

Conference opening statement of Knox Thames, Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia

**Christians in the Contemporary Middle East Conference:
Religious Minorities and the Struggle for Secular Nationalism and Citizenship**

**Villanova University
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The genocide commemoration was somber and emotional. After a three-hour ride from Erbil, in a gradual northwesterly arc avoiding Da'esh-occupied Mosul, I arrived in Lalish in northern Iraq. We came to commemorate the second anniversary of the horrific atrocities against the Yezidi people at Mt. Sinjar. Once there, I had the honor of being seated next to the Baba Sheikh, the spiritual leader of the Yezidi faith. Afterwards, I met with survivors and other families. I will never forget when one Yezidi man gave me a list of kidnapped family members – his five sons, five daughters, and 33 other relatives, all taken by [Da'esh](#).

These types of depredations against Yezidis, as well as Christians and other members of religious and ethnic communities, led [Secretary Kerry in March](#) to state that, in his judgment, Da'esh is responsible for genocide in the territory it controls against Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims. He also stated that, in his judgment, Da'esh is also responsible for crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing against these groups, against Kurds, Sunnis, and against other minorities.

This is not the first violence we have seen against religious minorities in the region. For decades, members of such minority groups have suffered human rights violations and abuses, discrimination, and cruelty. Christians have suffered from grinding violence and restrictions on the exercise of their human rights, which has resulted in a slow outmigration since the 1950s. But the emergence of Da'esh and other likeminded violent extremists introduced a new level of brutality.

With this in mind, I want to salute Villanova University, Father Peter and Father Kail for convening this important conference. These are critical issues with no simple answers, and I am impressed by the expertise gathered here. My position was created just over one year ago to sharpen U.S. government work to assist religious minorities. In my remarks, I will offer our perspective from the State Department and share about how we are engaging. I will share about some of the challenges we see, which will have a heavy focus on Iraq and Syria. I will speak to how we are responding, and note some opportunities in the future. I also agree with Cardinal Sandri's comments about terminology. The term "minority" is contextual and relative country by country. I will use it as a shorthand to describe

numerically small groups in specific countries. It is not a statement about their placement in society, as often these groups were the first peoples.

In recent years, I believe the greatest threat to Christians and members of other religious minority groups come from attacks by a variety of non-state and terrorist actors. Recent examples of Christians or Christian areas targeted for violence include the targeting of church leaders during a visit to Qamishli in northern Syria, the two Syrian bishops who remain kidnapped, the incursion of violent extremists into the Christian town of al-Qaa in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon, attacks in Upper Egypt against churches and Christian homes and businesses, and the murder of a Jordanian journalist from a Christian background in Amman.

We must remember that other communities have suffered greatly at the hands of violent extremists as well: sexual slavery and abuse of Yezidis; Da'esh attacks on Shabak, Kaka'i, and Turkmen Shia in northern Iraq; and the disappearance of the Sabaeen-Mandaeans from that country. Da'esh targets Shia Muslims for just being Shia, and it strikes out at any Sunni Muslim brave enough to denounce its hateful ideology.

Government actions targeting Christians and members of other religious groups include jailing Christians in Iran, bringing blasphemy cases against Muslims and Christians in Egypt, bringing a recent blasphemy case in Algeria, and enforcing undue limitations on the right to freedom of religion in Saudi Arabia. In Iraq, we have expressed concerns about parliamentary action in Baghdad regarding including religious affiliation on identification cards and recent efforts to ban alcohol, as well as the reported expropriations of Christian property in Iraq, including in the Kurdish region. Official discrimination against Baha'is in Iran, as well as harsh restrictions on their religious practices, continue and result in severe human rights violations, including the jailing of the leadership of that community – the Baha'i seven – on account of their beliefs. The jailing of Baha'i leaders in Yemen is also troubling.

And across the region two seemingly unrelated groups – converts to different faiths and atheists – face increasing abuse by governments and societal actors.

Because of this grim picture, the United States remains committed to supporting equal treatment and respect for human rights for all, regardless of the beliefs one holds. Since joining the Department of State a year ago in this new position focusing on religious minority protections, we have worked diligently in this challenging environment to defend members of minority communities, to support respect for religious freedom and related human rights, and to support conditions that value diversity and religious pluralism.

We have led international coalitions for religious freedom and minorities. We have provided training on human rights and initiated special work on protecting the cultural heritage of religious minorities. We have used satellites to search for mass graves. We have raised concerns about minority rights across all of our engagements.

These efforts were on full display during the major international conference we convened in late July, focusing on threats to religious and ethnic minorities under Da'esh. The conference emanated from a White House directive and Secretary Kerry's March statement about genocide, where he challenged the world to "find the resources to help those harmed by these atrocities."

The Washington Conference was a concrete expression of U.S. concern about the future of religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq and Syria. We brought together civil society, religious leaders, faith communities, and diplomats to discuss just that – how the international community can more effectively meet this challenge for minorities. Wanting to first hear from members of impacted communities and NGOs engaged on the issue, clergy from different churches spoke, as did Christian activists, along with representatives of Turkmen Shia, Kaka'i, and Yezidi communities.

Representatives from more than 30 countries met at the Department of State. Delegations participated from North America, across Europe and the Arab world, East and South Asia, as well as representatives of the European Union, several UN offices, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Demonstrating the high level of U.S. government concern, Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken delivered opening remarks, followed by Lt. Gen. Terry Wolff, the Deputy Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL.

Unlike previous meetings, we took a more holistic and action-oriented approach. Conversations identified gaps in assistance and focused on concrete responses those nations and donor organizations can undertake. The Washington Conference generated greater international attention to these issues. To follow up on these efforts, we are working with the Spanish government on their promised pledging conference to be convened in the coming months.

So where do we go from here? The change in administration provides an opportunity to reflect on the challenges before us.

The first point to emphasize is the importance of working to protect religious freedom for all. Of course we should care about our own communities. But to really help Christians, or Baha'is or other specific groups, we need to be working

to see systems develop where *everyone* has the freedom to believe or not believe. It is in those environments that the church can thrive.

But this will not be easy work. Authoritarian governments continue to suppress the peaceful practice of religion in almost every region of the world. Violent extremists continue to target members of religious minorities, as well as members of the majority faith who confront their ideologies of hate. Groups like Da'esh in Iraq and Syria, Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Shabaab in Somalia, and the Pakistani Taliban threaten international peace and security, acting without regard for the human rights of certain individuals.

According to the Pew Forum's 2010 survey on religious views, roughly 84 percent of the global community believes in something greater than themselves. Yet despite this religiosity, there are increasing limitations on the freedom to practice. Pew's 2014 survey found that 74 percent of the global population lives in countries where governments or societal actors restrict the free practice of religion, and 41 percent of the 200 countries surveyed had experienced religion-related terrorist activities. These statistics are important for policymakers to consider, because rising restrictions on religious practice overlaid with increasing religiosity presents a recipe for human rights abuses, instability, and potential violence.

Protecting religious freedom is vital not only because it is a human right, but because it is a driver of peace, security, and development. It is instrumentally important in forging a better world. We advocate for greater respect for religious freedom and for human rights of minority groups because doing so upholds international standards and can help promote more peaceful, stable, and prosperous societies and advance other goals we care about, including countering violent extremism. In essence, countries benefit when their people can fully enjoy the human rights and fundamental freedoms to which they are entitled. Moreover, no nation can fulfill its potential when its people are denied the right to observe their innermost beliefs and live peacefully in accordance with their conscience.

Minorities suffer most in situations of religious freedom violations. In countries where religious minorities have long contributed to their national societies in relative comity for decades, centuries, or millennia, we continue to witness violent upheavals – some of historic proportions, in which entire communities are in danger of being driven out of their homelands based solely on their religious and ethnic identity. The erosion of civic space for diversity of thought and belief is a challenge across the Middle East. In many circumstances, Christian community leaders I have spoken with have shared that they find themselves in an incredibly difficult position, having to choose between an authoritarian regime that provides

some security against more openness with fewer security guarantees and the potential for violent extremist violence. Christians in Iraq were faced with this conundrum in their recent history – the Saddam Hussein regime provided them space to practice their faith, but their political freedoms were repressed, along with other communities. Christian leaders have explained how the traumas of the post-Saddam years have shown what can happen when the strongman falls. Christians and other minorities in Syria believe they face the Hobson’s choice of Asad or al Nusra.

This it is a question I hope you will wrestle with over these two days. This is a question we cannot afford to ignore.

And the liberation of Mosul and Ninewa Province provides a unique opportunity to answer it in Iraq. These military operations are especially significant for members of minority communities, as the region is the heartland for many of Iraq’s ancient religious communities – Christians, Yezidis, Kaka’i, and Shabak, as well as home to Turkmen Shia and Sunni communities. The post-liberation environment will revive questions about political control of disputed internal boundaries. These will not be academic debates for minorities, as their ancestral homelands lay between Arab and Kurdish areas. As Catholic priest Father Benokah said at our conference, these are not disputed territories to minorities, as they have lived on these lands for a millennium or more.

As we enter the post-liberation phase in Iraq, equal citizenship and political participation for minorities will be key, if they are to feel confident in their future in the country. We understand their need to have time to rebuild their communities, both physically and spiritually. The United States supports a unified Iraq that respects the human rights of all, including members of minority communities. We want all parties – including Iraqi Arabs and Iraqi Kurds – to give minorities the space, support, and security they need to reestablish their communities. Towards this end, we are working to ensure that religious minorities have a voice and a place at the table as equals, vested with all the rights held by those in the majority. The United States supports structures that give religious minorities say over their own governance and security. Why? Because doing so will encourage communities to stay or to return from displacement and because it will make Iraq stronger. We have seen that when diverse communities, including religious and ethnic minority communities, are fairly represented in government and respected in a society that enables enjoyment of freedom of religion and the chance for decent livelihoods, societies are stronger, more prosperous, and more stable.

In conversations I have had with Christian leaders, such as Patriarch Sako from Baghdad and with Cardinal Sandri in Rome, they have emphasized the importance of what some refer to as “shared citizenship” – meaning equal citizenship and respect for the rights of all in our societies. Pope Francis has also spoken eloquently on this. We agree. The different components of these diverse societies must be treated equally and have an equal voice in their governance. Muslim scholars and intellectuals endorsed this concept earlier this year with the issuance the Marrakesh Declaration, in which they affirmed the importance of protecting the citizenship rights of members of religious minorities and equality for all before the law.

The stakes could not be higher for religious minorities. So many are suffering: Christians and Yezidis, Sunnis and Shias, Sabaeen-Mandaeans, Kaka’i, and Baha’is, and countless others. Too many have fallen victim to conflict and equally deserve assistance. But it is in every country’s interests to create and protect space for diversity of thought and belief, as they will be stronger, more prosperous, and progressive. Supporting religious freedom for everyone is the surest way to ensure a future for Christians in the Middle East.

And in my extensive travels since taking up this post almost one year ago, I have witnessed examples of increasing religious tolerance in the region. I’ve seen this in the effort in Marrakesh where Islamic scholars promoted equal citizenship for minorities. I’ve seen this in Egypt with Muslim and Christian clerics coming together to promote interfaith understanding. I’ve seen this in Tunisia with the remarkable display of government support for the annual pilgrimage to the Djerba island synagogue. I’ve seen this in the Persian Gulf, with Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman allowing for the construction of churches to host large expatriate communities. I saw it during my visit to the Sikh gurdwara in Dubai, across the street from 12 churches that have been built in recent years.

The task of promoting interfaith understanding and tolerance, of advancing respect for human rights, including religious freedom, is one that must be carried out with vigilance and confidence. To be clear, the protection of religious minorities is a foreign policy priority of the U.S. government. It is a task the United States must continue to pursue. I believe that by standing firmly for religious freedom, we can make a difference and help protect religious minorities.

In closing, I opened my talk by highlighting my participation in a genocide commemoration in August. Let me end by focusing on hope. As we know, churches across the Middle East and beyond are preparing for Christmas. Eastern Christians are observing the 40 day Nativity Fast focusing on proclamation of the

incarnation of God. Catholics and Protestants have begun celebrating Advent, a season of expectant waiting for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. The second week of Advent, which we are now in, focuses on hope.

So despite the challenges facing Christians and other religious minorities in the region, we should take inspiration from this season and not lose hope. The challenges are immense, but miracles can happen. Let us find hope in that church bells are ringing again on the Ninewa Plains. Let us find hope in that Yezidis are able to practice their rites in Sinjar and Lalish. And let us be people who give hope to the oppressed because of our tireless efforts to protect freedom of conscience and belief for all.