

**Testimony of the Honorable Anna G. Eshoo**  
Hearing, “Christian Minorities under Attack: Iraq and Egypt”  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission  
2359 Rayburn House Office Building  
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I want to begin by thanking each of my colleagues who are here today, with special thanks to Chairman Frank Wolf and Chairman Jim McGovern. I consider you the “Conscience of the Congress” and the work you do on the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission is a fitting tribute to our late colleague. I’m particularly grateful that you’ve called this hearing on a topic of such personal significance to me. Experts will address the tragic situation facing the Coptic Christians, but I will focus my remarks on Iraq.

My grandparents fled the Middle East because Christians were being slaughtered, so this story is tightly woven into my American identity and my family history. Today, history is repeating itself. It is important to note that the Christians of Iraq, Iran, Israel, Egypt, and Syria are the oldest in the world. Christianity was, from the beginning, a Middle Eastern religion. The Assyrian Christians, the Chaldeans, actually celebrate Mass in Aramaic, which is the language Jesus spoke. And for two thousand years, Christians have been a key part of the Middle Eastern community. As recently as the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Christians comprised 20% of the Middle East population.

In modern times, the situation for Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities in the region has worsened—today, they make up less than 5% of the population. Persecution and targeted violence, including the genocidal campaign that forced my mother’s Armenian family to flee the Ottoman Empire, shaped a region increasingly hostile to religious diversity. During Saddam Hussein’s regime, a large and stable Christian community persisted in Iraq. At the time of the U.S. invasion, there were some 1.4 million Assyrian, Chaldean, Syriac and other Christians in Iraq, alongside small communities of Yazidis, Mandaeans and Jews. Today, less than one-third of them remain, and these ancient religious communities face complete extinction.

This tragic process began in the chaos following the U.S. invasion in 2003, but only recently has a series of high-profile attacks attracted the world’s attention. On October 31, 2010, an Al Qaeda affiliate massacred worshipers at Baghdad’s Our Lady of Salvation Assyrian Catholic Church where Mass was being celebrated, leaving more than sixty worshipers, priests, and police dead. On December 31<sup>st</sup> a bomb detonated on the doorstep of two elderly Christians in Baghdad, killing both. This was one of seven Christian homes

targeted that same evening. These attacks grab headlines, and officials issue press releases and condemn them. The pervasive, grinding discrimination Iraqi minorities face every single day, however, does not make the news. Riding the bus and shopping in markets, Iraqi Christians are threatened with death if they don't leave. Even in the face of these threats, many communities have stood resilient. Still, without real protection from the Iraqi government or from us, the challenge will simply prove too great. For many, it already has.

Religious leaders are speaking out. In the lead-up to the March elections last year, Pope Benedict XVI called on the Iraqi government to restore security for the population and the most vulnerable religious minorities. In his Christmas address a few weeks ago, he once again called for solidarity with Iraq's Christians, offering a prayer to "ease the pain and bring consolation amid their trials to the beloved Christian communities in Iraq and throughout the Middle East."

This past summer, I was able to participate in a rare summit here in Washington with Iraq's minority religious leaders, each of whom expressed frustration, and even desperation, because we have failed to take meaningful

action to address their plight. Their besieged congregations are dwindling and afraid. To put it very simply, as Christians and other minorities disappear from the country, I fear the prospect for a pluralistic and democratic Iraq will vanish with them.

In Congress, I've been working for several years with Representative Wolf, who Co-Chairs the Religious Minorities in the Middle East Caucus, as well as several other dedicated Members to bring this situation to light. During the previous Administration, it was, frankly, very difficult to get anyone to admit that our invasion had precipitated this humanitarian crisis. In the current Administration, attention to this issue has improved somewhat, but not as quickly as the situation for Christians in Iraq has deteriorated. The appointment of Deputy Assistant Secretary Michael Corbin to focus on religious minorities was a welcome move, but we must do more.

Working across party lines, Congress directed specific funding in Fiscal Years 2009 and 2010 toward protection and development efforts for Iraq's religious minorities. Unfortunately, the distribution of those funds has not been transparent, and I've been told repeatedly by people "on the ground"

that many of the communities don't even know it's available. This money—and this effort—is too important to lose in the bureaucracy.

For the sake of our constituents—the taxpayers, and for the struggling minorities in Iraq, we must account for this money and refocus our efforts.

At my request, more than a dozen House colleagues and four Senators joined me in requesting the GAO conduct an audit of the funds. This is already taking place and GAO will report back on the distribution of funds and their effectiveness.

I don't doubt the good intentions of the State Department and USAID, but crises call for more than good intentions. I feel strongly that the Administration must lay out a comprehensive strategy for assisting Iraq's ethno-religious minorities. Such a strategy must articulate specifically how we will distribute assistance, protect these communities, and work with the Iraqi government to identify and prosecute those who attack them. The strategy must also include a streamlined mechanism for asylum-seekers to immigrate to the U.S. We have a responsibility to accommodate those Christians for whom the situation in Iraq has become impossible, even as we work to improve conditions there. The future of these ancient communities,

and indeed, the result of our very costly efforts in Iraq, may well depend on it.

I thank the Chairmen for this opportunity to testify before you today and I look forward to hearing from our other witnesses.