

Ambassador Peter W. Galbraith
“Genocide in Northern Iraq”
Testimony before the
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International
Organizations
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on the fate of the Christian and Yazidi communities in northern Iraq. Beginning thirty years ago when I served on the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, I have been visiting Kurdistan and northern Iraq regularly.

Kurdistan is key to any strategy to protect northern Iraq’s Christians and Yazidis. Kurdistan is home to a substantial part of Iraq’s population of both groups and it is the place of refuge for those fleeing ISIS. If ISIS is to be rolled back, the Kurdistan peshmerga will have to provide the ground troops to do so, since the Iraqi Army is significantly degraded and no western country is willing to send its own forces.

Kurdistan is unique in the Middle East for its strong commitment to religious tolerance and diversity. In the 1980s, Saddam Hussein’s regime systematically destroyed every village in Kurdistan, bulldozing or dynamiting homes and deporting the inhabitants. Assyrian and Chaldean villages were among those destroyed. Since it was established in 1992, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has made a special effort to encourage Christians to return to their villages. The KRG has restored property to Christians and has paid for rebuilding Christian villages. The KRG does not use public money to build mosques but it does use to build churches. To be fair, these efforts have met limited success—not due to lack of effort—but because so many Christians have relocated to cities or left Iraq altogether. Today, the KRG is using public funds to create a Catholic University in Ainkawa, the Christian area of the Kurdistan capital, Erbil. There is no similar funding of Islamic Schools.

From the start, the KRG has included Christians and Yazidis in the Kurdistan parliament, as ministers in the Kurdistan Government and, since 2005, as parliamentarians in Baghdad on the Kurdistan party lists. For many years, the KRG Deputy Prime Minister was a Christian as was the Finance Minister. In the current negotiations with Baghdad, the Kurds asked for a ministerial portfolio in the national government for a Yazidi, a demand rejected by Prime Minister-designate Haider al-Abadi.

Since 2003, Kurdistan has been a refuge for Christians fleeing sectarian attacks in Baghdad and other parts of Arab Iraq. In all this time, there has—to the best of my knowledge—not been one religiously motivated attack on Christians or Yazidis within the Kurdistan Region.

Many of northern Iraq’s Christians and Yazidis live in the borderlands between the Kurdistan Region and Arab Iraq. Some, like the Yazidis in Sinjar, lived in areas disputed between the KRG and the federal government. Others, like the Christians on Nineveh Plain, live in areas not claimed by the KRG. And, it is in these borderlands that Christians and Yazidis are most at risk from ISIS.

While I have been to the borderlands in the past, I have nothing to add to the testimony you have already received. The US Government, human rights organizations, and brave reporters like the New York Times' Alissa Rubin have done an excellent job documenting ISIS' crimes. In this case, however, their work is a bit superfluous.

In the past perpetrators of genocide and crimes against humanity have tried to cover up their crimes. ISIS advertises its atrocities in slickly produced videos.

We know what is happening. The question is what will the United States and its allies do about it. I urge the following five steps:

First, recognize that ISIS is committing genocide against Iraq's Christians and the Yazidis. In relevant part, the Genocide Convention says:

“Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

(a) Killing members of the group;

(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; “

ISIS is (a) killing, (b) causing serious bodily and mental harm, and (c) inflicting intolerable physical conditions with the announced intent of destroying the Christian and Yazidi religious groups in their entirety. These actions fit within all four corners of the Convention's definition of genocide.

In her Pulitzer Prize winning book A Problem from Hell on the US response to genocide, Samantha Power points out that genocide is a crime of intent. The treaty's first goal is to prevent genocide. We can't prevent genocide if we wait until everyone is dead. Power chronicles the contortions of successive US administrations from Reagan to Clinton to avoid using the “g-word”. If it is genocide, then the United States is legally and morally obliged to act, which past presidents have not wanted to do. President Obama, to his great credit, did use the word the genocide when he announced airstrikes on August 7. However, what was happening to the Yaizidis was not, as the President, said a “potential act of genocide”; it was genocide.

Second, the United States should do much more to assist the KRG to care of the 1.25 million displaced Iraqis and Syrian refugees now finding safety in Kurdistan. These include almost all of the Christians and Yazidis that had lived elsewhere in northern Iraq. After ISIS began its offensive in June, more than one million Iraqis fled to the Kurdistan Region. Kurdistan's pre-crisis population was just 5 million so the influx amounted to twenty percent of the Region's population. It would be the same as if the United States had fifty million people coming across our southern border this summer, and not just the 50,000 that has so pre-occupied the Congress.

Since February, the Maliki government—supported by Prime Minister-designate Haider al-Abadi—has refused to pay the KRG’s constitutionally mandated share of Iraq’s budget. The KRG has neither the resources to take care of its own people nor to assist the more than one million non-Kurdish Iraqis who have fled to the Region.

This leads to my third recommendation: The United States should prevail on Baghdad to end its vendetta against Kurdistan in the interest of jointly confronting the common enemy of ISIS. This means paying KRG budget arrears immediately, as well extra amounts to care of the IDPs and the 265,000 Syrian refugees in Kurdistan. But, it also means ending self-destructive actions. After ISIS took over Mosul and the Sunni north, Prime Minister Maliki closed Kurdistan’s airspace to cargo flights in order to keep arms out of the hands of the peshmerga. Nothing better underscores the narrow sectarian bias of an Iraqi Government that was willing to risk the lives of six million fellow Iraqis (many of whom are not Kurds) in order to score points in an ongoing policy quarrel. Al-Abadi is from the same political party as Malik and he has so far shown no greater flexibility than Maliki. Maliki and al-Abadi apparently fear that a financially sound and militarily strong Kurdistan might soon opt for independence but their actions are designed to produce just that result.

Fourth, we need to ensure that Kurdistan has the necessary weaponry to defend itself. The peshmerga are the only ground force that can protect northern Iraq’s Christians and Yazidis. The Administration is now facilitating the supply of weapons, but I hope the Congress will monitor the situation to insure the timely arrival of heavier weapons including armored vehicles, anti-tank weapons, and artillery. Inadvertently, the United States provided ISIS--- via the feckless Iraqi army—with the advanced weaponry that it used so effectively against the Kurds, Christians and Yazidis. We should provide comparable weaponry to the only military in Iraq that is reliable ally, the peshmerga.

Finally, we need a broader strategy to combat ISIS. The President is working on a strategy and, from what I have seen, there is much to commend it. It is a mistake, however, to develop a strategy that relies on a more inclusive Iraqi Government. No Shiite-led government that can win over the Sunnis, given how polarized Iraq has become. And, there is no indication that Iraq’s third Dawa-led government has any intention of becoming more inclusive than the first two.

Thank you.

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