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Reaffirming Religious Freedom: Bridging U.S. Advocacy and Iraq's Constitutional Framework

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The recent bipartisan resolution the U.S. House of Representatives passed, H.Res.554, reaffirms support for the human rights and dignity of Iraq's religious and ethnic minorities. This resolution highlights priorities such as restoring security, stability, cultural preservation, and political representation for Christians, Yazidis, Shabak, Kaka'i, and others. While this international support is invaluable, it is important to recognize that Iraq already possesses a constitutional foundation that can help achieve these goals. Fully realizing these constitutional guarantees, however, faces several significant challenges.

Article 121 of the Iraqi Constitution grants regions the authority to enact laws that preserve religious freedom, restore cultural heritage, and protect the rights of displaced populations. This constitutional provision aligns closely with the objectives outlined in H.Res.554. For instance, the resolution's emphasis on restoring homes and religious sites resonates with Article 121's empowerment of local governments to safeguard cultural and religious landmarks, ensuring the survival of Iraq's religious diversity.

Furthermore, the constitutional framework supports the safe return of displaced minorities to their ancestral lands, echoing the resolution's call for the restoration of stability and security. However, ongoing security concerns, including the presence of armed groups and unresolved land disputes, hinder the return process. By granting regional autonomy, Iraq's Constitution enables the implementation of policies that protect minority groups from demographic changes that threaten their existence. Yet, resistance from some national political factions has slowed the adoption of such policies.

The shared goals between Iraq's constitutional framework and H.Res.554 demonstrate a mutual commitment to fostering social cohesion and preserving Iraq's rich cultural heritage. The international recognition provided by this resolution can strengthen Iraq's efforts to realize these constitutional guarantees, offering a model for collaborative action between domestic and global stakeholders. In post-conflict areas such as the Nineveh Plains—home to Christians, Yazidis,

Shabak, and Kakais—Article 121 is critical for addressing as the horrors of genocide, as well as, displacement and the destruction of cultural heritage caused by ISIS. Through constitutional mechanisms, local governments are equipped to: 1) restore physical and spiritual structures, helping communities rebuild infrastructure and their sense of identity; 2) ensure families can return without fear of further displacement or marginalization; and 3) preserve cultural and religious traditions by maintaining landmarks.

These measures align with H.Res. 554’s objectives and contribute to preserving Iraq’s unique religious and cultural diversity. By leveraging its constitutional framework, Iraq can address the challenges these communities face in meaningful ways. However, achieving these outcomes will require enhanced coordination between national and regional authorities and increased international investment and technical support. A key aspect of H.Res.554 is its emphasis on restoring security and preventing demographic shifts that undermine the historical presence of minority groups. This priority complements Iraq’s constitutional approach to regional governance. Article 121 supports the dignified return of displaced groups to maintain the region’s historical makeup, providing tangible support to returning communities. With this support, they can rebuild livelihoods, which, in turn, contributes to long-term stability, and prevents demographic changes that risk marginalizing minority communities and erasing their cultural contributions.

This alignment is particularly relevant for regions like Sinjar, where the Yazidi community requires comprehensive support to rebuild their lives and maintain cultural integrity after enduring genocide. Addressing these needs shows how Iraq’s constitutional framework and the objectives of H.Res.554 converge on ensuring the survival of these communities. H.Res.554 also advocates for political representation and regional integration to enhance the stability and inclusivity of Iraq’s religious minorities. This advocacy reinforces the constitutional foundation provided by Article 121, which enables regional governments to represent minority voices and enact locally tailored solutions.

For instance, the resolution’s call for administrative autonomy aligns with Iraq’s commitment to decentralized governance for minority communities. Such governance models empower local authorities to address community-specific challenges, foster political representation that reflects the region’s diverse makeup, and create platforms for minorities to participate in decision-making processes. By combining constitutional mechanisms with international collaboration, Iraq can ensure that its religious minorities are protected and have opportunities to thrive in an inclusive society. Addressing current shortcomings, such as limited resources and political challenges, will be critical to turning this vision into reality.

The alignment between Iraq’s constitutional framework and the priorities of H.Res.554 demonstrates a unified vision for protecting religious freedom and fostering peaceful coexistence. These efforts are vital for preserving Iraq’s cultural heritage and setting a precedent for other post-conflict societies in the region. By leveraging its constitutional provisions in partnership with international advocacy, Iraq can serve as a model for inclusive peacebuilding. For example, restoring homes, schools, and religious landmarks aids in rebuilding communities and powerfully conveys the resilience of Iraq’s diverse cultural fabric. The empowerment of local governments under Article 121 ensures these efforts are sustainable and locally driven, with international support providing additional resources and visibility.

The intersection of Iraq’s domestic policies and global advocacy initiatives provides a roadmap for achieving long-term inclusivity and stability. By supporting its religious minorities, Iraq upholds its

constitutional commitments and benefits from the added strength of international recognition and support. H.Res.554 highlights the importance of collaborative action in addressing the challenges religious minorities face, offering a vision of hope and resilience for Iraq and the broader region. Through the combined efforts of constitutional autonomy and international advocacy, Iraq could secure a brighter, more inclusive future for all its communities.

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