

Testimony of Assistant Secretary Tom Malinowski

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Chairman Smith, Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Bass, Ranking Member Deutch and Members of the Subcommittees, thank you for holding this hearing on such a timely and important issue. We, like you, are outraged by the violence waged by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) against Iraqis of all sects, ethnicities, and religions. The U.S. government is very focused on ending ISIL's reign of terror and ensuring protection and access to humanitarian assistance for all its victims. We are particularly appalled by ISIL's targeted and systematic efforts to drive out and potentially eradicate entire religious communities from their historic homelands in the Ninewa plains area and Sinjar district. Among ISIL's clear ambitions is the destruction of Iraq's rich religious heritage and ethnic diversity and absolute subjugation of all people within its reach.

The Iraqi people need and deserve a government that not only represents all of their voices but also provides basic government services and security, paving a stable and prosperous path forward for all the people of Iraq, regardless of religion or ethnicity. The State Department was very pleased to see the new government formed earlier this week, and we are urging them to quickly demonstrate their commitment to be responsive to the ongoing threat against minority populations, including the abduction of and sexual violence against women and children. We are also working with the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government and with a wide array of international partners, to address the urgent needs of Iraqi forces, including Kurdish forces, as they continue to battle ISIL.

When ISIL took Mosul on June 9, the world once again was made witness to the heartbreaking human cost of this group's brutality. Beyond the mass evictions and forced migrations perpetrated against Christians, Yazidis, Shia Muslims including Shabak and Turkmen, and others, we have seen reports of extrajudicial and mass killings, beheadings, abductions, forced conversions, torture, rape and sexual assault, using women and children as human shields, and people being burned or buried alive. Women and girls as young as 12 or 13 have been taken captive, to be sold as sex slaves or put into forced marriages with ISIL fighters.

Meanwhile, we realize that ISIL's recent assault on northern and western Iraq is an extension of its brutal acts in Syria, where it has conducted a similar campaign of violence and atrocities against the Syrian population, targeting broad swathes of the population. There have been reports of mass killings in Christian and Alawite villages, conversion at gunpoint, beheadings, kidnappings, and extreme oppression and abuse of women from all communities. Two Syrian bishops and a priest were kidnapped by extremists in early- and mid-2013, and their fates remain

unknown. And in February, ISIL announced that Christians in Raqqa, Syria must convert, pay a special tax administered during medieval times, or face death—just as it later did in Mosul, Iraq. This, Mr. Chairmen and Ranking Members, to say nothing of the unspeakable atrocities they have committed against members of their own sect, Sunni Muslims, who we've seen ISIL crucify in public squares and stone to death Sunni women accused of adultery, proudly tweeting and posting these horrific acts on Youtube and other social media.

The interconnected aspects of ISIL's campaign of terror in both countries have the potential to further destabilize the region and dramatically increase gross violations of human rights.

Iraqi ethnic and religious minority populations suffer acutely. While exact numbers are not known, many organizations working with displaced Iraqis, as well as religious leaders and activists, believe nearly all of the Christian and Yezidi population in areas controlled or contested by ISIL have been displaced. These are communities that have lived on these lands for thousands of years, forced to flee their ancestral homeland. Shabak and Turkmen Shia have been significantly affected as well, with Turkmen leaders, reporting an estimated 300,000 Turkmen Shia were displaced. My colleagues from the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and USAID will address the issue of displaced persons more thoroughly, so I will focus my testimony on ISIL's brutality and persecution. But I do want to note the immensity of the needs the displaced now face, even to meet their most basic of necessities—clean water, something to feed their children, shelter from the scorching heat as well as the looming winter. These are the challenges my PRM and USAID colleagues are grappling with.

After about a week in Mosul, ISIL began ramping up the pace of religious persecution. Christians were barred from receiving work at public sector jobs and wage stipends. Christian churches and offices were looted and occupied by ISIL. Meanwhile, further west near the Syrian border, dozens of Yezidis were kidnapped for a \$50,000 ransom to avoid execution. A group of Yezidi men held captive had their eyes gouged out for refusing to convert to Islam. They were then reportedly burned to death.

In addition to their attacks on religious minorities, ISIL targeted religious leaders of any group that opposed its unconditional and absolute dominance. According to UN officials, in June ISIL murdered at least 13 Sunni Muslim clerics in Mosul who had encouraged their followers to reject ISIL. They paid the ultimate sacrifice for refusing to submit to ISIL's hateful ideology.

By mid-July, ISIL had destroyed hundreds of mosques and shrines throughout the territory it controlled, destroyed Christian statues of the Virgin Mary, and took sledgehammers to the tomb of the Prophet Jonah in Mosul.

Then we learned of the ultimatum against Christians, Yezidis, and at least some Shia groups in Mosul, that they must convert, pay a special tax I mentioned earlier, or vacate the city by July 19—or face execution. This ultimatum prompted a wave of hundreds more displaced families, robbed of all possessions as they fled the city. We received reports that ISIL took a reported five

Christians unable to flee due to disability or illness to a mosque and forced them to profess acceptance of Islam.

ISIL's second major offensive, on August 2 and 3 led to another wave of displaced people from Ninewa—again, many of them from towns with predominantly Christian or other minority populations. Some were fleeing for the second time. We heard heart-breaking reports of a 3-year old child taken from her mother by an ISIL fighter as the family was forced to continue on.

Concurrently, ISIL also advanced into Sinjar district near the Syrian border, a predominantly Yezidi region. With little warning, Kurdish forces retreated in the face of ISIL's advance and the Yezidi population was left with almost no means of defending itself. Hundreds, if not thousands, were killed, and tens of thousands were stranded on Mount Sinjar where they sought refuge from the immediate onslaught, only to find themselves at risk of perishing from thirst or exposure.

Representatives of the Yezidi community in the United States contacted my bureau, the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) immediately to share the terrible stories of suffering they were hearing from relatives trapped on the mountain, communicating via mobile phones they were sometimes able to charge using car batteries. As the crisis on Sinjar unfolded, my staff organized meetings with high-level officials at the State Department and the White House for representatives of the Yezidi community in the United States and we heard firsthand their stories and requests for assistance. They talked about hearing children crying for water in the background of phone calls with relatives. One man told us how he was on the phone with his brother as the family was fleeing ISIL fighters, and when he called back five minutes later no one answered because, as he learned from another relative, his brother had been shot in the back of the head as he was trying to shepherd his family to safety. One woman described how she had heard a woman being raped by ISIL fighters in the background of a call with another woman.

As you know, on August 7, in addition to authorizing operations to protect U.S. personnel, President Obama authorized a humanitarian effort to help save thousands of Iraqi civilians who were trapped on Mount Sinjar without food and water, facing almost certain death. This effort was reinforced by a series of targeted airstrikes to assist forces in Iraq as they fought to break ISIL's siege of Mount Sinjar and protect the civilians trapped there. The U.S. military conducted seven nightly humanitarian air drops between August 8-13, delivering more than 114,000 meals and 35,000 gallons of water to those displaced on Mount Sinjar. Detailed information—and even GPS coordinates—provided by the Yezidi community in the U.S. on where the people were sheltered on Mount Sinjar helped inform decisions about where to drop aid. Targeted airstrikes helped protect the evacuation route as people were escaping. Our contacts in the Yezidi community also provided us information about where ISIL fighters were advancing or firing on evacuees as they escaped, and we shared this information immediately with the military. During that week, most civilians were able to evacuate from Mount Sinjar.

But not everyone in the surrounding area was able to flee. For example, residents of the village of Kocho were trapped in their village, held hostage for almost two weeks under the threat of death if they refused to convert to ISIL's brutal, twisted version of Islam. On August 15, residents were rounded up at the village schoolyard, where women and children were loaded onto buses and taken away. The men were taken to the outskirts of town and executed, shot in the back of the head at the edge of shallow ditches.

The women and children from Kocho joined the hundreds upon hundreds of others being held captive by ISIL in various cities in northern Iraq. Hundreds of families have reportedly been pressured to convert, in some cases with severe coercion by, for example, forcing mothers to watch their young children beaten until they could no longer stand. In most cases, girls and unmarried women as young as age 12 are separated from mothers and children. We regularly receive blood-chilling reports of girls distributed to ISIL fighters as spoils of war, sold in markets in the cities as sex slaves, or held in houses in small groups where they are raped by a daily rotation of ISIL fighters. We have seen reports that ISIL trafficked hundreds of Yezidi women to Syria for its fighters there. We recently heard reports that a few dozen Christian women from Qaraqosh who had been unable to flee before ISIL's recent offensive were taken to Mosul, likely to same fate as ISIL's other women captives.

Truly, this brutality is beyond imagination, but despite the odds, a few captives have managed to escape, often when their ISIL guards are distracted, for example by airstrikes in the area. One woman shared her reaction after making a 50 kilometer hike from the village where she and her family had been held captive, through the wilderness, to get back to Mount Sinjar and the safe evacuation route the other IDPs had used: "My family—my husband, my two children, and I—were on the run from ISIS. After 20 hours of walking from the town of Til Azir to Mt. Sinjar, everyone was terrified, everyone was shaking, crying. We could only calm down after hearing U.S. jets above us. We felt, 'There is still someone there to save us.'"

Officials throughout the Administration have been closely tracking developments on the ground, and in Washington we are in regular communication with representatives of the Iraqi Yezidi, Christian, and other religious communities in Iraq. They are sharing helpful information with us about ISIL abuses against their community members in northern Iraq and about humanitarian conditions their displaced community members are facing. These reports are invaluable as the entire U.S. government examines all the viable options for protecting Iraq's minority vulnerable communities and halting the parade of atrocities ISIL is committing. My staff in DRL hears regularly from contacts in the Iraqi Christian diaspora in the U.S. and Iraqi Christians in Iraq with information about where aid is reaching IDPs and where more assistance or coordination is needed, which we share with colleagues in PRM and USAID, who also share information they hear from these communities with us. We've met with church leaders like the Patriarch of the Syriac Catholic Church, advocacy and aid groups like International Christian Concern and Catholic Relief Services, and human rights organizations like Yezidi Human Rights Organization—International. Our diplomats in Iraq have the same kinds of meetings regularly.

Likewise, we collect reports from our contacts in religious minority groups facing discrimination about cases of abuse against minorities by local Iraqi or Kurdish security forces.

In Syria, after sustained engagement by U.S. officials, the Syrian Opposition Coalition has committed itself to “the protection and inclusion of all the constituent groups of the Syrian people,” including religious minorities, and to meeting its obligation to “ensure the rights, integration, and participation of all Syrians, regardless of religion...” in the transition process and in the new government. We have received assurances from a number of armed opposition leaders that they understand and are committed to these principles, and we continue to closely monitor the situation.

In Iraq we have repeatedly emphasized to both the Iraqi government and the KRG the need to take measures to protect all Iraqis, including Iraq’s vulnerable religious and ethnic minority communities. During these formative days for the new government, we are continuing to urge political party leaders and lawmakers to be inclusive in their governance, responsive to the needs and concerns of all Iraq’s people. In a phone call with President Obama on Monday, the new Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, expressed his commitment to work with all communities in Iraq. We will continue to press Iraqi and Kurdish regional government officials to take appropriate action to ensure the security and rights of members of ethnic and religious minority communities are respected.

The Government of Iraq has continued to send equipment to the Kurdish forces - the cooperation between Baghdad and Erbil on this effort is at historic levels and we hope to continue to build on that. The Iraqi Air Force continues to provide direct support to Kurdish forces engaged in combat against ISIL. We are also working closely with the Government of Iraq to expedite Foreign Military Sales that will help Baghdad resupply Iraqi forces, including Kurdish forces in the north.

At the same time, we have been and will continue to invest in measures to address the underlying causes of and motivations for violent extremism, religious intolerance, societal polarization, and elected officials. We are working with NGOs, civil society groups, and religious leaders to build relationships between religious communities, combat terrorist propaganda about religious minorities, and administer programs that promote tolerance and empower minorities to better advocate for their interests and rights.

In conclusion, ISIL’s systematic persecution of religious minorities in northern Iraq, and their brutal and oppressive ideology in general, is of utmost concern to the Department and to the Administration. We are painfully aware of the suffering of so many people in Iraq, and in Syria, simply because their beliefs differ from those of these ruthless, inhuman terrorists.

Mr. Chairmen, members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to address you today and for your engagement on this important issue. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have. Thank you.