

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING
RELIGIOUS MINORITIES
AND GOVERNANCE IN IRAQ

Thursday, December 7, 2023

10:30 a.m., ET

Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Abraham Cooper, Chair
Frederick A. Davie, Vice Chair
David Curry
Stephen Schneck
Frank Wolf

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR COOPER: Good morning, and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing today on Religious Minorities and Governance in Iraq.

Thank you, also, to our distinguished witnesses who are in Iraq and here in the United States for joining us.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory board created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA.

The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this important virtual hearing.

Today's hearing will take stock of recent

conditions affecting freedom of religion or belief in Iraq, including in areas administered by the Kurdistan Regional Government, or KRG.

Religious freedom conditions in Iraq have stabilized since the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, known as ISIS, back in 2014 and its genocidal campaign against religious minorities, including the Yazidis and Christians.

Thankfully, ISIS' presence has been diminished. Nevertheless, freedom of religion or belief for Iraqis remains precarious in the face of recent political instability and religious division; the increasing power of government affiliated militias and other armed groups; and the continued displacement and political disenfranchisement of vulnerable religious minorities.

Baghdad's political environment is gripped by the rivalry of Shi'a Muslim-led political parties, some with strong links to militant Iranian political and religious forces.

Recent legislative campaigns present concerning potential restrictions on the ability of all Iraqis to freely express their religious beliefs or lack thereof.

While we welcome the recent overtures the administration of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani has made to the Yazidi community, we're concerned that the government's implementation of the Yazidi Survivors Law has stagnated.

In addition, neither the Iraqi government nor the KRG has substantially fulfilled the Sinjar Agreement to secure that district for Yazidis' full-scale return.

Hundreds of thousands of Yazidis remain displaced from their homes in Sinjar, which suffers ongoing security threats by competing militias and Turkish strikes.

Approximately 2,700 Yazidi women and girls, kidnapped by ISIS during the genocide, are tragically still missing, some believed to remain within their enslavers' families in camps just across the border in Syria.

For Christian communities, longstanding concerns over property appropriation and poor political representation under both the federal government and the KRG have escalated in the wake of a fatal wedding fire in September and the Iraqi government's restrictions of the Chaldean Catholic Church's authority to administer Christian properties.

Other religious and ethnic minorities, such as the Kaka'is, Sabaeen Mandeans, and Shabaks have expressed similar dissatisfaction with their political representation and lack of enforcement of the rights set forth in Iraq's constitution.

In short: life in Iraq is still not stable or secure for hundreds of thousands of Yazidis, Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syriac Christians, and others.

That is the reason Iraq's religious minorities either remain in internal displacement or reluctantly decide to permanently emigrate from Iraq.

Today, our commissioners and audiences

across the United States and around the world look forward to hearing more about what the U.S. can do to encourage the Iraqi government and KRG to ensure genuine freedom of religion or beliefs for all Iraqis.

I will now give the floor to our distinguished Vice Chair Fred Davie.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you very much, Chair Cooper, and I join you in welcoming all of our guests and expert witnesses here today.

And as you've outlined, the state of Iraq's political environment and related matters of governance are directly connected to freedom of religion or belief for Iraqis of all faith backgrounds.

USCIRF has expressed concern over the apparently increasing power of militias. These include the Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF, which are subsidized by the Iraqi government, often linked to militant Shi'a Muslim political powers in Iran, and exert great influence at the highest levels of Iraq's government.

Several PMF brigades have been designated by the United States and others as human rights abusers that target religious minorities for abuse at checkpoints and engage in other forms of harassment.

One of these, the Babylonian Brigade, is run by the notorious militia leader-turned-politician Rayan al-Kildani.

Mr. al-Kildani has invoked the Chaldean Catholic background, his Chaldean Catholic background, to deflect scrutiny from his Iran-linked brigade's attempts to usurp the political representation and property of Christian communities.

In fact, reports indicate Mr. Kildani helped inform President Abdul Latif Rashid's decision this past July to revoke the authority of the Chaldean patriarch, Cardinal Sako, to administer Christian properties.

Cardinal Sako has long been a vocal critic of the power of Iran-linked PMF brigades and an advocate for meaningful political representation

for Iraq's Christians.

This past year in Iraq has also seen an increase in legislative activity that could harm religious freedom and religious minority communities.

Community activists have expressed concern over draft laws introduced in Parliament on freedom of expression and cybercrimes.

Both contain vague language potentially subjecting atheists, Shi'a Muslim theological dissenters, and Sunni Muslims and other religious minorities to prosecution for expressing opinions being contrary to, quote, "public morals," unquote, or, quote, "public order," unquote, or for defining religious sects or leaders—or-I'm sorry—or for defaming religious sects or leaders.

Christian and Yazidi business owners have also objected to reactivated laws banning the import or sale of alcohol, which is forbidden to drink in Islam but permitted in other faiths.

And, last month, existing political sectarianism between and among rival Shi'a and

Sunni parties intensified with the federal court's ruling, the federal Supreme Court's ruling, to end the speakership of Sunni Parliament Speaker Mohammed Al-Halbousi.

Additional disruptions to the already shaky religious and ethnic balance in Baghdad risk a return to escalated conflict and political crisis, especially in relation to the upcoming provincial elections.

This ongoing religious and political instability also limits the government's ability to devote resources to initiatives that would improve the condition of religious minority groups and advance religious freedom for all Iraqis.

Today, we seek to learn more about the affirmative steps the Iraqi government and civil society can take to better protect freedom of religion or belief for the Iraqi people.

I'll now give the floor to one who has been a long champion in this field and who actually gave rise to this Commission that we have today, our own Commissioner Frank Wolf.

Commissioner Wolf.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Thank you very much,
Vice Chair Davie.

As my fellow commissioners have pointed out, life in Iraq for the country's diverse religious minorities no longer involves the daily threats of the mass-scale atrocities that ISIS perpetrated during its terrible reign.

However, however, as I witnessed with my own eyes on several occasions during my travels to Iraq, these communities' continued existence in their ancestral homelands remains tenuous at best.

Religious and ethnic minorities such as Kaka'is, Shabaks, Sabaeen Mandeans, Yazidis, and members of the Assyrian, Chaldean and Syriac churches are indigenous to what is now modern Iraq.

Yet, these very communities most at risk of political and social marginalization and potentially, potentially total disappearance from Iraq. The Iraqi constitution sets forth freedom of religion and acknowledges the "administrative, political, cultural and educational rights" of

minorities, while the KRG has promoted its region as a safe haven for religious minorities. However, both the Iraqi federal government and the KRG have failed, have failed to consistently enforce these principles, prompting many Christians to leave the country.

PMF brigades continue to target religious minorities for harassment at the militias' many checkpoints.

Neither the federal government nor the KRG reflect adequate political representation of religious minorities. Christians still have not seen the return of many properties appropriated during past periods of conflict, and they report continued ongoing employment and social discrimination.

On December 26th of this year, a few months after the government's revocation of Cardinal Sako's authority, a tragic wedding reception—I've been to this town where this took place—in the Nineveh province devastated, devastated the local Christian population, killing at least 130 people.

This part of Iraq includes many survivors, many survivors, of ISIS' campaign of terror against religious minorities, who have tried—they have tried so hard against heavy odds to rebuild their lives on their ancestral homelands.

Such a tragedy further heightens the risk of traumatized residents emigrating from Iraq, fearing continued government inaction in response to the Christian community's longstanding concerns.

And the Yazidis, the Yazidis too are a community in crisis. Many Yazidis are rightfully afraid to return to Sinjar. Not only is the infrastructure not there, the educational and employment opportunities, they are just not sustainable. Many of the Yazidis are still living in refugee camps. They've been there for nine, nine years.

Additionally, USCIRF has continued to raise inquiries about the status of the almost 2,700 Yazidi women and girls still missing, 2,700 still missing, after ISIS had kidnapped them and sold them into slavery nine years ago.

I will now turn the floor back to Chair Cooper to introduce our witnesses.

Thank you very much.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Commissioner, and I think I speak for all of the commissioners who associate themselves with your passion and your compassion for the religious minorities in Iraq.

Our hearing officially begins now with actually six voices, two from the U.S. government and four independent voices, individuals who we will get to soon.

We begin first with recorded remarks from Victoria Taylor, who is the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs at the United States Department of State.

DAS Taylor leads the U.S. efforts related to Iraq and Iran, and her remarks today will address current U.S. policy for Iraq.

MS. TAYLOR: [Pre-recorded remarks.] Good morning. My name is Victoria Taylor, and I currently serve as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iraq and Iran at the U.S. Department

of State.

I want to start by thanking the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for organizing today's hearing and allowing me the opportunity to share the Department of State's views on religious freedom in Iraq.

We greatly appreciate the Commission's reporting and recommendations on promoting respect for freedom of religion and belief.

Promoting universal respect for freedom of religion or belief is a key U.S. foreign policy priority.

We continue to strongly support efforts to realize an inclusive Iraqi society that includes rights for members of all religious and ethnic communities, as well as the recognition that the preservation of these communities cannot be sustained without the support and understanding of their value by all Iraqis.

Iraq is home to a immense diversity of religious and ethnic communities. But as you know from our human rights reporting and the reporting

of the Commission, the state of human rights in Iraq is challenging, including with respect to freedom of religion or belief.

Many communities are targeted by forces affiliated with the government, including the federal police, the National Security Service, and the Popular Mobilization Forces.

Faith-based communities and local and international NGOs report verbal harassment, physical abuse, torture, and arrest at the hands of these forces.

Sectarian armed groups, including Iran-aligned militias, perpetrate violence, extortion, and other crimes against members of these communities.

Following the defeat of ISIS, millions of Iraqis have returned to liberated areas, but according to the International Organization for Migration, approximately 1.1 million persons remain displaced within the country, and these individuals remain unable to return to their communities of origin due to ongoing violence, fears of

stigmatization, and a lack of services, which are compounded by the inability to restore these services.

We commend the Kurdistan Regional Government for its efforts to provide a safe haven for many of these displaced persons, including members of religious and ethnic communities, and for its commitment to finding voluntary, safe, dignified, long-term solutions for displaced Iraqis.

One consistent issue we focus on in Iraq is the increased pressure felt by Christian communities, especially the Chaldeans.

Christians in Iraq will continue to feel insecure until Cardinal Sako, the Chaldean patriarch, is able to return to Baghdad.

In addition, next year will mark the tenth anniversary of the ISIS genocide against Yazidis, Christians and Shi'a Muslims in the areas it controlled.

ISIS abducted and killed thousands of Yazidis while also terrorizing Christians and Shi'a

Muslims, forcing boys to become child soldiers and selling women and girls into sexual slavery.

The number of people killed remains unknown and discoveries of mass graves continue. Approximately 185,000 Yazidis remain displaced in internal displacement camps.

The administration has made it a priority to press for justice and accountability for victims and survivors and respect for the human rights of all, including Yazidis.

We urge full implementation of the Yazidi Survivors Law, as well as the 2020 Sinjar Agreement, in direct consultation with all communities that call Sinjar home.

And it's incumbent upon the Kurdistan Regional Government to work with the Office of Survivor Affairs to ensure implementation of the law and access to survivors for the benefits that they are due under law.

By pursuing justice and accountability, addressing the drivers of violence, and preventing genocide and other atrocities in the future, Iraq

has the opportunity to embark on a new path that leads to greater peace, stability and prosperity for all of its communities.

I'm confident that together the United States and Iraq can make progress in addressing these challenges.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Chair Cooper, I think you are on mute.

CHAIR COOPER: I want to thank DAS Taylor's important, very sobering analysis of the situation on the ground in Iraq, and now we continue recorded remarks from Gretchen Birkle, the Team Lead for Religious and Ethnic Minority Programs in the Bureau for the Middle East at the United States Agency on International Development, otherwise known as USAID.

Ms. Birkle will address U.S. development programs that serve interfaith communities in Iraq.

MS. BIRKLE: [Pre-recorded remarks.] I appreciate the opportunity to be here today and to share how USAID's commitment to religious freedom

in Iraq is reflected through our programs and partnerships.

Administrator Samantha Power underscored USAID's dedication to religious freedom in her remarks at an International Religious Freedom Summit early in her tenure when she said:

The fight for international religious freedom is not just a reflection of who we are as Americans but a strategic national interest to the United States and a key foreign policy objective.

We know that when countries promote religious freedom and protect religious minorities, democracy is more stable.

Communities are more likely to develop equitably and prosper. The rights of women and girls are more likely to be protected, and the overall quality of life improves.

USAID's work supporting religious and ethnic minorities throughout the Middle East region, including religious and ethnic minority communities in Iraq, is part of the overall mission of the Middle East Bureau, which is to advance

sustainable self-reliance for countries in the Middle East and North Africa by building prosperity, stability and inclusion across various sectors, including economic growth, democracy and governance, health, the environment, and other sectors.

In Iraq, USAID has provided long-term development assistance to support religious and ethnic communities for more than 15 years.

Since 2015, in direct response to the horrors of the ISIS genocide, the U.S. has spent more than \$459 million to stabilize liberated areas and to assist internally displaced persons in returning to their homes.

Our assistance has combined short, medium and long-term efforts, first, to help meet the immediate life saving and recovery needs of impacted populations, restore essential services, and rehabilitate critical infrastructure.

Second, as USAID, Iraq moves beyond a primary focus on humanitarian and reconstruction assistance and towards longer-term development

objectives, our activities will continue to center on improved access to jobs, support to local businesses, strengthening civil society, and mobilizing local and national actors to prevent future atrocities.

Examples of USAID's activities include supporting the Jiyan Foundation, which provides psycho-social services, community awareness interventions, and legal aid to thousands of Iraqis, including survivors of the ISIS terror and their families.

Additionally, in partnership with other multilateral donors and Nadia's Initiative, USAID funded construction of a new Kocho village for Yazidi genocide survivors and their families and supported the memorialization of the massacre of Kocho.

Nonetheless, Iraq with its beautifully complex array of ancient and modern faith traditions and cultures is beset by significant hurdles that continue to challenge efforts, both at reconstruction for religious minority populations

and reconciliation between Iraq's religious groups.

These hurdles include ongoing security concerns and issues over identity and civil documentation, among other concerns.

Yet, in the face of these challenges, our team in Iraq remains steadfast in their efforts to support the recovery of all Iraqis and to restore opportunity and stability for minority communities across both Federal Iraq and Kurdistan.

In closing, I would like to commend the work of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and your good partnership in our joint efforts to advance rights and opportunities for all Iraqis.

Thank you for your time today.

CHAIR COOPER: We appreciate Gretchen Birkle's special remarks for this morning. We've heard now from U.S. government officials, and now the most important part of our gathering today, to hear from a panel of expert witnesses: Dr. Michael Knights; Mr. Salah Ali; Dr. Alda Benjamin; Mr. Abid Shamdeen.

To view the panel's biographies, please see the Zoom chat feature on your screen where we will share the link to each of those bios on the web page.

Our first witness is Dr. Michael Knights, the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Dr. Knights specializes in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran and the Gulf states, and is an expert on U.S. policy related to regional security matters.

It's an honor for me to introduce and ask Michael Knights to present his testimony.

DR. KNIGHTS: Thank you very much for the introduction.

Chair Cooper, Vice Chair Davie, Commissioner Wolf, and other members of the Commission, thanks for the opportunity to testify today about some specific aspects of religious freedom conditions in Iraq.

I am Dr. Michael Knights and the Jill and Jay Bernstein fellow at the Washington Institute

for Near East Policy, and, importantly, I'm the co-founder of our Militia Spotlight program.

So my work focuses largely on the destructive role played by Iran-backed militias in Iraq, a topic I've been working on for almost 20 years now, including six years working in Iraq.

In the last ten years, the Popular Mobilization Forces, PMF, Hashd al-Shaabi, have emerged as a parallel army led by Iran-backed militia politicians, and it's become a mechanism by which Iran and her partners have been able to dominate religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq, particularly in northern Iraq.

So I'm grateful to speak to you, to speak to you about this growing menace to religious freedom, which I notice you regularly reference in your own Country Update on Iraq.

First, we're going to talk about the Christian communities, which have already been mentioned many times, and, in particular, Kataib Babiliyun movement, the Babylon movement, which is also the 50th Brigade of the Popular Mobilization

Forces, a militia led by Rayan al-Kildani, a U.S. sanctioned human rights abuser, and his brother Osama Kildani. They claim to represent Christians, but their forces are demonstrably shown to have been recruited largely outside of Christian areas.

A close look at previous electoral results shows that many of the votes cast for them were also cast from outside Christian areas, and, you know, they involve Iran-aligned human rights abusers.

At the moment, we're particularly seized by the urgency of pushing back on the Kataib Babiliyun effort to control security forces in Christian areas within the Nineveh Plains and also to push the country's clergy out of the way in order to gain access to the very significant properties of displaced Christians and of the Church within Iraq, which is very clearly a major asset grab and it comes at the same time that PMF elements are undertaking very significant asset stripping of other states' agencies all across Iraq.

Secondly, of course, there's the Yazidis

that I'll talk about today.

As you know, in your own Country Update on Iraq, the Iran-backed leadership of the PMF has already been very busy recruiting from within the terribly-persecuted Yazidi community in northern Iraq, who are desperate for any protection and also for any source of income. Particularly Sinjar remains so underdeveloped.

In this case, we're focused on what we call the Kataib Imam Hussein Brigade, which is the 53rd Brigade of the Popular Mobilization Forces, and also a unit called Yezidikan, which is the 80th Brigade of the Popular Mobilization Forces.

They have, both these elements have targeted young Yazidi men for recruitments into Iran-backed militia elements that have attacked the Kurdistan region, Turkish forces inside Iraq, and indeed U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria within the last year.

Finishing off, the PMF in our view is a well-organized colonizing occupier of the northern areas of Iraq, which is where most of the religious

minorities live. Christian, Yazidi, Sunni, Arab, Sunni and Shi'a Turkmen, Sunni and Shi'a Kurds, and Kakai, amongst others.

The PMF has become a mechanism by which the liberated areas were liberated from the Islamic state, but were immediately handed off to the occupation of another alien outsider force that tries to cloak itself within a national security force that is paid for by the Iraqi state, a state that the United States itself provides a lot of security assistance to, and the net effect of that is that some of that security assistance benefits the Popular Mobilization Forces who then use that money and those resources to suppress the population, the religious populations in northern Iraq.

U.S. government should push back strongly on Rayan al-Kildani's efforts to try and seize control of Christian properties in Iraq and to become the custodian for that community.

They should push for the demilitarization of Sinjar under the Sinjar October 2020 Agreement,

including the removal of PMF forces from the area, some of which just in the last couple of days fired a very heavy salvo of rockets at U.S. forces inside Syria, resulting in a lethal U.S. air strike within Iraq so we can see the destabilizing action, destabilizing effect that comes from Sinjar not being properly controlled, and the Sinjar Agreement not being implemented.

And finally, we should bring pressure on the Iraqi government, who we provide many services to in terms of use of the dollar, use of New York to handle all of their oil revenues, to work more directly to remove local religious minority security forces from the control of the PMF, which is sending those forces in the wrong direction and involving their local recruits in terrorist activities and human rights abuses, which is not what we want for religious minorities in Iraq.

We should also pay very close attention to how these militias are taking over elements like the Communications and Media Commission in the country, the Human Rights Commission inside Iraq,

and indeed the judiciary. All of these things require a lot of focus because they're being captured by militias and they're having very significant impact on civil liberties, freedom of expression, and interfaith tolerance within the country.

Thank you very much for having me today, and I look forward to your questions and discussion later.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Dr. Knights, and especially for laying out specific policy considerations for USCIRF, more importantly, for U.S. government and other interested parties around the world.

Next, we are joined from Iraq by Mr. Salah Ali, the General Coordinator of the Iraq Religious Freedom and Anti-discrimination Roundtable.

The roundtable led a recent legislative campaign focusing political attention in Iraq on the issues of religious freedom.

Mr. Ali.

MR. ALI: Thank you very much, Chair.

It's a great pleasure to be here. Thank you very much for this opportunity.

Basically, my name is Salah Ali, and I'm, as you mentioned, my name is Salah Ali, and I'm the General Coordinator of Iraq Religious Freedom and Anti-discrimination Roundtable, and I've been working in this field, working with religious and ethnic minorities, since 2013, and also I was, I had the opportunity just to submit my Ph.D. thesis, which is mainly—in September this year—which is mainly focused on promoting the involvement of religious and ethnic minorities and peace-building in Iraq.

And through observation in the field, an academic field, we just found out that Iraq in the past hundred years has systemically denied the rights of religious and ethnic minorities, and they've been excluded from political and economic decision-making, which has remarkably affected these communities, and as our colleagues also mentioned that that resulted in these communities leaving Iraq.

But in terms of, in terms of the work that we do right now in Iraq, the Iraq Religious Freedom Roundtable, established in 2021, and serves as a dedicated platform for advancing religious freedom in Iraq. The roundtable contains experts in the field of religious freedom and minority issues.

And the roundtable has facilitated numerous discussion bringing together religious and community leaders, local NGOs, and government officials.

Through these engagements, we have identified persistent challenges in safeguarding religious freedom and protecting minority groups.

The roundtable specifically recognizes the profound challenges within the country's political and cultural structure, which is we believe that is one of the key issues which is that it needs extra attention if we need just to change the situation of minority groups in Iraq.

Despite vital, I mean historical evidence, such as removal of Saddam Hussein regime, and the defeat of ISIL, these obstacles are still there and

continue.

In terms of the challenges, I just may be quite repetitive of what my colleague just mentioned, but militia exert control over minority areas across, which have, I believe that leads to fostering demographic change, and through a visit, I've personally just seen a couple of places being their names even, their names just been changed to different names that was previously named by the community minority groups, particularly in Sinjar and Bartella as well.

And the government hesitancy to implement crucial laws, basically accompanied by a concerning rise in hate speech, and particularly this is quite obviously during the religious ceremonies. And since we are reaching, I mean we are about Christmas, and some of the ceremonies actually for the minority groups, we have witnessed lots of hate speech throughout the social media.

This basically we believe that intensifies deeper systemic issues.

Ensuring meaningful involvement of

marginalized groups in political decision-making process is paramount and emphasizing the need for a thorough adjustment aligning Iraq's system with the modern principle, particularly human rights.

Numerous religious minority groups remain displaced, as you mentioned, harboring and they aspire really to return to the areas. The government's inefficiencies impair progress in the situation in general.

Key concerning implementation of crucial agreement, as you mentioned, like Sinjar Agreement and rectifying discriminatory laws. I mean since we are talking about this one, we have Law Number 105, which has been enacted by former regimes in 1970 related to the Baha'is, which they banned the activities of these particular minority groups, and since then, there are laws that—so despite the fact that they change the constitution in Iraq and we have right now constitution, the law is still there.

So we need to work harder in order to make sure that this law no more exists. And basically

we have issues related to law. For example, the National Identity Law, Article 26, regarding the Islamization of the minors from the Christian families.

Also, we have, as I said, the lack of providing services to—the reconstructing the areas which you said previously belonged to the minority groups. And the governments were lax and especially were doubting the Law of Survivors, Yazidi survivors.

We have information that it's about almost a third. I believe in perceptions, if I did. Around 65 to 70 percent of the Yazidi survivors have not yet received the compensation. So that also needs pressure, just put extra pressure on the government in order just to make sure that law, these survivors receive their compensation.

And basically I just brought a list of recommendations, if the time allows. First of all, ensure that the religious institutions are aligned with Iraqi society and human rights standards. This may require transformation of existing

institutions to actively contribute to unity rather than violence.

And initiate a legal framework supporting the development of inclusive religious institutions. This involves creating laws that promote unity and protect the rights of religious, all religious groups.

Recognize the significance of local engagement by focusing on building the capacity of local organizations, empower local communities to actively participate in decision-making process.

In the realm of education, to create the co-teaching of various religious into curricula. This fosters inclusivity and diversity of thought among younger generation.

And the last point, which really I found it quite important, we have a great gap in this area, which is revitalize the role of universities in promoting religious freedom, address the substantial gap in this area by incorporating initiatives that emphasize tolerance and understanding.

The last point, which I just wanted to make sure, and with all due respect to the speakers who just spoke before me, I found out there's a really huge difference between KRG and the rest of Iraq, and if you look at the vast majority of the minorities right now just live in the Kurdistan Region, which is really I think they found kind of a safe haven for them, particularly like Baha'is, Sabaeen Mandeian, and Kaka'i, and the rest, Christian, as well.

Right now the Minister of Endowment and Religious Affairs, they have each have own office that run the offices, and they have great coordination with the government in Iraq Kurdistan Region, and it seems they have better conditions than the rest of Iraq, which I just found, because we are working in this field, and we have office in Erbil and in Baghdad as well.

I am really happy just to participate, and I have, if you have any other questions, I am happy just to answer. Thank you very much for your time.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you very much.

If you don't mind, I'll now call you Dr. Ali, as you said, you submitted your Ph.D. I think everyone here will vote for you to get that so we can be the first to--

MR. ALI: Thank you very much.

CHAIR COOPER: --show the fruits of your commitment and labor. We appreciate your insights. Quite interesting.

CHAIR COOPER: Our next witness is Dr. Alda Benjamen, an Assistant Professor at the University of Dayton.

Dr. Benjamen has conducted extensive archival and oral history research among Iraq's indigenous and historic Assyrian communities.

We look forward to your presentation.

DR. BENJAMEN: Thank you for giving me the podium to share local accounts that I was entrusted with as an academic engaged in fieldwork in Iraq since 2007.

My career has been dedicated to the study of Iraq's modern history, including that of its minoritized ethno-religious and native communities.

I also serve as a research director of a cultural heritage preservation project that has been running since 2020 with USAID funding, focusing on religious minorities in the region.

How can we ensure that Iraq's rich ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity persists? Might the relatively successful coexistence that is reflected throughout my academic investigations of the past remain a reality and a treasure to be passed on to future generations?

In my presentation, I want to focus on two factors from which Iraq's minorities, and particularly the native Christian community, suffer grievously: loss of property and lack of real representation.

First is a question of land. In Baghdad, as well as central and southern parts of Iraq, since 2003, the community has lost property in the form of houses, most recently to Iran-backed militias.

At times, these families are threatened to leave before their homes are confiscated. In the

KRG, this has a longer history, which goes back either to displacements caused by conflict stemming from the civil war that began in 1961 or to government attacks and forced displacements of northern communities—Kurds, Assyrians, Yazidis and others—in the 1970s and 1980s.

In these areas, many villagers returned after 1991 to the newly established safe haven, which later became the KRG, to see that their villages or lands had been taken by neighboring or more powerful tribes.

In Duhok alone, research has documented 76 separate cases of land grabs in 58 villages—out of the 95 villages and sub-districts, plus the city center of Duhok, where Christians reside.

Many of these cases were legally investigated or recorded, and some were tried in KRG courts.

Some have, in fact, been won by the Assyrians, but are still awaiting implementation. For example, in a village in the district of Zakho, Duhok, more than 1,200 dunam, nearly 750 acres,

were confiscated by influential Kurds.

The KRG court ordered him in 2011 to return it within a year. The order is now 11 years old but remains unimplemented.

Recently, oil is believed to have been discovered in the Assyrian village Sawora 'Aeletha. Meanwhile, another larger Kurdish tribe now claims this village as its own. Such claims are typical in Nahla and many other neighboring districts.

For a couple of years, the village elders have asked the Land Department in Duhok to reissue their land deeds, which were burned along with their property in the 1980s, but to no avail.

It is their word against a more powerful tribe in a time when the Christian community lacks effective political representation.

As a result of the massive and rapid displacement of Christian populations, they have experienced a broad weakening of their networks and economic resources.

Their numbers have dwindled from 1.5 million to 300,000 or so post-2003.

Second, the role of political representation continues to be central to the welfare of these fragile communities. Areas heavily populated by native and minority communities along the KRG border, though officially administered prior to 2003 by Mosul, were contested by the regional and central governments.

Locals preferred their own administration. Article 125 of the new Iraqi constitution designated some of these areas as eligible for local administration on matters related to education, health care and civil services with a designated budget, while ensuring political representation.

However, expansionist agendas, especially given the discovery of oil in these areas, make them targets for co-optation by the KRG, which also used coercive methods.

In recent years, the Iran-backed militias have expanded this form of co-optation by overwhelming the minority quota system with their own loyalists elected outside the terms of the

quotas.

The Babylon Brigade today holds most of the seats for the Christian quota, though most community members and religious and political leaders do not view them as their legitimate representatives.

The votes this group has garnered come from non-Christian areas mostly.

When communities do not have a voice, it severely impacts their civil and health services, which are already substandard in contested and rural areas, as what was manifested recently in the Baghdeda wedding fire.

The wedding tragedy was a product of underlying systematic issues representative of what Iraqis face everywhere—bad construction, lack of effective safety regulation, and inadequate health care.

However, in smaller provincial towns with poorer services and local conflict of political interests those problems are only compounded.

Another example of the complicated nature

of life for minorities in the Nineveh Plain is in Telesqop, a town under KRG control, but close to Batnaya, which is under the control of the Iraq government and several militias.

The villagers' access to their agricultural land is cut off by checkpoints, where instead of a five minute drive, it takes them now over two hours. A woman recently died in an ambulance on her way to the hospital. Deaths are reported frequently on the commute along major highways between Mosul to Erbil and Duhok to Mosul.

In both cases, two seven-kilometer exits leading to Baghdeda and Bakhitma respectively still stand uncompleted. Had the local communities had control over budgets relating to infrastructure, this could now be different.

The implementation of Article 125, relating to local administration and other rights, could benefit minorities in provincial areas by elevating their concerns on questions of local governance and administration.

Religious and secular leaders have long

been pressing for an amendment of the electoral law that would ensure that only quota members would be able to vote for candidates within the quota system.

Legislation to protect land rights and political representation would constitute a step in the right direction, providing a basis for the survival of cultural and religious diversity.

The history of this coexistence should be documented and passed on to new generations, notably in school curricula.

More broadly, it should also be preserved in both its tangible and intangible forms, including languages and dialects that reflect our shared global heritage.

By elevating the community's demands in these areas, the human and cultural rights of all those in the country and wider region will be advanced, not just their own.

Thank you.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you very much for that comprehensive and sobering report.

Our final witness is Mr. Abid Shamdeen, a global development specialist, and along with Nobel Peace Prize winner Nadia Murad, a co-founder of Nadia's Initiative, which works to rebuild Yazidi and other communities in crisis and advocate for survivors of sexual violence around the world.

Mr. Shamdeen, the floor is yours.

MR. SHAMDEEN: Thank you, Commissioner. I am honored to join this hearing and to join this distinguished panel.

For hundreds of years, the Yazidis have lived in northern Iraq. We are a peaceful ethno-religious community that has throughout history been persecuted by those who are ignorant about our culture and beliefs.

Our ancestors recorded many instances of what they called fairma [ph], what you would call attempted genocide, due to centuries of these attacks, more recent Arabization policies, and our homeland becoming a disputed territory.

By 2014, the Yazidis were a marginalized community. When ISIS swept across Iraq, the group

used our religion as an excuse to target us. They used our lives of a holy book and different practices as an excuse and pretense for murder.

ISIS killed thousands of Yazidi men and older women. They enslaved and raped more than 6,500 young women and girls. Their aim was not only to break them as individuals but to break their communities as well.

Young boys were taken to be so-called "cubs" of the Caliphate, indoctrinated and turned into weapons.

They were able to enact genocide in the summer of 2014 because, according to the UN's Risk Factor Checklist, the Yazidis were vulnerable on nearly every single point.

Earlier this year, we saw a worrying rise in hate speech against our community in Iraq. Some of the online messages were saying let us finish what ISIS started, and almost ten years after the genocide, there are nearly 200,000 Yazidis who remain in displacement camps, just hours away from their home.

Conditions within the camps are basic and not sustainable for the long-term living. There is no privacy and no access to proper education or employment.

In fact, the camps that were supposed to help them are helping to bring about ISIS' goal of destroying our community. Despite all of these challenges, over 170,000 Yazidis have returned home to Sinjar.

Our recent Status of Sinjar report outlines the devastation that greeted them. Basic infrastructure had been destroyed, homes looted, farms and livelihoods rendered unusable.

The Iraqi government and KRG have failed to address the existential threats facing the Yazidi community and Christians.

The 2020 Sinjar Agreement signed between Baghdad and Erbil was just an empty promise on paper. The Yazidis felt excluded from the process with their wishes and aspirations ignored.

Baghdad has designated funding to rebuild other parts of the country, but that money has not

found its way north to Sinjar, and the rebuilding of the Yazidi homeland is left to international organizations.

As the territory is still disputed, the Yazidis are left without access to basic administrative services. Proxy forces and militias in the region exacerbate instability.

On top of this, as other speakers mentioned, over 2,700 women and girls remain missing in captivity.

Those who killed the Yazidi men and those who enslaved women and subjected them to sexual violence have not been held accountable.

Many simply shaved their beards and reintegrated into their communities. Others are held in prison camps on more minor charges. The psychological effect of this on the Yazidis is profound.

ISIS invasion of Iraq was in many ways unique. The whole world had a hand in its creation and subsequent actions.

Fighters came from across the globe,

joining homegrown psychopaths, to kill my community, filling a power vacuum left by the Coalition, using weapons made by the West.

While the Obama administration came to our aid initially, there is more the U.S. could do now to help create a more stable environment and to protect the Yazidis and Christians and other minorities.

We recognize, of course, there are many other geopolitical issues and concerns at play today. The U.S. is often fond of saying that it can walk and chew gum at the same time, and by focusing on the plight of religious minorities and the rights of women and children in our region there is a real chance for successful post-conflict society, a blueprint even for other countries.

It is time for the Biden Administration to consider investing more resources in Sinjar rather than reducing them to help rebuild what ISIS destroyed.

We still need to rescue the missing women and girls, and U.S. resources would be welcomed in

this mission as well.

The U.S. has the power to put sanctions against the groups who are actively undermining security in Iraq and denying Yazidis and Christians the right to return to their homeland.

If warlords, heads of militia, or even some government officials faced sanctions due to their destabilizing actions, we might see some change.

Additionally, while the U.S. has and continues to support the Anti-ISIS Coalition, it has not yet supported justice and accountability in the real term.

I would advocate for its endorsement of establishing a hybrid court or another international mechanism to hold ISIS accountable for crimes of genocide and sexual violence.

The Yazidis and other religious minorities in Iraq are resilient communities, but they cannot recover and survive in this environment without the support of the international community, especially the United States.

The U.S. has a long history in Iraq, and, therefore, it has a moral responsibility not to abandon the Yazidis, Christians and other smaller groups.

Thank you so much for your time.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Mr. Shamdeen.

You are a worthy ambassador for your people's suffering, martyrdom, but in many ways, most importantly, to fight and work for a just future.

We now are going to turn to our own commissioners for an abbreviated session of questions.

As chair, allow me to, since this is the month of December, we have a number of holidays that talk of hope, speak of light, et cetera, I would like to just ask Dr. Benjamin, can you describe to us the kinds of public ceremonies related to Christmas that won't be taking place because the communities don't feel safe enough to do so?

And to Dr. Knights, could you quickly

address the question of the frustration of many former Iraqi Jews, some of them living in Israel, but around the diaspora, as well, who very much want to visit their native homeland or visit cemeteries, visit old friends, and against the backdrop of the laws passed, draconian laws, against relations with Israel, if you can give us a quick sketch on how that impacts the overall situation in Iraq?

So, first, Dr. Benjamin, can you give us a crash course in what they'll be missing this year?

DR. BENJAMEN: Joy, I think. They will continue to celebrate. They will continue to go to masses. But especially, I mean I was in Iraq in October, just a month-and-a-half ago, for the opening ceremony of the grant that was extended by the USAID, and the community is very, very, the Baghdada fire is very tragic.

It's affecting all of them. They're comparing it to another ISIS-like situation where there was a lot of fear, and you speak to educated people, priests with Ph.D.s, political leaders,

secular leaders, your normal people, they truly believe that they were targeted.

And, of course, the investigation happened very quickly. The deaths of children at various ages, family members, complete families have perished in this fire, and the investigation came back quickly, and it was very politicized.

It targeted civil servants in Baghdeda who the Babylon Brigade wanted to be replaced. So that event, that tragedy, is weighing very heavily on the hearts of all community members.

And they will celebrate. I believe they will celebrate in terms of attending masses, but it is a leading to more displacement. A large wave of displacement in one of the largest Christian towns that we had remaining, which is Baghdeda, a very joyous town, you know, a town that you would enjoy visiting with their cafeterias and public lives, cultural heritage and music, and it really was a very wonderful place to be.

But the deaths and the belief that the community believes it was intentional, and the way

it was handled by the authorities, as I said, their investigative report, not taking any lab samples, not doing it properly, many bodies are still being, they're trying to still go through the evidence of who's who, who needs to be buried, and many are still dying.

And there's a lot of, those who were taken to Turkey and other places, and it's politicizing the whole situation or reminding them how politicized their struggle is in a contested place where they have no control in effective ways over their budgets, their local administration, their health care.

They cannot regulate things and now there's, you know, a militia that's basically running the show. So I think that is going to be very heavily weighted on their hearts outside of Baghdeda as well.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you.

Dr. Knights.

DR. KNIGHTS: Thanks very much.

The anti-normalization or anti-contact

with Israel line taken by Iraqi government, by the PMF, and by the Iran-backed militias inside the country is really extraordinary, and it poses a deadly threat to anyone who has any kind of connection to Israel or to Judaism.

You know we've seen, for instance, at Washington Institute for Near East Policy for, you know, sometime we've known Mithal al-Alusi, who is the Iraqi parliamentarian who visited the Knesset and spoke to them in Israel, and as a result, his two sons were murdered, and he himself is really driven into exile, you know, within the Kurdistan Region and other places.

In the last two years, the Iran-backed militias within the PMF, who are funded by the Iraqi government, have called openly for the beheading of Iraqi citizens who have any interaction with Israel.

We've also seen rockets fired at the Kurdistan Region on baseless accusations of Israeli forces based inside the region. We've even seen Iranian medium-range ballistic missiles fired into

the Kurdistan Region related to the same accusations, largely because they held a conference that envisaged briefly the idea of normalizing relations between Iraq and Israel.

And, then, most recently, Speaker of Parliament Halbousi, most senior Sunni-Muslim politician in Iraq, you know, partly ousted because he is said to have signed a contract in Washington that involved a company that has an Israeli on its board.

So, you know, this is a very, really extraordinary level of hostility, and, of course, it does mean that, you know, many, many families cannot reconnect with their heritage inside Iraq if they come from a Jewish background.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you very much.

Commissioner Schneck, do you have a question, comment for our distinguished panelists?

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, Chair Cooper.

First, let me say thank you to all the panelists. This was, honestly, this was

devastating testimony to hear, and I appreciate your bearing witness this morning to all of us.

Given the crush of time, I don't have a specific question, but I would encourage all of the, all of the panelists, perhaps, to send policy recommendations for us to consider on all of these topics.

I would note, obviously, the primary concerns seem to be security related. That is the situation where the PMFs and the militias and the insecurity that they provide around this issue, but I'm—so obviously policy areas, policy remarks in those areas would be very much appreciated.

But, you know, we are also very interested in what policies can actually help rebuild and sustain ethnic and religious minorities within Iraq, and I'd be pleased to hear those kinds of suggestions as well.

Thank you, again, to the panelists.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Commissioner.

Commissioner Curry, who devotes his life to the protection of religious rights of Christians

globally, if you have a question for our panelists and a comment?

COMMISSIONER CURRY: I do. I echo what Commissioner Schneck said about the power of this testimony. It's incredibly sad and difficult, but I think there's a lot that can be done if there's a collective will about it.

One question for Mr. Knights and then one for Mr. Shamdeen.

Mr. Knights, help me understand this connection, which was introduced in the testimony, between the militia and the stripping of Patriarch Sako of his right to oversee the property of the Chaldean Church.

I'm trying to understand the power struggle, and I don't quite get how those two work together. Could you explain that?

And then I'll have a question for Mr. Shamdeen.

DR. KNIGHTS: Yes, certainly, and I suspect there are other witnesses will have a lot of ground level intelligence to feed into this.

But, you know, ultimately, Cardinal Sako as patriarch had the ability to shield Christian properties within Iraq from seizure by various elements.

What we seem to be seeing is that Rayan al-Kildani is utilizing his ties to the Sudani governments and to the Iraqi presidency and the judiciary to try and knock them out of the way so that he can become the custodian of Iraqi Christian properties, and, you know, these are really substantial amounts of property that have been left behind from recent explosions or previous ones.

There's also been tremendous militia aggression against Christian property in Baghdad itself where, you know, the property is extraordinarily valuable, and so it's very, very high interest to those militias, and these include the key U.S. designated foreign terrorist organizations, who have killed so many of our own people over the years, as well as Iraqis like Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and others.

But let me cede, if I may, to the Iraqis

because I think they would be best placed to give you chapter and verse on the exact goings on within the Christian areas.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Is there anyone else who would like to comment on that?

I think one of the key elements in that that we have to keep coming back to--this is, forgive me, commentary, but the religious, whether it's mosques, temples, churches, these should be sacred sites overseen by religious leaders, not thrown into political-economic-military conditions.

So that's offensive to me obviously and to many others, but Mr. Shamdeen, thank you for commenting on your experience.

I'm trying to understand a little bit about what you mean by an empty promise when you're speaking about the implementation of the Yazidi Survivor Laws.

Could you highlight that a little bit further? I know that in many circumstances, not just the Yazidis, that we know where the problems are, and yet there is not a, there's either not a

will or a hesitancy to resolve them.

Here you have a situation where something has been done in theory, but perhaps not in practice. Maybe you could explain that a little bit?

MR. SHAMDEEN: Thank you so much for the question.

Sorry if it wasn't clear. I was talking about the 2020 Sinjar Agreement. It was an empty promise, which some of the speakers also mentioned. The agreement, which was signed by Baghdad and Erbil, welcomed by the U.S. government and the UN, but obviously back in 2020, it was October, and until today, Sinjar has no mayor. Sinjar has no running administrative offices like other parts of Iraq.

And the Yazidis who have returned, despite all the challenges and the destruction in Sinjar, continue to have to go back all the way to other parts of Iraq to get administrative services because the territory, as I mentioned, is considered disputed, and therefore now the Yazidis

are suffering because of this ongoing fight over territory in Sinjar between both sides of the governments, Baghdad and Erbil, but frankly also these militias that Mr. Knights and others mentioned, the militia groups and these proxy forces in the region.

So who is losing in this equation? It's the Yazidis. Almost nine-and-a-half years after this genocide, again, those who are displaced are not able to return, and those who had enough in the camps, the tents that were set up, back in 2000, the summer of 2014, they could not live under these tents anymore, and they decided to go back no matter what the challenges.

And now what options do the Yazidis have? One is either to return home and live in this destabilized region and no access to basic administrative services. The government is not doing what they're supposed to do to rebuild Sinjar.

The other option is to continue to live in the camps that, you know, and the camps are not a

good environment for the community to live. I personally as a Yazidi consider this another genocide against Yazidis because the culture has disappeared, because the community has disappeared, because vulnerable women are being taken advantage of in these camps because they don't have access to privacy, they don't have access to normal employment and source of income.

And the Yazidis have to vote in these camps. And the Yazidis have to vote in Sinjar under these proxy militia groups, and so what the U.S. can and it should have done is a little more pressure honestly on these groups and governments. As Mr. Knights mentioned earlier, the U.S. is doing a lot to help the Iraqi government in terms of finances and military training and equipment.

Myself, I worked with the U.S. military five years in Iraq, and I saw how much the U.S. provided for the Iraqi government and the Iraqi military, and yet we didn't use that leverage to help Christians, to help Yazidis, and to help stabilize these regions.

And I'm sorry if I took too much time.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Thank you.

DR. BENJAMEN: May I add to Dr. Knights' comment very quickly?

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Of course.

DR. BENJAMEN: So exactly what he said, but also to add that the Church does also have endowments of agricultural lands in particular areas.

For example, my next book project is about Alqosh and its market, and a lot of agricultural lands in Alqosh and nearby is owned by the land, and this is historic. It goes back to land deeds from the 1800s, from the Ottoman period.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you.

One of the moral driving forces for USCIRF over the years, but especially during the two that I've been involved, in ensuring that at least we don't forget the events and the people who are suffering in Iraq is Commissioner Frank Wolf.

So I'm going to come back to him again and ask if he has an additional question or comment

before we turn it over to the Vice Chair.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Well, thank you, chair.

I do. I have so many questions. I almost want to cry when I hear what went on. I have been in those places. I wouldn't want my father to live in Sinjar. What's going on? I have four daughters. What's going on to the women? I've never, the mothers, you say my daughters are gone, and there's so much that I could say.

I want to say a couple things just for myself, not speaking for USCIRF. One, I think our government, my government, the American government has failed.

I think we have failed on this issue. Once this fighting stopped, we have literally walked away. And I think the KRG has to be careful because the world is beginning to look away from Iraq, beginning to look to Ukraine, look away from Ukraine, look to Israel and Gaza, and they're going to be forgotten about. They're going to be literally forgotten about.

We owe more to the people of Iraq, Christians, Yazidis, and the others. So the only question I would have, I wrote a long list down and everything else, but would it not make sense for this administration to appoint, call it a special envoy, call it one person who literally is that person speaking for the administration to go in and negotiate and push on all these issues, make sure there is a program whereby we can bring as many, the 2,700 women and girls wherever they are back.

Make sure the Yazidis have the opportunity to return to Sinjar. Make sure. Make sure, but one person who will take a five-year role that will be there for a long period of time.

Does it make sense for this administration to have one person who's responsible that will spend a large period of time over in Iraq to deal with all the issues you dealt with today?

CHAIR COOPER: So I'm going to use the chair's prerogative to add the following. If any of the witnesses today agree with the suggestion, and you decide to send letters to the

administration, to Congress, our Secretary of State, why not send them through USCIRF?

If you send us those requests on your letterhead—I have no idea if it's violating our mandate. Frankly, I don't really care, but we'll make sure that those requests for what seems to be a reasonable concept that would ensure that the various communities in Iraq are not forgotten. It's the best idea most of us have heard.

And if Iraqi voices agree, let us know, and we will be your emissaries to provide your request or your confirmation of such a suggestion.

I want, because of the issue of time, I want to come back to our distinguished Vice Chair Fred Davie, who has, I think, one more question and some thank-yous before we adjourn.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Sure. Well, let me do the thank-yous first, and echo what everyone else has said. This has been an extraordinary hearing. The testimony is really devastating.

It's an indictment pretty much of all parties of any influence in that region and beyond,

and it compels, I think, this Commission to work even harder, to redouble our efforts, to make sure that these issues aren't forgotten given all the other turbulence around the world these days.

Let me, let me just ask, in following the very powerful recommendation of Commissioner Wolf, and one that I hope we can pursue with you, when I look at the country like I look at the world, you know, there is a lot churning there, and so I ask, well, where might we focus?

Special envoy, yes, but if we look at Sinjar, and we look at the kidnapped and missing women and girls, my question, I guess, would be what specific strategies might the U.S. and others pursue in identifying where those women and girls are?

Can USCIRF continue to focus on that particular issue? Who else is brought to the table? If we did a hearing just on the return of the women and girls, what would that look like? Who are the power players there?

And then the final thing is, and I'm

rambling a little bit, but we haven't heard anything about Turkey, and I know that Turkey is a force in the region. So I'd just be curious as to sort of what role Turkey might have in all of this, and what pressure might the U.S. bring to bear there as well?

So I'll leave that to anybody.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Fred.

I think what we'll do is we'll go in reverse order and ask Abid Shamdeen if he has some comments first, and we'll circle back to the others. But we have only a few minutes. So, please, two minutes each.

MR. SHAMDEEN: No problem. Thank you so much for the question.

Yes, so the issue of missing Yazidi women and girls, we believe that the majority of them are scattered throughout Syria, held in territory that is controlled by SDF and radical groups affiliated to Turkey.

We know some of the boys that were taken, the Yazidi boys, that were five and six-year-old at

that time, were ISIS brainwashed, and they were later arrested, and are now in some of the prisons in northeast Syria.

A lot of the women were also taken with ISIS family members to Turkey, which recently, a few months ago, we rescued six of them working with the president of the Kurdish Region, Mr. Nechervan Idris Barzani, to bring them back to Sinjar. And we continue to work with the president on that issue.

I have communicated with the State Department multiple, multiple, multiple times to try and help us coordinate with SDF, you know, put some pressure on them to cooperate a little bit more, to help us coordinate with some of the other relevant parties, Turkey and these other groups, to bring some of the Yazidi women and children back because, as you know, this is across borders, and for an organization like ours, it's hard to coordinate these efforts because these territories are in different countries.

And the Iraqi government has yet, nine

years after, to put together a rescue team, a committee to help bring back Yazidi women and children.

And this is something my wife Nadia Murad has asked them over and over again in meetings, in writing, and they have failed to do so because they simply don't care, to be honest with you.

And one of the Yazidi women that I am trying to also bring back home is currently held in Gaza, by the way. She was taken all the way from Syria through Turkey and then to Gaza because one of the ISIS was a Palestinian from Gaza.

And this is the challenge we are facing as a community because we're not a country. We don't have ambassadors. We don't have embassies. We don't have ministers.

What we do as individuals and civil society is all we have, and, you know, we very much depend on the support of the U.S. and the international community, but there is a reason that I do not reach out to the Chinese or the Russian, for example, foreign ministries to help us because

the U.S., you know, has a history there, but because the U.S. cares more about human rights, about women's rights, about children's rights, and we continue to mention these points.

I know I took over more than two minutes, but there is more the U.S. can do simply by just coordinating with these different entities to help us bring the Yazidi women and children back home.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Dr. Shamdeen.

Let me just ask you to please send the name of the woman who was taken to Gaza to USCIRF for my attention. Please forward that when you can.

Dr. Benjamin, I'm sorry I can't give you a Jewish two minutes. It has to be a real two minutes.

DR. BENJAMEN: Thank you. The effects of Turkey, very quickly, I will say that in the Batawati [ph] area of Duhok, seven villages were repopulated in 2006-2007 after being displaced in the '60s and '70s due to what I described earlier.

Most of the community, the Christian

community, comes from the north, Mosul, Erbil, Duhok, and they experienced rural-urban migrations in the second half of the 20th century either by force or for opportunities and such in Baghdad.

So they were repopulated after being displaced for decades, and what happened is because of the PKK attacks or the Turkish attacks on the PKK and vice versa, which is not only affecting their areas, but also Yazidi areas, they have been impacted and had to leave once again. So that's a serious problem.

In terms of where to focus, I think really that's the territories and getting these communities, empowering them in these local administrations with a budget, which is actually historic presence that we have.

It's very important and we need to focus on these strategies and education, curricula, and the cultural heritage because coexistence has to be documented and also taught.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Dr. Benjamin.

Dr. Ali.

MR. ALI: Thank you very much. Thank you for calling me "doctor," and thank you for the time as well.

Well, basically, the first points in terms of dealing with the militias and in terms of security I am talking, the first point is like dealing with these militias is a short-term. I see the short solution, short-term solution.

The long-term solution if we look at the long-term one is to deal with the interference of the regional power in Iraqi situation, particularly in the disputed areas. So this is the strategic point of view I think we need to focus on.

And the other point is that in terms of the points that had just been mentioned about dealing with the survivors, the Yazidi Survivors Laws, I believe that the government of Iraq, they don't see that as a primary issue.

So that it means that the will is not there actually in the first place.

The second one is the capacity and lack of putting an effective mechanism to deal with these

cases, just the survivors of ISIL. And these are really one of the key issue.

But the other point, as you mentioned, about having support of people or communities from the U.S. government, I see a significant point, which is really we focus right now, as we mentioned, about the local and the government as well in Iraq.

But we need international support because, as I said, the will of protecting the rights of minorities is not there, and the environment, it's just been there like that for ages, for hundred years, as I say.

So we need to transform the social and political structure.

Thank you very much.

CHAIR COOPER: All right. Thank you, Dr. Ali, and finally Dr. Knights.

DR. KNIGHTS: Yes, three quick points, in well under two minutes.

First, the U.S. military presence in northeastern Syria is still important for holding

back the return of the Islamic State.

I saw the al-Qaeda in Iraq, Islamic State, Islamic State of Iraq. They all come back unless you continue to keep pressure up. So if we don't want this to happen again, you know, we need to keep an eye on that northeastern Syria because that's where it came out of last time largely.

Second, if there are no militias in Sinjar, there will be no Turkish strikes, I think. I think it's very important, you know, for us to follow through the Sinjar Agreement.

And, third, security forces are really, really key to all of this stuff that we've been talking about. I've worked with security forces across Iraq over the years, and the one thing I'll tell you is this:

Police forces were always local. They always recruited locally. They lived locally. Generally speaking, the police chief was a local. That really helped when it came to making those security forces representative and fairly sensitive to the communities.

It also gave those communities a sense of pride and a sense of security if their own people run their own security, and that's through the police.

There is no need for a Popular Mobilization Force now ISIS is, you know, mostly gone inside Iraq, and there's no need for PMF to be the police of local areas.

To get outsiders out of security, you will strengthen religious minorities in Iraq.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you.

Vice Chair Davie, would you bring us home and deconvene?

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Well, I want to thank you, Chair Cooper, first of all for your leadership for helping us convene this conversation.

Obviously, my fellow commissioners, but more importantly are the people who both live this every day, and then the people who bear witness to it every day through the work that you do, and so we want to thank you.

I want to assure you that USCIRF will

continue to focus here, that we won't let this get lost. It's an important piece of what we do, and I think with Congressman Wolf's leadership, Chair Cooper's leadership here on this issue, we'll continue to be partners with you for some time to come.

But thank you for this very important conversation this morning.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you all. God bless, and be safe out there.

This hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:59 a.m. ET, the hearing was adjourned.]