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Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability

*Excerpts of remarks by Chairman Chris Smith (R-NJ)
Hearing of the House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights and International Organizations
October 3, 2017*

Good afternoon and welcome.

In August 2014, ISIS began committing genocide against Yazidis and Christians in Iraq. Three years later, they are still not receiving the assistance they need from the United States and so their survival in their ancient homelands is in jeopardy.

Two consecutive Secretaries of State and the Congress declared ISIS was responsible for genocide. This year, the President and Vice President declared the genocide and committed the Administration to provide relief to the surviving religious and ethnic minority communities. In the final appropriations bill for Fiscal Year 2017, Congress required the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development to fund the assistance promised by the Administration.

But career staff at the State Department and USAID have ignored the law and thwarted the will of the President, the Congress and the people we represent. These bureaucrats have refused to direct assistance to religious and ethnic minority communities, even to enable them to survive genocide. This obstruction is unacceptable and I urge Secretary Tillerson and new USAID Administrator Green and to put an end to it.

I chaired my first hearing on atrocities against religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq or Syria in September of 2013. This hearing today is the 10th I have chaired focused in whole or in part on their plight. Last September I introduced bipartisan legislation, coauthored by my good friend Anna Eshoo, explicitly authorizing the State Department and USAID to identify the needs of these communities and fund entities, including faith-based entities, effectively providing them with aid on-the-ground. Even though the U.S. already has the authority to provide such assistance, we were aware some in the bureaucracy inaccurately claimed they lacked the

authority and so we wanted to remove this excuse. It was also important to have a detailed authorization as the foundation for forth-going appropriations. This bill would also set an important precedent for how the U.S. should respond to future crises in which religious and ethnic minorities are targeted for atrocity crimes.

Partially informed by my trip to Erbil last December to meet first-hand with genocide survivors, we reintroduced this legislation as H.R. 390 almost immediately after the start of the new Congress, with even stronger support from both sides of the aisle and many Yazidi, Christian, accountability and human rights groups and leaders. The House passed it unanimously in early June and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee passed it unanimously on September 19. There has been no subsequent action in the Senate. The appropriations bill for fiscal year 2017 has expired and the situation on-the-ground is deteriorating for these endangered communities. I respectfully ask the Senate to immediately pass H.R. 390.

This hearing will explore the urgent crisis for Christian and Yazidi genocide survivors, especially in Iraq, what the Administration can do now to enable them to survive, and what the consequences will be for these communities and our national security if we fail to act. As you will hear from several of our witnesses, helping these communities survive and return to their homes will reduce threats from Iran. It will also deny ISIS a major propaganda victory and recruiting tool.

Before proceeding to the witnesses, I should note the State Department and USAID were invited to testify. They were unavailable.

Our first witness is known to many of you, my dear friend for many years, the former Representative for the 10th district of Virginia, Frank Wolf. He is here today as the Distinguished Senior Fellow at 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative and he visited Northern Iraq this August. In his written statement, Congressman Wolf warns “if bold action is not taken by the end of the year, I believe a tipping point will be reached and we will see the end of Christianity in Iraq.” About the Yazidis, he reports although “Sinjar has been liberated from ISIS since the fall of 2015...it is currently controlled by multiple different militia groups...few families have been able to return and few aid groups work in the area.”

Congressman Wolf also raises the alarm about Iraq-backed militias filling the post-ISIS liberation vacuum as part of Tehran’s “goal of creating a land-bridge from Iran [to] allow Iran to move fighters, weapons and supplies to aid Hezbollah and other terrorist groups” and offers several concrete policy recommendations the Administration and Congress should heed.

Our second witness will be Shireen, a Yazidi survivor of ISIS enslavement. She wrote in her statement for the record this “captivity under ISIS...was like hell. They performed an abdominal surgery on me...and I am suffering from the effects of it...They committed all kinds of atrocious crimes against us including mass killing, sexual enslavement, and forced conversion.”

Shireen also wrote “19 members of my family and my relatives are missing. They may be killed or still in captivity but we don’t know anything about them...We are still waiting for action and the liberation of thousands of Yazidis from ISIS captivity.” She warns that “Yazidis, Christians and other religious minorities, especially the non-Muslim minorities, cannot survive in Syria and Iraq under the current conditions. Without serious action from you and the world

governments, many of these people will continue to flee their ancient homelands of Syria and Iraq.”

Our third witness will be Lauren Ashburn, Managing Editor and Anchor of EWTN News Nightly. She travelled to Northern Iraq earlier this year and has continued to report on the crisis. Her story-telling and video, rooted in more than 20 years as a journalist, has helped tell the stories of heroism, indomitable faith, and survival. As she reported in her written testimony for this hearing “Christians in Iraq are on the brink of extinction... The United States is the only nation in the world that can provide concrete aid to rebuild the community that I saw in shambles.”

Our fourth and final witness will be Stephen Rasche, Legal Counsel and Director of IDP Resettlement Programs for the Chaldean Catholic Archdiocese of Erbil, and Legal Counsel and Chief Coordinator for the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee. Mr. Rasche testified before a hearing I chaired of the Helsinki Committee last September, and he reports in his written testimony today, “I regret to say that we have still yet to receive any form of meaningful aid from the US Government... While we have found the political appointees much more willing to help us since January, the fact is that even after the better part of a year, they have been unable to move the bureaucracy to take meaningful action.”

The Obama Administration channeled all U.S. funding for stabilization in Iraq through the Funding Facility for Stabilization, administered by the UN Development Program, and the current Administration has continued this policy. Mr. Rasche testified in his written statement “While status reports from UNDP work in Nineveh purport to show real progress in the Christian majority towns, on the ground we see little evidence of it. Work projects are in most cases cosmetic in nature, and much of that cynically so... In effect, US taxpayers are financing the spoils of genocide.”

As an alternative option for U.S. assistance, he details the Nineveh Sustainable Return Program, an initiative of the ecumenical Nineveh Reconstruction Committee to repair homes damaged or destroyed by ISIS. The Program has already rebuilt several thousand homes and enabled thousands of Christian families to return, mostly funded by the Knights of Columbus and Aid to the Church in Need, with some additional funding from the Government of Hungary. Last month, the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee USA submitted a proposal to USAID to ensure the project can be completed and many more families can return.

I strongly support this time-sensitive proposal and call on USAID Administrator Green to ensure a decision is made about it soon. Because of the resistance among career staff at USAID to directing assistance to religious and ethnic minority communities, even though they were targeted for genocide, it is imperative officials appointed by the President are part of the review process and that the final decision be made by Presidential appointees. I am including this proposal as part of the hearing record.

As Mr. Rasche warns in his written testimony, “Today, as I speak to you, we are caught fully exposed and at-risk, finding ourselves at a critical historical inflection point, foreign aid decisions over which will determine whether Christianity, and religious pluralism – vital to the US national interest and regional security – will survive in Iraq at all.”