time, Dilan Saraf said, despite the general reasons for migration in this context, Christian migration has also been heavily influenced by the lack of language use (Interview: 2025). Although Livia Muzaffar, who spoke on the topic, said that migration in southern and central Iraq poses a threat to their lives, she added that this is not the case to the same degree in Sulaymaniyah. If a Christian in Sulaymaniyah has a job and a livelihood, they won't leave and will stay (Interview: 2025).

Therefore, all previous returns and these responses we received on this subject clearly indicate that Christian migration has a deep historical root. At the same time, they reveal that this migration has intensified alongside every undesirable political, military, and economic event or condition of instability, because they have always found themselves in a more vulnerable position. This has become even more evident in recent years. If previously Christians migrated due to general causes, it was not necessarily due to those specific threats. For that reason, Gashaw Hussein says: "When Christians do not migrate, it is when they feel respected, like in the earlier years" (Interview: 2025). Therefore, the Kurdistan Regional Government and the local administration must understand that the recent developments mentioned including the influx of Sunni Arabs into the city and their implications, the chaotic and personalized conditions that were described, the absence of a specific law to protect minorities, and even the constitutional and legal issues related to personal status laws all of these factors have impacts on the overall situation of coexistence and on the migration of Christians and other components as well. That is why, when the migration rate increases, it becomes clear: yes, there is a threat to their existence, to their language, and to their culture, all of which they themselves have spoken about. Most of the original Christian families of the city have migrated to the extent that Sargon Simon referred to a depletion going back to the 1980s (Interview: 2025). They all indicated that there are even families in which no one remains here anymore (Interview: 2025). Samira Hanna stated: "Now it's reversed; the number of IDPs who have arrived from other areas is greater than the number of the city's original Christians" (Interview: 2025).

This, clearly, has an impact on Christians in terms of their demographic presence, culture, language, and status in the city. Therefore, they all believed: if the causes of this migration are not addressed, there will be a greater threat to their continued presence in the region in general, and in the city of Sulaymaniyah in particular. Some of them believed that the solution lies in reducing the causes of migration. Above all else, the government must take serious action to protect this minority from further decline. I am not saying the government has been neglectful, but it must engage in a more serious, timely, and targeted effort to protect this community. It is necessary to reduce the politicization of identity and to build stronger relations with minorities, and to seriously implement the previously discussed decisions aimed at reducing those causes and relieving their sense of insecurity (Alunad Shexani, Interview: 2025). Efforts must be made to enact more and more specific laws for the protection of these people and their lives. As Dilan Saraf said, "True, they have not been harmed, and everything must be made available to them, but action must be taken on trust, protection, and reassurance. Life is only lived once. If this is not provided, I too will leave and will no longer listen to any talk about cultural or linguistic preservation or belonging here" (Dilan Saraf, Interview: 2025). At the same time, they must be more engaged not only with participation in celebrations and a few remarks at events but with serious efforts.

They must be valued historically and intellectually, and efforts must be made to recognize and introduce them. Therefore, more attention must be paid to this matter, because we are still part of the life of this city (Alan Pari, Interview: 2025). It would be better to hold conferences and events and to inform them that their presence in Sulaymaniyah is real and that life is normal. The government should protect their rights through concrete decisions, because in their view, they feel they have no guarantees. These thoughts must be changed, and the government must support them (Huda Shamas, Interview: 2025). Efforts must also be made to foster and promote a culture of peace and reconciliation among all groups. Even extremists must not be excluded; dialogue must be pursued with everyone, and a solid foundation for coexistence must be built (Pitzol, Interview: 2025). This was the shared view of all those we interviewed. Even Gashaw Hussein said: The solution is to once again respect Christians as in the past, and to ensure freedom of conscience and the right to choose one's religion, something that is currently, unfortunately, unavailable (Interview: 2025).

Regarding what the government has done to facilitate their return, since there is a decision to assist with the repatriation those who are abroad said: "No, nothing has been done for us in this regard, and no effort has been made to ease the way for our return" (Alan Pari, Interview: 2025; Sargon Simanos Toma, Interview: 2025).

What emerges from the middle of their narratives is this: yes, it is possible that those who migrated from Sulaymaniyah did so, on the surface and according to the time periods, for general reasons. However, what lies at a deeper level is that the lack of trust among minorities has deep historical roots, and with each incident, this distrust intensifies and serves as a justification for migration. Therefore, even if such incidents did not occur in Sulaymaniyah in the same way or, on the contrary, the city was much better compared to other areas and although a large number of those who left the city following the events of recent years were quite satisfied with life in Sulaymaniyah and had settled there, at the root of it all, these incidents have increased the fears in the hearts of the Christians of this city, making them uncertain about what the future holds for them.

From another perspective as well, the entirety of the narratives points to statistics indicating a rather alarming level of Christian emigration from the city of Sulaymaniyah, with its consequences already clearly evident and likely to intensify further in the future. This situation is not favorable for the governance of the region or the city of Sulaymaniyah, whether from a historical standpoint where the city has always been characterized by diversity or from the perspective of its political reputation in the eyes of international organizations and those concerned with human and minority rights. For part of any region's pride lies in preserving its diversity, fostering coexistence, and mutual acceptance. If the absence or significant decline of such diversity occurs, it will inevitably call into question the image of Sulaymaniyah. At the same time, the legitimacy of representation itself would be endangered. Therefore, it is crucial that the local and regional authorities, along with the central government, address this matter seriously and work toward enacting special legislation and implementing targeted measures in support of coexistence in the city and to assist in the return and reintegration of those who have left. If nothing else, they should at least strive to ensure that the connection of these individuals to the city is not permanently severed.

Third: Their Political Participation

Regarding their participation in politics, previous interviews have revealed that some of their concerns centered around the perception that they had been given fewer opportunities. However, when we turn to other interviews, we observe that some of them redirect the issue to the idea that the Christians of this city themselves are not interested in political involvement. Simultaneously, regarding their participation in administrative, decision-making, and representational domains, they similarly express this sentiment. Although some believe they have representation, they also argue that the representative in question has not met their expectations. At the same time, others say that they personally have not encountered such issues that would require the intervention of a representative. Yet again, the subject is tied back to the broader context, and their representative is seen just like any other. On this point, Qasha Pitzol noted: "Politically, in Erbil and Duhok, there are Christian parties, but in Sulaymaniyah, it seems that Christians themselves prefer to participate in other parties, non-Christian ones, whether major or minor, and they cast their votes for those parties. We had one person who served in the Provincial Council. We've also had Christians in the Kurdistan Regional Parliament. Christians are also present in administrative bodies and have their own organizations, but they are more social and cultural in nature, not political" (Interview: 2025).

On the same matter, Qasha Alwand also stated that regarding political rights and political participation, his view is likewise that it is a matter of proportion. In Sulaymaniyah, as in all of Kurdistan, there are Christians in every group, but the elected representatives themselves are not necessarily from Christian parties to the same extent as the political parties (Interview: 2025).

Qasha Ayman, speaking more broadly about the political participation of Christians, stated that he has not been satisfied since 2003. He said, "Regarding our political participation as Christians in Iraq in general, we have been subjected to injustice. After 2003, we had different expectations, because before that, we had endured too much, many of our people suffered, and left their homes behind. But after 2003, things became even worse due to the unstable situation that followed, to the extent that the wave of emigration intensified and our numbers significantly declined. He added that in the end, it was as if even the bare minimum was not guaranteed for us as Christians. Therefore, even Sulaymaniyah, for me, was not very reassuring, and I do not feel confident about it" (Interview: 2025).

Sargun Toma stated that politically, in the nineties, especially during the two administrations, significant attention was given to the participation of Christians, particularly in areas under the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's control. Administratively and politically, even if it was minimal, Christians may have faced fewer issues because they were not preoccupied with participation in governance. However, if viewed proportionally, we might have received more than our share (Interview: 2025).

From this perspective, Huda Shamas said: Although our participation is limited, this does not mean there is obstruction (Interview: 2025). Khalid Jamal also believed that they should participate at all junctions and at the deputy minister level, but proposed that efforts should be made for them to participate at the minister and deputy minister levels as well, especially in this cabinet, because they have seats in Sulaymaniyah. He added that this initiative has so far only been undertaken by the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Therefore, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan must also do so (Interview: 2025).

From here, we moved to the topic of their representative in the Provincial Council. They believed that while a representative exists, ultimately, one problem in Kotash is that voters from other communities also vote for them. Therefore, they do not fully represent you, but rather represent the party that sent them there. This brings us to their personal character: What do they do for Christians? Because they were not elected by Christian votes and do not need them. Nevertheless, their presence remains positive because Christians feel represented. Even if in other fields, such special treatment is given to minorities, it would be very good. Therefore, to prevent their migration and further decline, efforts must be made in laws and other matters to grant them some privileges. Even if their numbers are small, this is essential for the continuity of this segment (Dilman Sarraf: Interview: 2025).

Samira Hanna also stated: We have a member in the Provincial Council, but it is merely administrative and lacks authority. Therefore, our strength lies in ourselves and our peace, not in a representative (Interview: 2025). All other opinions similarly emphasized that their representative does not play the necessary role for Christians. Sometimes, the issue was interpreted as a general one, meaning that other representatives also lack that role.

Regarding the existence of political parties, the responses indicate that Christians in Sulaymaniyah do not have a political party specific to themselves. They are not even affiliated with Christian parties from other areas of the Kurdistan Region. Rather, those interested in political work operate within the framework of the major Kurdish parties.

Regarding cultural organizations, they did have organizations, but after the financial crisis and the cessation of financial support, these have ceased to be active and now exist only administratively.

The Last Seat in the Parliament and Their Waiting

One of our questions concerned the recent decision of the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq, which allocated a parliamentary seat for Christians in Sulaymaniyah. We asked about their feelings toward this decision and their perspective on the matter. All respondents, except Qeshe Immanuel and Samira Hanna, expressed no hope. They said it would be like previous cases, and "we have no hope." Others, however, welcomed it; the decision created a sense of joy. Some stated: "For the first time, a Christian representative from Sulaymaniyah enters parliament, which is heartening for us" (Araz Najib, Interview: 2025). They added: "This makes us feel acknowledged" (Leviar Muzaffar, Interview: 2025). Even Huda Shamas said: "I view the addition of a parliamentary seat for Sulaymaniyah very positively, as it strengthens our position, gives us hope, and motivates us to assert our identity" (Interview: 2025). Aram Isa recounted this story: "This became a major point of conflict between several parties who fought over Christian representation until the court issued this decision. Existing representatives only covered Christians in Erbil and Duhok and belonged to specific parties. As a minority, they resisted having a Christian representative in Sulaymaniyah. I personally engaged in extensive debates with them. They argued: 'Your numbers are small.' I responded: 'Parliamentary representation isn't about numbers but about voice.' They retorted: 'It's ironic that major parties secured seats for you, yet you deny Sulaymaniyah's Christians the same right.' For us in Sulaymaniyah, this isn't about numbers; it's about our historical footprint in the city" (Interview: 2025).

However, what they all emphasized was this: They feared this representative might not be a genuine representative of Christians, like others. Therefore, they suggested that after a period of work, their performance must be monitored to ensure Christians are not driven to hopelessness. This is so that in future elections, their votes will go to their own designated candidates.

Conclusion and Analysis of Results

In conclusion, this research reached several findings, including:

1- It emerges that in most narratives, emphasis is placed on this: Sulaymaniyah is a unique city in terms of culture, mutual acceptance, and coexistence. Even in most expressions, it was evident that they lived among Kurds without perceiving themselves as distinct Christians in Sulaymaniyah. This model could be presented by the regional authorities as a point of pride to international organizations to enhance the city's historical narrative. Simultaneously, it could play a role in establishing connections with other global cities and the United Nations, because, as noted, the United Nations attaches great importance to this model.

2- It became evident that, yes, coexistence has existed in the history of Sulaymaniyah and is part of the city's heritage. However, due to political factors, demographic shifts, and the resurgence of certain religious-political ideologies, negative discrimination against Christians has emerged from some quarters. This has impacted individuals within the community and risks perpetuating prejudice against Christians. Consequently, as Christians, they refrain from self-identification in all contexts, a phenomenon that ultimately undermines coexistence and increases their likelihood of migration. This also threatens to erase this aspect of the city's history. Simultaneously, such discrimination becomes a driver of emigration, which in turn reduces their population and affects the city's parliamentary seat allocation. Furthermore, the development of such discriminatory practices contradicts Article 3 and Clauses 2–3 of Law No. 4 (2015) of the Kurdistan Region Parliament – Iraq (Law on Protecting the Rights of Components in Iraqi Kurdistan), which states: "All forms of discrimination against any component in Iraqi Kurdistan are prohibited, and violators shall be punished under applicable laws." It also mandates: "Banning any religious, political, or media propaganda by individuals or groups, directly or indirectly, that incites hatred, violence, provocation, marginalization, or exclusion based on national, ethnic, religious, or linguistic grounds." (Kurdistan Parliament | Laws). Additionally, Law No. 11 (2007) of the Kurdistan Region Parliament – Iraq (specifically for the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs), Articles 10–11, emphasizes: "Prioritizing religious affairs to foster tolerance among faiths, encouraging conferences to promote enlightened culture, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence between religions." (Kurdistan Parliament | Laws). Therefore, the government must enforce these parliamentary laws to protect this component, as failure may jeopardize peaceful coexistence in the city.

3- It became evident that some Christians in the city voiced complaints about the lack of equality and equal opportunity in the political sphere, despite the fact that the Kurdistan Region's Parliamentary Law No. (4) of 2015 – the Law on the Protection of the Rights of Components in Iraqi Kurdistan – explicitly states in Article 1, Paragraph (J): "The government shall guarantee the right to equality and equal opportunity in political, cultural, social, and economic life through effective laws and policies for individuals belonging to any component." It also guarantees their right to participate in decision-making processes that concern them (Kurdistan Parliament | Laws). However, it became clear that they do not express the same level of grievance when it comes to social and economic opportunities. Therefore, based on this law, the government must ensure equal access and treatment for them across all areas, not only in selected domains or by certain authorities.

4- Understood. Here's the revised translation without any added headings, line breaks, or formatting not present in the original: It became clear that Christians in the city do not have schools in their own language, nor any other media or communication channels or public platforms available to them, and the responsibility of preserving their language rests with the church. Some of them feel that their language is in decline and under multiple threats. This comes at a time when, according to the laws of the Kurdistan Region Parliament Law No. (4) of 2015 on the Protection of the Rights of Components in Iraqi Kurdistan. Article 8 states: the government is obliged to protect the mother tongue by guaranteeing its teaching, cultural promotion, and the establishment of dedicated media channels. The government also guarantees the establishment of departments for the languages of the components in Kurdistan universities and the founding of academic institutions for linguistic studies according to their needs. (Kurdistan Parliament | Laws) Likewise, under the request of the Council of Ministers of the Kurdistan Region–Iraq, in meeting No. (18) on (6/11/2006), the council approved Law No. (15) of 2006, the Second Amendment to the Ministry of Education Law of the Kurdistan Region–Iraq No. (4) of 1992. Article 4, clause (4) was amended, and an additional clause was added becoming clause (5), which reads as follows: The Turkmen, Syriac, and Armenian languages may be used as languages of instruction in those areas where speakers of those languages form a settled community, according to educational requirements, provided that Kurdish and Arabic be taught as mandatory languages. (Karim, 2023: 42) This comes at a time when Article 4 of the Framework Convention on the Rights of Minorities stipulates: states must, whenever needed, adopt measures to provide freedoms and equality before the law, and must enable minorities to express their distinctiveness in terms of culture and language and ensure they have full opportunity to access education in their mother tongue and to study in their own language. (Ismail, 2012: 40–45) Although it appears the government does not prevent this, it also does not align naturally with the situation of Christians in Sulaymaniyah. Therefore, it is important to explore alternative ways for the government to support churches in organizing programs in their language and to provide a channel for language education and cultural enlightenment.

5- It became clear that although, in terms of access to employment opportunities, they generally face no major problems and at times are even facilitated, nevertheless, the issue of negative discrimination by some individuals still plays a role in this area. In some cases, the ideological views of certain people contribute to limiting these rights. At the same time, due to their lack of political backing and influence, they may not be able to advance significantly within the professional world. This is clearly addressed within the framework of the United Nations' human rights principles, especially those concerning minorities, which state: full access must be guaranteed for their participation in economic development and advancement of their status. (Ismail, 2012: 40–45)

6- However, regarding the issue of land, property ownership, and land appropriation, they have no such problems of this kind in Sulaymaniyah.

7- In terms of security, they do not face any particular problems in this city. In fact, like many other places around the world that have experienced tension in this regard, Sulaymaniyah has remained relatively safe. However, such individual acts of discrimination can still, at times, create situations of concern.

8- They believe that, in the field of education, their history and religion have been significantly marginalized. Furthermore, the topic of coexistence is not meaningfully addressed. Therefore, they called for serious efforts in this regard and for the establishment of an appropriate educational system. According to educational objectives, these goals must reflect the social context and be designed to address complex and interconnected problems. (Mostafazadeh, 2022: 111–112) In the educational goals of the preparatory stage in the Kurdistan Region, a section is devoted to social development, stating: recognizing and clarifying the rights and duties of citizenship through expression and active participation, and the citizen's role in societal progress and nation-building; education and formation of good, beneficial, and healthy citizens based on the principles of democracy, justice, and human rights; providing opportunities for learners to practice the principles of equality in freedom, democracy, justice, cooperation, and compassion; building a healthy society through everyone's participation leads to a healthy community; introducing students to international human rights foundations and environmental protection through scientific inquiry and research. In reality, this entire educational process, including books and curricula in schools, has had little impact in these areas. Because these topics have not been prioritized, they also play no role in presenting the identity and history of minorities; rather, more emphasis is placed on Kurdish and Islamic history and major civilizations. For example, according to the findings of a study conducted at the University of Sulaymaniyah on the representation of human rights principles in the tenth and eleventh-grade history textbooks, it was found that: In the tenth-grade history textbook, which covers ancient civilizations and consists of 244 pages across eight chapters, there is a minimal reference to the minorities of Kurdistan, including Christians. There is also no mention of the Christians of Kurdistan, their history, or their civilizational role in the region. (Karim, 2023: 71–84) Likewise, the eleventh-grade history textbook, consisting of six chapters and 200 pages, follows the same pattern. (Karim, 2023: 84–104) This comes despite the fact that the UN Declaration on the Rights of Minorities states that: States must take appropriate measures to ensure that minorities have access to developing the history of their own communities, including information about their religion, language, and culture. They must have the opportunity to fully understand and engage with the fabric of their society. (Ismail, 2012: 40–45)

9- Social media platforms and the harsh rhetoric expressed from pulpits and other forums against Christians, even if some of them do not specifically target the Christians of Sulaymaniyah, ultimately cause harm to Christians in general. If these issues are not properly addressed, they will have a negative impact on peaceful coexistence. Therefore, it is necessary to take action on this matter, confront such discourse, and regulate it through a specific legal framework.

10- The government and official state institutions do not cause any problems for Christians and treat them in a normal and equal manner. However, to a certain extent, the Ministry of Culture has shown less attention to them. As some pointed out, this reflects a kind of double standard and subtle neglect. Regardless of the nature of the matter, the government must work to lift this omission within the Ministry of Culture, which is responsible for such affairs. It should take action and make special efforts to address Christian presence and activities, and strive to allocate space for programs and content specific to Christians, their language, role, and notable figures in the city. This is particularly important because, according to Law No. (14) of 2010 issued by the Kurdistan Region Parliament concerning the Ministry of Culture and Youth in the Kurdistan Region–Iraq, Article 2 states: “Promoting and developing the culture of Kurdistan in a way that preserves its authenticity, protects heritage, and helps develop a civilized and forward-looking approach in the fields of culture , arts, and sports vision in the region. Respecting cultural and national diversity, paying attention to the Kurdish language and other languages of the region, and fostering the spirit of coexistence in Kurdistan and openness toward global cultural perspectives.” (Kurdistan Parliament | Law Likewise, in Law No. (4) of 2015 on the Protection of the Rights of Components in Iraqi Kurdistan, Section Three affirms: “Each component has the right to express its own culture and values, and the government is obligated to protect the cultural, intellectual, and religious heritage of all components.” (Kurdistan Parliament | Laws)

11- They fall under the Directorate of Christian Affairs within the Ministry of Endowments, which is specifically designated for them. However, they believe that this role is merely administrative, and from a financial perspective, they receive almost nothing. As a result, their financial needs rely more on non-governmental assistance, which they see as a form of institutional neglect in the management system of religious affairs, and it may indicate that this institution does not fully belong within the state's overall system. According to Law No. (11) of 2007 concerning the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs of the Kurdistan Region Parliament–Iraq, Article 2 states that the Ministry works to realize the following objectives. Clause (2) reads: “Supervising places of worship for all religions and organizing their administrative affairs.” Clause (5) states: “Paying attention to the religion of Islam and other religions and their heritage, respecting their religious figures, protecting their social foundations, and improving their living conditions so that their religious, national, and ethnic activities are conducted in a way that serves Kurdish society.” Clause (7) adds: “Establishing and rehabilitating mosques and other places of worship and providing their necessary needs in appropriate locations.” (Kurdistan Parliament | Laws)

12- The absence of political backing, armed protection, and power has significantly affected their ability to obtain some of their rights as needed. This is due to the broader political environment, in which the law does not effectively function within the institutional framework as it should. In this context, armed forces and powerful alliances play a role, while they lack access to any such support. As a result, this condition affects them more severely than it does the general public, and according to some, this is one of the reasons behind their migration.

13- Migration is one of the defining features of the lives of Christians in the region in general, and in the city of Sulaymaniyah in particular. While on the surface, the migration of Christians from Sulaymaniyah may appear to result from general causes similar to those affecting the rest of the city's population, in essence, Christian identity itself is a historical factor deeply rooted and one that responds intensely to any political or social instability, thereby increasing their migration rate. What became clear is that, in addition to the general circumstances, personal discrimination, the political situation in the region, issues related to personal status laws, lack of trust, and the escalation of hostile discriminatory acts following the events of ISIS and the spread of radical Islamic ideologies have further driven migration. Moreover, it became clear that the migration rate of Christians from Sulaymaniyah is particularly high. If left unaddressed, this will severely impact their existence, language, and culture, and later raise questions about their continued representation in the city. This will create negative consequences for the governance of the Kurdistan Region in general and for Sulaymaniyah in particular, especially since Article 1 of the Human Rights Declaration for Minorities states: states must protect the existence of minorities within their territories as well as their cultural and ethnic identities, and adopt legal and other measures to achieve this aim. (Ismail, 2012: 40–45) From another angle, it became clear that the government has taken no steps toward the return of those who have migrated. According to Article 7 of Law No. (4) of 2015 on the Protection of the Rights of Components in Iraqi Kurdistan, it is stated: the government shall work to facilitate the return of individuals belonging to components who were previously residents of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and were forced to migrate, and guarantee their rightful entitlements. (Kurdistan Parliament | Laws) Therefore, at this point, it is necessary to adopt a specific decision and resolution regarding the Christians.

14- Politically, although some of them believe that, relative to their proportion, they have equal opportunities in the city in this regard, others expressed complaints that they have not been recognized in accordance with their historical standing and civic contributions. At the same time, they lack representation in local government and in specific decision-making processes. This issue is addressed in Article (6) of Law No. (4) of 2015 on the Protection of the Rights of Components.

First: They have the right to participate in the legislative and executive authority of the Region, in accordance with applicable laws.

Second: In areas where they constitute a concentrated population, they have the right to participate in the administration of governmental and administrative institutions, in accordance with applicable laws. (Kurdistan Parliament | Laws)

Likewise, Article 2 of the UN Framework on Minority Rights states: they have the right to enjoy their own culture, to practice their own religion and language, and to participate actively at the national level in decisions that concern them. (Ismail, 2012: 40–45) However, many of them were not satisfied with their representatives. They emphasized that their representative should be someone who genuinely represents them, not a political party. On another front, although they feared that their elected representative in the Kurdistan Parliament might not meet expectations, they welcomed the idea of holding a referendum after a certain period (not less than two years) to evaluate performance. Nonetheless, the majority were pleased with the decision to add a reserved seat for the city and viewed it as an important step. They felt that this affirmed their presence.

Recommendations

As a result of the measures examined in this research and in light of the findings reached, this study presents the following recommendations:

1- Attention should be given to the aspects of Sulaymaniyah's history that reflect coexistence and mutual acceptance, and efforts should be made to deepen internal integration within the Region and Iraq, and to convey this image to international organizations so that the city may be recognized as a model in this regard and take part as a member and contributor alongside global cities and institutions. At the same time, this should play a role in securing the tradition of a reserved seat in the city council for Christians and ensuring that no future threat is posed to it.

2- The local government of the city must investigate the undesirable situation that has emerged as a result of certain transformations and now manifests in attitudes and discriminatory behavior from some religious figures, preachers, political rhetoric, and later even at the individual level. To prevent further escalation, attention must be paid to incidents such as the one that occurred during this year's Akitu festival in Duhok, and steps must be taken to prevent even more serious incidents that could pose a threat to the city's historical coexistence. Therefore, coordinated efforts are required across all relevant sectors, including education, culture, internal affairs, and the judiciary, to promote a mindset of coexistence and mutual acceptance through various channels (meetings, media, schools, social media, etc.). Furthermore, within the framework of parliamentary decisions, a specific resolution should be issued on this matter and implemented through judicial and interior authorities. In this context, the government itself must take the role of the initiator, not merely wait for individual complaints.

3- Although the conditions for opening schools in their own language do not exist due to the dispersed nature of their population in the city, the government should still support the efforts currently taking place within churches in this regard. Financial and logistical support should be provided to help preserve the language from disappearance. In this way, Christians in the city will become more attached to Sulaymaniyah and feel that they are valued, which may reduce the incentive to migrate. At the same time, it will also reinforce the legitimacy of their reserved seat in the city.

4- Work must be done to highlight that Christians in Sulaymaniyah have not faced land or property-related problems compared to other areas. At the same time, the local government should address individual bias and ideological prejudice in how Christians are treated in the workplace. Measures must be taken to eliminate the risk that a Christian business owner could face obstacles in running a business simply because of their identity. Therefore, rather than leaving them unsupported, the local government must stand behind them, especially since they do not have access to other forms of backing. In this sense, this issue once again affects the protection of the reserved seat, as it is important that Christian names be present among the city's influential figures, just like Karim Aleka, who continues to be seen as a symbol of the city's beauty and coexistence.

5- Efforts should be made to ensure that the Ministry of Education revises religious and social subjects. At the same time, these topics should be restructured through coordination with minority communities, universities, and relevant experts. The content should be properly organized in a way that ensures the rights of minorities are upheld, not just the history of Kurds and Islam. Additionally, a special program should be developed to promote a mindset of coexistence and mutual acceptance.

6- Serious efforts must be made to regulate social media platforms through a dedicated legal framework in order to put an end to the current state of lawlessness and prevent them from becoming arenas for spreading anti-coexistence rhetoric. Instead, they should serve as platforms to promote mutual acceptance and social harmony. This means that within the bounds of the law, the government should take the initiative to monitor and regulate posts and comments, preventing any form of attack under the guise of preaching or any other justification against other components. While this falls under the general framework of parliamentary laws, a specific decision regarding social media regulation is necessary.

7- The Directorate of Culture should give greater attention to Christian occasions and organize more activities for them. Legally, as well, it would be better to work on establishing a department specifically for them so they can operate with greater autonomy in their affairs. Efforts should also be made to provide them with their own channel, website, and platform to promote their culture, language, arts, history, and prominent figures, so they can feel a stronger sense of presence. Additionally, there should be increased recognition of the need for a dedicated seat for them in the city.

8- In order for their religious leaders to perform their duties within the framework of a national program in service of Kurdistan, and for the Christian community to feel that they are an important and contributing part of the social fabric, their administrative authority should not be limited to procedural matters only. A dedicated budget must also be allocated for their clergy and for the renovation of their places of worship, as these churches are an integral part of the region's cultural heritage.

9- Efforts should be made to ensure the application of special laws in cases specific to Christians, in order to bring justice closer to them since they have neither political influence nor armed protection. Instead, a dedicated legal resolution on this matter should be issued.

10- The issue of Christian migration should be taken seriously, and efforts must be made to reduce its causes by giving importance to the aforementioned recommendations and supporting those who are currently in the diaspora. All of this should fall within the framework of a parliamentary resolution, especially since migration, particularly from Sulaymaniyah, has reached high levels and poses a serious threat to the city's history of coexistence, as well as to the continued presence of their reserved seat.

11- Politically, efforts must be made to ensure their rights are protected and that they hold positions within the local government, parliament, and even other institutions so that these representatives genuinely work on the demands and needs of the Christian community, making them feel truly represented. Members of parliament and the provincial council should actively follow up on the previously mentioned points. Even though current representatives may not meet expectations at a broader level, they must at least be active enough to create a sense of belonging among Christians to the city, which would encourage them to participate more in future elections and vote for their own candidates. This would also contribute to enhancing local governance and drawing positive external attention, helping push back against voices opposing the existence of the city's reserved seat. To this end, it is important for the local government to ensure that Christian figures are visibly present in public and official spaces. Christians should hold prominent roles, such as general directors and officials in universities and other institutions. This will encourage both local residents and the diaspora to maintain their ties to the Christian presence in the city, reinforcing their attachment to it and turning the reserved seat into a reflection of lived reality ultimately discrediting the arguments of those who question their numbers or parliamentary participation.

Suggestions

As a result of this study, the researcher presents several recommendations, including:

- 1- Further research should be conducted on the Christians of Sulaymaniyah in order to document and affirm the city's rich history of coexistence.
- 2- Additional research should be carried out on Christians in other parts of Kurdistan within the same thematic framework as this study.
- 3- Research should also be conducted on other components of Sulaymaniyah in the same field of study.
- 4- A comparative study should be conducted on the coexistence of components in the city of Sulaymaniyah and the Kurdistan Region between the past and the present.

Sources

First : the Interviews

- 1- Lucia Baho Gabriel Shushandi, born in 1971 in Hamdaniya, holds a bachelor's degree and is a teacher. Due to ISIS-related events, she has been living in Sulaymaniyah since 2014.
- 2- Dilan Latif Pols Saraf, born in 1984 in Sulaymaniyah, comes from an old Sulaymaniyah family. He holds a master's degree and is an engineer and company owner.
- 3- Aram Issa Yousif, born in 1971 in Khurmali, from a longstanding Sulaymaniyah family, holds a diploma, is a civil servant and photographer.
- 4- Ayman Aziz Hormuz Botani, born in 1982 in Kirkuk, has a bachelor's in philosophy and theology. He serves as a priest at the Mar Yousif Church.
- 5- Khalid Jamal Albert, born in 1976 in Sulaymaniyah, currently resides in Erbil. He holds a bachelor's in agriculture and is the General Director of Christian Affairs at the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.
- 6- Francis Dawood Yousif, born in 1946 in Sulaymaniyah, from a longstanding local family. He lives in the Teachers' Complex and is retired.
- 7- Abdulmasih Yousif Yaqoub, born in 1957 in Shaqalawa. He moved to Sulaymaniyah in 1993. He became a bishop and is now retired.

8- Jens Petzold, a priest at the Church of Maryam al-Azra, was born in 1961 in Berlin. He has lived in Sulaymaniyah since 2012 and currently serves at Mar Yousif Church.

9- Huda George Yonan Shamas, born in 1986, is a Christian who moved to Sulaymaniyah from outside. Her husband is a local Muslim from the city, and she has lived in Sulaymaniyah for over thirty years. She represents the Christian community in Anbar.

10- Shwan Jamal Issa Toma, born in 1968 in Sulaymaniyah, from an established family. He works at the Directorate of Culture.

11- Liviyaar Muzaffar Mata, born in 1993 in Erbil, has lived in Sulaymaniyah ever since. She holds a diploma and works for an airline company.

12- Araz Najib Shamoun Saraf, born in 1957 in Sulaymaniyah, from a well-known local family. He holds a bachelor's in engineering and previously worked for Asiacell. He is now retired.

13- Samira Hanna, born in 1956 in Bartella. Since 1991, she has lived in Sulaymaniyah due to marriage. She has a high school education and is retired.

14- Sabah Qaddouri, born in 1943 in the Gawran neighborhood. He left Sulaymaniyah in 1977 and now lives in Denmark. He is retired.

15- Sargon Simanos Toma, born in 1973 in Sabunkaran. He lived there until 2011 before emigrating. He now resides in Canada. He studied technical vocational education and worked as a civil servant in Sulaymaniyah.

16- Alwand Abdulla Abdulqadir Shekhani, born in 1988 in Shores subdistrict, Chamchamal. He is pursuing a master's degree and is a pastor at the Evangelical Church of Ravaiah.

17- Rafal Zaid Amir al-Khoury, born in 1996, originally from Baghdad. She has lived in Sulaymaniyah since 2006.

18- Majd Shahada, born in 1973 in Damascus. She has lived in Sulaymaniyah for over six years.

19- Alan Pari, born in 1978 in Sabunkaran. He emigrated in 1999 and now lives in Copenhagen, Denmark. He studied at a technical institute.

20- Gashaw Hussein Abdulkarim, born in 1973 in Sulaymaniyah. Originally from the city center. He now resides in Germany.

Second: Books, Journals, and Academic Papers

A. In Kurdish

- Sorme, Hezhari Aziz (1998): On the Occasion of the Golden Jubilee of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, First Edition, Ministry of Education Press, Kurdistan Regional Government, Erbil. Published in the journal Center for Brotherhood.
- Mustafazadeh, Ismail (2022): An Introduction to the Methodologies of Lecturing, First Edition, Taran Press, Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan Region.
- Fattah, Soran Mohammed (2016): The Rights of Minorities and the Mechanisms for Their Protection Between Sharia and International Law (The Case of Iraq), College of Arts and Humanities, Department of Human Rights, Al-Jinan University, Tripoli, Lebanon (Thesis).
- Karim, Hiwa Mohammed (2024): The Reflection of Human Rights Provisions in the Content of Preparatory Stage History Textbooks, University of Sulaymaniyah, College of Basic Education (Master's Thesis).
- Ismail, Abu Bakr Saleh (2012): The Right to Self-Determination in United Nations Documents, Mukrian Center, Erbil.
- Jean Réthoré, A Missionary's Travel Diary to the Regions of Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah, 1878, Translated by Dr. Najati Abdulla, Sulaymaniyah, 2008.

B. In Arabic

- Abd Rabbih Ibrahim Al-Waeli (2008): History of the Baban Principality (1784–1851), Damascus.
- William Heude, A Journey from the Coast of Malabar to Constantinople, translated by Dr. Suad Mohammed Khudr, Sulaymaniyah, 2010.

Appendices

Form No. (1)

Dear Citizen, The following questions are part of the tools used to collect information for a research study on the living conditions of Christians in the city of Sulaymaniyah, as one of the components of the city. This study is part of the projects of the Vision Foundation for Strategic Studies, and it aims to investigate the situation of Christians in Sulaymaniyah and the state of coexistence among the different components of the city. The study seeks to identify the challenges and problems faced by this community, with the objective of presenting these issues along with potential solutions to the relevant authorities, in order to help address them and promote stronger intercommunal coexistence in Sulaymaniyah.

We kindly ask for your cooperation in answering several questions, and to please indicate your preferred method of participation in the interview (written response, audio recording, or video, both voice and image).

If you consent to taking part in this interview, please fill out the information below and submit it afterward:

- full name:
- Are you a Christian originally from Sulaymaniyah, or are you among those Christians who moved to the city after the events in southern and central Iraq?
- Interview format: Writing, Audio Recording, or Audio-Visual (Video)
- Location and time of the interview:
- For the questions you do not wish to answer, please just write their corresponding numbers:
- Would you prefer your name to appear as it is in the research, or to be represented by a pseudonym?

"Since my name was mentioned above, I am ready to answer these questions as part of the project by the Vision Foundation for Strategic Studies." Let me know if you need it integrated into a full participant consent form or statement.

signature:

Interviewer Name:

[2]- Special Form for Christian Families in the City of Sulaymaniyah

Questions

- 1- Full name and surname
- 2- Location and date of birth
- 3- Your previous living location
- 4- Your current place of residence (city and district)
- 5- Educational Level:
- 6- Your current work location
- 7- As a Christian, do you believe your rights to equality and participation in political, intellectual, social, and economic life have been guaranteed? Have your rights to be involved in decisions that specifically affect you been ensured? If yes, how? If not, why? Please clarify what are the obstacles, and in your opinion, what should the solutions be?
- 8- Do you experience discrimination? How? In other words, in the everyday life of Christians in Sulaymaniyah on the street, in the workplace, and in public spaces, can they openly identify as Christian? How do people react to that? What challenges do you face in this regard? If such challenges exist, how should they be addressed, and which institutions should be involved? For example, in cases where any form of abuse occurs, do you believe there should be specific decisions and penalties?
- 9- Has there ever been any encroachment or violation against your home or property? Was the issue resolved? How was it resolved? Did the government play a role? If the problem still exists, in your opinion, what would be the proper solution?
- 10- Has the government taken any action to protect your mother tongue through means such as facilitating education, cultural awareness, or managing a media channel specific to your community? How do you perceive the role of the Directorate of Culture, and what are your suggestions?

11- What obstacles do you face in practicing your cultural life, religious and social ceremonies, using your own language, wearing traditional clothing, or expressing your religious symbols and identity? To what extent do you encounter difficulties in public spaces, official institutions, or educational settings? If such issues exist, how are you treated in those situations? In other words, are you able to openly express your religious identity and enjoy, on equal footing with the majority, your fundamental rights and freedoms such as freedom of worship, freedom of expression, access to media, freedom of assembly, and the right to form associations and religious institutions? Has the government been supportive in this regard?

12- Is the government committed to protecting your culture, intellectual life, and religion from a cultural and media perspective? What are the challenges you face, and how should the Ministry of Culture and Media deal with them?

13- Is your right to participate in legislation and implementation protected through your representation in the government, parliament, and local authorities? Do you face any challenges in this regard? If so, what are the solutions?

14- What is your opinion on the recent decision issued by the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court regarding the reserved quota seats for the upcoming elections? Do you think this decision will affect the delivery of your voice, your concerns, and their resolution? Do you support holding a referendum after two years to assess its outcome?

15- Do you feel that there is discrimination in terms of political participation, political engagement, or the establishment of cultural, political, and party organizations? If yes, what do you believe is the solution?

16- What are the challenges facing churches and Christian religious leaders in the city, in your opinion? What are their causes and potential solutions? What issues do you face with the Ministry and Directorate of Endowments, if any, and what do you see as the solutions? (Specifically regarding clergy and churches.)

17- Do you feel discrimination in the fields of business, professional opportunities, employment, and access to the labor market? If so, what are the causes, and what do you see as the appropriate solutions?

18- In terms of safety and personal security, what challenges do you face? Do you feel any threats to your well-being? If so, how should these issues be addressed

19- As a community in this region, what challenges do you face within the education system, including its structure and curriculum? Do you feel any form of discrimination in educational subjects or content? If so, what solutions would you propose?

20- Do you feel that your identity and sacred values are being attacked on social media platforms? If so, what solutions would you propose, and which institutions should take responsibility for addressing this issue? Would you agree that coordination between the Ministry of Culture and security agencies is necessary to reduce such incidents and enforce regulations on websites and digital platforms?

21- Do you feel that the rise of political Islam and extremist religious movements has contributed to the restriction of your freedoms and created obstacles to peaceful coexistence?

22- What are the reasons behind the migration of Christians, and how do they differ from those of the general residents of the city? Have these migrations affected the cultural presence and foundational status of Christians in the city, and what are the possible solutions?

23- Do you know of any families from the historic Christian households of the city of Sulaymaniyah who have completely left the city, to the extent that no members of the family remain in Sulaymaniyah today?

24- What, in your opinion, is the solution to the issue of Christian emigration?

25- Do you think that the lack of political and social support, as well as the absence of any backing force or military protection, plays a role in your challenges?

Form No. (2)

Dear Participant, The following questions are part of an information-gathering effort aimed at conducting a research study about the Christians of the city of Sulaymaniyah, as one of the components of the city's social fabric. This study is part of the projects of the [Vision Foundation for Strategic Studies](#), and it focuses on exploring the living conditions of Christians in Sulaymaniyah and the dynamics of coexistence among the various components of the city. The research attempts to identify the challenges and problems facing this community in order to present them along with potential solutions to relevant stakeholders and authorities. The ultimate goal is to support efforts aimed at addressing these challenges and to contribute to enhancing coexistence among the city's different social groups.

Please be advised that you will be answering a number of questions, and at the same time, please indicate **which method** of participation you prefer for the interview:

If you kindly agree to participate in this interview, please fill out the following information below and then submit it.

Form 2 – For Migrants from Abroad

Full Name:

Are you originally a Christian from the city of Sulaymaniyah, or one of the Christians who moved to the city after the events in southern and central Iraq?

Interview Format:

☐ Written ☐ Audio Recording ☐ Audio and Video Recording

Time and Place of Interview:

For any questions you do not wish to answer, please write only the question number.

Would you prefer your real name to be used in the research, or an alias?

☐ Real Name ☐ Alias

Since my name is listed above, I am ready to respond to these questions as part of the project conducted by the Vision Foundation for Strategic Studies.

Translation:

Interviewer's Name:

2. Special Form for Migrants from Abroad

Questions

- 1- Full Name and Alias (if any):
- 2- Year and Place of Birth:
- 3- Previous Place of Residence:
- 4- Current Place of Residence (City and Neighborhood):
- 5- Educational Background:
- 6- What is your current job and where do you work?
- 7- What was your occupation in Sulaymaniyah, and have you ever faced any issues in your work or public life in Sulaymaniyah because you are Christian?
- 8- During your time in Sulaymaniyah, were you able to perform Christian rituals and ceremonies without obstruction, and were you free to say you are Christian or display your religious symbols?
- 9- In your opinion, has the expansion of the city of Sulaymaniyah contributed to Christians facing more challenges?
- 10- As a Christian resident of Sulaymaniyah, has the lack of equal rights and opportunities in political, intellectual, social, or economic life, or the lack of your participation in decisions affecting you, influenced your decision to emigrate? If yes, how? If not, why?
- 11- Where do you currently live?
- 12- Since what year have you left Sulaymaniyah?
- 13- What was the reason for your migration?
- 14- In your opinion, what is the main reason for the continued migration of Christians? Do you believe it is due to special discrimination or threats?
- 15- Do you know of any Christian families originally from Sulaymaniyah who have completely left the city, leaving no one behind?
- 16- Do you feel that the emergence of political Islam and extremist religious ideologies has contributed to limiting your freedoms and created barriers to peaceful coexistence?
- 17- Has the government taken any action to encourage the return of Christian individuals who were previously residents of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and had to migrate, by safeguarding their rights and entitlements?
- 18- In your opinion, what is the solution to the issue of Christian migration?

Form No. (3)

Dear Participant, the following questions are part of an effort to collect information for a research study on the Christians of Sulaymaniyah as an integral component of the city's social fabric. This research is one of the projects of the Vision Foundation for Strategic Studies, aiming to investigate the living conditions of Christians in Sulaymaniyah and the dynamics of coexistence among the city's diverse communities. The study seeks to document the challenges and issues facing this group, with the goal of bringing these problems and their potential solutions to the attention of the relevant authorities. Ultimately, this effort strives to promote a more inclusive and harmonious coexistence in Sulaymaniyah. Thank you for your cooperation.

Please review the following and respond to the questions, and also indicate your preferred method for participating in the interview (written, audio recording, or audio-visual/video recording). If you consent to taking part in this interview, kindly fill in the following information and then submit it:

Form 3 – Special Form for Christian Families from Southern and Central Iraq Displaced to the City of Sulaymaniyah:

Full name:

Are you originally a Christian from the city of Sulaymaniyah, or one of the Christians who moved to the city after the events in southern and central Iraq?

Interview Format:

☐ Written ☐ Audio Recording ☐ Audio and Video Recording

Time and Place of Interview:

For any questions you do not wish to answer, please write only the question number.

Would you prefer your real name to be used in the research, or an alias?

☐ Real Name ☐ Alias

Translation:

Interviewer's Name:

2. Special Form for Migrants from Abroad

Questions

1. Where did you come from before arriving in the city of Sulaymaniyah?
2. In which year did you come to the city of Sulaymaniyah?
3. Why did you choose Sulaymaniyah and move to this city? Did you have any prior knowledge about coexistence and the life of Christians in this city that encouraged you to relocate here?
4. Why have you not returned to your place of origin so far?
5. How have the people of Sulaymaniyah treated you?
6. In public places, can you openly say, "We are Christians"? Have you ever faced any problem in this regard?
7. Are you able to openly use your language, religious symbols, cultural expressions, traditional clothing, and religious identity? To what extent has the government supported you in this regard?
8. In your experience as a Christian, what differences do you see between Sulaymaniyah and other areas? Do other Christians speak about such differences elsewhere?
9. Do you feel that the rise of political Islam and extremist religious ideologies has contributed to limiting your freedoms and created obstacles to basic coexistence?

استمارة الاسئلة باللغة العربية

عزيزي المواطن/عزيزتي المواطنة، تأتي هذه الأسئلة ضمن دراسة بحثية حول المسيحيين في السليمانية، بوصفهم جزءاً من التركيبة الاثنية والدينية للمدينة، وذلك ضمن مشروع بحثي لمؤسسة رؤية للأبحاث الاستراتيجية. يهدف البحث إلى دراسة التحديات التي تواجه المسيحيين في المدينة، واقتراح حلول تُرفع إلى الجهات المعنية لتعزيز التعايش بين مكونات المجتمع في السليمانية.

إذا وافقتم على المقابلة نرجو منك الإجابة على الأسئلة التالية، و توقيع عليها، كما يمكنك اختيار طريقة المقابلة (الأنسب لك) مكتوبة، صوتية، أو مصورة بالفيديو.

المعلومات الأولية:

- الاسم الثلاثي:
- هل أنت من سكان السليمانية الأصليين، أم انتقلت إليها بسبب الأحداث التي شهدتها جنوب ووسط العراق؟
طريقة المقابلة المفضلة: كتابة/تسجيل صوتي/ فيديو
- المكان والزمان للمقابلة:
- هل ترغب في ذكر اسمك الحقيقي أم استخدام رموز بديلة؟ إذا كانت هناك أسئلة لا ترغب في الإجابة عليها، يرجى ذكر أرقامها:

اني المذكور اسمي أعلاه أوافق على إجابة الاسئلة الاتية، كجزء من مشروع بحث مؤسسة الرؤية للبحوث الاستراتيجية.

- التوقيع:
- -اسم الشخص الذي أجرى المقابلة

1. من أين أتيت إلى السليمانية؟
2. متى انتقلت إلى السليمانية؟
3. ما الأسباب التي دفعتك لاختيار السليمانية؟ هل كنت تمتلك معلومات مسبقة عن طبيعة التعايش المسيحي في المدينة، وكانت تلك المعلومات دافعاً لك للانتقال إليها؟
4. لماذا لم تفكر في العودة إلى مكانك السابق؟
5. كيف وجدت معاملة سكان السليمانية لك؟
6. هل يمكنك التصريح علناً بديانتك المسيحية في الأماكن العامة؟ وهل واجهت أي تحديات أو مشكلات بهذا الخصوص؟
7. هل تستطيع ممارسة طقوسك الدينية بحرية، مثل استخدام لغتك، وإقامة مناسباتك الدينية والثقافية، وارتداء ملابسك ورموزك الدينية؟ وإلى أي مدى تدعمك الحكومة في هذا الجانب؟
8. كيف تقارن وضع المسيحيين في السليمانية بالمناطق الأخرى؟ وهل لديك تواصل مع مسيحيين في مناطق أخرى تناقشون فيه هذه الفروقات؟
9. هل تعتقد بأن صعود الإسلام السياسي و الحركات الدينية المتطرفة كانت سبباً لتقليص حرياتكم الدينية و خلق مشاكل للتعايش السلمي.



دامه زراوهى فيژن بؤ ليكؤلينه وهى ستراتيجى
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