

The following letter was sent to President Obama December 7, 2011:

The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

I am writing on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to urge you to raise religious freedom issues in your upcoming meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Since 2008, and most recently in May 2011, USCIRF has recommended that Iraq should be designated as a “country of particular concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act for systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom. Despite an overall decrease in violence in the country, members of Iraq’s smallest religious minorities, including Christians, Sabeen Mandaeans, and Yazidis, continue to suffer from targeted violence, threats, and intimidation, against which the government does not provide effective protection. Sectarian attacks also continue between Sunni and Shi’a Iraqis. Perpetrators of sectarian or religiously-motivated attacks are rarely identified, investigated, or punished, creating a climate of impunity. In addition, the smallest minorities experience a pattern of official discrimination, marginalization, and neglect, particularly in areas of northern Iraq over which the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government dispute control.

Mr. President, in your May 19 speech at the State Department, you pointed out that “democracy depends not only on elections, but also strong and accountable institutions, and the respect for the rights of minorities.” For Iraq to become a secure and stable democracy, it must guarantee and enforce the human rights of all Iraqis, both in law and in practice. USCIRF urges

you to raise with Prime Minister al-Maliki the urgent need for his government to protect Iraq's most vulnerable religious minority communities, who face the threat of religious cleansing, and ensure them justice. Specifically, the Iraqi government should work with the smallest minorities' political and civic representatives to develop more effective security measures; undertake prompt, transparent, and effective investigations of all human rights violations and bring perpetrators to justice; and address the ongoing problems of discrimination, marginalization and neglect of religious minorities.

Prime Minister al-Maliki has made welcome public statements affirming the equal rights of Iraq's smallest religious minorities and denouncing violence against them, and there have been some arrests in high-profile attacks. Nevertheless, he and his government need to do more to turn his rhetoric into reality. Without concrete action to protect their rights, these minorities will continue to flee the country.

Sincerely yours,

Leonard A. Leo
Chair

cc: Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at

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