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Protecting Iraq's religious minorities

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By Felice D. Gaer and Archbishop Charles J. Chaput Since 2003, more than 1.5 million Iraqis have fled their country, and a similar number are displaced within Iraq - a massive flight of more than one in 10 members of Iraq's prewar population of 26 million. This exodus has not only caused tragic hardships and uncertainty, but could mean the end of the presence in Iraq of ancient Christian and other religious minority communities that have lived on that land for 2,000 years. Amid the widely publicized cycle of Sunni-Shi'ite sectarian violence in Iraq, members of non-Muslim religious minorities continue to suffer a disproportionate burden of violent attacks and other human-rights abuses. Minority communities, including Christians, Yazidis and Sabeen Mandaeans, have been forced to fend for themselves, and are particularly vulnerable given their lack of a tribal or militia structure to provide for their security. The repeated targeting of Iraqi religious minorities in coordinated bombing attacks and other violence has forced many worshippers to cease attending religious services or participating in religious events. Moreover, they face a continuing climate of impunity. As a result of these attacks, Iraqi ChaldoAssyrians and Sabeen Mandaeans are fleeing Iraq in numbers disproportionate to their size. While they constitute less than 3 percent of the Iraqi population, they represent approximately 40 percent of those who have fled Iraq seeking refugee status over the past three years, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Numbering at least 100,000, these refugees are dispersed today in Jordan, Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Iran and Lebanon. In the countries to which they have fled, their welcome is wearing thin. Iraqi refugees live in fear that they have no legal protection and no work opportunities in the countries where they have sought refuge, and are vulnerable to forced repatriation. When a delegation of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom visited Turkey last month, we met with representatives of Iraqi ChaldoAssyrian refugees who spoke despairingly about their feelings of abandonment by the international community. Moreover, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees has not even acted to assess their claims of religious persecution. They spoke to us of religious leaders being targeted for execution, and of churches being burned and threats posted on Christian homes. Even the trades in which many Christians have long worked in Iraq without problem, including hair salons and the sale of alcohol, have made them targets of extremists who say these activities are against Islam. They report that groups fighting the United States in Iraq are associating Christian Iraqis with the United States and treating them as an internal enemy. In October, UNHCR acknowledged that recent developments in Iraq have "necessitated a reassessment" of its work and priorities of providing assistance to the tens of thousands of Iraqis "who are now fleeing their homes every month" in a "steady, silent exodus." According to UNHCR, those who have managed to flee Iraq increasingly "are becoming dependent and destitute." Despite this grave situation, the United States has not made direct access to the U.S. Refugee Program available to Iraq's religious minorities. The State Department has indicated its willingness to take referrals from UNHCR, but UNHCR has not conducted refugee status determinations for Iraqis. This means that Iraqis fleeing persecution in their home country are being denied international protections to which they are entitled as legitimate refugees. The United States should create new or expand existing options, independent of UNHCR, for allowing members of Iraq's ChaldoAssyrian and Sabeen Mandaean religious minority communities to access the U.S. refugee program. It should also urge UNHCR to assess all claims from Iraqi asylum seekers without delay. Thousands of Iraqis are suffering and fleeing their country, and refugee protections should be available to all of them. Iraq's Christian and other religious minority communities are particularly vulnerable, and UNHCR, the United States and other nations must recognize their special circumstances and address their needs. Surely countries can make "room at the inn" for these vulnerable people so badly in need of help. Felice D. Gaer chairs the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and is director of the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights of the American Jewish Committee. Commissioner Charles J. Chaput is the archbishop of Denver.