



**Written Testimony of**

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**Regarding  
"U.S. Resettlement as a Life Saving Durable Solution for the Most Vulnerable Syrian and Iraqi  
Refugees, Including Religious and Ethnic Minorities"**

**For a Hearing of the Helsinki Commission**

**"Atrocities in Iraq and Syria: Relief for Survivors and Accountability for Perpetrators"**

**10:00 a.m., Thursday, September 22, 2016  
Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2200**

I am Bill Canny, the Executive Director of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS). I am grateful for this opportunity to testify before the Helsinki Commission-- grateful to Representative Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ), Chair, and Senator Roger F. Wicker (R-MS), Co-Chair, and also Ranking Members Representative Alcee L. Hastings (D-FL) and Senator Benjamin L. Cardin (D-MD), and all the Commission members.

USCCB welcomes the introduction of H.R. 5961, the bi-partisan Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act, sponsored by Chairman Smith. We appreciate this opportunity to share our thoughts and ideas about the bill, as well as share other recommendations to protect those fleeing atrocities in Syria and Iraq.

The work of the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration is carried out by USCCB's Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS), which is the largest U.S. refugee resettlement agency, resettling about one quarter of the refugees each year. MRS works with over 100 Catholic Charities offices across the United States to welcome and serve not only refugees but also unaccompanied refugee and migrant children, victims of human trafficking, survivors of torture, and other at-risk migrants.

The U.S. Catholic Church also relates closely with the Catholic Church in countries throughout the world, where our worldwide Catholic communion serves the needs of the most marginalized regardless of nationality, ethnicity, race, or religious affiliation. We serve many refugees, internally displaced persons, and many refugee host communities straining under the large numbers of people fleeing persecution and war. The Church's deep experience in combating poverty and forced migration and their root causes in the Middle East and throughout the world also includes the work of, among others, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the official overseas relief and development agency of the U.S. Catholic bishops, and the Geneva-based, International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC).

The level of loss, displacement, and human suffering is staggering in this conflict.<sup>1</sup> Over 10.9 million Syrians have been forcibly displaced--6.1 million as internally displaced people (IDPs) inside the country and 4.8 million as refugees who have fled to neighboring countries. Over half of the refugees are under the age of 18 and over 35 percent are under the age of 12. Over 3.5 million Iraqis have been forcibly displaced—3.3 million as IDPs inside the country and a conservative estimate of 233,000 Iraqis as refugees in neighboring countries.

As the March 17, 2016 statement of Secretary of State Kerry detailed and you indicated in the Act's findings, many of the people are forced to flee due to atrocities. This includes ISIS's genocidal actions against Christians, Yazidis, and Shia Muslim, and the crimes against humanity and war crimes perpetrated by ISIS or the Syrian government against the Sunni majority, or the Kurds, and other ethnic minorities.. *Genocide Against Christians in the Middle East*, March 16, 2016, co-authored by the Knights of Columbus and In Defense of Christians, details further persecution that Christians have suffered in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics in this paragraph are from the following sources: UNOCHA, *Iraq: A Worsening Humanitarian Crisis*, July 31, 2016 (number of Iraqi IDPs); UNHCR, *Iraq: Mosul Situation Flash Update*, July 31, 2016 (number of Iraqi refugees in seven neighboring countries); UNOCHA, *Syrian Arab Republic: An Overview*, September 2016 (number of IDPs, refugees, under 17, under 12).

USCCB shares this deep concern for Syrian and Iraqi victims of atrocities. USCCB's Committee on International Justice and Peace, and its Committee on Migration have made numerous, recent missions to the region and written two assessment and solidarity reports about the plight of refugees in the region.<sup>2</sup>

In our most recent report in 2015, the delegation described arriving in southern Turkey as some 130,000 Kurds, an ethnic minority in Syria, were forced over the course of a weekend to seek refuge in Turkey as ISIS devastated their city of Kobane.

As the trip continued, the USCCB delegation met a growing number of religious minorities, including Christians, Yazidis, and Shia Muslims. The delegation met a Syrian Christian in his 20s, newly converted to Christianity, who boldly shared his faith with the arriving ISIS fighters to his village. Surprised that they let him go, he went home to the family home several hours later to find his parents and siblings slaughtered by ISIS. At Sunday Mass in Istanbul, we met with a church full of Iraqi Christian villagers who had fled en masse from ISIS. One of the village leaders had stood up to ISIS. The next morning the villagers found the leader's severed head on his doorstep.

Based on what we continue to see and hear from the region, we are urging the U.S. government and the international community to help address the root causes of this gruesome conflict, the root causes of the forced migration, and to help build an inclusive society so that those forced to flee, regardless of religion or ethnicity, would be able to make a safe, humane, voluntary return at the end of the conflict, including Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities. At the same time, we urge the United States and international community to continue to protect and support internally displaced people and refugees from Syrian and Iraq, and also to support and keep stable the neighboring countries that host most of them. As is the case for most refugees, such return is the first choice and option most viable for most refugees. Meanwhile, for some refugees--because of their vulnerability, the trauma they experienced, or their need for family reunification--waiting for return is not viable. There are a number of options available to the United States and other nations to help alleviate the suffering of these most vulnerable within already vulnerable refugee populations. One of those options is to offer resettlement in the United States to a relatively small number of them.

Some of the most vulnerable include majority Sunni from Syria, as well as religious minorities in Syria, such as Christians, Shia, Yazidi, and others who are in grave danger there because of their religious beliefs. We have urged the United States and other concerned countries, as well as countries in the region, to do more to protect them and others who are facing persecution at the hands of both state actors and non-state actors.

We are pleased that the United States has resettled more than 10,000 Syrian refugees in the current fiscal year. Indeed, while we are pleased at the increased number of Syrian refugees who have been offered protection in the United States over the last year, we believe that the United States has the capacity to admit and resettle even more than that number in the coming fiscal year, and we stand ready to work with the Administration, Congress, and local communities in achieving that end.

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<sup>2</sup>USCCB/MRS, *Mission to the Middle East: A Report of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on Syrian Refugees*, 2012; and USCCB/MRS, *Refuge and Hope in the Time of ISIS: The Urgent Need for Protection, Humanitarian Support, and Durable Solutions in Turkey, Bulgaria, and Greece*, 2015.  
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However, we are gravely concerned by the small number of religious minorities who have been resettled in the United States during the current fiscal year. For example, only .53 percent of Syrians resettled this year in the United States have been Christians, down from 1.7 percent last year. Last year's number was close to being in line with the percentage of Christians among all the Syrians registered as refugees, which was around 2 percent. It is unclear at the time of this writing precisely why the percentage of Syrian Christians, who have been registered as refugees or resettled in the United States as refugees, is so low. More needs to be done to assess why this is so and then to address it. It is clear, however, that Christians and other religious minorities have become a target for brutality at the hands of the non-state actor ISIS, and that they are fleeing for their lives, and that far too few of them have been attaining U.S. resettlement.

We commend H.R. 5961 for recognizing the plight of Christians and other religious minorities and taking steps to improve their access to the U.S. refugee admissions program. We have some questions about whether the bill's provision amending Section 599D of the Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 1990 is the right approach and respectfully suggest that creating a new Priority 2 (P-2) classification in the U.S. refugee admissions program's priority system for religious and ethnic minority victims of genocide could more effectively achieve the laudable goals of this legislation. We believe that a P-2 designation would increase the access that Christians and other religious minorities have to the U.S. refugee admissions program, and we support the inclusion of this provision in H.R. 5961. While supporting this effort to increase access for religious and ethnic minorities to resettlement, we also encourage that all the most vulnerable refugees in Syria and Iraq continue to have access to resettlement as well.

In March 2016, you, Chairman Smith, and others were instrumental in ensuring the passage of H. Con. Res. 75, the "Genocide" resolution that drew attention to the atrocities being committed against Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Syria. Your bipartisan support on this issue complemented Secretary of State John Kerry's March 17 decision to declare that Daesh/ISIS was committing genocide against these groups in areas under its control.

Beyond the resettlement solutions for Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities, we appreciate that this new legislation takes the "Genocide" resolution one step further and seeks to help those who have been harmed and to hold the perpetrators accountable. In particular, it is noteworthy that H.R. 5961 calls for assistance for survivors of genocide and allows faith-based organizations (such as Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC)), who already have a record of providing humanitarian assistance to these populations, to be funded for such life-saving work.

USCCB has consistently raised its voice in support of Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities who are facing persecution in the Middle East. USCCB has joined with Pope Francis in condemning the actions of those who would persecute others solely for reasons of their faith and ethnicity. CRS stands ready to provide protection and support in the region to IDPs and refugees from Syria and Iraq. USCCB/MRS and ICMC stand ready to assist in the resettlement of those most vulnerable refugees from Syria and Iraq who are unable to return home, including Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities.

May I again commend you for your efforts to help and support the suffering victims of persecution in Iraq and Syria. USCCB looks forward to working with you as this legislation proceeds to find the most effective way to implement a P-2 and take other measures that assure a greater participation in the U.S. resettlement program by Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities from Syria and Iraq.

Thank you.

*William Canny, USCCB/MRS Helsinki Commission Testimony 9 22 2016*