

Religious abuse continues in Iraq, commission says

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Iraq should be designated as a “country of particular concern” because its government tolerates the abuse of religious communities, according to the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) .

The federal commission said many Iraqi religious minorities—including Christians, Yazidis and Sabeen Mandaean—have fled, threatening their faiths’ existence within the country.

“The lack of effective government action to protect these communities from abuses has established Iraq among the most dangerous places on earth for religious minorities,” said Felice Gaer, chair of the commission.

Only five of the nine commissioners agreed with the “country of particular concern” designation, the report noted. That designation is used when a government has engaged in “systemic” and “ongoing” religious freedom violations.

But the report said all of the commissioners agreed the Iraqi government needs to take more action to address the plight of religious minorities.

Commissioners encouraged President-elect Obama’s administration to make prevention of abuse a high priority and to seek safety and fair elections for all Iraqis.

They also asked the U.S. government to appoint a special envoy for human rights in Iraq and Iraqi officials to establish police units for vulnerable minority communities. They also seek changes in Iraq’s constitution, which

currently gives Islam a preferred status, to strengthen human rights guarantees.

Rep. Frank Wolf, co-chair of a congressional caucus addressing human rights, said about 500,000 Christians—50 percent of the population of that faith in Iraq in 2003—have fled the country.

The U.S. State Department designated Iraq as a “country of particular concern” from 1999 to 2002 under the International Religious Freedom Act. It dropped the designation in 2003 after the U.S. war in Iraq began and Saddam Hussein’s government collapsed. In May 2007, the commission placed Iraq on its watch list due to escalating sectarian violence and the conditions affecting religious minorities.