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EP resolution on mass graves in Iraq

EP (16.12.2016) - In a resolution adopted this Thursday 15 December, MEPs expressed overwhelming dismay over the ongoing discoveries of new mass graves in Iraq and Syria. They condemn "without reservation" the continuing atrocities and crimes against

humanity committed by ISIS/Daesh and express their condolences to all those in Iraq who have suffered as a result.

The Iraqi authorities should "take urgent steps" to protect the gravesites around the newly recaptured Mount Sinjar area, where thousands of victims are reportedly buried, in order to ensure accountability. Protecting these gravesites is essential to achieving justice for the Yazidi victims of mass killings by ISIS/Daesh, which amount to genocide, stress MEPs.

Parliament reiterates its "full support to the Iraqi army, the armies of the global anti-ISIS/Daesh coalition, the Peshmerga forces of the KRG and their allies in their efforts to liberate Mosul and other parts of the country from ISIS/Daesh presence".

'No Christmas Bells in Mosul,' says Assyrian priest



Father Emanuel Youkhana leader of the Assyrian Christians and head of CAPNI (Christian Aid Program Northern Iraq), speaking at a Dec. 12, 2016 press conference at the United Nations in Geneva about a report of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), a member of the ACT Alliance on the plight of ethnic and religious minorities in Syria and Iraq. (Pic: Peter Kenny)

By Peter Kenny

AINA (14.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2hIXuj9> - For a third Christmas in a row, the church bells will not ring in Mosul, Father Emanuel Youkhana laments.

He recounts that around June 2014 the numerical religious minorities such as Yazidis and Christian around Iraq's second biggest city began to face a horrific onslaught by the group calling itself IS (Islamic State), or Daesh in Arabic.

Mosul was once one of the major centers of Christianity in Iraq and it had once again become a place of genocide against them, he said.

"Since October this is now the second month of liberation," said Emanuel, but he said much apprehension still remains for what will happen after IS is defeated militarily.

"As pleased as we are that our homelands from which thousands of Christians were forced to flee from the extremists, are being retaken, we are very concerned about what lies ahead," Father Emanuel said at the United Nations in Geneva on 12 December.

Archimandrite Emanuel Youkhana, leader of the Assyrian Christians and head of CAPNI (Christian Aid Programme Northern Iraq), spoke at a 12 December press conference and later at a seminar about a report of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), a member of the ACT Alliance.

Protection of minorities' report

The report, which was first released in Oslo on 28 November, is titled, "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq". It was funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"We were quite sure that we would one day be enabled to go home to our towns and villages. We live in this hope," Emanuel said.

Many of Iraq's religious minorities live in the north, including Christians and Yezidis.

The Assyrian Christians who constitute the most populous Christian group in Iraq speak their own languages and do not necessarily identify as Arab, the report explains.

Consequently, they regard themselves, and are regarded by others, as a distinct ethnic group.

The Yezidis are predominantly Kurdish speaking, with homelands in Iraq and the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Since 2003, much of the Yezidi homeland of Sinjar has been under the control of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), although it officially remains under the jurisdiction of the central government of Iraq.

While many Yezidis are willing to identify as Kurds, they see themselves as a distinct ethnic group but they have faced turmoil under IS and even before that as they have been "totally unjustifiably accused of being devil worshippers".

Emanuel reiterated that Christian leaders in Iraq estimate that, as of November 2016, there are fewer than 250,000 Christians remaining in the country.

According to estimates in the WCC-NCA report around 70 percent of the Christians in Iraq have left the country since 2003 and most of those who remain are internally displaced.

Emanuel showed photos he had taken of damage in Christian areas and he said that regretfully sectarian messages had been painted on some of the walls by members or the Iraqi national arm fighting Iraq.

He even noted there were German messages sprayed on the walls, "put there by German Jihadis".

"As much as we are pleased that the military operation have started we hope there will not be attempts by the victors to change the demographics of the area," said Father Emanuel.

"We may not be able to restore the Christian demography [as it was before] but we can restore the Christian values and add value to this place," said the Assyrian church leader.

He noted that there were a number of main religious and ethnic minorities around Mosul -- the Iraqi indigenous community; the Jewish community; the Mandeans or followers of John the Baptist, the Yazidis and the Christians.

In Iraq before Arabization

"They all lived in Iraq before Arabization."

None of these peoples had been introduced in the Iraqi school curriculum.

"We were even neglected before Daesh came to uproot us physically. I don't want this to be repeated."

He said that over 100 years, three generations of his family had faced genocide attempts -- first under the Ottomans, then after the formation of the Iraqi State in 1933 and now the latest attempt by IS.

Peter Prove, the director of the WCC's Commission of the Churches on International Affairs said that Iraq faces a "litmus test" after the fighting for Mosul ends. "Society diversity is the best bulwark against sectarianism."

Iraqi ambassador criticises country's conversion law

World Watch Monitor (02.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2hoa6eB> - A "detrimental" law passed in the Iraqi parliament that forces children of parents who convert to Islam to automatically become Muslim will probably not be implemented, an Iraqi ambassador says.

Lukman Faily, who served as the Iraqi ambassador in Washington between 2013 and 2016, told an audience at the London School of Economics on Wednesday evening (30 Nov.) that the legislation had been introduced "without due consideration" for its impact on Iraq's beleaguered minorities and to "score political points, trying to be more royal than the king".

Christians, Yazidis, Mandeans, Kakai and Bahai MPs walked out of the Iraqi Parliament session in protest when the law was passed on 27 October 2015. The marginalisation of non-Muslims has continued as power transferred from Sunni to Shia hands after the 2003 US-led invasion, and those who have not emigrated have been subjected to attacks and intimidation by jihadist groups such as Islamic State.

Faily said he had voiced concerns about the law with Muslim clerics and politicians. "Even those in the Government, and those religious men who are engaged in the government, said it's insensitive, detrimental and out of date. So I don't think it will be implemented," he said.

In his lecture, Faily warned that Iraqis need to accept that minorities such as Christians and Kurds are part of Iraq, along with tribes, city-dwellers, those who live in rural areas, and returnees who lived overseas during the punishing sanctions era of the 1990s. Only then could the country's badly damaged social fabric be repaired, he said.

He presented a report, 'Social harmony: an Iraqi perspective,' in which he argued that the country's ethno-sectarian violence was caused by a lack of cohesion between the three pillars on which Iraqi society was built, namely the state, religion and culture, and that respect and tolerance were needed as well as cultural, religious and political pluralism.

Christian refugees facing attacks in European refugee camps

Bosnewslife (28.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2gEoAEM> - Christians fleeing war and persecution face violence and death threats because of their faith in several refugee camps across Europe, BosNewsLife established.

In Germany, religiously motivated attacks against Christian migrants and other minorities have been at a refugee center in the central German town of Rotenburg an der Fulda.

"We, the Iranian refugees based in the city of Rotenburg, have fled from the Islamic Republic of Iran because we have been accused of being Christians and, therefore, have repeatedly been threatened by torture, imprisonment and the death penalty," Christian refugees said in a published letter.

"Here, where we have been accommodated presently, we are exposed to the same kinds of threats as before, this time at the hand of Afghan Muslims, and we fear for our lives," they wrote.

"The Afghan refugees...call us Iranian Christians 'apostates' and 'infidels' because of our decision to leave Islam and consider the shedding of our blood as legitimate (or even necessary)."

Kurdish church leader

Separately, a Kurdish church leader smuggled to Britain said he received death threats – for having left Islam for Christianity – while living in makeshift camps in northern France.

The church leader, who did not wish to be identified, spent nine months living in camps outside the French cities of Calais and Dunkirk. He told World Watch Monitor, the news agency of Christian advocacy group Open Doors, that Kurdish Muslims in both camps antagonised him.

"In Calais, the smugglers [saw] my cross [round my neck], and said: 'You are Kurdish and you are a Christian? Shame on you,'" he recalled. "I said, 'Why? I'm in Europe, I'm free, I'm in a free country.' They said, 'No, you are not free, you are in the Jungle. The Jungle has Kurdish rule here – leave this camp.' The smugglers were from inside the camp, and were Kurdish. They said to me, 'We will tell the Algerians and Moroccans to kill you.'"

The church leader, who taught art in his home in Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as helping to lead a church there, said he received further threats in the camp outside Dunkirk. "They [set] fire [to] my tent," he added. The Christian moved from what was known as the "Jungle" camp in Calais to the Grande-Synthe camp near Dunkirk after one of the people-smugglers allegedly told him, "You're a Kurdish pastor? I've heard about you."

Convert to Christianity

As a convert to Christianity from a devout Muslim family, he left Kurdistan in Iraq after receiving death threats, the Christian explained. He said he was detained and beaten by police for preaching in the streets, and twice received letters warning him that he would be killed if he did not return to Islam.

"In the mosque the imams talked about me, and my father, and my little brother, who

became a Christian too... The imam talked about us – ‘they are kafir [unbelievers], they have to die,’ from the stage, into the mosque microphone. My father [a Muslim] was filled with shame,” he said. “They were taught bad things about us in the mosque: ‘The Christians are kafir.’ Of course, they [also] say you are slaves to Israel, to the American people.”

Within his family, five of his close relatives also became Christians, he said. This apparently strained relationships, including with his father and two brothers, who are imams. He said one of his brothers supports the Islamic State group, which, he said, has “definitely, definitely” created sleeper cells in Kurdistan.

He said his elderly father also tried to kill him, entering his bedroom one night with a knife. He left home the evening that four men, whom he described as having long beards and belonging to Islamic State, came to his family home and asked where he was. He heard his mother lie for him, saying he was not at home, and escaped through the back door without the opportunity to say goodbye to her.

He said he had flown from Kurdistan to Turkey and paid around \$10,000 to cross the Mediterranean in the bottom of a boat packed with 56 others, including women and children. The Christian recalled that he had experienced kindness, as he and a friend made their way through Europe from Greece, through Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia. They reportedly travelled by bus and train and walked other stretches of the journey.

Under the shadow of IS: Iraqi Christians tell of crucifixions, torture, sex slavery

World Watch Monitor (21.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2fkeMxm> - Islamic State (IS) jihadists hung Karlus, a 29-year-old cook, from the ceiling of the jail he was held in, by a rope attached to his left foot. As blood poured from his foot, they beat and kicked him, rubbing salt into his wounds. He was sexually abused in prison by three women wearing niqabs. He was told he would be shot dead; but for reasons he still does not understand, on the day his execution was due to take place, 26 September 2014, he was released.

When IS seized control of Iraqi territory in the summer of 2014, they gave Christians, as “People of the Book”, four options: leave, convert to Islam, pay a protection tax (jizya) or be killed. The vast majority fled – an estimated 120,000 in a few short weeks that summer. But those left behind were subjected to torture, forced conversion, sexual slavery and even crucifixion, according to testimonies collected from Iraqi refugees in Jordan by the religious freedom charity ADF International.

Karlus told its researchers he had been unable to flee his home in Batnaya, a village outside Mosul, because he was looking after his disabled father. When the terrorists came to his house, they destroyed a cross and a picture of Jesus.

“They even destroyed a piece from the Quran that was given to me by a friend,” he said.

Karlus was taken to a police station unconscious after retaliating when one of the jihadists hit him in the face. There began his seven-week ordeal at the hands of IS, after which he fled to Kurdistan, was treated in Spain for the injuries to his leg, and sought asylum in Jordan. Unknown to Karlus, his father had meantime managed to travel to Baghdad, but died there in August 2015.

Esam, a father-of-three from outside the town of Qaraqosh, said two of his wife’s relatives had not managed to flee Qaraqosh before IS arrived. They were abducted; the husband has not been heard of since and the wife “now lives with one of the Daesh [IS]

amirs". While reports have focused on Yazidi women being taken into sex slavery, Esam's account suggests that Christian women and girls may have been targeted as well.

"We heard of 12 Christian girls who are with Daesh. They may be more. Our bishop told people not to tell if they lose their girls: it is a shame on the family," he said.

Karlus and Esam are among the thousands of Iraqi Christians who have sought refuge in neighbouring Jordan. While Iraqi and Kurdish forces and militias, with US and UK air support, are embroiled in the push to liberate Mosul from IS, many Christians from the city and its surrounding villages are too traumatised by their experiences to countenance returning. Some say they feel betrayed by neighbours who supported IS, and are no longer sure whom they can trust. Instead, many have applied for asylum in Western countries such as Sweden, Canada and Australia.

One family recovering in Sweden is that of Esam's brother-in-law.

"My wife's brother was crucified by Daesh," Esam said. "He was crucified and tortured in front of his wife and children, who were forced to watch. They told him that if he loved Jesus that much, he would die like Jesus."

Esam said the fighters tortured his relative from 6pm until 11pm; they cut his stomach open and shot him before leaving him hanging, crucified.

My wife's brother was crucified by Daesh. He was crucified and tortured in front of his wife and children, who were forced to watch. They told him that if he loved Jesus that much, he would die like Jesus.

"A Swedish organisation helped his wife and the children; they are now in Sweden." He added: "His wife has cancer."

In the ongoing instability in Iraq, Christians are not necessarily safe even if they escape areas held by IS. Baghdad has been home to the country's largest Christian community for decades, but numbers have plummeted as sectarian militia violence sporadically ripped the capital apart and targeted non-Muslims in the wake of the 2003 US-led invasion. Twice in 2014, Alaa, a father-of-two living in the city, received death threats. The first was by phone; the second time, "someone wrote on our door, 'Your day is coming to die, you infidels'". Alaa knew these were no empty threats.

"My wife's cousin was killed in 2010, in an explosion at a church. Another family member was abducted in 2009," he said. The family left Iraq in November 2014 and flew to Jordan to register as refugees.

Amid the ongoing violence and political instability in Iraq, Alaa sees little future for his family. "It is impossible to go back to Baghdad," he said. "It is not possible to go back to Iraq. I can't build a life there. I hope to go to Australia, but any country that will accept me, I will go there. I want to build a life and a future for my children."

Some of the damage done by IS has already begun to be reversed. Esam said friends of his who escaped Mosul after being forcibly converted to Islam had been "baptised back to Christianity". Other aspects will take far longer. Iraqi Christians who end up returning to Iraq know they return to a country whose sectarian fault-lines have been activated to lethal levels. Aid workers have warned that extensive reconciliation work will be vital if Iraq's many different faith and ethnic communities are to cohere again, especially as levels of trauma among all sectors of the population are thought to be extremely high. In Jordan, Karlus reflects on his ordeal at the hands of IS members in Mosul.

He concludes: "What happened is not easy, but in the end we must forgive. This is my destiny; maybe God is planning something for me."

On the Nineveh Plain, German ISIS fighters left their mark

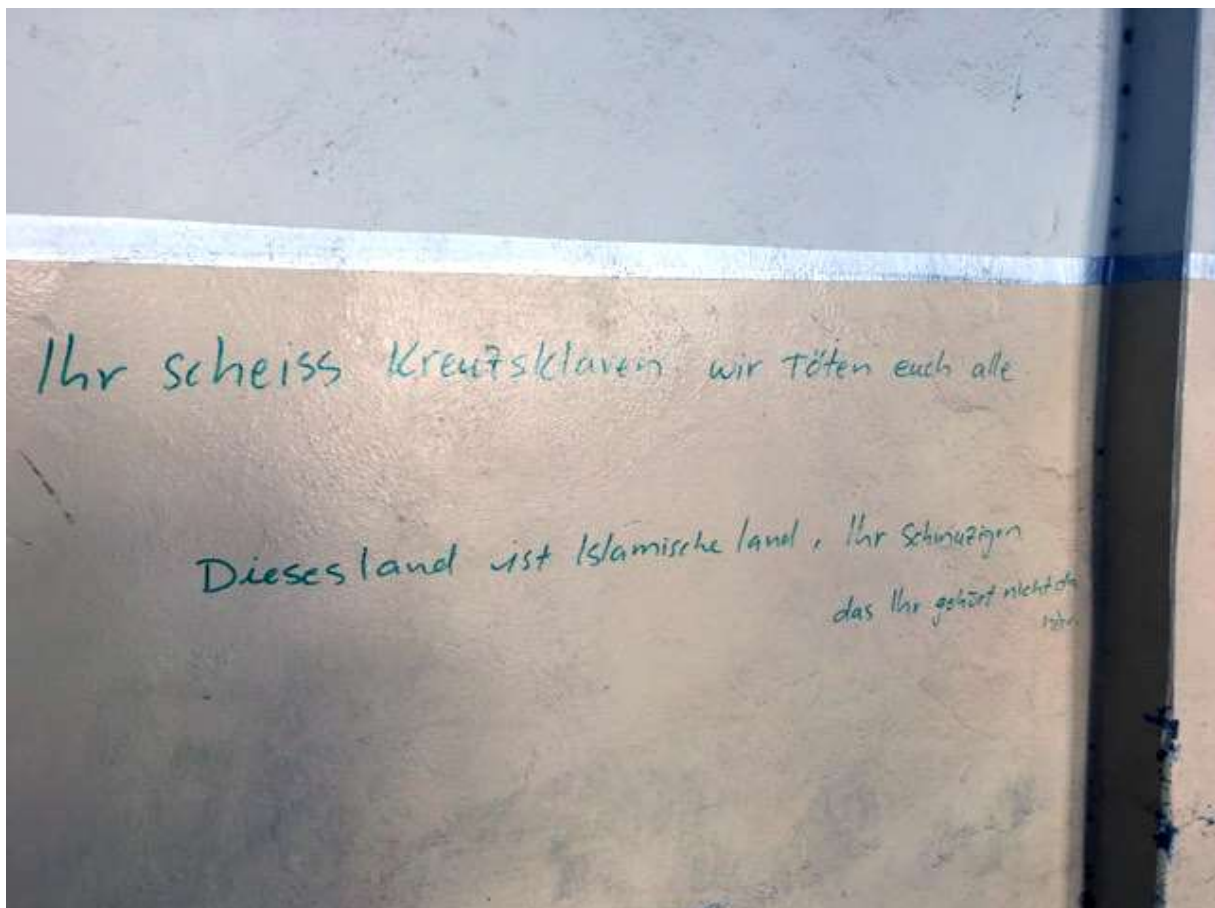
"This country is Islamic country, you dirty ones, and you don't belong here."

By Maria Lozano

Aid to the Church in Need (17.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2gDpRKH> - In an eerie reminder of the role ISIS has had in recruiting foreign fighters, provocative graffiti in German was found on the wall of a chapel during an inspection of the small town of Batnaya, on the Nineveh Plain. The small town, just 10 miles from Mosul, was recently recaptured from ISIS. It had been home for 850 Christian families.

The graffiti denounces Christians as "slaves of the Cross" and threatens them with death; "this country is Islamic country, you dirty ones, and you don't belong here." Further graffiti on the walls of the chapel of St. Addai reads: "Either you leave, or we will kill you."

Stephen Rasche, an advisor to the Chaldean Archdiocese of Erbil who took photos of the graffiti and also documented the great degree of destruction in Batnaya, told international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need: "The most important thing is to show the great degree of destruction so people can understand what has happened and just how dangerous it still is to return.



"Furthermore, by showing the destruction and desecration of our holy places, I would like to communicate to the world just how much dread and fear our own people are feeling right now when they have to decide whether they would later like to return."

Destruction was also evident in the neighbouring town of Karamles, which lies about 18 miles southeast of Mosul. Apart from desecrated and destroyed churches, along with broken and mutilated statues saints, Rasche made a particularly shocking find when he came upon the desecrated grave of a priest.

He reported: "the grave of one of our priests was dug up and the corpse removed. We found his vestments and the lid of the coffin, but there was no trace of the corpse." ACN learned that the deceased was Father Salem Ganni, a priest who passed away in 2009, a relative of the 34-year-old priest Father Ragheed Ganni, who was shot dead in Mosul in 2007.

The Cross, deemed illegal by IS, returns to the Nineveh Plain

World Watch Monitor (01.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2gcSLVA> - There were tears, soldiers praying, priests singing. This was the moment thousands of Iraqi Christians had been waiting for: the Cross, symbol of Christ's victory over evil, deemed illegal by IS, had returned to the Christian villages in Iraq's Nineveh Plain.

This came as news continues to emerge of more villages reclaimed from the Islamic State (IS), and more signs of destruction become apparent.

As soon as it was remotely safe, the priests got into a car and were escorted back to their villages. In Christian villages like Karamles and Qaraqosh – half an hour's drive east of Mosul – they were among the first non-combatants to return now the villages have been liberated from IS occupation.

Father Thabet, who lives with his congregation in a complex for internally displaced people in Erbil, brought a Cross, the size of a man, covered with flowers, with him when he returned to his home village of Karamles.

This is the Body of Christ; this is Christian land!

"I am so happy I can do this. I'm smiling from cheek to cheek and I weep tears of joy at the same time. This is the trip I have been praying for, for two years now," he said.

He climbed Barbara Hill, next to his village, and planted the Cross firmly in the ground overlooking Karamles.

"My dream is to bring all the Christians back to this village. Then we will worship outside on Barbara Hill; we will have the Eucharist in the open air. Everybody will see that this is the Church; this is the Body of Christ; this is Christian land. That is my dream – to give a testimony to the world," he said.

When he arrived in Karamles, Fr. Thabet found his church had been heavily damaged by IS but was still standing. The Cross has been taken off and thrown to the ground. The inside of the church was a mess, but it's not beyond repair. Fears that the Christian village would be completely uninhabitable have proven to be unfounded.

'What counts is that we can pray here again'

The same goes for the village of Qaraqosh, visited by Father Ammar. He reinstated the Cross on his church, helped by Christian soldiers guarding the village after it had been liberated.

"I praise God for this wonderful day," he said. "Yes, they destroyed and burned some houses and churches, but we can rebuild them. What counts is that we have prayed here and have put up the Cross.

"After being away for exactly 811 days, after being attacked by the forces of darkness and evil, we have come back to worship in freedom."

While in Qaraqosh, Father Ammar was able to locate 40 ancient documents from his church's history, untouched by IS.

"I brought those back to our people in Erbil. For us those documents are our link with our history and are therefore very important," he said.

Still fighting at night

IS conquered the Nineveh Plain – including Iraq's second city of Mosul and many Christian villages surrounding it – in 2014. Tens of thousands of Christian families had to run for their lives. The battle for Mosul is still being fought, but large Christian settlements surrounding Mosul, like Karamles and Qaraqosh, are already liberated. At night, however, IS fighters are still attempting to reclaim territories.

One Christian photographer who just returned from Qaraqosh estimated that 30 per cent of the houses have been severely damaged or destroyed. The rest need a "thorough cleaning", he said.

It is expected it will take some time before families can start returning to their villages close to Mosul. Most of them will wait for Mosul itself to be liberated and for IS to be driven out completely before they start planning their return.

Assyrians in Iraq to unify their militias

AINA (01.11.2016) - Assyrian leaders in north Iraq held a second meeting on October 29 to discuss the situation of the Assyrians, who were driven from their homes and villages in the Nineveh Plains two years ago by ISIS. Nearly 200,000 Assyrians were displaced when ISISH pushed into Assyrian territory after it captured Mosul in June of 2014.

The meeting was attended by political and religious leaders, as well as six Assyrian political parties.

In joint statement issued after the meeting, the leaders called for unifying the three Assyrian militias operating in North Iraq and protecting the Nineveh Plains, which are north and east of Mosul, for Assyrians.

Here is the English translation of the statement and the original in Arabic.

The Chaldean Syriac Assyrian political organizations held a meeting on October 29, 2016 to continue discussions from their previous meeting that was held on October 21, 2016. The meeting was hosted by Bishop Mar Yokhana Putrus Moshe with the presence of representative of His Holiness Patriarch Mar Georgis Third Saliwa at the headquarters of the Syriac Catholic Diocese.

During the meeting, they discussed ways to unite the efforts of the military and security coordination in the Nineveh Plain areas in order to enable the people of the region to manage the security file. It was agreed that the military forces formations of our people are the fundamental forces to protect towns and villages in the Nineveh Plain. Seeking unity for the joint military efforts and coordination of security leaders by holding joint meetings between the stakeholders for this purpose.

The meeting parties also emphasized to keep Nineveh Plain areas out of any future political conflicts, especially since the region and its inhabitants suffered greatly as a result of these conflicts that have no legitimacy among the dominant political forces. Whereas the meeting parties also called for the formation of political delegations to be supported by clerics to travel and meet with the international community and to urgently convene a conference for the reconstruction of the Nineveh Plain areas.

Signatories:

- The Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council
- Assyrian Democratic Movement
- Bethnahrin Democratic Party
- Bethnahrin Patriotic Union
- Chaldean National Congress Syriac Assembly Movement
- Assyrian Patriotic Party

Videos: Iraqi forces liberate Christian village en route to Mosul

See damage to the Monastery of Qaraqosh: <http://bit.ly/2foazx6>

See the liberation of the Christian village Karamles: <http://f24.my/2eEccp9>

France 24 (25.10.2016) - FRANCE 24's reporters followed an Iraqi armored column into the Christian village of Karamles, 15 kilometres east of Mosul, shortly after it was cleared of Islamic State (IS) group militants.

Nine days into the start of their offensive, coalition forces have liberated a string of towns and villages around Mosul, [Iraq](#)'s second-largest city and the capital of the jihadist group's self-proclaimed "caliphate".

Iraqi elite troops and Kurdish peshmerga are leading a multi-pronged offensive on Mosul, opening [several fronts](#) to the south, east and north of the city, with air support from the US-led coalition.

But the [IS group](#) has mounted a stiff defence, hitting back with shelling, sniper fire, suicide car bombs and booby traps.

In Karamles, FRANCE 24's reporters found a network of tunnels dug underneath an ancient Christian shrine, which the jihadists had turned into a bunker.

Video: Iraqi troops liberate Christian town of Bartella

[See video here](#)

The Golden Brigade, the anti-terrorist division of the Iraqi army, has liberated the first Christian city of Bartella, located around Mosul. Just hours later, Christian militiamen returned to their village.

France 24 (23.10.2016) - <http://f24.my/2e3PQu0> - After two years in forced exile, the Christian militiamen of the brigade made it their first duty to replace a cross on the dome of their church, devastated by jihadists.

In 2014, Assyrian Christians fled Bartella, a town about 20 kilometres east of Mosul. Men from the town and surrounding Mosul region formed a militia known as the Forces of the Plain of Nineveh. Their few hundred fighters sometimes fight alongside the peshmerga.

"Our aim is to defend our land. We must never re-live what we have just been through with Daesh. Our people are scattered, our children are dead, we had to live in tents. Now I want to send a message to my people: Bartella is Liberated," one of the fighters said.

But Mosul is part of an ongoing offensive to drive the Islamic State group out of the region and it will have to be reconquered and secured before these men can consider bringing their families back.

Other videos from Bartella

[Iraqi troops liberate Christian town of Bartella](#)

[Iraqi army drives Islamic State from Christian region](#)

Mosul battle video

[Iraqi army retakes Christian town of Qaraqosh](#)

Religious minorities find protection, support in southern Iraq

Al-Monitor (18.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2ejSUCQ> - Minority populations are suffering in areas under the control of militants in northern and western Iraq, where their temples have been destroyed and they are forbidden to build new ones. Meanwhile, these groups are enjoying freedom and safety in the predominantly Shiite southern areas, where the Iraqi government sponsors and supervises construction and renovation projects and allocates large sums to protect the holy places of minority groups.

The Iraqi Cabinet's Office of Christian, Yazidi and Sabeen Endowments oversees several temple construction and renovation projects, including the construction of the administrative building of the Church of Saint Mari, the Apostle of the Assyrian Church of the East. This building has been allocated 250 million dinars (\$214,000), and 90% of the project has been completed, the office's head Raad Kajaji said Oct. 1.

One such project, a Sabeen "mandi," was completed Sept. 20 in the predominantly Shiite city of Diwaniyah, south of Baghdad.

Ayham Nasser, a Sabeen Iraqi from Diwaniyah, told Al-Monitor, "The community members chose the Tigris River as the project's location due to a link between their beliefs and the water." He said that the mandi will begin operating in early 2017, adding, "The local government in Diwaniyah, in collaboration with the Ministry of Construction, has greatly helped facilitate the construction of the mandi."

Nasser said, "Many Muslims living nearby are proud of this achievement, which they see as a symbol of religious tolerance at a time when religious extremism is widely spread across the region."

In the city of Hillah, located to the south of Baghdad, Christians celebrate Christmas every year in the Church of the Virgin Mary, the only church in the city, and they attend mass throughout the year.

Suhaila Abbas, a member of the Babil Provincial Council, told Al-Monitor, "The provincial council is determined to support minorities in the province and work on the renovation and expansion of places of worship." She stressed, "The Hillah church will be restored as soon as the financial crisis calms."

Christian Saeb Louay confirmed to Al-Monitor, "Christians in Hillah live in peace, have not faced any attacks and do not even need armed factions to protect them." Louay went on, "Religious and sectarian diversity in Babylon intermingles cultures and contributes to building a world free of hatred," and added, "The Church of the Virgin Mary, which was built in 1987 by the engineer Elias Boutros, needs reconstruction and renovation, and the local government has promised to do it."

In the city of Nasiriyah in southern Iraq, head of the Mandaean community Samer Naeem Handal told Al-Monitor, "Ever since the restoration in 2014 of the Sabean mandi in Nasiriyah, which is located on Habboubi Street and whose establishment was supervised by the Housing Ministry in 2011, ... there has been a clear harmony between the Muslim majority and the Sabean minority, which freely practices its rituals and even enjoys cooperation from Muslims in the city." The facilities, he said, are enormous and modern and include a conference hall.

He added, "There is a common understanding of the social mores and religious traditions. A good example is that Christian and Sabean women willingly wear a veil in Muslim communities, especially during religious occasions. Also, Muslim women attend Christian and Sabean religious ceremonies."

Basra Governor Majed Nasraoui promised on March 16, 2016, to members of the Sabean sect that their religious celebration in the coming year would be held in the land allocated to them for the establishment of a mandi, and that the local government would contribute to its construction.

Writer and civil activist Ali Abu Iraq told Al-Monitor over the phone that he was unsurprised by the interest in providing places of worship for minority groups. He said, "Flexibility and tolerance are among the most important characteristics of the Basra community. We see members of minority groups taking part in social and religious events, as Christians, Sabeans and other minorities peacefully coexist with the Basra community."

Harith al-Harthy, a parliamentarian for the Reform Front, told Al-Monitor, "The construction of places of worship for minorities is a right granted by the constitution, which guarantees in Article 2.2 the full religious rights of all individuals to freedom of religious belief and practice such as Christians, Yazidis and Sabean Mandaeans."

He went on, "According to Article 39, Iraqis are free to practice their religions, sects, beliefs or choices, and Article 41 says that the followers of all religions and sects are free in the practice of religious rites and management of their endowments and affairs."

This is the article on which the Office of Christian, Yazidi and Sabean Endowments has been established to sponsor the construction of places of worship.

In the province of Maysan, the Om al-Ahzan ("Mother of Sorrows") Church, founded in 1880, is considered one of the oldest churches in the southern region. It was renovated in the 1990s.

Jalal Daniel, the head of the Christian community in Maysan, confirmed to Al-Monitor, "They were promised that the church would be reconstructed and renovated by the local government as soon as the financial crisis experienced by the local and central government quiets."

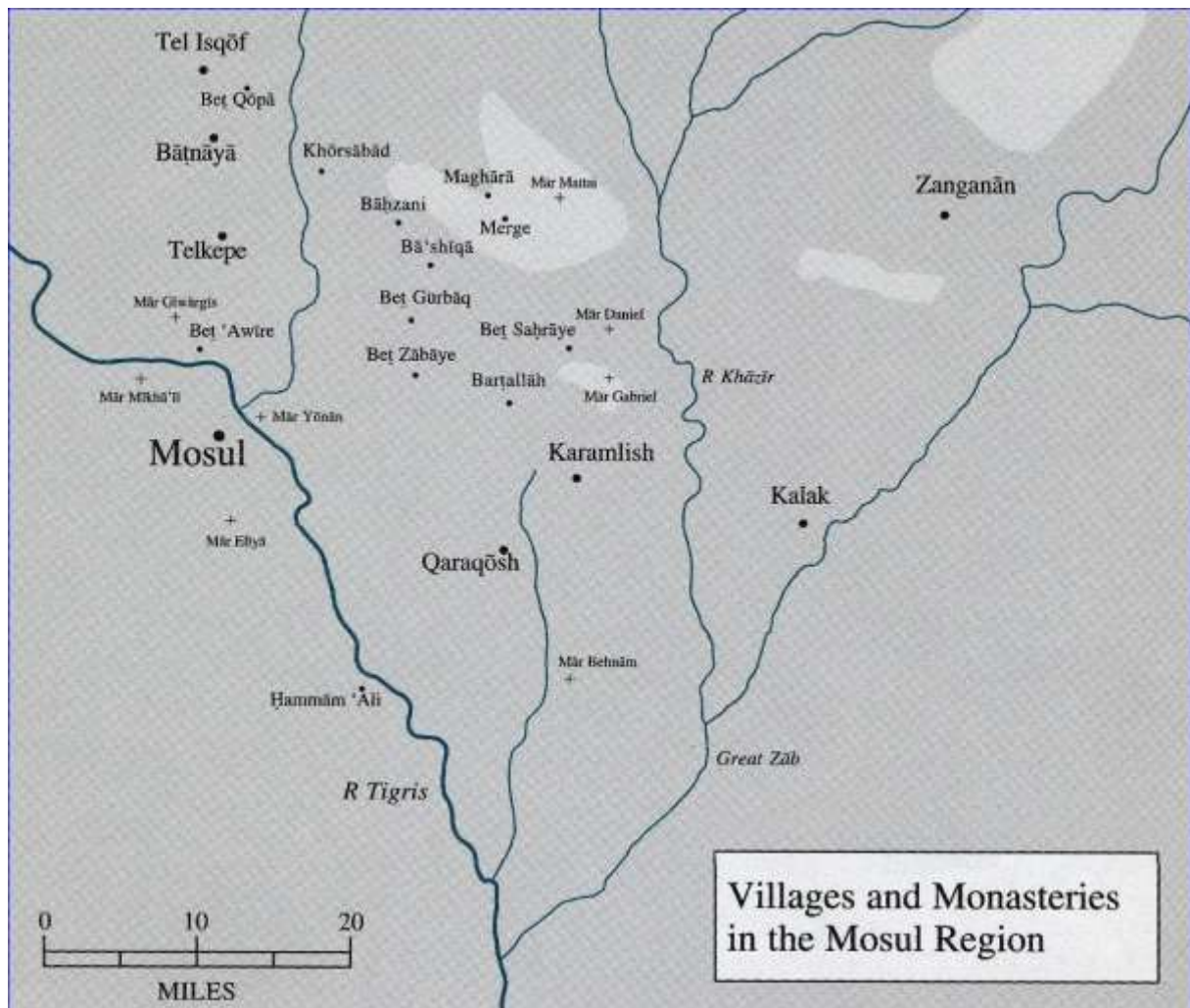
Amar Francis, a Christian resident of Wasit, told the press Dec. 25 in Kut, north of Baghdad, "The provincial council adopted a plan to allocate a plot of land for the building of a church after the necessary approval was obtained upon the initiative of the human rights organization."

Cleric Ali al-Tai told Al-Monitor that this tolerance "stems from the spread of moderate Islam in those areas, where takfiri thoughts subside." Mutual respect for religious beliefs as well as the reconstruction of old houses of worship and building of new ones have turned central and southern Iraq into exemplary areas in spreading the spirit of tolerance, cooperation and freedom across Iraq.

ISIS destroy Assyrian Church in Iraq

By Raman Yousef

Assyrian International News Agency (10.10.2016) –



Karemlis (center) is in the Nineveh Plains north and east of Mosul, the last stronghold of Assyrians in Iraq. Extremists of the Islamic State (ISIS) bombed an Assyrian Church in Iraq's northwestern Nineveh governorate on Sunday.

The radical group has bombed the Barbara Fouq Attal Church in the Assyrian town of Karemlis near Mosul city.

"Daesh [ISIS] jihadis detonated a number of explosive devices inside the church on Sunday afternoon," human rights activist Ghazi Shamoun told ARA News. "The church was destroyed completely."

The Assyrian town of Karemlis and other Christian areas have been evacuated completely subsequent to the ISIS invasion of Nineveh governorate in June, 2014. Thousands of Christian families fled their hometowns and took shelter in Iraqi Kurdistan Region.

[Related: Church Bombings in Iraq Since 2004](#)

[Related: Timeline of ISIS in Iraq](#)

[Related: Attacks on Assyrians in Syria By ISIS](#)

"The terrorist group has destroyed dozens of Assyrian churches and archeological sites in Nineveh in a bid to eliminate the historical identity of the area," Shamoun said.

History under attack

Zuheir Mousilly, a media activist based in Nineveh, told ARA News that since its control over the city of Mosul in 2014, ISIS has destroyed much of Iraqi historic sites and monuments, including the Assyrian city of Nimrud, the Winged Bulls, and the Mosul National Museum, after stealing the removable pieces for smuggling.

Last April, ISIS demolished the Gate of God [Eia] which dates back to the 7th century BC, the time of the Assyrian king Sennacherib.

The expert on the Iraqi Antiquities Affairs Yasser Hatami condemned the destruction of the historic gate, blaming Iraqi authorities for the incident for their inability to protect those archeological sites.

"ISIS views those sites as sacrilegious and a return to paganism," Syrian antiquities chief Abdul Maamoun Abdulkarim told ARA News in an earlier interview.

Last year, ISIS extremists bombed the renowned Yezidi ancient minaret of the Shingal district (120 km west of the city of Mosul), in northern Iraq.

In April 2015, the terror group blew up the church of Virgin Mary in the Assyrian village of Tel Nasri near the town of Tel Temir (50 km west of Hasakah) in northeastern Syria.

Also, the radical group blew up two monuments in the ancient city of Palmyra in central Syria in June, 2015, according to local sources.

Around 1000 archaeological sites in Syria and Iraq have been attacked by ISIS and other Islamist groups, according to reports.

Motion at the US Congress to support the "self-determination" of the Nineveh Plain

Agenzia Fides (16.09.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2czNYZu> - Twelve members of the US House of Representatives - 9 elected in the Republican Party, and 3 elected in the Democratic Party - presented a resolution to the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House to ask the US Congress and the international community to promote the recognition by the Iraqi government of a Province corresponding to the Plain of Nineveh and organized according to legal criteria in line with the "self-determination by indigenous peoples".

The resolution, presented by Republican Jeff Fortenberry on behalf of his colleagues, is dated September 9, 2016. It introduces and argues the request with a list of 16 considerations, many of which refer to the campaigns carried out in recent months to push the US government and other Western political institutions to apply the definition of "genocide" to the various forms of brutality and oppression carried out by militants of the Islamic Caliphate (Daesh) on Christians and other minority groups.

Among other things, reference is made to the statement of US Secretary of State John Kerry, who after an insistent parliamentary campaign, on March 17 2016 recognized the Islamic State as "responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control, including Yazidis, Christians and Shiite Muslims". In another passage, the Resolution recalls that "in 2003 in Iraq, there were a million and a half Christians, and today there are less than 350 thousand". In this reference to the drastic decrease in the number of Christians in Iraq, registered since 2003, nothing is mentioned to the US-led international military intervention designed to end the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

The resolution, the text of which was sent to Agenzia Fides, states that "the indigenous communities of the Iraqi region of Nineveh Plain - Assyrian Christians Syrians and Chaldeans, Yazidis and others - have the right to security and self-determination, in the context of the Republic of Iraq". In the concluding part, the resolution calls for "the United States and the international community to support the Government of Iraq in implementing the decision to create a Province of the Nineveh Plain, according to the disposition of the Iraqi government cabinet of January 21, 2014, and support the new provincial administration in the realization of its full potential, in line with the legal expressions of self-determination of the local people".

The resolution sponsored by US lawmakers represents a decided measure in the lively debate under way on the future of the Nineveh Plain. In recent months (see Fides 29/08/2016) a series of actions and utterances by leaders and activists of local political forces on the political and administrative future of which is still controlled by Daesh have also followed. In August, representatives of political parties guided by Christian activists, such as the national Parliamentary Imad Youkhana, requested that the area of Nineveh is to be recognized the autonomy also guaranteed by the Iraqi constitution, allowing local components to manage areas such as security.

Already in late July, the Sunni politician Atheel al Nujaifi, former governor of the Nineveh province and leader of the Al Hadba political Party, had declared that the Nineveh province, once freed from the jihadist Islamic State (Daesh) control, will be transformed into an autonomous region, divided into provinces - six to eight - with also a certain degree of administrative autonomy. These statements still raised once again the project of an "autonomous, predominantly Christian, province", to be set up in the Nineveh Plain to recognize the local Christian communities a role in the functioning of the administrative institutions and in the field of protection and security.

The "promises" - pointing in particular to Christians - on the future of the Nineveh Plain accommodation are becoming subject propaganda of political management of the

projects that appear competing with each other. Previously (see Fides 19/07/2016), Kurdish leader Masud Barzani, President of the Autonomous Region of Iraqi Kurdistan, during a meeting with Christian politicians held in Erbil, had foreshadowed the creation of a "Christian state" in the Nineveh Plain, and the subsequent call for a referendum to allow the inhabitants of such an autonomous administrative entity to choose their own political framework under the rule of an independent Iraqi Kurdistan, rather than under the federal government based in Baghdad.

ISIS genocide against 'People of the Book' — How long will Kerry continue to talk around it?

By Nina Shea, National Review (16.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1pvKo8T> - For five months, the State Department has indicated that Iraq's Yazidi community should be declared a target of ISIS genocide but meanwhile has been less sure about ISIS's intentions toward Middle East Christians. Tomorrow is Secretary John Kerry's congressional deadline for officially determining whether Christians, along with the Yazidis and possibly others, face genocide by ISIS. Insisting that department lawyers need a little more time to struggle with the evidence, Kerry promises his decision soon, if not this week.

This shouldn't be a hard case. Few groups have publicized their brutality toward Christians in real time and in technicolor as ISIS has. Christians, among others, have been declared genocide victims by Pope Francis, the EU Parliament, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and the U.S. House of Representatives, in a bipartisan, unanimous vote on March 14, in the heat of election season.

All along, the State Department has demonstrated that it is not just being abundantly cautious and slow in ruling that the atrocities against Christians is genocide but that it is simply unwilling to use that designation specifically for Christians. Rather than carefully reviewing the evidence, as it claims, it has ignored it.

For months, State officials claimed they lacked facts about the Christians and then did nothing about it. Rather than follow the precedent of Secretary Colin Powell, who collected evidence for determining genocide in Darfur, Kerry refrained from dispatching fact finders in the case of the Middle Eastern Christians. When some 30 Christian leaders wrote on December 4 to request an opportunity to brief Kerry, he failed to answer. With only a month remaining until its March deadline, State Department officials asked the Knights of Columbus, which had been running TV spots on the Christian genocide, to prepare a written report of the facts. Before it was even completed, those same officials, meeting with Iraqi Chaldean Catholic leaders, told them that a genocide determination for Iraqi Christians was not in the offing. State suggested that terms such as "persecution," "ethnic cleansing," or "crimes against humanity" — terms that carry less moral and legal weight — be used instead.

The Knights on March 9 presented their weighty, 300-page report, based in part on a fact-finding mission that used the Darfur fact-finders' questionnaire. The Knights list over a thousand instances of ISIS's deliberately massacring, killing, torturing, enslaving, kidnapping, or raping Christians. This catalogue of horrors, however, may still not be enough.

Genocide is a crime of intent, and State Department officials, overlooking such ISIS declarations as "We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women," have had trouble determining whether ISIS aims to destroy all or part of the Christian communities in its territory and is thereby committing genocide as defined in the United Nations' Genocide Convention. State's troubles may be explained in part by its reliance on a 30-page trip report of the Holocaust Museum's office of genocide

prevention. That report finds that ISIS, far from intending to destroy Iraqi and Syrian Christian communities, respects them as "People of the Book," and seeks to peacefully coexist with them.

The report takes at face value ISIS's claims of a *jizya* option, as does the State Department in its annual religious-freedom report for 2015. The museum report uncritically asserts that "ISIS specifically notes that its treatment of the Yazidis differs from its treatment of *ahl al kitab*, the 'people of the book,' Christians and Jews, who had the option of paying the *jizya* (tax) to avoid conversion or death."

The museum report repeats such ISIS claims and lets them stand unchallenged. Purporting to quote ISIS fighters on why they reject a Mosul Christian's attempt to stay and pay the *jizya* — "we wanted to meet with your priests and they said no" — the report neglects to give the Church's side of the story. It gives the impression that ISIS gave Iraq's Christians a reasonable deal but that Christian leaders refused it and therefore have themselves to blame.

That conclusion is reinforced in another passage in the museum report: "It is unknown whether Christians who were given the option to pay a *jizya* or leave, instead of convert or face death, would still be given this option should they return now." This speculation, of course, is preposterous. ISIS doesn't respect Christians. It beheads or enslaves them. The museum report is compromised by its failure ever to present the viewpoint of Christian leaders.

Nineveh, Iraq

In fact, Mosul clergy who had direct engagement with ISIS in July 2014 state that there was no serious option for Nineveh's Christians to pay *jizya* to avoid worse consequences. Archbishop Yohanna Mushi of the Syriac Catholic Church, the largest church in Nineveh, writes that the Christians of northern Iraq determined they "can never trust Daesh [ISIS] no matter how many good intentions they try to show." This is not Islamophobia: The Christian *jizya* issue aside, the State Department, of course, does not trust ISIS either.

Emanuel Adelkello, a Syrian Catholic priest who dealt directly with ISIS over the fate of the 1,000 Christians still in Mosul in late July 2014, wrote to me details about the "jizya option." He relates that ISIS demanded all remaining adult Christian men to gather at a Mosul community center, purportedly to hear ISIS's *jizya* announcement. After the Christian leaders consulted among themselves, they decided it would be unwise to go. Father Emanuel explained that they feared that either they were being rounded up for slaughter or that the Christian women and girls would be jeopardized should their people remain under ISIS's "protection." In the priest's words:

The collective belief was that this gathering was not an attempt to negotiate, it was only going to be a demand at best, and a trap at worst. The Christians mostly believed they would likely be killed if they showed up. At the appointed time, no Christians showed up. Angered, ISIS then gave them two choices, leave or be killed. . . . [Jizya] was only put forward initially as a ploy from which ISIS could keep the Christians there to further take advantage of them and abuse them. There was specific concern that the intention was to keep women there so that they could be taken freely by the ISIS fighters. The ISIS fighters had made public statements that according to the Koran it was their right to take the Christian women as they pleased.

Their concerns were soon to be validated. Within weeks, two dozen Christian women and girls who had remained in Nineveh were captured as ISIS sex slaves. They have yet to be freed. In August, thousands of Yazidis were also captured. On October 16, 2014, the Islamic State's treasury department released an official price list for the sale of Christian as well as Yazidi females. Girls one to seven years old were the priciest, at \$200.

This price list was found authentic by Zainab Bangura, the U.N.'s special representative for sexual violence in conflict.

Reports about the Christians who stayed behind in Nineveh after ISIS took control in the summer of 2014 also provide critical evidence. Iraqi Christian parliamentarian Yonadam Kanna reports that a dozen or so Christian families who remained in Mosul, largely because of disabilities or old age, were forced to convert to Islam. *World* magazine editor Mindy Belz, who interviewed Christian survivors in Nineveh, writes in her new book *They Say We Are Infidels* that, in the major Christian city of Qaraqosh, some 100 Christians who were initially left behind were held hostage in their homes. "One father described being tortured," she relates, "while his wife and two children were threatened after the family refused to deny their faith."

Another Nineveh family had their three-year-old daughter, Christina Noah, taken from them by ISIS militants. According to a cell-phone call from Rita, a 25-year-old Christian woman who also failed to escape, both she and Christina were detained in a holding pen with other women and girls and waiting to be sold at a Mosul slave market, as reported in the *New York Times*. Archbishop Moshi states that in all, over 20 Christians, aged mostly between 40 and 70, were captured and haven't been seen since, despite ransom offers from the Church.

One 80-year-old Nineveh Christian woman who stayed was reportedly burned alive last May. In another Christian family, the mother and twelve-year-old daughter were raped by ISIS militants, leading the father, who was forced to watch, to commit suicide. A Christian refugee told Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, now the archbishop emeritus of Washington, that she witnessed ISIS crucify her husband on the door of their home.

In September 2014, a family of twelve Assyrian Christians, trapped in their Nineveh hometown of Bartella after ISIS swept in a month earlier, escaped after being forcibly converted to Islam. A coreligionist who refused to renounce his faith was badly beaten, tied up, and taken off in a truck to, as they concluded, be killed.

The small numbers of Nineveh Christians remaining live as indigents or captives, or both.

Syria

Ambassador Alberto Fernandez, the former counterterrorism coordinator in the State Department under Kerry, has determined that ISIS's jizya option is a "Salafi Caliphate publicity stunt." It aims to make its leader appear more caliph-like. Fernandez wrote about the jizya option in Raqqa:

After burning Christian books, destroying churches, and kidnapping priests in Raqqa in 2013, ISIS then publicized, in February 2014, a new dhimmi pact [to pay a jizya tax] with Christians in Raqqa State. The announcement received considerable attention in international media, but there is little evidence that there was much of a Christian community to form the pact with. Although the agreement includes the standard language of "not building a church, monastery or monk's hermitage," there is no evidence that any existing churches actually remained open or in Christian hands, much less that anyone would want to build any. Indeed, there are no images whatsoever of what could be described as normal Christian life in ISIS-controlled territory — no functioning churches, no monasteries or working priests, and no Christian families or Christian schools — all of which had existed throughout Islamic history.

ISIS defectors report that the rape of Christian female "infidels" in Raqqa was common and approved by the ISIS sharia court. Some were twelve years old. The last young person to leave Raqqa reported that he had to pay "jizya" but lived in "constant fear" and had to conform to Muslim dress and customs, even to shout "Allahu akbar" along with

mobs, and had no possibility of going to church. No more than a dozen or two elderly Christians are left in Raqqa.

Over the past year, ISIS abducted some 500 Christians from the Syrian town of Qarayatain and from villages in the Khabur River valley. In both cases, Islamic State sharia courts ordered church patriarchs to pay the Islamic tax levied for non-Muslims, but it's impossible to see these as anything but hostage-for-ransom cases. From the Khabur group, three men dressed in orange jumpsuits were killed in an ISIS video, and the rest were eventually freed, after the Assyrian Church paid part of the \$23 million that ISIS demanded. Archbishop Jean Kawak of the Syriac Orthodox Church states that the Qarayatain Christians are being "treated like slaves" and continue to be held there against their will.

In every known case where ISIS uses the term "jizya," the Christian payments are clearly ransom or extortion. Permission to perform Christian "rites" is traditionally purported to follow from jizya, but in no known case does ISIS honor it. ISIS's demands for jizya are typically accompanied by atrocities. There is no functioning church, no Christian clergy, no Christian liturgies or sacraments, and no intact Christian community anywhere under the Islamic State.

Genocide is the "crime of crimes." Representative Jeff Fortenberry (R., Neb.), who along with Representative Anna Eshoo (D., Calif.) introduced the House genocide resolution, remarked that it is important to address "the scandal of silence and indifference about ISIS' targeted and systematic destruction of these endangered communities." It is urgent that the Obama administration recognize that Christians too are among the victims of ISIS genocide and, along with Yazidis, extremely vulnerable. You can help by signing [this petition](#).

Knights of Columbus report: ISIS committing Christian 'genocide'

Full report with pictures (280 pages):

<http://www.stopthechristiengenocide.org/en/report-photos.html>

By Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service (10.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1Ro6sYW> - The Knights of Columbus has issued a 280-page report declaring that the Islamic State group is committing "genocide" against Christians and other religious groups in the Middle East and urging the U.S. State Department to use that term to describe its actions.

Knights of Columbus CEO Carl Anderson said his Catholic fraternal organization, working in partnership with the group In Defense of Christians, does not contend Christians alone are facing genocide from the group known as ISIS but it believes the State Department must include them.

"The United States government should not exclude Christians from such a finding," he said at a news conference Thursday (March 10). "Doing so simply would be contrary to the facts."

At the request of senior State Department officials, the Knights of Columbus issued the report detailing how Christians have been the victims of killings, kidnappings, rapes and destruction of religious property. It included a list of 1,131 Christians killed in Iraq between 2003 and 2014, and 125 churches attacked there in the same period.

Gregory Stanton, president of Genocide Watch, joined Anderson on a panel of experts supporting the findings of the report and the use of the word "genocide."

"The truth is, the word's moral force is the reason for this word to be used," said Stanton, the former president of the International Association of Genocide Scholars.

Nina Shea, a religious freedom expert at the Hudson Institute, called the report the "largest compilation in existence of what has happened to Christians in the path of ISIS."

In response to a question from RNS, a State Department official, who was not authorized to be identified by name, said, "Regardless of whether Da'esh's conduct satisfies certain legal definitions, including genocide and crimes against humanity, the United States has been clear that our interest in accountability for perpetrators remains undiminished."

European Parliament resolution on the systematic mass murder of religious minorities by the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh' (2016/2529(RSP))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to its previous resolutions of 27 February 2014 on the situation in Iraq⁽¹⁾, of 18 September 2014 on the situation in Iraq and Syria, and the IS offensive, including the persecution of minorities⁽²⁾, in particular paragraph 4 thereof, of 27 November 2014 on Iraq: kidnapping and mistreatment of women⁽³⁾, of 12 February 2015 on the humanitarian crisis in Iraq and Syria, in particular in the IS context⁽⁴⁾, and specifically paragraph 27 thereof, of 12 March 2015 on recent attacks and abductions by ISIS/Daesh in the Middle East, notably of Assyrians⁽⁵⁾, in particular paragraph 2 thereof, of 12 March 2015 on the Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World 2013 and the European Union's policy on the matter⁽⁶⁾, in particular paragraphs 129 and 211 thereof, of 12 March 2015 on the EU's priorities for the UN Human Rights Council in 2015⁽⁷⁾, in particular paragraphs 66 and 67 thereof, of 30 April 2015 on the persecution of Christians around the world, in relation to the killing of students in Kenya by terror group Al-Shabaab⁽⁸⁾, in particular paragraph 10 thereof, and of 30 April 2015 on the destruction of cultural sites perpetrated by ISIS/Daesh⁽⁹⁾,
- having regard to its recommendation to the Council of 18 April 2013 on the UN principle of the 'Responsibility to Protect' ('R2P')⁽¹⁰⁾,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 16 March 2015 on the EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Daesh threat, of 20 October 2014 on the ISIL/Daesh crisis in Syria and Iraq, of 30 August 2014 on Iraq and Syria, of 14 April 2014 and 12 October 2015 on Syria, and of 15 August 2014 on Iraq,
- having regard to Council Decision 2003/335/JHA of 8 May 2003 on the investigation and prosecution of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes⁽¹¹⁾;
- having regard to: the EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief; the EU Guidelines on promoting compliance with international humanitarian law; the EU guidelines on violence against women and girls and combating all forms of discrimination against them; the guidelines for EU policy towards third countries on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment or treatment; the EU Guidelines on children and armed conflict; the EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of the rights of the child; and the EU Human Rights Guidelines on freedom of expression online and offline; and the EU Guidelines to promote and protect the enjoyment of all human rights by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons,

- having regard to the statements by the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (VP/HR) on Iraq and Syria,
- having regard to Resolution 2091 (2016) Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on 27 January 2016,
- having regard to the statement of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, of 25 August 2014 on 'Iraqi civilians suffering "horrific" widespread and systematic persecution',
- having regard to the recent UN Security Council resolutions on Iraq and Syria, in particular Resolution 2249 (2015) condemning recent terrorists attacks by ISIS and Resolution 2254 (2015), endorsing a road map for the peace process in Syria and setting a timetable for talks,
- having regard to Resolution S-22/1 adopted by the UN Human Rights Council on 'The human rights situation in Iraq in the light of abuses committed by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and associated groups', of 3 September 2014,
- having regard to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948,
- having regard to the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion and Belief of 1981,
- having regard to the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment of 1984,
- having regard to the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 9 December 1948,
- having regard to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, in particular Articles 5 to 8 thereof,
- having regard to the Analysis Framework by the Office of the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide (OSAPG),
- having regard to the statement of 12 August 2014 by the Special Adviser of the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide and the Special Adviser of the UN Secretary-General on the Responsibility to Protect on the situation in Iraq,
- having regard to the Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Iraq in the light of abuses committed by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and associated groups, of 27 March 2015, in particular paragraph 16 thereof on 'Violations Perpetrated by ISIL – Attacks against religious and ethnic groups',
- having regard to the statement of 13 October 2015 by the Special Adviser of the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide and the Special Adviser of the UN Secretary-General on the Responsibility to Protect on the escalation of incitement to violence in Syria on religious grounds,
- having regard to the Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, presented in the Human Rights Council on 13 August 2015, in particular paragraphs 165 to 173 thereof,
- having regard to Rule 123(2) and (4) of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas, as recognised by UN Security Council Resolution 2249 (2015), the violent extremist ideology of the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh', its terrorist acts, its continued gross systematic and widespread attacks directed against civilians, abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law, including those perpetrated on religious or ethnic grounds, and its eradication of cultural heritage and trafficking of cultural property constitute a global and unprecedented threat to international peace and security;

B. whereas religious and ethnic minorities, such as Christian (Chaldean/Syriac/Assyrian, Melkite and Armenian), Yazidi, Turkmen, Shabak, Kaka'i, Sabae-Mandean, Kurdish and Shi'a communities, as well as many Arabs and Sunni Muslims, have been targeted by the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh'; whereas many have been killed, slaughtered, beaten, subjected to extortion, abducted and tortured; whereas they have been enslaved (in particular women and girls, who have also been subjected to other forms of sexual violence) and forcibly converted, and have been victims of forced marriage and trafficking in human beings; whereas children have also been forcibly recruited; whereas mosques, monuments, shrines, churches and other places of worship, tombs and cemeteries have been vandalised;

C. whereas genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, wherever and whenever they happen, must not go unpunished, and whereas their effective prosecution must be ensured by taking measures at national level, by enhancing international cooperation and through the International Criminal Court and international criminal justice;

D. whereas genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes are of concern to all EU Member States, which are determined to cooperate with a view to preventing such crimes and putting an end to the impunity of their perpetrators, in accordance with Council Common Position 2003/444/CFSP of 16 June 2003;

E. whereas UN Security Council Resolution 2249 (2015) authorises those member states that have the capacity to do so to take all necessary measures, in compliance with international law, in particular with the United Nations Charter, and with international human rights, refugee and humanitarian law, on the territory under the control of the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh', in Syria and Iraq, to redouble and coordinate their efforts to prevent and suppress terrorist acts;

F. whereas the international legal definition of genocide, in accordance with Article II of the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, includes the words: 'any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such: (a) killing members of the group; (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and (e) forcibly transferring children of one group to another group'; whereas Article III of that Convention considers punishable not only genocide, but conspiracy to commit genocide, direct and public incitement to commit genocide, and complicity in genocide;

G. whereas since 2014 an estimated 5 000 Yazidis have been killed, while many others have been tortured or forcibly converted to Islam; whereas at least 2 000 Yazidi women have been enslaved, and made victims of forced marriage and trafficking; whereas girls as young as six have been raped and Yazidi children have been forcibly recruited as soldiers for the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh'; whereas there is clear evidence of mass graves of Yazidi people abducted by the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh';

H. whereas on the night of 6 August 2014 more than 150 000 Christians fled the advance of the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh' over Mosul, Qaraqosh and other villages in the Nineveh Plains, having been robbed of all their belongings, and whereas to date they

remain displaced and in precarious conditions in northern Iraq; whereas the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh' captured those who were unable to flee from Mosul and the Nineveh Plains, and whereas non-Muslim women and children were enslaved, with some being sold and others brutally killed and filmed by the perpetrators;

I. whereas in February 2015 the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh' kidnapped more than 220 Assyrian Christians after overrunning several farming communities on the southern bank of the Khabur river in the north-eastern province of Hassakeh, and whereas to date only a few have been released, while the fate of the others remains unknown;

J. whereas several reports by UN bodies, including the Special Adviser of the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, the Special Adviser of the UN Secretary-General on the Responsibility to Protect and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, have stated that acts committed by the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh' may amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide;

K. whereas the International Independent Commission of Inquiry has documented and reported that persons from ethnic and religious minorities opposing the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh' and other terrorist groups, militias and non-state armed groups in areas under their de facto control continue to be persecuted;

L. whereas, according to the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) principles, when a state (or non-state actor) manifestly fails to protect its population or is in fact a perpetrator of such crimes, the international community has a responsibility to take collective action to protect populations, in accordance with the UN Charter;

M. whereas under international law each individual has the right to live according to his or her conscience and to freely hold and change religious and non-religious beliefs; whereas political and religious leaders have a duty at all levels to combat extremism and to promote mutual respect among individuals and religious groups;

1. Recalls its strong condemnation of the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh' and its egregious human rights abuses, which amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes, within the meaning of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and that action should be taken for it to be recognised as genocide by the UN Security Council; is extremely concerned at this terrorist group's deliberate targeting of Christians (Chaldeans/ Syriacs/Assyrians, Melkites, Armenians), Yazidis, Turkmens, Shi'ites, Shabaks, Sabians, Kaka'i and Sunnis who do not agree with their interpretation of Islam, as part of its attempts to exterminate any religious and ethnic minorities from the areas under its control;

2. Expresses its view that the persecution, atrocities and international crimes amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity; stresses that the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh' is committing genocide against Christians and Yazidis, and other religious and ethnic minorities, who do not agree with the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh' interpretation of Islam, and that this therefore entails action under the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide; underlines the fact that those who intentionally, for ethnic or religious reasons, conspire in, plan, incite, commit or attempt to commit, are complicit in or support atrocities should be brought to justice and prosecuted for violations of international law, notably war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide;

3. Urges each of the Contracting Parties to the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, signed at Paris on 9 December 1948, and to other relevant international agreements, in particular the EU Member States, to prevent war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide within their territory; urges Syria and Iraq to accept the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court;

4. Urges the members of the UN Security Council to support a referral by the Security Council to the International Criminal Court in order to investigate violations committed in Iraq and Syria by the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh' against Christians, Yazidis and religious and ethnic minorities;

5. Urges each of the Contracting Parties to the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, of 1948, and to other international agreements for the prevention and punishment of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, and in particular the competent authorities of countries – and their nationals – which are in any way supporting, cooperating in or funding, or are complicit in, these crimes, to wholly fulfil their legal obligations under the convention and such other international agreements;

6. Urges the competent authorities of those countries which are in any way directly or indirectly supporting, cooperating in or funding, or are complicit in, these war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, to wholly fulfil their legal obligations under international law and to stop these unacceptable behaviours, which are causing enormous damage to the Iraqi and Syrian societies and are seriously destabilising neighbouring countries and international peace and security;

7. Recalls that UN Security Council Resolution 2253 imposed a legal duty on UN member states to prohibit any kind of assistance to the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh' and other terrorist organisations, notably supplying arms and financial assistance, including the illegal oil trade, and urges them to make this kind of assistance a crime under domestic law; recalls that failure to act in consequence by some member states would constitute a violation of international law and endow other member states with a legal duty to implement the UN Security Council resolution by acting to bring the responsible individuals and entities to justice;

8. Denounces in the strongest terms the destruction of religious and cultural sites and artefacts by the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh', which constitutes an attack against the cultural heritage of all inhabitants of Syria and Iraq and of humanity at large; calls on all states to step up their criminal investigations and judicial cooperation with a view to identifying all groups responsible for illicit trafficking in cultural goods and for damaging or destroying cultural heritage that belongs to all of humanity in Syria, Iraq and the broader Middle East and North African regions;

9. Urges all the countries of the international community, including the EU Member States, to work actively on fighting radicalisation and to improve their legal and jurisdictional systems in order to avoid their nationals and citizens being able to travel to join the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh' and participate in violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, and to ensure that, should they do so, they are criminally prosecuted as soon as possible, including for online incitement and support to commit those crimes;

10. Calls for the EU to establish a permanent Special Representative for Freedom of Religion and Belief;

11. Recognises, supports and demands respect by all for the inalienable right of all ethnic and religious minorities, and others, living in Iraq and Syria, to continue to live in their historical and traditional homelands in dignity, equality and safety, and to fully practise their religion and beliefs freely without being subject to any kind of coercion, violence or discrimination; believes that, in order to stem the suffering and the mass exodus of Christians, Yazidis and other communities of the region, a clear and unequivocal statement by all regional political and religious leaders in support of their continued presence and full and equal rights as citizens of their home countries is imperative;

12. Requests the international community and its member states, including the EU and its Member States, to ensure the necessary security conditions and prospects for all those who have been forced to leave their homeland or have been forcibly displaced, to make effective as soon as possible their right to return to their homelands, to preserve their homes, land, property and belongings, as well as their churches and religious and cultural sites, and to be able to have a dignified life and future;

13. Recognises that the ongoing persecution of religious and ethnic groups in the Middle East is a factor that contributes to mass migration and internal displacement;

14. Stresses the importance of the international community providing protection and aid, including military protection and aid, in accordance with international law, to all those targeted by the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh' and other terrorist organisations in the Middle East, such as ethnic and religious minorities, and of such people's participation in future political lasting solutions; calls on all parties involved in the conflict to respect universal human rights and to facilitate the provision of humanitarian aid and assistance through all possible channels; calls for the creation of humanitarian corridors; considers that safe havens, protected by UN-mandated forces, could be part of the answer to the massive challenge of providing temporary protection for millions of refugees from the conflict in Syria and Iraq;

15. Reaffirms its full and active support for international diplomatic efforts and the work of UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura aimed at launching peace negotiations in Geneva between all Syrian parties, with the participation of all the relevant global and regional players, in the coming days, as well as his proposals for local ceasefires; calls for the EU and the international community to put pressure on all donors to fulfil their promises and to fully commit themselves to providing financial support for the host countries, especially ahead of the Syria donors' conference in London on 4 February 2016;

16. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, the Government and Parliament of Syria, the Government and Council of Representatives of Iraq, the Regional Government of Kurdistan, the institutions of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (Gulf Cooperation Council, GCC), the United Nations Secretary-General, the United Nations General Assembly, the UN Security Council and the UN Human Rights Council.

(1) Texts adopted, **P8_TA(2014)0011**.

(2) Texts adopted, **P8_TA(2014)0027**.

(3) Texts adopted, **P8_TA(2014)0066**.

(4) Texts adopted, **P8_TA(2015)0040**.

(5) Texts adopted, **P8_TA(2015)0071**.

(6) Texts adopted, **P8_TA(2015)0076**.

(7) Texts adopted, [P8_TA\(2015\)0079](#).

(8) Texts adopted, [P8_TA\(2015\)0178](#).

(9) Texts adopted, [P8_TA\(2015\)0179](#).

(10) Texts adopted, [P7_TA\(2013\)0180](#).

(11) OJ L 118, 14.5.2003, p. 12.

EPRID's Statement on the European Parliament resolution on the systematic mass murder of religious minorities by the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh'

EPRID (19.02.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1OplpmV> - The European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID) welcomes the recent European Parliament resolution on the systematic mass murder of religious minorities by the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh'.

MEPs from each of the main political groups reiterated their strong condemnation of ISIS/Daesh and its egregious human rights abuses, deliberately targeting Christians, Yazidis, Turkmen, Shi'ites, Shabak, Sabeans, Kaka'e and Sunnis who do not agree with their interpretation of Islam. These violations amount to "war crimes", "crimes against humanity" and "genocide" according to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), they added. Hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women and children are suffering at the hands of ISIS.

EPRID believes that this resolution, as well as the resolution by the PACE of the Council of Europe, is a significant step forward that will help the international community to determine the specific nature of these crimes and, ultimately facilitate adequate responses, including the investigation and prosecution of those who are responsible, and redress for victims.

EPRID also welcomes the call for the EU to establish a permanent Special Representative for Freedom of Religion or Belief and joins the European Parliament in urging each country of the world to prevent persecution, discrimination and intolerance on grounds of religion or belief, as well as war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide within their territories.

Zoroastrianism in Iraq seeks official recognition

Al Monitor (17.02.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1q2hMUA> - Zoroastrianism is the world's oldest religion based on divine revelation, which served as the state religion of three great Iranian empires for 12 centuries, from the sixth century B.C. until the seventh century.

While religious diversity is now facing an imminent demise in Middle Eastern countries — especially in Syria and Iraq — the events following the rise of the Islamic State (IS) and its threat to this diversity has made it easier for the adherents of Zoroastrianism to

reveal themselves after they had hidden their religion for 15 centuries and to convert to the new religion, in the aftermath of the Muslim conquest of Iraq.

Zoroastrians today are present in several areas of Iraqi Kurdistan and other areas administratively affiliated with the Iraqi federal government. But there are no accurate figures of their numbers as they are still referred to as "Muslims" on their identity documents, even though they engage in Zoroastrian religious rituals. This represents a restriction on their right to freedom of belief, especially since converting from Islam to another religion is considered a crime according to the Personal Status Law.

At the Zoroastrian Cultural and Heritage Center in Sulaimaniyah — which contains a small temple where Zoroastrian rituals are being held for the first time in modern Iraqi history — Peer Luqman Haji, the spiritual leader of Iraqi Zoroastrians, administers the conversion from Islam to Zoroastrianism through the Kushti tying ceremony (a Kushti is the sacred girdle worn by Zoroastrians around their waists) and marriage ceremonies according to the Zoroastrian tradition.

Haji talked to Al-Monitor from this small temple in Sulaimaniyah about the extent of the recognition of Zoroastrianism in Iraq, the number of followers and places of their presence. He also addressed the controversy surrounding the return of this ancient religion after it had disappeared for centuries and how this relates to the emergence of IS and its occupation of large parts of the country. Haji also clarified the Kurds' search for a religious identity other than Islam, in addition to the reactions of Islamic religious circles regarding the return of this ancient religion that has resulted in many Muslims converting to Zoroastrianism.

As far as Haji is concerned, what he is doing is not merely a religious representation of a millennia-old religion, but a cultural revolution seeking to direct the hearts and minds of people toward a loving life and adopting moderation in a country threatened with segregation due to ethnic tensions. He is confident that his revolution will have a positive outcome on the country.

The full text of the interview follows.

Al-Monitor: Is Zoroastrianism an officially recognized religion in Iraqi Kurdistan? And what are the limits of such recognition?

Haji: Zoroastrianism is recognized as one of the religious beliefs as per Law No. 5 of Protecting Components of Iraqi Kurdistan of 2015, which is new and positive. This encouraged us to officially establish this place [Zoroastrian Cultural and Heritage Center] representing Zoroastrians, after an absence of centuries. We also have an official representative at the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, and this is considered a step forward on the path to official recognition. But we do not think these steps are enough for us to act freely, as the ministry has yet to recognize this place as a house of worship for Zoroastrianism, just like mosques and churches. We demand this, so we can have a house of worship that symbolizes our existence and therefore earns us legal protection.

I have been to the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs in Iraqi Kurdistan 12 times since September 2015, met with the minister on five occasions and asked for official recognition, particularly for the Zoroastrian Cultural and Heritage Center as a place that represents us from a religious point of view. The center has already been recognized as a nonprofit organization by the NGO Directorate. This means that the recognition of Zoroastrianism has not yet reached the point of giving us a temple to perform religious rituals, or at least recognizing the center as a house of worship or religious center. And it should be noted that the opening of the center was attended by a representative from the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. That same day — on Dec. 20, 2015 — we presented a memo to the ministry demanding that the center be recognized.

Al-Monitor: So you are saying that legal recognition of Zoroastrianism did not reach the point of equality with other religions? What aspects of equality are you demanding?

Haji: First, we demand the recognition of this place and the small temple built in it as a house of worship for Zoroastrianism. We also demand that Zoroastrian clerics are recognized just like Christian, Muslim and Zaidi clerics. For example, as the spiritual leader of Zoroastrianism, I have a diploma in Zoroastrian theology from the Zoroastrian school in France. I have earned the rank of "peer," which is the first rank in the hierarchy of Zoroastrian priesthood and the highest religious rank obtained by a Zoroastrian in Iraq. It was an intricate procedure, for — after earning my diploma in Zoroastrian theology — I had to be officially nominated to represent Zoroastrianism and be officially chosen by the Zoroastrian council in the United Kingdom, which indeed happened. But the Ministry of Endowments has yet to recognize me as a representative of the religion; I am working on this.

Al-Monitor: Were you the first to demand the recognition of Zoroastrianism after centuries of its decline in Iraq, or were there other historical demands?

Haji: I don't think Zoroastrianism really disappeared throughout that time, but it was indeed occulted since human beings have no power over their hearts and spirits, so they would hide their true beliefs for fear of persecution without abandoning them completely. I will give you an example: A Zoroastrian from Khanaqin in the Diyala governorate told me that his grandfather presented an official memo to the Iraqi court in 1924, demanding that Zoroastrianism was stated as his religion on his official documents. But his demand was rejected since Zoroastrianism was not one of the officially recognized religions upon the foundation of modern Iraq. This shows that Zoroastrians have not ceased to demand recognition throughout the past centuries and that political, religious and social reasons have forced them to hide their religious identity — just like they are doing today in fear of the reaction of radical Islamists. As a result, many of them have to go to mosques for prayer so that they are not accused of being Zoroastrian and deemed unbelievers for that. Their ID cards still label them as "Muslim."

Al-Monitor: Are there any accurate or at least approximate statistics concerning the number of Zoroastrians or those who are adhering to it today in Iraq?

Haji: The number of Zoroastrians in Iraqi Kurdistan and other regions is unknown, and I don't intend to hide these figures because I actually have no idea about the approximate number of public or secret adherents to the Zoroastrian faith. I receive new adherents each day in this temple. They are revealing their true religious beliefs after decades of hiding them or inheriting them from their fathers and grandfathers without being able to go public, until they now finally get the opportunity.

Al-Monitor: How are Zoroastrians distributed across the different regions of Iraq?

Haji: Each day, we discover new stories about Zoroastrians in many areas of Iraqi Kurdistan and others that are administratively part of the [Iraqi] federal government. Zoroastrians are [mainly] found in Dahuk province, in the city of Zakho in the far north [near the northern borders with Turkey] and in Sulaimaniyah province, notably the districts of Darbandikhan, Ranya, Qalaat Daza and Chamchamal. They are also concentrated in Halabja province and in Erbil province, notably Koysinjaq district and Koya near Koysinjaq. Zoroastrians reside in Daquq [district] and Altun Kupri [northwest of Kirkuk] in Kirkuk province; in Khanaqin and Kafri in Diyala province; in Tuz Khormato [administratively part of Salahuddin province] in Kalar district linking between several Kurdish, Arab and Turkmen areas such as Sulaimaniyah, Diyala, Kirkuk, Salahuddin and Baghdad. Kalar is bordered by Darbandikhan district [Sulaimaniyah] to the north, Khanaqin district [Diyala] to the east, the town of Jalawla [Diyala] and Kifri district [Salahuddin]. There are other areas as well that I am currently visiting and where I am discovering new adherents.

Al-Monitor: Are there high rates of conversion from Islam to Zoroastrianism within Iraqi Kurdistan and among the Kurds?

Haji: It is not a religious conversion per se. A more accurate term would be “returning to one’s original religion,” or recovering it. A few days ago, I was in Khanaqin visiting a number of families who adhere to Zoroastrianism. They had paid me a visit at the temple in Sulaimaniyah, and we then set a date for me to visit them — so I did. We performed the austerity ritual, which consists of a cleric wrapping the belt three times around the waist of a person, symbolizing his initiation to Zoroastrianism. They formed a Zoroastrian council in the area, and we now have a council in every city hosting Zoroastrians in Iraqi Kurdistan. The council is composed of adherents who take care of the creed and religion, to establish relations with the other adherents in their region and in other areas.

There are high rates of returning to the religion among Kurds through the Zoroastrian Kushti tying ritual, which is the equivalent of reciting the Shahada [Shahada consists of the recitation of “There is no god but God. Muhammad is the messenger of God.”] for Muslims before converting to Islam. The ceremony includes the tying of a girdle three times around the waist, which is called Tathbeet [binding], meaning the person has now become bound to Zoroastrianism and has not just converted from one religion to another. At the temple, I regularly administer marriage ceremonies according to the Zoroastrian tradition. Five couples came to [get married] according to the Zoroastrian rituals, while the sixth arrived with children. This last couple had had an Islamic ceremony, but they were remarried in conformity with the Zoroastrian rituals.

The ceremony starts by me asking the couple to declare their will to marry each other three times. I then start with the ritual; the couple hold hands that are tied with a green cloth. They pledge before the peer to apply the Zoroastrian's three main rules: good thoughts, good words and good deeds. The groom buys a wedding band for the bride and vice versa; the ring does not have to be made out of a specific material — it could be made out of iron, wood, gold or silver. All this happens in the presence of witnesses; the groom has a female witness and the bride has a male witness. The groom is not required to pay a dowry. After the ceremony is over, the couple vows to plant a tree every year on the day of their anniversary and give up all their commitments and devote themselves to volunteer work to serve others that day.

Al-Monitor: How did Muslims react to the declaration of the new Zoroastrian Supreme Council and the establishment of a temple where Zoroastrian rituals are performed and conversion from Islam to Zoroastrianism are administered?

Haji: To avoid any angry reactions, we worked silently without making any noise. We do not threaten anyone because our call is a peaceful one based on the values of peace and love. However, we still need a legal recognition within the constitution, as well as official financial and moral support in order to reinforce our position against radical clerics. This is especially true since [the latter] already started spreading lies and false accusations through mosques in order to calumniate us. An example is the claim that we are lewd and allow incest. And there are also many other false claims that aim to socially alienate us. This is obvious incitement against us. On Jan. 7, 2016, Mullah Abdul-Latif Ahmad of Sulaimaniyah defamed us publicly in front of an audience. We consider that a direct incitement to kill us. All I want to say is that people — even Muslims — treat us in a positive way, but some radical clerics deem us unbelievers publicly, which calls for an effective reaction from the state.

Al-Monitor: How would you respond to claims saying that Zoroastrianism is resurfacing today in the form of a national religion for the Kurds, and growing as part of a new Kurdish identity against a Muslim Arab one?

Haji: I do not agree with this argument, although we believe that Zarathustra was a Kurdish prophet, and that doesn’t mean that Arabs cannot adhere to Zoroastrianism. Just because Prophet Muhammad was Arab didn’t stop Kurds from adhering to Islam. Three members of the Arab al-Jabbur tribe in Kirkuk converted to Zoroastrianism, and I myself

administered their Kushti ceremony here at the temple. I believe that Zoroastrianism is not a national religion for Kurds only, although it was their original religion. Everyone is welcome, especially since we consider Zarathustra as a prophet, philosopher and teacher at the same time. Zoroastrianism is a Reformist religion that is constantly modernizing and developing its ideologies in line with recent developments. Zoroastrianism is beyond any nationalist limitation and is spread in India and Iran. There are even Westerners who adhere to it, including Americans, British, Germans, French and Australians.

AI-Monitor: How about the claims that go as far as associating the resurgence of Zoroastrianism in Iraq to the atrocities committed by IS in several Iraqi regions, and that these atrocities have driven people away from Islam and led them back to Zoroastrianism?

Haji: I do not think that the return to Zoroastrianism in Iraq, or officially announcing it, is a direct outcome of the rise of IS and the negative reactions it has sparked. We have been working for years in European countries like France, Britain and many others to bring Zoroastrianism back to its birthplace in Kurdistan. This resurgence would not have seen the light had it not been for Law No. 5 of Protecting Components in Iraqi Kurdistan. The law clearly recognized Zoroastrianism as one of Kurdistan's religions. And only after this have we been able to resurge in Kurdistan, and then we proclaimed the Zoroastrian Supreme Council in Iraq. This was preceded by secret efforts that have taken years, as I used to regularly visit the Kurdistan Region to demand recognition. However, we did not act publicly and officially until after this law recognized us — while many of our colleagues have been working for years without ever abandoning their religious belief in Zoroastrianism.

AI-Monitor: Amid the widespread religious radicalism in the Middle East, what does Zoroastrianism have to offer to counter this phenomenon?

Haji: I think we need a cultural revolution that would pave the way for a new culture of tolerance. As a Zoroastrian cleric, I strongly believe that we have to spread love and repair the house [Iraq] we live in, without any discrimination.

Therefore, clerics must preach reform and build societies on the basis of cooperation and with the aim of seeking heaven on earth, without waiting for Judgement Day to solve our problems. Zoroastrianism advocates for the freedom of religion, so it is up to each person to choose his or her religion. This means that no one should adhere to a certain religion before the age of 15. When religion turns into a strict ideology that rejects any debate or reform while clerics claim they speak in the name of God — believing that their word and interpretation are the word of God — society will be brought to ruins. Reform is an imperative and starting point for us representatives of Zoroastrianism to propagate our message.

Both the Kurdish and Iraqi communities are traditional ones, where religious sensitivities play a role in intensifying the conflict. It seems like the government is failing to reach any level of religious harmony among the believers of all religions and denominations — one that could ease the tension. So it is our duty to start this cultural revolution. We do not only mean the concept of religious freedom or the return to an old religion, but the choice of a new ideology that can suit and reconcile with the spirit of this age. This is why I call this "a cultural and Reformist revolution."

Hundreds of people flock into our small temple to perform marriage rituals according to the Zoroastrian tradition, the Kushti tying or the Tathbeet in Zoroastrianism. You will be surprised when I tell you that my visitors do not come alone but in the hundreds, and they ask me to visit them in other places. They also visit our headquarters in cities where Zoroastrians live. It is a true revolution that will seek to improve society.

Joint Declaration of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia

The situation of Christians in the Middle East, religious freedom and interreligious dialogue at the heart of the Declaration

HRWF (15.02.2016) - On the occasion of their meeting in Havana (Cuba) on 12th February, Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia released a Joint Declaration in which a substantial part was devoted to the situation of Christians in the Middle East, religious freedom and interreligious dialogue:

“Our gaze must firstly turn to those regions of the world where Christians are victims of persecution. In many countries of the Middle East and North Africa whole families, villages and cities of our brothers and sisters in Christ are being completely exterminated. Their churches are being barbarously ravaged and looted, their sacred objects profaned, their monuments destroyed. It is with pain that we call to mind the situation in Syria, Iraq and other countries of the Middle East, and the massive exodus of Christians from the land in which our faith was first disseminated and in which they have lived since the time of the Apostles, together with other religious communities.

We call upon the international community to act urgently in order to prevent the further expulsion of Christians from the Middle East. In raising our voice in defence of persecuted Christians, we wish to express our compassion for the suffering experienced by the faithful of other religious traditions who have also become victims of civil war, chaos and terrorist violence.

Thousands of victims have already been claimed in the violence in Syria and Iraq, which has left many other millions without a home or means of sustenance. We urge the international community to seek an end to the violence and terrorism and, at the same time, to contribute through dialogue to a swift return to civil peace. Large-scale humanitarian aid must be assured to the afflicted populations and to the many refugees seeking safety in neighbouring lands.

We call upon all those whose influence can be brought to bear upon the destiny of those kidnapped, including the Metropolitans of Aleppo, Paul and John Ibrahim, who were taken in April 2013, to make every effort to ensure their prompt liberation.

We lift our prayers to Christ, the Saviour of the world, asking for the return of peace in the Middle East, “the fruit of justice” (Is 32:17), so that fraternal co-existence among the various populations, Churches and religions may be strengthened, enabling refugees to return to their homes, wounds to be healed, and the souls of the slain innocent to rest in peace.

We address, in a fervent appeal, all the parts that may be involved in the conflicts to demonstrate good will and to take part in the negotiating table. At the same time, the international community must undertake every possible effort to end terrorism through common, joint and coordinated action. We call on all the countries involved in the struggle against terrorism to responsible and prudent action. We exhort all Christians and all believers of God to pray fervently to the providential Creator of the world to protect His creation from destruction and not permit a new world war. In order to ensure a solid and enduring peace, specific efforts must be undertaken to rediscover the common values uniting us, based on the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We bow before the martyrdom of those who, at the cost of their own lives, have given witness to the truth of the Gospel, preferring death to the denial of Christ. We believe that these martyrs of our times, who belong to various Churches but who are united by

their shared suffering, are a pledge of the unity of Christians. It is to you who suffer for Christ's sake that the word of the Apostle is directed: "Beloved ... rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly" (1 Pet 4:12-13).

Interreligious dialogue is indispensable in our disturbing times. Differences in the understanding of religious truths must not impede people of different faiths to live in peace and harmony. In our current context, religious leaders have the particular responsibility to educate their faithful in a spirit which is respectful of the convictions of those belonging to other religious traditions. Attempts to justify criminal acts with religious slogans are altogether unacceptable. No crime may be committed in God's name, "since God is not the God of disorder but of peace" (1 Cor 14:33).

In affirming the foremost value of religious freedom, we give thanks to God for the current unprecedented renewal of the Christian faith in Russia, as well as in many other countries of Eastern Europe, formerly dominated for decades by atheist regimes. Today, the chains of militant atheism have been broken and in many places Christians can now freely confess their faith. Thousands of new churches have been built over the last quarter of a century, as well as hundreds of monasteries and theological institutions. Christian communities undertake notable works in the fields of charitable aid and social development, providing diversified forms of assistance to the needy. Orthodox and Catholics often work side by side. Giving witness to the values of the Gospel they attest to the existence of the shared spiritual foundations of human co-existence.

At the same time, we are concerned about the situation in many countries in which Christians are increasingly confronted by restrictions to religious freedom, to the right to witness to one's convictions and to live in conformity with them. In particular, we observe that the transformation of some countries into secularized societies, estranged from all reference to God and to His truth, constitutes a grave threat to religious freedom. It is a source of concern for us that there is a current curtailment of the rights of Christians, if not their outright discrimination, when certain political forces, guided by an often very aggressive secularist ideology, seek to relegate them to the margins of public life."

(...)

Francis

Bishop of Rome
Pope of the Catholic Church

Kirill

Patriarch of Moscow
and all Russia

HRWF Footnote:

See the Resolution adopted by the Council of Europe Assembly on 27 January 2016:
<http://bit.ly/20x9DV5>

See the Resolution adopted by the European Parliament on 4 February 2016
<http://bit.ly/1U2JXhw>

Most Christians fled Iraq since 2003

AINA (11.02.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1o2F0sl> - Sectarianism and terrorist attacks have forced the majority of Iraq's Christians to leave the country since 2003, an Iraqi official said.

Khaled Albert, a senior official at the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs in Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government, said that around 1.8 million Christians had lived in Iraq during the era of former President Saddam Hussein.

"But changes in Iraq following the 2003 U.S. invasion, particularly sectarian conflicts, have forced 1.5 million Christians to immigrate from Iraq," he told Anadolu Agency.

According to Albert, only 300,000 Christians now live in Iraq, most of whom are located in northern Iraq.

"Only 68 Christians, mostly elders, now live in Mosul," he said.

Albert said that around 150,000 Christians have fled Mosul since Daesh took over the city in 2014.

Congress considering safe zone for persecuted Assyrians, Yazidis in Iraq

AINA (11.02.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1ouMXXR> - Former Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA) said that Congress is considering the creation of an autonomous region in Iraq to protect Christians and Yazidis from persecution by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and criticized the State Department's lack of involvement in the ongoing discussions.

"There are discussions and there will be a resolution introduced in the House, I believe, to set up an into-the-plains, basically a protectorate, whereby Christians, Yazidis and other minorities [will be protected]," Wolf said at an event last week at the National Press Club in Washington.

However, Nina Shea, director of the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom, noted that since the State Department was not part of the "serious discussion" in Congress, the prospects of establishing a safe zone for persecuted Christians and Yazidis in Iraq were not good.

Wolf, who championed human rights during his 17 terms in Congress, and Shea were part of a panel hosted by the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative, an international religious freedom organization.

CNSNews.com asked Shea about the likelihood that an autonomous region for Christians and Yazidis will be created in the Middle East.

"That's not going to be a part of a serious discussion because [their] voice isn't there," Shea said in response.

"Sadly the U.S.... religious freedom people from the State Department, Ambassador [David] Saperstein or a minority advisor, aren't at those talks either, so it's going to be very bleak for these minority groups."

Wolf agreed. "Again, as Nina said, you need them to be at the table," he said.

Displaced Iraqi Christians who are currently living in Kurdistan "have very little hope of returning home, their homes have been demolished and... most of them have very little desire in returning home. They have no legal route out. There's no country in the West that will accept them because ... technically they are not legal refugees," Shea continued.

Religious minorities still living within the sovereign borders of Iraq are not considered refugees under international law, which defines a refugee as someone with a "well-founded fear of persecution" who is living outside their home country.

"It is a disgrace that the UN runs these camps that we fund," Shea said. "We have a lot of leverage over them, we're the largest funder, and the Christian and Yazidis dare not enter these camps because it is so dangerous for them. The same thing would be true of any safe zones that are established. These minorities must be separated and protected," she asserted.

"There are talks taking place in Geneva now on the fate of Syria, but there's no Christian voice. There's no one representing the Christian, the Yazidi, or minority communities in these talks," Shea concluded.

According to Lou Ann Sabatier, communications director for the Wilberforce Initiative, the proposal Wolf referenced is called the Nineveh Safe Plain.

The Nineveh Plains is a region in the north of Iraq, about 30 miles north of Mosul. On March 11, the European Parliament approved a nonbinding resolution to create a safe haven from ISIS, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), for religious minorities in the region.

A United Nations report published on Jan. 16 detailed the Islamic State's continuing persecution of minority religious and ethnic groups.

"ISIL continues to target members of different ethnic and religious communities, systematically persecuting these groups and subjecting them to a range of abuses and violations. These acts exemplify ISIL's apparent policy of suppressing, permanently expelling, or destroying some communities." the report read.

But Shea pointed out that President Barack Obama has been reticent in calling these actions genocide.

Shea also noted that since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, 53 Christians and one Yazidi have been admitted into the U.S. as refugees. However, in fiscal year 2016, which began in October, there have been just six Christians and no Yazidis from Syria admitted as refugees.

"This is a time when the administration is promising to admit 10,000 Syrian refugees," she said. "Six Christians amount to less than one percent of the Syrian refugees admitted in the first quarter. Less than one percent. Christians comprised 10 percent of the Syrian population before the war."

For over a year, Obama stalled in appointing a State Department official to focus on the plight of religious minorities in the Middle East. Obama finally appointed an advisor, not a special envoy, despite legislation passed by Congress authorizing the position.

In contrast, a special envoy for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights overseas was appointed within a month of the introduction of a congressional bill.

"We cannot ignore this genocide"

Until the murderous persecution of Christians by ISIS is recognised for what it is, its perpetrators cannot be brought to international justice

Catholic Herald (04.02.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1KsnaJQ> - Just before Christmas 75 parliamentarians, from both Houses and all parties – including the former head of our Armed Forces, the ex-head of MI5, and former cabinet ministers – wrote to David Cameron urging him to declare the atrocities being committed against Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities in Syria and Iraq as genocide.

Poignantly, the letter, which I also signed, was delivered as the world commemorated the centenary of the Armenian genocide, in which between 800,000 and 1.5 million Armenian, Greek Orthodox and Assyrian Christians lost their lives. It is impossible not to see today's events as anything other than a continuation of that shocking story.

I recently read Franz Werfel's harrowing and prophetic novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, published in 1933. It was based on a true story about the Armenian genocide. His books were burnt by the Nazis and banned in Turkey, no doubt to try to assist in the process of collective amnesia. (In 1939, the eve of the Holocaust, Hitler famously asked: "Who now remembers the Armenians?")

Werfel – a Jewish writer who converted to Catholicism and also wrote *The Song of Bernadette* – tells the story of several thousand Christians who took refuge on the mountain of Musa Dagh (Moses Mountain). The Armenians were a remnant who fought back against the genocide and, without the dramatic intervention of the French navy, would have perished on the mountain.

An Armenian priest, Fr Bezdikian, whose grandfather had been involved in the siege, later remarked: "Franz Werfel is the national hero of the Armenian people. His great book is a kind of consolation to us – no, not a consolation, there is no such thing – but it is of eminent importance to us that this book exists. It guarantees that it can never be forgotten, never, what happened to our people."

But how quickly we did forget the massacres, rapes, robberies, forced labour, desecrations, and deportation on death marches of women, children, the elderly and infirm – all of which has an eerily and uncannily familiar ring to it today, as do the heartbreaking reports of Christian children starving to death.

In the same year that Werfel published *Musa Dagh*, and deeply affected by both the Armenian annihilation and the 1933 Simele massacre of Assyrian Christians in Iraq, Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jewish lawyer, began to campaign for what he called an international law against barbarity. In 1943, during the Holocaust, when 49 of his own relatives had been murdered by the Nazis, Lemkin coined the word "genocide", combining the Greek word *genos*, ("family, tribe or race") and the Latin word *caedere* ("to kill").

In 1948, Lemkin went on to draft the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide which the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted on December 9 of that year.

The signatories declared that they would never again tolerate any "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group".

So is genocide what is happening today in Syria and Iraq – specifically to Christians and Yazidis? Pope Francis has said that it is – and so has Hillary Clinton, as well as Marco Rubio and most of the other Republican presidential hopefuls.

In our letter to the Prime Minister in December we said: "There is no doubt in our minds that the targeting of Christians and other religious minorities by Daesh [ISIS] falls within that definition." We urged the British Government to seek agreement at the United Nations that we should name things for what they are.

We insisted: "This is not simply a matter of semantics. There would be two main benefits from the acceptance by the UN that genocide is being perpetrated..." The first is that those responsible would one day face a day of judicial reckoning, and the second is that it would require the 147 states that have signed the convention to "face up to their duty to take the necessary action to 'prevent and punish' the perpetrators."

In response, the Foreign Office continues to trot out the tired old mantra: "It is a long-standing government policy that any judgments on whether genocide has occurred are a matter for the international judicial system rather than governments or other non-judicial bodies."

This is a frustrating and circular argument. Which international courts and judges should decide, on the basis of what process, and in considering what evidence? And what steps are the government actually taking to ensure that those courts do indeed urgently consider the matter and reach a conclusion?

If there isn't a process that we are willing to invoke at the UN, then the convention is just window-dressing and is an insult to the intention of the original drafters and ratifiers, as "never again" inevitably repeats itself over and over again.

To try to salve their consciences about this officials tell Parliament not to worry, because they are spending money "aimed at the prevention of incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes".

But to what effect?

On the very day on which the Foreign Office issued that statement we learnt that ISIS had obliterated Mosul's ancient, stone-walled monastery of St Elijah, dating from the 6th century, where monks had etched the words Chi Rho, the first Greek letters of the word Kristus, "Christ".

This attempt to eradicate memory has been accompanied by the obliteration of Christ's followers. Last year 200 Assyrian Christians in the Khabur River Valley in Syria were kidnapped. Jihadist websites showed graphic executions of some of the group, warning that others would be executed if the ransoms remained unpaid.

Last August the ancient St Eliane Monastery, founded more than 1,500 years ago in central Syria, was destroyed by ISIS – with dozens of Syriac Christians abducted, including Fr Jacques Mourad, abbot of the Syriac Catholic monastic community in Mar Musa. Held captive in Raqqa, he made a dramatic escape in disguise on a motorcycle several months later.

In Iraq, the Christian population has been devastated, with fewer than 300,000 Christians remaining – down from 1.4 million in 2003. Most of the remnant, from Nineveh, are struggling to survive in makeshift and intolerable conditions in Kurdistan.

And the fate of Syria's Christians has been catastrophic. How deplorable it would be if Syriac-Assyrian Christians were now denied a place at the putative peace talks.

Along with the Yazidi community, Christians have been told to convert or die. Children have been seized, propagandised and indoctrinated with jihadist ideology.

Nina Shea, director of the Centre for Religious Freedom, says that children are drip-fed with "school textbooks that direct children to hate and kill the Nazarenes, that is, the Christians, and the Yazidis, condemned as 'polytheists' and 'Devil worshippers' respectively". According to Shea and Canon Andrew White, the "Vicar of Baghdad", 30

Muslim teachers are believed to have been arrested for refusing to teach from these texts.

The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) said in a report last month that it believes ISIS is holding around 3,500 slaves, mostly women and children, as hostages and that Islamists have committed acts that "amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity, and possibly genocide".

The report says ISIS continues "to deliberately and wantonly loot and destroy places of religious and cultural significance" – anything which ISIS considers un-Islamic.

It added that ISIS "destroyed the Syrian orthodox al-Tahira church, in Mosul city, using bulldozers ... it reportedly used explosives to destroy the Syriac Orthodox church in al-Muhaniseen area, east of Mosul ... and removed historical inscriptions from the front of two churches – the Virgin Mary church and the Chaldean church – located in Doctor Street, central Mosul."

And of the people? "UNAMI/OHCHR continues to have grave concerns for the welfare and safety of those held in ISIL [ISIS] captivity."

On January 5, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the United Nations high commissioner for human rights, said that these "perpetrators of gross violations and abuses of human rights and serious violations of international humanitarian law" must be "held accountable".

But what action is the UN taking to instigate this process of accountability?

Those who have been abducted have been targeted specifically because they are different; because of their ethnicity; because of their religion. If this is not genocide, what is?

Our failure to name this genocide for what it is was raised in a motion, tabled by Rob Flello MP, last week in the House of Commons. The text rightly insists that "this disgusting behaviour clearly falls within the definition of genocide as determined by the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide".

The motion – to which MPs can add their names – draws attention to the UN report, to the beheadings, crucifixions, shootings, burnings, other murders, torture, rape and extensive violence. It urges the British Government to ensure that "the provisions of the genocide convention are urgently, legitimately and effectively invoked and implemented".

In the House of Lords I will be doing two things. First, on Wednesday, with Baroness Nicholson and Baroness Cox, I moved an amendment to the Immigration Bill, that victims of genocide should be given priority in asylum applications. This will be considered further in two weeks' time. Secondly, I will be urging the Government to present the evidence of genocide to the UN – the names, the dates, the photographs of atrocities; the numbers killed, tortured, abducted or sold into sexual slavery; the accounts of forced conversions; the churches, shrines and manuscripts destroyed.

Why? So that those responsible are brought to justice.

We endlessly talk of something vaguely called "British values". One value, one belief, that particularly marks us out from the ideology of ISIS is our belief in the rule of law.

As a signatory to the genocide convention, it is a dereliction of our duty to uphold international law if we do not take the action that should follow our signature, our voice and our military action.

Council of Europe assembly recognises that ISIS committed genocide

APPG (29.01.2016) - On January 27 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (Strasbourg) adopted, almost unanimously, a resolution recognising that "individuals who act in the name of the terrorist entity which calls itself Da'ish" "have perpetrated acts of genocide and other serious crimes punishable under international law." In this resolution, the Assembly continues "States should act on the presumption that Da'ish [i.e. ISIS] commits genocide and should be aware that this entails action under the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide" (§2). The Assembly also "recalls that under international law States have a positive obligation to prevent genocide, and thus should do their utmost to prevent their own nationals from taking part in such acts" (§ 3). The Assembly calls on its 47 Member States as well as on its observer and partner's States (including Mediterranean States) to, inter alia, "fulfil their positive obligations under the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide by taking all necessary measures to prevent genocide".

See the resolution at: <http://bit.ly/20x9DV5>

The Genocide of Christians in the Middle East seen from Washington

IDC Prompts Hillary Clinton to Use 'G' Word at Townhall in New Hampshire

IDC/ In Defense of Christians (09.01.2016) - On December 31, 2015, In Defense of Christians (IDC) President Toufic Baaklini made the following statement:

"Yesterday evening at a town hall meeting, IDC New Hampshire supporter Father Andrew Nelson asked Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, 'Tonight, with all of us here, will you join those leaders, faith leaders and secular leaders and political leaders from both the right and the left, in calling what is happening by its proper name: Genocide?'

"Secretary Clinton responded, 'I will because we now have enough evidence.' She added, 'What is happening is genocide, deliberately aimed at destroying not only the lives but wiping out the existence of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East in territory controlled by ISIS, and so I agree with you.'"

Marist Poll: Americans Say ISIS is Committing Genocide Against Christians

On December 31, the Knights of Columbus Published a poll which finds that most Americans say ISIS is committing genocide against Christians:

"By a wide margin, most Americans agree with the presidential candidates of both parties in calling ISIS' atrocities against Christians in the Middle East "genocide," according to a KofC-Marist poll conducted this month.

"Hillary Clinton, Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush, Mike Huckabee and Martin O'Malley have all called the situation genocide.

"By almost 20 points, 55 percent to 36 percent, Americans agree that this targeting of Christians and other religious minorities meets the U.N. definition of genocide.

"In addition, nearly 6 in 10 Americans (59 percent), say they have heard "a great deal" or "a good amount" about the targeting of Christians and other religious minorities in the region by ISIS."

To read more, click here: <http://prn.to/1J5cIHC>

IDC Board Members and Chairman Royce Write Letter to Secretary Kerry

IDC Board Members Professor Robert Destro and Dr. Thomas Farr signed an important left-right, ecumenical coalition letter that was sent on Dec. 4 to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, requesting a meeting to brief him about genocide confronting Iraq and Syria's Christian communities. Signatories represented a broad range of distinguished religious leaders and scholars.

On December 23, Chairman Royce, along with 29 Members of the House of Representatives, also sent a letter to Secretary Kerry asking that the State Department acknowledge and respond to the aforementioned letter signed by IDC's Board Members, and expressing his concern that the administration may exclude Christians from a potential genocide determination.

In the letter to Secretary Kerry, the members write: "We are gravely concerned by persistent press reports that the Administration is preparing a genocide finding that would apply only to Yazidis, and may avoid judgment about whether ISIL is also committing genocide against Christians and the other minorities it is eliminating. ... At the hands of ISIL, Christians and other minorities have faced mass murder, crucifixions, sexual slavery, torture, beheadings, the kidnapping of children, and other violence deliberately calculated to eliminate their communities from the so-called Islamic State."

The signed letter is available here: <http://1.usa.gov/1PtKOLh>

Statement by the President on Persecuted Christians at Christmas

On December 23, President Obama released the following statement (<http://1.usa.gov/1YDv0kl>):

"During this season of Advent, Christians in the United States and around the world are preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. At this time, those of us fortunate enough to live in countries that honor the birthright of all people to practice their faith freely give thanks for that blessing. Michelle and I are also ever-mindful that many of our fellow Christians do not enjoy that right, and hold especially close to our hearts and minds those who have been driven from their ancient homelands by unspeakable violence and persecution.

"In some areas of the Middle East where church bells have rung for centuries on Christmas Day, this year they will be silent; this silence bears tragic witness to the brutal atrocities committed against these communities by ISIL."

On December 28, IDC Executive Director Kirsten Evans told Newsmax, "In Defense of Christians is grateful to President Obama for making this year's annual Christmas message an opportunity to manifest solidarity with and raise awareness about the terrible plight of the Christian community under ISIS."

Senators Introduce Companion Resolution to H. Con. Res. 75

On December 18, Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA) introduced for himself and Senators Joe Manchin (D-WV), Marco Rubio (R-FL), Mark Kirk (R-IL), and Roger Wicker (R-MS) a bipartisan resolution, S. Res. 340, denouncing the genocide against Christians and other

ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq and Syria. Click here to read the Arabic translation of the resolution by IDC Iraq Adviser Loay Mikhael.

The companion house resolution, H. Con. Res. 75, which was introduced by Rep. Fortenberry (R-NE) in September, now has 170 co-sponsors.

IDC is working with a broad, bi-partisan coalition of American and international religious leaders, activists, and scholars in urging the administration to officially recognize the genocide ISIS has waged against Assyrian Chaldean Syriac Christians, Yezidis, and other ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq and Syria.

At IDC's National Leadership Convention in September, more than 120 IDC state chapter leaders from across America, in an unprecedented show of unified political action on behalf of the Christians of the Middle East, pressed lawmakers to support H. Con. Res. 75, meeting with over 250 Congressional offices in a day.

Please ask your representative and senators to co-sponsor H. Con. Res. 75 and S. Res. 340 if they have not already! Click here to see if your representative has co-sponsored H. Con. Res. 75 and here to see if your senators have co-sponsored S. Res. 340.

United Kingdom Parliamentarians Write to PM Cameron About Christian Genocide

On December 21, Lord Alton & Rob Ffello, MP led a letter signed by more than sixty parliamentarians from both Houses to PM Cameron calling for the slaughter of Christians and Yazidis in Syria to be named as a genocide and requesting to meet with the Prime Minister:

"We write to ask you to meet a delegation of Members from both Houses and all parties to discuss our profound concern at what is now clearly best described as "genocide" being perpetrated by Daesh against minority communities including Iraqi and Syrian Christians, Yazidis and other vulnerable groups.

"There is now clear evidence that this genocide includes assassinations of Church leaders; mass murders; torture, kidnapping for ransom in the Christian communities of Iraq and Syria; sexual enslavement and systematic rape of Christian girls and women; forcible conversions to Islam; destruction of churches, monasteries, cemeteries, and Christian artifacts; and theft of lands and wealth from Christian clergy and laity alike. ISIS has made its own public statements taking "credit" for mass murder of Christians, and expressing its intent to eliminate Christian communities from its "Islamic State".

To read more, click here: <http://bit.ly/1O6sNgk>

Parliament of Lithuania Passes Genocide Resolution, European Parliamentarian Prepares to Introduce Resolution

On December 15, the Parliament of Lithuania passed a resolution by massive majority calling on the United Nations and the European Parliament to recognize the plight of Christians in the Middle East - and in particular in Syria, Iraq, Iran and north Africa - as an act of genocide and to act in accordance with the UN Human Rights Convention. Lithuania is the first EU country to legally call the persecution of Christians in the Middle East by Isis and other Muslim organisations genocide.

A European Parliamentarian is also working on a resolution calling on EU members to recognize that the Islamic State terror group is committing genocide against Christians and other minorities, and act upon that reality. Lars Adaktusson of the Christian Democrats party in Sweden wrote (November 30) in an op-ed published by Swedish

newspaper Svenska Dagbladet that there is clear evidence IS wants to eradicate all Christians from the territory it has captured across Iraq and Syria.

To read more, click here: <http://bit.ly/231GBz4>
