



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

November 5, 2010

The Honorable Robert M. Gates
Secretary of Defense
1400 Defense Pentagon
Washington DC, 20301

The Honorable Thomas E. Donilon
National Security Advisor
The White House
Washington DC, 20500

Dear Secretary Gates and National Security Advisor Donilon,

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is alarmed by this week's sharp increase in apparently religiously-motivated terrorist attacks and threats in Iraq.

As you know, a terrorist siege at a Catholic church in Baghdad on Sunday resulted in the deaths of more than 50 people, including worshippers, priests, and Iraqi security forces, and injuries to many others. Two days later, multiple civilian sites in Baghdad, mostly in predominately Shi'a areas but also at a Sunni mosque, were bombed, killing at least 60 and wounding more than 200. The group that claimed responsibility for the Sunday attack reportedly has now threatened Christians throughout the Middle East.

We know that the Obama administration takes these threats seriously. Sunday's attack in Baghdad demonstrates all too clearly these groups' willingness and capability to inflict horrific violence on those they deem the religious "other." In Iraq in recent years, this has included not only Christians but also members of other small minority groups, such as Mandaean and Yazidis, as well as Muslims of different sects or dissenting views. Many innocent civilians have been killed, injured, and forcibly displaced because of their religion or belief. In the case of the smallest, most vulnerable groups, including Christians, Mandaean, and Yazidis, their very existence in Iraq has been jeopardized.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress.

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Given the United States' continued military presence there, we urge the administration to work with the Iraqi government to proactively heighten security at Christian and other minority religious sites. The United States also should press its allies in the region to be increasingly vigilant of the threats by extremists targeting religious minority communities and work together to reduce these threats, in order to secure their well being and help prevent the continued exodus of Christians and other minorities from the Middle East.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Leonard Leo". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "L" and "L".

Leonard Leo
Chair