U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing: Religious Minorities' Fight to Remain in Iraq

Statement from Victor Marx:

I have three primary talking points I'd like to address today.

First, I'd like to start by explaining to you how a person on the ground in Iraq and Syria view the security situation based on my interactions and that of the members of our team at All Things Possible Ministries. I'll also briefly address how the uncertain security situation on the ground drives their actions and finally, I will discuss why this continues to fuel instability in the region.

In discussing these three topics, I hope to give you a perspective that cannot be obtained in the newspapers, on TV or by anyone who has not spent time on the ground engaging members on all sides of the conflict.

What does security mean to the average person in Iraq and Syria today? For them, security is anything that can protect their resources and family while providing them an opportunity to provide the basics needs for their family.

I've seen first hand how much of a void exists in this regard. Security to them is any person, group, or organization that can assist with these basic security needs. For instance, who responds to provide assistance when a person living in Al-Anbar is robbed, or someone's daughter is taken a hostage in Iskandariya? If you are an average person, you have a better chance of enlisting a local militia to provide assistance than you do the central government; there is no "911" service in Iraq.

This instability and uncertainty benefit militias and terrorists operating throughout the country. While not all people in Iraq align with groups like ISIS or the Shiite militias, they are dependent upon them for security, and this enables these groups to operate and keeps their ranks filled.

Additionally, it is often the case that these terrorist groups and militias provide better wage and career opportunities than does the government of Iraq. Understanding this is not difficult, but is sometimes hard to envision from people in the west who have these basic security mechanisms at their disposal. In most cases, the people on the ground in Iraq and Syria are moving towards whatever entity that provides them security and a semblance of stability and unfortunately, that is not the Government of Iraq in most cases. This lack of stability continues to drive the desire for alternate systems of governance and give rise and lasting power to groups like ISIS. To us, it seems that extremists groups like ISIS are systematically attracting people who badly desire these basic resources and security services by appealing to their religious identity and social marginalization. Addressing their religious identity while disregarding their marginalized role in

society or vice vera, is a failing solution. A good start to addressing this problem is a comprehensive approach that takes both of these items into account, at a minimum.

Minority groups such as the Christians and Yezidi people hoped the condition of life would change after the defeat of ISIS, but things did not go as expected. Displaced Christians now fear returning home because of Shiite militias occupying the Ninevah Plains.

Yezidis withhold from identifying themselves inside IDP camps for fear of being killed by ISIS members living in the tent next door. In addition to deteriorating security in the region, loss of confidence in leadership, disease, poverty, corruption, and the survival of extremist ideology are among other hardships minority groups are facing. Lack of jobs, poor health care services, and conflict between political groups fighting for acquisition of their areas cause these minority groups to lose hope, and turn to immigration to a more stable and secure country outside Iraq.

Until we find a way to address the most basic security needs of the average Iraqi or Syrian Citizen, groups representing alternative forms of governance will remain popular and the situation will not improve. Now, I do not claim to have a solution, my goal is to offer a perspective of the security situation that while basic, is overlooked.

My team's experience has been that feeding security funds to the highest levels of the government has failed because that money rarely finds its way to the people who need it most. If basic security needs are not meant at all levels of society, by those of all religious sects, and if those living outside Baghdad continue to be marginalized with no sense of connection to the government, the situation will continue to deteriorate and provide ample opportunities for terrorist and militia groups to sew chaos into the fabric of Iraqi society.