



## **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**

### **Religious Minorities' Fight to Remain in Iraq**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

**Tony Perkins, USCIRF Chair:**

Good morning and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing on "Religious Minorities' Fight to Remain in Iraq." I would like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us today to offer their expertise and recommendations, and Senator Joe Manchin and his office for providing this room for us.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad, using international standards to do so, and makes policy recommendations to Congress, the President, and the Secretary of State. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this hearing.

Over 20 years of our work, we have seen a strong correlation between religious freedom, social stability, security, development, and the consolidation of democracy. Conversely, the lack of religious freedom correlates with instability, increased security challenges, extremism, and a host of other social and political problems.

This correlation certainly pertains to Iraq, where USCIRF has noted significant religious freedom challenges. This is particularly the case for the communities who were targeted for genocide by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and are still struggling to return

to their homes and recover from that trauma. Two of our Commissioners, in fact, including Vice Chair Nadine Maenza who will offer remarks shortly, visited Iraq last month to gain a better understanding of religious freedom conditions at present.

We recognize that Iraq faces many challenges, including efforts to reestablish stability and security following the territorial defeat of ISIS; to restore and rehabilitate traumatized religious minority communities; to address long-standing Shi'a-Sunni issues; and to resolve tensions between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG).

However, recent years have been especially unkind to Iraq's religious minorities. Iraq once had one of the region's most religiously and ethnically diverse populations: for example, Jewish Iraqis made up an estimated one-third of the population of Baghdad only a century ago, until regional upheaval led all but a handful to flee to Israel and elsewhere. And the sectarian violence of the mid-2000s displaced a massive swath of the country's Christian population and slashed it from roughly one and a half million to an estimated 200,000 at present.

The rise of ISIS in 2014 compounded these challenges. The terrorist group perpetrated horrific atrocities against religious and ethnic minorities in northwest Iraq, focused on the areas of Sinjar and the Nineveh Plain. ISIS chased Christians from their towns, executed Yazidi men, and abducted 6,000 Yazidi women and children into sexual slavery. USCIRF followed these events with sorrow, but also with unflinching determination to make sure that the U.S. government would not turn away or forget those who were suffering.

Today, we are focusing on the current status of those vulnerable communities. This hearing seeks to ask two questions: first, whether conditions are improving sufficiently to allow them to return to their homes and ultimately survive in Iraq. And second, what more can and should the United States and its international partners do to support them more boldly and effectively.

I will now turn to my colleague, Vice Chair Nadine Maenza, to discuss USCIRF's recent country visit to Iraq and highlight some of the religious freedom challenges and areas of tentative progress that were evident during that trip.

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