

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 05 BAGHDAD XXXXXXXXXXXX

SIPDIS

SUBJECT: WHY THE NINE JEWS OF BAGHDAD STAY IN BAGHDAD

REF: XXXXXXXXXXXX

Classified By: xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

(b,d).

1. (S) SUMMARY: Despite the insecurity they face, and the necessity of hiding their identity, the nine Jews living in Baghdad appear set to stay here. Several are simply too old to leave, while others fear the unknown challenges of a new land more than they fear the more familiar, if deadly, perils of their own country. One of Baghdad's last remaining Jews, XXXXXXXXXXXX (strictly protect), told poloff, during conversations that spanned ten months, that the Jewish community in Baghdad continues to suffer from a pervasive sense of fear, but that each member has found a way to survive, endure, and remain. XXXXXXXXXXXX said that some original documents of the Iraqi Jewish community still remain in a former Jewish community center and that many of the community's sacred Torah scrolls are in various locations throughout Baghdad; and noted that she would like USG help in entrusting the scrolls to the expatriate Iraqi Jewish community until the security situation has sufficiently improved to allow Iraq's Jews to return. In the meantime, the Jews of Iraq do not appear likely to share in Iraq's future as a nation; they have no children, and cannot contribute culturally or even materially while unable to participate freely in Iraq's public life. They remain in Iraq, but not of it, hiding at the center of a country whose majority may, one day, welcome them again, but does not accept them at present. It seems unlikely that this fact of Baghdad life will change soon, and so these nine individuals may author the last chapter to the story of an ancient people in an ancient land. END SUMMARY.

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A SINGLE SOURCE  
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2. (S) Poloffs have only met with one member of Baghdad's historic Jewish community -- XXXXXXXXXXXX (strictly protect)(refel) -- despite continual efforts, over a period of ten months, to meet with other members. XXXXXXXXXXXX was unable to introduce Embassy officers to any of her co-religionists. She said that she never told any of the other Jews in Baghdad that she has continually met with Embassy officers since August 2007. She worried that several of them would try to prevent her from traveling to the International Zone; others would fear for their own lives and might cut all contact with XXXXXXXXXXXX; and still others would put XXXXXXXXXXXX's life in jeopardy through their indiscretion, or their attempts to blackmail her with threats to inform terrorists about her contact with the Coalition. Nor did XXXXXXXXXXXX inform any of her co-religionists about her regular, risky visits to Saddam Hussein's former Palace, which currently houses the Embassy, where she has taken part in religious services with Jewish Embassy officers and military officers.

3. (S) At religious services and on other occasions, XXXXXXXXXXXX met repeatedly with a number of Embassy political, economic, and military officers, earning their trust over time. She reported reliably about local developments in Baghdad, sharing stories of violence and reconstruction in her neighborhood XXXXXXXXXXXX. She relayed details about the Jewish community that matched those reported to post from other sources, including Christians in Baghdad and the expatriate Iraqi Jewish community in the U.S., Britain, and Israel. She proved to be a reliable source of information and a generous conduit of support for her community in Baghdad.

4. (S) She, in turn, appeared to relish the opportunity to pray with others, as she said that none of the other Iraqi Jews will risk visiting Baghdad's only remaining synagogue. After one of her first Shabbat services, she told Embassy officers, "This is the first time I haven't prayed alone in three years." During Passover in April 2008, she delivered matzah to four others. One of them reportedly told her, "This is the first time I've truly celebrated Eid (Passover) in more than 20 years." She said that she has shared with other members of her community numerous other donations sent to them from the U.S., including religious implements and commercial products difficult to find in Baghdad markets.

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CONTINUING THREATS AND INSECURITY

5. (S) XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX has also reported, over the course of the winter of 2007 - 2008, a series of challenges that she and her family experienced in their XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX neighborhood. In

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December, one of her neighbors was brutally murdered and beheaded in his home, leaving behind five children; in January, a water main burst and completely flooded her whole street; in April, two mortars landed right near her home. While these experiences reflected a reality shared by the majority of Baghdad residents, some incidents significantly increased XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX's consciousness of her minority status.

XXXXXXXXXXXX recently visited XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX in the hospital where he works XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, and heard from one of his patients: "Your brother is a good doctor, but we're sorry he's Jewish." (NOTE: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX said that she does not know how the patient knew he is Jewish. END NOTE.) On April 20, one of XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX's close colleagues, a 30-year-old female surgeon XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, was raped and murdered in her home.

The perpetrators also killed XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX's mother, whom they then proceeded to cut into three pieces. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX told poloff that she and her brother considered this attack to be sectarian in nature, since XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX is Sunni and her father reportedly served as an officer in the former regime. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX worked at Abn'Al Haythan hospital in the Babil neighborhood of Karada district, which is located down the street from XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX where XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX currently works, and is also very near XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX. She said that vicious attacks like this serve as a chilling reminder that sectarian violence may flare at any moment, with mortal consequences.

6. (S) XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX made clear, over the course of many months of discussions, that the Jews of Baghdad still live under a cloud of fear and suspicion. She said that her two surviving relatives -- XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX -- would never risk their lives by traveling into the International Zone, nor would any of the other Jews of Baghdad. All of them, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX said, concealed their identity on a regular basis; they rarely admitted their identity to strangers, and most of them carried falsified identity documents -- she cited XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX as a stubborn exception. "You can get anything with money," she explained. "I got my new passport in two days." Indeed, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX traveled around Baghdad with her passport because it does not reveal her religion, as her identity card does (reftel). She perceived threats in all directions. She did

not trust the local national employees in the Embassy, and even asked, at one point, whether the Embassy's Peruvian guards might have connections to ordinary Baghdadis and could mistakenly reveal her religious identity.

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SO WHY DON'T THEY LEAVE BAGHDAD?  
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7. (S) Despite the tense environment that they must endure in Baghdad, XXXXXXXXXXXXX and her small community chose to remain in Baghdad. Her reasons were complex. Well aware that she could immediately emigrate to Israel -- since Israel's "law of return" would entitle her to immediate citizenship -- she said that she was not ready yet to begin a new life in Israel, and she appeared extremely reluctant to leave her mother, who is very ill. She also asked Embassy officers if she might qualify for refugee status in the U.S.; when informed that she had a strong case to claim asylum, she explained that she was not ready to proceed with the application process. She expressed the strongest desire to emigrate to Holland, where two of her brothers live.

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THE DUTCH DEMUR  
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8. (S) Poloffs learned from the Dutch Embassy in Baghdad that their Embassy in Amman handled Iraqi refugee issues. On December 4, 2007, poloff met with Bianca Zylfui, chief of the consular section in the Dutch Embassy in Amman. Zylfui said that every year the Netherlands admits 500 members of vulnerable minority communities from around the world. Only a few Iraqis, she said, figure among this group. If XXXXXXXXXXXXX's family is vulnerable, she asked, why are they still in Baghdad? She said that, before proceeding, she would need to find out if UNHCR could process XXXXXXXXXXXXX's case quickly, and added that XXXXXXXXXXXXX would need help getting into Jordan. Even once they arrived in Jordan, and if UNHCR approved their application, Zylfui said the Dutch government might not accept them. If the refugee procedure did not succeed, she added, then XXXXXXXXXXXXX's brothers could petition for the rest of the family to receive immigrant visas. "Both routes are very difficult and there is no guarantee, once they leave Iraq, that they will be accepted" by the Dutch government, Zylfui warned. If the U.S. Embassy described the situation of the Baghdad Jews in writing, she said, then she would pass our message on to The Hague. END NOTE.

9. (S) When informed in December 2007 about the risks and challenges involved in attempting to emigrate to Holland,

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XXXXXXXXXXXX asked for time to think about it, and to discuss the issue with her mother and brother. Two months later, in February, XXXXXXXXXXXX had finally broached the topic with her family, and was disappointed to report that her mother could not and her brother would not travel with her. She remained uncertain as to whether or not she was willing to leave without them. Finally, on May 1, XXXXXXXXXXXX told poloff that she had decided she is willing to leave Iraq for Holland even without her mother and brother; she was not ready, however, she said, to go to Israel or the U.S. without them.

10. (S) XXXXXXXXXXXX also provided her opinion as to why the other eight members of the community have remained in Baghdad:

-- Her mother, XXXXXXXXXXXX, is 83 years old and suffers from "heart failure;" specifically, she has left ventricular failure. "She can't walk now, and she can't travel." She also suffers from depression, XXXXXXXXXXXX said. She will not leave the house and she will not see her friends.

-- XXXXXXXXXXXX (45 years old), told XXXXXXXXXXXX that he knows he can go to Israel whenever he is ready, but he does not want to leave now. XXXXXXXXXXXX said that he believes it will be difficult to start a new life, and he does not want to take his medical exams again. He wants to depend on himself, XXXXXXXXXXXX explained, not people in a new country. She said that she remains perplexed that XXXXXXXXXXXX works in Sadrist-led hospital. "Because he works hard and does free operations, they love him," she explained. He "works twice as hard as his colleagues."

-- XXXXXXXXXXXX, whom XXXXXXXXXXXX and expatriate Iraqi Jews described as the "matriarch" of the community, will not leave because she feels responsible for the other Jews and their collective property and documents. Also, XXXXXXXXXXXX said, she believes that XXXXXXXXXXXX is over 80 years old, and very fearful of the violence in Baghdad; XXXXXXXXXXXX indicated that XXXXXXXXXXXX has not left her home in several years.

-- XXXXXXXXXXXX, 72 years old, suffers from diabetes and hypertension. When XXXXXXXXXXXX asked XXXXXXXXXXXX why he has remained in Baghdad, he replied, "I am old, and no one will

take care of me. I am happy here, and XXXXXXXXXXXXX takes care of me. I do not have enough years left to make a new life."

(NOTE: See below for more information about XXXXXXXXXXXXX. END NOTE.)

-- XXXXXXXXXXXXX, in his late forties, has been to prison six times, according to XXXXXXXXXXXXX, for forging bank documents, among other crimes. He owns many properties and would not be able to operate these properties from outside Iraq, XXXXXXXXXXXXX said.

-- XXXXXXXXXXXXX, who is about 40 years old, and has family in the United Kingdom, appears relatively "happy in his life," XXXXXXXXXXXXX said. He lives with his uncle, XXXXXXXXXXXXX, and most people outside the Jewish community know him as XXXXXXXXXXXXX -- the name on his identity card. "He is a Jew in religion, but on paper he is a Muslim." XXXXXXXXXXXXX said that she believes he is not trustworthy.

-- XXXXXXXXXXXXX, about 65 years old, is XXXXXXXXXXXXX's uncle, and owns several properties in Baghdad, according to XXXXXXXXXXXXX ("as well as many identity cards"). XXXXXXXXXXXXX did not know why he has stayed in Baghdad, but suggested that his nephew and his business interests keep him tied to the city.

-- Emad Levi, about 40 years old, is a successful businessman, XXXXXXXXXXXXX said, who once worked for the Coalition. She believes he was fired when Coalition members discovered that "he didn't translate honestly." She cannot trust or depend on him, XXXXXXXXXXXXX said, adding, though, that he is "not as bad as XXXXXXXXXXXXX and XXXXXXXXXXXXX."

The four Jewish men in their forties are not married, XXXXXXXXXXXXX explained, "because there are no Jewish women."

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THE FUTURE OF COMMUNAL POSSESSIONS  
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11. (S) XXXXXXXXXXXXX controls most of the community's remaining capital and property, XXXXXXXXXXXXX explained, and preserves its official documents in a room in a building that once served as a Jewish community center. The official documents comprise birth, marriage, divorce, and property records. The property appears to include a few homes and offices owned by Iraqi Jews who fled over the course of the past 60 years. XXXXXXXXXXXXX provides money to community members on a regular basis, and also supplies extra cash for special

circumstances and needs, such as medical expenses. "We can trust XXXXXXXXXXXX," XXXXXXXXXXXX said, "She's a good woman. Others will steal." XXXXXXXXXXXX said that XXXXXXXXXXXX trusts her because she has never made any false claims, where others have done so. XXXXXXXXXXXX described XXXXXXXXXXXX as an imposing figure, and said that she was "afraid" to ask XXXXXXXXXXXX what she would like to happen to the community's documents and property after she passes away. XXXXXXXXXXXX said that XXXXXXXXXXXX has implied that she, XXXXXXXXXXXX, will take care of the property, but XXXXXXXXXXXX said that she does not know if she could handle this responsibility. XXXXXXXXXXXX said that when XXXXXXXXXXXX dies, XXXXXXXXXXXX will seek help from the USG to preserve and protect the original documents of the Iraqi Jewish community.

12. (S) XXXXXXXXXXXX also described other communal areas, including a Jewish cemetery that the community was able to restore after 2003, but which the Sadrists controlled during the summer of 2007. She claimed that the Kindi Hospital in Karkh district was built on top of a Jewish cemetery. Baghdad Jews used another major cemetery, in Adhamiya district, from 1924 to 1978. She said that Baghdad residents now use most of the city's synagogues for other purposes, and that the same has happened in Basra, Maysan, Amara, Karbala, and Hilla. She noted, as well, that the tomb of Biblical Prophet Ezekiel is outside Hilla.

13. (S) She said that many of the community's sacred Torah scrolls remain in Iraq -- in the former secret police building (mukhabarat); in the Baghdad Museum (which she referred to as the "Iraq Museum"); in the one remaining synagogue (where she counted 13 remaining scrolls); and in a school in Mustansiya Street in Rusafa, which she described as "like a museum." She said that she believes that six of the scrolls in the Baghdad Museum may have originally come from her synagogue. "Religious Muslims respect the Torah," she noted, including "the New and Old Testament. They don't like the Jews but they do respect the Torah."

14. (S) XXXXXXXXXXXX said that she hopes the Jews of Iraq may return to Iraq one day, and that she would like the USG to help entrust their sacred Torah scrolls to the expatriate Iraqi Jewish community until the security situation has sufficiently improved to allow Iraq's Jews to return with the scrolls. On May 5, she wrote a letter to the Ambassador to this effect:

"To His Excellency the US Ambassador in Iraq,

"I'm an Iraqi citizen (XXXXXXXXXXXX). On my own behalf and that of the Jewish community in Iraq, I ask for your help with the transfer of the Torah scrolls which are currently unused (by Iraqi Jews) and held by the Iraqi museum and the Iraqi intelligence to a safe place outside my country Iraq for use by Iraqi Jews around the world, to be returned to Iraq with the return of Iraqi Jews to their country when security has completely stabilized.

"Our faith in the importance of these sacred manuscripts as a human heritage of our brothers Muslims, Christians and Jews alike is what led us to appeal to you to preserve them for the service of the civilization and history of this ancient country.

"Finally, please accept our wishes of peace to you, your country and to the friendly American people."

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THREE NON-JEWS RISK THEIR LIVES TO HELP  
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15. (S) XXXXXXXXXXXXX, an engineer and a Shia who lives in the International Zone, has cared for XXXXXXXXXXXXX and the Jews of Baghdad for several years. He has donated money and innumerable services, delivered food and other necessities, and facilitated XXXXXXXXXXXXX's travel into and out of the International Zone. During all of XXXXXXXXXXXXX's visits to the Embassy, XXXXXXXXXXXXX and his family hosted her at their home so that she would not have to travel back through Baghdad after dark. Most recently, he transported matzah through checkpoints in Baghdad, at great risk to his own life, in order to distribute them to Jewish homes. XXXXXXXXXXXXX explained that, in one instance, when an Iraqi Police officer said he planned to search the trunk containing the matzah boxes (with Hebrew lettering), XXXXXXXXXXXXX calmly joked that the policeman would find explosives there. "I put mortars there to explode in the IZ," he said. His ruse succeeded, XXXXXXXXXXXXX said, as he made the policeman laugh and persuaded him that he had no need to search the car. When XXXXXXXXXXXXX's husband was kidnapped, her friends told her and her brother and mother not to leave their home. XXXXXXXXXXXXX took care of them all during this trying period; he brought them "everything" they needed,

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XXXXXXXXXXXX said -- "even small things, like soap, garbage bags, rice."

15. (S) Another Shia man, whom XXXXXXXXXXXX referred to only as XXXXXXXXXXXX, has for more than 10 years cared for and protected the synagogue. He has also helped to care for several elderly members of the community.

16. (S) XXXXXXXXXXXX, XXXXXXXXXXXX's Christian neighbor, has helped her for many years to navigate around Baghdad, accompanying her in order to offer protection. He has been a friend to XXXXXXXXXXXX and her family for many years, and has taken risks in order to help and support them.

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COMMENT  
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17. (S) Despite the insecurity they face, and the necessity of hiding their identity, the nine Jews living in Baghdad appear set to remain here. Several are simply too old to leave, while others fear the unknown challenges of a new land more than they fear the more familiar, if deadly, perils of their own country. Unfortunately, when XXXXXXXXXXXX dies, the community may completely disintegrate. As things stand, the Jews of Baghdad currently form a "community" in name only. They share access to what remains of the Iraqi Jewish community's material wealth, but they do not share communal rites. They share an ancient past, but they do not share a future. Nor do they seem likely to share in Iraq's future as a nation; they have no children, and cannot contribute culturally or even materially while unable to participate freely in Iraq's public life. They remain in Iraq, but not of it, hiding at the center of a country whose majority may, one day, welcome them again, but does not accept them at present. It seems unlikely that this fact of Baghdad life will change soon, and so these nine individuals may author the last chapter to the story of an ancient people in an ancient land.

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