

INTRODUCTION

"I will follow anyone . . . and remind everyone . . . of the fate . . . of the . . . Yazidi . . . No one mentions your tears, sadness or slow death! But we feel your fallen tears, your beheaded bodies, your raped dignity."

–Widad Akrawi,
Iraqi-born human rights activist

"How in the 21st century could people be forced from their houses just because they are Christian or Shi'ite or Sunni or Yazidi?"

–Baghdad Chaldean Catholic Patriarch Louis Sako,
July 2014 sermon in Baghdad

"The Assad regime made no effort to protect the al-Hasakeh province . . . [ISIL] launched a surprise attack . . . along the Khabor on February 23 . . . , kidnapped 265 men, women, and children, sold 30 young women as sex slaves, and executed all captured Syriac defense forces. . . . Upon securing control of . . . Tel Hormizd, [ISIL] informed [the elders] that all crosses must be removed . . . In fighting for control of Tel Tamr, they seized the Saint Circis Church and burned its Bibles and broke its cross. . . ."

–Testimony of Bassam Ishak,
Syriac National Council of Syria, before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, March 18, 2015

"The devastating attack on the Grand Mosque in Kano, Nigeria . . . was almost certainly the work of Boko Haram, which . . . has targeted the Muslim 'establishment' in Nigeria"

–Tim Lister, *CNN, November 30, 2014*

"Madagali in Adamawa . . . was overrun . . . Christian men were caught and beheaded; the women were forced to become Muslims and were taken as wives for [Boko Haram]."

–Father Gideon Obasogie,
Director of Social Communications, Catholic Diocese of Maiduguri, Nigeria, cited in December 12, 2014 article from www.churchinneed.org web site

"Almost all of the 436 mosques in the Central African Republic have been destroyed by . . . fighting between Christians and Muslims, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations [Samantha Power] said. . . . At least 5,000 people have been killed since CAR exploded into unprecedented sectarian violence in December 2013. Nearly 1 million of [its] 4.5 million residents have been displaced, many of [them] Muslim."

–Cara Anna,
Associated Press, March 18, 2015

"During my last visit [to Burma] in January 2015, I witnessed how dire the situation has remained in Rakhine State. The conditions in Muslim IDP [internally displaced person] camps are abysmal and I received heart-breaking testimonies from Rohingya people telling me they had only two options: stay and die or leave by boat."

–Yanghee Lee,
UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, March 2015 presentation to UN Human Rights Council

Humanitarian crises fueled by waves of terror, intimidation, and violence have engulfed an alarming number of countries in the year since the release of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) prior Annual Report last May. The previous quotations highlight five of these nations – Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, Central African Republic, and Burma – and the horrific loss of human life, freedom, and dignity that has accompanied the chaos.

A horrified world has watched the results of what some have aptly called violence masquerading as religious devotion.

In both Iraq and Syria, no religious group has been free of ISIL's depredations in areas it has conquered. ISIL has unleashed waves of terror upon Yazidis and Christians, Shi'a and Sunnis, as well as others who have dared to oppose its extremist views. When ISIL last June overtook Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, it immediately murdered 12 dissenting Sunni clerics, kidnapped Christian priests and nuns, and leveled ancient houses of worship. The recent discovery of mass graves underscores the extent of the atrocities ISIL has perpetrated on foes of its reign.

More than half a million Mosul residents have fled their homes. When ISIL seized Sinjar, the Yazidis' ancestral homeland, 200,000 were forced to flee. In Syria, ISIL's horrors are replicated by those of other religious extremist groups and the Assad government.

Yazidis and Christians have borne the worst brunt of the persecution by ISIL and other violent religious extremists. From summary executions to forced conversions, rape to sexual enslavement, abducted children to destroyed houses of worship, attacks on these communities are part of a systematic effort to erase their presence from the Middle East.



"Displaced Yazidis fleeing violent Islamic State forces in Sinjar town make their way towards the Syrian border" –Reuters



"Ethnic Rohingya refugees from Myanmar wave as they are transported by a wooden boat to a temporary shelter in Krueng Raya in Aceh Besar" –Reuters

In Nigeria, Boko Haram has attacked both Muslims and Christians. From mass murders at churches and mosques to mass kidnappings of children from schools, Boko Haram has cut a wide path of terror across vast swaths of Nigeria.

There is perhaps no more visible testament to the human toll of these depredations than the millions of people who have been forced to flee their homes. In Iraq, 2 million people were internally displaced in 2014 as a result of ISIL's offensive. More than 6.5 million of Syria's pre-civil-war population now is internally displaced, and more than 3.3 million more are refugees in neighboring states. In Nigeria, Boko Haram's rampages are responsible for the displacement of more than one million individuals. In Central African Republic, a million or more people have been driven from their homes. And in Burma, 140,000 Rohingya Muslims and at least 100,000 largely Kachin Christians remain internally displaced.

By any measure, the horrors of the past year speak volumes about how and why religious freedom and the protection of the rights of vulnerable religious communities matter. Those responsible for the horrors have made the case better than anybody can.

And so it should come as no surprise that in the pages of this report, we have recommended that the United States designate all five of these nations – Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, Central African Republic, and Burma – as "countries of particular concern," or CPCs under the International Religious Freedom Act. We are identifying their governments as well as others as either perpetrating or tolerating some of the worse abuses of religious freedom in the world.



“Investigations following the bombing of Kano Central Mosque, the main mosque in north Nigeria’s biggest city Kano, killing at least 81 people” – Reuters

For humanitarian reasons alone, the world dare not remain silent in the face of the long trail of abuses committed in these and other countries.

But there is another reason as well. In August 2014, Archbishop Jean-Benjamin Sleiman, Latin-rite Archbishop of Baghdad, had this to say: “Unless there is peace . . . , I do not think that Europe will be calm. This . . . does not stop at territorial boundaries. . . .”

The Archbishop’s words proved tragically prophetic. Five months later, in January 2015, the same forces of violent religious extremism plaguing the Archbishop’s country struck the Hyper Cacher kosher supermarket and the Charlie Hebdo newspaper in Paris. The victims of the supermarket attack were murdered simply because they were Jews and the victims of the assault on the newspaper were killed because their attackers considered them blasphemers deserving punishment.

All nations should care about abuses beyond their borders not only for humanitarian reasons but because what goes on in other nations rarely remains there. Standing for the persecuted against the forces of violent religious extremism is not just a moral imperative; it is a practical necessity for any country seeking to protect its security and that of its citizens.

So what can the United States and like-minded nations do?

First, the humanitarian crises of the past year require continued emergency action. The United States government should be commended for its actions which helped save numerous Yazidis from murder or enslavement at the hands of ISIL or starvation as they were driven from their homes. The need, however, remains enormous, especially when it comes to the sheer number of



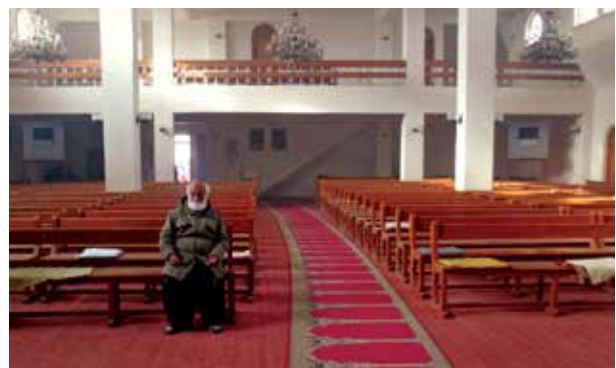
“Internally displaced persons on an armed AU peacekeeping convoy escorting Muslims in the Central African Republic” – Reuters

refugees and displaced people created by the forces of religious radicalism.

Second, emergency help, while essential to protect lives and communities from current danger, is not enough. In the long run, there is only one permanent guarantor of the safety, security, and survival of the persecuted and the vulnerable. It is the full recognition of religious freedom as a sacred human right which every nation, government, and individual must fully support and no nation, government, or individual must ever violate.

In addition, since religious freedom does not exist in a vacuum, the fundamental problems of corruption and unequal sharing of national resources and opportunities must be dealt with. And legal systems must protect the rights of both the majority and minorities.

The stories of both Iraq and Syria offer an especially grim lesson on this score. In both countries, religious minorities appeared safe for a while, but owed their safety to the whim of strongmen – Saddam Hussein and Bashar Assad – who offered protection for their own purposes.



“Lone parishioner sits in church after a small Christmas Eve service in Baghdad” – Reuters

In both nations, the rule of a strongman took the place of rule of law. But to rely on the favor of a single ruler, regime, or party is to live precariously. The question is what transpires when those in control pass from the scene or decide that protecting an embattled minority no longer serves stated or unstated interests. In the blink of an eye, a minority's safety and security can vanish.

Rulers, regimes, and parties may come and go, but when a society commits itself to religious freedom, the security of religious communities – as well as that of dissenters from religion – is guaranteed no matter who holds power.

To be sure, embedding religious freedom and other human rights in a society often can seem a herculean task, but it is a vital one.

And so we must stand tall for religious freedom as an antidote to religious extremism, an aid to security, and a universal right of humanity.