

Opening Statement of
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Before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health
Global Human Rights and International Organizations
of the
Committee on Foreign Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives

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The ISIS Genocide Declaration: What Next?

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Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this subcommittee and to discuss the next steps that need to be taken needed to protect the survivors of ongoing genocide in Iraq and Syria. Let me begin by saying that the House of Representatives, the State Department and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom are all to be commended for the important step of declaring the situation confronting Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East genocide.

The world's greatest humanitarian crisis since World War II is unfolding now in the Middle East. In addition to millions of refugees, many of the region's indigenous communities now face extinction. These communities may disappear in less than a decade. But their fate is not inevitable. The United States can avert this unfolding tragedy.

A unique historical moment

Around the world, people of good will, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, wish to differentiate themselves from the horrific and violent theology espoused by ISIS.

It is certainly true that such extremists make up a small percentage of Muslims overall. But among the world's billion Muslims, the majority simply want to raise their families in peace and are scandalized by what ISIS is doing in the name of Islam.

Prominent Islamic leaders and scholars from around the world have recently taken an important step in the Marrakesh Declaration.¹ Attempts such as this, which seek to align Islam with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights should be supported.

At the same time, it is clear that Christians, and other indigenous minorities, are experiencing genocide, at the hands of the Islamic State and related groups. Their plight is now at the top of the world's agenda in a way that it never has been before.

These factors together create an unparalleled opportunity for the United States, and for all those opposed to ISIS' radical vision – Muslims and non-Muslims alike – to advance an agenda of equality, justice, peace, and accountability in the region.

Six principles for sound policy in the region

The United States can avert the extinction of indigenous religious and ethnic communities in Iraq and Syria with a policy that contains the following six principles:

- (1) Increase aid and ensure that it actually reaches those most in need;

We are reliably informed that official government and U.N. aid does not reach the Christian genocide survivors in Iraq and Syria.

Repeatedly, we hear from Church leaders in the region that Christians – and other genocide survivors – are last in line for assistance from governments. Significantly, the Archdiocese of Erbil, where most Iraqi Christians now live, receives no money from any government whatsoever. If assistance from outside Church affiliated agencies ends in Erbil, Christians there will face a catastrophic humanitarian tragedy within 30 days. The situation is similar in Syria, according to Christian leaders there.

¹ <http://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org/>

Those who face genocide are a tiny fraction of the population. They often must avoid official refugee camps because they are targeted for violence there by extremists. As a result, these minorities often do not get “official” aid. This will continue to be the reality unless specific action is taken to bring the aid to where these minorities are forced to reside by continuing violence.

The Knights of Columbus and others private sources have responded to this situation. Since 2014, we have raised more than \$10.5 million for relief, assisting Christians and other internally displaced persons and refugees in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. We have partnered with dioceses and religious agencies working in the region to provide general relief, food, clothing, shelter, education, and medical care. In doing so we assist both Christians and non-Christians. We are also working with church entities to ensure that they are making use of all government or U.N. resources available.

But non-governmental organizations can only do so much. Government aid is essential to the long-term survival of these indigenous religious and ethnic minorities. It is urgent that Congress appropriate funding to save those who have escaped genocide. I urge you to consider special emergency appropriations, however modest, to improve the humanitarian conditions on the ground in Iraq.²

This funding, whatever the vehicle, should come with mechanisms in place —reporting requirements and oversight—to ensure that American aid does not get diverted from its intended purpose.

- (2) Support the long-term survival in the region of these ancient indigenous religious and ethnic communities;

In Iraq, the Christians population has declined by more than 80 percent, and in Syria by nearly 70 percent.

American policy should recognize the important differences in the situations of those fleeing violence and those targeted for genocide. And we should prioritize the latter.

Consider this analogy. After World War II, there were approximately 50 million refugees, and only a small fraction were Jews. Yet the world understood that Jews, who had survived genocide, faced a qualitatively different situation, and deserved heightened consideration.

The same is true today for the indigenous religious and ethnic minorities of the region. They have an indisputable right to live in their country – in whatever region of it they wish. Depending on the circumstances, this may mean where they are originally from, or where they find themselves now, but as survivors of an ongoing genocide, they deserve to be prioritized, not left behind by American policy decisions.

- (3) Punish the perpetrators of genocide and crimes against humanity;

The United States should support action by the U.N. Security Council to refer key perpetrators of genocide for prosecution. Equally important, we should support the Iraqi Central

² U.S. State Department and U.N. personnel have mentioned the State Department Economic Support Fund and the United Nations Funding Facility for Immediate Stabilization as two relevant, among others.

Government and the Kurdish Regional Government's adjudication of the cases of thousands of ISIS fighters and supporters who currently remain in local detention centers.

As the population of captured ISIS fighters increases, local detention centers and jails risk becoming their own humanitarian issue.³ The need to improve this situation cannot be overstated.

Additionally, although substantial evidence of genocide exists, the United States should cooperate in taking further action to develop additional documentation and preservation before physical evidence is lost. Appropriations intended to assist in the adjudication of ISIS fighters will be critical in the coming months.⁴

(4) Assist victims of genocide in attaining refugee status.

A news report last week indicated that of the 499 Syrian refugees admitted to the U.S. in May, not one was listed as being Christian or as explicitly coming from any of the groups targeted for genocide.⁵ How long will this situation be allowed to continue?

The U.S. should appropriate funding and work with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees to make provisions for locating and providing status to individuals – such as Yezidis and Christians – that have been targeted for genocide. Many of these genocide survivors fear going into official U.N. refugee camps, where they are targeted. Thus they are overlooked, and find it nearly impossible to acquire official refugee status or immigrate.⁶

Congress should act now. Senator Tom Cotton has introduced the Religious Persecution Relief Act, S. 2708, to provide for overlooked minorities in the prioritization of refugees. We support this bill and urge its passage.

(5) Prepare now for foreseeable human rights challenges as ISIS-controlled territory is liberated by ensuring that Christians and other minorities have equal rights to decide their future;

We should prepare now for the consequences of the liberation of ISIS controlled areas, including Mosul and the Nineveh Region, as well as regions in Syria. We are likely to see another humanitarian crisis as civilians flee the fighting or return to their former communities when fighting ceases.

³ See, Charlie Savage, et. al. *Lack of Plan for ISIS Detainees Raises Human Rights Concerns*, NEW YORK TIMES, (May 11, 2016), at http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/12/world/middleeast/lack-of-plan-for-isis-detainees-raises-human-rights-concerns.html?_r=0.

⁴ Congress can look to fund the State Department Office of Global Criminal Justice and the Human Rights Defenders Fund to help meet this need.

⁵ See, Patrick Goodenough, *Record 499 Syrian Refugees Admitted to US So Far in May Includes No Christians*, CNSNEWS.COM, May 23, 2016, at <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/patrick-goodenough/may-brings-biggest-monthly-number-syrian-refugee-arrivals-conflict>.

⁶ *Fulfilling the Humanitarian Imperative: Assisting Victims of ISIS Violence: Hearing Before the Subcomm. on Africa, Global Health, Global H. Rights and Intl. Orgs. of the H. Foreign Aff. Comm.*, 114th Cong. (2015) (Statement of Carl A. Anderson, Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus). <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA16/20151209/104273/HHRG-114-FA16-Wstate-AndersonC-20151209.pdf>.

There has been much debate concerning plans for victims of genocide in Iraq. Some have argued for returning people safely to the Nineveh Region, others that they should be allowed to stay in Kurdistan, still others that they be allowed to immigrate. But these are not necessarily mutually exclusive, competing proposals. People should be allowed to decide their own future. And when they do, we should work to ensure they are treated with fairness, dignity and equality. This also means that it will be increasingly important to ensure that the property rights and claims of minority groups are respected.

- (6) Promote the establishment of internationally agreed upon standards of human rights and religious freedom as conditions for humanitarian and military assistance.

The United States should advocate for full and equal rights for religious and ethnic minorities in the region in exchange for our military and humanitarian aid. A necessary first step to prevent genocide is to overcome the social and legal inequality that is its breeding ground.

Religious hatred, discrimination and second-class citizenship too often constitute a way of life in the region—and it is a way of life that is an antecedent to genocide. We cannot accept one standard for human rights in the region and another standard for the rest of the world.

The guarantees in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – and the First and Fourteenth amendments to our own constitution – regarding equality under the law and freedom of speech and religion must become a reality for all citizens of Iraq, Syria and elsewhere throughout the region.

Conclusion

The rich tapestry of religious pluralism in the region must be preserved now or it will be lost forever. With its loss will come increased instability and threats to our own security and that of the world.

We have a unique opportunity—and some would say, unique responsibility--to protect the victims of genocide. The United States can provide such protection with a policy that includes the principles outlined above. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much for your leadership and that of the members of this subcommittee.