

Testimony before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom
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Chairman Perkins and the Members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the U.S. government's efforts to help victims of genocide perpetrated by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). I would also like to thank the Commission for your continued efforts to highlight the plight of those persecuted for their beliefs - whether in Iraq, the People's Republic of China, Burma, the Federal Republic of Nigeria, or elsewhere. The indispensable reporting and advocacy of the Commission are making efforts and investments of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) stronger and better-informed.

Today I would like to talk about what we have done to respond to the genocide ISIS committed against religious and ethnic minorities in Northern Iraq, and the remaining challenges that face us. As USAID Administrator Mark Green has emphasized during his travels to the region, the Trump Administration is committed to ensuring that assistance reaches those most in need, including members of Iraq's ethnic and religious minority communities. At the outset I want to say that although we can be proud of our accomplishments, the road to recovery for these devastated communities is long and difficult, and will require continued commitment on the part of the United States, the Government of Iraq, and our partners. Helping communities recover from genocide is not like helping them recover from an earthquake, nor is it like any other development problem. It is an effort that requires a tailored approach that addresses the fullness of needs in a deeply traumatized society - not just rebuilt schools and hospitals, but also psycho-social support to survivors, reconciliation efforts between mistrustful neighbors, and the revitalization of a broken economy.

Two years ago the United States channeled the vast majority of its stabilization funding in Iraq through a single implementer the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). UNDP was conducting important work rehabilitating critical infrastructure in areas liberated from ISIS, but many NGOs and community leaders reported that its approach did not sufficiently address the specific needs of those targeted by ISIS.

In October 2017 Vice President Pence called upon the U.S Government to do more, and we answered that call. In the two years since we have scaled up our efforts dramatically, in terms of dollars, partners engaged and work performed. Whereas in 2017 the United States had provided about \$3 million for stabilization in Ninewa, today USAID and the Department of State have contributed a total of \$380 million in assistance. Whereas in 2017 USAID had only a handful of UN partners in Ninewa, today we have 57 local, 13 faith-based, and 35 international organizations, each contributing in ways appropriate to their size and specialization. We are

empowering members of these traumatized communities by giving them a voice and a role in how we implement our assistance programs.

These partners include Catholic Relief Services, which last week received an award to work with the Chaldean Catholic Archdiocese of Erbil to provide support to long-term displaced residents from towns in the Ninewa Plains. They include Samaritan's Purse, which through a number of USAID-financed awards is rehabilitating homes and providing clean drinking water and sanitation for families in Sinjar and elsewhere. And they include local Iraqi groups funded directly via a new USAID system called the New Partnerships Initiative launched earlier this year.

This is not just an American effort, and we are proud to be sharing the burden with friends and allies at home and abroad. In the past year USAID Administrator Green signed Memoranda of Understanding with the Knights of Columbus, and the Governments of Hungary and Poland. These MOUs are not just empty words. Just last week we joined the Knights of Columbus and the Government of Poland to announce an award to Solidarity Fund Poland, which will provide healthcare for those displaced from their homes in Ninewa. And I am proud to announce that we will be working with the Government of Hungary to expand our coordinated investments in the town of Qaraqosh. USAID will provide funding to a local group to restore a commercial center and shops while Hungary has directed new funds for the rebuilding of homes and other infrastructure there. We collaborate with other Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS partners, such as Germany, the United Kingdom, and other governments to ensure that the donor community is effective in meeting the many needs of Iraq's victims of genocide.

This comprehensive approach has touched nearly every corner of the Ninewa Plains and Western Ninewa. Whereas in 2017 we rarely advertised or branded specific U.S. assistance projects in these areas, today everywhere you go you see the USAID logo and our slogan "From the American People."

But as measured by the return of those displaced, we have seen only modest success from our efforts. Although according to the International Organization for Migration, Ninewa has seen the highest number of returns in Iraq to date, members of persecuted religious minority groups lag far behind their compatriots. An estimated 927,000 people originally from Ninewa remain displaced as of August 31.

We are struggling against tectonic forces in Iraq, in which the ISIS genocide is only the latest factor contributing to the declining size of the country's religious and ethnic minority populations. Decades of government neglect and discriminatory policy in Iraq have marginalized members of religious minority and more than 15 years of almost constant sectarian

strife have driven hundreds of thousands from their homelands. The communities are atomized, distrustful of the Iraqi government, and losing people to emigration every month.

Lack of security remains the primary barrier to returns. In Sinjar the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) runs unchecked, conscripting young Yazidi boys into its forces. Elsewhere in Ninewa the largest threat comes from Iranian-backed elements of the Popular Mobilization Forces which continue to occupy swathes of the Ninewa Plains long after ISIS's defeat. Militias such as the 30th and 50th Brigades have become part local mafia, part Iranian proxy. They terrorize those families brave enough to have returned, extort local businesses, and openly pledge allegiance to Iran. According to Chaldean representatives, Christian returns to towns like Batanaya and Telkaif have reached only one to two percent because of persecution by these militias. In Bartela, the Christian community is under siege by the 30th Brigade that routinely resorts to anti-Christian rhetoric and puts up placards of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khameni at entrances the town.

The U.S. government recently sanctioned the leaders of the 30th and 50th Brigades under the Global Magnitsky sanctions program for their role in serious human rights abuse. But while the Iraqi government has pledged to rein in these militias, they continue to operate with impunity in many areas, with the authorities seemingly unable or unwilling to confront them. Just this week, we learned that the 30th Brigade has assumed the role of registering NGOs implementing U.S. projects in Ninewa, an unacceptable level of interference. State Department diplomats continue to engage the Iraqi government at the highest levels to replace these militias with police and other local security forces, but thus far too little success.

Until the Iraqi Government resolves these security concerns, it will be extremely difficult for members of persecuted minority groups to return home.

Administrator Green believes passionately in the commitment of the people of the United States to religious freedom, and he often talks about how supporting ethnic and religious pluralism is an inherent component of good development work. It is part of who we are as Americans, and we know that it is part of what makes any society strong. This is why we remain committed to Iraq's historical diversity despite the many challenges we face.

With this Commission's guidance, and our own perseverance, and the courage and faith of Iraq's mosaic of communities, we believe that we will succeed.