

# Hanging by a Thread:

*Christians and Other Religious Minorities  
Are Fading into History on the Nineveh Plains*

*Report on Fact-finding Trip (December 8-15, 2018)*

*January 2019*



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***The Religious Freedom Institute (RFI)***

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Kent Hill joined the RFI after six years as Senior Vice President at World Vision, one of the largest faith-based relief and development organizations in the world. He also served for eight years as Assistant Administrator for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), responsible for U.S. foreign assistance to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and, subsequently, all USAID health programs worldwide. Earlier in his career, Dr. Hill was President of Eastern Nazarene College, and President of D.C.'s Institute on Religion and Democracy. In 2010, as a Vice President at the John Templeton Foundation, Hill, along with Tom Farr, conceived Georgetown's Religious Freedom Project and secured funding to launch the project. Dr. Hill has published a book on Christianity and the Soviet Union. His Ph.D. is from the University of Washington.



“ *Christians will once more be caught in the crossfire, and forced to flee – probably never to return.* ”

## The Problem

Over the past 15 years, the Christian population in Iraq has plunged by more than 90 percent from 1.5 million to less than 200,000. Many others express a desire to leave. Yazidis have suffered a major decline as well, hundreds of thousands now live in Germany, and the majority of those who remain in Iraq are still internally displaced.

## What is at Stake

Beyond the survival of Christian and other religious minorities in Iraq, the demise of religious pluralism and the colonization of the Nineveh Plains by Iranian-backed Shi'a who are not interested in pluralism, and who are likely to generate Sunni support for the return of ISIS, gravely threaten the peace and stability of Iraq and the Middle East.

The U.S. Government (USG) has been very slow to grasp the close connection between religious pluralism and its own national security. Time is running out on the Nineveh Plains and in northern Iraq to ensure the presence of Christians, Yazidis and other minorities, and preserve the possibility of fostering stability, religious pluralism, and peace.

## What We Observed:

### *Increasing Security Concerns and a Devastating Absence of Jobs*

Everywhere we went in Northern Iraq (the Nineveh Plains, as well as in Erbil and Duhok in the Kurdistan region), we saw etched on the faces of the indigenous Christians, and those struggling to help them, the strain of four years of waiting – waiting, mainly in vain, for the USG or the UN to come to their assistance. Meanwhile the Christian homeland on the Nineveh Plains has steadily slipped into the hands of those who



were willing and capable of acting, and acting quickly – the Shi’a. This has grave security implications for all non-Shi’a and will create the conditions for future conflicts.

Two concerns emerged as fundamental from our fact-finding trip: security and jobs. If both are not addressed, and addressed quickly, Christians and other minorities will continue to disappear. Chaldean Archbishop of Erbil Bashar Warda emphasized to us that security and jobs were the critical issues facing the minorities.

## *Security*

Iraqi Shi’a, with Iranian government support, as well as that of the pro-Shi’a Government of Iraq (GOI), have moved with a sense of urgency to encourage the Hashd Shi’a militia to expand their presence on the Nineveh Plains. Shi’a settlers have been provided homes on the lands which for centuries have been Christian. In some cases, the GOI has provided land grants for Shi’a “martyr” families.

As a result, the security situation for Christians and Yazidis is deteriorating by the day on the Nineveh Plains. We saw a compound of Iranian-backed Hashd outside the Christian town of Teleskof. The Hashd are increasingly aggressive, and while there we received reports that the Hashd militia was sexually threatening a local Christian woman working for an organization on a State Department funded project. In addition, the GOI has appointed a Shi’a as the rector of the Hamdaniyah University in this Christian-majority town Qaraqosh, which cannot be characterized as in anyway a good-faith appointment at such an institution.

The policy of the GOI to facilitate the colonization of Christian lands on the Nineveh Plains is lethal for Christians and Yazidis on its own merits. But it also sets the stage for the return of ISIS terror. The presence of Shi’a so close to Sunni-majority Mosul will tempt Sunnis to join forces with ISIS against the Shi’a or anyone else who does not conform to the extremist views of ISIS. At the very least, Christians will once more be caught in the crossfire, and forced to flee – probably never to return.

Walking through the ruins of the Christian town of Batnaya with a local priest, Father Aram, gave us a terrifying reminder of what the return of ISIS to the region could mean – a return made more likely by the reckless Iraqi government policy of encouraging Shi’a encroachment onto the Nineveh Plains. We encountered a chilling message from a German ISIS fighter scribbled on the walls of a Batnaya church:

*“ O, you [expletive] slaves of Christ. You have no place in the land of Islam. Get out now or we will kill you all. ”*



## *Lack of Jobs and an Economic Future*

In addition to the deteriorating security situation on the Nineveh Plains, those Christians and Yazidis who have managed to return face daunting economic challenges. While infrastructure to provide water and electricity is in place and private funds are enabling the repair and reconstruction of homes, there are often no jobs or major economic revitalization projects underway to create jobs. Unless, the USG and others quickly addresses this problem, many Christians will be forced to “sell” their homes (and there are plenty of Shi’a ready to purchase them), and abandon their homeland once again.

We want to note with great appreciation that the arrival in August 2018 of Max Primorac as Special Representative for Minority Assistance Programs in Iraq at USAID has provided a new and welcome sense of urgency to act that was not there before. Mr. Primorac has brought effective interventions and hope to the scene. This report is intended, however, to make clear that the situation is still grave and much needs to be done to amplify his efforts.

## **Recommendations**

### **Security:**

- 1** The USG should demand – as a condition for continuing billions of dollars of foreign assistance to Iraq – that the Iraqi government expel the Hashd Shi’a militia from the Nineveh Plains, cease Shi’a colonization, and prioritize on an urgent basis the return of Christian and Yazidis to their homes on the Nineveh Plains.
- 2** The GOI has been provided a list of 1,000 young Christian men from the Nineveh Plains willing to serve in the Iraqi police and security forces in their own backyard. The GOI should expedite their entry into these units and let them serve on the Nineveh Plains. The removal of Hashd Shi’a militias combined with a strengthened presence of the Iraqi security forces, including units made of the residents from the minority communities will increase the feeling of security.
- 3** The USG should expand its own presence on the Nineveh Plains by establishing training centers for the Iraqi police and security forces. In addition to support for these Iraqi forces, the very presence of the U.S. forces would serve as a deterrent to those who seek to purge the area of minorities.
- 4** The USG should immediately provide funding for the return of 50,000 Iraqi Christian refugees living just outside the borders of Iraq (in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey). Given the goal of stabilizing religious pluralism, this quick influx of minorities should be a high priority for the United States.
- 5** The USG should place equal priority on the return of Yazidis to Sinjar. It should express gratitude to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for protecting Christian and Yazidi IDPs in Kurdistan, but also demand that the Sehala road to Sinjar be fully opened to civilians, and no longer to the smugglers who profit from oil coming from Syria through Iraq to Turkey and Iran. Returning Yazidis to Sinjar, like the return of Christians and other minorities, would promote the kind of pluralism that can yield stability and peace, provided it is made secure and safe. This kind of pluralism is critical for the region and for the interests of the United States.

## Jobs and Economic Revitalization:

- 6** Though infrastructure projects in places are needed, Archbishop Warda insisted that morale would be tremendously impacted by even small economic revitalization projects that would create food, jobs, and self-esteem. The Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act of 2018 (HR 390) was signed into law by President Trump on December 11 while we were in Iraq. Section 7 requires a report from the Administration within 90 days to be delivered to ten congressional committees on what has already been done on behalf of the Christians and Yazidis and what is planned. Small, job-creating projects could be part of that report from the USG (USAID). The Religious Freedom Institute expects to deliver about \$35,000 later this month to cover most of the costs of three greenhouses for the Christian city of Teleskof – a project that will also benefit neighboring Yazidi communities. It is not difficult to find such projects to fund and fund quickly. The USG has often failed to do so. This must change.
- 7** Disappointingly, monies available to the USG continue to be allotted to U.S.-based entities while credible and capable Iraqi-based entities on the Nineveh Plains and in the KRG see their proposals continue to languish without encouragement or funding. This is especially so in the critical area of cultural preservation within the Christian and Yazidi areas of Nineveh, where within the past six months the Ambassador’s fund has allocated over \$2.5 million in funding for limited scope projects which primarily benefit U.S.-based entities. Meanwhile, a far more cost effective and comprehensive proposal for cultural preservation was put forward to the USG by the Catholic University in Erbil (CUE) over a year and a half ago. The existence of this proposal is well known to the USG. If implemented it would provide desperately needed jobs and training for the returning minorities, has received no outreach or support despite repeated pleas to the USG as to the proposal’s fundamental importance in developing long-term confidence and economic sustainability for the returning Christians and Yazidis. It should be noted that the CUE proposal is a joint project involving all the major Christian churches plus the Yazidi leadership. Furthermore, the structuring of the proposal was in fact developed by former high-ranking USG officials, and covered goals which are well established within USG aid policy priorities.

## Conclusion

The Iraqi Ambassador to the United States has often said that “Iraq without her minorities would not be Iraq,” but the Iraqi government facilitation of the Shi’a colonization of the Nineveh tells a different story.

The 2017 National Security Strategy lists protecting religious minorities as a priority action that both champions American values and establishes the conditions for a more secure and prosperous world.

The Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act of 2018 (HR 390) is an encouraging sign, reflecting nearly unanimous bi-partisan commitment to assist vulnerable religious minorities in ISIS-ravaged Iraq and Syria. Unless the words of HR 390 are matched with deeds, and quickly, and unless the accelerating colonization by Shi’a and the Hashd Shi’a militia is reversed, and quickly, the bleeding away of minorities will continue and even accelerate. Local Sunnis may support the return of ISIS, and the likelihood of a peaceful and stable Iraq will slip away as a result.

The United States cannot afford to permit this to happen.



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