

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

Bilagsnr.:	310
Land:	Irak
Kilde:	U.S. Department of State
Titel:	"International religious freedom report 2006"
Udgivet:	10. oktober 2006
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	10. oktober 2006



Iraq

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

During the reporting period, unsettled conditions prevented effective governance in parts of the country, and the Government's ability to protect religious freedoms was handicapped by insurgency, terrorism, and sectarian violence. Following the U.S.-led coalition's removal of the Ba'athist regime in April 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the Iraqi Governing Council administered the country pursuant to UN Security Council Resolutions 1483, 1500, and 1511, until the Iraqi Interim Government (IIG) was appointed on June 28, 2004. In January 2005, the country held its first free election, leading to the transitional government led by former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Ja'afari in May 2005. During the October 15, 2005 referendum, voters adopted a constitution and, in a first step toward establishing a permanent government, elected members of the country's new legislature on December 15, 2005. The permanent government, led by Prime Minister Noori al-Maliki and the constitution, came into office May 20, 2006.

The Law for the Administration of the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period (TAL) was adopted on March 8, 2004, and was the operative law in the country until May 20, 2006 when the constitution came into effect. The TAL and the constitution established a republican, federal, democratic, and pluralistic system with powers shared among the federal and regional governments, including eighteen governorates. The TAL and constitution also guarantee freedom of thought, conscience, religious belief and practice.

Both the TAL and the constitution recognize Islam as the official religion and state that no law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam. While the Government generally endorsed these rights, its efforts to prevent or remedy violations were hampered by substantial political and religious violence between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and by harassment of non-Muslims.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Since 2003, the Government has not engaged in the persecution of any religious group, calling instead for tolerance and acceptance of all religious minorities. However, long-standing discriminatory practices against the Baha'i and Wahabbi Sunni Muslims continued by some government institutions.

While the Government generally respected the right of the individual to worship according to thought, conscience, and belief, private conservative and radical Islamic elements continued to exert tremendous pressure on other groups to conform to extremist interpretations of Islam's precepts. In addition, frequent attacks on religious places of worship, as well as sectarian violence, hampered the ability to freely practice religion. This sectarian violence was heightened by the February 22, 2006, attack on the al-Askariya Mosque in Samarra, one of the most significant Shi'a mosques in the world containing the mausoleums of the tenth and eleventh imams.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom problems with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Senior U.S. administration and embassy officials called for unity in the face of sectarian violence, supported the inclusion of religious minorities in the political and constitution drafting processes, and facilitated interfaith discussion with all members of the country's diverse religious communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 437,072 square miles and a population of 26 million. An estimated 97 percent of the population is Muslim. Shi'a Muslims--predominantly Arab, but also including Turkmen, Fali Kurds, and other groups--constitute a 60 to 65 percent majority. Sunni Muslims make up 32 to 37 percent of the population, of whom approximately 18 to 20 percent are Sunni Kurds, 12 to 16 percent Sunni Arabs, and the remainder Sunni Turkmen. The remaining 3 percent comprises Chaldean (an eastern rite of the Catholic Church), Assyrian (Church of the East), Syriac (Eastern Orthodox), Armenian (Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox), and Protestant Christians, as well as Yazidi, Sabeen, Baha'i, Kaka'i (a small, syncretic religious group located in and around Kirkuk), and a small number of Jewish believers. Shi'a, although predominantly located in the south, were also a majority in Baghdad and had communities in most parts of the country. Sunnis formed the majority in the center and the north of the country.

According to official estimates, the number of Christians decreased from 1.4 million in 1987 to fewer than 1 million, with Catholics (Chaldeans) comprising the majority. Christian leaders estimated that approximately 700,000 Iraqi

Christians lived abroad.

Four of the five largest Christian communities were located in Mosul (150,000), Erbil (20,000-25,000), Dohuk (13,000), and Kirkuk (12,000). According to church leaders in Erbil and Mosul, Christians in the north accounted for roughly 30 percent of the country's Christian population.

The Primate of the Armenian Diocese reported that approximately 20,000 Armenian Christians remained in the country, primarily in the cities of Baghdad (12,000), Basrah, Kirkuk, and Mosul.

There were approximately 225,000 Assyrian Christians and an estimated 750,000 Chaldeans (Eastern Rite Catholics). The Chaldean and Assyrian Christians are descendants of the earliest Christian communities, and they share a similar cultural and linguistic background. Both communities speak the same ancient language (Syriac); however, they are considered by many to be distinct ethnic groups. Chaldeans recognize the primacy of the Roman Catholic Pope, while the Assyrians, who are not Catholic, do not. While some Chaldeans and Assyrians considered themselves Arab, the majority, as well as the Government, considered both groups as ethnically distinct from Arabs and Kurds.

The Yazidi are a religious group with ancient origins that encompass several different religious traditions comprising elements of Zoroastrianism, Manicheism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Gnostic beliefs and traditions. Yazidi do not intermarry with outsiders or accept converts. Defined by the former regime as Arabs, some Yazidi considered themselves to be Kurds, while others defined themselves as both religiously and ethnically distinct from Muslim Kurds. Most of the 650,000 Yazidi resided in the North.

Sabeans are an ancient religious group dating from the first three centuries and reflect numerous religious influences, including ancient Gnostic, Jewish, and Christian beliefs. The Sabean community continued to decline; according to Sabean leaders, an estimated 10,000 remained in the country. While some Sabeans fled the tyranny of the former regime, this decline could also be attributed to the fact that converts are not accepted, and those Sabeans who marry Christians or Muslims are no longer regarded as Sabean. The Kaka'i, sometimes referred to as Ahl-e-Haqq, resided primarily in Kirkuk, Mosul, and Kankeen in the Diyala Province. Most are ethnic Kurds.

There was no data available on active participation in religious services or rituals; however, terrorist attacks rendered many mosques, churches, and other holy sites unusable. Many worshippers reportedly did not attend religious services or participate in religious events because of the threat of violence. There were numerous reports of places of worship closing due to those threats.

The Government provided significant support for the Hajj. The Sunni and Shi'a *waqfs*, or religious endowments, accepted applications from the public and submitted them to the Supreme Council for the Hajj.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution mirrors many of the same religious freedoms provided when the TAL was in effect. Both provide for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. While the Government endorsed this right, its efforts to prevent or remedy violations were hampered by substantial political and religious violence between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and by harassment of non-Muslims.

It is the Government's policy to protect the right of all religious groups to gather and worship freely; however, in practice, the ongoing insurgency impeded the ability of many citizens to exercise that right. Article 43 states that the followers of all religious groups and sects are free in the practice of religious rites, and in the management of religious endowments, their affairs, and their religious institutions. Article 10 of the constitution establishes the state's commitment to assuring and maintaining the sanctity of holy shrines and religious sites, and to guaranteeing the free practice of rituals in them. The second clause of Article 43 of the constitution reiterates this by explicitly guaranteeing the freedom of worship and the protection of places of worship.

Deficiencies in security force capabilities and in the rule of law made it difficult for the justice system to investigate or address violations. Furthermore, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) did not operate at full capability during the reporting period and were unable to prevent or remedy violations of these rights.

Although the constitution generally provided for full religious freedom, it was heavily focused on the nation's Islamic identity. Article 2, which recognizes Islam as the country's official religion, mandates that Islam be considered a source of legislation and that no law be enacted which contradicts the faith's universally agreed tenets. On June 14, 2006, the Council of Representatives implemented bylaws requiring that a verse from the Qur'an be read before each session.

The second clause of Article 2, however, stipulates that no law be enacted that contradicts the principles of democracy, or basic freedoms, which include the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religious belief and

practice. Article 14 of the constitution establishes that citizens are equal before the law without discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, origin, color, religion, sect, belief, opinion, or economic or social status. Article 41 provides that citizens are free in their commitments to their personal status according to their religious groups, sects, beliefs, or choices.

Many Muslim holy days are also national holidays, including, Ashura, Arbai'n, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad. Although some non-Muslim holy days are recognized, such as Christmas, only Muslim holy days are officially recognized as national holidays.

Non-Muslims complained that although the Government recognizes their religious holidays by law, in practice they were generally disregarded. Schools routinely scheduled examinations during non-Muslim holy days, and no special dispensation was given to students wishing to observe them.

Religious groups are required to register with the Government. According to the Christian and Other Religions Endowment, approximately twenty foreign missionaries have applied to operate in the country since 2003; however, only ten remain in the country. After learning of the registration requirements, which include having at least 500 followers, none of the organizations returned to complete the registration process.

The Government permits religious instruction in public schools. In most areas of the country, students in both primary and secondary school must study Islam for approximately three hours daily as a requirement for graduation. Religious study is not mandatory in the north. Non-Muslim students are not required to participate in Islamic studies; however, some non-Muslim students reported that they felt pressure to do so. Alternative religious study is provided for in the curriculum of non-Muslim schools.

Under civil law there is no penalty for conversion. Under Islamic law, conversion from Islam to another religion is a criminal offense subject to the death penalty. Article 1 of the Penal Code No. 111 of 1969, however, mandates that criminal penalties can be imposed only by civil law. Despite the Shari'a punishment for conversion, the penal code does not import the Shari'a penalty, nor does it contain a similar penalty. The Law of Civil Affairs No. 65 of 1972 explicitly allows non-Muslims to convert to Islam. The constitution provides that citizens are to be free in their commitment to their personal status according to their religious groups, sects, beliefs, or choices, as regulated by law.

Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) Resolution 201 of 2001, prohibits the Wahhabi branch of Islam and mandates the death penalty for adherents if the charge is proved. Law No. 105 of 1970, prohibits the Baha'i faith. Both are still part of the law.

Provisions in the TAL and the constitution provide for religious freedom. However, at the end of the reporting period, the Ministry of Interior's Nationality and Passport Section continued to follow the provisions of Regulation 358 of 1975 which prohibits the issuance of a nationality identity card to those claiming the Baha'i faith. Without this official citizenship card, Baha'i experienced difficulty registering their children in school and applying for passports.

Although the constitution, as well as the TAL before it, provides that any person who had his citizenship withdrawn shall have the right to demand its reinstatement, the Transitional National Assembly (TNA) passed a citizenship law on November 15, 2005, that, among other things, specifically precludes local Jews from regaining citizenship. The Presidency Council (the president and the two deputy presidents) sent a notice to the TNA that it was vetoing this legislation, but the TNA challenged the legal effectiveness of the notice. The law came into effect in March 2006, when it was published in the *Official Gazette*.

Although the Personal Status Law of 1959 calls for incorporation of Shari'a into the law in the absence of legislative text on a matter, Article 2(1) expressly exempts from its application, individuals covered by special law. Such special law includes British Proclamation No. 6 of 1917 and the Personal Status Law of Foreigners, No. 38 of 1931. Proclamation No. 6 provides that the civil courts consult the religious authority of the non-Muslim parties for its opinion under the applicable religious law and apply this opinion in court. The Personal Status Law of Foreigners requires that courts apply the municipal law of the foreign litigants to resolve their domestic law matters.

Article 92 (Second) of the constitution provides that the Federal Supreme Court shall be made up of a number of judges, experts in Islamic jurisprudence, and legal scholars. The law is supposed to regulate the number, method of selection, and work of the Court. At the end of the period covered by this report, the law had not been enacted, leaving unsettled the question of whether Islamic jurisprudence experts would serve as consultants and advisors to the judges or as members of the court.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practices generally did not interfere with the free practice of religion; however, the ongoing insurgency significantly harmed the ability of all religious believers to practice their faith. Additionally, sectarian misappropriation of official authority within the security apparatus impeded the right of citizens to worship freely.

All political parties participated in the December 15, 2005, election, including the Sunni Arab parties that had boycotted the January elections. The two Sunni Arab coalitions won a total of fifty-five seats in the Council of Representatives (COR). Sunni Arabs held the positions of vice president and speaker of the COR, as well as several ministerial positions.

The Government did not restrict the formation of political parties based on religious beliefs, or interpretations of religious doctrine. Although the political coalitions competing in the December elections were based predominantly on religion or ethnicity, religious belief or ethnicity was not a requirement for participation in all cases. For example, the Kurdish List, which won 21 percent of the seats in the COR, included Sunnis, Shi'a, Christians, and Yazidi; the Iraqiyyun List also included a variety of ethnicities and religious groups. Likewise, the winning Shi'a Coalition, although predominantly Shi'a Islamists, also included religious and ethnic minorities, such as Sunnis, Yazidi, Kurds, Turkmen, and Shabak. The United Iraqi Alliance also included secular Shi'a and political independents not associated with any religious party.

Although the transitional government publicly supported the freedom of all individuals to worship as they chose, there were some reports of discrimination by Shi'a elements in the Government against Sunni and non-Muslim minorities. The Wahhabi branch of Islam and the Baha'i faith are prohibited by law; however, the respective provisions of the TAL and provisions within the constitution on freedom of religion may supercede these laws. Nonetheless, by the end of the reporting period, no court had ruled on these laws as no challenges had been brought.

The Personal Status Law of Foreigners requires that courts apply the municipal law of the foreign litigants to resolve their domestic law matters. Despite this exception in the 1959 Personal Status Law, there are instances in which this law, based on Shari'a principles, applies to non-Muslims, thereby overriding rules particular to their religion. For instance, the law forbids the marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim; also, in the distribution of inheritance, a female receives one-half of what a male receives. These provisions could be considered inconsistent with Article 14 of the constitution, which guarantees equal protection under the law without discrimination based on gender or religion. No court has yet ruled on this issue.

Many residents on the Ninewah Plain, who are mostly non-Muslim, were better able to participate in the October 2005 constitutional referendum and December 2005 national election. Although the Chaldean and Assyrian Christian communities were anticipating barriers to voting--similar to those in January 2005--there were few documented cases of voter intimidation according to the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI).

Passports do not indicate an individual's religion; however, religion is explicitly noted on the national identity card.

Government employees were not prohibited from displaying elements of their religion.

Students generally were not prohibited from practicing elements of their faith in school; however, during the reporting period, non-Muslim minorities and secular Arabs in some schools were increasingly forced, often under the threat of violence, to adhere to conservative Islamic practices. During the reporting period, Basrah's education director instituted a policy requiring all females in the schools to cover their heads and all female university students in Mosul, even non-Muslims, were required to wear the hijab, or headscarf.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government does not officially engage in or tolerate abuses of an individual's right to religious freedom. However, the Government focused most of its resources and attention on the ongoing insurgency and reconstruction efforts during the reporting period; thus, it did not have the capacity to address issues relating to abuses of freedom of religion.

Many attributed the escalating violence in the country, especially the tremendous upsurge in sectarian violence following the February 22, 2006, bombing of the al-Askariya Shrine "Golden Mosque" in Samarra to terrorists attempting to sow sectarian strife. Sectarian attacks and reprisals following the Samarra bombing, were estimated to have claimed more than one thousand lives and damaged more than sixty mosques across the country. In the aftermath of the Samarra bombing, it became increasingly difficult to determine how much of the violence was based on religious affiliations rather than criminal elements.

The Sunni Arab community often cited police raids of its mosques and religious sites as an example of targeting by the Shi'a-dominated government.

On May 19, 2005, for example, security forces raided Baghdad's prominent Sunni Abu Hanifa Mosque as Friday prayers were ending, reportedly to detain alleged terrorists. Local leaders complained that security forces used tear gas and abused women. The prime minister subsequently provided compensation for damages to the Sunni religious endowment office and promised a full investigation of the incident.

On June 9, 2005, police broke into Amarra's Sunni Hetteen Mosque in the south charging that it harbored terrorists.

Subsequently, the police turned the mosque over to the Shi'a Endowment Office, which changed its name to Fatima Al Zahraa Mosque.

There were allegations that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) engaged in discriminatory behavior against religious minorities. Christians living north of Mosul claimed that the KRG confiscated their property without compensation and began building settlements on their land. Assyrian Christians also alleged that the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)-dominated judiciary routinely discriminated against non-Muslims and failed to enforce judgments in their favor. Despite the allegations of KRG discrimination against religious minorities, many non-Muslims fled north from the more volatile areas in the middle and southern parts of the country where pressures to conform publicly to narrow interpretations of Islamic teaching were greater.

Sunni Arab leaders accused the Badr Organization, an armed militia of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), and the Jaysh al-Mehdi Shi'a militia, of assassinating Sunni clerics. The Badr Organization group claimed it had relinquished its weaponry and become a strictly political organization. However, by the end of the reporting period, reports of Jaysh al-Mehdi militia attacks on Sunni residents and places of worship were increasing.

The Armenian Church of Iraq was working with government officials to regain properties that the former regime forced it to sell. Although the Church was paid fair market value for six properties in Mosul, Basrah, Kirkuk, Baghdad, and Dohuk, it was forced to sell the properties under pressure. Church officials stated that discussions with the Government yielded no results during the reporting period; however, they were optimistic about the KRG's return of property in the north.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States. However, there were reports that Islamic extremists threatened, kidnapped, and killed Mandaean for refusing to convert to Islam.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

While the general lawlessness that permitted criminal gangs, terrorists, and insurgents to victimize citizens with impunity affected persons of all ethnicities and religious groups, many individuals were targeted because of their religious identity or secular leanings. Individuals were victims of not only harassment and intimidation but also kidnapping and even killings. Women and girls were often threatened, assaulted with acid, and killed for refusing to wear the hijab or for dressing in western-style clothing. On August 5, 2005, Assyrian college student Anita Tyadors was killed in the Zohoor region of Mosul. She was reportedly targeted for her modern lifestyle, including speaking English and wearing Western clothing. Some women claimed they were denied employment and educational opportunities because they were non-Muslim, did not dress in accordance with conservative Islamic norms, or did not sufficiently adhere to strict interpretations of religious rules governing public behavior.

On March 15, 2005, Muqtada al-Sadr loyalists attacked picnicking Basrah University students, claiming they were violating the principles of Islam with their western-style clothing, and by singing, and dancing. The Sadrist fired guns at the students and beat them with sticks. Police were present during the incident but did not intervene. University officials reported that at least fifteen students were hospitalized, many with serious injuries. One student reportedly died in the incident.

Islamist militants harassed shopkeepers for providing goods or services they considered to be inconsistent with Islam and sometimes killed them for failing to comply with warnings to stop such activity. Liquor storeowners, primarily Christians and Yazidi, were especially targeted. Liquor stores in Baghdad, Mosul, and Basrah were bombed, looted, and defaced. More than fifty liquor stores operated by Assyrians in Baghdad were closed during the reporting period due to threats by Islamic extremists.

The Christian and Other Religions Endowment reported that, after a series of church bombings and incidents of violence targeting Christians over the past two years, more than 200,000 non-Muslims left the country or fled to the North. Many remained in Jordan or Syria awaiting improvement in the security situation.

A succession of car bombs on January 29, 2006, targeted Christian churches in Baghdad and Mosul. Attacks on the Catholic Church of the Virgin Mary and the Orthodox Church in Kirkuk, and Saint Joseph's Catholic Church and an Anglican Church in Baghdad killed at least three persons and injured nine. The same day, a car bomb also exploded outside the residence of the Apostolic Nuncio (also referred to as the Vatican Embassy).

Christian leaders inside and outside of the country reported that members of their Baghdad community received threat letters demanding that Christians leave or be killed. Thousands of Christians reportedly left their neighborhoods to live

with family either in other neighborhoods, or outside of Baghdad.

Both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims reported receiving death threat letters demanding that they leave their neighborhoods following the attack on the al-Askiriya mosque. More than 100,000 Shi'a and Sunnis reportedly left their homes to avoid these threats. Some were living in internally displaced camps, while the majority sought refuge with families or through religious community support systems.

During the reporting period, Sabean leaders reported that their community was increasingly targeted. In the spring of 2006, Sabaeans began to receive death threat letters accusing them of practicing sorcery and urging them to leave the country. According to estimates, more than ten Sabaeans were killed and ten to fifteen Sabaeans were kidnapped for ransom during the reporting period. There were also reports that Islamic extremists threatened, kidnapped, and killed Sabaeans for refusing to convert to Islam.

The Yazidi community reported that eleven Yazidis were killed during the reporting period, including Ninewa Provincial Council member Hasan Nermo, who was assassinated on April 20, 2006.

In addition to targeting non-Muslims, terrorists continued to attack both Sunni and Shi'a communities during the reporting period. Insurgents attacked mosques in Sunni and Shi'a neighborhoods and killed clerics, other religious leaders, and private citizens of both sects. There were also accusations that both insurgents and militia wore police uniforms to incite sectarian violence and discredit the Government in the eyes of the public.

On July 16, 2005, a suicide bomber killed more than ninety-eight people and injured more than 130 in a suicide attack in front of a Shi'a mosque in Musayyab. The explosion occurred as worshippers were emerging from evening prayers. The same mosque was also targeted in a suicide attack on November 2, 2006, which killed at least twenty persons. In that attack, a bomber exploded on a minibus in front of the mosque as persons were arriving for sunset prayers.

On September 14, 2005, Baghdad was hit by at least a dozen attacks that appeared to target Shi'a civilians. Violence continued two days later, with an attack on a Shi'a mosque in Tuz Khurmatu in Salah ad Din province that killed fourteen, and assassinations of Shi'a clerics in Mosul and the Sadr City neighborhood of Baghdad. In an internet posting, Al Qaeda in Iraq claimed responsibility for the series of attacks and declared an "all out war" on Shi'a in the country.

On October 5, 2005, a bomb planted in the doorway of a Shi'a mosque in Hilla killed at least twenty-five and injured more than eighty-seven. The bomb at the Ibn al-Nama mosque exploded as worshippers gathered for prayers on the first day of Ramadan.

On November 18, suicide bombers struck two Shi'a mosques in the town of Khanaqin, near the Iranian border. More than ninety persons were killed in the midday attacks, as worshippers gathered for Friday prayers. Both the Greater and Smaller Khanaqin mosques were destroyed in the attacks.

The February 22, 2006, bombing of the Askariya Shrine in Samarra led to an increase in sectarian violence. Those who attacked the Golden Mosque sought to exploit divisions among the population and the political leadership. The Government and religious leaders alike, in a demonstration of national unity, condemned the attacks and called for an end to sectarian unrest. Many families fled mixed neighborhoods for fear of attack, and estimates indicated that between 50,000 and 80,000 persons were internally displaced. Although the majority of the displaced were Shi'a, almost 25 percent of the families were Sunni. Reports also indicated that as many as one thousand Christians were also displaced due to threats and intimidation.

On March 24, 2006, a bomb planted outside a Sunni mosque in the town of Khalis killed five persons and injured seventeen others. The explosion at the Sunni Saad Bin Abi Waqqas mosque occurred as worshippers were leaving from Friday prayers.

On April 6, 2006, a car bomb exploded approximately 300 meters from the Imam Ali Shrine in Najaf. At least thirteen persons were killed in the attack against the most revered holy site for Shi'a Muslims in the country.

On April 7, 2006, three suicide bombers attacked a Shi'a mosque in Baghdad, killing at least seventy-nine persons. The attack on the Baratha mosque, which is affiliated with the largest Shi'a political party, occurred as Friday prayers were ending. Two of the bombers detonated in the crowded courtyard, while the third exploded at the main exit. The Baratha mosque was again attacked on June 16, 2006.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Despite the tenuous security environment and the Government's preoccupation with fighting the insurgency and rebuilding the country's infrastructure, significant improvements were made with respect for religious freedom during the reporting period.

While the Sunni minority did not broadly participate in the January elections, resulting in only nominal representation in the TNA, the transitional government made some efforts to encourage Sunni participation in the political and constitutional development processes. Members of all minority and religious groups participated in the October constitutional referendum, approving a constitution that protects the rights of all citizens, regardless of religious affiliation. Although there was some initial concern from minority leaders, especially Christians, about the extensive role of Islam in the constitution, the Government has reached out to these leaders to assure them that their rights as minorities are protected. During the transitional government administration, both President Talabani and Prime Minister Jafari met with Chaldean (Catholic) Patriarch Emmanuel III Delly in September 2005 to discuss constitutional concerns. Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari met with Pope Benedict XVI in Rome on August 26, 2005, to discuss religious freedom and legal rights for Christians in the country. Zebari attended a Catholic Church sponsored conference in Italy. Later, in November 2005, President Talabani also discussed religious freedom with the Pope.

Despite violence against Christian communities, fifteen new evangelical Christian congregations have reportedly been established in Baghdad since April 2003. Under the previous regime, only two evangelical churches--both Presbyterian and led by Egyptian nationals--were allowed to exist. At the end of the period covered by this report, Baptists, Methodists, and other Christian congregations emerged, all led by local clergy.

During the reporting period, Government leaders repeatedly spoke of the need for all citizens to unite--regardless of religious orientation--to confront terrorism. Government leaders often emphasized their commitment to equal treatment for all religious groups and ethnicities. Former Prime Minister Ibrahim Jafari frequently expressed his concern over implications of Government involvement in violence against the Sunni Arab minority. By the end of the reporting period, no information regarding investigations into alleged ISF abuses or punishment of perpetrators had been released to the public. The Government also made clear it would not exempt mosques and homes of religious leaders from assault if they were being used as insurgent strongholds.

The Government publicly denounced all incidents of sectarian violence and, as such violence escalated in late February, repeatedly encouraged unity among the country's religious sects. Both President Jalal Talabani and former Prime Minister Ibrahim Jafari immediately condemned the bombing of the Askariya Shrine in Samarra and called for calm as sectarian tensions flared.

Religious leaders reported that they generally had good relations and worked together to promote interfaith understanding. The Sabeans sought the assistance of the Grand Ayatollah Sistani, SCIRI's Hakim, Prime Minister Jafari, and Muqtada al-Sadr in supporting minority rights.

Religious leaders of all religious groups condemned the terrorist acts committed by the insurgency and urged the country's religious communities to refrain from retaliation and join together to end the violence.

After the Samarra bombing, Sunni and Shi'a religious leaders in cities across the country joined together for joint prayer services in protest of sectarian violence. In early March 2006, representatives of the Sunni Muslims Scholars Association visited Grand Ayatollah Al Sistani and the Marjaiya, or the Shi'a supreme religious authorities, in Najaf to discuss ways to calm the sectarian violence and unite the population.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The country's cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity is far better reflected in its political and economic structure than prior to the 2003 liberation. Shi'a Arabs, the religious majority of the population, were long disadvantaged economically, politically, and socially but now constitute the majority in the Government.

Despite these changes, conservative and extremist Islamic elements continued to exert tremendous pressure on society to conform to their interpretations of Islam's precepts. Although this impacted both the Sunni and Shi'a secular Muslim population, non-Muslims were especially vulnerable to the pressure and violence because of their minority status and the lack of protection provided by a tribal structure.

Sunni Muslims claimed general discrimination, alleging revenge by the Shi'a majority for the Sunnis' presumed favored status under the former regime, but also because of the public's perception that the insurgency was composed primarily of Sunni extremists and former regime elements with whom the majority of the Sunni population supposedly sympathized. While some within the Sunni community supported and even assisted the insurgency, many denounced the terrorism as vocally as their non-Sunni counterparts.

Non-Muslims, particularly Christians, complained of being isolated by the Muslim majority because of their religious differences. Despite their statistically proportional representation in the National Assembly, many non-Muslims said they were disenfranchised and their interests not adequately represented.

The combination of discriminatory hiring practices, attacks against non-Muslim businesses, and the overall lack of rule of law, have also had a detrimental economic impact on the non-Muslim community and contributed to the significant numbers of non-Muslims who left the country. The Armenian Diocese estimated that the number of destitute Armenian

Christians, for example, had grown by 50 percent since 2003, a condition exacerbated by the inadequate security environment, which hampers Armenian Christians' ability to find employment. Terrorist threats have compelled tens of thousands of Christians, including Armenian Orthodox and Chaldean Catholics, to leave the country in the wake of church bombings in 2004 and early 2006.

Terrorist threats also caused thousands of Sunni and Shi'a to leave their homes and flee to more tolerant neighborhoods or leave the country altogether. The magnitude of sectarian attacks on both Sunnis and Shi'a was extremely high, albeit difficult to track.

Anti-Semitic feeling remained a strong undercurrent during the reporting year. According to the head of the Christian and Other Religions Endowment, the country's 2,700-year-old Jewish population had dwindled to less than fifteen persons in the Baghdad area.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government is committed to promoting religious freedom and continues to work closely with the Government on this as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. officials at all levels, including the secretary of state, regularly engaged the Government on problems relating to freedom of religion. This took the form of public statements calling for unity in the face of sectarian violence, high-level meetings with government officials and religious leaders, and working-level interaction urging representatives of the Government and religious organizations to include minorities. The embassy also facilitated interfaith discussion by hosting meetings, roundtables, and other events with all member religious groups of the country's diverse religious communities and funded training, seminars, conferences, and exchange programs to promote religious understanding and tolerance.

The embassy's primary focus during the reporting period was on reducing sectarian violence, increasing Sunni and non-Muslim inclusion in the political and constitutional development processes, and increasing interfaith understanding. The United States worked to increase Sunni inclusion in the political process by providing technical assistance to Sunni leaders. U.S.-funded projects worked with religious minorities by bringing together members of different religious and ethnic backgrounds to discuss common problems. The United States also conducted a significant amount of conflict mitigation at the local level through its Community Action Program (CAP). Under the CAP, community groups were formed with diverse membership, including women and youth, in an effort to promote reconciliation. In ethnically or religiously mixed communities, these community groups included representatives from all segments of society. These groups identified and prioritized their needs and developed projects to address those needs. The projects did not specifically target any one ethnic or religious group for assistance. Rather, they sought opportunities to bridge differences.

The Iraqi Institute of Peace (IIP), an interfaith dialogue center established with financial and organizational support from the U.S. Institute of Peace, continued to focus on mitigating conflict and building peace primarily through its forum work. IIP forums target specific groups such as women, youth, and the media, and focus on key topics such as human rights and religious dialogue.

IIP forums have promoted tolerance and peace through democracy building. They played a critical role in the drafting of the constitution by educating the public about the process and made a concerted effort to encourage Sunnis, who had boycotted the January 2005 elections, to participate in the process. Conferences and forums educating citizens about the constitutional referendum and the national election were also held.

In addition to promoting peace through democratic reform, IIP regularly meets with tribal leaders, senior clerics and community leaders in tension-filled areas to improve dialogue and mitigate conflict. IIP, along with a network of affiliated NGOs, also organized Brotherhood Day events during Ramadan in assorted cities. These events were attended by clerics of different religious sects, tribal sheiks, and other notables who held common prayers and signed declarations of brotherhood.

Released on September 15, 2006

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