

For Your Information

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On July 19, on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), I spoke on Capitol Hill in Washington about the desperate plight of the Middle East's religious minorities, many of whose members have close friends and relatives in the Detroit metropolitan area.

In attendance were representatives from groups such as the Mandaean, 85 percent of whom either fled Iraq in recent years to countries like the United States, including the Detroit area, or were killed.

Iraq's other religious minorities, such as Christians and Yazidis, face discrimination and marginalization, displacement and violence.

A decade ago, Iraq was home to over a million Christians. Today, half that number remains.

Beyond Iraq, Egypt under President Mubarak tolerated widespread bias against dissident Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and Baha'is, as well as Christians, while letting state-controlled media and state-funded mosques vilify them as well as Jews.

After Mubarak's departure, a breakdown in security and a rise in violence made 2011 one of Egypt's worst years for religious minorities, especially its Coptic Christians.

While religious minorities in Iraq and Egypt face societal violence, in other Mideast nations, Saudi Arabia and Iran, government poses the greatest threat.

Saudi Arabia only allows public religious expression reflecting its own interpretation of Sunni Islam.

It bans non-Muslim places of worship, permits state textbooks to incite violence, and uses criminal charges of apostasy and blasphemy to stifle dissent. It continues to support global activities promoting extremist ideology, and in some cases, violence.

Iran tyrannizes religious minorities, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, as well as Shi'a majority dissidents.

Since 1979, Iranian authorities have murdered more than 200 Baha'i leaders, while removing 10,000 from government and university jobs. Christians are periodically arrested and imprisoned. State-run television broadcasts anti-Semitism and President Ahmadinejad and high-level clerics promote Holocaust denial.

USCIRF has long recommended that the U.S. State Department designate these four nations as "countries of particular concern," marking them as severe religious freedom violators. Only Saudi Arabia and Iran have been designated.

We have also advanced specific proposals for these countries.

For Iraq, we support greater military protection for religious minorities, as well as fuller investigations of religiously motivated attacks and a stronger commitment to hold the guilty accountable.

For Egypt, Cairo should not only bring those who promote and perpetrate violence to justice, but repeal discriminatory decrees against religious minorities, remove religion from official identity documents and abolish blasphemy codes.

For Saudi Arabia, the United States should cease waiving punitive measures for Saudi religious freedom abuses.

And for Iran, the United States should continue to impose assets freezes and travel bans on repressive officials — including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad — while demanding the release of prisoners of conscience.

We're also concerned about Syria. President al-Assad, from the minority Alawite community,

has long ruled over Syria's Sunni majority and is now killing thousands to maintain dictatorial power. Not just the Alawites, but other religious minorities, including Christians, fear the worst as the violence spreads.

The plight of Middle East religious minorities is unmistakably grim. Nonetheless, there is hope. There is still time for the Arab Spring to produce pro-human-rights alternatives to authoritarian dictatorships and violent religious extremism.

And the efforts of various Mideast countries to draft constitutions offer a chance to consider not only protection for religious minority members, but for every individual.

Regardless of what the future holds, we must stand resolutely for religious freedom in the Middle East and across the globe.

Katrina Lantos Swett serves as chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

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