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Church leaders urge more support for Christians of Nineveh Plains

By Maria Lozano

ACN (19.12.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2Qs54LR> - In an urgent appeal, Christian leaders on Iraq's Nineveh Plains called on the international community to do more to help resettle thousands of Christian families who had fled ISIS and ensure the survival of Christianity in Iraq—which is by no means certain.

"Please do not be a silent bystander to our drama. We call on you to support the Christians of Iraq... while there is still time for it," wrote leaders of the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Syrian Catholic Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church, the three main Churches on the Nineveh Plain. The signatories are part of the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee, which was created by Aid to the Church in Need, the international papal charity, to oversee the reconstruction of the Christian communities in northern Iraq.

Funding is falling short, the statement said, noting that "there is still a lot to do" to facilitate the return of Christians "to their respective ancestral communities from which they were expelled" as ISIS swept through the region in the summer of 2014.

The appeal reports that 13,904 homes needed repair or rebuilding after the ouster of ISIS; work has been completed on half the number of houses. To-date, 9,060 families have returned from exile in Kurdistan, representing only just over 45 percent of all Christians who fled the Nineveh Plains.

The leaders said that an additional "2,000 families are eager to return, but have no means to do so." The statement stressed the fact that the return of these Christians to their former homes "is a matter of great urgency, since the window of time for returning safely is closing. If they do not return now to repossess their homes, others will occupy them. Moreover, the Iraqi government is not inclined to protect empty houses."

Besides urging greater financial and diplomatic support from the international community, the statement calls for the "legal protection of Christians and other minorities, their fundamental human rights, especially equal citizenship;" trauma care;

investment in education that uses the Syriac language spoken by Christians; and the funding of “small business/self-employment micro-projects” to help prevent the impoverishment of the Christian community and stem the flow of emigration.

Iraqi Christian leaders cite two key recent developments: commitments made by the German and Austrian governments to help fund the reconstruction of the Nineveh Plains and US President Donald Trump signing into law the “Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act of 2018,” which provides for “relief for victims of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes who are members of religious and ethnic minority groups in Iraq and Syria, for accountability for perpetrators of these crimes, and for other purposes.”

To read the full statement, please click [here](#).

H.R.390 - Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act of 2018 115th Congress (2017-2018) | 11 December 2018

Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act of 2017

Congress (11.12.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2PzUamI> - (Sec. 4) This bill states that is U.S. policy to ensure that humanitarian, stabilization, and recovery assistance for nationals and residents of Iraq or Syria, and of communities from those countries, is directed toward ethnic and minority individuals and communities with the greatest need, including those individuals and communities that are at risk of persecution or war crimes.

(Sec. 5) The Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development may provide assistance, including financial and technical assistance, to support the efforts of entities, including nongovernmental organizations with expertise in international criminal investigations and law, to address crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes in Iraq since January 2014 by:

- conducting criminal investigations,
- developing indigenous investigative and judicial skills to adjudicate cases consistent with due process and respect for the rule of law, and
- collecting and preserving evidence for use in prosecutions.

The State Department shall encourage foreign governments to identify and prosecute individuals who are suspected of committing such crimes, including members of foreign terrorist organizations operating in Iraq or Syria.

(Sec. 6) The State Department shall identify:

- threats of persecution, genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes against members of Iraqi or Syrian religious or ethnic groups that are minorities in Iraq or in Syria with respect to whom the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has committed such crimes in Iraq or Syria since January 2014 or who are members of other persecuted religious or ethnic groups;
- persecuted religious and ethnic minority groups in Iraq or Syria that are at risk of forced migration and the primary reasons for such risk;
- humanitarian, stabilization, and recovery needs of these individuals; and
- entities, including faith-based entities, that are providing such assistance and the extent of U.S. assistance to or through such entities.

(Sec. 7) The State Department shall provide Congress with:

- a description of the efforts taken and proposed to implement this bill; and
- an assessment of the feasibility and advisability of prosecuting individuals for acts of genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes in Iraq since January 2014 or in Syria since March 2011.

See as well : Trump signs bill to help religious minorities in Iraq, Syria:

<https://www.apnews.com/6c456d1fc4f1443699eb7ef8b7670e92>

Christians on brink of extinction in Middle East, warns Archbishop of Canterbury

By Camilla Tominey

The Telegraph (01.12.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2Ebc6TI> - Christians who were the first founders of the church are on brink of "imminent extinction", the Archbishop of Canterbury is warning.

Describing the "daily threat of murder" faced in the Middle East, the Most Reverend Justin Welby says Christians are experiencing "the worst situation since the Mongol invasions of the 13th Century".

Writing in the Sunday Telegraph, Archbishop Welby, the most senior clergyman in the Church of England, calls on the Government to take in more refugees.

It comes as figures have revealed just one in 400 Syrian refugees given asylum in the UK last year were Christians despite them being subjected to "horrendous persecution".

Highlighting their plight ahead of a special service at Westminster Abbey to celebrate the contribution of Christians in the Middle East, the Archbishop writes: "Christians face daily the threat of violence, murder, intimidation, prejudice and poverty.

"In the last few years, they have been slaughtered by so-called Islamic State, and in many countries they find themselves squeezed between the upper and lower millstones of pressure on them within society and of conflicts that afflict the region.

"Many have left. Hundreds of thousands have been forced from their homes. Many have been killed, enslaved and persecuted or forcibly converted. Even those who remain ask the question, 'Why stay?' The Christian population of Iraq, for instance, is less than half what it was in 2003 and their churches, houses and businesses have been damaged or destroyed. The Syrian Christian population has halved since 2010. As a result, across the region Christian communities that were the foundation of the universal Church now face the threat of imminent extinction."

He adds: "The Christians of the region are facing the worst situation since the Mongol invasions of the 13th Century."

The Archbishop says that even where Christians are secure in physical terms, tensions in regions like Israel "makes life difficult for them".

Calling for everyone to "remember Christians in the Middle East and pray for them", he says we should not ask Syrian Christians to choose between President Assad "under whom they were tolerated" and "the unimaginable horrors and threats of so-called Islamic State", adding: "We should not judge too easily."

"We must support and help them in every way we can," he says. "Where they wish to leave, they will be refugees in need of asylum. Where, courageously and by the grace of God, they choose to remain, they need publicity and external, visible support."

Archbishop Welby will join forces with Prince Charles at Tuesday's service, where the heir to the throne is expected to give a Reflection focusing on forgiveness and reconciliation. In a moving speech last Christmas, the future king spoke of his "heartbreak" at the situation, and called on believers in the UK to step up their response to the crisis.

And in an Easter message this year, he said: "Over the years, I have met many who have had to flee for their faith and for their life – or have somehow endured the terrifying consequences of remaining in their country – and I have been so deeply moved, and humbled, by their truly remarkable courage and by their selfless capacity for forgiveness, despite all that they have suffered."

In June, a Freedom of Information request found just 11 of those admitted to Britain under the Government's flagship Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS) in 2017 were Christian. This is despite an estimated 10 per cent of the Syrian population being Christian at the start of the civil war.

The number of Christians granted asylum by Britain has slumped considerably since 2016, when 1.5 per cent were Christians. Last year that percentage dropped to just 0.23 - amounting to 11 of the 4,832 Syrians who were resettled in the UK.

USAID and Knights of Columbus in agreement to help Mid East Christians

Catholic News Agency (12.10.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2CKvHZU> - The Knights of Columbus have signed an agreement with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to cooperate in assisting religious minorities in the Middle East rebuild their communities following the persecution and genocide of the Islamic State.

The joint effort was agreed in a memorandum of understanding announced Oct. 12 and will begin in Iraq, before being rolled out throughout the region.

Andrew Walther, Vice President for Strategic Communications for the Knights of Columbus, said that the agreement was an important advance in helping the Christian communities who had suffered under IS.

"This memorandum is important in itself," he told CNA. "But it is also illustrative of a wider engagement with, commitment to, and prioritization of persecuted communities in the region by USAID - not only Christians but Yazidis, Shi'a Muslims and others."

Carl Anderson, the Supreme Knight and head of the Catholic fraternal order, released a statement Friday welcoming the news.

"The Knights of Columbus is pleased to work together with USAID in the important work being done to stabilize these communities and hope that our joint and combined efforts will bring hope and concrete improvement to the situation confronting minority communities targeted by ISIS," Anderson said.

"Vice President Mike Pence and [USAID] Administrator Mark Green are to be commended for working to ensure that these communities are not overlooked by American government assistance."

USAID plans to work closely with the Knights, and local faith and community leaders, to deliver aid rapidly to persecuted communities, according to the memorandum signed Friday.

"Crucially," the document states, "the support will flow directly to individuals and households most in need of help."

In the agreement, USAID recognized "the unique expertise and relationships of trust that organizations like Knights of Columbus has forged with local and faith-based organizations in the region."

According to the memorandum, partnerships with the Knights and similar organizations will form a crucial part of delivering the Genocide Recovery and Persecution Response Program in the Middle East announced last year by Vice President Mike Pence.

Andrew Walther explained that these partnership had historical roots.

"Almost exactly 100 years ago there was a real public-private partnership in the United States to help ensure the survival of Christian communities being persecuted throughout the Ottoman Empire," he said.

"Under the Wilson administration, several organizations including, in a modest way, the Knights partnered with the government to deliver aid to these communities under threat. Reviving this historical cooperation will make our combined efforts that much more effective for the benefit of those Christians struggling to survive in their own land."

USAID is responsible for delivering the program and currently has more than \$195 million in planned and active efforts to support rebuilding in northern Iraq.

In addition to advocacy work on behalf of persecuted minorities, the Knights of Columbus Charities has committed more than \$20 million in aid to the region since 2014. An additional \$5 million is expected to be committed over the next six months.

Two years ago, the Knights produced a report detailing IS atrocities in the region. That report was instrumental in successive U.S. secretaries of state designating the treatment of religious minorities in the region by Islamic State as genocide.

The memorandum also committed both organizations to "enhance our collective response to vulnerable populations to help preserve and promote pluralism in the Middle East" through assistance to a number of communities hit hard by IS, including Yazidis, Christians, Shi'a Muslims, and other ethnic and religious communities.

"Our work with USAID is intended to help these populations survive and prosper in lands they have called home for centuries, and even millennia. We cannot allow ISIS to succeed in driving them out," Anderson said.

USAID has partnered with religious communities and organizations in carrying out its work since its establishment in the 1960s.

Aid to the persecuted Christian communities in Iraq was one of the central focuses of the the Knight of Columbus' annual convention held in August.

Iraqi archbishop tells USAID delegation to hurry up aid delivery

World Watch Monitor (04.07.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2IUhM26> - An Iraqi Catholic archbishop has said he and other bishops are "delighted" that the US aid arm is to make good on a pledge to send aid directly to non-Muslim communities recovering from ISIS's occupation of their towns and villages, but warned "time is running [out]".

Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil, in Kurdistan, addressed his warning to a visiting delegation from the agency, USAID, led by its administrator, Mark Green.

"The time should be now and the help should be immediate and effective," [Archbishop Warda told the US-based Catholic News Service \(CNS\)](#) after the visit.

Some eight months after it was [announced by Vice President Mike Pence](#), USAID is providing US\$10 million to two umbrella organisations, Catholic Relief Services and Heartland Alliance, to help Christians and Yazidis rebuild their homes and communities after Islamic State's occupation of the Nineveh Plains region, which ended with the Battle of Mosul in 2017. An additional \$25m of aid has also been pledged.

Last month Pence [ordered Green to fly to Iraq](#) to assess why aid was being held up after Archbishop Warda, who has been caring for tens of thousands of displaced Christian families since 2014, [told US-based Fox News](#) that much of the pledged aid had not materialised.

Green said on Twitter today (4 July) that he would be presenting President Donald Trump and Pence "with a plan for expediting the delivery of assistance to the most vulnerable communities". He said USAID was supporting "the safe and dignified return of persecuted religious and ethnic communities in northern Iraq".

Archbishop Warda told CNS this week that the delegation visited Qaraqosh and other devastated towns which had had large Christian populations before ISIS seized control of the region in 2014. He told CNS the delegation's message was that "the American government and the Americans do care about the fate of the Christians, Yazidis and the minorities and want to help".

On 1 July, a high-level US delegation met the prime minister of the semiautonomous Kurdish region, Nechirvan Barzani, who told them that the return of Iraq's religious and ethnic minorities to their homes would require the help of the international community. Barzani also suggested that a confidence-building process be launched to encourage Christians and other minorities not to leave Iraq or the Kurdistan Region.

Yesterday [the delegation met the Iraqi Prime Minister](#), Haider Al-Abadi, and according to his Facebook page discussed "cooperation between Iraq and USAID, economic support, the return of displaced persons, the protection of minorities, and the training of local police".

As well as Green, the US delegation included the US Ambassador to Iraq, Douglas Silliman; the US Consul General in Erbil, Ken Gross; the US Special Envoy for International Religious Freedom, Ambassador Sam Brownback; the co-chairman of the bipartisan Religious Minorities in the Middle East Caucus, Congressman Jeff Fortenberry; and religious freedom advocate and retired congressman Frank Wolf.

Before USAID officials' visit, Pence spoke to Al-Abadi by telephone and, according to the White House, the pair "conveyed their shared commitment to protecting victims of religious persecution at the hands of ISIS, and discussed USAID administrator Mark Green's upcoming visit to Iraq in support of this effort".

IS cells continue to carry out insurgent attacks, bombings, ambushes and kidnappings, [Kurdistan 24 reported](#) last week.

According to the UN's refugee agency, 2.1 million Iraqis are displaced within Iraq and, of those, more than 360,000 are living in "informal settlements" such as abandoned buildings. But church leaders fear that if Christians are unable to return to their homes and start rebuilding their lives in safety, they will seek asylum abroad, further diminishing the Christian presence in Iraq and damaging the country's fragile religious diversity. The number of Christians in Iraq has fallen from 1.4m in 1987 to an estimated 2-300,000 today, accelerated by war, instability and targeted sectarian violence.

More than 100,000 Iraqis – including many Christians – fled Mosul and the Nineveh Plains for Kurdistan in the summer of 2014, after ISIS seized control of large swathes of Iraq and threatened non-Sunni Muslims with death if they did not leave. According to the church committees in the Nineveh Plains, some 8,744 Christian families have returned to nine villages in the area. In addition, 82 Christian families have returned to Mosul.

The Chaldean Catholic patriarch, Cardinal Louis Raphael I Sako, has said about one-third of the Christian families who fled IS have returned home but that infrastructure and security remain inadequate, CNS reported.

Warda said many actors had a role to play in ensuring Christians remained in Iraq. He told CNS that "concerned governments and parties need to bring a dialogue of life, that existed before, back again" to Iraq's rich cultural mosaic.

Praying for a peacemaker: What do Iraq's elections mean for the remaining Christians?

By Abigail Frymann Rouch

World Watch Monitor (09.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2Kn8MDP> - Iraqis go the polls on Saturday (12 May) for the first time since the military defeat of Islamic State, whose campaign of terror against non-Muslims pushed thousands of the country's last Christians to flee their homeland.

Only about 200,000 to 300,000 Christians are thought to remain in Iraq now, mostly in the Nineveh Plains and the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in the country's north. Around 700,000 emigrated in the violent years that have followed the 2003 US-led invasion and the 2014 appearance of IS, and tens of thousands more have fled to Kurdistan. Politically weak, Christians will be hoping the election process helps rather than hinders the country's slow progress towards peace.

The vote is going ahead despite a plea from Sunni and Kurdish MPs to delay it to allow more time for people to return home. It has already been postponed from last September, when the military action against IS was ongoing. More than 2.3 million Iraqis, mainly Sunni Muslims but also tens of thousands of Christians, remain displaced. Many of the displaced Sunnis are in camps around the former IS strongholds of Mosul and the western Anbar region, and in Anbar the army is still sporadically attacked by IS jihadists.

However, a spokesman for the Iraqi Embassy in London told World Watch Monitor that displaced Iraqis would be able to vote as long as they had the required form of identification. "The High Electoral Commission in Iraq has provided all the necessary requirements for all Iraqis to vote with no exception," he said, adding that displaced people who no longer have their biometric card, nor the electronic card used in previous years, still would be able to cast their vote if they could produce an official document with their name and photo attached to it.

Some 24 million Iraqis are eligible to take part in Saturday's elections for the 329 seats of the Council of Representatives. Those elected then will determine the president and prime minister.

'A nod to pluralism'

Under the country's quota system, established in 2004-05 after the removal of Saddam Hussein by US-led forces, Christians are allocated five of those seats, and the other non-Muslim minorities a total of four. The Christians' seats are in Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, Duhok and Erbil.

Dr. Erica Hunter of London University's School of Oriental and African Studies told World Watch Monitor the quota system was "one of the problems" for Christians.

"While they have a representation, they realise it is a tokenism to pluralism," she said. "Clergy say, 'We don't have any say, and nothing really gets done,' because the whole scenario is on the much larger demographic of the Shia and Sunni communities." In the absence of greater decision-making power, Christians' prime concern, she said, is "the security and stability and safety of their communities".

The Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, Louis Sako, has repeatedly urged Chaldeans to take part in the vote. In a statement to be read in churches 6 May, he urged people to choose "those who can best serve them and their homeland", and expressed a hope for the election to take place in a "sound, secure and fair manner, so as to come out with a strong national government representing all components." In a previous statement he warned voters against backing "inexperienced and opportunist" candidates.

Who's who?

According to the political structure established post-2003, the role of Prime Minister is reserved for members of Iraq's Shia majority. In his forthcoming term, whoever is elected will need to lead the country through major post-conflict reconstruction, rebuild relations with the Sunnis and reduce corruption in the oil-rich country. Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi is standing for re-election, as is his divisive predecessor, Nouri Al-Maliki, both of whom come from the Islamic Dawa Party. Another frontrunner, Hadi Al-Amiri, is a militia leader who fought against Iraq during its war with Iran. A candidate popular with Christians is the former vice president Ayad Allawi, 74, a secular liberal, although he is seen as not powerful enough to win the top role.

"Whoever comes in will need to be a peacemaker," Sir Terence Clark, a former British ambassador to Iraq, told World Watch Monitor. The election comes eight months after a Kurdish vote in favour of secession was rejected by Baghdad. "Somebody has got to sit down with the Kurds and sort out their grievances as part of a federal state".

"Another major obstacle is to reconcile the grievances of the Sunnis," he said. "Sadly, Al-Maliki seemed to aggravate the differences; Abadi has made some efforts but not enough. And whoever comes in next has got to do a lot more than has been done before." Al-Abadi has reached out to Sunni voters and is prepared to work with Sunni politicians, while Reuters has reported that Al-Maliki is planning to reject the post-2003 power-sharing agreement that allots government roles to larger non-Shia communities.

Sir Terence said the sense of grievance among the Sunnis that led to the creation of ISIS had not been resolved. "If anything, it has been exacerbated, by the failure of the central government to respond quickly to the needs of the people in the Sunni areas, which were last to be liberated from ISIS' control." Therefore, he said, the threat of extremist violence has not gone away following what he called the "nominal" defeat of IS.

Christian vote divided

Christians, now being so few in number, know their political power is severely limited. In previous elections there has been one main Christian party, the Assyrian Democratic Movement, and Christians have backed it or sometimes nationalist secular parties. However this time there are as many as 12 Christian parties taking part in the elections – some Assyrian, some Chaldean; some candidates were closer to the Kurdish agenda and others to the Shia – weakening the Christian voice and re-opening denominational divisions. "The Christian vote is completely split now", said Robert Ewan, an Iraqi-born journalist in London.

Another change in the demographic make-up of the country is the spread northwards of Shia Iraqis. Since government forces reclaimed the oil-rich city of Kirkuk from the Kurdish troops who had defended it from IS, members of Shia Hashd militias have begun moving into towns in the Nineveh Plains not far away. They have had little trouble in buying up properties from those Christians who have decided to emigrate.

According to the ecumenical Nineveh Reconstruction Committee, which aims to rebuild nine Christian towns and villages, some 37,000 of the more 100,000 Christians who fled their homes in the Nineveh Plains in 2014 for the Kurdish region have returned home. But Fr. Salar Kajo, who is part of the committee, said: "We have to rebuild now. If we take more time, families will leave and Christianity will disappear from Iraq."

Sixteen-year-old Issac, a Syriac Catholic from Qaraqosh in the Nineveh Plains, spends his days cleaning and repairing the town's damaged churches while his family awaits relocation. "Our house was completely burned; repairing it isn't possible. I have no hobbies," he told World Watch Monitor. "And I don't go to school because our family decided to leave the country as soon as we can."

Eighteen-year-old Yousif, also from Qaraqosh, said: "I don't have many friends any more. Pretty much all of them left the country over the last few years. They are in Australia, the United States and France now." But he told World Watch Monitor: "There is still fear among the Christians that there still could be attacks. But there is also courage among the Christians that chose to stay in this country."

Christians have been scapegoated for too long to tolerate much more violence. With their political power limited by design and weakened by division, their best hope lies with a government that works to heal the grievances left by 15 years of bitter conflict and incorporates all the country's religious and ethnic groups. Only with the establishment of a lasting peace and a citizenship that moves beyond religious favouritism will Christians be persuaded to return home, and, if they have already, to stay.

Iraqi courts seeking out atheists for prosecution

By Omar al-Jaffal

Al-Monitor (01.04.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2pXCqa9> - Arrest warrants have been issued for four Iraqis on atheism charges, according to Dhi Qar province's Garraf district judiciary. The announcement garnered quite a reaction on media and social networks, as some say these hunts infringe on the rights of the Iraqi people, whose constitution guarantees them freedom of belief and expression. Other observers say the campaign has political aspects.

Dhidan al-Ekili, the chief Garraf judge, told local Iraqi newspapers March 11 that security forces had been able to arrest one of the four indicted, as the search for the remaining three continued. Ekili said they are being pursued for "holding seminars during social gatherings to promote the idea of the nonexistence of God and to spread and popularize atheism."

According to Ekili, the local court administration has tasked intelligence agencies with cracking down on the "atheism phenomenon." Ekili said the crackdown is in accordance with the Iraqi Penal Code.

But political and legal analyst Ali Jaber al-Tamimi told Al-Monitor, "There aren't any articles in the Iraqi Penal Code that provide for a direct punishment for atheism, nor are

there any special laws on punishments against atheists." However, "there are articles that punish the desecration of religions."

The Iraqi Constitution allows "freedom of belief and intellectual views."

Critics on social media were quick to lambaste authorities in Garraf, but atheists themselves weren't safe from ridicule by well-known Facebook figures. Stand-up comedian Ahmad Wahid, for one, slammed people who publicly brand themselves as atheists without having a profound understanding of atheism.

Many Iraqi newspapers are claiming that the propagation of atheism is a manifestation of the Islamic parties' failed reigns over the past decade, in addition to their corruption.

Studies and statistics about beliefs and views in Iraq are nonexistent. However, Gallup released a study that said about 88% of Iraqis were religious in 2012. Iraq was ranked No. 7 globally in terms of its religious demographic.

The situation in Iraq seems complicated when it comes to defining atheism. Many clerics who are close to Islamic political parties have misconceptions regarding the subject. For instance, secularism is often branded as atheism. Some religious figures promote the idea that liberal and communist ideologies are inherently anti-religion and teach that God doesn't exist, which is why they should be resisted, as Shiite cleric Amer al-Kufaishi stressed in August 2017.

Indeed, the campaign against atheists has heavy political ties. Some of the Islamic parties that have been in power since the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 are behind it, as Safaa Khalaf, a reporter who follows social and political matters, believes.

"The idea of atheism in Iraq is rooted in political pressure and its economic and social ramifications," Khalaf told Al-Monitor. "Atheism surfaced as a social reaction to the overreaching hands of political Islam and its failure to govern services and state, not to mention the new patterns of intellect and lifestyles that were the result of the openness of modern communication, especially for new generations that live under huge pressure [from] frustration."

Khalaf, who monitors desperation-rooted phenomena in Iraqi society, added, "Most often, intellectual views are confused with religious views or civil rights-related views. You can often see demonizing propaganda on social media against any trend that collides with the interests of political Islam's authority." Based on this, "Secularism was considered an adversary of religious faith due to political Islam's rhetoric, and this term has been removed from political circulation in Iraq since 2003. Many established Iraqi parties, such as the Iraqi Communist Party, renounced this term, and the term 'civility' replaced it," he said.

"Inaccurate and misused labels are being used to describe incorrect behaviors by the political authority in light of the security mentality prevalent in both society and state," Khalaf concluded. "The authorities are comfortable with this illiteracy because it immensely aids them in oppressing any opposed view, especially if it challenges religion, clerics or practices that interfere with public freedoms."

Indeed, atheism has always been on the radar of Islamic parties' leaders in Iraq. Many of them simply believe atheism is worth fighting and restricting, while some others consider it an attack on the Islamic parties themselves. Iraq's highest authority on Shiite religious and legal matters considers the propagation of atheism a result of political failure in Iraq for more than a decade.

Netherlands joins UN Security Council to shine light on IS genocide

World Watch Monitor (11.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2r10m0c> - The Netherlands has just joined the UN Security Council as a temporary member for a year. Ten days before, its Foreign Minister, Halbe Zijlstra, published a letter explaining the Dutch government's response on the use by politicians of the term "genocide".

The Dutch Parliament had had several debates on the "genocide" committed by members of the Islamic State group (IS), and came to a consensus that it was not for politicians but for the international judicial system to make such a determination.

The Dutch government's response - the main points of which can be viewed at the bottom of the article - followed a joint legal opinion from the Advisory Committee on International Law Issues (CAVV) and the External Adjudication Adviser (EVA), which it had requested at the end of 2016.

"The Dutch government must be commended for its work on this topic. Hopefully those promises are translated into action and will be visible over the next year."

The Dutch government supported this legal opinion, and confirmed its reluctance to use the word "genocide" where such a determination had not been previously made by an international court or UN body.

However, concerning the atrocities perpetrated by IS against Christians and Yazidis, the Dutch government confirmed that it "is the opinion that sufficient facts have been established to judge that [IS] is most likely guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity". It added that the obligations under the 1948 UN Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide apply to IS's atrocities.

This declaration is late, in comparison with other actors. The opinion published by the Dutch government, relying on the joint legal opinion of CAVV and EVA, clarifies the approach to be taken by government and parliamentary officials concerning mass atrocities that may amount to genocide.

Additionally, the Dutch government indicated in its letter the possible direction of work, including: referral of the situation in Syria to the ICC; supporting the work of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, a new mechanism established by the UN General Assembly resolution to collect evidence of atrocities in Syria; and assisting the Investigative Team, a new mechanism established by the UN Security Council to collect evidence of IS atrocities in Iraq.

The Dutch government mentioned that it would further advocate focussing on atrocities perpetrated by other actors in addition to IS. Concerning Iraq, this position has been abandoned by other states for the sake of achieving consensus on the issue of IS.

But the Dutch government emphasised that the atrocities perpetrated by other parties must not be neglected and forgotten.

Analysis by Ewelina Ochab*

The Dutch government must be commended for its work on this topic. Hopefully those promises are translated into action and will be visible over the next year.

It should also be emphasised that apart from the commendable joint opinion of the CAVV and EVA, the Dutch government has had great assistance on the topic from MP Pieter

Omtzigt, who represents the Netherlands at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and became a rapporteur on bringing IS to justice in late 2016.

His mandate included preparing a report outlining the options to bring IS to justice, and a resolution proposing recommendations to member states to the Council of Europe. The report and the resolution were adopted by the EU in late 2017.

Omtzigt will continue to hold his mandate for another year to follow up on the recommendations made in the EU resolution, as he looks to ensure the Dutch government makes a firm stance at the UN Security Council.

He has said he wants to ensure IS militants are prosecuted for their involvement and complicity through an international or hybrid tribunal (a domestic court with significant support of international expert and judges).

The UK recently claimed that it was not "crucial" to make such a determination of genocide, and that it has fulfilled its international obligations by working with the Iraqi government on UN Security Council Resolution 2379, establishing the Investigative Team to collect the evidence of IS atrocities in Iraq, and has been providing humanitarian assistance. However, there is more to the story.

Indeed, the determination of genocide should not be crucial to trigger the obligations under the 1948 UN Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide; historically, however, this has been done first after the use of the word "genocide".

The UK was the leading force behind the UN Security Council Resolution 2379 that passed successfully on 21 September 2017. However, the resolution proposes that Iraqi courts will deal with prosecutions of the perpetrators. The question is whether Iraqi courts can do so.

British peer David Alton questioned the UK government on what checks it had done before proposing, by way of Resolution 2379, Iraqi courts prosecute IS militants. The UK government responded that it was currently considering the issue, namely after the resolution was adopted and not in preparation of the resolution, to allow it to propose the best solution for bringing IS to justice.

If, in fact, Iraqi courts do not have the capacity, it means that an international or a hybrid tribunal will need to be established, as proposed by Omtzigt. Furthermore, the UK has failed to prosecute returning IS fighters. According to the information submitted by the UK to the Council of Europe, as of early 2017 only 101 individuals connected with IS atrocities have been convicted, which may be just the tip of the iceberg, considering that 425 are said to have returned to the UK.

The UK has been actively supporting the work of the Global Coalition against IS, a coalition of 74 countries with the aim to tackle IS on all fronts. However, at the same time, the assistance provided to the victims of the IS genocide is concerning. The UK government confirmed that it is funding 171 projects in the Christian areas affected by IS atrocities and 80 projects in the Yazidi areas. While this may sound reassuring, the extent, impact, and benefit of these projects is unclear. I attempted to obtain this information by way of Freedom of Information request but have not received word back yet.

However, as indicated in the letter from the Dutch government, the determination of genocide is a vital step towards the fulfilment of the obligations to prevent and punish.

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