

Opening Statement of Carl A. Anderson
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing
Tuesday, April 19, 2016

Chairman McGovern and Chairman Pitts, thank you for your invitation to participate in this important discussion, and for your work on the Lantos Human Rights Commission.

Last month, the House of Representatives in a unanimous vote declared that the persecution faced by Christians, and other religious minorities in the Middle East, constituted genocide. The State Department followed suit.

The House, Secretary Kerry and those who assisted him, the U. S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and the many others who urged this decision, have our gratitude.

Extensive evidence of this ongoing genocide is contained in the nearly 300-page report produced by the Knights of Columbus and submitted to the State Department on March 9.

Now the United States must act to stop this genocide, to prevent its recurrence, to assure the future of Christians and other genocide victims whether they wish to leave or to remain. Their future affects not only the fates of Christianity and other minority religions in Iraq and Syria. It also implicates the national security of the United States.

We recommend U.S. policymakers focus on five key areas:

First, as lands are liberated, we need proper planning for those evicted by ISIS and those who will flee the military actions needed for liberation.

Some towns in Iraq (and Syria) have been liberated by military action, and Mosul itself soon may be. Planning must include the likelihood of hundreds of thousands fleeing this action. We must also ensure that the liberating military forces be integrated and not seen as one oppressive force replacing another.

The claims of genocide survivors, many Christian, who lost everything when forcibly evicted from their homes must be supported. If they wish to return, we must help them. And for those who too traumatized to return, we must ensure that they can rebuild their lives in new homes in the KRG and elsewhere, that aid sent there actually reaches them, and that they be allowed to get jobs and schooling and the rights of other citizens.

Second, genocide survivors who wish to come to the United States must not be put at the back of the line. Of the 1,366 Syrian refugees admitted to this country in FY 2016, fewer than three percent came from the groups targeted for genocide.¹ It is wrong when those who faced genocide are excluded – often on the basis of bureaucratic oversight.²

Third, it is in the fundamental national interests of the United States that Christians and other minorities who wish to remain in Iraq and Syria are able to do so. If they disappear, pluralism and stability leave with them, notwithstanding their two millennia of social, intellectual and economic contributions to these societies. Iraq and Syria will at best become unstable majoritarian tyrannies, and at worst extremist-dominated training grounds for violent Islamist extremism and terrorism.

America can rebuild homes and churches, train and equip national militaries, and help rebuild the local economy. But if gross inequality, social disdain and angry religious intolerance remain the reality, minorities will either perish or flee and America's actions will have been in vain.

The United States cannot help defeat ISIS, without defeating its genocidal antecedents – the malignant idea that discrimination and second-class status are the lot of religious minorities, and that those who offend Islam, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, must be eliminated, along with the concept of blasphemy as a punishable offense. This idea ensures the suppression of pluralism and the dominance of extremist interpretations of Islam.

The antidote is full equality in law and practice for all citizens of Iraq and Syria. Where Christians and Yazidis cannot get jobs, or are classified by faith on government-issued ID cards in order to stigmatize them as minorities; where conversion from Islam is illegal; where minorities are forced to identify as Muslim even if they are not; where Christian property rights are more legal fiction than legal fact – the precursors for violent Islamist extremism and genocide are in place.

The United States must help the region's elites to recognize the value of religious pluralism for their own interests. This will help provide a model of tolerance and stability for the rest of the Middle East.

Fourth, in the region where the concept of law was born in the code of Hammurabi, America too has something important to offer both in the law and in its application. In influencing the Syrian peace negotiations, and the governments of Iraq and the KRG, we must share the legal concepts and practical meaning in people's lives of the religious freedom and equality under the law guaranteed in our First and Fourteenth Amendments. Similar rights are enshrined also in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the region would greatly benefit from embracing them.

In my decade on the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, I saw that in America, what began with constitutional guarantees, and took shape with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, became reality through decades of hard work and dedication. This is the model for a peaceful future in the Middle East.

If genocide survivors get meaningful guarantees of freedom of speech, of assembly, of the press, the free exercise of *their* religion and equal protection under the law, it would

mark a sea change. It would be the beginning of rebuilding hope and trust and a future of pluralism, respect, freedom and peace.

Finally, we must help create the interpersonal relationships that bind society together. Precedent for peacefully unifying divided societies includes the Northern Ireland peace process where the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, sought “to remove barriers of distrust, on the basis of promoting respect for the equal rights and validity of both traditions and identities...”

South Africa, after Apartheid, created the Commission of Truth and Reconciliation, which held hearings, and investigated abuses by both government and liberation forces. I am told often by Christians in the Middle East that they forgive their persecutors. That spirit could form the basis for a commission of *reconciliation and mercy* in these countries.

The criminal perpetrators of genocide must be punished. But for many caught up in the maelstrom of violence the Irish and South African models provide a way forward that can heal individual communities.

We must be clear-eyed about the current historical moment.

Never in history has the world’s attention been so focused on the suffering of these minorities. Never has their plight been so high on the agenda of the world’s governments, and vast majority of the world’s Muslims, and all people of good will. U.S. leadership can make hope a reality. Peace, equality and stability, rather than religious terrorism and genocide, can be the legacy of these countries and of our involvement there. Our leadership can help these societies, the Middle East, and the security of the American people.

Thank you very much.

¹ <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/patrick-goodenough/rep-collins-speeding-syrian-refugee-applications-threat-our-national>

² <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA16/20151209/104273/HHRG-114-FA16-Wstate-AndersonC-20151209.pdf>