



Northern Iraq 2017

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Introduction

I. Executive Summary

The following are my personal observations and recommendations from my recent trip to Iraq. In the summer of 2014, the world watched as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria began their murderous march across much of northern Iraq, leaving in their wake a path of unimaginable destruction. In March of 2016, the United States Congress unanimously passed a resolution identifying the acts of ISIS against Christians, Yazidis and other ethnic and religious minorities as genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. Just a few days after the Congress passed the resolution, Secretary of State John Kerry made an official statement recognizing the events as genocide. However, three years on and following the liberation of most of the Christian and Yazidi villages in northern Iraq, including Mosul, there is an ever-increasing concern that many of the ethnic and religious minority communities will be unable to return homes due to the destruction, and the growing political tensions between the central government of Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government and other non-state actors. If something bold is not done by the United States and the international community, I believe we will see the end of Christianity in the cradle of Christendom and a loss of religious and ethnic diversity throughout the region which could result in further destabilization across the Middle East and present a threat to U.S. national security interests.

I have visited Iraq five times now. This August I travelled with a delegation including Christian Solidarity Worldwide and others in order to better understand the current situation the Christians and Yazidis face. We went into war-torn areas where US embassy personnel are not allowed to go because of understandable security concerns, including Sinjar Mountain, Sinjar City, Bartella, Qaraqosh, Nimrud, Erbil, Duhok and Mosul, which was most recently liberated from ISIS in July 2017. In addition, we met with representatives from the central government of Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government, local NGO's such as the Assyrian Aid Society and Humanitarian Nineveh Relief Organization, international NGO's such as Samaritan's Purse and UN agencies such as UNICEF, International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the UNDP, as well as Christian and Yazidi religious and political leaders. We also visited IDP camps where we heard heartbreaking stories from men,



Church in Qaraqosh



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The Christians

women and children who had been tortured, raped, and displaced by the Islamic State.

II. The Christians

In 2003, the Christians in Iraq numbered 1.5 million. Today, that number has decreased to what most estimate is 250,000, although some argue the number is down to 150,000. I believe the number is between 200,000-300,000. Unknown too many, after Israel, Iraq is the location of more biblical history than any other country. The great patriarch Abraham came from Ur in southern Iraq, modern Nasiriyah and Rebekah came from northwest Iraq. Additionally, Jacob's sons, the 12 tribes of Israel, were all born in Iraq and Daniel lived in Iraq most of his life. Despite this, the Christian community in Iraq has been largely forgotten by many in the West.

While on the trip we spoke with several internally displaced Christian families. One family, living in a camp outside of Duhok, had fled from Bartella. When asked if they would return home the father indicated that he would since Christians are people of peace and would be willing to forgive those who wronged them. His wife, however, said, "I want to leave. Australia...anywhere in the West. For the sake of my children." She then went on to explain that she was so concerned for the well-being and safety of her 15-year-old daughter that she had kept her out of school since the family's displacement.

Another gentleman from Mosul was studying for his PhD when ISIS came and forced him to flee with his family. When asked if he would return to Mosul he said he would like to but does not believe he can since many of his neighbors indirectly considered him and his family infidels even before ISIS came. He stated, "We have no guarantees. Everyone is using us - we are caught in the middle. We asked for peace, but we cannot live with the discrimination."

One of the most heartbreaking personal accounts was the story of a Christian woman named Maryam,* who was sold as a sex slave over 20 different times, raped hundreds of times, beaten and abused. At one point while trying to escape she jumped out of a third story window and broke



Remnants of an ISIS banner in Bartella (Christian town)



Meeting an Arab family living in a church in Mosul

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The Christians

her leg. When her captor realized what had happened he beat her and left her lying on the ground. When she was eventually rescued she thought her family would welcome her back, instead a deeply entrenched honor culture compelled her family and community to reject her. Now she is afraid to walk on the street in her own community.

In addition, we met with a young boy who lived with his disabled mother. When ISIS came he tried to hide in his house, but eventually they ran out of food and ISIS fighters found them. The fighters said they must convert or die. The mother told her son they should just pretend to convert in order to survive, even though in their hearts they knew the truth. They did and ISIS allowed them to stay. However, they forced the young boy, aged 14, to join ISIS. Eventually he managed to escape with his mother. However, today they are unable to return to their hometown because no one will trust them.

Even though their homes were destroyed or looted and their lives nearly destroyed, many of the Christian families believe this can be overcome. However, the Christian communities are skeptical of security guarantees in post-ISIS Iraq. Currently, they must rely heavily on the central Iraqi government and the KRG for their protection but they lack trust in both groups since both the Arabs and Kurds have marginalized the Christian communities before.

Moreover, the tension between the Peshmerga and Iraqi Forces, including the Hashd al Shabbi, has created contested territories all throughout the Nineveh Plains, where most Christians reside. According to a top UN official, the Christians are being instrumentalized by both sides trying to claim land after ISIS. Along with the destruction of the homes and livelihood of thousands of Christians, ISIS attempted to completely destroy any memory of Christianity in Iraq by destroying ancient biblical sites and symbols, including the cross. The Assyrian Aid Society, a local Christian NGO, took me to several historical Assyrian biblical sites, including the ancient town of Nimrud, mentioned in Genesis 10. In 2015, ISIS packed the ruins of Nimrud with explosives and then filmed its detonation. Very little remains intact. When visiting churches in Mosul, Bartella and Qaraqosh, every single cross was broken, even those that



Remnants of Ancient Nimrud which ISIS blew up in 2015



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The Christians/ Yazidis

had been carved into stone.

However, there are reasons to be hopeful. While estimates vary, to-date approximately 600 families have returned to their homes in the Nineveh plains. This reveals a desire within the communities to return to their ancestral homelands. In addition, NGOs and the Catholic Church are beginning house repair and rebuilding programs in the areas to assist Christians who want to rebuild their lives. However, there is much more to be done. More funding, demining and protection is essential to fully rebuild the region from ISIS's destruction.

If nothing is done, I believe that we will see the end of ancient Christianity in Iraq within a few years. Currently, the population is getting dangerously close to dipping below the critical mass needed for these Christians to maintain their long-term presence in their ancestral homeland. If this trend is allowed to continue, the Christian population will follow that of the Jewish population, which has decreased from 150,000 individuals in 1948 to just 10 people today. To counteract this trend, bold action is required on the part of the United States and the West.

III. The Yazidis

The Yazidis are an ancient ethnic and religious group numbering 1 million worldwide with 600,000 living in Iraq. Sinjar is the ancient homeland of the Yazidis as well as the location of their devastating mass murder committed by the Islamic State, which began on August 3rd, 2014. Mass graves continue to be found throughout the city, one of which I saw during my visit. Along with the utter destruction of their homeland, the murder, rape and displacement of thousands of their people, over 3,000 of their women and girls are still being held by ISIS.

The images of the Yazidis fleeing Sinjar City from ISIS are still imprinted on the minds of many. However, a year and a half since the liberation of Sinjar City no more than a handful of families have returned. This is due to, not only the immense destruction, but also the unpredictable security situation the various militias on the ground have created. One of the only signs of life were the soldiers belonging to the militias controlling



Destruction in Sinjar



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The Yazidis

the area, including the Peshmerga, the Sinjar Protection Units, mostly made up of Yazidis, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), as well as the Iraqi army and the Hashd al-Shaabi, or Popular Mobilization Forces.

Moving forward, like the Christians, the Yazidi's biggest concern is protection. In addition, survivors and Baba Chawish, the Yazidi spiritual leader, all indicated that in order for them to regain confidence in any security plan it must include international oversight. Without a guarantee of security and protection, the majority of Yazidis will not return to their villages.

Moreover, while the largest percentage of Yazidis are currently living in Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps, about 2,800 families have returned to Sinjar Mountain. Those living on the top of the mountain are in dire need of aid. However, due to the instability of Sinjar City, created by the tension between militia groups, those who could provide aid are often unable or unwilling. In addition, many NGOs are concerned that the next offensive against ISIS taking place in Tal Afar, just twenty minutes east of Sinjar, could send a stream of fleeing extremist fighters east through Sinjar City seeking refuge in Syria. This makes any investment in the area at this time very risky.

Complicating issues further, there have been a number of reports from local NGOs that suicide is an increasing threat to the lives of many Yazidi women and young girls affected by ISIS. Many of these women are unable to obtain proper psycho-social care due in part to a lack of available programming, but primarily as a result of a deeply entrenched honor culture that views any form of sexual uncleanness as shameful and psychological treatment as taboo. Even though Yazidi leaders have made an effort to ensure that girls taken by ISIS are able to return to their families safely, families and communities are still ashamed by the situation. Most of the girls fear that no man will ever take them in marriage, denying them the opportunity for financial stability and physical protection. The international community needs to develop counseling programs to assist women and girls suffering from the memory of their traumatic experiences.



Yazidi girls



Bombed cars and clothes left behind by Yazidis who fled to the mountain



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Policy Recommendations

IV. Policy Recommendations

1) Encourage the Senate to pass HR 390, The Iraq and Syria Genocide Accountability Act.

This bi-partisan bill, co-sponsored by Congressman Chris Smith (R- NJ) and Anna Eshoo (D- CA) authorizes and directs the State Department and USAID to use already-appropriated funds to provide humanitarian aid to minority faith and ethnic communities that have been affected by war crimes and genocide and are in desperate need of assistance. It also authorizes and directs the State Department and USAID to support criminal investigations on-the-ground in Iraq to hold members of ISIS and perpetrators of war crimes accountable. In turn, this strengthens U.S. efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism; and it directs the Secretary of State to encourage foreign countries to add identifying information about suspected perpetrators of such crimes to their databases and security screenings.

2) Fresh Eyes on the Target

In 2005 I travelled to Iraq and what I found was a failing US policy. Following that trip I encouraged the administration to create the Iraq Study Group, also known as the Baker-Hamilton Commission, named after former Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton of Indiana. The purpose of the bi-partisan commission was to evaluate US engagement in Iraq and propose an updated policy. I believed that “fresh eyes” on the target were needed.

Today, the United States is once again in need of “fresh eyes” in Iraq, not only for the victims of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, but also because of our critical national security interests in the region. Failure to act in the upcoming months may result in chaos and violence in Iraq once again. The lines are drawn. The militias stand ready at the berms and check points. The United States has a vested interest in



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promoting peace and stability in a region where over 4,000 Americans gave their lives and \$2 trillion of taxpayer money was spent in the past fifteen years. I believe that we have a small window to act and if we don't, we will have squandered a unique political moment.

A high-level group of individuals with expertise in the region should be brought together to do an assessment of the current situation and make recommendations for policy going forward. People like Gen. David Petraeus and former Ambassador Ryan Crocker could head such an assessment group.

After this assessment, perhaps new top leadership should be brought together to carry out proposed policies. During my time in Congress, I visited conflict zones around the world, like Iraq. I have come to the conclusion that personnel is policy and therefore the Trump Administration should consider a new team leader to implement post-ISIS policies in Iraq, including an "Office of the Special Coordinator for Post-ISIS Iraq." This office would be responsible for coordinating NGO rebuilding projects in the region, overseeing stability operations and peace-keeping missions.

3) International Coalition to Secure the Nineveh Plains

During my visit, every Christian and Yazidi leader cited insecurity as their people's main impediment to returning home after ISIS. Protection and security are essential. While this must ultimately be determined by the Department of Defense and the State Department, many on the ground suggested a U.S. training base, or a joint-training base, in the region. Those we spoke with have great confidence in the American military and desire to have their local police and security forces trained by the US.

4) The US should utilize contractors who are able to leave the secured compound in order to build relationships, gather information and observe daily life in the region.

I understand that embassy and consular employees have security



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restrictions; however, I believe this limits their ability to learn and hear the grievances of local Iraqis. It is not possible to make good sound policy without considering events on the ground and the people most affected by American foreign policy. I believe that a team of contractors with the ability to freely move throughout the region gives us the best chance of developing the best post-ISIS strategy for Iraq.

5) The United States should pressure the KRG to implement constitutional reforms that ensure adequate provisions are put in place to provide equal citizenship, security and economic opportunities for the ethnic and religious minorities prior to the referendum.

In light of the impending referendum, I believe that the Administration and Department of State should be actively engaged in conversations with the Kurdistan Regional Government. The Kurdish constitution must include adequate provisions that provide equal citizenship, security and opportunities for the ethnic and religious minorities living within their borders. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom recently released a report entitled, *Wilting in the Kurdish Sun: The Hopes and Fears of Religious Minorities in Northern Iraq*, which notes progress on the part of the KRG but also details additional recommendations related some of these concerns.

To the extent possible, the United States should utilize their leverage to serve as an arbiter between the KRG and Baghdad to settle conflicts pertaining to resource sharing, boundaries, and others between the two governments. If not, the religious minorities will once again feel the brunt of the conflict as many live within the contested territories.

6) Counteract Iranian Imperial Ambitions in Iraq

Coordinated by officials in Tehran, Baghdad and Damascus and overseen by Gen. Qassam Soleimani, head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Quds Force and responsible for expansionist operations, Iran is developing a land corridor stretching from Iran, through Iraq and to the Syrian port of Latakia on the Mediterranean. If achieved, this will aid Hezbollah and Assad and become a direct threat to Israel and to



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US regional interests and national security. Iran will be able to supply militia in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon with guns, materials and soldiers. In addition, this development will fuel the Sunni-Shia rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia and incite sectarian violence. In a post-ISIS Iraq, where power vacuums will exist, this needs to be addressed in order prevent the insidious spread of Iranian influence.

In order to achieve their goals, the Iranian regime is currently sponsoring the purchase of Christian land by Shia Shabaks - a minority group of Shiite Turkmen - in the Nineveh plains. Christians are agreeing to sell their land to Iranian funded Shabaks because they fear their land will be taken from them anyway. However, this is an insidious plot devised by the Shiite clerics in Iran to cleanse the Nineveh plains of Christians and establish a Shiite - dominated region of Iranian influence stretching from Iran in the east to Hezbollah in Lebanon in the west.

The expansion of Iran is not a just a problem facing Christian minorities on the ground, but also one of the biggest American foreign policy challenges of the 21st century. It threatens American influence, regional stability and security, as well as access to key shipping lanes. Therefore, I suggest that the US government work closely with the KRG and Baghdad to establish a temporary moratorium on land sales in the Nineveh plains until the Christians feel safe to return to their homes. This is not only a human rights question, but also a national security matter.

7) Christian, Yazidi and minority groups in both Iraq and amongst the diaspora need to be united in their cause and message.

Currently, the total population of Iraq is 37 million people. Minority groups, anyone who does not identify with the mainline Sunni or Shia expressions of Islam, in Northern Iraq number roughly 1 million. However, these minority groups are fragmented especially as relates to whether alliance with Baghdad or Erbil offers the best chances for peace, security and stability. Unity would offer these groups significant leverage with key power centers.

Additionally, the diaspora community tied to these groups in Iraq also



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need to be united, as they have an important role to play in advocating for their people in the US and the West and in funding the rebuilding towns in the Nineveh Plains. The diaspora can be most effective and helpful if they unite with common voice, vision and mission when engaging with policy makers in Washington, DC. By working with their communities on the ground in Iraq they can make a positive difference.

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