

USCIRF Press Conference Recommending CPC Designation for Iraq

I'd like to thank the Commission for its continued work on the critical issue of religious freedom. I am eager to read their complete findings with regard to the state of religious liberty in Iraq, and I stand here today to voice my shared concern for the plight of Iraq's ethno-religious minorities including ChaldoAssyrian Christians, other Christians, Sabeen Mandeans, and Yazidis.

Back in 2006 the Iraq Study Group advised the administration that "the rights of all minority communities in Iraq" must be protected.

But we stand here today at a time of diminishing religious pluralism in Iraq—a development which is deeply troubling for both the future of Iraq and the region as a whole.

More than 500,000 Christians, or roughly 50 percent, have fled Iraq since 2003. Even though Christians make up only 3 percent of the country's population, according to the UN High Commission for Refugees they comprise nearly half of all refugees leaving Iraq.

Even as Iraq has continued to stabilize, these minority populations, including the ancient Christian community—some of whom still speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus—is ever dwindling and increasingly vulnerable to targeted attacks and marginalization.

The minorities suffered an additional blow this fall when a provincial election law passed by the Iraqi parliament was at the last minute stripped of a provision that would have guaranteed precious seats in the provincial councils to minorities. While an amendment was later adopted it included fewer seats than originally proposed.

The *Chicago Tribune* recently reported the following: "Iraq's Christians appear powerless against greater forces, and the community in Mosul is divided between those who believe they still have a place in Iraq and those who fear their days here may be numbered... "We normally have about 200 to 300 people attend mass," said Rev. Peter Gethea, a priest at the Seda al-Bashara Assyrian Catholic Church in Mosul. "Last Sunday we only had about 20 people. People are still scared."

Their fear is understandable. This fall was marked by chilling targeted killings in which attackers approached people and ordered them to hand over their I.D. cards which list religious affiliation. Once they were recognized as Christians they were killed. Thousands fled in the wake of these events.

I have been disappointed by this administration's lack of a coherent policy as it relates to the Iraq's religious minorities and I urge the incoming Obama administration to take steps to ensure that these communities are afforded the necessary protections. We must not allow their extinction, from the Nineveh of old, on our watch.