



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

March 2021

# REFUGEES FLEEING RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Gayle Manchin  
*Chair*

Tony Perkins  
*Vice Chair*

Anurima Bhargava  
*Vice Chair*

### Commissioners

Gary Bauer

James W. Carr

Frederick A. Davie

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Nury Turkel

Erin D. Singhsinsuk  
*Executive Director*

### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

### Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution

On February 10, 2021, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a virtual hearing on [Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution](#). The hearing examined ways the U.S. government can better support refugees and asylum seekers and provided policy recommendations to the U.S. government.



Chair [Gayle Manchin](#) led the hearing, convening [five witnesses](#) with various perspectives on the U.S. refugee resettlement process, the U.S. asylum system, and overseas assistance.

In her opening statement, Chair Manchin highlighted the United States' tradition of protecting persons seeking religious freedom: "Many of our nation's founders who fled religious persecution abroad cherished religious freedom. In honor of this heritage, the

International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) includes several provisions related to asylum seekers and refugees."



Vice Chair [Tony Perkins](#) emphasized USCIRF's history of advocating for a robust U.S. refugee resettlement program, stating that USCIRF has "consistently called for maintaining the annual refugee resettlement ceiling at its typical levels and ensuring the implementation of the Lautenberg Amendment."



Vice Chair [Anurima Bhargava](#) discussed USCIRF's work evaluating the U.S. asylum process over the past two decades, highlighting USCIRF's reports on expedited removal, released in [2005](#), [2007](#), [2013](#), and [2016](#), that documented major problems that successive administrations have not addressed. USCIRF's assessments found that Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials often fail to follow required procedures to identify asylum seekers; that they detain asylum seekers in inappropriate, prison-like conditions; and that funding disparities, backlogs, and a lack of high-level oversight hamper the process. These flaws raise serious concerns that the United States is erroneously returning asylum seekers to countries where they could face persecution or torture—a risk that the expanded use of expedited removal over the years has only exacerbated.



Jenny Yang, Senior Vice President of Policy and Advocacy at World Relief, summarized the worsening state of refugees fleeing religious persecution:

- More than 340 million Christians live in countries with high levels of faith-based persecution.

- In Burma, Chin Christian pastors face violence and one million mostly Muslim Rohingya have fled genocide in Rakhine state.
- The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) remains a threat to religious minorities, including Christians and Yazidis.
- Christians, Baha'is, and Mandeans are imprisoned for their faith and face discrimination in Iran.
- Refugees to Thailand include 1,600 mostly Ahmadi Muslim and Christian Pakistanis.

World Relief supports the Biden administration's expressed intention to increase the refugee ceiling to 62,500 for this fiscal year and to 125,000 for next fiscal year. Yang also explained that the Biden Administration indicated that it is considering creating new priority categories for refugee resettlement, including severely persecuted religious groups. Yang recommended that Congress appropriate robust funding to the Migration and Refugee Assistance Account, through which World Relief and members of the Refugee Council USA help resettle refugees.



Mark Hetfield, President and CEO at the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), offered the following recommendations to DHS to better protect asylum seekers in the expedited removal process:

- End the practice of placing asylum seekers in jails and jail-like facilities.
- Record all initial sworn statements taken and implement meaningful quality assurance procedures in reviewing those statements.
- Implement quality assurance measures in the immigration courts to ensure that the outcome is dependent on the strength of the asylum claim rather than the bias of the judge. Additionally, guarantee access to legal assistance for asylum seekers.
- Create a high-level position empowered and equipped to coordinate the process of expedited removal.



Leon Rodriguez, the former Director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) at DHS and an immigration attorney at Seyfarth, addressed the process of vetting refugees. He described vetting as a constantly evolving and multilayered

system, with redundancies to ensure its effectiveness, in which decisions must be based on intelligence and law enforcement information, not prejudice or sensationalist media reports. He also discussed the high level of training, knowledge, and preparation of the USCIS Refugee Officers who conduct admissions interviews. As of today, not a single refugee admitted among the 100,000 Iraqi and 20,000 Syrian refugees, has been charged or implicated with involvement in a terrorist crime against the United States. Rodriguez recommended the U.S. government rebuild the refugee services officer corps at USCIS by training and deploying more refugee officers in the field.



Elizabeth Neumann, Senior Advisor at the National Immigration Forum and former Assistant Secretary for Threat Prevention and Security at DHS, discussed how a more robust refugee admission program would protect U.S. national security interests.

- Eighty-five percent of refugees are hosted in developing regions, particularly in countries facing economic and political instability. Within such environments, forcibly displaced individuals are vulnerable to ideological extremism and abusive exploitation.
- The pre-existence of militant groups and the inhumane conditions within refugee camps facilitate the radicalization process. The sometimes decade-long wait for resettlement increases an individual's susceptibility to being radicalized.

Neumann recommended the following steps to strengthen the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program:

- Make immediate investments in personnel, technology, and process improvements that will allow for the rapid scaling of the program.
- Address the backlog of Iraqis, who risked their lives to help Americans, awaiting approval as P-2 refugees.
- Move towards a multi-year planning approach to create sustainable planning.



[Murad Ismael](#), the co-founder and former Executive Director at Yazda, described the current state of the Yazidis six years after the commencement of the genocide. Sixty-five percent of Yazidis from Sinjar remain displaced throughout

Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon, and Europe. Approximately 2,200 Yazidis have chosen to leave Sinjar because there is no support to rebuild homes, the unemployment rate is up to 80 percent, and the trauma from the genocide is still felt.

Ismael provided the following recommendations to the U.S. government:

- Address the backlog of refugees through the P-2 and Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) programs, respectively.
- Resettle 25,000 Yazidis through a multi-year plan.
- Continue partnering with Yazidi non-governmental organizations (NGOs) through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to help rebuild Sinjar.

Chair Manchin concluded the hearing by thanking the witnesses for their work on behalf of the 80 million people worldwide who have been forcibly displaced.

USCIRF recommends the U.S. government:

- In accordance with the definition of who constitutes a refugee in international and U.S. law, prioritize for resettlement through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) survivors of the most egregious forms of religious persecution, including Iranian religious minorities eligible for processing under the Lautenberg Amendment, members of other severely persecuted religious or belief communities, and survivors of genocide or other atrocity crimes; and
- Address longstanding flaws in the treatment of asylum seekers in Expedited Removal, including by enhancing the quality and oversight of the initial processing of noncitizens, improving detention conditions, and appointing a high-level official at DHS to coordinate and oversee reforms.

The Commissioners listed below were present at the hearing.



[Commissioner Gary Bauer](#)



[Commissioner James W. Carr](#)



[Commissioner Nadine Maenza](#)



[Commissioner Nury Turkel](#)



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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.