



United States Institute of Peace

The ISIS Genocide Declaration: What Next?

**Testimony before the
House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights, and International Organizations**

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Introduction

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the current situation of religious minorities in Iraq, efforts of the Government of Iraq (GoI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government to provide assistance, and steps that can be taken to help improve the situation of minorities in Iraq.

I testify before you today as a Senior Program Officer of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). The views expressed here represent my own and not those of USIP. USIP was established by Congress over 30 years ago as an independent, national institute dedicated to the proposition that peace is possible, practical, and essential to our national and global security. The Institute engages directly in conflict zones and provides tools, analysis, training, education, and resources to those working for peace. USIP has worked extensively with minority groups in Iraq, including supporting the establishment of the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities in 2011 to strengthen their joint efforts to advocate for their rights as citizens.

I commend Congress' continued interest in this issue, especially in light of Secretary of State John Kerry's March 17 designation of the atrocities against minority religious groups in Iraq, including Shia Muslims, as genocide. Members of the U.S. Congress, as you know, have sponsored legislation calling for the same and appealing for the U.S. Government and the international community to take more action to protect religious minorities in Iraq. The ethnic and religious minorities, as well as non-minorities of Iraq need all the help they can get.

The American democracy is proof that ethnically and religiously diverse society can work. The Middle East is one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse societies on the planet. Iraq, home to ancient civilizations, has had a particularly rich mosaic of peoples. Although it is easy to grow despondent about the ethnic and religious cleansing that has taken place, it is still possible to envision an Iraq and a Middle East with a mosaic society at peace. But it takes commitment and methodical work, resources and time to provide alternatives to violence.

My testimony will address:

- How religious minorities are affected by the larger conflicts within Iraq, in the region, and among international powers. Unless those conflicts are resolved or at least mitigated, the minorities caught in the maelstrom will continue to be vulnerable.
- A reminder of attacks on Iraqi minorities that decimated their numbers even before the rampage of the self-styled Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL, Daesh, or other names), and the collective toll over the decades.
- The record of Iraq's minorities in working to improve their own economic, social and political conditions in the country, and in responding in the aftermath of the ISIS attacks. The repeated mobilization of these communities to help themselves illustrates the potential when they receive the international community's support.
- The response of the Iraqi and Kurdistan Regional governments, the United States, and the international community to help religious minorities—and what supporters can do moving forward.

The Dilemma of Religious Minorities: Ensnared in Larger Conflicts

Religious minorities in Iraq have been adversely affected by conflicts repeatedly over the decades, from Saddam Hussein's destruction of thousands of villages in the 1980s to direct attacks from ISIS's predecessors, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI, aka al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia), which morphed into the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2006 and ISIS in 2013.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the conflict involving ISIS has displaced more than 3.3 million people in Iraq, including some 1 million minorities. ISIS continues to control or threaten minority areas in Iraq's Nineveh Province.

As a result, the number of religious minorities in Iraq has dropped precipitously. While there has been no census in Iraq for decades, Christian groups in Iraq estimate their numbers have declined from about 1.5 million in 2003 to less than one-third of that now. The Yazidis cite more than 70 acts of genocide perpetrated against them throughout their history. These onslaughts have left only about 1 million Yazidis worldwide, including between 500,000 and 700,000 in Iraq. The Sabean-Mandaeans have been less directly targeted by ISIS, perhaps only because they live further away, but their numbers too have fallen to a few thousand worldwide, most within Iraq. No Jews are known to be left in areas controlled by the Iraqi government or by ISIS, and only a small number of Jews—probably in the hundreds or fewer—remain in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Religious minorities in Iraq have long faced existential threats largely because of broader conflicts, circumstances, and actors outside their control and because of genocidal ideologies or tactics that predate ISIS.

Sunni-Shia and Arab-Persian competition produced an eight-year war between Iraq and Iran from 1980 to 1988 that cost the lives of more than 600,000 people¹ with many minorities caught in the middle. Also in the 1980s, Saddam Hussein and the Baath Party perpetrated genocide against the Kurds; used chemical weapons, rape and torture against innocent civilians; and destroyed over 4,500 villages. ISIS continues to perpetrate similar acts today. ISIS has taken thousands of Yazidi and Christian women and young girls as sex-slaves from Sinjar and other areas of Nineveh, used chemical weapons that killed minority Turkmen in Taza district, and massacred as many as 1,700 mostly Shia military cadets and soldiers near Tikrit.

ISIS is both a cause of atrocities and a symptom of governance failure resulting from political division and competition for power among Iraq's main ethno-sectarian forces (mainly the Shia, Sunnis, and the Kurds) and their regional backers. The group also grew from the belief that the use of force and violence are the only means to win or to resolve differences.

In Iraq, religious minorities have been caught in disputes between the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government over internal boundaries and the political agendas of big political parties. Of course religious minorities also have had their own internal disputes, such as

¹ PRIO Battle Deaths Dataset - Lacina, Bethany & Nils Petter Gleditsch, 2005. 'Monitoring Trends in Global Combat: A New Dataset of Battle Deaths', *European Journal of Population* 21(2-3): 145-166.

one that came close to triggering violence in 2012 between the Christians and the Shabak in the town of Bartella in the Nineveh Plain, a sweeping, multi-ethnic area in the Nineveh Province.

Iraqi and Kurdistan Regional Governments Response to the Needs of Displaced Minorities

Security

Failures of the political process and exclusionary policies of political leaders, such as former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, triggered the current cycle of conflict in Iraq. Internally displaced people (IDP's), especially religious minorities, see the government of Iraq and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) as having failed to protect them, especially after official Iraqi military units abandoned their locations and weapons in Nineveh and other places in the summer of 2014, allowing ISIS to overrun large swaths of northwestern Iraq in a matter of a few days. Religious minorities, particularly the Yazidis and Christians, also feel the Kurdistan Regional Government failed to protect them in Sinjar and other areas of the Nineveh Plain during that devastating period.

Yet the vast majority of Iraqi minorities are now taking refuge in areas protected by the Kurdish Peshmerga that control not only the autonomous region, but also much of the Nineveh Plain and Kirkuk Province. Other armed groups, like the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party, also play a role protecting minorities in some liberated areas of Nineveh. But it is the Peshmerga, supported by the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Counter ISIS that is the primary force preventing and rolling back ISIS advances in minority areas.

A smaller number of minorities live in areas under the control of the Iraqi government, where security is provided by the Iraqi Security Forces, Iraqi police, and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, also known as al-Hashd al-Shaaby or Shia militias). Fundamentally, however, minorities trust neither the Government of Iraq nor the Kurdistan Regional Government to protect them in liberated areas. Still, minorities and other displaced Iraqis currently living in the Kurdistan Region or parts of Iraq outside the control of ISIS, like Baghdad or the country's south, are at least safer.

Displacement: Magnitude, Capacity to Handle, and Fatigue

In addition to providing security, the Iraqi and Kurdistan Regional governments have aided IDPs by setting up camps for shelter, offering limited financial support, and supplying food and health care. The U.N., international aid organizations and foreign governments support those efforts, as well as operating their own direct programs. Still, these efforts continue to fall woefully short of the needs for shelter, food, health care, education, and psycho-social support to deal with trauma.

The government of Iraq provided cash to IDPs in a one-time payment of 1 million Iraqi Dinars—about \$833. But corruption, lack of required documentation, frequent movement of some of the IDPs, and the limited capacity of the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement Affairs has resulted in cash payments or even monthly food rations from the Public Distribution System of Iraq being delayed or not delivered at all.

The Kurdistan Region shelters about 1.5 million displaced Iraqis, including minorities and others, as well as some 250,000 Syrian refugees. The region has hosted IDPs for most of the period since the 2003 U.S. invasion, especially from 2006 to 2008, when religious or sectarian violence reached record levels in Iraq.

It is estimated that 1 million IDPs from the 2006-2008 period never returned home, a good portion of them staying in the Kurdistan Region. In 2013, displacement accelerated again and peaked in 2014,² as many Arabs and religious minorities from Anbar, Salahaddin, and Nineveh fled to Iraqi Kurdistan. This time the numbers were unprecedented, putting enormous strain on the Kurdistan region and its governing structures. Many places of worship, schools, public buildings, and unfinished buildings became shelters for IDPs. Significant support came from local citizens who hosted families, donated food and clothes, and even provided homes rent-free. Civil society organizations in the Kurdistan Region and the rest of Iraq, including the minority communities inside and outside Iraq, have been pivotal in their support for the IDPs, including with food, clothes, health care, education and psycho-social support.

Given the protracted displacement, the economic hardships triggered by the drop in oil prices, and internal political gridlock, the IDPs and their host communities have exhausted their resources.

The authorities, people, organizations, and private companies that have stepped up again and again in this crisis will not be able to help IDPs much more, increasing the risks of escalating tensions and competition over dwindling resources. The international relief system is severely strained and struggles to raise the necessary levels of funding to cope with the proliferation of humanitarian crises in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere in the world.

The U.S. and Global Responses

The Department of Defense has already provided \$3.1 billion in assistance to the Iraqi government in support of activities to counter ISIS. The U.S. currently supplies air power, command and control, and other security support, training, sustainment, and logistics. Secretary Carter recently announced that the Department of Defense will provide a \$415 million package of financial assistance to the Peshmerga in response to a request from the fiscally strapped Kurdistan Regional Government. In anticipation of the operation to retake Mosul, the Pentagon also announced increases in the number of American military advisors and additional equipment made available to Iraqi forces.³ The United States has also contributed more than \$750m in humanitarian assistance to the Iraqi people since the ISIS conflict began in 2014.⁴

² IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, DTM Round 44, May 2016 Accessed at: <http://iomiraq.net/dtm-page>

³ Carter: Next Steps in Iraq ISIL Fight Include More Troops, Military Equipment, Accessed at: <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/737764/carter-next-steps-in-iraq-isis-fight-include-more-troops-military-equipment>

⁴ US Department of State – New Humanitarian Assistance for Iraq, Accessed at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/04/255613.htm>

In addition, in June 2015, the international community pledged \$100 million to fund stabilization efforts following the establishment of the U.N. Development Program's Funding Facility for Immediate Stabilization (FFIS), the global mechanism created to quickly respond to targeted stabilization needs in liberated areas through service delivery, community reconciliation, capacity building, and infrastructure development. As of March 31, the FFIS had received \$67 million. Of that, \$46 million has been spent or obligated for expenditure.⁵

Rethinking Assistance to Religious Minorities

Protection

The religious minorities, and even some ethnic minorities, call for international protection in some form. Calls by many religious minorities for safe zones and autonomous zones are not new, and occurred repeatedly even before the emergence of ISIS in response to other attacks outlined earlier. The call for autonomous zones also is inspired, at least in part, by provisions for decentralization and self-administered units enshrined in the Iraqi constitution. It is, therefore, important to determine in each case what problems might be addressed by safe and/or autonomous zones, and, conversely, what problems such areas might create or aggravate.

It risks stating the obvious to point out that a genuine lessening of the Middle East's underlying conflicts would go a long way toward improving security for the region's minorities in the long term. In the meantime, minorities need physical security to protect them against existential threats like ISIS, and cultural security to preserve their communities, religions, languages and culture. Enabling minorities to police and protect their own areas, and take part in Iraqi and Kurdistan Regional Government security institutions would help, but they will always need the support of those governments.

The recent violent conflicts in Iraq have militarized society to an alarming extent. Weapons have flooded into communities, and many citizens see no option but violence to resolve conflicts. Christians, Yazidis and Shabak have taken up arms, and formed their own military units under the command of the Kurdish Peshmerga, the Iraqi Security Forces, the Popular Mobilization Forces, other Kurdish troops such as the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party. In some cases, religious minority groups have formed their own armed groups independently. While it may be tempting to consider these actions as a mere effort at self-defense, they carry the greater risk of pulling minorities more directly into existing and future armed conflicts, as well as complicating future attempts to disarm and reestablish government control. And yet other actors in Iraqi and regional conflicts will always have greater numbers and more powerful weapons. The dilemma of minorities could be further aggravated.

Return of IDPs to Liberated Areas

⁵ UNDP Iraq Funding Facility for Immediate Stabilization Quarterly Progress Report Q1 – Year 2016. Accessed at: <http://www.iq.undp.org/content/iraq/en/home/library/Stabilization/funding-facility-for-immediate-stabilization--ffis--progress-rep.html>

Minority areas in the Nineveh Plain and Nineveh Province overall remain under ISIS control or threat of attack, and the pace of recapturing these locations remains slow. Liberating and securing Mosul City is months away, probably more. Even when areas are freed from ISIS rule, the return of IDPs will be delayed while mines are cleared, basic services such as electricity and water are restored and trust of security forces is rebuilt. Without that achievement and accompanying guarantees of protection, the minorities likely will continue to emigrate to the West. Even after their communities are recaptured by friendly forces, a good number may still sell whatever land and properties they have and leave the country in search of a more sustainable peace.

UNDP estimated in late 2015 that 275,000 Yazidis from Sinjar and Sinuni towns are still displaced.⁶ In Sinuni, which was recaptured from ISIS in 2014, only 20 percent of the population has returned, a process delayed by demining as well as the persistent security threats from the proximity to the current front line. The majority of Yazidis depend on farming and herding for their livelihoods, yet agricultural equipment was destroyed or stolen and farm land remains contaminated by mines. Basic public services like electricity and water are still lacking. And the return could be complicated by still more displacement. The Kurdistan Regional Government expects to receive between 300,000 and 500,000 displaced people when Mosul is recaptured.⁷

Another risk is that of revenge violence when ISIS is driven from areas it has controlled and displaced residents return with suspicions that those who stayed were complicit with the extremists. Nineveh Province will require multi-layered conflict mitigation and reconciliation to prevent renewed cycles of violence based on retribution, and to restore and sustain social cohesion. Such work likely would need to cover disputes among the minorities themselves, and between the minorities and Arab tribes, Kurds and Arabs, minorities and Kurds, potentially among Kurds, and the communities and the state.

USIP has successfully implemented interventions in both Iraq and Syria that address these kinds of community reconciliation issues.

- USIP brokered a reconciliation pact in the then-volatile district of Mahmoudiyah, south of Baghdad, between Sunni and Shia tribes in 2007.
- USIP and the Network of Iraqi Facilitators that USIP helped establish provided trained dialogue facilitators to ease tensions and prevent violence between Shabak and Christian communities in Bartella in Nineveh Province in 2012.
- USIP and the facilitators network, as well as another Iraqi partner, Sanad for Peacebuilding, forestalled revenge acts of violence in 2015 after the recapture of Tikrit, preventing a renewed cycle of violence over the 2014 massacre of 1,700 military cadets and soldiers, most of them Shia, at the nearby Camp Speicher military base. USIP's

⁶ UNDP Iraq Funding Facility for Immediate Stabilization Quarterly Progress Report Q4 – Year 2015. Accessed at: <http://www.iq.undp.org/content/dam/iraq/docs/Stabilization/UNDP%20IQ-%20Stabilization%20FFIS%20Progress%20Report%20Q4%202015-%20201601.pdf?download>

⁷ Al-Jazeera Iraq's humanitarian workers brace for Mosul influx. Accessed at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/04/iraq-humanitarian-workers-brace-mosul-influx-160410105114219.html>

stabilization model, which involves third-party mediation and the engagement of key national and local leaders, produced an agreement in which tribal leaders committed to disavow members of their tribes who had been involved in the massacre. This agreement culminated in the initial return of 400 displaced Sunni families to Tikrit in June 2015. IOM reports that 158,412 IDPs have returned since then.

USIP is supporting a similar process in Yathrib in Salahaddin Province, and is working with the National Reconciliation Committee of the Iraqi Prime Minister's Office to support such efforts in Anbar and Nineveh provinces. USIP also has trained security and civilian personnel of the Kurdistan Regional Government and civil society organizations to address IDP issues with sensitivity to the causes and effects of conflict, with the aim of preventing violence among IDPs and between IDPs and their host communities.

Resilience of the Minorities

Despite the atrocities that are all too apparent and that must be stopped, it is crucial to remember that the religious minorities of Iraq have remarkable strengths and capabilities. As mentioned earlier, USIP helped establish, and continues to support, the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities (AIM), a coalition of civil society organizations that provides a voice for minority groups. AIM was formed in 2011 and is comprised of 13 non-governmental organizations representing the country's Christians, Faily Kurds, Kakayee, Sabeen-Mandaeans, Shabaks, and Yazidis. AIM has a board of directors, a general assembly and an advisory body that includes a Baha'i member as well as other minorities.

Among AIM's many accomplishments, in 2014, before the ISIS onslaught, AIM partnered with the United Nations to organize a national conference on all Iraqi minorities. That culminated in the adoption of a national declaration and action plan to inform the advocacy of the minorities, and the work of the Iraqi Government and the international community to protect the minorities. Their most notable accomplishment occurred just last year, when AIM contributed to the Kurdistan Regional Government's law on minorities, as well as the region's draft constitution, to ensure minorities were properly represented and protected. AIM members played an instrumental role in helping the minority IDPs, as they were being displaced, through providing shelter, food, and informing the international community of the developments. Earlier, in 2012 and 2013, AIM won changes in Iraq's national budget law to allow for more equitable allocations to their geographic regions, and helped draft curriculum changes in Iraqi textbooks to mention minorities and include text from their holy books and literature for the first time.

AIM continues to serve as a strong voice for minorities in Iraq and remains a critical source of information for international supporters, specifically the U.S. Government through USIP, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, the U.N., Iraqi authorities, and the Kurdistan Regional Government.

Recommendations

I recommend the following to address the current situation of religious minorities in Iraq:

- The most certain way to protect and preserve the future of religious minorities in Iraq is to resolve the larger conflicts of Iraq and their international supporters. At their core, a resolution of these conflicts will require political processes and solutions, supplemented by security and economic measures. Such efforts require an active and leading role from the United States to facilitate peace processes and provide technical and resource assistance to implement agreements.
- The Government of Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government, the United States, the United Nations, and other international actors must adopt early detection mechanisms—and the resulting necessary actions—to prevent atrocities against both majority and minority communities. Religious minorities in Iraq have been warning about threats to their communities for many years, and security indicators gave ample warning about the risk that Iraqi security forces would collapse, and that Mosul would fall.
- Iraqi minorities trust neither the Government of Iraq nor the Kurdistan Regional Government to protect them in areas recaptured from ISIS. The attacks at Sinjar and other areas of the Nineveh Plain, particularly against Yazidis and Christians, and the unprecedented social, political and financial strain of the resulting displacement and global economic crises, have left a legacy that will require intense efforts to address. Mechanisms are necessary to ease tensions and repair ties among the minorities themselves, among Kurds, and between the minorities and Arab tribes, Kurds and Arabs, minorities and Kurds, and the communities and the state. A good place to start would be the local conflicts in the Nineveh Province and Nineveh Plain. Providing civilian mechanisms for all the parties to identify needs, prioritize them, and engage each other and the international community for ways to implement the agreed solutions would resolve many core problems and serve as an example to Iraqi minorities and non-minorities in other areas.
- The Iraqis lack the needed technical and financial capacity, especially given the significant public budget deficit due to the drop in oil prices, to manage the multiple challenges facing them, including political wrangling, public outrage towards the government, the military campaign against ISIS, and humanitarian and economic crises. The Kurdistan Regional Government, the Government of Iraq, and the minority communities need help to rebuild schools, hospitals, roads, and other key infrastructure in areas recaptured from ISIS. This could include helping the minorities help themselves the same way the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities is doing—to influence legislation, tap into national and local budgets, and attract international support to help them address their needs.
- Given the likelihood that the current record displacements of people will be protracted, the United States and the international community should support programs in conflict prevention and peaceful co-existence for liberated areas, as well as in the communities of the Kurdistan Region and the rest of Iraq that have so generously sheltered those displaced.

Thank you, again, for the Subcommittee's continued focus and attention to this critical issue. I look forward to answering your questions.

The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.