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U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Iraq

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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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.

While 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 clergy and religious places of worship, hampered the ability to practice religion freely. As the Government began to exhibit the will and capacity to challenge its militant opponents, the violence began to abate and the Government became increasingly successful in restoring security, in a generally nonsectarian manner, throughout the country.

Overall, there was limited progress in government commitment and action in support of religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Since 2003 the Government has generally not engaged in the persecution of any religious group, calling instead for tolerance and acceptance of all religious minorities. The Prime Minister publicly reinforced this commitment following security operations against violent groups in Basrah, Baghdad, and Ninewa Provinces, the latter of which is the province with the largest concentration of non-Muslim minorities.

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 Kurdish Regional Government, 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 population 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 country has an area of 437,072 square miles and a population of 28.2 million. Ninety-five percent of the population is Muslim. Shi'a Muslims – predominantly Arabs, but also including Turkmen, Faili (Shi'a) Kurds, and other groups – constitute a 60 to 65 percent majority. Sunni Muslims make up 32 to 37 percent of the population, where 18 to 20 percent of the population are Sunni Kurds, 12 to 16 percent are Sunni Arabs, and the remaining 1 to 2 percent are Sunni Turkmen. The remaining five percent of the population is comprised of Christians, Yezidis, Sabean-Mandaeans, Baha'is, Shabaks, Kaka'is (sometimes referred to as Ahl-e Haqq), and a very small number 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 of the Christian population in 2003 range from 800,000 to 1.2 million. Current population estimates range from 550,000 to 800,000. Approximately two-thirds of Christians in the country are Chaldeans (an eastern rite of the Catholic Church), nearly one-third 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 found in the north, and most Syriac Christians are split between Baghdad, Kirkuk, and the Ninewa province. It is estimated that as much as 50 percent of the country's Christian population live in Baghdad, and between 30 and 40 percent live in the north, with the largest Christian communities there located in and around Mosul, Erbil, Dohuk, and Kirkuk. The Archbishop of the Armenian Diocese reported that 15,000 to 16,000 Armenian Christians remained in the country, primarily in the cities of Baghdad, Basrah, Kirkuk, and Mosul. It was reported that evangelical Christians number between 5,000 and 6,000. They can be found in the northern part of the country, as well as in Baghdad. A very small number reside in Basrah.

Yezidi leaders reported that most of the country's 500,000 to 600,000 Yezidis resided in the north, near Dohuk and Mosul. Shabak leaders stated there are 200,000 to 500,000 Shabaks, who reside mainly in the north near Mosul. The Sabean-Mandaean community continued to decline; according to Sabean-Mandaean leaders, 3,500 to 5,000 remained in the country, down from an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 in the previous reporting period. The Baha'i leadership reported their members number less than 2,000 and are spread throughout the country in small groups. Fewer than 10 Jews remain in Baghdad; a sizable portion of this 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.

In June 2008 the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that 2.3 to 2.5 million citizens have fled the country since the spring of 2003. In April 2008 the Office of the U.N High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that in Syria 55.7 percent of registered Iraqi refugees were Sunni, 20.2 percent were Shi'a, 16 percent were Christian, 4.3 percent were Sabean-Mandaean, and 0.8 percent were Yezidi. For Jordan the UNHCR's figures for registered Iraqi refugees were 47 percent Sunni, 28 percent Shi'a, 16 percent Christian, and 6 percent Sabean-Mandaean. There were no figures provided on the number of Iraqi Yezidis in Jordan. In August 2008 the IOM reported that there are an estimated 2.8 million internally displaced persons in the country, 1.6 million of whom were displaced after the al-Askariya mosque bombing in February 2006. An estimated 59 percent of the internally displaced are Shi'a Muslims, 34 percent are Sunni Muslims, 5 percent are Christians, and less than 1 percent are Yezidis.

Section II. Status of 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 in them. Article 43 of the Constitution 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. The second clause of Article 43 reiterates this by explicitly guaranteeing the freedom of worship and the protection of places of worship.

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

Although 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, which include 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 provides that citizens are free in their commitments to their personal status according to their religious groups, sects, beliefs, or choices. However, a 1972 law that is still in effect makes conversion of minor children to Islam automatic if one of the parents converts to Islam.

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 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 officially required to participate in Islamic studies; however, some non-Muslim students reported that they felt pressure to do so. During the reporting period, there were no private primary or secondary schools operating with approval of the Government.

Many 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. Christians reported that although Easter and Christmas are not national holidays, government policy recognizes their right to observe both holidays.

Under the country's civil law, there is no penalty for conversion. Article 1 of the Penal Code No. 111 of 1969 mandates that criminal penalties can be imposed only by civil law. Despite the Shari'a punishment for conversion from Islam to another religion, the penal code does not impose 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. Article 41 of 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. Article 42 of the Constitution provides that each person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and belief.

At the end of the reporting period, national identity cards continued to note the holder's religion; however, passports do not.

Law No. 105 of 1970 prohibits the Baha'i faith, and a 2001 resolution prohibits the Wahhabi branch of Islam. While 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, and at the end of the reporting period, six or seven Baha'is had identity cards indicating their religion. 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.

A March 2006 citizenship law specifically precludes Jews from regaining citizenship in the event 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. 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. However, at the end of the reporting period no legislation to regulate the number, method of selection, and work of the Court had 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.

The Government provides significant support for the Hajj by organizing travel routes and assisting pilgrims with obtaining immunization paperwork for entry to 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 from among the submitted applications.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practices generally did not interfere with the free practice of religion; however, ongoing violence harmed the ability of all religious believers to practice their faith. Additionally, sectarian misappropriation of official authority within the security apparatus, which could impede the right of citizens to worship freely and which had been a significant concern in earlier reporting periods, declined markedly this year.

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

Students generally were not prohibited from practicing elements of their faith in school; however, during the reporting period, there were some schools and other public places where non-Muslim minorities and secular Arabs were forced to adhere to conservative Islamic practices. This occurred less frequently than in previous reporting periods.

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 primarily on defeating the ongoing insurgency and on reconstruction efforts during the reporting period, and it 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.

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 alleged that the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)-dominated judiciary continued to discriminate routinely against non-Muslims and failed to enforce judgments in their favor. Despite such allegations, many non-Muslims fled to the 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 tenets were greater. In May 2008 IOM estimated there were 58,600 internally displaced persons in the Ninewa Plain.

There were also allegations that the KRG exhibited favoritism toward the Christian religious establishment, and that on February 17, 2008, KRG authorities arrested and held incommunicado for 4 days an Assyrian blogger, Johnny Khoshaba Al-Rikany, based on articles he had posted attacking corruption in the church.

The Armenian Church of Iraq worked 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. However, church officials stated these discussions with the Government about property claims yielded no results during the reporting period.

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

Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion 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, Sabeian-Mandaeans reported that Islamic extremists threatened, kidnapped, and killed members of their religion for refusing to convert to Islam. Christians also reported that Islamic extremists warned Christians living in Baghdad's Doura district to convert, leave, pay them a jizya (a tax non-Muslims used to have to pay the government to live in some Islamic countries), or be killed.

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 not only harassment and intimidation but also 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 magnitude of sectarian attacks, while difficult to track, appeared to decline during the reporting period. While such incidents were progressively fewer, 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.

Many attributed the continuing sectarian violence in the country to terrorists attempting to sow sectarian strife. Sectarian displacement sparked by the tremendous upsurge in sectarian violence following the February 22, 2006, bombing of the al-Askariya Shrine ("the Golden Mosque") in Samarra, appeared to decline during the reporting period. By the end of the reporting period, available evidence suggested that more sectarian reintegration was taking place than additional sectarian displacement.

On June 18, 2008, a truck bombing that killed 63 and wounded 75 in the predominantly Shi'ite Hurriya area of Baghdad was blamed on a rogue Shi'ite militia group. An April 16, 2008 bus explosion in Baqubah, the capital of Diyala Province, resulted in 40 dead and 70 injured. The attack was blamed on Sunni extremists.

On February 15, 2008, two suicide bombers blew themselves up during Friday prayers at the Shi'ite Jawad al-Sadiq mosque in Tal Afar, a Turkomen town 260 miles northwest of Baghdad. At least 4 persons were killed and 13 wounded.

On January 17, 2008, a Shi'ite mosque in Baqubah, northeast of Baghdad, was bombed. Police reported 8 dead and 14 injured among the worshippers who had gathered to observe Ashura, one of the holiest events for Shi'ites. The same mosque had been targeted twice before.

On September 24, 2007, a suicide bomber struck Shi'a and Sunni religious leaders in Baqubah as they gathered together in a symbolic show of unity to break the Ramadan fast. As many as 25 were killed, including the Baqubah police chief, and 40 injured in the attack.

On August 27, 2007, at least 9 were killed and 10 injured when a suicide bomber detonated explosives at a mosque in Falluja, west of Baghdad. The mosque's imam, who had been an outspoken critic of al-Qa'ida, was also killed in the attack.

On August 25, 2007, seven Shi'a, were killed in the predominantly Shi'ite Baghdad neighborhood of Kadhimiya.

On August 23, 2007, a Sunni sheikh in Baqubah was killed and his mosque destroyed, reportedly because he had opposed al-Qa'ida in Iraq and had cooperated with Coalition Forces.

On July 7, 2007, a suicide car bomb attack killed 150 and injured more than 265 in the predominantly Shi'a Turkmen village of Amerli in Salahuddin Province.

The most notorious kidnapping case of a Christian cleric was that of Chaldean Archbishop Paulus Faraj Rahho in Mosul. On February 29, 2008, Archbishop Rahho was kidnapped in Mosul. Rahho died in captivity and his body was found on March 13, 2008. The leader of the kidnappers, described by the Iraqi Government as a Sunni Islamist al-Qa'ida leader, was captured, tried, and sentenced to death in May 2008. News accounts reported that the kidnapping was the result of Archbishop Rahho's refusal or inability to continue to pay the kidnappers protection money, frequently characterized by insurgents as *jizya*. The Government and Grand Ayatollah Sistani issued statements denouncing the kidnapping of Archbishop Rahho.

On October 13, 2007, two Syriac Orthodox priests, Father Pius Affas and Father Mazen Ishoa, were abducted in Mosul as they were heading to conduct Mass at St. Fatima Church in al-Faisaliya neighborhood. Both were released on October 21, 2007, after negotiations conducted by Syriac-Catholic Archbishop of Mosul, Basile Georges Casmousa. Archbishop Casmousa told the media that a \$1 million ransom had been demanded, but the amount actually paid, if any, is not known.

On April 6, 2008, Father Adel Youssef, an Assyrian Orthodox priest, was shot and killed in Baghdad's Karrada district.

In January 2008 Christian churches and convents were the target of ten reported bomb attacks. On January 18, 2008, a car bomb exploded outside the Chaldean Tahira Church in Mosul, slightly injuring two persons. On January 9, 2008, two churches in Kirkuk, in the north, were simultaneously bombed. No one was injured in the blasts, which struck Kirkuk's Chaldean Cathedral and St. Ephrem Syrian Orthodox Church. On January 6, 2008, coordinated bombings in Baghdad and Mosul struck six churches and three convents; six persons were injured. The Baghdad churches were the Saint George Church in the al-Ghadeer neighborhood, the Saint Paul Church and convent in Za'afaraniya, and the Roman Orthodox Church in Taharriyat Square. In Mosul the targeted churches were the Assyrian Church and adjacent convent, the Saint Peter Church, the Convent of Mosul al-Jadeedah, and the Miskanta Church.

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. 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 of the country reported that members of their Baghdad community, especially in the district of Doura, received threat letters demanding that Christians leave or be killed.

Violence committed against members of Iraqi religious minorities – when not cases of simple criminality for profit – were orchestrated largely either by Al-Qa'ida in Iraq (a Sunni extremist, foreign-based, foreigner-led terrorist organization trying to violently overthrow the Iraqi government) or by Shi'a extremists, especially the Special Groups of the Mahdi Army, which the Government forcefully confronted and largely defeated during the reporting period.

Criminals as well as Islamic extremists or terrorists continued to kidnap Christians and Muslims; Christians remained particularly vulnerable. For example, on September 26, 2007, Maha Hanna Al-Bidari, an Assyrian girl abducted 10 days earlier, was released unharmed after her mother paid a \$7,000 ransom.

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. On December 10, 2007, police in the southern city of Basrah discovered the bullet-ridden bodies of Christian Maisoon Marzouq and her brother Osama Marzouq. According to the Basrah police, the case was one of 40 during 2007, in which women, regardless of religion, were murdered for not covering their heads and conforming to a conservative Muslim style of dress.

Islamist militants continued to harass shopkeepers for providing goods or services they considered to be inconsistent with Islam, and sometimes used violence against them for failing to comply with warnings to stop such activity. Liquor store owners, primarily Christians and Yezidis, were especially targeted. For example, on February 26, 2008, a bomb exploded in front of a liquor store in the market of the Assyrian town of Baghdada. The explosives were hidden in a sack and left at the entrance of the store. Seven persons were wounded. However, whenever the Government was able to establish control over an area previously held by extremists, terrorists, or criminals, reports of this type declined, such as after the Iraqi security operation in Basrah in spring 2008.

On September 29, 2007, a car bomb explosion in Baghdada, an Assyrian Christian town approximately 12.5 miles northeast of Mosul, killed 2 and injured 15.

Sabean-Mandaean leaders reported that their community continued to be targeted. They reported forced conversions, hijab wearing by Sabean-Mandaean women, and kidnappings for ransom. While ransom payments secured the release of some victims, other victims, despite the payment, were killed or remained missing. They also reported that Islamic extremists threatened many Sabean-Mandaeans.

On June 24, 2008, a Sabean-Mandaean named Bahram Al-Dihesi, accompanied by his father, was abducted while on his way home from work at a jewelry business in Zubayr, Basrah province. The father was beaten and left at the scene of the crime. A day later the father received a letter demanding ransom; the son was released on July 12, after a \$20,000 ransom was paid.

On June 18, 2008, a Sabean-Mandaean named Chasib Mhawi Sailan was abducted in the Al-Thoura quarter of Baghdad. He was released on June 24, after his family reportedly paid a \$50,000 ransom.

On February 2, 2008, ten members of a Sabean-Mandaean family died in a rocket attack on their house in the Alaza area in Kut after having received threats from Islamist militants.

On August 14, 2007, a massive bomb attack in which several fuel tanks exploded targeted the predominantly Yezidi communities of Qahtaniya, al-Jazeera, and Tal Uzair, in the northwest, leaving, according to the Ministry of the Interior, over 400 dead and at least 300 injured.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Although significant effects were slow to trickle down to the country's minority communities, the "surge" by the Multinational Forces in the country began to reduce the overall level of violence and also had a positive impact on minority communities. For example, although there were numerous reports over the past two reporting periods of places of worship closing due to threats, a reverse trend began to take hold during the reporting period, at least in some areas of Baghdad. On November 15, 2007, St. John's Church in Doura was reopened. Bishop Shlaimon Wardouni celebrated a mass attended by both Christians and Muslims to mark the occasion. By the end of the reporting period, at least two more of the seven churches that were operating in Baghdad's Doura neighborhood in 2003, but subsequently closed when sectarian violence erupted there, reopened and were holding regular services. Furthermore, in the previous reporting period, several churches were forced to remove the crosses from their domes; however, that trend began to reverse during the reporting period. In May 2008 the cross was reinstalled on one of Doura's major churches.

Christian leaders stated in press reports that 500 families left the Doura District between April and May 2007, and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reportedly counted at least 100 families fleeing Doura. Due to the improved security situation this reporting period, a number of Christian families returned to their Doura homes.

Despite the tenuous security environment and the Government's preoccupation with fighting the insurgency and rebuilding the country's infrastructure, the Government took some positive steps with respect to religious freedom during the reporting period.

In June 2008 Prime Minister Maliki created a Minorities Committee led by a cabinet-level official.

The last few months of this reporting period saw significant improvements in the security environment as the Government took direct responsibility for protecting the population. In March and April 2008, Prime Minister Maliki launched military operations in Basrah, Sadr City in Baghdad, and Mosul against criminal, militia, and al-Qa'ida forces in those areas. These criminal and extremist forces were often responsible for targeting Muslims and non-Muslim minorities and perpetrating sectarian violence against them. It was noted that, generally, the Government successfully 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, 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 June 10, 2008, Vice President Tareq Al-Hashemi received Sheikh Ganzabra Sattar Jabbar Al-Hilo Al-Zahrany, spiritual leader of the Sabeen-Mandaeans, and publicly asserted that the development of states is measured by the minority equity in them, adding that, "we must live together in this country as equal citizens."

Following the kidnapping of the Archbishop of Mosul at the end of February 2008, Prime Minister Maliki said in an official press statement: "The Christian sect is one of the basic components of Iraqi society and can never be parted from its people and civilization. Any assault on its sons represents an assault on all Iraqis." Following the death of the kidnapped archbishop, Prime Minister Maliki said in a statement: "We condemn and denounce this ugly crime and consider it as an aggression that aims to ignite strife among ... the Iraqi people."

On January 8, 2008, Prime Minister Maliki, in a meeting with the Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, denounced the terrorist attacks that targeted churches in Baghdad and Mosul, asserted the strength of the relations between the country's Muslims and Christians and their desire for peaceful coexistence, and asked them to unite in confronting terrorists and lawlessness.

On October 27, 2007, Prime Minister Maliki received Chaldean Patriarch Cardinal Emmanuel Delly and pledged to support and protect the country's Christian minority.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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. While some within the Sunni community supported and even assisted the insurgency, many Sunnis strongly denounced the insurgency.

Individuals from minority communities held senior positions in the Government. The Prime Minister's cabinet includes two Christian ministers and the Iraqi parliament had representation from the Christian, Yezidi, and Shabak communities. The Kurdish Regional Government also had senior officials and assembly members from minority communities, including the Minister of Finance. However, in general, minorities were under represented, especially at the provincial level where they lacked full representation in the Provincial Councils, limiting their access to government provided security and economic development. Non-Muslims, particularly Christians and Yezidis, complained of being isolated by the Muslim majority because of their religious differences. Many non-Muslims continued to complain they were disenfranchised, marginalized, and not adequately represented.

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.

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

The primary focus of the Department of State and the Embassy during the reporting period was on increasing Sunni and non-Muslim minority inclusion in the political process through the passage of key pieces of legislation. On February 13, 2008, the Council of Representatives passed the 2008 budget, the Provincial Powers Law, and an Amnesty Law. These laws are critical to political accommodation and national unity in the country.

The Department of State and the Embassy increased attention to the country's minority communities. In January 2008 the Department named the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Iraq, as Special Coordinator for Iraq's Minority

Communities. An interagency working group that included Department of Defense, USAID, and NSC officials met regularly to discuss and address issues faced by minority communities in Iraq and engaged with numerous representatives of these communities.

The U.S. Ambassador's Senior Advisors to Northern Iraq and Southern Iraq engaged religious minority communities in their areas. PRT officials, 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 requested that \$10 million in unobligated Economic Support Fund money for Iraq be directed toward projects in the Ninewa Plain region. In June 2008, the Department and USAID identified \$11 million in existing funds to support minority communities in Ninewa.

The United States worked to increase Sunni inclusion in the political process by strongly advocating a nonsectarian unity government, encouraging the passage of legislation that would bring Sunnis into the political process, and providing technical assistance to Sunni leaders.

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