



## Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

### **Confronting the Genocide of Religious Minorities: A Way Forward**

Tuesday, April 19, 2016  
2:00 – 4:00 PM  
1334 Longworth House Office Building

#### **Remarks**

Good afternoon.

I am pleased to share the dais with my distinguished colleague and Co-Chairman of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, Rep. Joe Pitts, for this important and timely hearing on *Confronting the Genocide of Religious Minorities: A Way Forward*.

I join Congressman Pitts in welcoming our witnesses today and thank them for their presence. Ambassador Saperstein, it is always nice to see you here on the Hill. And it is a particular pleasure to welcome back to this chamber my colleague and former Co-Chair of the Commission, Rep. Frank Wolf, who since his retirement has continued to dedicate himself to the cause of religious freedom. I know that the topic we are addressing today is very close to his heart.

Like everyone in this room, I have been horrified by the reports and the images of atrocities committed by the so-called “Islamic State.” “Barbaric” doesn’t even begin to describe its practices of torture, mass executions, sexual enslavement of women and girls and forced recruitment of children, as well as the destruction of cultural heritage – assaults carried out systematically against religious and ethnic minority communities that have lived in the region for hundreds of years, including Yezidis, Assyrian Christians, and Shi’a Muslims. Armenian Christians, descendants of ethnic Armenians who fled to Syria to escape the Armenian genocide, have also come under attack. I was among the 391 members of Congress who voted in March to condemn the Islamic State’s actions as genocide. I also supported the Administration’s determination a few days later that the Islamic State is genocidal in its ideology, and is committing crimes against humanity as well as ethnic cleansing. So I welcome our attention today to the crimes of the Islamic State.

But at the same time I am deeply concerned that as a legislative body, and as a society, we have found it difficult to come up with an adequate response not only to the actions of the Islamic State, but to the region-wide humanitarian and human rights crisis that has been unfolding for some time now.

Unfortunately, the Islamic State is not the only bad actor in Syria and Iraq. In Syria, their atrocities were preceded by the atrocities of the Assad regime in Syria: the use of chemical weapons, the dropping of barrel bombs, the purposeful destruction of medical facilities and the killing of doctors, nurses and first responders; and the laying of siege to cities and towns, inflicting

starvation on the civilian inhabitants. In Iraq, there have been many consistent, credible reports of violations of international humanitarian and human rights law by Iraqi Security Forces and associated armed groups.

And as we know, the way these wars have been fought has resulted in the largest humanitarian crisis the world has seen since the era of the Second World War. As of March, 13.5 million people inside Syria, more than half the population, were in need of humanitarian assistance. More than 6.5 million are displaced inside the country, and an additional 4.8 million Syrians have registered as refugees abroad. In Iraq, some 11 million people need humanitarian and protection assistance, of whom more than 3.3 million people are internally displaced. There are also some 250,000 Syrian refugees in Iraq. The numbers are staggering and simply overwhelming.

Let me be clear: our inadequate response is not because we didn't know what was happening. Since 2011, this Commission has hosted any number of briefings and hearings, and issued many public statements, on the situation in Iraq and Syria, and we have certainly not been alone in the effort to educate in Congress and more widely. And prior to 2011, particularly in Iraq, the Commission held hearings and briefings on the relentless sectarian persecution by the Iraqi State of religious and ethnic minorities, with many of their communities already in extremely precarious and vulnerable situations before the Islamic State ever arrived in Iraq.

But we seem not to have the right tools, or we have been unable to reach consensus on the policies we need, or we lack the

political will to provide sufficient resources, to make a bigger difference.

In 2005, in the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, and the Balkan wars, the countries of the world adopted the UN doctrine on the Responsibility to Protect -- a reminder that States are responsible for keeping their populations safe from genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing; and that the international community has a responsibility to assist States in fulfilling their obligations. If a State fails to protect its population from these atrocities, the international community must be prepared to take collective action. Yet a decade later, the international community has failed to act to prevent war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide in Iraq and Syria.

To make matters worse, UN appeals for humanitarian assistance for the two countries have remained significantly underfunded. As of April 12, 2016, the 2016 Syria appeals are only 8% funded, and the 2016 Iraq appeal is 20% funded. The U.S. has been much more generous than most donor nations: since FY2012, we have allocated more than \$5.1 billion to meet humanitarian needs in Syria, and since FY2014, another \$778 million for humanitarian assistance for Iraq. But it's not enough.

So I very much welcome the focus today on the way forward: what should we be doing? I would like to put some ideas on the table.

On the humanitarian front, I am on record as supporting substantial increases in U.S. refugee resettlement funding, the humanitarian refugee accounts, international disaster assistance, and

in emergency food and other assistance, to ensure that the crises in Syria and the larger region are well-funded, first, to meet the ever-growing need, and second, so that our contributions to the region do not come at the cost of the neglect of other humanitarian crises in the world.

I am also on record in support of humanitarian and resettlement assistance specifically targeted at Armenian and other Christian populations. USAID should put in place policies and programs to close gaps in the distribution of need-based aid to at-risk minority populations in Syria, including Armenians and other Christians.

I would welcome much greater attention to accountability for the war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide that have been committed by belligerent forces in Syria and Iraq, including but not limited to the Islamic State. Documentation initiatives like that of the Commission for International Justice and Accountability, an independent investigative entity, merit our political and financial support. I welcome the calls for investigations and prosecutions at the international level; we should support these in any way possible. Perhaps it's time to revisit U.S. ratification of the Rome Statute.

In closing, I want to emphasize that the Islamic State and its crimes cannot be addressed in isolation. We should not be in the business of privileging some victims over others, nor can we afford to ignore or condone atrocities committed by purported allies. To do so would be bankrupt morally, as well as a huge strategic mistake.

I want to leave you with two questions.

- Where are the women in this conversation? From what I've seen, most on the ground efforts to overcome the consequences of grave human rights violations by caring for the victims, fostering tolerance and rebuilding communities are led by women. We need their experience and wisdom as we try to imagine recovery after genocide.
- Can we as the U.S. Congress play a role in convening victims from different sides to hear their recommendations for the way forward? I would especially like to hear the views of Muslim communities on how to go forward in the aftermath the kinds of violence we are discussing today.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back the remainder of my time.