

# Diminished Religious Freedom in Iraq

By Khody Akhavi | September 19, 2007

Despite the addition of 30,000 U.S. troops to enhance security in Iraq, the freedom of average Iraqis to practice religion deteriorated sharply during the past year, according to a report released last Friday by the U.S. State Department.

The ninth “Annual Report on International Religious Freedom,” which covers 198 countries, described continued violence targeting people of specific faiths in Iraq and largely blamed the ongoing insurgency, as well as “conservative and extremist Islamic elements,” for harming the ability of religious believers to practice their faith.

While acknowledging that some Iraqi government institutions continued their long-standing discriminatory practices against the Baha’i and Wahhabi Sunni Muslims, the report praised the government of Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki for denouncing all incidents of sectarian violence and emphasizing its commitment to equal treatment for religious groups and ethnicities.

The Iraqi Constitution protects religious freedom yet focuses predominantly on Iraq’s Islamic identity, mandating that Islam be considered a source of legislation and that no law be enacted that contradicts the faith’s universally agreed-upon tenets.

“While conditions deteriorated during the reporting period, this situation was not due to Government abuse,” said the report. “Unsettled conditions prevented effective governance in parts of the country, and the Government’s ability to protect religious freedoms was handicapped by insurgency, terrorism, and sectarian violence.”

Four years after the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s government, more than 1.9 million Iraqis remain displaced inside their country, and more than 2 million have fled abroad to neighboring countries such as Syria, Jordan, Iran, Egypt, and Lebanon, according to figures from the UN High Commission for Refugees.

Many Iraqis fled before the fall of Hussein’s government in 2003, but in the following two years, more than

300,000 returned. The trend reversed, especially after the February 2006 bombing of the Shiite-revered al-Askari Mosque in Sammara, which intensified sectarian violence in the country.

Since then, Shiite militia members, unchallenged by the Iraqi government, have been accused of driving Sunnis from religiously mixed neighborhoods in Baghdad. Shiite families experience similar threats and harassment at the hands of self-professed Sunni insurgents.

Iraq’s Christian community has steadily dissipated, similarly driven out by a campaign of intimidation and violence. Of the 1.2 million Christians estimated to be living in the country before the 2003 invasion, only 600,000 remain, according to Chaldean Auxiliary Bishop Andreos Abouna of Baghdad, as mentioned in the State Department report.

“Although [sectarian violence] affected both the Sunni and Shi’a secular Muslim population, non-Muslims were especially vulnerable to pressure and violence, because of their minority status and, often, because of the lack of a protective tribal structure,” said the report.

Shiite (Shi’a) Muslims—predominantly Arabs, but also including Turkmen, Faili Kurds, and other groups—constitute 60-65% of the population. Sunni Muslims make up a 32-37% minority. The remaining percentage is comprised of Christian groups such as Chaldeans, Assyrians, Syrians, Armenians, and Protestants, as well as Yazidis, Sabean-Mandeans, Bahai’s, Shabaks, and Kaka’is.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is also alleged to have engaged in discriminatory practices against religious minorities. Christians living north of the city of Mosul claimed that the “KRG confiscated their property

---

without compensation and began building settlements on their land.”

Despite the claims, non-Muslims were among the 160,000 Iraqis who fled to Kurdish controlled Northern Iraq from more volatile areas in the middle and southern parts of the country, according to estimates by the Iraqi Red Crescent Society.

The George W. Bush administration’s “surge strategy” was aimed, in part, at providing increased security for all Iraqi citizens and, thus, breathing room for political reconciliation among Iraq’s increasingly adversarial political factions.

However, the report underscores the extent to which Iraq’s population continues to be polarized along sectarian lines, as well as the blurring lines between religiously inspired violence and political forces that utilize religion to achieve political ends.

“It is fair to say the attacks can be laid at the feet of the insurgency, whatever and whoever it is,” said Joe Stork, a Middle East expert at Human Rights Watch.

Stork described violence carried out by government-connected Shiite “death squads” as not having “religious freedom connotations” per se, but rather as manifestations of political violence.

“The point of a deadly political contest,” he said.

Analysts are leery of comparing the conditions of religious freedom in Iraq under Hussein to the current situation; Stork would not comment on the issue.

But the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan federal agency that monitors freedom of belief and gives independent policy recommendations to the secretary of state, has placed Iraq on its “watch list” one rung below “countries of particular concern (CPC).”

Iraq was designated a CPC under Hussein from 1999 to 2002 because of systematic government violations of religious freedom but was dropped from the list following the U.S. intervention and subsequent collapse of Hussein’s government.

“Today the issues are different, but extremely serious,” said Judith Ingram, communications director at USCIRF. She said Iraq would be moved to the list of CPCs if improvements to religious freedom are not made in the next year.

The USCIRF has urged the U.S. government to take more effective action to respond to the growing refugee crisis that has grown due to the sectarian violence, and will hold a public hearing on September 19 to examine intra-Muslim sectarian violence, including what role, if any, the Iraqi government plays in that violence.

“From what we’ve seen and written so far, this government body does believe the Iraqi government does bear some responsibility, and we’re trying to determine further how direct that responsibility is,” said Ingram.

---

*Khody Akhavi writes for the Inter Press Service.*

Published by the Right Web of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)). Copyright © 2007, International Relations Center. All rights reserved.

## **The Right Web**

“Exposing the architecture of power that’s changing our world”

### Recommended citation:

Khody Akhavi, “Diminished Religious Freedom in Iraq,” Right Web Analysis (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, September 19, 2007).

### Web location:

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/rw/4565>

### Production Information:

Writer: Khody Akhavi

Editor: Right Web

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz