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Testimony for the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Religious Minorities' Fight to Remain in Iraq – September 26, 2019

Between the Department of State's Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom and the United Nations Global Call to Protect Religious Freedom earlier this week, the attention being paid to the question of religious freedom is unprecedented.

Unfortunately, such attention is necessary given the great scale of persecution and genocide in the contemporary world.

Hearings on religious freedom provide an important forum to engage with the destruction of ethnic and religious groups—such as Mandaeans, Yazidis and Assyrians—in Iraq. My message today is that the crisis of religious freedom must be addressed through a discussion of the fundamental political and security problems that have enabled the genocide of Assyrians and continue to threaten their survival today. Without a serious understanding of these problems, it is impossible for the desperate state of religious freedom in Iraq to improve.

In March 2016, the Obama administration declared that ISIS had committed genocide against various groups including Assyrians. But the ISIS genocide was in fact merely the latest round of persecution that has left Assyrians on the verge of disappearance in Iraq.

Prior to 2003, the Assyrian population in Iraq was approximately 1.5 million. Today, that number has dropped to less than 200,000. Assyrians have endured profound discrimination and targeted violence, both for their Christian faith as well as their distinct ethnic identity, rooted in the ancient history of Iraq.

The unequal degree of suffering experienced by Iraq's marginalized communities is a reflection of political and security policies that have completely failed them. Based on current realities and trends, the most likely outcome for Assyrians in Iraq is that they will disappear entirely. The good news, however, is that it is not too late to act—and the policies necessary for Assyrians to survive are clear and actionable.

Since 2003, Assyrians have sought to form a self-administered province in the Nineveh Plain – their ancestral homeland – in accordance with Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution. This effort only became more crucial as Baghdad and other places were emptied of Assyrians targeted by violence. The advancement of this policy, however, has consistently been undermined by the negligence of the Iraqi Government as well as interference from the Kurdistan Regional Government, which included the Peshmerga's unilateral expansion into the Nineveh Plain. These factors have eroded the capacity of Assyrians to achieve and secure conditions of real equality in their homeland.

The Nineveh Plain's official designation as disputed territory comes at the expense of the Assyrians, Yazidis, and other marginalized communities who have historically inhabited these

areas. The ongoing political conflict has created lasting uncertainty, prevented development, enabled violence, fueled departure, and continues to hinder return to areas affected by ISIS.

In a landmark moment for Assyrians in Iraq, on January 21, 2014, the Iraqi Council of Ministers voted for the creation of a Nineveh Plain Governorate. This was the result of more than a decade of advocacy by Assyrians and other communities in Iraq. This new governorate would serve as a safe haven for the marginalized, including Assyrians, while remaining part of Iraq and under the authority of the Iraqi Central Government. The January 2014 decision renewed hopes for Assyrians in Iraq, however, this new hope was short-lived as ISIS invaded the Nineveh Plain just months later.

Weeks before the ISIS advance into the Nineveh Plain, KRG security forces forcibly disarmed local Assyrians, pledging to defend the population in case of an attack. But when ISIS approached, KRG Peshmerga forces tactically withdrew from their posts at the last minute, without firing a single shot and without notifying the local populations. These actions mirror those that took place in Sinjar in August 2014.

Perhaps the most haunting aspect of the events of 2014 in both Sinjar and the Nineveh Plain was not the straightforward evil of ISIS, but the fact that these communities were systematically rendered vulnerable to attack by the very government that was supposed to protect them.

In the wake of these actions, described by both Assyrians and Yazidis as a betrayal, Assyrians formed a security force called the Nineveh Plain Protection Units—the NPU—signaling not only their desire to remain in their lands, but to have greater power over their future.

The NPU has proven itself to be a reliable partner for the US; first through its participation in efforts to liberate the Nineveh Plain from ISIS and second by providing security in southern towns since its liberation. Its soldiers are highly motivated to defend the towns their families have inhabited for centuries and have never expanded or deviated from that mission. The NPU's reliability is expressed through its total lack of violations and transgressions. It has been equally effective in guarding Assyrians in day-to-day life as during cultural events and religious ceremonies.

The NPU is not a party-political entity; those serving in it are not members or supporters of any particular party. They are drawn from the several ancient churches in the Nineveh Plain and are deeply attached to the survival of their faith in their homeland, even in the face of appalling long-term negligence and the shock of ISIS.

Today, security in the Nineveh Plain remains divided between KRG Peshmerga forces, Iranian-backed militias known as Brigade 30 and Brigade 50, Iraqi Army forces, and the NPU. The instability in the region has resulted in the emergence of a new threat to locals as Iranian influence has expanded into northern Iraq through transgressive sectarian militias. The NPU can serve as a bulwark against this threat to both locals and American interests.

The communities of the Nineveh Plain are constantly referred to as the voiceless—but they have always had a voice—the problem is that no one is listening. The API has gathered extensive

testimony from locals that reflect how necessary the NPU is for the survival of Assyrians in Iraq. It is a legitimate, trusted local force that seeks to preserve Christianity in Iraq and help stabilize the country after ISIS. But most importantly, Assyrians have voted in favor of the NPU with their feet.

The rate of Christian return in towns guarded by the NPU is comparably higher than those controlled by other forces. In fact, it is greater than the number of Christian returnees in other Nineveh Plain towns combined. In the town of Bakhdida, for example, approximately 35,000 Christian Assyrian inhabitants have returned—70% of the town’s original population—whereas in Tesqopa, which is controlled by KRG Peshmerga, the rate is roughly 20% and under Brigade 50 in Tel Kepepe, the rate is 7%.

Despite the remarkable success of the NPU, the dangerous security and political status quo has been upheld, and local governance and security policies have not changed. While the current level of US assistance to the Nineveh Plain is exceptional and essential, its impact is severely limited and undermined by the failure to resolve the security challenges in the region.

The abuse of religious freedom in Iraq is a symptom of failed governance. The Iraqi Government and its international partners have a very short window to demonstrate that they have learned from the mistakes of the past and to commit to policies that advance real solutions. Yet this moment presents an opportunity to do just that.

In the NPU, the United States now has a security partner in the defense of religious freedom. The NPU has already played their part in defeating ISIS; all they need now is and support to ensure that they can protect their families from future threats.

In addition to immediate security needs, support for a Nineveh Plain Governorate is the most direct and straightforward way to defend the religious freedom of Assyrians in Iraq. Such a province would enable the various communities of the Nineveh Plain to develop sustainable, functional, and democratic forms of local administration within the framework of the united, federal, Iraqi state, in order to preserve the continuity of groups like Assyrians within their homeland.