

Threats to Iraq's Communities of Antiquity: Opening Remarks by Commission Chair Michael Cromartie

July 25, 2007 Good morning. My name is Michael Cromartie, and I chair the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. I'd like to welcome you to a hearing to examine the serious threats faced by Iraq's communities of antiquity: the country's non-Muslim religious communities, including ChaldoAssyrian Christians, Yazidis, Sabean Mandaeans, and other minority religious groups. Today's hearing is the first of two. The second, scheduled for September, will focus on Sunni-Shi'a sectarian violence, including the Iraqi government's role, as well as the U.S. response to the refugee crisis. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge my fellow Commissioner, Nina Shea, for all the work she has done to keep this issue in the public eye and to help with this hearing. This year the Commission added Iraq to its Watch List of countries requiring close monitoring because of the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by their governments. We made the decision because of the alarming and deteriorating religious freedom conditions for all Iraqis. Despite efforts to stabilize the country, successive Iraqi governments have not adequately curbed the growing scope and severity of human rights abuses. Although non-state actors, particularly the Sunni-dominated insurgency, are responsible for a substantial proportion of the sectarian violence and associated human rights violations, the Iraqi government also bears responsibility. Also influencing our decision to place Iraq on our Watch List are the grave conditions affecting minority religious groups in Iraq, including the ChaldoAssyrian Christians, Yazidis, and Sabean Mandaeans. These groups appear to suffer a degree of attacks and other human rights abuses disproportionate to their numbers. As a result, thousands of members of Iraqi religious minorities have fled the country, seeking refuge in neighboring states and among growing Diaspora communities in the West. Violence against members of Iraq's Christian community is of particular concern in Baghdad and the northern Kurdish regions. Reported abuses include the assassination of Christian religious leaders, the bombing and destruction of churches, and violent threats intended to force Christians from their homes. In some areas, ordinary Christians have reportedly stopped participating in public religious services for fear of inviting further violence. Though smaller in number, Sabean Mandaeans and Yazidis have suffered abuses similar to Christians. Extremists view members of these groups as infidels or outsiders. What is more, religious minority communities often lack the tribal base or militia structures that might otherwise provide security and they are often targeted by both Sunni insurgents and Shi'a militias. According to some reports, nearly half of Iraq's indigenous Christian population is now living outside the country. According to the Mandaean Society of America, approximately 85 percent of Iraqi Mandaeans have fled their country since 2003. This forced exodus may mean the end of the presence in Iraq of ancient Christian and other religious minority communities that have lived on those same lands for 2,000 years. Together with the rising tide of sectarian violence, conditions for religious minorities and the associated Iraqi refugee crisis require heightened attention and more effective action by the U.S. government. Let me ask that the witnesses on each panel keep to their allotted time of 10 minutes in order to allow adequate time for follow-up questions. All of the witnesses have been asked to submit longer statements, which will be posted on the Commission's Website. We have also asked the Embassy of Iraq and the Representative of Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government to submit written statements for the record.