

**Testimony by Bishop Oscar Cantú, Bishop of Las Cruces, New Mexico, and
Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace**

**on behalf of the
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops**

**before the Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
of the Committee on Appropriations of the United States Senate**

March 11, 2015

Chairman Graham, Ranking Member Leahy and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to offer testimony today on a high priority concern for us, religious persecution. My testimony will focus on the Middle East where Christians and other religious minorities are facing systematic and horrendous persecution at the hands of the so-called “Islamic State” or ISIL.

Just yesterday, the thirty-five bishops of the Administrative Committee of our Conference issued a statement in which they said: “Upon learning of the death of 21 Coptic Christians at the hands of ISIL terrorists, Pope Francis called their murder a ‘testimony which cries out to be heard.’ ... The testimony of those 21 brave and courageous martyrs does not stand alone as thousands of families – Christian and other religions – find themselves fleeing from horrific violence. ... We urge all people of goodwill to work toward protections of the marginalized and persecuted.” I am here to reiterate that plea.

Humanitarian Catastrophe

The numbers of persons and families impacted by the rampage of ISIL is staggering. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) identified close to 2.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) across Iraq in February 2015.¹ That same month in Syria OCHA identified over 12 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, almost 4 million who had fled the country as refugees, and over 7.5 million internally displaced.²

The U.N. estimates that the Syrian civil war, now entering its fifth year, has killed 220,000 persons. In Iraq, the U.N. reports that “[f]rom the beginning of January until 10 December 2014, at least 33,368 civilians casualties have resulted from the ongoing violence, including at least 11,602 killed and 21,766 wounded.” Of course, all of these casualties and forced displacements are not due solely to religious persecution, but the weakening of the rule of law and the corresponding rise of extremist groups, many associated with ISIL, created the conditions where religious persecution could grow malignantly like a cancer unchecked. In Syria and Iraq, religious persecution is a distinct crisis within a wider crisis.

The U.N. in Iraq received “reports of serious violations of international humanitarian law and gross human rights violations and abuses perpetrated by ISIL,” including: “attacks directly targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure, executions and other targeted killings of civilians,

¹ Iraq Crisis Situation Report No. 33 (21 – 27 February 2015)

² <http://www.unocha.org/syria> Data source: OCHA (as of Feb 2015)

abductions, rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence perpetrated against women and children, slavery and trafficking of women and children, forced recruitment of children, destruction or desecration of places of religious or cultural significance, wanton destruction and looting of property, and denial of fundamental freedoms.”

Ominously, the U.N. concluded: “In particular, members of Iraq’s diverse ethnic and religious communities, including Turkmen, Shabaks, Christians, Yazidi, Sabaeans, Kaka’e, Faili Kurds, Shi’ite Arab, and others have been intentionally and systematically targeted by ISIL and associated armed groups and subjected to gross human rights abuses, in what appears as a deliberate policy aimed at destroying, suppressing or expelling these communities permanently from areas under their control.”³ Similar persecution and abuses by ISIL are widely reported in Syria. It should be added that Sunni Muslims who disagree with ISIL’s radical ideology are often targeted for violence and intimidation, and many of them, including Sunni Kurds, have tried to protect persecuted minorities.

Human Consequences

These statistics, as grim as they are, only tell part of the story. In January of this year, I made a solidarity visit to the Kurdish region of Iraq. Our hotel in Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan, overlooked St. Elias Chaldean Catholic Chapel. The small Chapel compound was packed with tents, home to 116 families and 560 persons who had fled the mainly Christian city of Qaraqosh to the south in August of 2014. On the final day of our visit, I celebrated Mass in the Chapel. An elderly woman came up to one of the members of our delegation after Mass with tears in her eyes as she recalled escaping the attack by ISIL militants. She now lives in poverty in a tent. Imagine the trauma, the sense of loss, the disorientation. In one tent two families and 11 persons were crammed into the tight living space, huddled against the cold.

At the Shariya Collective in the Dohuk Governorate we met a displaced Yazidi father who shared his family’s story. He was a 34 year-old policeman. His family of eight fled on foot and walked for hours to Mount Sinjar where they spent twelve days hiding and foraging for food in very hot summer conditions. Kurdish fighters helped them get to Kurdistan. His family, including his mother, wife and children now lived in one room. Five other families are in the same building. He hopes to return to his ancestral village when security allows.

At another Church compound near Dohuk, two related Christian families who had fled Mosul shared one room, a former classroom, as their temporary home. The man and his brother, with virtually no worldly possessions beyond clothes and blankets, offered us coffee, a traditional gesture of hospitality and normalcy in a situation that is anything but normal.

The suffering Church of Iraq is also the servant Church. With incredible compassion and commitment, the local Church is reaching out through Caritas Iraq, in a strong partnership with Catholic Relief Services, to all in need. We traveled to Dohuk and the region surrounding the city where Caritas and CRS are running extensive programs for displaced Yazidis, Muslims and Christians. Many of the staff are themselves displaced persons.

³ Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Iraq: 11 September – 10 December 2014, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, U.N. Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI)

In the Dohuk area, CRS and Caritas are operating child-friendly spaces to help children deal with trauma in a safe environment and experience some normality. We visited a number of unfinished structures that CRS has helped to winterize with windows, doors and plastic sheeting, creating warmer homes in the face of the harsh winter weather. We witnessed long lines of displaced families receiving winterization items, including carpets, blankets, kettles, and kerosene heaters, containers and vouchers. We talked to people at another site receiving cash assistance based on the size of their families. The distributions were calm and orderly despite the desperate circumstances. We commend the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) for their rapid and generous support of CRS' efforts.

We met many Yazidis from Sinjar and Christians from Mosul who had fled ISIL with little more than the clothes on their backs. Their stories were haunting, but their gratitude was deep. Not only were they receiving assistance, they were being treated with human dignity.

Whenever I got the opportunity I assured displaced families of the prayers, support and advocacy of the Church in the United States. Time and again, I promised to bring back their stories and their hopes for peace.

Implications for U.S. Policy

As a bishop, I especially appreciated the opportunity to meet with Archbishop Bashar Matti Warda of Erbil, Bishop Raban Al Qas of Zakho and Amadiya, and Bishop Shlemon Warduni, Auxiliary Bishop of the Patriarchate of Babylon in Baghdad. Bishop Warduni had addressed our full body of bishops in June 2012. These courageous shepherds are guiding their flocks through incredibly difficult days. They asked for our prayers and promised theirs. They also affirmed our advocacy work with the government of the United States.

We were frequently told that Iraq needs international military assistance to protect its people from the onslaught of ISIL. At the same time, they asked our nation to support Iraq in working for an increasingly inclusive government so that extremists cannot exploit Sunni exclusion and marginalization. It goes without saying that they begged our nation to provide robust humanitarian and development assistance.

Our Conference of Bishops urges the U.S. government to adopt five key policies in response to the rise of ISIL and religious persecution in the Middle East:

1. Confront the reality of religious persecution in the Middle East, where Christians are beheaded “for the mere fact of being Christians” and other religious minorities suffer similarly at the hands of extremists;
2. Recognize that it may be necessary for the international community to use proportionate and discriminate force to stop these unjust aggressors and to protect religious minorities and civilians within the framework of “international and humanitarian law;”
3. Acknowledge that the problem cannot be resolved solely through a military response and that it is critical to address political exclusion and economic desperation that are being manipulated by ISIL in its recruitment efforts, especially in Syria and Iraq;

4. Scale up humanitarian and development assistance to host countries and trusted NGOs, including our own Catholic Relief Services, that are struggling to aid displaced persons; and
5. Accept for resettlement a fair share of some of the most vulnerable people where return is impossible.

Allow me to elaborate on each one.

1. Religious Persecution

Our government must name and confront the reality of religious persecution in the Middle East, where Christians are beheaded “for the mere fact of being Christians” and other religious minorities suffer similarly at the hands of extremists. It is critical that in addition to addressing the wider conflicts in the Middle East, including the civil war in Syria and sectarian violence in Iraq, that our nation work with other nations, particularly those in the region, to support initiatives to promote education, pluralism, tolerance and respect. Support for intercultural education and interfaith dialogue, as well as investments in strengthening the rule of law and impartial judicial systems, are critical to reestablishing pluralistic societies respectful of religious freedom and human rights.

Resisting religious persecution and promoting religious freedom are important not only for Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East. They are critical for those societies as a whole. In a letter to Christians in the region, Pope Francis asserted: “You can help your Muslim fellow citizens to present with discernment a more authentic image of Islam, as so many of them desire, reiterating that Islam is a religion of peace, one which is compatible with respect for human rights and favors peaceful coexistence on the part of all. This will prove beneficial for them and for all society. The tragic situation faced by our Christian brothers and sisters in Iraq, as well as by the Yazidi and members of other religious and ethnic communities, demands that all religious leaders clearly speak out to condemn these crimes unanimously and unambiguously, and to denounce the practice of invoking religion in order to justify them.”⁴

Religious persecution may begin with religious minorities, but it does not end there. An entire society is at risk when fundamental rights are denied to any group. Attacks on religious and ethnic minorities are attacks on the health of an entire society. The rights of all Syrians, Iraqis, Libyans and others in the region are at risk from the current situation. Our nation must do more to protect civilians, especially religious minorities, to address political and economic exclusion that extremists exploit, and to assist refugees and internally displaced persons who have fled for their lives.

The realities facing religious minorities around the world demonstrate the need for a renewed and refocused approach to addressing religious freedom. Passage of The Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2015 (H.R. 1150) by this Congress would represent a first step in improving “the ability of the United States to advance religious freedom globally through enhanced diplomacy, training, counterterrorism, and foreign assistance efforts, and through stronger and more flexible political responses to religious freedom violations and violent extremism worldwide.”

⁴ Pope Francis, Letter to the Christians in the Middle East, December 21, 2014.

2. *Responsibility to Protect*

Pope Francis and the Holy See have reiterated on a number of occasions that it is “licit” to use force to stop these unjust aggressors and to protect religious minorities and civilians from these horrendous attacks. They have emphasized that the use of military force must be proportionate and discriminate, and employed within the framework of “international and humanitarian law.” Given our nation’s history of military engagement in the region, an engagement that has contributed to Shia-Sunni tensions and weakened the rule of law, the United States must be particularly careful as it employs force to do so in close collaboration with international and local partners.

3. *Diplomacy and Political Engagement*

Pope Francis has argued: “In reaffirming that it is licit, while always respecting international law, to stop an unjust aggressor, I wish to reiterate, moreover, that the problem cannot be resolved solely through a military response.” The international community needs to remember that military force alone is not adequate to address the challenges posed by violent extremism and religious persecution. It is critical to address political exclusion and economic desperation that are being manipulated by ISIL in its recruitment efforts, especially related to Syria and Iraq. Sunni exclusion and marginalization in both Iraq and Syria, combined with a weakening of the rule of law in the wake of the war in Iraq and the civil war in Syria, created fertile soil for the growth of ISIL. As ISIL recruits fighters from foreign countries, they often rally young recruits to the cause of defending Sunni Islam from perceived and real threats.

The United States should lead international diplomatic efforts to encourage inclusive governance in both Iraq and Syria. We are grateful for the way the United States has worked with Iraqi officials to encourage the formation of an inclusive government in Iraq that respects human rights and religious freedom for all. Although Iraqis still face challenges in this regard, the task of building inclusive governance remains essential. The same must be done in Syria and Libya.

In Syria, efforts to engage both the government and mainstream rebels in meaningful negotiations on a transition toward inclusive governance respectful of the rights of both majorities and minorities have never gotten enough serious attention and support. Such an initiative is critical to marginalize and overcome ISIL. A year and a half ago, the Administrative Committee of the U.S. bishops noted: “A humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding in Syria. We call upon our nation and the international community to save lives by pressing for serious dialogue to end the conflict, by refraining from fueling further violence with military attacks or arms transfers, and by offering more humanitarian assistance.”⁵ The failure to press for serious dialogue then created space for the rise of ISIL. But it is never too late to engage in diplomacy and political solutions.

4. *Humanitarian and Development Assistance*

Given the magnitude of the crisis and the depth of basic human needs, our nation must scale up humanitarian and development assistance to host countries that are struggling to aid

⁵ Statement on Syria, Administrative Committee, United States Conference Of Catholic Bishops, September 10, 2013

displaced persons. In addition, it is important to deliver both humanitarian and development assistance through trusted NGOs, including faith-based organizations like Catholic Relief Services, who are close to displaced populations.

We must recognize that investments in international assistance not only alleviate human suffering, they are also investments in peace. Pope Francis maintains, “Fanaticism and fundamentalism...need to be countered by...solidarity” that rests “on the following pillars: respect for human life and for religious freedom...; commitment to ensuring what each person requires for a dignified life; and care for the natural environment.”

Improvements in economic life that enable young people to look to the future with confidence and parents to support their families in dignity help inoculate populations against the false promises of extremism. This is particularly true in failing states and developing countries in which extremism has taken or may take root.

The number of people affected by humanitarian crises today is staggering. The U.N. estimates 77.9 million people need humanitarian assistance in 2015. For this reason we ask Congress not to “rob Peter to pay Paul” in the international assistance budget. Today’s desperation can be exploited to become tomorrow’s extremism. We urge you to support International Disaster Assistance, Migration and Refugee Assistance, and Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance. As you know, not only in Syria and Iraq, but also in surrounding countries, humanitarian organizations, the U.N. and local communities are struggling to provide adequate humanitarian assistance. Overwhelmed by the influx of refugees, Jordan and Lebanon have begun to tighten their borders, pushing more refugees to flee in rickety boats across the Mediterranean, often losing their lives.

In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, many people rely on the international community for their everyday survival. Unemployment, especially among young adults, is unacceptably high in both the West Bank and Gaza, contributing to suffering and instability. More than 100,000 people are without housing in Gaza as a result of the latest conflict. Poverty and desperation in the Palestinian Territories are not good for ordinary Palestinians or for Israeli security. We urge you to continue funding to assist the poor and marginalized there.

In places like the Central African Republic and South Sudan, humanitarian intervention and peacebuilding efforts would be impossible without United Nations or regional peacekeepers. Those peacekeepers are saving lives and need help to improve their efforts.

Thanks in part to robust intervention by the United States, the international community is winning the struggle against Ebola. Yet much work remains to enable the affected communities to recover and children to return to school. The crisis has taught the international community a valuable lesson: that strengthening health systems globally not only protects the dignity of millions, but also is a valuable investment in preventing and containing future outbreaks. Support for infectious disease control is critical for the same reason.

Support for Development Assistance and specific aspects of economic support funds that reduce poverty and enhance the dignity of families improves stability and immunizes populations against extremism. Approximately \$0.5 billion of the Development Assistance request includes a long-overdue scaling up of investments in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, where tens

of thousands of children and vulnerable families continue to flee violence and crushing poverty. It is essential that we address these root causes of migration.

In all of these programs it is critical to preserve the important role of faith-based organizations through conscience clauses that prohibit discrimination in funding as well as through other provisions that ensure their unique contribution in serving the poor.

We know there are many budget demands and limitations. We support you in working across the aisle and with the President to find a long-term solution to our rising national debt, but strongly urge you to preserve the less than one percent of the federal budget that reduces global poverty and the desperation that contribute to suffering, conflict and extremism. Reductions in the less than 1% of the budget devoted to helping the poorest and most vulnerable people in our world would not have a significant impact on deficit reduction, but would have a profound impact on the lives of people in desperate situations at a time of increased need. Together with Catholic Relief Services, the Conference of Bishops supports these poverty-reduction development and humanitarian accounts:

Agency	Account	Amount (\$ in thousands)
USAID	Maternal Health and Child Survival (including vaccines)	\$770,000
USAID	Nutrition	\$120,000
USAID	Vulnerable Children (orphans and displaced children)	\$30,000
USAID	HIV/AIDS	\$330,000
DOS/PEPFAR	HIV/AIDS (State Funding/PEPFAR)	\$5,670,000
USAID	Malaria, TB, other infectious diseases, and pandemic diseases	\$1,078,000
USAID	Development Assistance	\$2,999,694
USAID/OFDA	International Disaster Assistance	\$2,100,000
DOS/PRM	Migration and Refugee Assistance	\$3,300,000
DOS/PRM	Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance	\$100,000
MCC	Millennium Challenge Corporation	\$1,250,000
DOS/IO	Contributions to International Peacekeeping	\$2,930,223
DOS/IO	Peacekeeping Operations	\$495,200
DOS/IO	Peace Operations Response Mechanism	\$150,000

5. Resettlement

In January, in his address to the diplomatic corps, Pope Francis declared, “A Middle East without Christians would be a marred and mutilated Middle East!”⁶ Church leaders at all levels hope and pray for the day when Christians can return to their ancestral lands. The historic Christian presence in the Middle East is important religiously, and is critical for the pluralism and development of societies in the region. In my visit to Iraq, I met many refugees and internally displaced persons who shared the hope of return.

⁶ Address to the Diplomatic Corps, Pope Francis, January 12, 2015.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that some families and individuals will be unable to return to their homes. Our delegation to Iraq also met with some very vulnerable refugees and displaced Syrians and Iraqis who will not be able to return to their homes. Some have health conditions, others have lost a bread winner, and still others are orphaned. The most vulnerable of this population need to have the option of resettlement to a third country. The United States needs to accept for resettlement a fair share of some of the most vulnerable people where return is impossible, and it needs to expedite the processing of their resettlement. This should include the consideration of in-country processing for vulnerable Iraqis.

Conclusion

Religious persecution in the Middle East must be confronted directly and strongly with comprehensive and far reaching strategies: encouraging intercultural education and interreligious exchanges and rejection of extremist ideologies; strengthening the rule of law; using proportionate and discriminate force to protect religious minorities and civilians within the framework of “international and humanitarian law; addressing political exclusion and economic desperation that are exploited by extremists; scaling up humanitarian and development assistance to host countries and trusted NGOs; and accepting for resettlement a fair share of some of the most vulnerable people where return is impossible.

Near the conclusion of my visit to Iraq, Bishop Warduni thanked us for coming and demonstrating solidarity with the people and Church of Iraq at this time of persecution and conflict. He promised that they would not forget us. With the images of destitute refugees and displaced families seared into my memory, I cannot forget those suffering religious persecution in the Middle East. Neither should our nation.