

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

**“The Future of Iraq’s Minorities: What’s Next After ISIS”
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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. Having 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 UN 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.