

July 7, 2016

The Honorable John McCain
218 Russell Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mac Thornberry
2208 Rayburn House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Jack Reed
728 Hart Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Adam Smith
2264 Rayburn House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Senator McCain, Senator Reed, Representative Thornberry, and Representative Smith:

We write as an informal and diverse group of non-governmental organizations and individuals who are scholars, former policy advisors, religious leaders, and human rights advocates deeply concerned—as we trust you are—about the protection of religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq.

In March of this year, the U.S. government officially declared that ISIS was committing genocide against Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities. The protection of these victims of genocide, who have been brutalized and displaced must be a greater priority for the United States in its ongoing efforts to liberate territory occupied by ISIS. As national leaders, you are uniquely positioned to ensure that our response in defense of those suffering and vulnerable reflects American leadership by example globally.

In particular, we ask you to help ensure that the religious minority IDPs—including Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriacs, Yazidis, and other groups—who fled Mosul and the Nineveh Plain after the territory was occupied by ISIS are able to exercise their rights to return safely to their ancestral lands and homes, reasonably able to defend themselves.

Many of the approximately 125,000 Christians who fled from Mosul and the Nineveh Plain after the territory was occupied by ISIS in the summer of 2014—the majority of whom are living in desperate conditions in Iraqi Kurdistan—want to return to their ancestral homes. The right of these communities displaced by the conflict to return to their historic homes is fundamental and warrants utmost urgency and prioritization.

To guarantee their safety and security, it should also be U.S. policy to provide security assistance to local forces in Iraq, including ethnic and religious minority groups who have already demonstrated a commitment to protecting themselves. A number of minority forces were formed to protect vulnerable communities in the wake of the Islamic State's onslaught and the collapse of the Iraqi Army. These minority forces are not receiving the assistance they need, and urgently seek U.S. support.

As the leaders of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, we urge you to include the following language as offered by Representative Jeff Fortenberry (R-NE) as amendments to Section 1222 of H.R. 4909 in the final FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA):

SEC. 1222. MODIFICATION AND EXTENSION OF AUTHORITY TO PROVIDE ASSISTANCE TO COUNTER THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND THE LEVANT.

(a) Sense of Congress.—It is the sense of Congress that—
(4) securing safe areas, including the Nineveh Plain, for purposes of resettling and reintegrating ethnic and religious minorities, including victims of genocide, into their homelands, is a critical component of a safe, secure, and sovereign Iraq.

“(ii) Sunni tribal security forces, or other local security forces, including ethnic and religious minority groups, with a national security mission.”.

We are encouraged that this language passed the House of Representatives and urge you to support the inclusion of this language in the final FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act that will be sent to President Obama.

As the recent attacks in Paris, San Bernardino, Brussels, Orlando, Dhaka, Baghdad, Medina, and elsewhere make clear, the violence emanating from ISIS' worldview is globalized in scope. These issues demand clear U.S. leadership and the world's full engagement, as fundamental questions of human identity and worth are at stake.

Whether serving in or outside of government, we share a common cause to protect the lives of those subject to genocide. With millions already displaced, hundreds of thousands killed and held captive for their beliefs and/or gender, and even more living in fear of ISIS' brutality—we thank you for doing all you can to include the above language in the NDAA, to protect religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq from further harm, and to help restore those displaced to lives free from fear and persecution.

Respectfully,

Kirsten Evans
Executive Director
In Defense of Christians

Randel Everett
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President & CEO
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Lauren Homer
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Dr. Sargon Issa
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