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before the

**CONGRESSIONAL INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CAUCUS AND
RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST CAUCUS**

"IRAQ'S VULNERABLE RELIGIOUS MINORITIES"

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Relentless waves of bombings, assassinations, kidnappings, extortions and rapes have triggered a mass exodus of Christians, Mandeans, and Yizidis from Iraq over the past seven years. This continued this year, even this month, with targeted bombings and murders, each incident, it seems, prompting thousands more to flee. On July 5, a Syriac Orthodox man in Mosul was assassinated for what his community believes are religious motives.

Since 2003, over half of the estimated 1.5 million Iraqi Chaldean Catholics, Assyrian, Syriac Orthodox, and Armenian Christians, as well as some Protestants have fled to Syria, Jordan and farther flung places. While only 3 or 4 percent of Iraq's pre-2003 population, they account for 40 percent of its refugees, according to UN reports.

Christians remain the largest non-Muslim minority there, but church leaders express a real fear that the light of the faith in Iraq that is said to have been kindled personally by Thomas, one of Jesus' Twelve Apostles, could soon be extinguished. Iraq's other non-Muslim religions, the much smaller groups of Mandeans (followers of John the Baptist), Yizidis (an ancient angel-centered religion), Bahai's and Jews are also being forced out, and in some cases, their unique language and cultures may not survive in exile.

Religious persecution in Iraq is so "egregious" that the country has now been included, alongside the likes of notoriously repressive Iran and China, on a recommended short list of "Countries of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act, by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

No Iraq group, Muslim or non-Muslim, has been spared massive and appalling religiously-motivated violence; however, as the independent federal commission found, the one-two punch of extremist ruthlessness and deep governmental discrimination now threatens the "very existence" of Iraq's Christian churches, some of whom still pray in Aramaic, the language of Jesus of Nazareth, and Iraq's even older communities of Mandeans and Yizidis.

These smallest minorities are not simply caught in the middle. The refugee branches of both the United Nations and U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops separately concluded

after extensive research that their presence in Iraq is being "obliterated" (the bishops group's term) because of fiercely intolerant attacks specifically targeting them.

The Sunni-Shiite violence rightly concerned the United States. The surge that was devised to alleviate it, however, did not address the unique plight of the Christians, Mandeans, and Yizidis. Evidence suggests it may have even made things far worse for them by flushing terrorists northward into regions where many religious minorities are located around Mosul and the northern Nineveh Plains—Mosul is now the stronghold of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. In 2007, Pope Benedict directly told President Bush that in Iraq, "the society that was evolving would not tolerate the Christian religion." Yet, no American policy has been directed to enable minorities survive the religious cleansing that the invasion unleashed.

Lebanese Christian scholar Habib Malik wrote in a recent publication of the Hoover Institute: "The beleaguered Christian communities [and other minorities] have been marginalized in American strategic thinking and hence expendable next to larger and more pressing economic, political, and security interests."

The Obama administration must act fast to adopt U.S. policies that take into account the reality of the obliteration of the religious minorities who are targeted because they are not Muslim.

It is good for Iraq to have religious diversity, to have these skilled and educated populations. These populations have had a moderating influence on that society; they do not have militias nor engage in terror.. It is also good for the U.S.'s own national interests not to have a religiously polarized Middle East.

The U.S. State Department reports that Iraq's government is not responsible for the persecution of these religious minorities, and that it wants to end the emigration of them. But this misses the point. Iraq's government is not doing enough to protect the minorities, to end the impunity of their oppressors, or to ensure they are treated equally in employment, education and receiving essential government services. In fact, one of the recent measures taken by Baghdad was to urge the European Union, the United States and Australia not to grant these refugees political asylum. This is both cruel and unlawful.

The United States should adopt the policies recommended by the [United States Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) in its May 2010 annual report. I will highlight some that I think should be priorities:

The U.S. government should urge the Iraqi government to:

- undertake prompt, transparent, and effective investigations of all human rights abuses, including those stemming from sectarian, religiously-motivated, or other violence by Iraqi security forces, political factions, militias, or any other para-state actors affiliated with or otherwise linked to

the Iraqi government or regional or local governments, and bring the perpetrators to justice;

- promptly develop and issue new national identification cards that do not list religious or ethnic identity;
- take steps to enhance security at places of worship, particularly in areas where religious minorities are known to be at risk—these must be *proactive*, and not simply taken after each terrorist attack is over;
- replace the existing Prime Minister’s minorities committee with one that is independent and includes representatives of all of Iraq’s ethnic and religious minority communities selected by the communities themselves, and ensure that this committee has access to communicate minority concerns to senior officials of the Iraqi government and the international community;
- enact constitutional amendments to strengthen the Iraqi Constitution’s human rights guarantees by:
 - clarifying sub-clause (B) in Article 2 that no law may contradict “the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in this constitution” to make clear that these rights and freedoms include the principles of equality and nondiscrimination and the human rights guaranteed under international agreements to which Iraq is a state party;
 - deleting sub-clause (A) in Article 2 that no law may contradict “the established provisions of Islam” because it heightens sectarian tensions over which interpretation of Islam prevails and improperly turns theological interpretations into constitutional questions.

Among others, the U.S. government should directly undertake actions to:

- revive the U.S. government’s internal Inter-Agency Task Force on Iraqi Minority Issues and direct it to consider and recommend policies for the U.S. government to address the needs of Iraq’s vulnerable minority communities;
- press the KRG and Kurdish officials in neighboring governorates to cease any interference with the creation, training, and deployment of representative police forces for minority communities, and link progress on representative policing to U.S. financial assistance and other forms of interaction with the KRG;
- demand immediate investigations into and accounting for allegations of human rights abuses by Kurdish regional and local officials against minority communities, including reports of attacks on minorities and expropriation of minority property, and make clear that decisions on U.S. financial and other assistance will take into account whether perpetrators are being investigated and held accountable;

- work with Iraqi and KRG officials to establish a mechanism to examine and resolve outstanding real property claims involving religious and ethnic minorities in the KRG region and neighboring governorates; and,
- increase assistance, and encourage the Iraqi government and U.S. allies to do likewise, to the UN, humanitarian organizations, host nations, and host communities providing necessary aid to vulnerable Iraqi internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, including funding programs to provide medical care, psychological care, educational opportunities, direct financial assistance, basic needs packages, and information campaigns.

There are numerous other policies that the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommends for U.S. policy that relate to helping Iraq's most vulnerable religious minorities. They can be found in their entirety on the Commission's website: www.uscirf.gov.

I thank the two caucuses for holding this critically important briefing and am grateful for the opportunity to participate in it.