

# Religious Freedom Coalition

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12 August 2005

President George W. Bush  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Will the legacy of the American presence in Iraq be the establishment of Islamic Shari'a law at the great cost of American lives? Nothing can be more significant to the future of Iraq than its Constitution, the bedrock of law and freedom in this new nation where democracy is promised to be "strong and vibrant and vital" (to quote Secretary Rice). If the Administration does not intervene soon, however, there is a very real possibility that the New Iraq will be a nation based on Islamic law and lacking in freedom.

Will the thousands of American and Coalition forces, the tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians and military have died only to create a society in which not even the majority are free? We understand that Iraq will not be a replica of American democracy in its fullest, but there are certain inalienable rights that the dignity of every human being demands. Mr. President, we have followed your call to bring freedom to those without, but it will all have been for naught if the New Iraq becomes a nation where significant portions of its citizens are deprived of their basic God-given rights.

Freedom of religion is the "first freedom," for from it flow all other freedoms that are enshrined in our own Constitution. Islamic Shari'a law, on the other hand, is the antithesis of religious liberty. Unfortunately, the majority of draft resolutions for the new Constitution are, to various degrees, based upon Shari'a law. There is ample evidence, Mr. President, from throughout the Muslim world to demonstrate that religious minorities ALWAYS lose when living under Islamic law; equality has no meaning in such circumstances. Iraqi lawyer and journalist Sattar al-Dulaymi notes that "Islamic law does not speak about rights. Islamic law is a system of orders and prohibitions." If religious minorities are second-class under the law itself, they have little to look forward to.

There are numerous ancient religious communities throughout Iraq, including the Chaldo-Assyrian, Syriac, and other Christians, the Mandaean, Muslim Turkmen, Bahai, Yezidis, and others. Until recently, Christians made up over ten percent of the overall population. In just the past year, however, nearly 100,000 have fled to safer neighboring countries (notably Syria, where Christians actually enjoy relative freedom). Many would like to return to the land of their birth, but to what purpose if they only have a virtual Dhimmitude (second-class citizenship) to look forward to? Bishop Andreas Abouna, speaking for nine Christian denominations in Iraq, has warned that a pro-Shari'a Constitution would "massively speed up the exodus of Christians from Iraq, almost to a

point where the Christian presence could all but disappear.” Iraq without its religious minorities is a much poorer civilization and potentially much more dangerous as well.

While non-Muslims may only be a minority of the overall population – albeit not insignificant – women make up a majority. Even under the repressive Baathist regime, women enjoyed greater political and economic rights than under any Shari’a-ruled land. Women’s rights and religious liberty are, in fact, intertwined, for those who would restrict religious freedom would also take away women’s basic rights. In areas of the Muslim world with a significant Christian population – those places where religious tolerance is respected – women of all backgrounds tend to enjoy greater freedom. Civil courts have presided over personal status laws in Iraq since 1959, but if these are instead relegated to Islamic courts, issues such as inheritance, marriage, and divorce will always see women as the losers. Advance religious freedom, Mr. President, and you also advance women’s rights.

We call upon the Administration to work with its Iraqi counterparts to ensure the establishment of freedom of religion in Iraq. If Islamic Shari’a becomes the law of the land, America’s noble goals and stated aims become little more than a mockery. Those rights enjoyed under the Transitional Administrative Law and demanded by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights will be trampled unless you act now. At a minimum, Iraqis deserve an unqualified guarantee of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief for each individual; unqualified provision of equality for all, including women; and a provision that no law shall be contrary to the rights guaranteed in the bill of rights and international human rights standards. These rights are taken for granted in the United States, but if your Administration shamefully ignores the pleas of these minorities, they may never be realized in this new land of Iraq.

Very Respectfully,

William J. Murray, Chairman  
Religious Freedom Coalition