

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20500

November 25, 2015

Dear Mr. President,

We write representing human rights organizations, genocide scholars, and religious leaders to implore your administration to include the Christian communities of Iraq and Syria in recognizing the genocide that religious minorities are currently facing in the Middle East.

In September of this year, over 100 individuals and organizations sent you a letter expressing our grave concern for religious minorities including Christians, Yazidis, and Shia Muslims at the hands of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS.) We urged you to formally declare the systematic destruction of these ancient religious communities to be genocide.

Recent reports suggest that your administration may be preparing a forthcoming statement declaring the targeted mass killing, rape and enslavement of the Yazidi community under ISIS to be “genocide.” This is a welcome step in the right direction, but the clearly documented facts on the ground and our country's treaty obligations under the Genocide Convention require that our government include Christians and other groups as victims of genocide as well.

According to Presidential Study Directive 10, preventing mass atrocities and genocide is a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility of the United States. Designation of a group as one targeted for genocide would have significant policy implications for American efforts to offer aid, asylum, and other protections to such victims. This is why it is critical that a presidential statement on the crimes against humanity that Middle Eastern Christians have suffered alongside Yazidis be given the proper name, which in this case is genocide.

The International Association of Genocide Scholars, the world’s largest organization of experts on genocide, has stated in an open letter, “ISIS’ mass murders of Chaldean, Assyrian, Melkite Greek, and Coptic Christians, Yazidis, Shia Muslims, Sunni Kurds and other religious groups meet even the strictest definition of genocide.”

Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs, whose presence in Syria and Iraq predates Christianity by 4,000 years, were among the first converts to Christianity. They are clear victims of religious genocide, both for their Christian faith, and for the historical contributions their ancestors made to the world. The destruction of UNESCO world heritage sites such as the ancient city of Nimrud, the gates of Nineveh and the columns of Palmyra are ISIS attempts to further the wholesale annihilation of ancient civilizations for religious reasons.

The Iraqi and Syrian governments have proven either unwilling or unable to provide even a semblance of protection to Christians and other religious minorities. If the United States fails to adequately recognize the full scope of the intentional destruction of these groups, it will constitute a failure of the values of tolerance and plurality for which our republic stands.

Failure to call ISIS' mass murder of Christians, Shia Muslims, and other groups in addition to Yazidis by its proper name—genocide—would be an act of denial as grave as U.S. refusal to recognize the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Calling genocide by its proper name cannot wait for a ruling by a court of law. Under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide we have an obligation to work towards prevention and punishment. We also urge the administration to encourage the U.N. Security Council to refer this case to the International Criminal Court.

Congress has advanced important measures to recognize these atrocities for what they are: Genocide. Congressman Jeff Fortenberry introduced H.Con.Res 75, which recognizes the collective persecution of religious minorities as genocide, and to date the resolution has over 150 bipartisan cosponsors. The Senate State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs appropriations bill, which has been overwhelmingly approved in committee, contains a provision that would require the Secretary of State to make a determination whether ISIS crimes against Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities constitutes genocide.

Speaking for the nearly 7 million Middle Eastern - American Christians in the United States diaspora, we implore you to recognize that the genocide perpetrated by ISIS has not stopped with the Yazidis. Middle Eastern Christians have suffered the same level of targeted and systematic crimes of extermination. Their blood cries out no less. Their protection is as imperative as that of their Yazidi brothers and sisters.

We urgently request that you and the State Department publicly acknowledge and denounce ISIS crimes against humanity against Yazidis, Christians, and other religious minorities as genocide. We urge you to act quickly with our allies and the United Nations to ensure that these ongoing, abominable crimes are halted, prevented, and punished. The religious freedom and dignity of the human race depends on our leadership.

Respectfully,

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