

Atrocities in Iraq and Syria: Relief for Survivors and Accountability for Perpetrators
A Hearing Before the Helsinki Commission
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the Commission, for this opportunity to testify. Congress and the Administration have our appreciation for their declarations of genocide that speak on behalf of victims, who often feel that the world has forgotten them.

Mr. Chairman, you, Ms. Eshoo, Mr. Fortenberry and Mr. Franks are to be commended for your leadership in introducing H.R. 5961, *the Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act*. In testimony in May, I outlined six principles for averting the extinction of Christians and other minorities in the Middle East.

I am grateful that H.R. 5961 makes progress in all six of these areas. Thank you, and be assured of the full support of the Knights of Columbus in your work to bring this bill to the President's desk with all deliberate speed.

I would like to speak to you today about three matters.

First, our government's humanitarian aid bureaucracy is often not making aid available to communities that need it most.

Section 5 of the bill directs the Secretary of State in consultation with Administration officials to prioritize relief particularly for those groups and individuals targeted for genocide, to identify their vulnerabilities, and to work with humanitarian and faith-based organizations to address these needs. It seems that it is more of a mindset than anything else that has resulted in the need for this section.

Our representatives have met with U.S. and U.N. officials in Iraq and in Washington to ask them all the same question: "Why aren't the communities that were victims of this genocide receiving public aid?"

The main answer has been that the current policy prioritizes individual needs but does not consider the needs of vulnerable communities — even when they have been targeted for genocide and risk disappearing altogether.

But regardless of the reason, the outcome is the same. Such a policy increases the likelihood that the complete eradication of these groups from the region — which was the intent of the genocide — will succeed.

We know that many Christian and Yazidi victims of genocide do not receive public aid.

And here we have a fundamental inconsistency in the U.S. stance toward the genocide.

On the one hand we have the unanimous policy of the elected branches of the United States government stating that a genocide is occurring. On the other hand we have an aid bureaucracy that is allowing the intended consequence of the genocide to continue, even though it is in our power to stop it.

Responding to a genocide requires a different approach. Fortunately, the bureaucratic roadblocks are mainly cultural, not statutory.

What the bureaucracy needs is an immediate change of mindset. Legislation — or the threat of legislation — may be helpful in hastening this, but even now, it does not have to be this way.

As this bill proceeds to a vote, our legislative and executive representatives need to deliver to our diplomatic and aid entities a clear and simple message:

In the midst of this genocide, saving Christian — and other communities that face extinction — in Iraq and Syria is part of your mission. There is nothing unconstitutional, illegal, unethical or unprofessional about prioritizing their right to survival *as communities*. They are innocent victims of a genocide. If these victim communities are not receiving aid, you are not fulfilling your mission. And such action is consistent with the best of American and U.S. State Department tradition.

In fact, exactly a century ago, during and following World War I, the United States government helped assist Christians in the region with direct aid as they suffered what Pope Francis has called the first genocide of the 20th century.

Chartered by an act of Congress, and recipient of more than \$25 million in direct U.S. government “supplies, services and cash,” the Near East Relief organization constituted a collaboration of the State Department and American religious entities on the ground in the Middle East. It is widely credited with having been key in saving religious pluralism in the region during and following World War I. And I am proud to say that the Knights of Columbus was among the groups that supported this humanitarian effort in the 1920s.¹

The organization sought to save the Christian populations of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Armenia from “immediate and total destruction.”²

There is no reason that such a prioritization and partnership — assisted by direct government funding — could not exist today to save Yazidis, Christians and other small vulnerable indigenous groups.

To be clear, we have had the assistance of many people who are working within this system and are trying to help, and many officials are advocating within their entities for a change in the status quo. But they are often limited by a bureaucracy that is resistant to initiative and resists change.

What is lacking may be legislation, but it is also leadership. With this bill, Congress is providing leadership — and it is time for the aid community to respond. If they do not, the officials from the State Department, USAID, and their private partners that have not prioritized aid to Christians and Yazidi communities need to continue to hear directly from Congress and

¹ JAY WINTER, ED. AMERICA AND THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE 195 (2003) at <https://books.google.com/books?id=pnLSRXAXTfcC&lpg=PA198&dq=near%20east%20relief%2025%20million&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

² REV. JOSEPH NAAYEM, SHALL THIS NATION DIE? xvi (1921) at <https://books.google.com/books?id=hokGAQAAIAAJ&lpg=PR16&ots=1wrLicULSu&dq=%22immediate%20and%20total%20destruction%22%20mesopotamia&pg=PR3#v=onepage&q=%22immediate%20and%20total%20destruction%22%20mesopotamia&f=false>.

from the President and from the American people that public aid needs to flow to these communities now.

Second, on the subject of aid I would like to reiterate that, in addition to the funds provided in this bill, Congress should explore a stand-alone emergency appropriations bill to respond to this genocide in an even more direct and comprehensive manner.

It seems that few situations could be as worthy of such a measure as the genocide Congress has declared unanimously to be ongoing.

My third point is that the aid we provide must be an investment in a more peaceful future in the region. This cannot happen unless the system of religious apartheid there ends. Christians and other religious minorities are entitled to equal rights and the equal protection of the laws as enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.³

Our tax dollars to governments in the region must not be used to rebuild a discriminatory system that imposes second-class citizenship upon religious minorities. U.S. aid for reconstruction, military and other purposes should be contingent on the application of full and equal rights of citizenship to every citizen of Iraq and other countries in the region, as defined by the Universal Declaration.

This agenda demands from us a new approach to issues of human rights in the region.

When we here speak of human rights, we are referencing those rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. When governments in Muslim-majority countries speak of human rights, they may be thinking of those rights as defined — or as confined — by *Sharia*. The interests of the region, and our own interests demand that we not mislead ourselves or allow others to mislead us in this regard.

³ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. Res. 217A, U.N. GAOR, 3rd Sess., 1st plen. Mtg., U.N. Doc A/810 (Dec.12, 1948).

Our own laws, including the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998,⁴ recognize these realities, and require our government to act. Christians in the region have a natural and universal right to practice their faith freely and openly. They must receive protection from civil authorities when they do so. They and other minorities must have religious freedom. Without it, pluralism will certainly die, and with it all hope for stability in the region. If civil authorities in the region cannot supply this protection, they are not suitable partners for aid.

Only with such policies will we be able to break the cycle of persecution culminating in genocide which has afflicted these communities for far too long, and which threatens international peace and security.

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much for your leadership and that of the members of this Commission.

⁴ International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, 22 USCS §§ 6401 – 6481 (2016).