Systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations continue in Iraq. In recent years there have been an alarming number of religiously-motivated killings, abductions, beatings, rapes, threats, forced displacements and conversions, and attacks on religious leaders and holy sites. In 2011, USCIRF again recommends that Iraq be designated as a "Country of Particular Concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998. USCIRF has recommended CPC status for Iraq since 2008, and placed Iraq on its Watch List in 2007.

BACKGROUND

The smallest religious minorities' numbers are diminishing at an alarming rate. Half or more of the pre-2003 Iraqi Christian community is believed to have left the country, with Christian leaders warning that the consequences of this may be the end of Christianity in Iraq. In 2003, there were thought to be in Iraq 800,000 to 1.4 million Chaldean Catholics, Assyrian Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East members, Syriac Orthodox, Armenians (Catholic and Orthodox), Protestants, and Evangelicals. Today, Christian leaders estimate the number to be around 500,000. Almost 90 percent of the small Mandean community has either fled Iraq or been killed. Mandean leaders have asked that the surviving group be collectively resettled to a third country so that their religion, language, and culture can survive. The Yazidi community reportedly numbers about 500,000, down from about 700,000 in 2005. The Baha'i faith, estimated at only 2,000 adherents in Iraq, remains banned under a 1970 law. Iraq's ancient and once-large Jewish community, many of whose members fled following the founding of the state of Israel, now numbers fewer than 10.

Control over Ethnically and Religiously Mixed Disputed Areas: Many displaced non-Muslim minorities have moved into disputed areas. The Kurdistan Regional Government

(KRG) and the central Iraqi government dispute who should control parts of the Nineveh governorate, which is ethnically and religiously mixed. Religious and ethnic minorities in these areas, including non-Muslims and ethnic Shabak and Turkomen, have accused Kurdish forces of engaging in systematic abuses and discrimination against them to further Kurdish territorial claims. The Nineveh Plains is the historic homeland of Iraq's Christian community, and some minority groups have been seeking an area there specifically for themselves which they argue would help address their lack of security and their political and economic marginalization.

Iraqi IDPs and Refugees: More than three million Iraqis remain displaced in neighboring countries or within Iraq and in need of significant humanitarian assistance. Many of these individuals have fled religious-based persecution. Members of Iraq's smallest religious minorities continue to make up a disproportionate percentage of the refugees who have voluntarily registered with UNHCR in the region.

Constitutional Reform and Representation: Members of the smallest minorities have urged reforms to provisions in Article 2 of the Iraqi Constitution that give Islam a preferred status. They argue that favoring Islam provides a potential justification for discrimination against non-Muslims. In a positive development for the smallest minorities, the 2010 Iraqi parliament (Council of Representatives or COR) reserved eight seats for them: five for Christians and one each for Mandeans, Yazidis, and Shabak. In addition, six Yazidi candidates were elected, bringing the total number of religious minority parliamentarians to 14 (out of 325). A minority caucus was recently established for the first time in the COR.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS

Members of the country's smallest religious minorities experience violence and threats with no effective protection by the government. Sunni-Shi'a tensions remain a concern and violence against women and those with secular leanings continue.

Violence against the Smallest Religious Minorities: The 2010-2011 reporting period saw continued terrorist attacks against the smallest religious minorities and their religious sites. The highest-profile attacks were against Christians. For example, on October 31, 2010, a hostage siege during a mass at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church in Baghdad left more than 50 people dead, and more than 60 injured. The government has since made several arrests, as well as efforts to increase security at churches and in Christian areas. Extremists have also targeted the Mandaean community. For example, an NGO informed USCIRF that nine Mandaeans were killed in Iraq in 2010. In addition, extremists continued to target shops, including by bombing and vandalizing, which provide goods and services they deemed "un-Islamic," including liquor stores owned by Christians and Yazidis.

Sunni-Shi'a Tensions: Sunni-Shi'a mistrust and tensions remains a problem. Serious sectarian abuses were attributed to actors from the Shi'a-dominated Ministries of Interior and Defense and Armed Shi'a groups with ties to the Iraqi government. Since 2007, such sectarian violence has diminished markedly. Nevertheless, the State Department noted that the "sectarian misappropriation of official authority within the security apparatus" remains a concern. In the past year, there were reports of torture and other abuses, some allegedly along sectarian lines, in detention facilities. Organized groups outside of the government, notably the Sunni-dominated insurgency and foreign and indigenous extremist groups, continued to commit serious sectarian abuses as well. The Shi'a-led government's promised integration of Sunni Sons of Iraq members into the security forces and government jobs is still not complete.

Violence against Women and Secularists: Human rights groups continue to express concern about violence against women and girls, including domestic violence and honor killings. Furthermore, women and girls have suffered religiously-motivated violence and abuses, including killings, abductions, forced conversions, restrictions on movement, forced marriages, and reportedly other violence including rape. The State Department also continued to report that extremist groups targeted individuals for “secular leanings” and that, as a result, women and secular Muslims often felt obliged to comply with conservative Islamic norms, particularly related to dress and public behavior.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

The United States is withdrawing its military forces from Iraq. At the same time, the U.S. diplomatic mission in Iraq is growing. Since 2008, U.S.-Iraqi bilateral relations have been governed by a “Strategic Framework Agreement”, which emphasizes cooperation in specific areas including politics and diplomacy, defense and security, culture, and law enforcement, and the judiciary. U.S. diplomacy and programs support “political and economic reform; political party development; respect for the rule of law and human rights; increased government capacity at the national, provincial, and local levels, and an engaged civil society and citizenry…” A number of the programs described include efforts to protect and promote the human rights of women and ethnic and religious minorities. The United States provides significant foreign assistance to Iraq, including funding for security, economic development and democracy, governance, and human rights programs. In Fiscal Year 2010, Congress earmarked $10 million of foreign assistance funds for projects to assist Iraqi religious and ethnic minorities. In addition to designating Iraq as a CPC, the U.S. government should:

- Work with the Iraqi government and the smallest religious minorities’ political and civil representatives to help the Iraqi government develop more effective security measures for these particularly vulnerable communities;
- Urge the Iraqi government to continue the process of ensuring greater sectarian

integration into the government and security forces so that they better reflect the country's diversity;

- Work with the minority communities to help them reach an agreement on what measures are needed to implement Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution, which guarantees "the administrative, political, cultural, and educational rights of the various nationalities, such as Turkomen, Chaldeans, Assyrians, and all other constituents;"
- Fund workshops and training on religion/state issues for Iraqi offices, policymakers, legal professionals, NGO representatives, religious leaders, and other members of key sectors of society, including expanding the State Department's International Visitors Program for Iraqis, in order to focus on exchange and educational opportunities related to religious freedom and tolerance;
- Revive the internal, inter-agency U.S. government task force on Iraqi minority issues and direct it to recommend policies for the U.S. government to address the needs of Iraq's vulnerable minority communities; and
- Ensure that U.S. development assistance prioritizes areas where the smallest minorities are concentrated and that the use of such funding is determined in consultation with those communities' political and civic leaders.

Please see USCIRF's 2011 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Iraq.