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# The Christian and Yezidi Genocide

*Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights,  
and International Organizations Hearing  
December 9, 2015  
Excerpts of Remarks Chairman Chris Smith*

Each day, our newspapers, magazines, radios and television screens are filled with images of people fleeing territory controlled by the Islamic jihadist group known as the Islamic State of al-Sham, or ISIS.

More than half of the 635,000 refugees—an estimated 53 percent—in Europe are from Syria alone, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees or UNHCR.

While violence plays the major role in the impetus of Syrians to leave their homes, Shelly Pitterman of the UNHCR testified at a hearing I chaired on October 20<sup>th</sup> that the main trigger for flight from refugee camps or shelter in nations like Jordan is the humanitarian funding shortfall. In recent months, he told us that the World Food Programme cut its program by 30 percent, and the current Syrian Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan for 2015 is only 41 percent funded. The UNHCR expects to receive just 47 percent of the funding it needs for Syria over the next year.

One year ago this month, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs issued a report that detailed a worsening humanitarian situation in Syria. An estimated 12.21 million were in need of humanitarian assistance, including 7.6 million internally displaced people and more than 5.6 million children in need of assistance. An estimated 4.8 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance in hard to reach areas and locations. Those numbers have not improved as the conflict has continued.

By the third international pledging conference on March 31, 2015, the crisis had become the largest displacement crisis in the world, with 3.8 million people having fled to Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt, in addition to those internally displaced. In support of the Syria

Response Plan and the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, international donors pledged US\$3.8 billion. However, according to the Financial Tracking Service at the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs or OCHA, only \$1.17 billion of \$2.89 billion in the plan had been received as of December 7<sup>th</sup>. This constitutes only 41% of what is considered necessary by OCHA

Today's hearing will focus on the plight of persecuted religious minorities in Syria and Iraq, which today constitutes genocide, and the failure of much of the international community to live up to their pledges of humanitarian assistance, factors which "push" refugees to Europe and beyond. In particular, we will examine violence targeting religious minorities such as Christians and Yezidis (a non-Islamic religious minority) in territory controlled by ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

This past September, the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum undertook a "Bearing Witness" trip to northern Iraq to investigate allegations of genocide being committed by ISIS. In a report entitled "*Our Generation is Gone*": *The Islamic state's Targeting of Iraqi Minorities in Ninevah*," the report stated that:

"Based upon the public record and private eyewitness accounts, we believe the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) perpetrated crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing against Christian, Yezidi, Turkmen, Shabak, Sabaeen-Mandaean, and Kaka'i people in Ninevah province between June and August 2014. In our interviews, we heard accounts of the forcible transfer of populations, severe deprivation of physical liberty, rape, sexual slavery, enslavement, and murder perpetrated in a widespread and systematic manner that indicates a deliberate plan to target religious and ethnic minorities. Some specific communities— notably the Yezidi, but also Shia Shabak and Shia Turkman— were targeted for attack.

Mirza Ismail, Chairman and Founder of the Yezidi Human Rights Organization-International, will testify that the Yezidis are on the verge of annihilation.

Chaldean Bishop Francis Kalabat will testify that, "There are countless Christian villages in Syria who have been taken over by ISIS and have encountered genocide and the Obama administration refuses to recognize their plight."

Carl Anderson, Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, calls on the Obama Administration to publicly acknowledge that genocide is taking place against the Christian communities of Iraq and Syria. Mr. Anderson will testify that "vulnerable religious minorities fear taking shelter in the camps of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees because of religiously motivated violence and intimidation inside the camps." "Syrian Christians", he notes, "and other vulnerable minorities are disproportionately excluded from the U.S. Syrian Refugee Resettlement Program due to reliance on a functionally discriminatory UNHCR program."

Dr. Gregory Stanton, President of Genocide Watch and research professor at George Mason University, in his testimony entitled "Weak Words Are Not Enough", he states, "Failure to call ISIS' mass murder of Christians, Muslims, and other groups in addition to Yazidis by its proper

name – genocide – would be an act of denial as grave as U.S. refusal to recognize the Rwandan genocide in 1994.”

The Administration reportedly is considering declaring the ISIS treatment of Yezidis to be genocide, but there is no indication that Christians will be included. That’s absurd! Such an action would be contrary to the facts and tragically wrong. Last year, a United Nations resolution determined that both Yezidis and Christians were being particularly targeted by ISIS.

A group of Christian leaders last week wrote to Secretary of State John Kerry to present their case for treating Christians the same as Yezidis in this matter, but they have not received a reply thus far.

As we attempt to end the ISIS threat, we must consider how to help ensure religious pluralism in Syria and Iraq in the future. That will not be an easy task since animosities have grown during the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, exponentially so during the rise and reign of terror of ISIS. Nevertheless, unless we consider how to help make these lands safe for religious minorities, we will continue to see them chased out of their traditional areas even if there is no ISIS.

Our witnesses today will provide us a picture of the ongoing struggle faced by religious minorities in ISIS territory, and hopefully, they will help us to begin the discussion of making these areas safe for their people in the years to come.