

Threats to Iraq's Communities of Antiquity: Statement (as Delivered) by Representative Christopher Shays, (R-CT)

July 25, 2007

You rightfully heard, I think, a very extensive presentation by my colleague. And I'd just like to associate myself with her. I've hit my stopwatch and I'll go no more than four minutes, because I can just basically say that I'm moved by what my colleague said, and agree with her.

I also want to say that as a member of Congress, I am extraordinarily proud to be able to say the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. I am proud that my country would establish you. I am proud that you would be so active. And I think that your work is highly important.

Iraq was on the watch list - or more than that - before we basically invaded Iraq. You took it for a while, and now it's on the watch list, and it deserves to be so. In my first trip - and I guess my value added is as a former Peace Corps volunteer and someone who has visited Iraq 17 times - I get a flow of what is going on there.

And the first time I was there, I met a man named Mohammed Abdul Hassan. It was April 2003. The fighting hadn't yet totally been completed. And he was telling me things about what we do and so on, and things that make him concerned.

Things that I learned immediately is that the Iraqi people are an extraordinarily proud people. They're a very tough people. He described his life in an Iranian prison, and he got married in his 50s now, and he was starting to have a family. And I said, boy, you've had a tough life. And he looked at me in amazement and said, my life is no different than any other Iraqi.

Finally, when we ended, he put his hands on my shoulder and said, you don't us and we don't know you. I think of Mithal al Alusi who was part of the de-Ba'athification commission. He goes to Jerusalem to participate in a Moslem-Christian - both a Muslim and a Christian forum

and a Jewish forum. And when he returns, he is kicked off the de-Ba-athificatin commission. His guards are taken, two attempts on his life; and then the beginning of '06, his two children are killed trying to defend him. This is a place that doesn't have a lot of tolerance for people who have tolerance. And we're right to pay attention to it.

So as my colleague has rightfully pointed out, we have a lot of people whose lives are at risk who are looking to find some safe haven. And I'd like to point out to you legislation that Mr. Blumenauer has moved forward that would set up a program to allow 15,000 Iraqis and their families who are at risk, because they helped us in Iraq to enter the U.S., to come in for each of the next four years. Believe it or not, those who are religious minorities are viewed as having helped us. It would also, in addition, increase the number of Iraqis who can enter in addition to the 15,000, 20,000.

I think it's important for this commission to make it a very high priority to provide safety for these individuals, because the fact is, with all the mistakes we made - the allowing the looting, totally eliminating all security - I mean, no police, no border patrol, no army - and then asking 150,000 coalition forces to protect a nation of 26 million people, we just allowed unbelievable insecurity and we got rid of what people basically have a right to expect - that they would be able to live in a land where there would be security. And so, the governments are not capable of protecting the public in general, and they have no interest in protecting the minorities in particular.

So you have the government of Iraq that is aggressively seeking out people, and in many cases, if you're not one of them - and you are a small minority - you are going to be taken; you are going to be questioned; and your lives are going to be threatened. That's what the government is doing, and then in addition, as is rightfully pointed out, you have the Shia militia that have tended to be very unfriendly to these religious minorities.

So I think our first task is to recognize that problem exists, secondly to find ways to help some of these individuals find safety, and as my colleague has pointed out, you have between 2-4 million refugees, probably 2 million who have left, 2 million that are seeking some kind of status. We have burdened neighboring countries. So I would respectfully suggest that this commission be actively promoting this United States doing, at the minimum, what we should be doing, but even doing more than that.

I thank you.