

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom and the Assyrian Christians

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February 9, 2026

In the 105th Congress (1997-1998), the United States passed resolution HR 2431, also known as the International Religious Freedoms Act. According to HR 2431, an office within the US Department of State was established to enforce the International Religious Freedoms around the world. The office was to be headed by an ambassador at large.

The resolution called for the establishment of an Internet site containing major international documents relating to religious freedom, the Annual Report on Religious Persecution, issue annual reports on the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom presented in what is known as Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.¹ It also amended the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 to authorize the use of development assistance funds to carry out programs and activities in foreign countries which will encourage and promote the right to free religious belief and practice, among other measures. With time, the International Religious Freedom Summit², the International Religious Freedom Roundtable³ and other bodies were created.

However, many of these bodies have been influenced by certain special interest groups that support, for example, the Kurdish national agenda. The question that we ask, if this body was created to protect religious freedoms, why are the Kurds overwhelmingly present in the meetings of certain of these bodies when we know that the Kurds are religiously Sunni Muslims and they are not persecuted in the Middle East for being Muslims? Of course, we could sympathize with the Muslim Uyghurs of China, for example, for being persecuted. Critics believe that HR 2431 was created to give Washington a tool to advance US interests around the world under the guise of the very sensitive and emotional issue of protecting religious minorities.

Why are the Kurds undermining the real persecuted people in the Middle East in these platforms, such as the Assyrian Christians, Yezidis and others? Yes, the Kurds do not have a platform of their own to speak, but those who support them do and to a great extent as they convey the message that the Kurds protect the Christians and Yezidis, which is misleading in many ways.⁴ Did the Kurdish peshmerga protect the Assyrian

¹ Accessed February 8, 2026 <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>

² Scanlon, Kate. "Threats to religious freedom present risks to global security, experts warn" February 3, 2026. Accessed February 8, 2026. <https://trentonmonitor.com/2026/02/03/threats-to-religious-freedom-present-risks-to-global-security-experts-warn/>

³ Accessed February 8, 2026 <https://www.irfroundtable.org/>

⁴ Rubin, Michael. "Stop giving Iraqi Kurds a free pass on religious freedom". January 24, 2023. Accessed February 7, 2026. <https://vip-stage.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/2568944/stop-giving-iraqi-kurds-a-free-pass-on-religious-freedom/>

Christians and the Yezidis in 2014 when ISIS attacked northern Iraq's Nineveh Province (including the Nineveh Plain and Sinjar), considering that the Kurds disarmed the two communities two weeks before ISIS invaded the region, claiming that they will defend them in case of any attack?⁵ At the night of ISIS attack, the peshmerga withdrew without a fight leaving the Assyrians under the mercy of the jihadists. The Peshmerga did the same with the Yezidis in Sinjar. The Kurdish leaders hoped to force these two indigenous people out so that they seize their lands and in time add them to the Kurdish region. Why is Nadine Maenza, a Global Fellow at the Wilson Center, and the President of the IRF Secretariat, for example, acting as the Kurdish champion in the International Religious Freedom Round Table meetings? Again, are the Kurds religiously persecuted? How did the Kurdish population quadruple in the last century if they were? Why is Maenza not fighting for the Assyrian Christians whose population in the Middle East has diminished unlike that of the Kurds?

Indeed, human rights in general must be a topic in certain of these platforms, but the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of northern Iraq has an office in Washington DC. This office is very active and has large influence on many US policy makers. The KRG office has been active defending Kurdish interests and rights not only in Iraq but in Syria as well. So the Kurds have a strong voice in Washington already.

It was expected that the International Religious Freedom bodies entrust the real representatives of the Middle East Christians to the diaspora Assyrians since those in the homeland are helpless and in general fear a retaliation by the KRG and other governmental institutions for speaking up. Ano Abdoka, for example, is the Minister of Transportations and Communications in the KRG.⁶ Will he speak up about any persecution against his Christian people in northern Iraq? A persecutor cannot simultaneously claim to defend the persecuted. It's like trusting the Taliban on the status of women's rights in Afghanistan or the Iranian regime on the status of the Baha'i faith followers in Iran. Yes, the KRG built few churches, created religious endowment offices and pays the various patriarchs gifts (Arabic هبة or hiba), but the Assyrians are not strictly Christians, they are rather the indigenous people of northern Mesopotamia and the September 13, 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples⁷ must apply to the Assyrians⁸ and be honored. Northern Iraq is historic Assyria, history and archeology proves it. The Kurds are relatively newcomers compared to the Assyrians; they have slowly entered the region from western Iran's Zagros Mountains post the 1514 Battle of Chaldiran between the Sunni Ottomans and the Shia Safavid Persians where the Sunni Kurds helped the fellow Sunni Ottomans against their own fellow Iranians. Ever since, the Kurds have been leaving western Iran to Anatolia as the

⁵ Abraham, Ashurienna. "Erasing Assyrians: The Kurdish Nationalist Project." Modern Diplomacy. June 13, 2025. Accessed February 8, 2026. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/06/13/erasing-assyrians-the-kurdish-nationalist-project/>

⁶ <https://gov.krd/english/government/the-cabinet/ano-jawhar-abdulgaseeh-abdoka/>

⁷ <http://www.un-documents.net/a61r295.htm>

⁸ Aprim, Fred. "Iraq Must Recognize Assyrians as its Indigenous People". 2022. Accessed February 6, 2026. <https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2022/Assyrians%20are%20Indigenous%20to%20Iraq2.pdf>

Ottoman Sultan Selim I gifted them the permission to settle there and into modern northern Iraq.

The Kurds know well that northern Iraq is not their ancestral homelands.⁹ Therefore, they will do whatever it takes to let or force the Assyrians out by committing aspects of a soft genocide and they are simply relying on time as the Assyrian Christians continue to exist the Middle East.

It is surprising that attention in these bodies is paid mainly to the Assyrian Christian personalities who are under the Kurdish control or payroll instead of independent Assyrian Christians who actually represent the real interest of the Christians in the Middle East. Why are the Assyrian Christians placed under the influence of the Kurds, who perpetrated genocide and massacres against the Christians and Yezidis (Assyrians from 1843-1847, Yezidis in 1832 & 1844 and Armenians in 1895 and later in WWI)? What are International Religious Freedom bodies and the Department of State doing to end the Kurdish illegal activities in northern Iraq, such as land grabbing, religious freedom violations, including repeated desecration of churches and cemeteries, employment discrimination, ongoing crimes against women and girls (Islamization of minors), the vandalizing of Assyrian archeological sites¹⁰, and the almost complete emptying of the Assyrian Khabor region in Syria and other issues.

The Assyrian Christians are capable to administer their lives on their ancestral lands on their own only if Washington provided for them what the US administration has been providing for the Kurds since 1992.

Lastly, but not least, why are certain Kurdish proxy Assyrians harassing independent Assyrians who are part of these bodies or planning to be? The International Religious Freedom bodies are not doing the persecuted Assyrian Christians any good when they rely on, support, or seek information from, Kurdish proxy Assyrian Christians or from Assyrian personalities who seek personal fame at the expense of the fate of their people. Gerry Georgatos, an Australian university researcher and social justice and human rights campaigner¹¹, writes, we should examine the oppressor, not the oppressed, otherwise all hope is lost. The oppressor would not be so strong if he did not have accomplices among the oppressed. The Christian representatives in these platforms must be carefully selected, because a personality under the KRG payroll or advancing Kurdish national agenda could not be trusted.

⁹ Aprim, Fred. "Kurds and Kurdistan". February 22, 2024. Accessed February 8, 2026. <https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2024/The%20Kurds%20and%20Kurdistan.pdf>

¹⁰ Foley, Ryan. West Has 'Repeatedly Failed Assyrian Christians'. In Christian Today. February 8, 2026. Accessed February 8, 2026. <https://www.christiantoday.com/news/west-has-repeatedly-failed-assyrian-christians>

¹¹ Policy Forum. Gerry Georgatos. Accessed February 7, 2026. <https://www.policyforum.net/authors/gerry-georgatos/index.html>