

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 20, 2017

The Honorable Rex W. Tillerson
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Tillerson:

Well over a year ago, your predecessor, Secretary of State Kerry, officially determined and publicly announced at a press conference on March 17, 2016, that ISIS is "responsible for genocide" against Christians, Yazidis and other religious minorities. This designation was made pursuant to a congressional mandate contained in the December 2015 Omnibus Spending Act—marking only the second time that the executive branch had made such a designation while the crisis was ongoing. Sadly, little substantive action from the State Department has followed to help these imperiled communities, who have inhabited Iraq for millennia, and are in some cases on the verge of extinction.

While the designation occurred during the previous administration, President Trump and Vice President Pence have both spoken about the genocide of Christians and others by ISIS. Last month at a conference in Washington, D.C., the Vice President reaffirmed America's commitment to religious freedom as a foreign policy "priority"—a principle that enjoys broad bipartisan support in Congress.

Reports from the ground in Iraq indicate that the smallest of the religious minorities who fled ISIS and are currently residing in Erbil, have been unable to access the \$1.3 billion in U.S. humanitarian aid program in Iraq in large part because they are not residing in camps administered by the United Nations. It is our understanding that they often avoid these camps due to reported dangers to minorities within them. Rather, under an agreement with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), since 2014, the Chaldean Catholic Archdiocese of Erbil, led by Archbishop Bashar Warda, has served as the overarching authority that oversees the majority of sustained food, housing and medical aid for Christian IDPs in the greater Erbil region. This aid effort has in many cases extended to both Yazidi and other non-Christian IDP families. In congressional testimony last year in front of the Helsinki Commission, the Archdiocese reported that apart from an initial infusion of tents and tarps in August 2014, no U.S. government assistance has reached them.

In order to address the existential threat posed to these communities, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017, (Division J, Title VII, Section 7033) specifically references "vulnerable and persecuted religious minorities, including victims of genocide designated by the Secretary of State," such as the Nineveh Christians and Yazidis and prioritizes both humanitarian assistance and resettlement. The complete text follows:

(3) HUMANITARIAN PROGRAMS.—Funds appropriated by this Act under the headings “International Disaster Assistance” and “Migration and Refugee Assistance” shall be made available for humanitarian assistance for vulnerable and persecuted religious minorities, including victims of genocide designated by the Secretary of State and other groups that have suffered crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, to—
(A) accelerate the implementation of an immediate, coordinated, and sustained response to provide humanitarian assistance;
(B) enhance protection of conflict victims, including those facing a dire humanitarian crisis and severe persecution because of their faith or ethnicity; and
(C) improve access to secure locations for obtaining humanitarian and resettlement services.

As such, We request a report on the implementation of this section and specifically how the Department is working to ensure that the most vulnerable genocide-designated minorities receive the assistance that Congress intended. Groups operating in the region report that there is an acute need as it relates to food aid for these religious minorities. While the emphasis in the long term is necessarily on resettlement, such efforts cannot come at the expense of short term physical needs.

Additionally the legislation included language requiring the Department, no later than 90 days after enactment, to submit to Congress a plan “for transitional justice, reconciliation, and reintegration programs for vulnerable and persecuted religious minorities.” The complete language follows and we would request an update on the status of this plan including the extent to which the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia is involved in writing this report.

(4) TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE, RECONCILIATION, AND REINTEGRATION PROGRAMS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA REGIONS.—

(A) Not later than 90 days after enactment of this Act and after consultation with relevant central governments in the Middle East and North Africa regions, the Secretary of State, shall submit to the Committees on Appropriations a plan for transitional justice, reconciliation, and reintegration programs for vulnerable and persecuted religious minorities in such regions: Provided, That such plan shall include a description of actions to be taken by such governments to safeguard and promote the political and economic rights of such minorities, including the return, rehabilitation, and protection of property in areas of conflict.

If the communities mentioned above remain indefinitely displaced, with little hope for the future, then many of the individuals and families who remain will be forced to seek refuge abroad, thereby dealing a deathblow to pluralism and the prospects for religious freedom and diversity in any future Iraq. Already, Iraq’s Christian population has sharply dwindled under

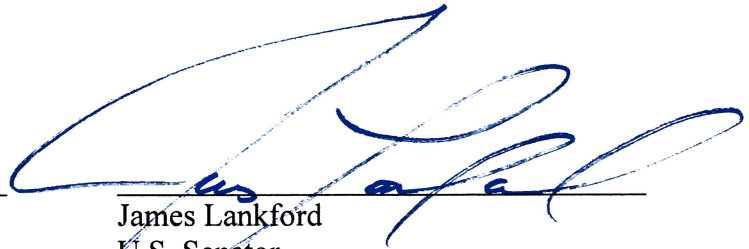
recent genocide and persecution so that less than 200,000 remain in the country, down from 1.4 million a generation ago. These issues require urgent and sustained attention.

We look forward to your timely response given the urgency of the situation.

Sincerely,



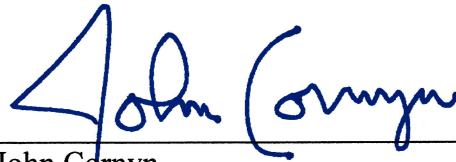
Marco Rubio
U.S. Senator



James Lankford
U.S. Senator



Ben Sasse
U.S. Senator



John Cornyn
U.S. Senator