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2009 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iraq

[Covers the period from July 1, 2008, to June 30, 2009]

The country is a constitutional democracy with a republican, federal, pluralistic system of government, consisting of 18 provinces or "governorates." Although the Constitution recognizes Islam as the official religion and states that no law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam, it also states that no law may be enacted that contradicts principles of democracy or the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in the Constitution. Moreover, it guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religious belief and practice for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Although the Government generally endorsed these rights, violence conducted by terrorists, extremists, and criminal gangs restricted the free exercise of religion and posed a significant threat to the country's vulnerable religious minorities throughout the reporting period. Radical Islamic elements from outside the Government exerted tremendous pressure on individuals and groups to conform to extremist interpretations of Islamic precepts. Sectarian violence, including attacks on religious leaders and religious places of worship, hampered the ability to practice religion freely. The Government's growing will and capacity to challenge its militant opponents resulted in a decrease in the overall level of violence as the Government became increasingly successful in restoring security, in a generally nonsectarian manner, throughout the country.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period. Since 2003 the Government generally has not engaged in the persecution of any religious group, and has called for tolerance and acceptance of all religious minorities. This commitment was publicly reinforced by the Prime Minister's deployment of additional police brigades to the city of Mosul following a series of killings targeting Christians in the city in October 2008. In addition, the Prime Minister, along with other high-ranking government officials and political party leaders, made numerous public statements in support of the country's religious minority communities.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom 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 and pressed for greater inclusion of religious minorities in the political process. Individuals from minority groups hold senior positions in the national Parliament and central Government, as well as in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), but generally, minorities are proportionally underrepresented in the Government, particularly at the provincial and local levels.

Section I. Religious Demography

Due to increased violence, internal migration, and lack of governmental capacity,

religious demography statistics varied. Numbers are often estimates from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) rather than census data or other official sources. The Government passed a census law, which will allow them to conduct a nationwide census in the future.

The country has an area of 168,754 square miles and a population of about 28.9 million. According to statistics provided by the Government, 97 percent of the population is Muslim. Shi'a Muslims – predominantly Arabs, but also Turkmen, Fali (Shi'a) Kurds, and other groups – constitute a 60 to 65 percent majority. Arab and Kurdish Sunni Muslims make up 32 to 37 percent of the population; of these, 18 to 20 percent are Sunni Kurds, 12 to 16 percent are Sunni Arabs, and the remaining 1 to 2 percent are Sunni Turkmen. Approximately 3 percent of the population comprises Christians, Yezidis, Sabeen-Mandaeans, Baha'is, Shabaks, Kaka'is (sometimes referred to as Ahl-e Haqq), and a very small number of Jews. Shi'a, although predominantly located in the south and east, are also a majority in Baghdad and have communities in most parts of the country. Sunnis form the majority in the west, center, and the north of the country.

Reported estimates from Christian leaders of the Christian population in 2003 ranged from 800,000 to 1.4 million. Current population estimates by Christian leaders range from 500,000 to 600,000. Approximately two-thirds of Christians are Chaldeans (an eastern rite of the Catholic Church), nearly one-fifth are Assyrians (Church of the East), and the remainder are Syriacs (Eastern Orthodox), Armenians (Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox), Anglicans, and other Protestants. Most Assyrian Christians are in the north, and most Syriac Christians are split between Baghdad, Kirkuk, and Ninewa Province. Christian leaders estimate that as much as 50 percent of the country's Christian population lives in Baghdad, and 30 to 40 percent lives in the north, with the largest Christian communities located in and around Mosul, Erbil, Dohuk, and Kirkuk. The Archbishop of the Armenian Orthodox Diocese reported that 15,000 to 16,000 Armenian Christians remained in the country, primarily in the cities of Baghdad, Basrah, Kirkuk, and Mosul. Evangelical Christians reportedly number between 5,000 and 6,000. They can be found in the northern part of the country, as well as in Baghdad, with a very small number residing in Basrah.

Yezidi leaders reported that most of the country's 500,000 to 600,000 Yezidis reside in the north, with 15 percent in Dohuk Province and the rest in Ninewa Province. Shabak leaders stated there are 200,000 to 500,000 Shabaks, who reside mainly in the north, near Mosul. Estimates of the size of the Sabeen-Mandaean community vary widely; according to Sabeen-Mandaean leaders, 3,500 to 7,000 remained in the country, down from an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 in 2003. The Baha'i leadership reported that their members number fewer than 2,000 and are spread throughout the country in small groups. A sizable portion of the Jewish community, which once had a significant presence in the country, left in the years immediately following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Eight Jews remain in Baghdad, and none are known to live in other parts of the country.

As of June 2009, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that approximately 1.5 million Iraqis had fled and remain outside the country. In May 2009 UNHCR reported that 57 percent of all registered Iraqi refugees (in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt) were Sunni, 21 percent were Shi'a, 4 percent were non-specified Muslim, 14 percent were Christian, 3 percent were Sabeen-Mandaean, and fewer than 1 percent were Yezidi. In June 2009 the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported that there are an estimated 2.8 million internally displaced persons in the country. After the al-Askariya mosque bombings in February 2006, 1.6 million persons were displaced. An estimated 59 percent of the internally displaced are Shi'a Muslims, 35 percent are Sunni Muslims, 5 percent are Christians, and fewer than 1 percent are Yezidis.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally endorsed this right. However, other legal provisions are subject to interpretations that limit religious freedom.

Article 10 of the Constitution establishes the Government's commitment to assuring and maintaining the sanctity of holy shrines and religious sites and to guaranteeing the free practice of rituals there. Article 43 of the Constitution states that 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. The second clause of Article 43 explicitly guarantees freedom of worship and protection of places of worship, although legislation to implement the clause remains outstanding.

It is the Government's policy to protect the rights of all religious groups to gather and worship freely; however, in practice, ongoing violence and instability impeded citizens' ability to exercise this right in some parts of the country.

Article 2 of the Constitution, which recognizes Islam as the country's official religion, mandates that Islam be considered a source of legislation and states that no law can be enacted that contradicts the faith's universally agreed-upon tenets. It also stipulates that no law can be enacted that contradicts the principles of democracy or basic freedoms, including the rights 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, which requires implementing legislation, provides that citizens are free in their commitments to their personal status according to their religious groups, sects, beliefs, or choices. Until such implementing legislation is passed, the 1959 Personal Status Law (Law 188) remains in force. Article 42 of the Constitution provides that each person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and belief. However, a 1972 law still in effect makes conversion of minor children to Islam automatic if one of the parents converts to Islam. The Minister of Human Rights raised this issue with the Higher Judicial Council seeking to have the law overturned, but the Council determined that the law remains valid.

Religious groups are required to register with the Government. To register, a group must have a minimum of 500 adherents in the country.

The Government maintains three waqfs, or religious endowments: the Sunni, the Shi'a, and the Christian and Other Religions Endowments. The endowments were formed when the Ministry for Religious Affairs was dissolved under the Coalition Provisional Authority in August 2003. The endowments, which operate under the authority of the Prime Minister's Office, receive government funding to maintain and protect religious facilities.

The Government permits religious instruction in public schools. In most areas of the country, the curriculum of both primary and secondary public schools includes three class periods per week of Islamic education, including study of the Qur'an, as a requirement for graduation. Non-Muslim students throughout the country are not required to participate in Islamic studies; however, some non-Muslim students reported that they felt pressure to do so. Private schools such as Al-A'araf Elementary School and the Al-Massara School for Girls, which is run by the Eastern Orthodox Church, are now operating in the country. To operate legally, private schools must obtain a license from the Director General of Private and Public Schools and pay annual fees.

The Kurdistan Region Ministry of Education funds Aramaic-language public schools (elementary and high school) where students are taught in Aramaic, Arabic, and Kurdish. The majority of these (more than 30 elementary schools and eight secondary schools) are in Dohuk and supply appears to meet demand. These schools have operated since the late 1980s and are overseen by a special division within the Ministry staffed by Christians.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), through the Kurdistan Region Ministry of the Endowment, pays the salaries of imams and funds the construction and maintenance of mosques. This funding is available for Christian religious establishments, but many churches prefer to be self-funded.

Most Islamic holy days are also national holidays, including Ashura, Arbai'n, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Maulid al-Nabi (the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad). Nawruz, a national holiday, is celebrated as a religious holiday by Baha'is. Christmas was declared a national holiday during the reporting period. Christians reported that although Easter is not a national holiday, government policy recognizes their right to observe it.

Article 1 of the Penal Code No. 111 of 1969 mandates that criminal penalties can be imposed only by civil law. Under the country's civil law, there is no penalty for conversion and the Penal Code does not impose the Shari'a penalty, despite the Shari'a punishment for conversion from Islam to another religion. The Law of Civil Affairs No. 65 of 1972 explicitly allows non-Muslims to convert to Islam.

At the end of the reporting period, national identity cards continued to note the holder's religion, which has been used as a basis for discrimination; however, passports did not note religion.

Law No. 105 of 1970 prohibits the Baha'i Faith, and a 2001 resolution prohibits the Wahhabi branch of Islam. Although provisions on freedom of religion in the new Constitution may supersede these laws, no court challenges have been brought to have them invalidated, and no legislation has been proposed to repeal them.

In April 2007 the Ministry of Interior's Nationality and Passport Section canceled Regulation 358 of 1975, which prohibited the issuance of a nationality identity card to those claiming the Baha'i Faith. In May 2007 a small number of Baha'is were issued identity cards. The Nationality and Passport Section's legal advisor stopped issuance of the cards thereafter, claiming Baha'is had been registered as Muslims since 1975 and citing a government regulation preventing the conversion of "Muslims" to another faith. Without this official citizenship card, Baha'is experience difficulty registering their children for school and applying for passports. Despite the cancellation of the regulation, Baha'is whose identity records were changed to "Muslim" after Regulation 358 was instituted in 1975 still could not change their identity cards to indicate their Baha'i faith, and their children were not recognized as Baha'is.

A March 2006 citizenship law specifically precludes Jews from regaining citizenship if it is ever withdrawn.

Article 41 of the Constitution states that "Iraqis are free in their commitment to their personal status according to their religions, sects, beliefs, or choices, and this shall be regulated by law." 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) of the Constitution 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 also requires that courts apply the municipal law of the foreign litigants to resolve their domestic law matters. Despite this exception, there are instances in which this law, based on Shari'a principles, applies to non-Muslims, thereby overriding rules particular to an individual's religion. For instance, the law forbids the marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man; 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. Other provisions of the Constitution, notably Article 2(1)(A), prohibit laws from contradicting the "established provisions of Islam," creating potentially conflicting constitutional standards. No court has yet ruled on this issue.

Article 92 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. At the end of the reporting period, no legislation had been enacted to regulate the number, method of selection, and work of the Court, leaving unsettled the question of whether Islamic jurisprudence experts would serve as consultants and advisors to the judges or as members of the Court.

The Government provides significant support for the Hajj by organizing travel routes and assisting pilgrims with obtaining immunization documents for entry into Saudi Arabia. The Government also provides funding to Sunni and Shi'a waqfs, which accept Hajj applications from the public and submit them to the Supreme Council for the Hajj. The Council, attached to the Prime Minister's Office, organizes a lottery process that selects pilgrims for official Hajj visas.

The Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government continued to provide political representation and support to minority communities during the reporting period. The Iraqi Council of Ministers includes two Christian ministers (Human Rights, Industry and Minerals), and two Christian ministers (Finance, Civil Society) are in the Kurdistan Region Council of Ministers. The Kurdistan Region Council of Ministers also includes two Ministers without Portfolio who are prominent Yezidis.

Saddam-era campaigns against Kurds in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in the destruction of a number of Christian villages in Dohuk Province; most residents relocated to Baghdad. Under the supervision of the Kurdistan Region Ministry of Finance, a number of these towns have been re-inhabited, housing has been rebuilt, and the original inhabitants have received small stipends to move back.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practices generally did not interfere with the free practice of religion; however, violence in some parts of the country had a negative impact on the ability of all religious believers to practice their faith, although to a lesser extent in the Kurdistan region. Sectarian misappropriation of official authority within the security apparatus, which could impede the right of citizens to worship freely, continued to be a significant concern.

The Government did not restrict the formation of political parties based on religious beliefs or interpretations of religious doctrine.

The education department in the province of Salah ad-Din instructed schools to ban female teachers from wearing trousers. According to the government statement, the "[education department] sees that long and conservative clothing is much better than trousers." The statement instructed schools to report teachers who violated the order so the "severest disciplinary measures" could be taken.

During the reporting period, there were some schools and other public places where non-Muslim minorities and secular Arabs felt obliged to adhere to certain conservative Islamic practices. This occurred less frequently than in previous reporting periods.

Although a few individuals from minority communities held senior positions in the Government, there were reports of religiously based employment discrimination in which ministries hired and showed favoritism toward individuals who shared the minister's religious persuasion.

Several evangelical churches complained that they had been unable to obtain official registration from the Government and that registration conditions were too onerous. In order to register, a church must have 500 members and receive approval from the Council of Iraqi Christian Church Leaders, a quasi-governmental group consisting of representatives from each of the 14 officially recognized churches.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

It is contrary to stated government policy for officials to engage in or tolerate abuses of an individual's right to religious freedom. The Government focused its resources and attention during the reporting period primarily on defeating the ongoing insurgency and on reconstruction efforts, and had a limited capacity to address matters relating to abuses of freedom of religion. Limitations in security force capabilities and in the country's rule of law infrastructure made it difficult for the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) or the justice system to investigate and prosecute criminal activity, including alleged sectarian-based crimes, although some investigations were carried out.

There were allegations that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) engaged in discriminatory behavior against religious minorities. Christians and Yezidis living north of Mosul claimed that the KRG confiscated their property without compensation and that it began building settlements on their land. Assyrian Christians alleged that the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)-dominated judiciary in Ninewa routinely discriminated against non-Muslims and failed to enforce judgments in their favor. There were reports that Yezidis faced restrictions when entering the KRG and had to obtain KRG approval to find jobs in areas within Ninewa Province administered by the KRG or under the security protection of the Peshmerga.

There were also allegations that the KRG exhibited favoritism toward the Christian religious establishment, and it was alleged that on February 17, 2008, KRG authorities arrested and held incommunicado for four days an Assyrian blogger, Johnny Khoshaba Al-Rikany, based on articles he had posted attacking corruption in the church.

Yezidi and Shabak political leaders alleged that Kurdish Peshmerga forces regularly committed abuses against and harassed their communities in Ninewa Province. Districts that are within the security control of the Peshmerga include Sinjar, Sheikhan, Ba'asheqa (sub-district of Mosul), and Bartalla (sub-district of Hamdaniya). Minority leaders alleged that Kurdish forces were intimidating minority communities to identify themselves as Kurds and support their inclusion in the KRG. Yezidi political representatives also reported that because of their religious affiliation, they were not allowed to pass through security checkpoints in areas controlled by Kurdish Peshmerga as they traveled from Baghdad to their communities in northern Iraq.

The KRG denied allegations that it was behind violent incidents directed at Christians and other minorities. Moreover, despite such allegations, many non-Muslims reside in northern Iraq and the KRG area, and there were reports that some sought refuge there from other parts of the country where pressures to conform publicly to narrow interpretations of Islamic tenets were greater. In February 2009 the IOM estimated that there were 19,100 internally displaced families in the Ninewa Plain and that 43,595 internally displaced families were located in the Kurdistan region.

The Armenian Orthodox Church of Iraq worked with government officials to regain properties the former regime forced it to sell. Although the Church was paid fair market value for properties in Mosul, Basrah, Kirkuk, Baghdad, and Dohuk, it had been forced to sell the properties under pressure. Previous efforts to regain properties did not succeed, but church officials stated that the government rulings in these property claim cases are being appealed.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

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 who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States. However, Sabean-Mandaeans reported that Islamic extremists threatened, assaulted, kidnapped, and killed members of their religious group for refusing to convert to Islam. Christians living in Baghdad's Doura district and in the city of Mosul also reported that Islamic extremists threatened to kill

them unless they converted, left, or paid a jizya (a tax on non-Muslims).

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

Many individuals from various religious groups were targeted because of their religious identity or secular leanings. Acts committed against them included harassment, intimidation, kidnapping, and murder. The general lawlessness that permitted criminal gangs, terrorists, and insurgents to victimize citizens with impunity affected persons of all ethnicities and religious groups. The overall magnitude of sectarian violence declined during the reporting period. The overwhelming majority of the mass-casualty attacks targeted the Shi'a population.

Shi'a in Sunni-dominated neighborhoods, Sunnis in Shi'a-dominated neighborhoods, and religious minorities in both Sunni- and Shi'a-dominated neighborhoods reported receiving death threat letters demanding that they leave their homes, and in many cases individuals either complied or were killed. These incidents were fewer than in the prior reporting period.

Many attributed sectarian violence in the country to terrorists attempting to sow sectarian strife. The rate of sectarian displacement, which increased as a result of the upsurge in sectarian violence following the February 2006 bombing of the al-Askariya Shrine ("the Golden Mosque") in Samarra, remained low during the reporting period. By the end of the reporting period, available evidence suggested that more sectarian integration was taking place than additional sectarian displacement. The UNHCR estimated that 220,000 to 300,000 Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons returned to their homes in 2008. The majority of these returnees (89 percent) were internally displaced persons.

Even so, numerous incidents of sectarian violence occurred during the reporting period. Very few of the perpetrators of violence committed against Christians and other religious minorities in the country have been punished; arrests following a murder or other crime are rare.

There were no data available on active participation in religious services or rituals; however, terrorist attacks rendered many mosques, churches, and other holy sites unusable. During most of the reporting period, many worshippers reportedly did not attend religious services or participate in religious events because of the threat of violence. Christian leaders inside and outside the country reported that members of their communities received threatening letters demanding that Christians leave or be killed. In October 2008, for example, a group calling itself the Ansar al-Islam Battalions sent a letter to leading Christian leaders in the country warning them that all Christians should leave the country immediately or face death.

During the reporting period, Sabeen-Mandaean leaders reported that their community continued to be targeted. In addition to being forced to convert, they reported kidnappings, with victims held for ransom. In some cases, ransom was paid. However, among those cases, only some were released; others were killed or remained missing. Women were pressured to wear the hijab and to marry non-Sabeen-Mandaean men. Sabeen-Mandaeans also reported that their gold and jewelry stores were burglarized.

During the reporting period, Yezidi and Shabak leaders reported that their communities also continued to be targets of harassment and violence.

Violence against members of Iraqi religious minorities – other than cases of simple criminality for profit – was orchestrated by al-Qa'ida in Iraq or, in some cases, by Shi'a extremists.

On June 24, 2009, a bomb attached to a motorcycle exploded in a crowded market in the predominantly Shiite neighborhood of Sadr City in Baghdad, killing at least 76 persons and injuring 158.

On June 20, 2009, a suicide truck bomb exploded near the mosque of Al-Rasool Al-a'dham in the town of Taza, south of Kirkuk, killing at least 68 persons and injuring nearly 200.

On June 12, 2009, the leader of the Sunni political party Tawafuk, Harith al-Obaidi, was killed in the Al-Shawaf mosque in the neighborhood of Yarmouk in Baghdad. After the gunman shot al-Obaidi, he threw a grenade that killed four others and injured 12. The following week, Iraqi security forces arrested a man they described as the "mastermind" behind the killing.

On June 10, 2009, a car bomb killed at least 28 persons and injured 70 at a market in the predominantly Shiite city of Nasriya in southern Iraq.

On May 20, 2009, a car bomb killed 34 persons and injured scores of others in the predominantly Shi'a neighborhood of Shula in Baghdad.

On May 15, 2009, a Christian missionary was kidnapped in Kirkuk and held for eight days before mediation by tribal chiefs and local imams led to his release.

On May 11, 2009, a car bomb targeting a police patrol detonated near the al-Adl mosque in the al-Asra neighborhood of Kirkuk, killing two persons and injuring eight.

On May 11, 2009, a Christian child kidnapped by terrorists on March 5, 2009, was found killed in Mosul. The abductors demanded a ransom but killed the child before the ransom was paid.

On May 10, 2009, a young Christian man was found killed in the al-Qadisiya district east of Kirkuk city. According to police sources, he was killed by the same terrorist organization responsible for the bombing of the Al-Rasool Al-a'dham mosque in Taza on June 20.

On May 9, 2009, an alcohol seller in the al-Shurta district of southeastern Baghdad was found killed after merchants in the area received anonymous warnings to close their shops.

On May 6, 2009, a truck bomb targeting a Shiite produce market in the Doura neighborhood of Baghdad exploded, killing 10 persons and wounding 37.

On April 29, 2009, three car bombs targeting predominantly Shiite neighborhoods in Baghdad killed at least 17 persons. Two of the bombs exploded in the Muraidi market area of Sadr City. The third bomb targeted the Shiite neighborhood of Shurta Rabia in southwestern Baghdad. On the same day, two additional car bombs exploded in front of the Sunni Nida Allah mosque in the Shiite district of Huriya in northwestern Baghdad, killing two persons and injuring eight.

On April 26, 2009, in the city of Kirkuk, three Chaldean Christians were shot and killed in their homes and two others were injured. On April 29, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) in Kirkuk received reports that eight suspected members of al-Qa'ida in Iraq had been arrested in connection with the attack. However, the suspects were later released due to lack of evidence, and no additional arrests were made.

On April 25, 2009, a Sabeen-Mandaean goldsmith was killed during a kidnapping attempt in Baghdad. A media report quoted the goldsmith's friend as saying the victim had been threatened many times and ordered to pay large sums of money as a "tax" for being Sabeen.

On April 24, 2009, two female suicide bombers blew themselves up as worshippers were entering Baghdad's most important Shiite shrine, the mosque of Imam Mousa al-Kadhim. This resulted in 66 deaths, among them 25 religious pilgrims from Iran; 127 were injured.

On April 23, 2009, a suicide bomber blew up a restaurant in Baqubah, the capital of Diyala Province, killing 48 persons, mostly religious pilgrims from Iran.

On April 22, 2009, a suicide bomber detonated explosives inside a Sunni mosque in Dhuluiya, north of Baghdad, killing at least five persons and injuring 15.

On April 19, 2009 three Sabeen-Mandaean goldsmiths were among seven jewelers killed in a coordinated daytime robbery in Baghdad. Three other Sabeen-Mandaeans were severely injured. Four suspects in the killings were arrested.

On April 6, 2009, a bomb near the mosque of Imam Mousa al-Kadhimi in Baghdad killed seven persons and injured 23.

On April 5, 2009, a group of gunmen shot and killed a Christian man in his generator repair workshop in Mosul.

On April 2, 2009, according to press reports, three Assyrian Christians were stabbed and killed in their homes in the Doura neighborhood of Baghdad. Although the motive is unknown, a local Christian leader indicated that the motivation for the killings was "theft."

On April 1, 2009, a Christian man was found dead in Kirkuk, with his throat slit.

On March 25 and 26, 2009, two Yezidi men were shot and killed, their bodies discovered in fields near the city of Mosul. Iraqi security forces reportedly believed that one of the deaths was the result of a tribal feud.

On February 16, 2009, unknown gunmen shot and killed a 15-year-old Christian boy and critically injured another in the al-Midan area of Mosul.

On February 16, 2009, eight Shiite pilgrims returning from the holy city of Karbala were killed in two separate roadside bombings in Baghdad, one on the edge of Sadr City and the other in the Shiite neighborhood of Al Obeidi.

On February 13, 2009, a suicide bomber blew herself up among Shiite pilgrims walking in an annual procession to the holy city of Karbala from Baghdad, killing 35 persons.

On February 12, 2009, a bomb placed inside a propane gas canister exploded in Karbala, killing eight persons and injuring 35. The attack came as tens of thousands of Shiite pilgrims were massing to commemorate Arb'een, one of the holiest events for Shiites.

On February 8, 2009, a roadside bomb in northern Baghdad killed two Shiite pilgrims and injured 11 others who were on their way to Karbala for the commemoration of Arb'een.

On January 16, 2009, a young Christian was found killed, with a close range gunshot wound to the head, in Mosul.

On January 16, 2009, a Shiite cleric and political candidate of the Dawa party was assassinated in the province of Babil after leaving a campaign event.

On January 4, 2009, an armed group broke into the home of an elderly Christian couple in the Doura neighborhood of Baghdad. The gang threatened the husband and then strangled and killed his wife.

On January 4, 2009, a suicide bomber blew herself up near the mosque of Imam Mousa al-Kadhimi in Baghdad, among a crowd of Shiite pilgrims, killing 40 and injuring more than 70.

On December 31, 2008, a Christian was kidnapped and tortured in Mosul before being

released four days later after a \$50,000 ransom was paid to the kidnappers.

On December 27, 2008, a Christian man was shot and killed by an Iraqi army soldier at a checkpoint near the Church of St. Behnam and St. Sara in the town of Baghdida. Police conducted an initial investigation, but no further details were known.

On December 27, 2008, there was a report that the body of a Christian girl was found in a river in the area of Nahla in northern Iraq. The report stated that a Kurdish man may have abducted the girl, but no arrest was made.

On December 27, 2008, a car bomb killed 24 persons, many of them Shiite pilgrims, and injured 46 others when it exploded on a road in Baghdad that leads to the mosque of Imam Mousa al-Kadhim.

On December 14, 2008, a group of armed men shot and killed seven members of a Yezidi family in their home in the town of Sinjar in Ninewa Province.

On December 9, 2008, a criminal gang robbed, tortured, and strangled a Christian clothing store owner in his home in Baghdad.

On December 7, 2008, according to press reports, two Yezidis were killed in a liquor store in Mosul.

On December 2, 2008, a suicide bomber targeting Coalition Forces blew himself up near the Church of St. Joseph in the city of Mosul, killing at least 15 persons, including a Christian father and son.

On November 29, 2008, a suicide bomber blew himself up inside the courtyard of the Shiite mosque Al Hussainiya in the town of Musayyib, located south of Baghdad. The explosion killed 12 persons and injured 19. The town was also the site of a suicide bombing using a gasoline tanker that killed 70 persons in 2005.

On November 13, 2008, a Christian was killed when a car bomb exploded in the al-Naaeriya area of New Baghdad.

On November 11, 2008, according to a media outlet, two Christian sisters were killed, their mother injured, and their home bombed in Mosul by armed gunmen. One was killed while she was waiting for a bus and the other after the gunmen stormed the family's home. The motive for the attack is unknown.

On October 14, 2008, a church in the northern city of Mosul was bombed. There were no casualties.

During a 10-day period in the beginning of October 2008, 14 Christians were killed in Mosul, prompting more than 2,000 families to flee their homes for villages in the Ninewa Plain north of the city. The attacks followed protests in which hundreds of Christians demonstrated for greater representation on the country's local provincial councils. Leaflets were distributed in predominantly Christian neighborhoods threatening families to convert to Islam, pay the "jizyah" tax, leave the city, or be killed. Gunmen then set up checkpoints in several parts of the city, stopping vehicles in search of residents who could be identified as Christians. Local security forces did little to stop the killings, but Prime Minister Maliki sent two additional brigades of police to reassert control of the city. During the last months of 2008, the majority of Christian families who had fled returned to Mosul. A government investigation into the killings had not been made public by the end of the reporting period.

On October 2, 2008, suicide bombers killed two dozen persons in attacks on two Shiite mosques as Iraqis were attending prayers for the first day of the Eid al-Fitr celebration. The attacks came in the Shiite neighborhood of Zafaraniya and the middle-class neighborhood of New Baghdad.

On September 14, 2008, Fouad Ali Hussein al-Douri, a Sunni mosque imam and a proponent of reconciliation in his mixed neighborhood of Baghdad, was killed.

On September 10, 2008, it was reported that a Christian man was shot and killed in the al-Bakr neighborhood of Mosul. The motives for the killing were unknown.

On September 8, 2008, it was reported that armed men killed three Sabeen-Mandaean family members, including a child, in their family store in Baghdad.

On September 2, 2008, according to press reports, two Christians were kidnapped and killed in Mosul despite ransom payments to the kidnappers.

On August 18, 2008, a suicide bomber killed 15 persons and injured 29 others in front of the Sunni Abu Hanifa mosque in Baghdad.

On August 16, 2008, a suicide bomber killed six persons and injured 10 in an attack near a bus pickup point in northeast Baghdad for Shiite pilgrims heading to Karbala to celebrate the birthday of Muhammad al-Mahdi, one of the holiest days in the Shiite calendar.

On August 15, 2008, a pickup truck exploded near the central bus station in the largely Shiite town of Balad, killing nine pilgrims.

On August 14, 2008, a suicide bomber blew herself up in a tent filled with women on a religious pilgrimage in the city of Iskandariya, killing 18 persons and injuring scores of others.

On August 14, 2008, in a separate attack, a Shiite pilgrim was killed and seven others injured by a roadside bomb in downtown Baghdad.

On July 26, 2008, gunmen killed seven Shi'a pilgrims in the town of Madain who were traveling to the Shiite shrine in the mosque of Imam Mousa al-Kadhim in Baghdad's Kadhimiyah District.

On July 28, 2008, two suicide bombers and a third bomb killed 32 persons and injured 64 in Baghdad during a Shiite religious procession to the shrine of Imam Kadhim.

On July 13, 2008, gunmen killed a member of the Shabak Assembly near the village of Oman Qabchi. Shabak political representatives accused Kurdish Peshmerga forces of the attack.

On July 10, 2008, a Christian man was shot and killed in his car by gunmen in Mosul who stole all of his possessions.

On July 2, 2008, a group calling itself the Battalion of Just Punishment, Jihad Base in Mesopotamia, sent threatening letters to Assyrian churches in Mosul, demanding they not cooperate with Coalition Forces.

In a symbolically significant event, the Chaldean archbishop of Mosul, Paulus Faraj Rahho, was kidnapped on February 29, 2008, for failing to pay protection money or "jizya" to Islamic insurgents. The archbishop died while in captivity. Government security forces subsequently arrested one of the kidnappers, and he was sentenced to death.

Regardless of religious affiliation, women and girls were often threatened for refusing to wear the hijab, for dressing in Western-style clothing, or for failing to adhere sufficiently to strict interpretations of conservative Islamic norms governing public behavior. Numerous women, including Christians, reported opting to wear the hijab for security purposes after being harassed for not doing so.

Shopkeepers were targeted for providing goods or services considered to be inconsistent with Islam, and sometimes were subjected to violence for failing to comply with warnings to stop such activity. Liquor store owners, primarily Christians and Yezidis, were especially targeted. On April 20, 2009, the Governor of Karbala, Amal al-Din al-Hir, stated that he would "take strong measures against liquor stores" because "they violate the sanctity of the city," although no official liquor stores were known to exist in the province. Some political figures complained that the Government was not licensing restaurants to sell alcohol in Baghdad. The Iraqi Parliament also debated the possibility of banning alcohol, but no formal legislation was introduced.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The "surge" by the Multinational Forces in Iraq, in coordination with Iraqi Security Force operations, reduced the overall level of violence in the country; however, significant effects were slow to trickle down to the country's minority communities. Despite the tenuous environment, the Government generally conducted security operations in a nonsectarian manner, removing the principal threat to religious freedom in the country and providing an opportunity for the Government to begin to improve overall conditions in this area.

During the reporting period, the Government took direct responsibility for protecting the population, leading to improvements in the overall security environment.

In October 2008 Prime Minister Maliki sent additional police brigades to Mosul to protect the city's Christian population against criminal, militia, and al-Qa'ida forces in those areas, launched an investigation into the attacks, and set up a National Security Council committee to assess the situation. Security improvements in Mosul allowed a majority of displaced Christians to return to their homes.

The security situation in the Doura neighborhood of Baghdad improved sufficiently to allow 325 Christian families who had been displaced by sectarian violence to return. Two churches were operating in the neighborhood – one Assyrian Orthodox and one Chaldean – along with a Chaldean seminary. Church leaders reported full attendance at services in these churches throughout the reporting period. Christmas was declared a national holiday, and on December 20, 2008, the Ministry of Interior sponsored a public Christmas event in Baghdad.

Chaldean patriarch Cardinal Delly led Christmas Mass at the Virgin Mary convent church in Baghdad's Karada neighborhood with Ammar Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, a prominent member of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), in attendance.

The Government also enhanced security at churches throughout Iraq during Easter celebrations.

Sabean-Mandaean leaders stated that the security situation had improved during the reporting period to the point that the community in Baghdad was able to hold without incident a baptismal ceremony in March 2009 at the Tigris River with 400 members attending.

On November 3, 2008, the Council of Representatives passed an amendment to the Provincial Elections Law that reserved six seats for minority groups throughout the country – two in Baghdad (one each for Christians and Sabean-Mandaeans), three in Ninewa Province (one each for Christians, Yezidis, and Shabaks), and one in Basra Province for Christians. Although this ensured a degree of representation for minorities during the provincial elections in January 2009, the six allocated seats fell short of the United Nations' proposed 12 seats. Some community leaders expressed concern that the seats were allocated by majority groups as a token gesture and political maneuver and were not sufficient to ensure meaningful minority representation. Others asserted that the reserved seats disenfranchised and confused minority voters, who had to choose between voting for a minority-seat candidate and voting for a candidate running for a non-reserved seat. These factors appeared to contribute to low minority-voter turnout

for the elections.

The Government increased the budget of the Directorate for non-Muslim Endowments, which will provide additional funds to renovate and protect minority religious sites. According to press reports, the Government launched a project to renovate the interior of the Shrine of Ezekiel, a prominent Jewish heritage site that Christians and Muslims also revere. According to the spokesman for the Ministry of Tourism, "The ministry is concerned with all Iraqi heritage, whether it is Christian or Jewish or from any other religion."

During the reporting period, government leaders spoke of the need for all citizens to unite – regardless of religious orientation – to confront terrorism. The Government publicly denounced incidents of sectarian violence and repeatedly encouraged unity among the country's religious sects. Government leaders often emphasized their commitment to equal treatment for all religious groups and ethnicities.

On April 29, 2009, the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) stated in response to the killing of three Christians in Kirkuk: "We Iraqis were all unhappy about the attack on Christian citizens in Kirkuk that led to the death of three innocent people who had done nothing wrong. Who is carrying out such actions that are intended to spread a spirit of discord, revenge, and disunity among sections of the Iraqi people that have coexisted for more than a thousand and several hundred years? Certainly they are the enemies of Iraq."

On April 15, 2009, Shiite Vice President Adel Abdul Mahdi stated that "the position of Iraqi Christians is vulnerable and Iraq must not be left alone to face this. It's a collective task.... Christians are an integral part of Iraq. We need to help Iraq and help Christians remain in Iraq."

From October 12-14, 2008, in the wake of the murders of Christians in Mosul, Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi said that "Iraqis stand in solidarity with the Christians. All displaced families should return to their homes and all places of worship should be protected. Christians have the same rights as we have."

In response to the killing of Christians in Mosul in October 2008, prominent Shiite cleric Moqtada al Sadr sent representatives from Najaf to Baghdad to meet with church leaders and express solidarity. One of the representatives, Sheikh Muhanned al-Gharrawi, conveyed a message from Sadr that "we will not hesitate to turn into human shields for our Christian brothers."

On July 22, 2008, Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki made a statement to the media in support of the Christians in Iraq: "The Christian brothers in Iraq were exposed to discrimination. We stress that we do not discriminate between one Iraqi and another at all, between one Muslim and another, between a Christian and a Muslim, or between one ethnic group and another. In fact, we are proud of them and we need all of them. We are ready to provide them with special privileges in order to be in Iraq, especially since they are a part of the beautiful Iraqi mosaic of which we are proud. We will spare no effort to secure their return to Iraq, which is the homeland of their fathers and grandfathers. There is no discrimination at all and we will not tolerate this issue."

On July 25, 2008, Prime Minister Maliki met with Pope Benedict XVI in the Vatican. The two discussed the security situation in Iraq, including the situation facing Iraqi Christians, and the need for dialogue and collaboration among all ethnic and religious groups, including minorities.

A March 25, 2009 amendment to the Kurdistan Regional Elections law provided for 11 of 111 seats in the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament to be set aside for minorities – five for Chaldeans and Assyrians, five for Turkmen, and one for Armenians.

In December 2008 the KRG took steps to promote religious tolerance and bar public "hate speech." During Israel's Gaza offensive, some Muslim religious leaders used

their Friday sermons to exhort the congregation to acts of violence against Jews, Israelis, and the supporters of Israel. Some messages also decried the increasing appearance of Christmas decorations, lights, and holiday events. The KRG banned 15 imams from preaching.

On February 17, 2009, at a conference on Religious Freedom and Tolerance with participation of religious leaders from all faiths represented in the Kurdistan Region, KRG Prime Minister Barzani stated: "We are proud that our region has diverse ethnicities and religions. We have been living together for hundreds of years: Kurds, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syrians, Turcomen, Arabs, Muslims, Christians, Yezidis, and other components of our society. Religious tolerance is the symbol of all civilized and successful societies.... We can respect our religious commitment and respect the religious commitment of those who worship differently. It is important that all of us in a position of responsibility encourage tolerance, coexistence, and ethnic and religious harmony. We believe in freedom of religious ceremonies of all faiths."

On November 19, 2008, the KRG announced the opening of a special directorate within the Ministry of Religious Affairs headed by a Yezidi Director General.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Conservative and extremist Islamic elements continued to exert pressure on society to conform to their interpretations of Islam's precepts. Although these efforts affected all citizens, non-Muslims were especially vulnerable to this pressure and violence because of their minority status and their lack of protection provided by a tribal structure. For example, Sabeen-Mandaeans, who are few in number and live in small groups spread across the country, continued to report that they were targeted by Islamic militias. They were not able to defend themselves, since nonviolence is a basic tenet of their religion.

Sunni Muslims also continued to claim general discrimination during the reporting period, alleging that it was due to an ongoing campaign of revenge by the Shi'a majority for the Sunnis' presumed favored status and abuses of Shi'a under the former regime, and 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. Although some within the Sunni community supported and even assisted the insurgency, there was a broad Sunni rejection of al-Qa'ida in Iraq as evidenced by their participation in the government, provincial elections, and the anti-insurgency Awakening Councils.

In general, minorities were underrepresented, especially at the provincial level, where they lacked full representation in the Provincial Councils, limiting their access to government-provided security and economic development. The January 2009 provincial elections helped somewhat to improve representation. Non-Muslims, particularly Christians and Yezidis, complained of being politically isolated by the Muslim majority because of their religious differences.

The combination of discriminatory hiring practices by members of the majority Muslim population, attacks against non-Muslim businesses, corruption, and the overall lack of rule of law also had a detrimental economic impact on the non-Muslim community and contributed to the departure of significant numbers of non-Muslims from the country.

Many Yezidi towns in Ninewa are in areas disputed between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Government of Iraq and as a result suffer from poor municipal services, although the Kurdistan Regional Government fills some gaps, including payment of salaries for Yezidi religious instruction at certain state-funded schools.

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 from the Department of State, the military, the Embassy, and Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) met regularly with representatives of all of the country's religious and ethnic communities, including its minority communities, and maintained an active dialogue.

The Department of State and the Embassy increased attention to the country's minority communities. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs for Iraq also serves as the Special Coordinator for Iraq's Minority Communities.

The U.S. Ambassador's Senior Advisors to Northern Iraq and Southern Iraq engaged religious minority communities in their areas. PRT officials, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Multi-National Force-Iraq worked with department and embassy officials to address minority concerns. Embassy officials raised minority concerns in meetings with the country's senior government officials.

In the 2008 Foreign Operations Statement of Managers, Congress authorized \$10 million in unobligated Economic Support Fund money for Iraq to be directed toward projects in the Ninewa Plain region. During the reporting period, USAID used the funds to implement projects in education, microfinance, and infrastructure directly benefiting minority communities. PRT Ninewa has taken the lead in meeting a similar soft earmark for \$10 million in the FY2008 Supplemental budget, primarily through the PRT's Quick Response Fund (QRF) program to fund projects of benefit to local minority communities.
