Addressing the human rights situation of Iraq's Indigenous Assyrian Christians for Iraq's Second UPR Cycle

Thursday, October 9, 2014
Ms. Johanna Green

Thank you,

My intervention today will cover first, the systematic persecution of Iraq’s ancient Assyrian Christian community at the hands of members of the so-called “Islamic State.” Second, I will discuss how the Government’s legacy of discrimination against Assyrian Christians has further marginalized the community. Thirdly, I will conclude by offering actionable and evidence-informed recommendations for consideration in Iraq’s second UPR cycle.

Assyrians, referred to also as Chaldeans and Syriacs, represent a distinct, ethno-religious and linguistic community in Iraq with a heritage linked to the pre-Islamic and pre-Arab civilizations of Mesopotamia. They are politically non-dominant, profess to various ancient traditions of Christianity, and were historically the first to settle in many of the territories they currently reside. They speak Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic known commonly as “Sureth” which served as the lingua franca of Western Asia before the advent of Arabic. But now, the language once spoken by Christ has been designated as “definitely endangered” by UNESCO and faces the threat of extinction in the lands where it originated.

Their heritage as one of the oldest Christian communities in the world serves as the basis for violent attacks by members of the so-called Islamic State (IS) and their affiliated armed groups. Following IS’s capture of Mosul in early June 2014, an edict was issued to all non-Muslims in the city to either convert to Islam, pay a tax, flee or be killed. As nearly all of the city’s 35,000 Assyrian residents escaped Mosul, members of IS marked their homes with the Arabic letter “noon” to symbolize the word “Nasrani,” or “Christian.” Each of the 30 churches and monasteries inside the city are believed to be in the hands of IS militants, who have reportedly removed the buildings’ crosses and burned, looted, or destroyed much of the property. In late June, the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Erbil stated that for the first time in 1,600 years, mass was not celebrated in Mosul.

Many initially sought refuge in the Nineveh Plain region, one of the only areas within the country historically dominated by native non-Muslim and non-Arab populations and which houses the greatest concentration of Assyrian Christians in Iraq. In early August, nearly all of the roughly 200,000 residents in the Nineveh Plain, including many who have endured repeated displacement, fled the region as IS militants advanced. Now this culturally unique and historically significant territory is nearly empty of its indigenous inhabitants. The resulting humanitarian crisis has garnered the highest level emergency designation by UN officials as tens of thousands of perpetually uprooted minorities struggle to access food, water and shelter from the scorching summer heat.

As disastrous as their situation may be, their fate is immeasurably better than those unable to escape the advances of IS militants. In a recent joint statement, the Special Representative of the Secretary-
General on Sexual Violence (SRSG) in Conflict and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq noted that members of IS may have forced as many as 1,500 captured Christians and other minorities into sexual slavery. Reports from women who have escaped their captors tell harrowing accounts of the violence and degradation that these prisoners endured; one victim even divulged that some slaves forcibly converted to Islam so that they could be “fit to marry an ISIS fighter.” In addition to these violent attacks, the IS has also destroyed several Assyrian churches, statues, and monuments in an attempt not only to eliminate the Assyrian people from Iraq, but all remnants of their history and culture. The most notable attack took place in July when IS militants bombed the tomb of the prophet Jonah, a revered figure in the Christian faith.

In July, the UN Security Council released a statement expressing deep concern over reports of such atrocities and condemning “in the strongest terms the systematic persecution of individuals from minority populations.” Secretary General Ban Ki Moon also condemned the actions claiming that such systematic targeting may amount to a crime against humanity. During last month’s Special Session of the Human Rights Council, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights Flavia Pansieri highlighted that the targeted persecution of Christians and other minorities by members of the Islamic State may also “amount to ethnic and religious cleansing.” And most notably, members of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination recently issued a rare decision urging for the deployment of UN Peacekeeping forces to the Nineveh Plain to establish a safe zone for the return and protection of displaced persons traditionally living in that area. Their decision expressed alarm over mass killings and the forced displacement of populations, which “increase the risk of genocide.” The UN’s statements confirm the gravity of these crimes and implicate an obligation to protect the community from the dire consequences sure to result if action is not immediately taken.

The rampant rate of emigration is indicative of the reality that Assyrian Christians may no longer remain a viable component of Iraq’s once vibrant social fabric. While Assyrian Christians were believed to number 1.4 million before the 2003 invasion, current estimates place the community at less than half that size. Their population continues to dwindle as church officials claim that roughly six Assyrian Christian families leave Iraq every day. In 2011, Assyrian Christians represented 52 percent of new UNHCR-registered Iraqi refugees in Turkey and more than half of new UNHCR-registered Iraqi refugees in Lebanon. The statistic is alarming when considering that the community represented just 3 percent of Iraq’s population before 2003. Iraq’s Ministry of Migration and Displacement reported that out of the more than 300,000 Iraqi refugees and IDPs registered to return in 2012, only 304 were from minority communities. Such a rate will undoubtedly result in the rapid eradication of Assyrian Christians from their ancestral homeland.

The persecution of Assyrian Christians at the hands of the Islamic State is compounded by a longstanding legacy of discrimination targeting non-Arab communities within Iraq. While such a legacy emerged under the regime of Saddam Hussein, much of the same policies against Assyrians persists – and is even reinforced at times – by various levels of Iraq’s new democratic government. For instance, despite provisions within Iraq’s Constitution requiring that security services maintain a balanced representation of the country’s various components, Assyrian Christians constitute an inequitable proportion of local security forces in the Nineveh Plain as well as high-ranking law enforcement positions. As a consequence of such discrimination, Assyrians were left largely
defenseless after Iraqi Security Forces and Kurdish Peshmerga retreated following the capture of ancient Christian villages by members of the Islamic State in early August.25

While the Government of Iraq and those throughout the international community have condemned the actions taken by members of IS, little action has been taken to cure the injustices. Iraq’s human rights commitments go beyond passive obligations to refrain from engaging in discrimination but include an affirmative duty ensure that all of the country’s ethnic and religious components enjoy genuine equality, both in law and in fact. Such targeted persecution warrants swift and effective action to ensure that the indigenous Assyrians and other minorities in Iraq are afforded equal enjoyment of their rights contained within Iraq’s constitution and its international obligations, including but not limited to freedom from discrimination in their right to security of person, political rights, right to own property and the freedom to manifest their religion or belief.

In conclusion, the recommendations I will present draw upon those incorporated in the CERD’s latest Concluding Observations on Iraq.26 They will rely on issues raised both in this intervention as well as AUA’s stakeholder submission:

1. **First**, ensure that Assyrian Christians and other minorities are adequately represented in all levels of the government’s security forces, both in positions of command and authority as well as in areas in which they represent a significant portion of the population.
2. **Second**, implement administrative processes to allow both formerly as well as currently displaced persons the ability to quickly and efficiently redeem all property deprived by conflict.
3. **Third**, amend existing laws or implement new legislation allowing all Iraqis the right to change their religious designation on identity cards and other government documents to the religion of their choice.
4. **Fourth**, amend existing laws or implement new legislation to end discrimination against religious minorities in their commitment to their personal status.
5. **Fifth**, promptly end all policies and practices aimed at changing the demographic composition of the Nineveh Plain.
6. **And lastly**, amend election laws to guarantee minorities are proportionally represented in parliamentary and provincial councils throughout Iraq.

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displaced
concerned
by reports of sexual violence against internally displaced
persons. &mdash; SRSGs Bangura and Mladenov gravely concerned
by reports of sexual violence against internally
displaced persons, UN Assistance Mission to Iraq, August 13, 2014,


Id. 17


Id. at 76.


Constitution of Iraq, Article 9(1)(A).

constituting at least half of the total population in the two districts.
