Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
WORLDWIDE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS: RESPONDING TO NEW CHALLENGES

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Chairman Smith, Chairman McGovern, Members of Congress, Congressional Staff, and fellow defenders of religious freedom, thank you for this opportunity to testify about the Worldwide Persecution of Christians and how we may raise our level of awareness, defend more effectively against violent extremism, deliver humanitarian aid more efficiently, and apply lessons from vicious atrocities of the past to prevent the evil of like atrocities and genocides in the future.

In my remarks today, I wish to focus on two geopolitical hotbeds of Christian persecution that continuing unchecked will certainly lead to thousands of more violent deaths, rape and forced marriages, the spread of violent extremism, threats to global security, including the national security of the United States.

Nigeria

First, nowhere in the world today do Christians face a more severe threat of persecution than in Nigeria. Nigeria has an estimated population of approximately 235 million people with Christians making up about 45.7% of the population or roughly 107.3 million Christians (Open Doors Int'l and the US Department of State). The Dept of State estimates the Christian population at 48.1% of the overall

population. Christian communities in Nigeria are located primarily in the south and parts of the Middle Belt while northern regions are predominantly Muslim.

Modern day Nigeria is one of the deadliest countries in the world to be a Christian. Open Doors Int'l reports an estimated 3,490 Christians have been killed in 2026. Approximately 12 Christians per day are killed in Nigeria because they are Christian. Open Doors estimates 3,100 killed in 2025 for their faith. And, thus far in 2026, Open Doors reports 2,293 Christian kidnappings.

One of the factors elevating the threat of persecution in Nigeria is the confluence of methodologies. The physical violence perpetrated toward Christians is dehumanizing. Christians face mass killings, sexual violence, torture, kidnapping for ransom, destruction of property, and forced displacement. Churches, schools, and religious leaders have been targeted. Violence is frequently planned for rural communities where security forces are limited in their response.

Coupled with the physical violence is the fact that Nigerian authorities have deliberately ignored or been complicit in the violence. They have failed to hold violent perpetrators systematically accountable. They have downplayed the violence and reporting, failed to govern with accountability, and left Christian communities especially vulnerable. Finally, the threat of persecution toward Christians is elevated through systematic legal and institutional repression. Sharia-based criminal laws in northern states and blasphemy provisions have been used to prosecute individuals accused of religious offenses. Christian communities face discrimination, including land restrictions for building churches and lack of access to legal protections.

Who are the perpetrators of these threats to Christians in Nigeria? The most commonly identified nonstate actors targeting Christians include the Boko Haram

(pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq in 2015 at which point a group splintered off to form Islamic State West Africa Province – ISWAP), armed Fulani militants, and criminal bandits who are often affiliated with branches of the Islamic State.

But these are not the only perpetrators, and that is part of the increasing threat to Christians and, in fact, to the global security apparatus.

(Focus Comments)

Emerging trends and developments in Nigeria should serve as a call to vigilance and action for the U.S. and other leading nations of peace and security **in the world. Today, I note three factors contributing to an increased threat toward Christians in Nigeria:**

(1) Nigeria is quickly becoming an extremely complicated militant environment with more Islamic militant groups getting involved – including Lakurawa, Mahmuda, and Ansaru. Lakurawa. With insufficient time today to properly identify these groups, we should note that each one is identified either with the broader Islamic state or, Al-Qaeda (with ties to the Muslim brotherhood). The presence of violent extremist in Nigeria is building. Extremist groups have acted with little-to-no accountability, and often with government complicity. Therefore, extremist groups are growing and expanding. Christians and other communities of faith are the local targets. The U.S. and other nations of peace are targets as well.

(2) The continued humanitarian crisis and heightened vulnerability of Christian IDPs elevates instability and increases risk. More than 3.7 million people are internally displaced in Nigeria. Nearly half of all IDPs

are housed in the state of Borno, most living with families or hosts of the same ethnic group and others living in government established camps in the Middle Belt or in Bauchi state as the flee northeast. The inability of Christian families to return home safely is a critical issue, especially as resettlement becomes a state priority of U.S. – Nigeria cooperation. Ongoing vulnerability for families and communities increases vulnerability.

(3) Slow-moving diplomatic engagement in the wake of CPC designation has stymied the potential impact of the designation. The reinstatement of the CPC designation by the U.S. and establishment of a Joint Working Group between Nigeria and the U.S. has focused on protecting vulnerable Christian communities, promoting resettlement, and pursuing counterterrorism prosecutions. However, the Joint Working Group has only met twice in 2026. The stated initiatives of providing security training, intelligence sharing, and coordinated military operations must be fast-tracked. While efforts in these directions try to get off the ground, Christian fatalities persist, humanitarian assistance lags, and gaps in transparency, financing, and local governance fall woefully short.

Syria

Second, I turn my attention quickly and briefly to Syria today. Syria remains deeply unstable following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, particularly for religious minorities like Christians. Despite promises by the transitional government to provide protections for religious communities, Christians (sometimes as part of broader sectarian violence toward all religious minorities) continue to face violence, intimidation, discrimination, and daily uncertainties regarding their religious freedom. The June 2025 bombing of Mar

Elias Church in Damascus demonstrates the threat violent extremists pose to Christians in the country. The probability that the three gunman who opened fire on mourners attending a funeral at the Greek Orthodox Church of St. George in Hamoud, Jordan on October 23, 2026 were affiliated with the Islamic State in Syria may also highlight the presence and extended reach of Islamic terrorists both within Syria's porous borders and to neighboring states. It may be worth noting that the evils perpetrated upon Christians and other religious minorities in northern Iraq/Kurdistan from 2014 to 2017 were carried out by Islamic State terrorists who poured into Iraq from Syria.

Estimates for the Christian population in Syria range from 10% down to as low as around 1%. The differences rest in the difficulty of collecting data and in the fact that the population is unstable, under threat, and disappearing. In 2026 alone, Open Doors estimates more than 27 Christians have been killed, 100 Christians physically or mentally abused, and 100 churches attacked. Additional persecution of Christians often involves broader sectarian violence that includes the Druze and Alawite communities.

Attacks upon Christians involve physical violence and public intimidation. Christians face intimidation through public threats, social media harassment, and pressure to limit religious activities. For example, concerns over security reportedly led to the cancellation of outdoor Easter celebrations in March 2026.

Further discrimination toward Christians is evidenced by the fact that that that Syria's transitional authorities have retained restrictive laws impacting religious freedom in the post-Assad regime. Under the current regime, the March 2025 constitutional declaration affirms Sharia law as the principal source of legislation.

Additional legal and institutional restrictions govern marriage, inheritance, adoption, and religious conversion. Christians face legal consequences under these restrictive laws and practices. Adding to these measures of discrimination, reports indicate that Christian students are confronted with intimidation in schools and pressured to convert to Islam.

Four emerging trends and developments in Syria highlight the threat to Christians.

(1) Instability and marked uncertainties under the Transitional government. Despite promises to support religious minorities in Syria, the new regime has preserved restrictive laws and practices countering religious freedom, supporting singular religious norms, and ineffectively responded to violations and persecution.

(2) Christian communities continue to physical violence, harassment, vandalism, public threats, restriction on religious activities, pressure from authorities surrounding conversion, and interference in Christian education.

(3) The inclusion of Christians in broader sectarian violence against Alawhite and Druze communities highlights the lack of commitment by the current regime to religious freedom and inadequate protections from minority communities. The broader extensive violence against these minority communities raises serious concerns about the protection of religious minorities in Syria.

(4) The lack of certain commitment religious freedom, protections for religious minorities, and preservation of restrictive laws and practices toward Christians and other minority faiths, is contributing to the

disappearance of Christian communities in Syria (and Iraq) and the rising threat of another genocide similar to the ISIS genocide of 2014-2017.

What Should We Do: Policy Recommendations:

1. Prioritize Religious Freedom Education. Education is the incubator of culture and the foundation for good laws in any nation. Education enhances stability, promotes democracy, and teaches diverse communities about the true meaning and value of religious freedom. In the aftermath of the Iraq genocide 2014-17, the government in Baghdad nearly zeroed out the educational budget – the national budget for rebuilding schools, paying teachers, and getting students back in school. ISIS strategically executed a plan to destroy schools, introduce their own curriculum, use educational apps for recruiting and teaching, and become the "teacher" of children. At the same time, the government put less money into getting their children back into school than in any other budget priority, despite the evidence showing that when school-age children in Iraq miss two years of school in succession, they will never return. Education is a deterrent to violence and a significant factor in preventing genocide.
2. Create an "Atrocity Prevention Commission" (APC) with statutory authority and funding. The APC would be a multi-agency commission with appointed members across federal agencies and non-governmental experts who oversee analysis of geopolitical contexts of persecution and recommend methods of crisis response to avoid escalating violence and genocide. Members of the APC would be required to participate in religious freedom training and awareness training of all current U.S. laws and international treaties relevant to their duties under the APC. The training and inclusion of non-governmental experts would distinguish the APC from the prior Atrocity

Prevention Board created by Executive Order under President Obama's administration,

3. Return to prioritizing the position of Ambassador-at-Large (AAL) for International Religious Freedom and the stand-alone operational authority of the IRF Office at the U.S. Department of State. Under the 2016 Frank R. Wolf Amendment to the International Religious Freedom Act, the IRF Ambassador has statutory authority to report directly to the Secretary of State and to manage the IRF office as a "stand-alone" office with statutory authority to implement U.S. IRF policy throughout the world. The U.S. needs to move swiftly to confirm an AAL now and in successive administrations without a lengthy hiatus. The U.S. has been recognized as the world leader on international religious freedom. We need to return to living up to that responsibility.
4. The IRF Office at the U.S. Department of State must recognize the contribution of more Non-governmental Organizations to provide solutions to complex contexts of persecution. Funding the same organizations to do the same work will not address the complexity of today's problems. Solutions must include short-term and long-term methods. Recommendations include:
    a. The IRF Office should promote the development of religious freedom education curricula and training in contexts of persecution and in countries where persecution is or on the rise.
    b. The IRF Office should promote funding to programs that build bridges between local government leaders and faith communities. Christian and Muslim leaders in Nigeria voice the concern that they cannot work with local government leaders because they are part of the problem. However, those religious leaders could work with the

Chief Justices Forum – a multi-national platform of African Chief Justices who want to align with religious leaders in Nigerian to build peace and religious freedom in Nigeria and across the region. RFI and Pepperdine University will be in Nigeria with the Chief Justices Forum February 25-27, 2027, for this purpose.

5. The U.S. Department of State must continue to rebuild its humanitarian assistance programs. When I was in the historic Christian town of Karamlesh in the spring of 2019, I asked Msgr. Thabet, "What do you need most to help the people to return home?" His answer was not a new law; it was not strong policies from the U.S. or Baghdad; it wasn't even stronger security; is response was one word – "seeds." His Christian community is comprised mostly of families that are farmers. They simply needed seeds to plant in the fields to feed their families. Sometimes religious freedom is about tarps, toothbrushes, and toilets. Sometimes it is about seeds. We cannot lead the world if we fail to respond to the human dignity of others with humanitarian assistance when we have the abundance to meet their cries for help.