

THE 'MYTH OF EQUALITY
IN VICTIMIZATION':
THE ROOTS OF US GOVERNMENT INACTION
AS ETHNO-RELIGIOUS CLEANSING
CONTINUES

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POLICY BRIEFING

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1. Introduction

On January 6th, 2008, the Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac people (hereafter ChaldoAssyrians) were issued another reminder of their status in Iraq with the bombing of 6 more churches. Despite liberation, Christian ChaldoAssyrians are now almost entirely dislocated (either as refugees or IDPs – statistics are reported below). The Department of State, however, is insisting on perpetuating a ‘myth of equality in victimization’ regarding Iraq’s most vulnerable ethno-religious minorities. This *myth* is being used to justify staying the course with respect to minorities.

This inexplicable and irresponsible position will result in the successful ethno-religious cleansing of Iraq’s indigenous ChaldoAssyrian Christians, with other minorities soon to follow.

This policy brief arises from two primary sources. The first is a Department of State report produced as a result of a Congressional reporting requirement on the situation of ethnic and religious minorities, and the Nineveh Plain geographically. The second source is from responses to a series of questions asked of General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker. The questions came from Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman, Senator Joseph Biden. This policy brief arises from these two sources that are, by default, the clearest, most formal articulation of US intentions for minorities.

The aim of this policy brief is to draw attention to the crisis and the sources of US Government policy failings with respect to Iraq’s ethno-religious minorities.

2. ‘Equal US Government Attention’ – A Policy for Ignoring Unequal ChaldoAssyrian Persecution

The Department of State (DoS) says that in the delicate situation in Iraq, “US policy is to promote a united and stable Iraq. As such, we look to support projects that promote unity; we are sensitive to any activities that might be seen as sectarian-based or which exacerbate tensions between Iraq’s various communities.” It is impossible to see how much worse the situation of ChaldoAssyrians could be exacerbated. The US liberation of Iraq mobilized latent societal animosity of Arab Muslims (Sunni and Shi’a) against the ChaldoAssyrians on the one hand and Kurdish ethno-centric nationalism on the other. These two sources of pressure are driving ChaldoAssyrians out of Iraq. US inaction at this point is now becoming complicity as violence and vulnerability feed one another in a vicious spiral for ChaldoAssyrians.

The US Government (USG) consistently maintains that it does not target ethnic and religious minorities for policy attention – either in terms of reconstruction, development or security. This is a wholly understandable *standard* policy. It defies understanding, however, when it becomes clear that a group is disproportionately, deliberately targeted and suffering with no change in course by the USG. With 1 in 3 ChaldoAssyrians as refugees and an even greater percentage trying to survive as internally displaced persons (IDPs), it is impossible to conceive how successful ethno-religious cleansing must be for the USG to accept that a ‘minorities crisis’ exists.

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The USG is effectively saying it will not help these people to reduce their disproportionately high level of persecution because its policy approach does not allow it to take any action if they acknowledged disproportionate ChaldoAssyrian suffering.

Acknowledging and confronting the ethno-religious cleansing of Iraq’s Christian ChaldoAssyrians is not about giving preference to one group. It is about dealing with a real situation before it is too late. The ‘myth of equality in victimization’ cannot stand in the face of all the evidence, facts, and statistics.

2.1 Non-Committal Recognition of a Crisis

The DoS report affirms the dire crisis facing Christian ChaldoAssyrians. On the overall situation, it states, “Their security and economic status have suffered dramatically in recent years [...] many have sought to escape from central Iraq out of genuine fear of attacks, kidnappings and assassinations.” Specifically with regards to the governorate of Ninawa and the Nineveh Plain, the report indicates that, “In Ninawa, the Christian minority faces considerable hardship. Some factions are under-represented politically, some suffer from uneven resource transfers from the KRG Ministry of Finance, and some experience human rights abuses.”

In terms of internal displacement, the report indicates that, “Ninawa absorbs a significant number of Christian IDPs, moving from the south, placing an economic burden on the area.”

Finally, simple numbers indicate the scope of the crisis. 1 in 3 ChaldoAssyrians have become refugees according to recent UNHCR numbers on the percentage of Christian Iraqi refugees.¹ UNHCR also indicates they are an extraordinary number of IDPs (reporting that Dohuk Governorate – the highest IDP absorbing governorate in the north – has ChaldoAssyrians at 85 percent of IDPs).² The close to 40 bombed churches, the beheadings, slaughters, rapes, kidnappings, etc. all attest to the deliberate and disproportionate targeting of this vulnerable, indigenous ethno-religious minority.

3. Inexplicable Policy Recommendations

Despite the obvious existence of a crisis, the main finding and recommendation of the report states: “Nonetheless, most informed observers believe that in terms of economic status, essential services, rule of law, and human rights, this minority compares favorably not only to other minorities (the Yezidis and Shabaks) but also to the Arab majority. *Thus on the basis of relative need, it would be inappropriate to single out this group for special attention.*”³

¹ UNHCR refugee and IDP situation report for July 2007 indicates that Christians constitute 15 percent and 20 percent of refugees in Jordan and Syria respectively. Based on the refugee numbers they use and conservative US Department of State data that Christians constituted roughly 1 million of Iraq’s population, a conservative estimate would be upwards of 300,000 ChaldoAssyrian Christian refugees. (see Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report, 2005, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51600.htm>). This confirms the data of various NGOs working closely on the refugee issue that upwards of 1 in 3 are now refugees.

² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Rapid Needs Assessment (RNA) of Recently Displaced Persons in the Kurdistan Region”, January 2007, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.pdf?tbl=SUBSITES&id=45db09052>. (last accessed September 24, 2007).

³ Emphasis added by ISDP.

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This finding simply does not reconcile with anything else the DoS is reporting or the facts confirming the horrific level of dislocation and displacement. ChaldoAssyrians are voting with their feet, before the world’s eyes, in a crisis that 60 Minutes⁴, and an array of other major media sources is documenting. DoS officials will not acknowledge the results of that vote, however. The policy recommendation is mutually exclusive of the background information provided by the DoS on the hardships and targeting of ChaldoAssyrians. So what does the DoS response truly mean for Washington’s decision-makers?

The DoS response represents the inability of USG officials to articulate basic, coherent policy assessments with respect to the plight of minorities in Iraq. The situation is too complex, the challenge too great, and so the response is to provide a recommendation completely disconnected/disjointed from the situation on the ground. ISDP refers to this trend in the DoS with respect to minorities as, ‘The Myth of Equality in Victimization’. It is a tragic reaction by DoS officials who should acknowledge the crisis but also indicate that until directed, there is no particular policy for saving Iraq’s minorities or even making this crisis a priority.

The myth is reinforced with the additional assertion by the Department of State that, “Like many in Iraq, Iraq’s Christian communities face severe hardships; however, on the basis of relative need, their circumstances would not justify a significant change in resource allocation.”

In fact, this response by the DoS rings the loudest alarm about the need to define a policy. a DoS report TO A Congressional reporting requirement on the situation in the Nineveh Plain, focusing on ChaldoAssyrians, that says the USG should not change course while this people undergo total dislocation/cleansing and possible annihilation, is clearly a reflection of the need for decision-makers to intervene urgently. The DoS should be provided with the policy direction and prioritization they require to assist in forming a policy. Without a policy mandate to focus on a clear-cut crisis facing minorities, DoS officials are compelled to stand reason on its head and put forth policy recommendations that are clearly disconnected from reality.

4. Define a Policy

The ‘Myth of Equality in Victimization’ perpetuated by the DoS and clearly articulated in its response to Congress’ call for an accounting of the situation, reflects a confluence of various realities in facing the ChaldoAssyrian crisis in Iraq. First, it reflects the absence of a specific, focused policy to protect this community and ensure it is not eradicated from Iraq. Second, it demonstrates that the DoS has little to no direction on this matter.

This ‘*myth*’ is reinforced in the Department of State’s assertion that, “The environment is fragile, and directing additional resources that are perceived to benefit a particular group could both heighten tensions and undermine the USG policy of fostering a tolerant and multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and non-sectarian society.” The Department of State adds, “The best way to provide physical and economic security for vulnerable Iraqis is to help build a democratic, stable and prosperous Iraq with a security force that provides protection for all of Iraq’s citizens.”

⁴ Readers are encouraged to visit the link to 60 Minute’s December 2, 2007 segment on this crisis: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/11/29/60minutes/main3553612.shtml>.

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By perpetuating the *‘myth’*, it is then possible to say that nothing should be done; thereby completely disregarding the reality that ChaldoAssyrians and other similar minorities cannot withstand the deliberate targeting of their people until such time as widespread stability and peace is achieved in Iraq.

The core basis of a policy for Iraq’s real minorities must proceed on the understanding that they cannot survive until such time as the US and Iraqi government bring stability and peace to all of Iraq. This is not a matter of singling them out, but a matter of unavoidable fact that the Islamist/insurgent violence and prejudicial, authoritarian KRG pressures they are facing today is driving them out of the country. The US must decide if having inherently moderate populations that make Iraq truly multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian is in its strategic interest in the long term.

The Department of State, having received no prioritization for minorities, is then compelled to take the self-evident fact that minorities can assist in the promotion of moderation, something wholly consistent with the US’ ‘National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terror’, and dismiss this in the promotion of a ‘myth of equality in victimization’. If decisive US leadership is not provided regarding this crisis, it will mean an end to the existence of Iraq’s 6,758 year old indigenous ChaldoAssyrian Christian presence. Thereafter, other minorities will follow, along with other moderate elements of Iraqi society.