

**THE FUTURE OF IRAQ'S MINORITIES:  
WHAT IS NEXT AFTER ISIS?**

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**HEARING**

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON WESTERN  
HEMISPHERE, TRANSNATIONAL  
CRIME, CIVILIAN SECURITY,  
DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS,  
AND GLOBAL WOMEN'S ISSUES

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## **THE FUTURE OF IRAQ'S MINORITIES: WHAT IS NEXT AFTER ISIS?**

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2017

U.S. SENATE,  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WESTERN HEMISPHERE, TRANSNATIONAL  
CRIME, CIVILIAN SECURITY, DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS,  
AND GLOBAL WOMEN'S ISSUES,  
*Washington, DC.*

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 11:35 a.m. in Room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Marco Rubio presiding.

Present: Senators Rubio [presiding], Kaine, and Shaheen.

### **OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. MARCO RUBIO, U.S. SENATOR FROM FLORIDA**

Senator RUBIO. Good morning. Now we are back in a hearing of the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues.

If you guys are coming to the hearing, you need to sit down. Thank you. It feels like I am at home here. "Close the door. We're working over here." [Laughter.]

Senator RUBIO. Anyway, the title of the hearing is, "The Future of Iraq's Minorities: What Is Next After ISIS?"

So we will have one panel testifying here today, and the panel features, of course, former Congressman Frank Wolf, who was just part of our previous nomination hearing as well, where he introduced the President's nominee to be the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. He is a distinguished senior fellow at the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative. And Ms. Denise Natali, who is the director of the Center for Strategic Research at the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University.

Both of them have long and distinguished careers, and we are fortunate to have the benefit of their expertise and testimony here today.

The hearing is especially timely, not only because we have a new administration that is still working through and formulating its Iraq policy, but also because, for some of the communities in Iraq that are in question and are being impacted, for them, the hour is late, and their continued presence in the lands they have inhabited since antiquity literally hangs in the balance.

Three years ago, ISIS began a brutal campaign in northern Iraq, a campaign against Christians, Yazidis, Shia Muslims, and other smaller religious minorities, ruthlessly murdering innocent men and women and children, and destroying communities that have been there for millennia.

The images of these vulnerable communities fleeing for their lives sent shockwaves around the world. During the ISIS seize of Mount Sinjar, tens of thousands of Yazidis were trapped without food or water, and the Islamic State massacred and kidnapped and enslaved members of this community. Girls were separated by eye color and sold as sex slaves to ISIS fighters based on their preference.

Similarly, in Iraq, their ancient Christian community was and is under assault. Fifty thousand fled Mosul to the Nineveh plains as ISIS advanced eastward. Days after the Sinjar massacre, ISIS seized Qaraqosh, which is the city in Iraq with the second largest population of Christians, and thousands more were displaced. Death, kidnapping, and forced conversions ensued.

Places of worship and holy sites that had been there for centuries were defaced. They were bombed, looted, destroyed, including the 1,400-year-old monastery of Saint Elijah.

It was clear that the bloody campaign targeting ethnic and religious minorities amounted to genocide, and the Obama administration and now the Trump administration have rightfully declared it as such. While these designations are significant—quite frankly, even historic, and clearly justified—the fact is that the words alone are cold comfort to these communities whose lives have been upended, places of worship destroyed, and their communities and families ripped apart.

One of the issues that prompted this hearing is the seeming disconnect between the millions of dollars in U.S. humanitarian assistance to Iraq and the inability of these communities targeted with genocide to adequately access this aid. Clear congressional directives over multiple years have gone unheeded, unimplemented, and, frankly, ignored.

There has been an overreliance, beginning during the previous administration and seemingly continuing apace today under the new administration, on the United Nations' development fund to administer U.S. assistance. This U.N. agency has shown little interest in following congressional appropriations language, and our own U.S. Government agencies have not demanded that accountability.

So I am heartened that Administrator Mark Green himself, a former Member of Congress, is now at the helm of USAID. I know that he is personally invested in addressing this issue.

Despite divisions within Iraq's religious minority communities, I was encouraged to learn of the creation of the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee, a formal ecumenical partnership between the three largest Christian churches in Iraq—the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church. Representing the overwhelming majority of Christians that remain in Iraq, this was an important step.

As we discuss the plight of Iraq's religious minority communities, we also must look at the broader context of Iraq's minorities, par-

ticularly the Kurdish people living in Iraqi Kurdistan. Once again, all eyes were on Iraq last week as the Kurdistan Regional Government pressed forward with their nonbinding referendum for independence from Iraq, despite broad international calls for delay, including from the highest levels of the U.S. Government.

I was among those urging a delay for many reasons, not the least of which was my concern about how the already vulnerable religious minorities, especially those residing in the contested areas, would fare in such a scenario.

Following the referendum, the tensions are predictably high. At this time, the U.S. is not supportive of a unilateral referendum by the KRG. However, we must urge restraint from both sides and work with both sides to de-escalate tensions between Baghdad and Erbil, as well as with Iran and Turkey. Any violence or further escalation from any party will only deepen the problem.

I am concerned about news reports that Iranian and Turkish militaries are engaged in provocative military exercises near the Kurdish regions in Iraq, and that the central government in Baghdad is taking retaliatory and even discriminatory action against the KRG and Kurdish members of parliament.

The KRG are important partners in the fight against ISIS, and we, along with our partners, including Iraq's central government, must maintain our focus on defeating ISIS.

In the interim, we should support KRG requests for mediation with the Government of Iraq and create space for them to present its views.

In the coming weeks and months, the U.S. must be forward-leaning in our Iraq strategy in the hopes of preserving the communities that have been a part of the fabric of Iraq for centuries. Their continued existence, and even their flourishing, is not simply a moral imperative given the grave injustices that they have suffered. It is also a key strategic and national security priority because they are key to any future pluralistic Iraq that respects religious freedom.

Often, we consider patience a virtue. But the time for patience on this issue has passed. Urgency must now animate us moving forward.

The U.S. should implement timely and targeted assistance to the Christians, Yazidis, and other minority internally displaced persons targeted by ISIS so that they are able to return to their homes.

I look forward to the recommendations from our witnesses in this regard. You have experience that will contribute greatly to this discussion.

Senator Kaine?

**STATEMENT OF HON. TIM KAINE,  
U.S. SENATOR FROM VIRGINIA**

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Just briefly, we have great witnesses here on an important topic. We cannot take for granted the continuing battle against ISIS. The progress has been very, very strong since August 2014 when President Obama decided that they were a significant enough threat that we should take action against them. And our military leader-

ship, working in tandem with the coalition, has done really good work on the battlefield, and more remains to be done.

However, as the ISIS pressure has been reduced in some parts of the country, other pressures come to light, pressures that might have been temporarily sidelined as everybody focused on the battle against ISIS. I have been in Erbil and dealt with the issues that the chair was talking about, tensions between Erbil and Baghdad, and dealt with a Chaldean Catholic Church in Kurdistan and church leaders there, and see significant tensions ahead. We need to get ahead of them rather than just be in a responsive posture.

And I think the witnesses today have good recommendations for analysis of the situation. But even better, we do a lot of diagnosis up here, and sometimes we are short on the prescription. But I think the witnesses are not just going to give us a good diagnosis. I have read their written testimony, and I think they are going to offer us some prescription as well, which is important.

I appreciate you being here.

Senator RUBIO. Thank you. With that, I guess, the Honorable Frank Wolf, we again welcome you to the microphone for the second time this morning. On this very important topic, you have a long history of contribution. I know you traveled to the region recently, and we thank you for being here, and we look forward to your testimony.

**STATEMENT OF FRANK R. WOLF, DISTINGUISHED SENIOR FELLOW, 21ST CENTURY WILBERFORCE INITIATIVE, FALLS CHURCH, VA**

Mr. WOLF. Thank you, Chairman Rubio and Senator Kaine and Senator Shaheen. I appreciate the hearing very, very much.

After a week visiting Bartella, Qaraqosh, Duhok, Erbil, Mosul, Nimrud, Mount Sinjar, and Sinjar City in August, and talking with individuals from the various communities, I am sad to say that if bold action—bold action—is not taken by the end of the year, I believe a tipping point will be reached, and we will see the end of Christianity in Iraq in a few short years, and a loss of religious and ethnic diversity throughout the region, a loss that will not be regained and could result in further destabilization, violent extremism, and terrorism across the Middle East.

In other words, ISIS will have been victorious in their genocidal rampage, unless concrete action is taken.

Iraq is a land rich with biblical history. Abraham was born there. Daniel lived and died there. And many events of the Bible took place in Iraq. And yet, we have already seen the Christian population drop from 1.5 million to now 250,000 or less, some even say 150,000, over the course of the past 14 years.

This exodus continues with additional families leaving every day in search of physical security, economic security, and education.

Having spent the past 3 years as internally displaced people, IDPs, many Christian families are at a crossroads, having to decide whether or not they should return to their newly liberated villages or just leave Iraq forever. Despite their best efforts, many believe that they can stay only if bold action is taken by the United States and other international partners to ensure their security.



While I went expecting to hear further reports about security concerns related to ISIS, I was surprised to find that most individuals I spoke with were concerned about the various military factions controlling their towns and villages, in particular, the Hashd al-Shaabi, also known as the Popular Mobilization Forces, or the PMF.

The Hashd-al Shaabi militia, which is backed by Iran, and other militia groups are filling the vacuum left post-liberation.

This is part of the Iranian goal of creating a land-bridge from Iran through Iraq to Syria to reach a port in the Mediterranean.

We went through checkpoint after checkpoint after checkpoint. It was not the Peshmerga. It was not the Iraq military. It was this militia group.

Such a land-bridge will allow Iran to move fighters, weapons, and supplies to aid Hezbollah and other terrorist groups. This will be a direct threat to Israel, a direct threat to the United States military, as well as others in the West.

Literally, they will be able to get in a van in Tehran, drive from Tehran through Iraq, through Syria, to a port in the Mediterranean.

Among the Yazidi community, we heard many of the same concerns. Sinjar is a prime example of the complications the minority communities on the ground continue to face.

Considered a contested territory by the central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, Sinjar has been liberated from ISIS since the fall of 2015. However, it is currently controlled by multiple different militia groups.

We saw very few who have returned. A house here, and then nobody for blocks. Then another house here, then nobody for blocks.

Due to this, few families have been able to return, and few aid groups work in the area due to the potentially volatile situation, after having been the victims of genocide and with 3,000 of their women and girls still in captivity.

Yesterday, there was a hearing on the House side. There was a Yazidi woman there who testified. She said she saw the person who did it—and I will not go into what he did to her—living in a refugee camp, maybe funded by the U.N., maybe funded by the United States.

So this ISIS guy got room and board, basically. And the Yazidi community is just pretty much forgotten about. And there is no counseling service for these young girls and women who have been held by ISIS over the years.

One of the Yazidi religious leaders we met with stated, “We just want to be able to live.” Unfortunately, to a large extent, U.S. Government assistance has not been forthcoming to Iraq’s Christian and Yazidi communities, even though the President, the Vice President, Congress, and the Secretary of State have declared them victims of genocide.

Many of the displaced Christians, for example, have had to seek the mainstay of their aid from private charitable sources on a piecemeal basis over the last 3 years. This is becoming more difficult as many individuals who give to humanitarian organizations are facing donor-fatigue.

It is imperative that the United States help the Christians and Yazidis to return to their hometowns. As a U.N. official aptly stated in a recent meeting, "The religious minorities need unique solutions." What works to return Sunni Muslims to Mosul will not work to return religious minorities to contested areas.

Since 2014, Congress has had over 40 different hearings related to ISIS, including seven specifically on the topic of religious minorities, and required the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development to spend some funds on assistance specifically for genocide survivors from religious and ethnic minorities.

Congressional resolve, and the force of law, must be matched by administration action.

Some recommendations.

Now that the military battle with ISIS is largely over, our government needs fresh eyes. We need fresh eyes on the target to bring some people, almost like the Baker-Hamilton commission did to Iraq before, fresh eyes not only to see with regard to current policies, but victims of genocide, war crimes, but also because of the critical national security interests in the region.

If the Iranians get a corridor to the Mediterranean, there are going to be some serious problems. We have a vested interest because we lost 4,000 Americans who gave their lives, and we spent over \$2 trillion of taxpayer money.

Secondly, a presidential decision directive or a presidential memorandum should be issued directing the State Department and USAID to immediately address the needs of communities identified by Secretary Tillerson as having been targeted by genocide. This would address both humanitarian aid for those living as IDPs and refugees, and stabilization assistance for those returning to those areas.

Thirdly, a post should be established by the White House for an interagency coordinator to guarantee that the needs of these communities are adequately addressed to ensure their safety and preservation consistent with United States foreign policy.

When President Bush appointed Senator John Danforth, who I think used to serve on this committee, to be the envoy to work on similar issues in Sudan, the announcement was made in the White House Rose Garden. It was the day before 9/11, with Senator Danforth standing between President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell. This sent a powerful message to the world and to the suffering people of Sudan.

So I recommend the same level of announcement for the person to fill this position. It will be held at the White House with President Trump and Secretary Tillerson, and will send a message that America is engaged. And the Christians and Yazidis and those who have suffered genocide would know that it is not just words. We really have someone to really work on this.

Now, when groups come into town, do they go to USAID? Do they go to the State Department? Do they get to the DOD? There will be one place to go, and I think this is very important.

Lastly, Congress should immediately pass H.R. 390, the bipartisan Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act, authored by Chairman Chris Smith and coauthored by Congresswoman Anna Eshoo. It gives explicit authorization for the

State Department and USAID to identify the assistance needs of genocide survivors from religious and ethnic minority communities, and provide funding to entities, including faith-based entities, effectively providing them with aid on the ground.

This is essential, because some within the State Department and USAID have claimed they lack the authority to deliberately help religious and ethnic communities, even if they are genocide victims and will become extinct without assistance. Although there is nothing in U.S. law preventing them from helping genocide-surviving communities, the authorization will help ensure the aid actually flows to the victims.

The House passed H.R. 390 on June 6, and the Senate Foreign Relations passed it on September 19. Hopefully, the Senate will pass the bill quickly so it can be sent back to the House and then to the President for signing.

Also, it deals with dealing with those who have committed criminal activities. We remember, after Nazi Germany, many of the Nazis embedded themselves, went to America, went to different countries. We funded an office at the Justice Department to track them down.

In Rwanda, the same thing. Rwandans who were involved in genocide spread. You could not find them. You had to track them down.

The same thing in Srebrenica. You had Serbs and Croats who were involved in genocide with regard to the Bosnians, and we had to track them down.

These ISIS people are going to begin to spread and move and go around. Frankly, I think we need what Mr. Smith's bill does.

Lastly, there is still time, but the hour I believe—and I may be wrong. I may be wrong. I think the time is about to run out.

We cannot allow ISIS to be successful in their genocide. We are aiding these people not because they are Christians, not because they are Yazidis, not because they are Shia Turkmen. We are aiding them because they were subject to genocide, and the word "genocide" carried a powerful message.

So they are waiting, and many are just waiting and waiting. So I think there is time, but if we do not do something by the end of the year, I think we will reach a tipping point, and I think it will be over.

[Mr. Wolf's prepared statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. FRANK R. WOLF

To begin I would like to thank Chairman Rubio and Senator Kaine for holding this hearing today.

After a week visiting Bartella, Qaraqosh, Duhok, Erbil, Mosul, Nimrud, Mt. Sinjar, and Sinjar City in August and talking with individuals from the various communities, I am sad to say that if bold action is not taken by the end of the year, I believe a tipping point will be reached and we will see the end of Christianity in Iraq in a few short years and a loss of religious and ethnic diversity throughout the region—a loss which will not be regained and could result in further destabilization, violent extremism and terrorism across the Middle East. In other words, ISIS will have been victorious in their genocidal rampage unless concrete action is taken.

Iraq is a land rich with Biblical history. Abraham was born there, Daniel lived and died there and many events of the Bible took place in Iraq. And yet, we have already seen the Christian population drop from 1.5 million to 250,000, or less, over the course of the past 14 years. This exodus continues with additional families leaving every day in search of physical security, economic security and education. Hav-

ing spent the past three years as Internally Displaced People (IDP's), many Christian families are at a crossroads, having to decide whether or not they should return to their newly liberated villages or leave Iraq forever. Despite their best efforts, many believe that they can stay only if bold action is taken by the US and other international partners to ensure their future security.

While I went expecting to hear further reports about security concerns related to ISIS, I was surprised to find that most individuals I spoke with were concerned about the various military factions controlling their towns and villages—in particular the Hashd al-Shaabi (also known as the Popular Mobilization Forces or PMF). The Hashd-al Shaabi militia, which is backed by Iran, and other militia groups are filling the vacuum left post-liberation. This is part of the Iranian goal of creating a land-bridge from Iran, through Iraq to Syria to reach a port on the Mediterranean.

Such a land-bridge will allow Iran to move fighters, weapons and supplies to aid Hezbollah and other terrorist groups. This will be a direct threat to Israel and the United States military as well as others in the West.

Among the Yazidi community we heard many of the same concerns. Sinjar is a prime example of the complications the minority communities on the ground continue to face. Considered a contested territory by the Central Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, Sinjar has been liberated from ISIS since the fall of 2015, however, it is currently controlled by multiple different militia groups. Due to this, few families have been able to return and few aid groups work in the area due to the potentially volatile situation. After having been the victims of genocide and with 3,000 of their women and girls still in captivity, one of the Yazidi religious leaders we met with stated, “We just want to be able to live.”

Unfortunately, to a large extent, U.S. Government assistance has not been forthcoming to Iraq's Christian and Yazidi communities even though the President, Vice President, Congress and Secretary of State have declared them victims of genocide. Many of the displaced Christians, for example, have had to seek the mainstay of their aid from private charitable sources on a piecemeal basis for over three years. This is becoming increasingly difficult as many individuals who give to humanitarian organizations are facing donor-fatigue.

It is imperative that the United States help the Christians and Yazidis to return to their home towns. As a U.N. official aptly stated in a recent meeting, “the religious minorities need unique solutions.” What works to return Sunni Muslims to Mosul will not work to return religious minorities to contested territories.

Since 2014, Congress has had well over 40 different hearings related to ISIS, including at least 7 specifically on the topic of the religious minorities and required the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development to spend some funds on assistance specifically for genocide survivors from religious and ethnic minorities. Congressional resolve, and the force of law, must be matched by administration action.

In closing I would like to provide a few recommendations:

1. Now that the military battle with ISIS is largely over, our government needs “fresh eyes” in Iraq with regard to our current policies, not only for the victims of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, but also because of the critical national security interests in the region. Failure to act soon may result in chaos and violence in the region yet again. The United States has a vested interest in promoting peace and stability in a region where over 4,000 Americans gave their lives and \$2 trillion dollars of taxpayer money was spent in the past 13 years. 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 our policy going forward.
2. A Presidential Decision Directive or Presidential Memorandum should be issued directing the State Department and USAID to immediately address the needs to communities identified by Secretary Tillerson as having been targeted for genocide. This would address both humanitarian aid for those living as IDP's and refugees and stabilization assistance for those returning to the areas seized from them by ISIS.
3. A post should be established by the White House for an inter-agency coordinator to guarantee that the needs of these communities are adequately addressed to ensure their safety and preservation consistent with United States foreign policy. When President Bush appointed Senator John Danforth to be the Envoy to work on similar issues in Sudan, the announcement was made in the White House Rose Garden with Sen. Danforth standing between President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell. This sent a powerful message to the world and the suffering people of Sudan. I recommend the same level of announcement for

the person who will fill this position. It should be held at the White House with President Trump and Secretary Tillerson. This will send a message that America is engaged. The Christians and Yazidis have faced genocide and for the longest time the United States and the West has offered little more than words.

4. Congress should immediately pass H.R. 390, the bipartisan Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act, authored by Chairman Chris Smith and coauthored by Congresswoman Anna Eshoo. It gives explicit authorization for the State Department and USAID to identify the assistance needs of genocide survivors from religious and ethnic minority communities and provide funding to entities—including faith-based entities—effectively providing them with aid on-the-ground. This is essential, because some within the State Department and USAID have claimed they lack the authority to deliberately help religious and ethnic communities, even if they are genocide victims and will become extinct without assistance. Although there is nothing in U.S. law preventing them from helping genocide-surviving communities, the authorization will help ensure the aid actually flows to the victims. The House passed H.R. 390 on June 6 and Senate Foreign Relations Committee passed it on September 19. The Senate should pass the bill quickly so it can be sent back to the House and then the President for signing.

There is still time, but the hour is late and we are about to run out of time. We cannot allow ISIS to be successful in their genocide.

Senator RUBIO. Thank you for that.

Dr. Natali?

**STATEMENT OF DENISE NATALI, PH.D., DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR STRATEGIC RESEARCH, INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES, NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY, WASHINGTON, DC**

Dr. NATALI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, distinguished members of the committee, for the opportunity to testify on the future of Iraq's minorities.

I would like to note that these are my personal views and not those of the United States Government, the Department of Defense, or the National Defense University.

I would like to talk about where I see the vulnerabilities of the minorities, much of this based on my 25 years working in and out of the north. I just came back 2 weeks ago from the north as well as Baghdad, speaking to a host of folks.

Much of this, in my view, after ISIS, is rooted in the larger political framework of Iraqi politics, and, of course, as you indicated, the differences within these religious minority groups. In addition to Yazidi and Christian, as was indicated, there are Turkmen, Armenians, Circassians, Jews, Kaka'is, Shabaks, Faily Kurds. Many of these groups are all living in northern Iraq.

In addition to their shared persecuted beliefs for religion, these groups also have overlapping ethnicity, language, and geography. Some Yazidis who are living in one part of Northern Iraq are divided and emphasize the fact that they are not Sunni Kurdish. They differentiate themselves from Sunni Muslim Kurds, as they will say.

Within the Assyrian community, and there was a fantastic document that just came out called, "Erasing Assyrians," they now emphasize that they are an ethnic group that is in the process of being extinguished alongside the fact the Kurdistan Regional Government controls Nineveh.

My point is, these groups are divided between their support for the Iraqi Government, their support for the Kurdistan Regional

Government, and many, many who just want to be left alone and live autonomously.

The biggest threat, in my view, after ISIS, is the fact that these minority groups are caught in the political crossfire, and they are being used as cannon fodder for everybody else's contestations.

The biggest problem, as you have indicated, is the issue of the disputed territories. I do not think enough attention is being given to the fact that most of the territories of the minority groups are in northern Iraq. They regard this territory as their ancestral lands. The Iraqi Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government regard it as disputed and their own. They [the minorities] are not strong enough to defend themselves, so, again, they are being put in this crossfire.

In addition, there is the proliferation of militia all across Iraq.

Not to be an academic nitpick, but of these Hashd al-Shaabi (or Popular Mobilization Forces), 80 percent are with the Iraqi Government. Between 10 and 30 percent are backed by Iran. Thus, there is a significant group that is official. They are integrated with the Iraqi Government. In fact, some Yazidis and Assyrians are also working with these Popular Mobilization Forces.

So we need to be careful about making these kind of generalizations about all the Hashd al-Shaabi when certain groups are in certain localities and some are coordinating with other minority groups.

When I was back in Iraq in March, there was violence that broke out in Sinjar, and that violence affected the Yazidis, as the Honorable Frank Wolf said. But the violence was between two Kurdish groups. So we have to be careful, again, when we are looking at who is fighting whom, and how Yazidis, Assyrians, and everybody else is caught in the crossfire.

I will make a couple points about the Kurdish referendum. I think it has actually exacerbated tensions and threats to these minority communities, not because people are directly targeting them with gunfire but, because it has enhanced divisions between Baghdad and Erbil, and between Arabs and Kurds. The outcome is going to prevent some of these groups—the internally displaced populations, from going back to their territories.

So there are regional threats. There are threats from the militias taking advantage of this instability. And the minority groups have very weak security forces themselves to protect themselves.

So what do we do?

My recommendation is that we have to look at the underlying political issues. If you do not handle the political issues, then the minority groups are still going to be caught in the crossfire. This situation is highly localized. It is complex. And it is tied to the cohesion of the Iraqi state.

I would suggest three recommendations.

One is to support minority group rights in conjunction with the Iraqi Constitution. There is a Constitution that exists. We should enhance decentralization and self-protection within the existing Iraqi structure.

There is also a need for developing a security and political architecture to which should include training minority police. Local police in every community across Iraq, by the way, every Sunni Arab

community I talked to as well, and every Kurdish locality, needs and wants local protection, because they do not trust people outside their communities. I think the Assyrians and Yazidis are the most affected, because they have been the most neglected.

Third, the U.S. should reinforce a sovereign civil state and Iraqi institutions. This last trip 2 weeks ago was very insightful in the fact that when I was in Baghdad, I spoke to Sunni Arab tribal sheikhs, minorities, and others, and I perceived some kind of cautious optimism. Many told me that Iraqis want a civil state.

This trend is fighting against sectarianism. There are groups that are coming together at a local level. They are having cultural exchanges, educational exchanges.

And this is very good momentum. It is a moment. There is a very strong movement of Iraqi nationalism right now. There is great pride in the counterterrorism forces that, by the way, the United States trained. This is a great success.

And nearly every Iraqi I spoke to, even Sunni Arab tribal sheikhs who are criticizing the Iraqi Government, said that they trust these people [counter terrorism forces]. So this is a moment and I think that we should build upon the movement toward a civil state. Grand Ayatollah Sistani is calling for this.

We also should move away from using ethno-sectarian language—Sunni, Shia, Kurd—that most Iraqis do not want to use. We are creating it. We are enforcing it. And they are trying to move away from it.

My final point is, because so much of this is rooted in the disputed territories, we should mediate key issues regarding these areas. We have leverage. We should help broker local power and revenue-sharing agreements not only between Baghdad and Erbil but between the local communities. We should use our leverage. We have it.

Thank you.

[Dr. Natali's prepared statement follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF DENISE NATALI

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the future of Iraq's minorities after the defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). I would like to note that these views represent my own and not those of the United States government, the Department of Defense, or the National Defense University.

The prospects for Iraq's most vulnerable minorities after ISIS are tied to the larger framework of Iraqi politics and minority group dynamics. They will likely be affected by post-ISIS stabilization challenges. These challenges include, but are not limited to ethno-sectarianism, disputes between the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and the proliferation of militias.

Iraq's minorities are not monolithic. They represent about ten percent of the Iraqi population and include Assyrians, Yazidis, Mandaeans (Sabians), Turcoman, Armenians, Circassians, Jews, Kaka'is, Shabaks, and Faily Kurds. Most of these groups live in northern Iraq; the Ninawah Plains, Kirkuk, Sinjar and other localities. Although these territories have become politicized as 'disputed areas'—lands claimed by the Iraqi government and the KRG—they are regarded by Assyrians and Yazidis as ancestral lands. Since the breakdown of the Iraqi state and emergence of sectarian conflict in 2003, the most vulnerable non-Muslim minorities have been the Christians (Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriac and Armenians) and Yazidis. According to a report by Minority Rights Group International, from 2005-2014 the Yazidi population decreased from 700,000 to approximately 500,000. Christian populations also fled Baghdad during this period, with about fifteen percent remaining.

Threats against Christians and Yezidis increased significantly after the ISIS onslaught in June 2014. Reports indicate that about 9,900 Yezidis were killed or captured by ISIS while 6,800 others were kidnapped, with over a third still missing. Thousands of Yezidis also escaped to Syria, Jordan and other states, adding to refugee strains. By 2016 Christian populations declined from about 1.4 million to about 300,000. At present, most Christians and Yezidis in Iraq are living as internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps inside the Kurdistan Region, with smaller numbers in central or southern Iraq.

Despite a shared persecution for their religious beliefs, Iraq's minorities are fractured. Successive Iraqi governments attempted to exploit religious differences between Christian denominations, and these differences persist today. Religion also overlaps with ethnicity, language, and geography within and across groups. Some Yezidis emphasize their Zoroastrian roots and differentiate themselves from "Sunni Kurdish Muslims," while affiliating more closely with secular groups. Others, however, regard their Yezidi identity as being ethnically Kurdish first. These differences often overlap with political affiliations. Yezidis living in northern Ninawah and in Dohuk province support the KRG while others, mainly in Sinjar and southern Ninawah, back the Iraqi government. Still others are independent and seek their own autonomous region. The Yezidis are also isolated by their own traditions—to include a caste-like system that restricts marriages within the Yezidi community. Similarly, Assyrians regard themselves as a distinct ethnic group with their own language that is in danger of extinction, a sentiment that has grown alongside increased KRG control of Ninawah. Assyrians are also divided between supporters of Baghdad and Erbil, and independents.

*After ISIS: Vulnerabilities and Opportunities*

The liberation of former ISIS safe-havens has provided some reprieve for minorities and encouraged the return of IDPs. According to the International Organization for Migration, by September 2017 about 2.2 million of about 3.2 million IDPs had returned to their homes. The vast majority of these IDPs are Sunni Arabs, and about 20,000 of 200,000 Assyrians from the Ninawah Plains. Some Yezidis have returned to northern Ninawa but not to Sinjar, which according to local groups, remains "a ghost town" since its liberation three years ago. What prevents a more robust return of Christians and Yezidi IDPs?

The main obstruction to IDP return is ongoing security threats and lack of services. Some localities remain dangerous; public buildings and homes are destroyed and/or filled with improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Reconstruction support is also lacking. Another reason is a deep sense of mistrust and vulnerability. Yezidis and Christians victimized by ISIS distrust government authorities in Baghdad and Erbil, as well as some Sunni Muslim groups—Arabs and Kurds. Most Yezidis from Sinjar blame Peshmerga from Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) for disarming and abandoning them during the ISIS onslaught, which led to the mass atrocities against them. Post-liberation security arrangements have exacerbated their sense of fear and mistrust. One Yezidi man from Sinjar told me that former ISIS militants and members from some Sunni Kurdish and Sunni Arab tribes made deals with the KDP to help stabilize the border area. He affirmed that "they shaved their beards and are now walking around Dohuk, Sinjar and other areas." Those Yezidis who do not support the KDP have been obstructed from returning to Sinjar by KRG Peshmerga.

IDP return is also inhibited by the presence of various militia groups that have proliferated since 2014 and which control checkpoints and influence local activities. These militias are tied to the Iraqi government, KRG, or Iran (and to a lesser extent, Turkey). In Mosul, Iranian-backed militias are recruiting Sunni Arabs through salaries, food provisions, and security—services which until now, are not offered by the Iraqi government. In the Christian town of Bartella, recently liberated from ISIS, there is a new Imam Khomeini primary school with flags of Iran. Although these militias and institutions are not targeting Christians and Yezidis directly, they are feeding local power struggles, sectarianism, and the risk of conflict.

Minority groups are caught in the political cross-fire between Baghdad and Erbil and have become cannon fodder for everyone else's contestations. A key tension involves unresolved claims to disputed territories and their resources, the vast majority of which have fallen under the de-facto control of the KRG, but which remain administratively and legally under Baghdad's authority. The KRG has expended important resources on some Christian and Yezidi populations as part of its larger aim to annex the territories into a future Kurdish state or expanded Kurdistan Region. In two Christian towns in Ninawah, the provincial council, which is largely controlled by the KDP, recently replaced mayors with a KDP-Christian party affiliate. These dynamics have further divided and weakened Christian groups politically.



While many Assyrians regard these actions as the “Kurdification” of the Ninewah plain and seek greater autonomy under Baghdad’s authority, others support the KRG and the largess it has offered to local officials.

In some areas, political tensions have turned to violence since the liberation of ISIS safe havens, further inhibiting IDP return. Sinjar is a case in point. During my visit to Iraq in March 2017, armed conflict broke out in Sinjar between Syrian Kurdish forces tied to the KDP and Yezidi affiliates of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK)—which has expanded its influence in northern Iraq and disputed areas. The conflict also involved Turkey’s bombing of PKK bases in Sinjar and Syria and resulted in the deaths of 11 people, including KRG Peshmerga forces. Since then, some Yezidis have defected from PKK groups and joined the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) under the auspices of the Iraqi government. Still others affiliate with KRG Peshmerga.

There are small pockets of opportunities for post-ISIS stabilization that could potentially reduce minority group vulnerabilities. I just returned from another research trip to Iraq two weeks ago. I spoke with diverse groups and officials in northern Iraq and Baghdad, including Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, members of the Iraqi parliament, Sunni Arab tribal sheikhs, provincial representatives, civil society leaders, members of the business community, and teachers and students. Most expressed “cautious optimism” about Iraq’s future. Their optimism is tied to an important political trend; efforts to create a civil state and diminish ethno-sectarianism.

This trend is rooted in a strong sense of Iraqi nationalism that has revived since the ISIS onslaught, and demands for political reforms and citizens’ rights (Of the 150 entities registered for the 2018 Iraqi parliamentary elections, 76 have the word civil or civilian in their title). Iraqis also largely support al-Abadi, a political moderate, although worry about Iranian influences, including former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. All—including Sunni Arabs and critics of Baghdad—expressed high respect and trust for Iraq’s Counter Terrorism Forces (CTF). Iraqis are also tired of war. They are attempting to build trust across communities through local leaders and educational and cultural exchanges within and across governorates.

Still, ethno-sectarianism persists, particularly among the political classes. Powerful blocs in the Iraqi parliament may have changed their names, but many remain committed to supporting distinct religious and ethnic constituencies; Sunni Arab, Shi’a Arab, and Kurds. Regional states also continue to back particular leaders or proxy forces that promote sectarian agendas.

The Kurdish referendum has aggravated challenges to post ISIS stabilization.<sup>1</sup> It has deepened tensions between Baghdad and Erbil, enhanced ethnic divisions between Arabs and Kurds, and instigated militia groups seeking to assure Iraq’s territorial integrity. The referendum has raised the ire of the Iraqi parliament—Sunni and Shi’a Arabs alike—and placed al-Abadi in the position of having to more forcefully assert Iraqi sovereignty and push back the KRG’s unilateral actions. The Iraqi government, alongside the governments of Iran and Turkey, have reacted with a series of economic, political, and security measures that aim to assert Iraqi sovereignty. They have threatened to use military force to enter and control the disputed territories directly, or through militias. The potential for armed conflict that will destabilize the Ninewah Plains and Kirkuk and its minority populations is significant. Although minorities have developed their own local forces, they are tied to Baghdad and Erbil and are likely to become further entrenched in the political cross-fire.

#### *Recommendations: Protecting Minorities in a Post-ISIS Iraq*

Even after ISIS is defeated militarily, minorities will remain vulnerable to political instability in the disputed territories. This vulnerability is complex, highly localized, and tied to the cohesion of the Iraqi state. The challenge will be to create conditions that keep minorities out of the cross-fire between Baghdad and Erbil, minimize regional interventions, allow IDPs to return to their homes, and assure some form of local autonomy and self-protection.

It is in the U.S. interest to assure the stability of Iraq after ISIS is defeated so that minority communities remain in Iraq and their homelands. U.S. policy should be based on a nuanced understanding of minority groups that addresses their distinctions and role in the larger Iraqi political arena. The U.S. should:

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the referendum results are not representative of minorities and non-Kurdish populations in the disputed territories. A large percentage of Christians and Yezidis remain as IDPs and did not vote. Many also reported being threatened by Kurdish authorities to vote “Yes.” Similarly, most Arabs and Turkmen are displaced, oppose the referendum, and did not vote.

- *Support local minority rights in conjunction with the Iraqi constitution.* Efforts to stabilize Iraq after ISIS and ascertain minority group rights should be made within the framework of the existing Iraqi constitution. The U.S. should support a political and security architecture that allows people within localities to administer and secure their own areas. All assistance should be conducted in cooperation with the Iraqi government and based on enhancing local decentralization and self-protection of minority groups. This effort can include training local minority police as part of Iraqi security forces and helping to integrate minority group PMUs into official state institutions, to include provincial structures and the KRG as part of a unified Iraqi state.
- *Reinforce a sovereign, civil state and Iraqi institutions.* The U.S. should take advantage of current trends in Iraq that support a civil state and end sectarianism. It should continue to support Iraq's state institutions through clear and consistent messaging that affirms Iraqi sovereignty and territorial integrity. The U.S. should also address Iraqis and its sub-state entities as territorial units and refrain from using ethno-sectarian narratives ("Sunni, Shi'a and Kurds").
- *Mediate disputed territories.* The U.S. should help mediate tensions between Baghdad and Erbil, to include control over territories and energy resources in the disputed areas. The U.S. should also assist in brokering local power and revenue sharing agreements between the Iraqi government, KRG, and provincial councils.

Senator RUBIO. Thank you.

Are you ready, Senator?

Senator KAINE. Yes. I am going to defer to Senator Shaheen first, since you and I know that we will be staying.

Senator RUBIO. We will be.

Senator Shaheen?

Senator SHAHEEN. I want to start, Mr. Wolf, I guess from looking at your report after you came back from your trip. Can you comment on the different options to establish security in the area? Because clearly, one of the biggest impediments for people going back is the lack of security.

Who can they depend on for security? The Iraqi Government? Are there remnants of police officers from their communities who can take over? What is the option there for security?

Mr. WOLF. In every meeting, you are right, Senator, security came up in every meeting. The definition of security was different depending on who you were talking to.

They do not want the 82nd-Airborne. They are not asking for American soldiers.

Senator SHAHEEN. Sure.

Mr. WOLF. But they would like, they believe, a base, an American base, a Western base, where you have American NATO forces training, as Dr. Natali said. They would like to see some presence of the West there.

Others are asking that there be some—there was the Levin amendment passed by this committee or by Armed Services years ago that provided—it is law—provided for the training of some of the National Guard. I do not want to call militia, the NPU. There are different groups. Train them for human rights, religious freedom, basically a police department or basically a National Guard. There are a number of options out there.

Many do not trust some of the more organized groups, without getting into controversy. The Yazidis were up on Mount Sinjar, and they were told to give their weapons away by some people in the Peshmerga. They gave them away. The next morning, they woke

up—the lady yesterday who testified has lost 19 people in her family.

So there is a certain mistrust. One, they would like to see a presence of the United States. And I think it does make sense to have some base there. We have a base in South Korea. We have been there for years. We still have military in Germany. To have a NATO base, to have some base there—we have a base in South Korea. We have been there for years. We still have military in Germany.

To have a NATO base where you would train their National Guard just to defend their villages, not to be a point of the spear against anybody. But security was the number one issue. Every different time it came up—security, security, security.

Senator SHAHEEN. You talked about the Iranian presence there. It has been pointed out to me that, in Syria, for example, that many of the fighters for Hezbollah and the Iranians who are in Syria are moving their families there and actually settling, taking over lands that were originally owned by the Syrians. Are you seeing evidence of that in Iraq as well, either of you?

Mr. WOLF. Yes, we are. The Iranians are funding a certain group, Shia, not those who have been persecuted, but Shia, to come in and buy the home of Christians.

If you are a Christian man and family, do you stay? Do you go? Your one daughter is 17, another is 15. Do you go or do you not? Are you going to get security?

So they are selling. So what the Iranians are doing are putting people in there to buy properties, and they are buying them here, here, through the Nineveh plains.

Thirdly, they are afraid that Tehran will run this. We have seen reports of this guy Soleimani, the Quds there.

So, yes, the Iranians have a concerted effort to dominate that region for a certain portion to create a land-bridge, or some people call it a crescent, that will literally go all the way into Syria and into the Mediterranean. But, yes, there is a formal effort.

One thing both governments, both the Kurds and Iraqis, could do is put a moratorium on selling property for at least a period of time. But there is a concerted effort by the Iranians to buy up property so they will have people there.

Senator SHAHEEN. Dr. Natali, in your opinion, what is the balance that should be struck in many of these communities between those who want to return to the communities, those who want to be resettled elsewhere in Iraq, those who want to leave Iraq? Should that be up to the individual folks to make that determination? And how can we help make that happen?

Dr. NATALI. Thank you, Senator.

And I would like to answer the question about Iran, since you asked both.

Senator SHAHEEN. Sure. That would be great.

Dr. NATALI. Most of these people would like to return, as the Honorable Frank Wolf said, if the security was there. They are caught between Baghdad that does not have the resources and is focused on ISIS and, let's be frank, the Kurdistan Regional Government, which according to many, has co-opted, taken care of some, and as many Assyrians would say, Kurdified the Nineveh plains.

So we have to be very careful about taking sides between these two. The vast majority [of minorities] would like to go back and have control and some form of autonomy. That is something new.

Before ISIS came, by the way, there was a motion in the Iraqi parliament that aimed to create a new governorate for the Assyrians, for the minorities. And then ISIS came.

There are some discussions going on in Iraq to allocate within the existing provincial structures—we are not talking about breaking up states—special territorial administrative autonomy to these groups.

So yes, part of the solution is the security. I absolutely agree. But we should be careful about which militias we are saying really represent these minorities. Many militias are saying right now they represent or they do not represent their communities. I think we should be careful about getting too involved in these contestations..

The second part is reconstruction. The donations or the contributions from donor countries to reconstruct Iraq, are minuscule, and the NGO communities are not engaging to the extent that they can because of security.

There are those two elements right there. But I go back to my point. This effort should be conducted within the framework of the Iraqi state. If we start getting involved in territorial engineering, then we are, in my view, fueling some of these conflicts.

I would like to make some points, if I may, about the Iranian element, because I think this is important. I did go, this last trip, I go regularly back to the region, to look at the extent of Iranian influences, in addition to the referendum.

We should be nuanced about this issue. Yes there is increasing Iranian influence to fill power vacuums through particular militia. In regard to this issue, I spoke to officials in the Iraqi Government to include Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, and others. .

There are two main Iranian-backed Hashi Shaabi groups the AAH and Hezb Kata'ib (some also include Badr Brigades). These groups represent as low as 10 percent or as much as 30 percent of all Hashi Shaabi. They are referred to as the disciplined and the undisciplined.

As long as ISIS is there, Iraqi officials indicate that they cannot get rid of them the militias because they are not threatening their lives like ISIS. So these groups will like remain there for some time.

Are they gaining influence in some areas? Yes, they are. I will give you an example.

In Mosul, and this was told to me by several leading Arab sheikhs that I spoke to, they are recruiting local populations through salaries and food baskets. And some people are joining.

One tribal sheikh told me that he was very worried. "I am losing my people. not to the regular Hashd al-Shaabi, but to the Iranian-backed ones." So that is a concern.

, Iran is also extending influence in minority areas. In a Christian town called Bartella, there is actually a new Imam Khomeini elementary school, and they are flying an Iranian flag there.

Are they directly targeting the Christians? No. Are they going to enhance sectarian tensions? Yes.

The third point is that even though Prime Minister Abadi, who I think is someone that we should continue to support—he is a moderate—has done remarkable things in bringing Iraqis together, all of this can be used to enhance his challenger, former Prime Minister Maliki, including the referendum. That is where Iranian-backed groups are going to try to get their influence as well.

So they are there, but I think we should be careful about saying all of it is Iranian-focused.

My final point is, there is a long border between Iran and Iraq. The Kurds have a long border with Iran. I lived there for many years. When the Iranians shut the border, you are doomed.

There is a lot of influence between the Kurdish region and Iran commercially. You cannot say that you are going to completely remove Iranian influence. It is the nefarious, undisciplined militia that I think we need to hone in on. That is the 10 percent to 30 percent of the militias.

Finally, we should be mindful about how much Iranian militia influence can emerge because of the need for services. If a militia can provide services in Iraqi localities, people will join them, because everybody is human. They want electricity. They want food. And they want salaries.

So not to go off on a tangent, but that is where I see the influences that we should be concerned about.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator RUBIO. Thank you.

Senator Kaine?

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is very helpful testimony. It is the treatment of minorities, but it is also big picture: What should our Iraq policy be? Obviously, they connect so strongly.

And when minorities get treated poorly, as was the case after 2011, a lot of the reason that ISIS was able to run wild and get a lot of territory is that the Sunni parts of Iraq felt like they had sort of been abandoned by the central government, and they were not necessarily immediately going to join up and fight against ISIS with a government they did not trust.

So creating a government that has the trust of minority groups is really important not just for the safety of the minority groups to avoid genocide but for the future of the country.

There was an article last week in *Foreign Policy*, “An Ominous Future for Kurdistan’s Minorities.” I just want to read a portion and just get you both to comment on this, if you think this is sort of an accurate statement.

“The issue of the disputed territories, and who will ultimately govern them, also throws the fate of Iraq’s myriad religious and ethnic minorities into question. These groups, like the Yazidis, Turkmen, Christians, and the Shabak, have been persecuted by ISIS in the disputed territories, and are now forced to choose which government—Iraq or the KRG—they deem less oppressive. The competition between the central government and the KRG over the loyalty of minority groups in the Ninevah plain is one of the main drivers of conflict there, from Saddam’s time onward.”

If that is the case, if there is this competition between the central government and the KRG, and we are dealing with both of them, providing aid through Baghdad that goes to the KRG, what role should we be playing in trying to reduce this tug-of-war and these minority groups sort of being forced to choose which government they will be aligned with?

Dr. NATALI. I agree with that *Foreign Policy* analysis. I would say, “Yes, and.” “And” because of the political and security vacuums, because there are also militias and sub-state groups that they are also involved in.

For example, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) groups in Syria have made their way to Sinjar. Some people are now also forced to choose between Baghdad, Erbil, and other groups in these areas. That is one part.

Another part is responsibility for current threats to minorities. I don’t blame Baghdad and the Kurdistan region equally. Because most of the territories of minorities are in northern Iraq, and because the Kurdistan Regional Government has taken de facto control of these areas, for minority groups the threat is different. For Baghdad, it is because the Iraqi government is not giving enough attention to minorities. For the Kurdistan region, it is because Kurdish authorities are trying to control them.

-It is important to note that historically, Assyrians did not make claims that they were being erased ethnically. They were working with the Iraqi Government. Some of the bigger supporters of the Iraqi Government were the Christians. It was only after 2003 and then 2011 that Assyrians started to emphasize the Kurdification of the Ninewa Plains.

I would say, back to keeping the Iraqi state whole, that any support to minorities should go through the Iraqi Government to existing provincial councils.

I would not suggest going through the Kurdistan Regional Government but through provincial councils and localities.

This is a different mechanism than saying give support and aid to Baghdad, then to the Kurdistan Regional Government, and then to the provinces and minorities.

Senator KAINE. Congressman Wolf?

Mr. WOLF. I agree with the statement, whoever wrote that.

We talk to parents and young people. They just want security for their families.

Again, the Christian population has dropped from 1.5 million in 2003 down to 250,000, some say 150,000. I mean, if you have young kids, this is your last year you are going to stay. You are not going to wait. You are living in a tent.

We went into one tent. There was a man who was a technician in a hospital in Mosul. And his mother and father were lying on the floor. He said, “I have to get out of here. I have to get out.”

So they are waiting to see what we do. That is why, one, I think we need fresh eyes. I am not criticizing the previous, but it is just to see. Things change.

Secondly, I think you need one person who has the responsibility. I do not know if either of you know Senator Danforth. I think John Danforth did an incredible job. It was not a full-time job. I think

he continued to live out in St. Louis for that period of time. But one person who was the point of contact.

What he was able to do, working with Colin Powell, he could get to the President, get to Secretary Powell. He was able to bring that north-south peace agreement for a new South Sudan.

I think you need one person who has the support of the President, the support of Secretary Tillerson, the support of both of you, to give that authority. Because I do not think there is any one simple answer, you do this, you do that, it all works out.

But they want to see some progress. And if they do not see progress, I think they are going to leave. I had one Catholic priest say, "Help us to stay. But if you are not going to help us to stay, help us to leave."

And lastly, I believe—I am very pessimistic. I believe the Iranians will move in so fast. Nasrallah, the people who are involved with the Marine barracks—I remember Dan Coats and I went to the Marine barracks when they were blown up. Those people will have the aid and the support coming directly. They will be able to literally get in a van and stop for coffee halfway there, and with weapons and fighters and materials to aid Hezbollah, which will be a threat.

We know what they did to the Marine barracks. It will be a threat to Israel, but a threat to the entire West.

So I think it is an issue of helping the Christians and the Yazidis and the Turkmen. Also, it is making sure that the Iranians do not come in.

Senator Shaheen asked a good question. If they control that area and buy up that property, it will never be reversed, certainly not in our lifetime.

Senator KAINE. Let me just say one other thing before the chair, and that is, your last recommendation dealt with H.R. 390. And as you pointed out in your testimony, that came through this committee. I think it came through unanimously. We worked on some amendments, and it is on the floor, so it is in a slightly different form than it came through the House.

But we were just conversing. We do not see any challenges, so hopefully we can try to U.C. it, or do something to move it. It only came onto the committee—I mean, came onto the floor. It came out of committee about 10 days ago.

But I appreciate your encouragement of that. I think that is a very strong bill.

Senator RUBIO. A procedural update. Our understanding is there is—I have never heard this term before—an informational hold.

Senator KAINE. Somebody wants information before they vote? That is so shocking.

[Laughter.]

Senator RUBIO. Well, anyway, hopefully, we will be able to work through that. Then we will have to work out the differences between the two. But we are hopeful.

There are some differences between the House the Senate versions, so that makes it a little bit different than some of the other things we have done on this territory, because we have had to figure out a process for working out those differences. But hopefully, that will happen.

Dr. Natali, I wanted to ask you first just about, because you have talked about how the situation with the Kurds has exacerbated difficulties, the broader difficulties in the region. I know this kind of steps a little bit out of the lane of this hearing, but I think it is directly related to it, and that is whether the appropriate role of the United States at this point is to try to get both sides to sort of lower the tension and the rhetoric, not to do anything that provokes the other side to have to act or save face.

In essence, is it not in the best interests of the United States, viewing that issue holistically, and I think in the best interest of the parties involved, to make the following argument to both sides, and that is: We are not asking Kurdistans or Barzani or anybody to abandon their desires for independence. What we are asking them to do is to take steps to lower the sort of temperature, the rhetoric, because there are still some issues that need to be worked through.

And the flip side would be, of course, to ask the Government in Baghdad to take some steps that would in no way be used against them to argue that they have somehow caved, but, by the same token, show a desire to be open to dialogue on this topic in the future. But right now, sort of in the interim, try to lower the temperature as well, because there are still so many other issues at play.

In fact, the tension between these two is being used in many ways by other actors in the region to sort of look for strategic advantage.

Do you think there is an openness on both sides to that? Is there openness to that on both sides? Or are they backing themselves into a corner from which they can only fight their way out of?

Dr. NATALI. Thank you, Senator Rubio. I agree with you on that.

First and foremost, overall, we should be trying—and we have leverage—to defuse the tensions..

That effort is going on behind the scenes. There is what is going on in the newspaper, and there is what is going on internally.

To your question, “Yes, and.” I THINK we have to be careful about the way that we deal with the Kurds as well. Yes they are absolutely important partners, and they have provided invaluable Peshmerga support. But if we are emphasizing the territorial integrity of the Iraqi state and enhancing Iraqi state institutions, then “coddling” Kurds does not support that aim either.

I think negotiations between Baghdad and Erbil will occur. But we are not using our leverage sufficiently with the Kurds. We have been very clear about the referendum. And I agree with your statements. But we should emphasize to Kurdish officials that they also need to go down to Baghdad and negotiate.

In my discussions with some Kurdish officials the week before the referendum, some told me, “This is great. Now at least we have your attention. There was a lot of pressure not to have it [referendum] done. BUT NOW WE are back. You cannot forget about us now.”

Yes there was an honest desire to have the referendum. But there were many people who did not want to conduct it. They know they have to negotiate with Baghdad.



So yes, we should encourage our Kurdish partners to compromise because we are providing them with military support. My question is, how are we going to use our leverage to encourage that negotiation? Many Kurds said to me before the referendum, “You aren’t going to do anything. You need us too much.”

They also said “we are too important for you. If anything happens to us you will come and save us.”

Another problem is that the Prime Minister—who is very moderate—is being pressured by most by the people, Arabs and other Iraqis, Sunni and Shia, who are reacting to the referendum.

Again, I think our role is to mediate with the Kurds, and we should be very careful. We should continue that partnership, but should not overly enable the Kurds to the point where their leaders think they do not have to cut a deal with Baghdad. And I do not think that we have worked that part out quite well.

Senator RUBIO. The only addition I would make to that is my feeling is that the Government of Kurdistan would probably be open to a number of measures, joint patrols of certain crossings, perhaps increased revenue flow back to Baghdad, so long as they are not asked to completely abandon or feel like they somehow have foreclosed the ability for a dialogue in the future about their status.

I think the potential irritant that no one has counted on is the capability of Iranian-controlled militia groups to act unilaterally—

Dr. NATALI. That is right.

Senator RUBIO [continuing]. Against a border crossing or territorial space in order to trigger a conflict that the view would be beneficial to their desire to have control over the region and over those oil-producing places, in particular.

So that is an actor that is probably even outside of Abadi’s control, and a part of this dangerous game in the region. So it is something that bears watching because there are, in the context of this hearing, a significant number of religious minorities who have sought and received refuge within the Kurdish areas who will be directly impacted, if this thing heads in a bad direction. So that is why it is related to the topic we are discussing here today.

Dr. NATALI. I agree with you. I agree with that point. I just want to make one more caveat, and that is, be careful with our Kurdish partners. And this has been, again, written in the documents by the Assyrian Federation of Europe. Many Assyrian think that they are being erased by some of the Kurdish authorities as well.

Again, Baghdad’s fault is that they are not paying enough attention. Some of the Kurdish region’s fault is that they have confiscated lands of the Assyrians. The lands were not just confiscated by Iranians. They were confiscated by the Kurdistan Regional Government as well, and this is documented.

So we should encourage our partners to watch this behavior. If we ignore it and we turn our eye, then it will continue. Good partners and good friends should tell their friends not to do things that are undermining the minorities as well.

Senator RUBIO. Mr. Wolf, you may have alluded to this in your statement, and I may have missed it, and I apologize. But when

you were there in your recent trip, did you visit with U.N. officials during your trip?

Mr. WOLF. Yes, I did.

Senator RUBIO. So did they indicate to you that they had received guidance from the State Department or USAID regarding how U.S. assistance dollars were to be handled and spent?

Mr. WOLF. No, they did not. The woman who runs the U.N. program is an American from Texas, a very, very capable person. She came up and briefed us, and I think was doing a very good job. But she did not get into that.

Many of the Christians will not go into the U.N.-run camps, because they are afraid. Just the young lady yesterday who said she saw, and I think she can better explain than I can, she saw the man who did terrible things to her living in a camp.

So the Christian community is afraid to go into the camps. And many of the Yazidis are also afraid to go in.

But overall, I think the U.N. has done some very good things. It just has not gotten down to the Christians and the Yazidis and some of the religious minorities.

Senator RUBIO. Just that fact that you point to right there, is it your view or did you raise that? Was it raised in front of you to the U.N. officials while you were there, that a lot of the people who need this aid cannot get it because they are afraid to come to where you are because of some of the people around here?

Mr. WOLF. Yes.

Senator RUBIO. And their response was?

Mr. WOLF. There really was not a response. I mean, it has been common knowledge that if a Christian family is going to go into a camp, in the next tent, is the brother an ISIS supporter?

You are just not going to go there. Many of the Christians who have left have gone north. They are in Erbil. They are in different camps. They are in old shopping malls. Others have moved into Turkey. Others have moved into Lebanon.

Many would want to come back. It is a beautiful country. The northern part of Iraq is magnificent. The biblical history there, when we were there, we went to Nahum's tomb, Old Testament. The history is so rich. And they love their country. And, I might say, they are really a people of strong faith.

But they are not going to go into those camps. They are just not going to go in.

And most of our money has been going in to the U.N. It is now time for Mark Green to take some of that and give it to the Yazidis. Let's have a counseling program for the Yazidi women and girls. Let's bring in IJM, or let's bring in different psychological people to give counseling.

We met with the leader of the Yazidi community, Baba Sheikh. They need help, when they rescue these people. What do these women do? So they need help.

But also, let's give it to the Christian community. Bartella, Qaraqosh, when they come back, the water system, help them with their houses.

They feel, and I think if you talk to the Knights of Columbus and some of the others—and let me say, the Knights of Columbus have done an incredible job. Another group, Samaritan's Purse, has done

an incredible job. I was with a Catholic nun, Sister Diana. She says Samaritan's Purse. I asked Samaritan's Purse, they say Knights of Columbus. I mean, it is the most ecumenical group over there. They love each other.

Work it through Samaritan's Purse. Work it through Knights of Columbus. Work it through World Vision. Work it through them.

But the Christian community, not for any overt meanness, but has been neglected. And now that ISIS has pretty much, not totally, pretty much been defeated, this is the time to aid the Christian community, the Yazidi community, including counseling for these young girls.

As of this moment, they told us there were 3,000 girls still being held.

Senator RUBIO. But the best way to describe the situation, then, is that there is no ill will here. There is no bad faith. The United States Congress has appropriated and directed that American taxpayer funding be directed to assist religious minorities, including Yazidi and Christian communities. The money has been sent to the U.N. in order to do that.

The U.N. would say the money is here. It is available. They can come receive aid. But they do not come for the reasons you have outlined.

And as a result, our intent is not being carried out, and it does not seem like the U.N. officials feel as if they are under any sort of directive to do anything other than to say it is available, but not go any further than that, in terms of asking why people are not utilizing it or why they are not coming.

Mr. WOLF. I think you summed it up. I would like to see some of our money go to Samaritan's Purse, to World Vision, to Knights of Columbus.

Senator RUBIO. In essence, to organizations that are going out to those in need, as opposed to waiting for them to come.

Mr. WOLF. Right. Samaritan's Purse runs a hospital in Mosul, just outside Mosul, that I visited. All they treat are Muslims. Give it to Samaritan's Purse. Give it to Sister Diana. Give it to the Knights of Columbus. The Knights of Columbus, they are rebuilding villages.

So I am not saying that we take everything that goes to the U.N., but refunnel some of that money and give it to groups—not who are new who say, "I will go in if you give it to me"—who are already there.

Samaritan's Purse has been there for a couple years. Knights of Columbus has been there for a couple years. Sister Diana of the Dominican Sisters are from there.

Give some money to them so they can help their own community, not because they are Christians, but because they have been subject to genocide. Give it to some of the Yazidi groups, not because they are Yazidis, but because they have been subject to genocide.

So divert some of the money that is going to the U.N. and give it to some of these groups.

Senator RUBIO. So then my last question is, your suggestion of a special coordinator would be someone who would sort of oversee this process and make sure that some of these steps are taken?

And I am not against the notion of a special coordinator, but I guess my question is, is it also something that USAID under our current structure could also take it upon themselves to drive these funds in that direction? But you just feel that it will not happen, given all the other things USAID is facing.

Mr. WOLF. I think there is a resistance in government to do this. And secondly, it is not only AID, Senator. You need someone at the State Department who is not AID. You need somebody who can talk to General Mattis at the Department of Defense.

I mean, I think the model really was Senator Danforth. He was able to go anywhere in the government to deal with the problem. There were some security problems. The government was aiding the Lord's Resistance Army. He was able to go everywhere.

So this person has to have the ability not only to deal with AID, the State Department, the Department of Defense, Homeland Security, CIA, everybody.

Also, a citizen who used to show her on his cell phone pictures of his wife and children back in the United States. Where is Abdul Ameriki? Well, let's track him down. Let's do fingerprints.

Why have we not brought cases against those who beheaded the American citizens, the four American citizens? Track them down. Bring them to justice.

My committee, we funded the International Criminal Court. We funded Crane to come after Sierra Leone, Charles Taylor. They are all in jail now. It took a lot of effort.

The same thing should be done to bring justice, because if these people are not brought to justice, many will embed in.

Do you remember the story 5 or 10 years ago? You find a former worker at a General Motors plant was a Nazi. They embed in. They come over.

Let's find those people. Bring them to justice, the International Criminal Court, bring them here.

So I think this person has to be bigger than just dealing with Mark Green at AID.

Senator RUBIO. Got it.

Senator KAINE?

Senator KAINE. Just one last point in response to, Congressman Wolf, your point about there may be a better way to spin this aid, there is a bill that I think has now been introduced. The main sponsors are Senators Corker and Coons, and I am on as a cosponsor. It is to basically study donations to multilateral organizations to achieve ends versus direct either bilateral or unilateral, including to NGOs.

And I cosponsored. I am a fan of multilateral aid. I like it. But I am really agnostic, at the end of the day. I just want it to do the job for which it is intended.

And it is a fairly large study, but this may be the kind of example that we could use in a study like that. Okay, let's see the dollars that we are putting in, how effective are they going through a multilateral channel and accomplishing antigencide or relief for displaced persons? And we can compare it to more direct or bilateral solutions.

I think it is the bill that could give us some opportunity. This is an example that we could look at. So I appreciate you bringing that up.

Senator RUBIO. It is an important point, because what I hear you describe, Mr. Wolf, is, basically, a whole-of-government coordinator that can bring to bear the different agencies and tools available to the United States Government in a coordinated fashion not just to deliver aid and relief, but also reconstruction, assistance with governance and justice, bringing people to justice, in particular, this horrifying case that you outlined of the U.S. citizen. And if that individual is still alive, they should be brought to justice. Even if they are not, their name and circumstances should be known to the American people.

Do you have anything further?

We have gone beyond our allotted time. I thank you both for being so patient because of our hearings and the vote and the like. This was an important hearing, as you can tell by the attendance and the interest. I am glad you were able to shine light on it.

More importantly, you were both able to provide us with specific public policy recommendations. Often, we have these hearings, and we hear a lot about the problems and some vague notions. You both have been pretty specific, which is very helpful in terms of our work here and what to advocate for, what we need to be pushing for.

So we thank you both for that.

The record for this hearing is going to remain open for the next 48 hours.

Senator RUBIO. Again, I want to thank both of you for your patience, your time, and your work on this topic. It is a lot of hard work. Your dedication to it is very critical. Again, thank you.

With that, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:35 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]



## **Additional Material Submitted for the Record**

SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD BY HON. FRANK R. WOLF  
*Distinguished Senior Fellow, 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative*



### Northern Iraq 2017

Congressman Frank R. Wolf (Ret. 1981-2014)  
Distinguished Senior Fellow, 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative

August 16, 2017



# 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 uncleanliness 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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*Contributing to this report: Abigail Berg, Gavin Gramstad, Andrew Larsen.*



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