

United States Commission for International Religious Freedom
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Statement of Pascale Warda
Former Minister for Migration and Displacement

My name is Pascale Warda. I am an Assyrian Christian from the Chaldean Catholic Church, and I live in Baghdad, Iraq. In 2004, during the first transitional Iraqi government, under Prime Minister Ayad Alawi I held the position of Minister of Migration and Displacement. After serving the transitional government for a year, I was appointed as the human rights advisor to the Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament. I am currently serving as the President of the Iraqi Women's Center for Development, and I am also a political activist. I would like to thank our friends in the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for inviting me today to appear as a witness in order to bring attention to the reality of the situation facing religious minorities inside Iraq. I would like to begin with my own story.

While serving as the Minister for Migration, the Ministry building was targeted with bombs, and since then there have been four separate assassination attempts against my life. In 2005, during one of these attempts the convoy carrying my bodyguards was attacked – all four of my Christian bodyguards were brutally killed.

Today, I will be focusing on the deteriorating conditions of the largest ethnic and religious minority of the country, the Assyrian Christians (ChaldoAssyrians), the indigenous people of Iraq.

Iraq is the home of the last concentrated pocket of ChaldoAssyrians in the world. As a lifelong Assyrian human rights activist, I am honored to be with you today to be the voice of people who have no opportunity to speak or be heard. Today, there is a real disconnect between the authorities in Iraq and the people in Iraq. The foundation of the new political system, which was originally meant to develop into a real democratic rule of governance, is facing many challenges due to the unsustainable framework under which the current government was designed. It focused greatly on sectarian division and characteristics of the majority Sunni, Shi'a, and Kurdish groups in Iraq, with little regard to the rights of the religious and ethnic minority groups.

This is evidenced in the current electoral law, which were embedded in 2004 by the governing council which Paul Bremer administered. This design, in turn, awarded lawmaking positions based only on their sectarian links, rather than the qualifications of the candidates.

Iraq is a rich country, not only in natural resources, but also in human capital, and its strength lies in the diversity of its people. Satisfying the three largest groups in Iraq by guaranteeing full representation – at the expense of the minorities – forsakes the true values of democracy for which thousands of American and Iraqi lives were sacrificed.

Since the Iraqis were freed from dictatorship by American forces, \$52 billion dollars have been spent by the Iraqi and American administrations in Iraq, a large amount of which was spent on security. Unfortunately, the result is what we see today, a violent and unstable Iraq. Over 30 churches have been destroyed, priests have been kidnapped, killed, or beheaded, and the Christians have been systematically targeted for persecution by Islamic fundamentalists. A 14-year-old boy was crucified in Basra. A one-year old baby was roasted and delivered to his mother's doorstep, on a bed of rice. Just last week, a young boy was gunned down by Kurdish fighters wearing the Iraqi National Guard uniform in the Nineveh Plains. The stories are many, and seemingly endless, each day bringing fresh tragedy to this helpless Christian minority.

It is clear that the most vulnerable populations are minority groups and all Iraqi women, who represent more than 55% of Iraqi society. At the beginning of the war, the Christian ChaldoAssyrians represented 5% of the Iraqi population – an estimated 2 million people. The continuous and systematic attacks against this minority group has forcefully displaced tens of thousands from many areas in Baghdad, such as the Dora district, Baghdad-Aljadida, Mashtal, and Baqouba. These famous Christian Baghdad neighborhoods are now empty of the thousands of their Christian residents because of the fatwas issues by Islamic fundamentalists who gave them three choices; convert to Islam, pay the jizya (Islamic protection tax imposed on non-Muslims), or leave with no personal possessions. Christian women are forced under the Islamic hijab, a practice being rejected even by a large number of Iraqi Muslim women as well.

Those with limited financial ability flee to the north of Iraq for safety, but not necessarily better living conditions. The Nineveh Plain, an area with deep Christian roots, and a large Christian population, cannot possibly sustain the influx

of thousands of families fleeing to the north. With shortage of housing, schools, and basic infrastructure, life becomes unbearable with little hope for a better future. Those with greater financial means choose to flee outside the country. They end up in neighboring countries where their lives are on hold, living in horrid conditions, with no opportunity to provide education for their children, no access to healthcare, unauthorized to work, and in some countries they remain without any status, causing them to go into hiding for fear of immediate deportation.

According to the United Nations, an estimated 40% of 2.2 million Iraqi refugees are Assyrian Christians.

The defenseless Christians are directly targeted by the increasing violence in Iraq, because they do not have any militias. They are identified as American allies and infidels, for the simple reason that they share a common faith with those in the Western world. The security situation is worsened for lack of any protection offered by the Iraqi local government to protect the presence of the Christians.

The U.S. government must take steps in offering solutions to protect the minorities, especially in the Northern region and the Nineveh Plain. Rather than fleeing to neighboring countries, the ChaldoAssyrians and other minorities must be encouraged to stay. They need help with reconstruction and development projects in their indigenous villages, especially in those from where the Assyrians have been displaced since 1961 due to Kurdish uprisings against the central government.

Despite aggravating and insufferable conditions, Iraq's Christians continue to demand their safety, their right to practice their Christian faith and assert their unique indigenous ethnic identity, and to participate as equals in the new Iraq. It is the moral obligation of the Iraqi and American governments to help them achieve these objectives, and to ensure the protection of these vulnerable ancient communities of Iraq.