

December 13, 2006: Iraq: USCIRF Regrets Lack of Attention to Religious Freedom and other Human Rights in Iraq Study Group Report

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 13, 2006

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WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a bipartisan, independent federal agency, today expressed regret that while one of the Iraq Study Group's recommendations recognizes the importance of guaranteeing the rights of religious and ethnic minority communities and women, "the final report does not broadly incorporate fundamental human rights standards, including the right to freedom of religion, as an integral component of any way forward for U.S. policy in Iraq," said USCIRF Chair Felice D. Gaer. "The Commission has repeatedly stressed that, at a minimum, human rights guarantees in Iraq must protect the security and freedom of all Iraqis, and not be limited only to particular groups," Gaer said. "Every Iraqi, including individual Muslims, should have the freedom not only to worship and to practice his or her faith, but also the right to debate and dissent from state-imposed orthodoxy on issues related to religion." In Recommendation 32 of its report, the Iraq Study Group recommends that "The rights of women and the rights of all minority communities in Iraq, including Turkmen, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Yazidis, Sabeans, and Armenians, must be protected," a recommendation the Commission called for during its presentation to the Iraq Study Group's experts in November. "Yet the Iraq Study Group's recommendations fail to present a strategic vision of human rights promotion and religious freedom advocacy that the Commission believes is critical to securing durable stability in Iraq," Gaer added. "In its 160 page-report, the Iraq Study Group fails to mention the term 'human rights' or its significance to Iraq even once." The Commission has long identified the need for a strong and proactive U.S. role to help advance human rights protections for all Iraqis, a need accentuated by the Abu Ghraib events revealed in 2004 and their aftermath. A redoubled and clear commitment to human rights is vital to any successful policy shift in Iraq. A strong guarantee of equality and nondiscrimination in Iraqi society will be a prerequisite to reducing tensions between Sunni and Shi'a. Human rights protections and accountability for abuses will serve to address past abuses under Saddam Hussein and ongoing abuses that have arisen in the form of death squads and other unlawful violence. Without an effective system that can account for these and other human rights violations, instability will persist. Moreover, human rights protections will, over the long term, help combat extremism and prevent the return of authoritarianism and/or the rise of theocratic rule-an eventuality that would have negative implications for women, minority groups, and others, including individual Muslims who choose to debate or dissent from state-imposed orthodoxy. The Commission urges the administration, the Congress, and other policy makers to incorporate human rights principles into any new approach or strategy for Iraq. The Commission's policy recommendations on Iraq can be found on the USCIRF website, www.uscirf.gov.

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