

Testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee

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For over a decade, I have been involved in supporting victims of crisis and; advancing religious minorities' and women's rights across the Middle East. Since the emergence of ISIS, I have traveled to Northern Iraq several times through *Roads of Success*, a non-profit organization. Our missions included: (1) trucking medical supplies and basic necessities through the warring zones in Iraq and distributing the items to internally displaced persons in camps where survivors crowd into tents and in the field, such as to the Yazidis on top of the Sinjar mountain; (2) holding workshops in an effort to heal, restore and empower the girls who have been raped and tortured while in ISIS captivity, and (3) spending time on the frontlines with the Peshmerga army (military forces of Iraqi-Kurdistan) witnessing their needs on the ground.

I also visited the Egyptian families of 15 of the 21 Coptic Christians beheaded by ISIS in Libya. I delivered to His Holiness Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria, the condolences of Foreign Affairs Committee, Chairman Royce who wrote,

"Sadly, ISIS is bringing this barbarity across the region-beheading and crucifying those who don't share their dark ideology. The threat from this group seems to grow by the day. It will take all of us, working together, to focus our efforts to ensure this evil is defeated.... As Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, I'm committed to ensuring that the rights of religious minorities across the Middle East are recognized and protected[.]"

To preserve ancient religious minority communities and protect those fleeing from ISIS, I recommend the following:

Directly provide conventional weapons, support services, and training to the military forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government for use exclusively against ISIS;

Increase humanitarian assistance to the Kurdistan Regional Government for its care of millions of refugees and internally displaced persons in the Iraqi-Kurdistan region;

Highlight the Kurdistan Regional Government's crucial role in rescuing the innocent and beating back the menace that ISIS is to humanity;

Increase military and economic support for our other allies in the region who are working to defeat ISIS, particularly Jordan and Egypt.

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In my most recent visit of March 2015, I spent significant time with those displaced and/or affected by ISIS in Iraq and Egypt. It is clear to me that ISIS aims to eliminate all religious minorities in the region; ISIS continues to destroy the towns and livelihoods of the ancient Yazidi, Christian and other religious minority communities. The survivors are calling on the world to save their ancient communities from complete destruction.

Although ISIS intended to destroy through enslavement, rape and torture, they could not capture the souls of the courageous and resilient survivors I encountered. Their hope to remain in the region depends on the brave and courageous leaders of the Kurdistan Regional Government and on those surrounding safe havens such as Jordan and Egypt. I observed a common theme of gratitude by the displaced towards the governments who managed to create safe havens that survivors, at least for now, call home.

As the people of Iraqi-Kurdistan continue to prove themselves against ISIS, it is the responsibility of decent governments around the world to help make the burden of this battle bearable. As ISIS forced millions to flee across Northern Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government took it upon itself to provide shelter, food, medical care and protection to the displaced. Today, the Iraqi-Kurdistan Region has become a safe haven to Shia Muslims, Sunni Muslims, Armenians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriac, Kakai, Shabk, Turkmen and Yazidis-a place of equality, religious freedom and most importantly, safety.

After witnessing the dedication to the displaced of Kurdistan Regional Government leaders and their local workers on the ground, I suggest the following measures:

1. Provide a direct transfer to the Kurdistan Regional Government of conventional weapons, support services, and training to help defeat ISIS-

The brave Peshmerga army, one-third of which are women fighters, defend the innocent without essential weaponry or even basic equipment and have been scarcely paid salaries due to budget issues. They desperately need sophisticated U.S. military weaponry to help them secure their own land, protect religious minorities and defend from ISIS's advance. All of the other noteworthy goals-development, education, infrastructure, the strengthening of the rule of law-are the fruits of a basic level of security. In the present crisis, that security must be won by the force of arms.

2. Increase humanitarian support-

The Kurdistan Regional Government has exhausted most of the humanitarian resources that were available in the region-As they continue to welcome more innocent persons fleeing from the terrors of ISIS while their poverty rate continues to rise and government workers go unpaid for long periods. The U.S. should also call upon the world community to do more in providing tangible humanitarian assistance.

3. Highlight the rescue efforts of the Kurdistan Regional Government - Left with the horrid memories of rape and torture, some of the women and girls once enslaved by ISIS ended their own lives, however, the Kurdistan Regional Government and its friends, are doing everything in their power to help the survivors of those who were in ISIS's captivity. The Kurdistan Regional Government is calling on world governments and NGOs to assist them in the aid, psychological healing, and empowerment of the girls and children who have escaped the horrors of ISIS in Iraq. As a response to the call for help, *Roads of Success* brought a team of U.S. trauma experts to Iraq to aid the victims. I witnessed the transformational growth the girls experienced just after a few hours of counseling and being reminded of their value and purpose, a stark difference after ISIS had sold them as merchandise, classifying their price according to age, beauty, and virginity.

President Masoud Barzani has publicly reported on the Kurdistan Regional Government's rescue of 1,300 people and he pledges that the government will continue to do everything in its power to rescue thousands that remain captive. It is crucial for the United States to highlight the strides made by the Kurdistan Regional Government's rescue missions while continuing to condemn ISIS's brutal attacks-particularly those against girls and children.

4. Increase military and economic support of our allies in the region such as Jordan and Egypt in their fight against ISIS- By strengthening our security and economic cooperation with frontline partners like Jordan and Egypt, as well as the Kurdistan Regional Government, we promote our own national security by helping them destroy the nerve center of ISIS's international operations.

Last week's recent shooting in Texas, likely accredited to ISIS, is one of the many reasons to arm the Kurdistan Regional Government. This incident on our own land is a concrete example of the way the presence of ISIS in the Middle East provides a focus and sense of mission to lone wolves all over the world. Keeping disaffected types everywhere from unifying is a key element to keeping down their violence. ISIS's operation zone in the Middle East is a nerve center for inciting terrorism everywhere, just as Al Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan was in pre-2001.

The Kurdistan Regional Government's track record proves that the people of Iraqi-Kurdistan are reliable friends to the United States and standard bearers of decency in the region-They have acted with humanity and bravery to protect innocent civilians fleeing from terror-regardless of race, creed or religion.

When I had the honor to meet with Iraqi-Kurdistan President Masoud Barzani last week, he reaffirmed his dedication publicly to all religious minorities in the Kurdistan Regional Government region, personally urging them not to flee Iraq but to stay. President Barzani addressed religious minorities, stating via interpretation, "We do not want any of you to think about leaving the country, going to be asylum seekers abroad. I assure that we will be together. Either we live freely in our country or we will die together. "

There are two basic reasons that the United States must do more in the fight against ISIS, particularly, when one considers the plight of innocent people in ISIS's group. First , it is in America's national security interest to see ISIS defeated, both as an idea and as a military movement. Second, the preservation of human life and property-especially of allies like the people of Iraqi-Kurdistan, Jordanians and Iraqi citizens- is commensurate with our highest ideals.

It is true the U.S. can not do everything at all places, at all times, but this crisis is different. We cherish ethnic and religious diversity; ISIS hates it. The U.S. wants peace and security for the entire region; peace for ALL law-abiding people, whether Sunni, Shia, Kurd or from Iraq or Syria's many religious minorities. However, the present crisis may see entire communities purged from the land at the hands of ISIS.

What makes this situation particularly compelling is the role the U.S. has played in greater Iraq over the past decade; our good-will attempt to protect women, religious minorities and sectarian communities through security development, and education. Unfortunately, at present, many of the tools we left behind to assist the Iraqi security forces have been appropriated by ISIS and are being used to terrorize the population. We can do more to stop this scourge.

It is imperative for the U.S. to assist the Iraqi-Kurdistan army now, not only to secure their own land, but to stop ISIS's terrorist acts and recruitment. It is in our national security to act now, and help remove this menace from the world.