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Iraq

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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Iraq 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 guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religious belief and practice.

While the Government generally endorsed these rights, 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.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom demonstrated by the Government 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. However, some government institutions continued their long-standing discriminatory practices against the Baha'i and Wahhabi Sunni Muslims.

Radical Islamic elements continued to exert tremendous pressure on other groups to conform to extremist interpretations of Islam's precepts. In addition, frequent sectarian violence, including attacks on religious places of worship, hampered the ability to practice religion freely. 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 10th and 11th 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 and supported the inclusion of religious minorities in the political process.

Section I. Religious Demography

Due to increased violence, internal population migration, and lack of government capacity, statistics from different sources varied. Numbers are often estimates from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) rather than census data or other official sources. Official statistics are noted where applicable.

The country has an area of 437,072 square miles and a population of 27.5 million. Ninety-seven percent of the population is Muslim. Shi'a Muslims--predominantly Arabs, but also including Turkmen, Faili Kurds, and other groups--constitute a 60 to 65 percent majority. Sunni Muslims make up 32 to 37 percent of the population, of whom 18 to 20 percent are Sunni Kurds, 12 to 16 percent Sunni Arabs, and the remainder are Sunni Turkmen. The remaining 3 percent is comprised of Chaldeans (an eastern rite of the Catholic Church), Assyrians (Church of the East), Syriacs (Eastern Orthodox), Armenians (Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox), and Protestant Christians, as well as Yezidis, Sabean-Mandaeans, Baha'is, Shabaks, and Kaka'is (a small, syncretic religious group located in and around Kirkuk). Shi'a, although predominantly located in the south, are also a majority in Baghdad and have communities in most parts of the country. Sunnis form the majority in the center and the north of the country.

According to the official 1987 census, there were 1.4 million Christians living in the country. Current estimates place the number of Christians at fewer than 1 million, with Chaldeans comprising the majority. In August 2006, Chaldean Auxiliary Bishop Andreos Abouna of Baghdad stated that of the estimated 1.2 million Christians living in the country before the 2003 invasion, only 600,000 remained. According to church leaders, an estimated 30 percent of the country's Christian population lives in the north, with the largest Christian communities located in Mosul, Erbil, Dohuk, and Kirkuk.

The Primate of the Armenian Diocese reported that 19,000 Armenian Christians remained in the country, primarily in the cities of Baghdad, Basrah, Kirkuk, and Mosul. The population of Armenian Christians reportedly declined from 22,000 in the previous reporting period.

Yezidi leaders reported that most of the country's 600,000 Yezidi resided in the north, near Dohuk and Mosul. Shabak

leaders stated that the country's estimated 200,000 Shabaks resided mainly in the north, near Mosul.

The Sabeen-Mandaean community continued to decline; according to Sabeen-Mandaean leaders, 5,000 to 7,000 remained in the country, down from 10,000 in the previous reporting period. 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 by organizing travel routes and assisting pilgrims with obtaining immunization paperwork for entry to Saudi Arabia. The Government also provided funding to Sunni and Shi'a *waqfs*, or religious endowments, which accepted Hajj applications from the public and submitted them to the Supreme Council for the Hajj. The Council, attached to the Prime Minister's office, organized the lottery process that selected pilgrims for official Hajj visas from among the submitted applications.

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 place limits on this freedom.

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. 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 right of all religious groups to gather and worship freely; however, in practice, the ongoing insurgency impeded the ability of many citizens to exercise this right.

Although the Constitution generally provides for religious freedom, it is heavily focused on the nation's Islamic identity. 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.

The second clause of Article 2, however, 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.

The Government maintains three *waqfs*, or religious endowments, the Sunni, Shi'a, and Christian and Other Religions Endowments, that 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. Religious study is not mandatory in the north. 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 Muslim 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 (Spring Day), a national holiday, is celebrated as a religious holiday by Baha'is. Christians reported that although Christmas and Easter 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. Under Islamic law, conversion from Islam to another religion is a capital offense. 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. While provisions on freedom of religion in the new Constitution may supercede these laws, by the end of the reporting period, no court challenges had been brought to have them invalidated and no legislation had been proposed to repeal them.

Passports do not indicate an individual's religion; however, the national identity card explicitly notes the holder's religion.

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. Thereafter, a small number of Baha'is were issued identity cards in May 2007. Without this official citizenship card, Baha'is experienced difficulty registering their children for school and applying for passports. Despite the cancellation, as of the end of the reporting period, 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 local Jews from regaining citizenship in the event it is ever withdrawn.

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 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 their 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. 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, such a 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.

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

Religious groups are required to register with the Government. To register, a group must have a minimum of 500 adherents in the country. According to the Christian and Other Religions Endowment, no reliable information was available on the number of foreign missionaries operating in the country.

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 to adhere to conservative Islamic practices. Basrah's education director required 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.

The Women's Affairs Ministry reported that some male government officials, police officers, and Muslim clergymen often insist women cover before these men will speak with them.

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. 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 matters relating to abuses of freedom of religion. Moreover, deficiencies in security force capabilities and in the rule of law made it difficult for the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) or the justice system to investigate or address alleged violations.

Many attributed the continuing high level of 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. 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 Government expressed shock over Pope Benedict XVI's public reading of controversial statements regarding Islam in September 2006. These statements reportedly sparked demonstrations in Basrah and public vows on the Internet to embark on a war against the "worshippers of the cross" by a terrorist group linked to al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI).

The Sunni Arab community often cited police raids of its mosques and religious sites as examples of targeting by the Shi'a-dominated government. According to residents of Fadhil, a predominantly Sunni neighborhood on the largely Shi'a east side of Baghdad, on April 10, 2007, during a raid on a neighborhood mosque, the Iraqi Army killed two men in front of other worshippers during morning prayers. One resident noted that among the dead was the mosque's muezzin, who called the faithful to prayer from the mosque's loudspeakers.

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. During the reporting period, 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 Northern Iraq 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. However, migration statistics were not available.

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, Sabean-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 Dora district to convert, leave, or be killed.

Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitic feeling remained a strong undercurrent during the reporting period. For example, in July 2006, the Speaker of Parliament, Mahmoud al-Mashhadani, accused Jews of financing violent activity in the country to promote a Zionist sectarian agenda. No government official condemned his statement. Moreover, once a significant presence in Baghdad, the country's 2,700-year-old Jewish community is now virtually nonexistent.

Persecution 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 from various religious groups 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 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. During the reporting period, numerous women, including Christians, reported opting to wear the hijab for security purposes after being harassed for not doing so. One Sabean-Mandaean woman reported that she was burned in the face with acid for not wearing the hijab.

On June 20, 2007, suspected members of a Shi'a militia reportedly detonated a bomb inside a Sunni mosque in Haswa, south of Baghdad. Hours later, attackers struck a mosque near Hillah and targeted the imam's house near the mosque, but the cleric fled when he saw them coming, according to the police. The Sunni mosque bombings appeared to be retribution for the June 19, 2007, suicide truck bombing against the Shi'a Khulani mosque.

Also on June 20, 2007, according to police, a Sunni mosque suffered minor damage from a bomb attack in the town of Iskandariyah, and another Sunni mosque was badly damaged by a bomb attack in the town of Jbela, south of Baghdad.

On June 19, 2007, a suspected al-Qa'ida bomber rammed a truck packed with half a ton of explosives into the Shi'a Khulani mosque in central Baghdad, reportedly killing 87 persons and injuring 242.

On June 16, 2007, witnesses and security officials stated hooded gunmen in black blew up the Sunni Ashrah al-Mubashra mosque in Basra after ordering police officers at the mosque to flee. The Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most revered Shi'a cleric in the country, condemned and denounced the attacks on the mosques of Talha Bin al-Zubair and Ashrah al-Mubashra and called on all citizens to prevent, to the best of their ability, such attacks on all shrines and mosques.

On June 15, 2007, an explosion destroyed the Sunni Talha Bin al-Zubair mosque in Basra, apparently in retaliation for the June 13, 2007, destruction of the two minarets of the Askariya Shrine in Samarra, one of the holiest Shi'a shrines. The attack was similar to the February 22, 2006, destruction of the shrine's golden dome that sparked a wave of retaliatory sectarian violence throughout the country.

On June 13, 2007, following the attack on the Asakariya shrine, attackers reportedly set fire to the Sunni Khudair al-Janabi mosque in Bayaa area of Baghdad, and insurgents planted explosives inside the Shi'a shrine of Imam Ali Kamal in Khalis, north of Baghdad, destroying the building completely.

On June 9, 2007, an armed group blew up the Sunni Fatah-Basha mosque in Bayaa. According to the U.S. military, there were no casualties, but the mosque was damaged substantially.

On June 3, 2007, unidentified gunmen shot and killed Iraqi priest Father Ragheed Ganni and three deacons in Mosul when they had returned from celebrating mass.

On June 3, 2007, gunmen reportedly killed Sheikh Ali Khudher al-Zand, imam of a Sunni mosque, in al-Khadhraa district in western Baghdad.

On May 28, 2007, a bomb detonated near the Sunni Abdul Qadir Gilani mosque in Baghdad, killing at least 20 persons. The mosque's imam stated the mosque also suffered serious damage.

On May 4, 2007, the bodies of three Shi'a brothers were found in Adhamiya, a predominantly Sunni neighborhood in Baghdad. On the same day, a Shi'a mosque near the edge of the neighborhood was reportedly burned by insurgents, who kidnapped the mosque's guards.

On April 28, 2007, a suicide car bomber killed 60 persons and injured 170 near the Shi'a shrine to Abbas Ibn Ali in Karbala.

There were reports that on April 22, 2007, gunmen dragged more than 20 members of the Yezidi community off a bus in Mosul and shot them in retaliation for the stoning of a Yezidi woman, slain by fellow Yezidis for having a relationship with a Muslim Kurdish man. These deaths were in addition to the 11 Yezidis killed in the last reporting period, including Ninewa Provincial Council member Hasan Nermo, who was assassinated on April 20, 2006.

On April 28, 2007, a bomb exploded in Karbala near the Imam Hussein Shrine, one of the most important Shi'a holy sites, where the grandson of Islam's prophet Muhammad is buried. The attack killed more than 50 persons. A previous blast occurred on April 14th when a car bomb exploded 200 meters from the shrine as worshippers gathered for evening prayers, killing 56 persons and injuring at least 70 others.

On March 29, 2007, separate attacks targeted crowded Shi'a marketplaces in Baghdad's Shaab district and in Khalis, north of Baghdad. A suicide bombing in Baghdad and coordinated car bombings in Khalis killed at least 119 persons and injured 171.

On March 28, 2007, gunmen affiliated with the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia reportedly stormed homes in Wahda (a Sunni Turkmen neighborhood in Tal Afar) and killed 70, kidnapped 40, and injured 30 in retaliation for bombings in Tal Afar the day before. The March 27, 2007, Tal Afar carnage was the result of truck bombs that exploded in local markets, reportedly killing 85 persons and injuring 183 others. The Sunni and AQL-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) claimed responsibility.

On March 12, 2007, at least 31 houses in a predominantly Shi'a neighborhood in Diyala were doused with gasoline and burned by Sunni insurgents affiliated with the ISI.

Two car bombings, on March 10 and March 11, 2007, killed more than 30 Shi'a pilgrims returning to Baghdad from religious worship in Karbala for the Arbeyeen holiday.

On February 24, 2007, a truck bomb exploded near the Sunni Hay al-Ummal mosque in Habbaniyah, killing approximately 40 persons – including 15 who were praying inside the mosque – and injuring scores. The attack occurred 1 day after the imam of the mosque, Mohammad al-Marawi, had urged worshippers to stand firmly against AQI. Despite warnings from AQI, women in Habbaniyah were not forced to wear the hijab.

On February 15, 2007, allegedly in revenge against 2 Yezidi men found in a car in the company of a married Kurdish woman, dozens of Kurds reportedly attacked the Yezidi district of Shaikhan in Nineveh Governorate, damaging private property and Yezidi cultural buildings.

On January 30, 2007 a suicide bomber struck a crowd entering a Shi'a mosque in Mandali, near the Iranian border, killing 19 persons and injuring 54.

On December 30, 2006, a suicide bomber in Khalis killed Shi'a cleric Sheik Kadhim Hameed Qassim, the sheik of the Khalis Shi'a Mosque, when the cleric arrived at his home after Friday prayers. Officials reported that 10, including the suicide bomber, were killed, and 15 others were injured.

On December 30, 2006, Iraqi Army soldiers reportedly responded to an attack by terrorists on the Al-Hussein mosque in a western district of Baghdad, causing the terrorists to flee before doing any damage.

On December 26, 2006, a car bomb outside the Sunni Abu Hanifa mosque in the Adhamiya district of Baghdad reportedly killed at least 20 persons and injured 35.

On December 4, 2006, gunmen kidnapped an imam of a Sunni mosque in the town of Yathrib, near Balad, north of Baghdad, according to police.

On November 25, 2006, armed insurgents reportedly set the Sunni Al-Nidaa mosque in the Hurriya area of Baghdad on fire by throwing a gas container into the mosque. The mosque sustained smoke and fire damage but was not destroyed.

On November 23, 2006, using three suicide car bombs and two mortar rounds, suspected Sunni-Arab militants conducted coordinated attacks in the predominantly Shi'a Sadr City area of Baghdad, reportedly killing approximately 140 and injuring more than 200. The coordinated bombings followed a 2 hour siege by approximately 30 insurgents against the headquarters of the Shi'a-run Health Ministry in northern Baghdad. In response to the bombings, Shi'a militia groups reportedly fired 10 mortar rounds at the Abu Hanifa mosque in Adhamiya, among the holiest Sunni shrines in Baghdad, killing 1 person and injuring 7.

On September 27, 2006, according to police, gunmen opened fire on worshippers attending evening prayers at the Sunni al-Mashahada mosque in the Hurriya district of Baghdad, killing at least 10 persons and injuring 11.

On September 24, 2006, according to Christian leaders, Assyrian St. Mary's Cathedral of the Ancient Church of the East in al-Riyadh district of Baghdad – home of His Holiness Mar Dinkha II, Patriarch of the Assyrian Ancient Church of the East – was attacked with a hand grenade and a car bomb as worshippers were leaving the Church following Sunday Mass, killing 2 and injuring at least 17.

On September 12, 2006, according to police, insurgents late Monday attacked a Shi'a mosque in Khan Bani Saad, south of Baquba, in Diyala province, killing seven persons, injuring four, and destroying the mosque with mortar fire.

On August 10, 2006, a suicide bomb in front of the Shi'a Imam Ali mosque in Najaf, among the holiest Shi'a shrines worldwide, killed at least 35 persons and injured at least 122, according to the Iraqi Army.

On July 28, 2006, a bomb planted between a youth center and the Sunni al-Ali al-Aadhim mosque in Baghdad exploded as worshippers began leaving after Friday prayers, killing four persons and injuring another nine, according to police.

On July 18, 2006, a suicide bomber attacked a marketplace near the golden domed Kufa shrine in the Shi'a holy town of Kufa, killing 53 persons and injuring at least 105, according to local hospital officials.

On July 17, 2006, attackers set off several car bombs and then rode by in vehicles armed with AK-47s and rocket propelled grenades, shooting into a crowd in the town of Mahmoudiya, south of Baghdad. Al-Qa'ida in Iraq claimed responsibility via a sign hung on a nearby mosque that stated the attack was revenge against JAM.

On July 14, 2006, a bomb killed 14 persons and injured 5 worshippers leaving services at a Sunni mosque in northern Baghdad. On the same day, according to police, five mortar rounds fell near the Shi'a Imam al-Hussein mosque in Balad Ruz, 45 miles northeast of Baghdad, killing 2 persons and injuring 6.

On July 7, 2006, a bomb targeting the al-Furqan Sunni mosque in northeastern Baghdad injured a passerby. Also, a roadside bomb struck worshippers leaving the Ahmed bin Hanbal Sunni mosque in Baquba, northeast of Baghdad, killing one person and injuring five. A car bomb exploded near a Shi'a mosque as prayers were ending in Sinjar, killing 8 persons and injuring 48.

On July 6, 2006, a suicide car bomber killed 12 persons, mostly Iranian pilgrims, at a Shi'a shrine in the southern city of Kufa.

During the reporting period, Sabean-Mandaean leaders reported that their community was increasingly targeted. In addition to forced conversions and hijab wearing by Sabean-Mandaean women, they reported the kidnapping of 23 Sabean-Mandaeans, with at least 9 held for ransom. In all nine cases, ransom was paid in amounts that were not recorded; however, only seven out of nine abductees were released, while there was no further information on the status of the other two individuals. They also reported that Islamic extremists threatened many Sabean-Mandaeans and killed at least five for refusing to convert to Islam.

During the reporting period, there were also reports that Islamic extremists kidnapped Christians, including at least nine priests, for ransom.

On July 17, 2006, a Chaldean priest was kidnapped in Baghdad and released after 2 days.

On August 15, 2006, a Chaldean priest was kidnapped in Baghdad. He was reportedly tortured and released after a month.

On September 16, 2006, a Chaldean priest was kidnapped in Baghdad and released 2 days later.

On October 11, 2006, Assyrian priest Father Paulos Iskender was kidnapped and beheaded in Mosul 1 week later. He was reportedly targeted in retaliation for statements that the Pope Benedict XVI made in September 2006.

On November 19, 2006, a Chaldean priest was kidnapped in Baghdad. He was released after 9 days.

On November 26, 2006, Protestant clergyman Elder Munthir Al-Saqa from the National Presbyterian Church in Mosul was abducted after leading a Sunday Service at his church that day. He was found dead on November 29. The kidnappers reportedly demanded \$1 million in ransom from Elder Munthir's family using his mobile telephone.

On December 4, 2006, a Chaldean priest was kidnapped in Baghdad and released after 6 days.

On May 19, 2007, a Chaldean priest was kidnapped in Baghdad and freed after two days.

On June 6, 2007, Chaldean priest Hani Abdel Ahad and five other Christians were kidnapped in Baghdad. The five Christians were released after 1 day, while Father Hani was released in good condition on June 17, 2007. The Chaldean Church confirmed that the kidnappers demanded ransom but declined to comment on the amount.

Christian leaders inside and outside of the country reported that members of their Baghdad community, especially in the district of Dora, received threat letters demanding that Christians leave or be killed. In press reports Christian leaders stated that 500 families left the Dora District between April and May 2007, and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reportedly counted at least 100 families fleeing Dora.

The magnitude of sectarian attacks on both Sunnis and Shi'a were also extremely high, albeit difficult to track.

The Ministry of Migration and Displacement in Iraq noted in January 2007 that according to its estimates, nearly half of the country's minority communities fled to other countries since 2003. An anonymous UNHCR source in January 2007 reported minorities make up 30 percent of Iraqi refugees, whose total number was then thought to be 1.8 million. The source noted that in Syria alone, 36 percent of the estimated 700,000 Iraqi refugees who arrived there between October 2003 and March 2005 were members of religious minorities.

In addition, according to the International Organization on Migration (IOM), by the end of 2006, there were 1.5 million internally displaced persons in the country. During the reporting period, many families fled mixed neighborhoods for fear of attack, and IOM reports indicated that approximately 247,000 persons were internally displaced during 2006. Sixty-four percent of the internally displaced were Shi'a Muslims, 28 percent were Sunni Muslims, 7 percent were Christians, less than 1 percent were Yezidis, and less than 1 percent were Sabean-Mandaeans.

In addition to targeting non-Muslims, terrorists continued to threaten and attack both Sunni and Shi'a communities during the reporting period. 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 in February 2006. 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.

The Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement estimated in April 2006 that 11,000 families had left their homes following the February 2006 attack on the al-Askiriya Mosque, while the IOM estimated 6,500 families fled their homes. The IOM did not dispute the Government's figures, noting its estimates did not include persons who sought shelter with family or friends. Between February and March 2006, one resident of the Baghdad neighborhood of Dora reportedly fled his home with his wife and four children after militants killed his brother and left a note on his door reading: "Leave the area or have your head chopped off. You Shi'a are traitors and America's allies." The family took shelter in an abandoned sports hall in the Mansour neighborhood.

In March 2006 a Shi'a farmer and his family of seven reportedly fled their home after masked militants threatened to kill his family if they remained in Latifiya, a village south of Baghdad. The family and other displaced persons were reportedly squatting in a derelict hotel in Najaf.

During April 2006 Sunnis reportedly received threatening text messages and videos filmed on mobile phone cameras. In one, a Sunni Iraqi man who entered a mainly Shi'a neighborhood of Baghdad is seen being beaten and killed by men in black clothes. The video was then sent out with a warning that this would happen to any other Sunni who entered the area.

Insurgents attacked mosques in Sunni and Shi'a neighborhoods and killed clerics, other religious leaders, and private citizens of both sects. For example, on June 6, 2007, three unidentified gunmen shot and killed Sheikh Raheem al-Hesnawi, a representative of top Shi'a cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, in front of his house in Najaf. Al-Hesnawi was a prominent Shi'a cleric in the al-Mekhdshab region in southern Najaf. Furthermore, on June 3, 2007, gunmen killed Sheikh Ali Khudher al-Zand, imam of a Sunni mosque, in al-Khadhraa district in western Baghdad. Official death tolls for these kinds of incidents were not available, but individual cases continued to be reported through the end of the reporting period.

Between 2004 and 2006, 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 store owners, primarily Christians and Yezidis, were especially targeted. Liquor stores in Baghdad, Mosul, and Basrah were bombed, looted, and defaced. More than 50 liquor stores operated by Assyrians in Baghdad were closed due to threats by Islamic extremists. Christian leaders verified that Christian owners of movie theaters, restaurants, and liquor stores were targeted during the reporting period; however, detailed information on each of the incidents were not available.

A Chaldean clergyman reported in April 2007 that "in the last 2 months many Churches have been forced to remove their crosses from their domes." For example, Muslim extremists climbed onto the roof and removed the cross of the Church of Saint George in Baghdad. In the Chaldean Church of Saint John, in the Dora district of Baghdad, the parishioners decided to move the cross to a safer place after repeated threats.

The Chaldean Patriarchate in January 2007 officially transferred Babel College, the major Chaldean seminary and the only Christian theological university in the country, from the Dora district in Baghdad to Ankawa near Irbil after months of closure following kidnappings and threats against Christians. Between September and December 2006, the rector and vice rector of the seminary were kidnapped in Baghdad; both were released after a week.

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, the Government took positive steps with respect to religious freedom during the reporting period.

During the reporting period, government leaders 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. 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 repeatedly encouraged unity among the country's religious sects.

The Government canceled Regulation 358 of 1975, which prohibits the issuance of a nationality identity card to those claiming the Baha'i faith.

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.

Approximately 55 Sunni, Shi'a, Christian, Kurdish, and Yezidi religious and tribal figures attended the 2 day Iraqi Inter-Religious Congress conference, from June 11 to 12, 2007, and produced a religious accord calling for a reduction of violence in the country. During a side meeting, Prime Minister Maliki expressed to the delegation his strong support for the future work of the Congress.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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 their lack of protection provided by a tribal structure. For example, Sabeen-Mandaeans reported that since the fall of Saddam's regime, they have become increasingly vulnerable to targeting by Islamic militias. This is because they are few in number, live in small groups spread across the country, and are not able to defend themselves, since nonviolence is a significant tenet of their religion. Sabeen-Mandaeans reported that in Basrah, leaflets were distributed in June 2007 stating, "Sunnis and Suba [slang for Sabeen-Mandaeans] get out." Similar leaflets were reportedly distributed in Nassiriya in May 2007 and in the Hay Al Amil District of Baghdad in June 2007.

Sunni Muslims claimed general discrimination, alleging revenge by the Shi'a majority for the Sunnis' presumed favored status and abuses of Shi'as 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 stated they were disenfranchised and their interests not adequately represented.

The combination of discriminatory hiring practices by members of the majority Muslim population, 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 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 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 U.S. 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. 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.

The Iraqi Institute of Peace (IIP) regularly meets with tribal leaders, senior clerics, and community leaders in tension filled areas to discuss religious freedom issues.

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