

Hearing on Sectarian Violence in Iraq and the Refugee Crisis: Opening Remarks by Commission Chair Michael Cromartie

September 19, 2007 Good afternoon. My name is Michael Cromartie, and I serve as chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. I'd like to welcome you today to our second of two hearings on the situation in Iraq. The first hearing, held in July, examined the serious threats faced by Iraq's non-Muslim religious communities, including ChaldoAssyrian Christians, Yazidis, Sabeen Mandaean, and Jews. At today's hearing we will first examine the nature of the intra-Muslim conflict and the extent to which individual Muslims are being targeted for killings and other violence solely on account of their religious identity. Our second topic will be the refugee flows within and from Iraq, and the U.S. government's response to the refugee crisis. This year, the Commission added Iraq to its Watch List of countries requiring close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the government. We made the decision to place Iraq on our Watch List because of the alarming and deteriorating religious freedom conditions for all Iraqis. Despite ongoing efforts to stabilize the country, successive Iraqi governments have not curbed the scope and severity of human rights abuses. Instead, sectarian violence between Arab Sunni and Shi'a factions has become an increasing problem. Although the Sunni-dominated insurgency and foreign jihadi groups are responsible for a substantial proportion of the sectarian violence and associated human rights abuses, the Iraqi government also bears responsibility for actions it engages in and for tolerating abuses committed by Shi'a militias with ties to political factions in the governing coalition. One of the issues we hope to address at our hearing today is the steps the U.S. government should consider to address the security and religious freedom challenges posed by the intra-Muslim violence. The confluence of sectarian violence, religious discrimination, and other serious human rights violations has driven millions of Iraqis from their homes to seek refuge in the Nineveh plains in Northern Iraq, and in predominantly Kurdish regions, as well as in countries outside of Iraq. For the past few years, the Commission has drawn attention to the growing refugee crisis and continues to emphasize the plight of those fleeing religious violence in Iraq. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 4.2 million Iraqis have been displaced since the war began. Of that total, 2.2 million have fled to neighboring countries, the majority to Syria, which until earlier this month maintained an open border policy for Iraqis. Among the most vulnerable are members of religious minorities, the ChaldoAssyrians, Sabeen Mandaean, and Yazidis, who make up a disproportionately large number of refugees from Iraq. As many as 2 million people have been displaced within Iraq. In March 2007, UNHCR announced that Iraqis top the list of asylum seekers in western industrialized countries and that the number of Iraqi asylum claims increased by 77 percent in 2006. UNHCR has registered 170,000 Iraqi refugees and is on schedule to refer 20,000 for third country resettlement this year. It has referred more than 10,000 to the United States, though since the beginning of this year, only 700-900 Iraqi refugees have been resettled here. Clearly, the rising sectarian violence and the associated Iraqi refugee crisis require heightened attention and more effective action by the U.S. government. I would like to point out here that the Commission added Iraq to its Watch List with the understanding that it may designate Iraq as a country of particular concern, or CPC, for severe religious freedom violations next year if improvements are not made by the Iraqi government. Before we hear from our witnesses, let me just say a word about the structure of the hearing. There will be several panels that will address two broad subjects. We will begin our discussion about sectarian and religion-based violence with two distinguished witnesses. When that panel has concluded, we will turn to the situation for refugees in and outside Iraq, beginning first with Assistant Secretary of State Ellen Sauerbray from the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. After her panel, we will hear from a final panel of refugee experts, including the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, to gain further insight into the growing refugee problem. At some point during our hearing, we will also hear from Senators Gordon Smith, Arlen Specter, and Representative Steve Israel. You all have the witnesses' biographies in front of you so I will not repeat them to you here. Given the number of panels we hope to hear from today, we ask that the witnesses on each panel keep to their allotted time of seven minutes in order to allow adequate time for follow-up questions. All of the witnesses have been asked submit longer statements, which, together with transcripts of the hearing, will be posted on the Commission's Website.