

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, Members of the Subcommittee.
Good afternoon.

Thank you for inviting me to appear before you today.

In April of this year, I set out with a team from my network, EWTN, to report on the plight of Christians and other religious minorities in the northern Iraqi city of Erbil and the Nineveh Plain, to the north and east of Mosul. My team included the following members of my staff: Susanna Pinto, Paul Fifield and Tom Haller. We knew that these groups had suffered genocide, as the U.S. State Department recognized in March of 2016, and we had read about their harrowing experiences. But we were not prepared for the death and destruction we were about to witness.

Christians in Iraq are on the brink of extinction. And I saw that grim reality first hand.

My visit to the town of Batnaya in northern Iraq embodies the experience of Christians in the region. Islamic State forces controlled the Christian enclave for two years before Kurdish fighters pushed them out in November 2016. As I toured the devastated town, I could hear explosions from the fighting in Mosul, about 15 miles away.

What I saw was absolute evil in the form of devastation and destruction. ISIS has flattened ninety percent of Batnaya. The village literally looks like an earthquake struck. And the danger is not over. There are signs everywhere warning of IEDs and booby traps.

The Catholic Church – in the center of the town – is still standing, only because ISIS used it as its command center. But it has been severely damaged and desecrated. A statue of the Virgin Mary is decapitated, and other statues are smashed to bits. The face of Jesus has been ripped from paintings and bullet holes mark the place where a Cross once was. Every Christian symbol I could see has been defaced or obliterated. I couldn't hold back my tears.

In a nearby graveyard, Christian headstones are uprooted or desecrated. Even a final resting place was not safe from the fury of the Islamic State.

I spoke with a Christian grandmother and her daughter, who had fled the jihadists' onslaught with their family. They sobbed while looking at the damage to their home. Their whole life was there, and they want desperately to return, but they have no money to rebuild. Still, the daughter's husband climbed to the roof and tied a makeshift cross to a metal rod sticking out of it.

Similar scenes can be seen in other Christian towns in the area, including Qaraqosh, which was freed from Islamic State in October 2016 but suffered appalling damage. Many Christians in northern Iraq feel abandoned in the aftermath of the U.S.-led war that toppled Saddam Hussein. During my visit, headlines in the U.S. focused on the gas attack in neighboring Syria and two horrifying church bombings in Egypt, which killed dozens and were claimed by Islamic State. But events in Iraq seldom get as much attention. The American public seems to have moved on.

Despite having survived genocide, Christians in Northern Iraq want to go back to their homeland.

In Batnaya on Palm Sunday, I witnessed a crowd of Christians return for the day for Mass and a procession. At the church, a priest, aided by volunteers, had spent weeks cleaning up. As the priest conducted the service in Aramaic – the language of Jesus Christ - the altar behind him was still covered in rubble. The congregation erected a huge metal cross where the altar used to be, decorated with burning votive candles, and they had placed palm branches on the crosses defaced by Islamic State—a small symbol of hope over hate.

The United States is the only nation in the world that can provide concrete aid to rebuild the community that I saw in shambles. I urge our lawmakers to give Christians and other religious minorities in Iraq and Syria the resources they need to return home. May we show the world that we have not forgotten them and the United States still stand up for the vulnerable and those under threat, within our borders - or beyond.

I'd like to leave you today with some compelling video that we gathered of the destruction as well as the rebirth of the Christian communities in Northern Iraq. They speak for themselves. Thank you.

Lauren Ashburn
Anchor & Managing Editor, EWTN News Nightly