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**Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International
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Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

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Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle

I commend the two Subcommittees for holding this critically important and timely hearing today. The question of the treatment of religious minorities concerns America's core values as a nation, but, in recent foreign policy, it is one that the United States has too often failed to address, with tragic results. It represents a grave human rights crisis and undermines our national security interests.

I am honored to have been invited to testify for the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom. In my testimony, I will focus on the situation of the various Christian groups in Syria, and the threat they face to their continued existence in their ancient homeland. This threat, which undoubtedly applies equally to Syria's other defenseless and even smaller minorities – such as the Yizidis (80,000) and Jews (under 100) -- about whom there is scant information, is not recognized or understood in US foreign policy. We are grateful to the Subcommittees two chairs, Rep. Christopher H. Smith and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, for giving attention to this issue.

In the Middle and Targeted with Ethno-Religious Cleansing

In Syria's conflict, now characterized as overtly sectarian, every religious and ethnic group* has experienced catastrophic loss and pain. Reportedly over the past two years of war, 93,000 combatants and civilians, of diverse religious identities, have been killed, 1.5 million have become refugees, and 4.5 million more have been internally displaced.

Though no religious community has been spared suffering, Syria's ancient Christian minority has cause to believe that they confront an "existential threat," according to a finding of the UN Human Right Council's Commission of Inquiry on Syria, last December. And this group, in contrast to Syria's Alawites, Shiites and Sunnis, has no defender.

Syria's Christians are primarily ethnically Assyrian but some are also Armenian and Arab, who together number between 2-2.5 million or 10 percent of the population, and follow some ten different faith traditions.** They face a distinct peril so dire that their ability to survive in Syria is being seriously doubted by church leaders and independent secular observers, alike. While in some neighborhoods they struggle to maintain defense committees, they lack militias of their own. Nor do they have protective tribal structures, or support from any outside power. Referencing Syria, Archbishop Elias Chacour, head of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church in Israel, remarked a few weeks ago that, while many people are facing hardship and dying in the Arab Spring, no group is suffering more than Christians.

Living largely in the Syrian governorates of Hassake, Homs, Damascus, and Aleppo, the Christians are extremely vulnerable. They are indeed stranded in the middle of a brutal war, where each side – regime and rebel -- fires rockets into civilian areas and carry out indiscriminate bloody attacks daily. The Christian churches, which were registered and permitted by the Assad regime, have not formally allied themselves with either side in the conflict and in fact Christians have largely avoided taking sides despite intense pressure to do so by both the government and the opposition.

For example, Christians have been reportedly displaced by the regime in Tal Nasri, Um Sharshoh, and the old city of Homs. They have been reportedly displaced by the Free Syrian Army in Mesmye, Daraa, Ghassaniy, Idlib, Quseir and Rable in Homs. And clashes between the two sides caused displacements that disproportionately impacted the Christian residents, though Muslims were also affected, in Ras al-Ayn, Deir el-Zor.

The Christians, however, are not simply caught in the middle, as collateral damage. They are the targets of a more focused shadow war, one that is taking place alongside the larger conflict between the Shiite-backed Baathist Assad regime and the largely Sunni rebel militias. Christians are the targets of an ethno-religious cleansing by Islamist militants and courts. In addition, they have lost the protection of the Assad government, making them easy prey for criminals and fighters, whose affiliations are not always clear.

Wherever they appear, Islamist militias have made life impossible for the Christians. Metropolitan Archbishop Jean Clement Jeanbart, of Aleppo's Melkite Greek Catholic Church, told the Rome-based Catholic outlet, *AsiaNews*, "Christians are terrified by these militias and fear that in the event of their victory they would no longer be able to practice their religion and that they would be forced to leave the country." He explained:

"As soon as they reached the city [of Aleppo], Islamist guerrillas, almost all of them from abroad, took over the mosques. Every Friday, an imam launches their messages of hate, calling on the population to kill anyone who does not practice the religion of the Prophet Muhammad. They use the courts to level charges of blasphemy. Who is contrary to their way of thinking pays with his life."

Unprotected, the Christians are also prime victims of kidnappers and thieves. In one example last February, a Syrian Orthodox dentist in Aleppo told the American Christian

Morningstar News that he finally fled into exile when the constant fear of sniper-fire and kidnapping of Christians made life too dangerous. “Some people would come to my dental office and threaten me with kidnapping,” he says. The outlet reported that “[i]n the city of Hassaké, 50 Christians were kidnapped last month [January]. Most recently, a Christian pharmacist was kidnapped earlier this month and held for a ransom of approximately 11,000 euros.”

Such threats and assaults are driving out the Christians en masse, from various parts of the country. This 2,000-year-old community -- some members of which still pray in Jesus’ Aramaic tongue and trace their churches to St. Paul, who had experienced his conversion to the faith on the road to Damascus -- is now facing extinction.

Archdeacon Emanuel Youkhana of the Assyrian Church of the East, who has been desperately working to cope with the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon and Iraq, wrote to me in February:

“We are witnessing another Arab country losing its Christian Assyrian minority. When it happened in Iraq nobody believed Syria’s turn would come. Christian Assyrians are fleeing massively from threats, kidnappings, rapes and murders. Behind the daily reporting about bombs there is an ethno-religious cleansing taking place, and soon Syria can be emptied of its Christians.”

Targeted Attacks

Syriac League President Habib Afram states that Christians are “systematically targeted” with kidnappings, which are used to collect ransom or to terrorize them into leaving. The highest profile attack was the kidnapping by gunmen in April of two church leaders, Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi and Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim, as they drove back to Aleppo from a trip to the Turkish border where they worked for the release of two kidnapped priests. They have not reappeared. The authors of the attack on these two hierarchs are unknown but it sent an unmistakable signal to all Christians: none is protected.

Other clergy have been kidnapped and disappeared as well. In a report confirmed by the Vatican news agency *Fides*, on February 9, 2013, 27-year-old Father Michael Kayal of the Armenian Catholic Church in Aleppo was abducted by Islamic extremist rebels as he was travelling on a bus on his way to Rome. He was pulled off when Islamist gangs spotted his clerical garb. He has not been seen since. A similar fate befell the Greek Orthodox Maher Mahfouz around the same time.

The American Christian news service *Compass Direct News* reported in December 2012 of the torture and subsequent murder of a Syrian Orthodox parish priest Father Fadi Haddad. He left his church in the town of Qatana to negotiate the release of one of his kidnapped parishioners, but the priest never returned. A week later, Fr. Haddad’s mutilated corpse was found by the roadside, with his eyes gouged out. His murderers are unknown.

Ordinary individuals, too, have been summarily killed after being identified as Christian.

For example, *Fides* reported that a man named Yohannes was killed by an Islamist gunman who stopped the bus he was taking on the way to Aleppo and checked the background of each passenger. When the gunman noticed Yohannes' last name was Armenian, they singled him out for a search. After finding a cross around his neck, "One of the terrorists shot point blank at the cross tearing open the man's chest."

Such reports are not uncommon. A woman from Hassake recounted in December to Swedish journalist Nuri Kino how her husband and son were shot in the head by Islamists. "Our only crime is being Christians," she answers when asked if there had been a dispute.

On February 13, 2013, the *New York Times* reported on Syrian refugee interviews it collected in Turkey:

"One mother told of the abduction of a neighbor's child, held for ransom by rebel fighters in her hometown of Al-Hasakah, which prompted her family to seek safety for their three young sons across the border in Turkey. A young man demonstrated how he was hung by his arms, robbed and beaten by rebels, 'just for being a Christian.'"

Muslims are subject to kidnapping too but the *Wall Street Journal* reported on June 11, 2013, often "their outcome is different" because they have armed defenders. It told the story of a 25-year-old cabdriver Hafez al Mohammed who said he was kidnapped and tortured for seven hours by Sunni rebels in Al Waer in late May. He was released after Alawites threatened to retaliate by kidnapping Sunni women.

Swedish Assyrian journalist Nuri Kino, who travels to the region to interview Christian refugees from Syria recounts the story of Gabriel Staifo Malke, an 18-year-old who fled with his family from Hassake after his father was shot on July 17, 2012, for having a crucifix hanging from his car's rear view mirror: The son told him:

"In Hassake, terrorists had warned Christians that they would be killed if they didn't leave town; there was no room left for us. Most of the others hid their religion, didn't show openly that they were non-Muslims. But not Dad. After the funeral the threats against our family and other Christians increased. The terrorists called us and said that it was time to disappear; we had that choice, or we would be killed."

Many pointed to criminal assaults and a government that fails to protect them. A refugee detailed to Kino: "Two men from a strong Arabic tribe decided one day to occupy our farmland, just like that. When I went to the police to report, I was told there was nothing they could do. The police chief was very clear that they would not act, as they didn't want the tribe to turn against the regime."

A father told Kino: "We're not poor, we didn't run from poverty. We ran from fear. I have to think about my twelve-year-old daughter. She's easy prey for kidnappers. Three children of our friends were kidnapped. In two cases they paid enormous ransoms to get the children back, and in one case they paid but got the child back dead."

Chaldean Catholic Bishop Antoine Audo, the Jesuit head of Syria's Caritas charity, according to a March 21, 2013, AFP interview, said between 20,000-30,000 out of 160,000 Christians had fled the city of Aleppo, and two priests were abducted and held each for a ransom of 15 million Syrian pounds (\$150,000).

In an English-language video, Fr. Fadi al-Hamzi relates that his uncle was recently murdered: "They killed him because he is Christian, they refuse to have any Christians in Syria. . . ." When asked if he was worried if Christians would be massacred if jihadists overthrew the government, the priest said, "Yes, yes, this will be... they don't want us here."

Sharia Courts

Christians, as well as others, also have been targeted with summary executions, forcible conversions to Islam and expulsions from their homes as a result of actions taken by the courts of the "Caliphate of Iraq and the Levant", the name the al Nusra Brigade and other Islamist rebels use in reference to the Syrian territory under their control. The Christians find it impossible to survive under such rule.

According to *AsiaNews*, currently some 30 recognizable militias with some 100,000 fighters operate in Syria, and of these, only a handful belong to the Free Syrian Army, the main interlocutor of the international community. The others are linked to Al-Qaeda or belong to other Islamist or political movements.

Sources told *AsiaNews*, "the purpose of these groups is not only the liberation of Syria from Assad, but also the spread by force of radical Islam throughout the Middle East and the conquest of Jerusalem." Based on interviews with local church leaders, this Catholic press reported that many fighters do not speak Arabic, come from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Indonesia, and, according to some villagers near Aleppo, several, particularly younger, fighters were recruited by being told that they were going to "liberate Jerusalem." These extremists have wasted no time in establishing sharia courts.

Half of Aleppo, which has been under rebel control since last July, in the towns of al-Bab and Idlib and other villages under the control of Islamist groups, sharia has been enforced for the past year. Islamic justice is administered by well-organized courts, the Hayaa al-Sharia, or the Sharia Authority. Controlled by such militias as al Nusra, the Tawhid Brigade, and the home-grown Ahrar al-Sham, these courts, according to a *Washington Post* report, pass sentences "daily and indiscriminately" against Christians and anyone else who fails to conform to Wahhabi Islam. All women are required to cover up with the *abaya*, a black full length gown.

It was in Aleppo, that al Nusra executed a 14-year-old Muslim boy for insulting the Muslim prophet. A coffee street vendor, the boy, Mohammed Qatta, was asked to give a cup free to a customer and he reportedly refused, saying, "Even if [Prophet] Mohammed comes back to life, I won't." Rebels driving by overheard the exchange and apprehended the boy.

What happened next was reported by the *Washington Post*, on June 10, 2013:

"The rebels, according to ABC News' reconstruction of the Syrian groups' reports, appear to have whipped Qatta. When they brought him back to where they'd taken him, his head was wrapped by a shirt.

"The rebels waited for a crowd to gather; Qatta's parents were among them. Speaking in classical Arabic, they announced that Qatta had committed blasphemy and that anyone else who dared insult the Prophet Mohammed would share his fate. Then, the shirt still wrapped around the boy's head, the rebels shot him in the mouth and neck."

Sharia justice, as much as anything, has terrorized Syria's Christians, among others. In April, al Nusra's pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda reinforced their fears of a coming Talibanization of Syria.

After a recent prayer walk in Jordan for the two kidnapped bishops, Syrian Christian refugees told Dutch blogger Martin Janssen that their village of 30 Christian families had a first hand taste of the rebels' new sharia courts. One of Janssen's accounts, as translated by renowned Australian linguist, writer and Anglican priest, the Rev. Mark Durie, follows:

"Jamil [an elderly man] lived in a village near Idlib where 30 Christian families had always lived peacefully alongside some 200 Sunni families. That changed dramatically in the summer of 2012. One Friday trucks appeared in the village with heavily armed and bearded strangers who did not know anyone in the village. They began to drive through the village with a loud speaker broadcasting the message that their village was now part of an Islamic emirate and Muslim women were henceforth to dress in accordance with the provisions of the Islamic Shariah. Christians were given four choices. They could convert to Islam and renounce their 'idolatry.' If they refused they were allowed to remain on condition that they pay the jizya. This is a special tax that non-Muslims under Islamic law must pay for 'protection.' For Christians who refused there remained two choices: they could leave behind all their property or they would be slain. The word that was used for the latter in Arabic (dhabaha) refers to the ritual slaughter of sacrificial animals."

The man told Janssen that his and a number of other families began to pay the jizya but, after the amount demanded kept increasing over several months, the Christians decided to flee, leaving behind their farms and property. Some who could not pay or escape were forced to convert to Islam.

An Orthodox cleric, independently corroborating such accounts, described conditions in the towns taken by rebel forces in the Christian valley outside Homs: “They are ruled by newly-appeared emirs, and those Christians who were not able to flee these places are obligated to pay jizya—a special tax that allows them to remain Christians, and Christian women must hide their faces like Moslem women. If they don’t pay the jizya they are simply killed.”

Christian Refugees

Official information and media reports about the Christians’ fate has been sparse, and Christian refugees have been all but invisible since they are fearful of and avoid Muslim-dominated refugee camps. A report earlier this year by journalist Nuri Kino sheds valuable light on the atrocities visited upon the Christians inside Syria, and their ordeals in attempting to escape, relying as they must on exploitative human-trafficking networks that have sprung up. Entitled “Between the Barbed Wire,” the report resulted from a trip sponsored by a Swedish charity, the Syriac Orthodox Youth Organization, to assess the needs of refugees. It is based on over a hundred interviews this past Christmas with Christian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon.

The refugees and the Lebanese bishops whom Kino and his team interviewed relate that Christians are leaving in a torrent. Once they cross into Lebanon, guided by Middle Eastern versions of “coyotes” through a harrowing series of checkpoints guarded by various sides in the conflict, they mostly seek out the local Christian communities for help. A clearly overwhelmed Archbishop George Saliba, on Mount Lebanon, commented: “I want to help as many as I can, but it is not sustainable. We have hundreds of Syrian refugees who arrive every week. I don’t know what to do.”

Elsewhere in Lebanon, St. Gabriel’s monastery opened its 75 unheated rooms last winter to over a hundred refugees. In another Lebanese Christian town, the Syrian Catholic patriarch Ignatius Ephrem Josef III converted a school building into a shelter for the hundreds of refugees there then and the others constantly arriving. The patriarch described the situation as the “great exodus taking place in silence.” He also said he houses Christians who fled several years ago from Iraq. All of the Christian towns visited for the report were scrambling to keep up with the influx of Syrian Christians. Church leaders were grateful for the beds, washing machines, heaters, and medicine brought by the Swedish visitors.

Some of the Syrians told Kino they plan to stay in Lebanon until Syria “calms down” and they can return to their homes. Many others said going back is “unthinkable” and were making plans to try to get to Europe either on valid visas or by paying smugglers the going rate of \$20,000. They are largely small-business owners and skilled professionals — an engineer and his family, a jeweler and his, a hairdresser, a medical student, etc. Many hoped to be smuggled to Sweden and Germany, where they can receive some state subsidies until they find work. The town of Sodertalje seems to be a popular destination, with 35 new Christian families arriving from Syria each week. Kino, himself a citizen of

Sodertalje, relates that there are already many Syrian Christians living there, and Arabic is becoming as common as Swedish.

Some refugees were young men who deserted from the Syrian military. Others of the refugees were panic-stricken, pointing to some horrifying triggering event that forced them out — a kidnapping of a relative, a murder, or a robbery. They feel targeted for being Christian, which means that militants and criminals can assault them with impunity.

There is no complete data on the number of refugees. Most of the Christians, like the other groups, resettle internally when they leave their homes. How many Christians have fled to other countries is not known and escapees continue to come across the border each day. Only a fraction of the Christians in exile registers as refugees. They bypass the refugee camps where rebels press young men into their militias and many fear being victimized again as vulnerable minorities. Most of the Christians seek help from local churches and monasteries in Turkey and Lebanon.

It is, nonetheless apparent that hundreds of thousands of Christians have already fled. Entire neighborhoods and villages around the Wadi al-Nasara—the Valley of Christians, an enclave of some 30 villages west of the city of Homs, are emptying out. *Fides* reported in March 2012: “The Christian areas of Homs ... are at the center of the crossfire between army and rebels. In Homs there are about 1,000 Christians. A year ago, before the start of the fighting, there were in town, on the whole, 160,000 faithful and four Bishops of various denominations.”

On June 17, 2013, a *Fox News* blog cited a local priest’s report stating that two Christian villages near Homs with a combined population of nearly 1,000, now lie abandoned after everybody fled. Regarding a third Christian village abandoned a year ago, he stated that people recently returned to find their homes either destroyed or taken over by others. “The situation is disastrous,” he wrote.

When the jihadist rebel units take control of a town, like Ras al-Ayn, in Hassake province, it loses its Christian population over night, church sources further report. Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan Eustathius Matta Roham, of Jazirah and Euphrates, confirms that churches and all Christian symbols have been destroyed in Ras al-Ayn. [*Photographs of some of Syria’s destroyed that are provided to us by the European Syriac Union are submitted separately for the record.*]

Most information about these massacres and about the violence perpetrated by the regime comes from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), an organization set up by the Syrian opposition in London. Virtually all international news accounts republish the Observatory’s reporting. According to *AsiaNews*: “For nearly two years, SOHR has reported only acts of violence by the regime against the rebels. Mainstream international media like the BBC, al Jazeera and al Arabiya, have relied on it as their sole source of news.” I note, SOHR is now reporting on some jihadist rebel atrocities.

Some in the opposition openly deny that Christians are victimized for their faith. George Sabra, the Socialist Party leader who is president of the National Syrian Coalition, who comes from a Christian background and is often pointed to by Western supporters as evidence that Christians are represented in the Coalition, insisted to Kino on May 21, 2013 that there is no evidence Syrian Christians are under pressure because of their religion. Sabra was reported to have stated:

"Maybe there are some small events here and there," he said, "but we have not the right to exaggerate with these events to tell it as a fact, as a truth, of the life in Syria. Really it is not true."

Sabra's views are contradicted by the church leaders inside Syria and Christian refugees pouring out of it. We are only beginning to understand the perils Syria's Christians face.

The *New York Times* reported: "Hannibal, a 36-year-old pathologist who fled Syria when his life was threatened by rebels, was not smiling as he talked: 'As Christians in the Middle East, we live in misery and suffer many difficulties. We want nothing more than to emigrate to other places.'"

An Orthodox cleric concludes: "It would not be good if all Christians were to leave Syria, because then the Church would disappear here. But those who stay risk their lives and the lives of their children. Therefore the Church finds itself in a very complicated position. Prayer is our only support. After all, everything is in God's hands."

Regional Religious Cleansing

The devastation of Iraq's Christian community over the past ten years is foremost on the mind of those who analyze the situation of Syria's churches now. In 2003 in Iraq, Christians were some four percent of the population; they are now thought to be 1.5 percent, numbering no more than half a million.

After Saddam Hussein's secular Baathist dictatorship in Iraq was overthrown, up to two-thirds of that country's Christians was driven out in less than a decade. The Iraqi Christians, also with ancient roots in the area, have fled intense violence specifically targeting them by Islamist extremists and common criminals, both of whom operate with impunity. Authorities in Baghdad have been slow to protect Christians, and have watched passively as local authorities have deprived Christians of essential services – including those provided through American reconstruction efforts. In Iraq, too, kidnappers have found the unprotected Christians easy prey.

Like in Syria, no Iraqi group, Muslim or non-Muslim, has been spared massive and appalling religiously motivated violence. However, as the US Commission on International Religious Freedom found, the one-two punch of extremism, combined with deep governmental discrimination and indifference, now threatens the "very existence" of Iraq's ancient Christian churches.

The refugee branches of both the UN and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, after extensive research, separately concluded that these minorities are being “obliterated” (the bishops’ term) because of specifically targeted violence. Wijdan Michael, Iraq’s human rights minister and herself a Christian, concluded it is an attempt “to empty Iraq of Christians.”

Egypt’s ancient Coptic community, about 8-10 million, is the largest Christian and the largest non-Muslim religious minority in the Middle East, and it too is now under threat. They now suffer ruthless attacks by Salafi Muslims, as well as by the military troops, who have gone unpunished for abusing or using excessive force against Christians. Since the Arab Spring ushered in a Muslim Brotherhood government, anti-Christian persecution has increased.

Just a few weeks ago, another attack occurred when an angry mob laid siege to Cairo’s cathedral during the funeral of four Copts who were themselves indiscriminately murdered by another angry mob aroused by a rumor of blasphemy. Repeatedly Pres. Morsi has failed to protect them against violent Salafis. Tens, maybe hundreds, of thousands of Copts have fled the country since the beginning of 2011. Egyptian political scholar, who is my colleague at Hudson’s Center for Religious Freedom, Samuel Tadros, writes: “The Copts can only wonder today whether, after 2,000 years, the time has come for them to pack their belongings and leave, as Egypt looks less hospitable to them than ever.”

Syria’s Christian community constitutes the largest church in the Middle East after Egypt’s Copts. Only one other country in the region has over a million Christians: Lebanon, with about 1.5 million. The other countries of the region count the numbers of Christian populations in the thousands. Except for Saudi Arabia, which has no indigenous church at all left within its borders. Much more is at stake in the fate of Syria’s Christians than the future of the Church itself.

The driving out of Christians from the region, after a two millennia presence there, should be a concern not only to Christians. Lebanese Christian scholar Habib Malik makes the point that Christian minorities have traditionally served as “moderators” and “mediators” in the Middle East. They have often stressed Western-style education, individual freedoms, and women’s rights. A case in point is his own father, Charles Malik, a major drafter of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Malik insists:

”The existence of settled, stable, prosperous, and reasonably free and secure native Christian communities in the Middle East has served in many instances as a factor encouraging Islamic openness and moderation, creating an environment of pluralism that fosters acknowledgment of the different other.”

Without Christians, the Middle East, a cultural cross-roads historically, will become even more radicalized and more estranged from the West. This will be a political problem for the West. As a Chaldean Catholic bishop lamented about his own country, “This is very

sad and very dangerous for the church, for Iraq and even for Muslim people, because it means the end of an old experience of living together.”

American Policy

As my co-authors Paul Marshall and Lela Gilbert and I found in our recent book *Persecuted*, unfortunately, our policy officials often miss or misunderstand the perilous circumstances of Christians and other religious minorities as they make foreign policy.

For example, while there were 90,000 American and NATO troops on the ground in Afghanistan, that country’s last remaining church, in Kabul, was razed in 2010 after its 99-year lease was cancelled. The U.S. State Department knew of this, and even reported on it in September 2011, but no U.S. official took any measure to stop or reverse it. The destruction of Afghanistan’s last church did not draw the international protest that accompanied the Taliban’s destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhist statues in 2001, but it is equally emblematic and even more consequential, depriving a religious community of its only house of worship. While the American people supported President Karzai’s government, financially and militarily, Afghanistan joined the infamous company of hardline Saudi Arabia as a country that will not tolerate any churches. America’s own diplomats and contract workers in Afghanistan must now hide their worship services.

Other examples occurred in Iraq in 2005–08, under the noses of the US occupying power and over 100,000 American troops. During those years, Christians, Mandaean, and Yezidis experienced horrific persecution that ultimately led to a nationwide “religious cleansing” campaign against non-Muslims.

American foreign policy officials appeared to believe that it would be “special pleading” to do anything to help when 20,000 Christians were being violently driven from Baghdad’s Dora neighborhood by Islamist death squads in 2006. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told me that the administration could not protect them from being murdered and kidnapped because it did not want American policy to be seen as “sectarian.” But the U.S. was already deeply vested in sectarian considerations, though not for Christians. At the same time, the U.S. was engaged in a military surge against Islamic Sunni extremists. The U.S. was engaged in intensive efforts to ensure that non-violent Sunnis gained positions in the Iraqi government, which, thanks to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, was run largely by Shias, whom the administration had helped politically strengthen and unify. The problem is that U.S. Iraq policy had many sectarian considerations – except when it came to Christians and other non-Muslims, whom, because they were peaceful, it consistently overlooked.

These attacks on religious freedom in Afghanistan and Iraq took place under two different administrations, one Democratic and one Republican. They happened without a significant policy response from the United States.

Recommendations

The Center for Religious Freedom concludes that Syrian Christians are both trapped in a vise between the two sides of a brutal conflict, and specifically targeted in an ethno-religious cleansing campaign. The US administration is failing to address, or even notice, the particular situation of Syria's Christians. Without delay, it should adopt the following policies:

First, it is critical for the US to officially take notice that, while every group in Syria is suffering, the Christian minorities are currently particularly persecuted; as well as being caught in the middle of a terrible war, they are also the objects of a concerted religious cleansing campaign. The State Department's *Religious Freedom Report* on Syria, issued last month, notes blandly that: "Reports of harassment of Christians, mostly in the context of ongoing political unrest, increased during the year." Also that: "Some Christians reported societal tolerance for Christians was dwindling and this was a major factor for the surge of emigration of Syrian Christians." Few actual cases were cited by the State Department and there's not the slightest hint in this gross understatement that the threat they face is an existential one.

The situation of Christians and other minorities should be accurately reflected in a special report, one that Congress could mandate, and/or in official speeches, from the bully pulpits of our highest level officials. The fact that this cleansing is being missed is reason for the Congress to pass the resolution of Reps. Frank Wolf and Anna Eshoo mandating a special envoy for religious minorities in the Middle East.

Second, US humanitarian aid must also be directed to the institutions that are caring for the Christian refugees. Generous American humanitarian aid – over \$800 million -- for Syrian refugees typically bypasses Christians since they are generally afraid to go to the camps, where they risk further persecution and attack. Churches and monasteries in Lebanon and Turkey are being overwhelmed with Christians escaping violence in Syria and these and similar such facilities need to be identified and provided assistance.

Furthermore, humanitarian aid – and, in the future, reconstruction and development aid – is desperately needed inside Syria. The majority of Syrian Christians, and others, who have been driven from their homes are displaced within Syria and are in urgent need of assistance. The US should provide such aid and must ensure that –unlike in Iraq -- such aid actually reaches the Christians and other smaller minority communities and is not distributed solely through Assad government agencies, or existing opposition groups; aid to them should be distributed through Syrian Christian organizations, including, but not limited to, the churches.

Third, while many Christians wish to continue living in Syria and we hope that the Christian community will remain in their homeland, the US must begin to accept large numbers of the Christian refugees who are not be able or willing to return to Syria and who cannot securely stay in the region. Because as a group, the Christian minority has not been linked to terror by either side, they do not require extensive background checks

and their cases can be expedited. The *LA Times* recently reported that the Obama administration is considering resettling refugees who have fled Syria as part of an international effort that could bring thousands of the 1.5 million or more Syrian refugees currently in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East to the United States. According to a State Department official cited in the *Times*, the Department is "ready to consider the idea," upon the receipt of a formal request from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees. Washington usually accepts about half the refugees that the U.N. agency proposes for resettlement, the paper reports. However, because many Christians avoid registering and entering UN camps for fear of being victimized, they are not likely to appear in the High Commissioner's request. Hence, the administration should ensure that unregistered Christian refugees are included in any resettlement plan, and that their cases are not delayed by unnecessary terrorist background checks.

Fourth, as the administration distributes support, weapons and other aid, lethal and non-lethal, to the members of the Free Syrian Army, it must ensure that none goes, directly or indirectly, to those responsible for religious persecution and cleansing against any group.

In addition, the US should ensure that policing assistance needed for the defense of Christian neighborhoods and villages is provided.

Fifth, the US should make a peaceful settlement in Syria among its highest foreign policy priorities. It should do so in consultations that include appropriate and fair representation of Christian and other small minorities, including through their civic leaders. Charges must be taken seriously by the Syriac National Council of Syria, a coalition of Syrian Christians groups and leaders, that the Syrian National Coalition, with which the West regularly consults, is dominated by Islamist groups and does not include authentic Christian voices. (I have submitted the statement of the Syriac National Council's of Syria's statement separately for the record.)

Any settlement must ensure religious pluralism and freedom through a democratic constitution guaranteeing religious freedom, freedom of expression, personal security, and full recognition of the rights of all minorities, as well as other political and civil rights, including the right to equality under the law for women. Guarantees must be provided against Syria's Talibanization through the forcible imposition of sharia by sharia courts, Islamist security forces, or religious police.

In conclusion, I wish to draw attention to the appeal of Aleppo's Metropolitan Archbishop Jean-Clément Jeanbart, of the Melkite Greek-Catholic Church:

"One suffers for lack of goods, fuel, electricity, sometimes for food. But what makes us suffer most is to see that the future gets darker and darker. The future for us Christians and for all Syrians can only be based on full citizenship, freedom, dignity and respect for others. Otherwise what will happen to us? "

* According to a U.S. government source, the population of Syria is approximately 22.5 million. Sunni Muslims constitute 74 percent of the population and includes Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Chechens, and some Turkomans. Other Muslim groups, including Alawis, Ismailis, and Shia, together, constitute 13 percent. Druze account for 3 percent of the population. Various Christian groups constitute 10 percent. There is also a tiny Jewish population, numbering between 20-100 people. Yezidis number about 80,000.

** Most Christians belong to the Orthodox churches, the Uniate churches (which recognize Roman Catholic papal authority), the independent Nestorian Church and several Protestant churches.