

# Advocates question whether persecuted Christians are helped

July 26, 2019

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Soon after he was sworn in as president, David Brody of the Christian Broadcasting Network asked Donald Trump whether he would make the plight of Christians facing religious persecution abroad a priority of his administration.

“Yes,” Trump said. “They’ve been horribly treated.”

The president spoke about Christians fleeing violence in Syria, concluding: “We are going to help them.”

The U.S. State Department backed up Trump’s statement, recently convening its second ministerial to advance religious freedom, intended to draw attention to the plight of religious minorities all over the world.

But an increasingly vocal band of advocates and experts says the Trump administration’s policies have failed to address many of the challenges faced by Christians, Yazidis and other religious minorities abroad—especially those in the Middle East.

Some argue the administration’s efforts to scale back refugee resettlement, deport Chaldean Christians living in the United States and potentially end temporary protected status for Syrians have only made their situation worse.

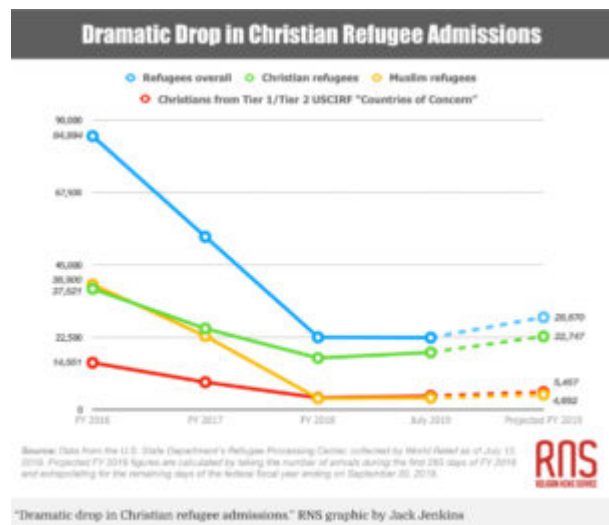
“I can tell you they feel completely abandoned,” Philippe Nassif, Amnesty International’s advocacy director for the Middle East and North Africa and

former executive director of the advocacy group In Defense of Christians, told Religion News Service. “They feel ignored, and in some cases, they feel used.”

## Number of refugees allowed into U.S. slashed

Many critics point to the administration’s decision to reduce the number of refugees allowed into the United States from 110,000 under President Obama to 45,000 shortly after Trump took office. Trump later reduced the cap to 30,000 people—the lowest since the refugee resettlement program started in the 1980s. Reportedly, White House officials now are considering whether to eliminate refugee resettlement altogether.

The reductions have sparked outrage among the nine nonprofit groups that help the government resettle refugees, six of which are faith-based.



Matthew Soerens, U.S. director of church mobilization for the evangelical Christian organization World Relief, has tracked refugees coming into the United States and found that Christian refugee admissions have fallen as well.

“The numbers don’t lie,” said Soerens, whose group is among those that resettle refugees.

The number of Christian refugees entering the United States dropped from 37,521 in fiscal 2016 to 22,747 projected for the end of fiscal 2019—a 39 percent decrease, according to Soerens’ calculations using data from the State Department’s Refugee Processing Center.

Among countries that show up in the top two tiers of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom’s list of “Countries of Concern,” the decline is more drastic: 14,551 Christian refugees were resettled in the United States from those nations in fiscal 2016, compared with 5,457 projected for the end of fiscal 2019. That represents a decrease of 62.5 percent.

Only 87 are expected to be resettled this fiscal year from Iraq, one of 11 countries where officials have instituted additional vetting procedures for refugees. That is down from 1,524 Iraqis resettled as refugees in 2016.

There have also been reductions in the number of Syrian Christians: The United States took 68 Christian refugees from the country in 2016; this year, it is projected to resettle 37.

## **‘A promise broken’**

Soerens said he was “saddened but not surprised” by the reduction in Muslim refugees under Trump, who proposed a “total and complete shutdown” of Muslims entering the country during his campaign. But Soerens insisted the reduction in Christian refugees simply did not match the president’s own rhetoric on religious freedom.

“President Trump also promised to facilitate the resettlement of Syrian Christian refugees, which is a promise broken,” he said. “And the declines among other persecuted Christians, such as those from Iraq, Iran, Burma and Pakistan, are even more stark.”

The Trump administration has deflected criticism about the refugee admission reductions by pointing to efforts to rebuild the homes of displaced Christians in places such as northern Iraq, where their communities were ravaged by ISIS militants.

Speaking at this month's second ministerial on religious freedom, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback argued that rebuilding efforts in Iraq's Nineveh Plains are part of a larger attempt to assist persecuted Christians and religious minorities where they are.

"What we're trying to do now is push on (with) being able to make places stable and safe for all people of faith," Brownback told reporters at a news conference at the end of the ministerial. "I recognize some criticize them: 'Well, wait a minute, what about the refugee numbers?' I recognize and I hear that statement. But the effort really is to try to make the place safe, which I do believe honestly is a much better long-term solution to the situation."

## **Security concerns in Ninevah Plains**

The Nineveh Plains project was funded due to an intervention from Vice President Mike Pence and through partnerships with faith-based groups such as the Knights of Columbus.

But reports from the region suggest that while some Christians have moved back to those locations, others are unlikely to do so due to lingering security concerns.



A man selling chicken sits in an area retaken by U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) from Islamic State militants in Hajin, Syria, on Feb. 16, 2019. (AP Photo via RNS/Felipe Dana)

“You get rid of ISIS, and then you have a situation where armed militias—some backed by Iran, others backed by the Iraqi government, others that are Kurdish armed groups—have filled in the void and have not allowed a lot of these communities to return to rebuild,” Nassif said.

“There are some communities where rebuilding has happened, but the majority of them—Christians and Yazidis—are still displaced.”

Stephen Rasche, counsel with the Chaldean Catholic Archdiocese of Irbil and the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee, stressed that hard data about who has returned to the beleaguered region is difficult to come by. Even so, he estimated that fewer than half of the original inhabitants of Christian Nineveh—between 35 percent and 40 percent or 40,000 to 50,000 people—have returned or are attempting to do so.

Rasche said some towns were able to act quickly to keep homes from remaining vacant. Others weren’t so lucky.

“Other towns, more dependent on the much slower moving and more

restrictive institutional aid providers, have faced a much slower and more difficult return, and their future as Christian towns remains quite uncertain as militias and power factions have moved into the vacuum,” Rasche said.

Still others, Rasche said, “remain so entrenched with fundamentalist mentalities, even post-ISIS, that they are no longer safely inhabitable for Christians. These Christians are essentially permanently displaced and are seeking to re-establish themselves either elsewhere in Iraq or in the diaspora.”

Nassif said some groups have called for a neutral United Nations presence to help provide stability for the region but said he has yet to see the U.S. government advocate for such a move.

“As the weeks and months go by, the prospects for rehabilitating any of these communities in northern Iraq—it’s grim,” he said.

## **Iraqi Christians in U.S. fear deportation**

Meanwhile, the Trump administration has moved to deport Iraqi Christians already in the United States back to the region. Shortly after Trump introduced the initial travel ban on several Muslim-majority countries, Immigration and Customs Enforcement detained several hundred Iraqis in and around Detroit, Michigan. Many are Chaldean Christians, an ancient group of Catholics whose historic homeland extends from Turkey and Georgia through northern Iraq and Jordan.

Efforts to deport the detained immigrants were halted by a legal challenge spearheaded by the ACLU. Miriam Aukerman, senior staff attorney at the ACLU of Michigan, explained that out of the roughly 1,400 Iraqi nationals who had final orders of removal, around 800 have criminal records.

But many of the criminal infractions are minor or years old and hundreds have no criminal record whatsoever.

What's more, ACLU lawyers uncovered documentation indicating that the State Department actively negotiated with Iraq to secure the deportation of Iraqi nationals, including Chaldean Christians.

Aukerman said the administration has been "calling out Iraq (for religious persecution), but at the same time using every tool ... to force Iraq to take back people who will be tortured or killed if they are repatriated."

Officials at the U.S. State Department did not immediately return requests for comment on this story.

## **Chaldean Christians' 'complex' relationship with administration**

U.S.-based Chaldean Christian leaders have made similar claims, saying deporting people back to Iraq would amount to a "death sentence."

Despite those pleas, the courts sided against the ACLU late last year. Lawyers are evaluating the possibility of escalating it to the Supreme Court.

In the meantime, Aukerman said, some Chaldeans have already been deported to Iraq.

Martin Manna, president of the Chaldean Community Foundation, said the threat of deportations has made his community's relationship to the Trump administration "complex."

He stressed that many of those at risk of deportation are winning their individual immigration cases and voiced appreciation for efforts to rebuild

in northern Iraq, but he found the continued reduction of refugees and the threat of sending Chaldean Christians back to the region “upsetting.”

“This administration clearly has a focus on aiding and assisting persecuted Christians throughout the Middle East,” he said, noting that he attended last week’s Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, D.C. “The flip side of that is, besides the deportations, there’s been no refugee flow to the United States—this is an issue we continuously bring up.”

Manna added that so far more Chaldeans were deported under the Obama administration than Trump, but “that’s likely to change.”

## **Future of Syrian Christians in U.S. uncertain**



Thousands of Syrian refugees walk in order to cross into Turkey on June 14, 2015, in Akcakale, Sanliurfa Province, in southeastern Turkey. (AP Photo via RNS/Lefteris Pitarakis)

As for the president’s concern for those fleeing Syria, religious groups and advocates are concerned about that commitment as well. Thousands of Syrians—including Syrian Christians— currently are granted Temporary



Protected Status in the United States, but acting U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Director Kenneth Cuccinelli has yet to say whether the government will extend the status when it comes up for renewal in the next few weeks.

“Acting Director Cuccinelli must re-designate Temporary Protected Status for Syrians of all faiths who want nothing else than to return home to a safe and secure Syria when that option is available,” said Jameson Cunningham, policy and public affairs strategist for the advocacy group Americans for a Free Syria.

The predicament of exiled Syrian religious minorities is especially dire, said Asaad Hanna, a journalist, activist and Syrian Christian based in Turkey, because they belie Syrian President Bashar Assad’s claim that he is their protector. “The regime doesn’t like to see minorities standing against him,” said Hanna.

Soerens noted that Canada has also restricted refugee admissions since 2016, and the European Union struck a deal with Turkey in 2016 to stop hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants from traveling into Western Europe.

Refugees who once looked to Brazil for shelter have been discouraged by the election there of Jair Bolsonaro as president. Bolsonaro has referred to refugees as “the scum of the earth.”

“As the U.S. does less to offer protection to those fleeing persecution, other countries are doing less, too,” Soerens said. “Persecuted people—including those persecuted for their faith—have fewer places to turn for refuge.”

## **Oval Office meeting with Yazidi activist**

Trump was directly confronted with the ongoing suffering of religious

minorities last week in the Oval Office, when he met Yazidi activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Nadia Murad as part of a delegation of survivors of religious persecution. Murad, who was kidnapped from her home in northern Iraq and held by ISIS for three months, pressed Trump to help her homeland become safe again.

“Our home is destroyed,” said Murad, who said she now lives in Germany with as many as 95,000 other Yazidis who fled there and to other parts of Europe in recent years. “Now there is no ISIS, but we cannot go back because there is Kurdish government and Iraqi government—they are fighting each other (over) who will control my area.”

She named French President Emmanuel Macron as a leader who helped pressure the Iraqi government to address the security issue. As she stressed that she and others cannot find a safe place to live, she referenced the deaths of her mother and brothers.

“Where are they now?” Trump interrupted, as Brownback and Paula White—an evangelical pastor and one of the president’s closest spiritual advisers—stood nearby.

“They killed them,” Murad replied. “They’re in the mass graves of Sinjar. ... Please do something.”

*Adelle Banks of RNS contributed to this report.*