

Refugee cuts affect persecuted Christians

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Just weeks into President Trump's first term, he was asked whether he would make the plight of Christians facing religious persecution abroad a priority of his administration. "Yes," Trump said. "They've been horribly treated."

The US State Department has backed up Trump's statement, recently convening its second ministerial to advance religious freedom, which was intended to draw attention to the plight of religious minorities all over the world.

But an increasingly vocal band of advocates and experts says the Trump administration's policies have failed to address many of the challenges faced by Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities abroad, especially those in the Middle East. Some argue the administration's efforts to scale back refugee resettlement, deport Chaldean Christians living in the United States, and potentially end temporary protected status for Syrians have only made their situations worse.

"I can tell you they feel completely abandoned," said Philippe Nassif, Amnesty International's advocacy director for the Middle East and North Africa and former executive director of the advocacy group In Defense of Christians. "They feel ignored, and in some cases, they feel used."

Many critics point to the administration's decision to reduce the number of refugees allowed into the United States from 110,000 under President Obama to 45,000 shortly after Trump took office. Trump later reduced the cap to 30,000 people—the lowest since the refugee resettlement program started in the 1980s.

White House officials are now reportedly considering eliminating refugee resettlement altogether.

The reductions have sparked outrage among the nine nonprofit groups that help the government resettle refugees, six of which are faith-based.

Matthew Soerens, US director of church mobilization for the evangelical Christian organization World Relief, has tracked refugees coming into the US and found that

Christian refugee admissions have fallen as well.

“The numbers don’t lie,” said Soerens, whose group is among those that resettle refugees.

The number of Christian refugees entering the US dropped from 37,521 in fiscal 2016 to 22,747 projected for the end of fiscal 2019—a 39 percent decrease, according to Soerens’s calculations using data from the State Department’s Refugee Processing Center.

Among countries that show up in the top two tiers of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom’s list of countries of concern, the decline is more drastic: 14,551 Christian refugees were resettled in the US from those nations in fiscal 2016, compared with 5,457 projected for the end of fiscal 2019. That represents a decrease of 62.5 percent.

Only 87 people are expected to be resettled this fiscal year from Iraq, one of 11 countries where officials have instituted additional vetting procedures for refugees. That is down from 1,524 Iraqis resettled as refugees in 2016.

There have also been reductions in the number of Syrian Christians: the US took 68 Christian refugees from the country in 2016; this year it is projected to resettle 37.

Soerens said he was “saddened but not surprised” by the reduction in Muslim refugees under Trump, who proposed a “total and complete shutdown” of Muslims entering the US during his campaign. Soerens insisted the reduction in Christian refugees simply did not match the president’s own rhetoric on religious freedom.

“President Trump also promised to facilitate the resettlement of Syrian Christian refugees, which is a promise broken,” he said. “And the declines among other persecuted Christians, such as those from Iraq, Iran, Burma, and Pakistan, are even more stark.”

The Trump administration has deflected criticism about the refugee admission reductions by pointing to efforts to rebuild the homes of displaced Christians in places such as northern Iraq, where their communities were ravaged by ISIS militants.

But reports from the region suggest that while some Christians have moved back to those locations, others are unlikely to do so due to lingering security concerns.

“You get rid of ISIS, and then you have a situation where armed militias—some backed by Iran, others backed by the Iraqi government, others that are Kurdish armed groups—have filled in the void and have not allowed a lot of these communities to return to rebuild,” Nassif said. “There are some communities where rebuilding has happened, but the majority of them—Christians and Yazidis—are still displaced.”

Stephen Rasche, counsel with the Chaldean Catholic Archdiocese of Erbil and the Nineveh Reconstruction Project, stressed that hard data about who has returned to the beleaguered region is difficult to come by. Even so, he estimated that fewer than half of the original inhabitants of Christian Nineveh—around 35–40 percent (approximately 40,000–50,000 people), he wrote in an email—have returned or are attempting to do so.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration has moved to deport Iraqi Christians who are already in the US back to the region. Shortly after Trump introduced the initial travel ban on several Muslim-majority countries, Immigration and Customs Enforcement detained several hundred Iraqis in and around Detroit, Michigan. Many are Chaldean Christians, an ancient group of Catholics whose historic homeland extends from Turkey and Georgia through northern Iraq and Jordan.

Efforts to deport the detained immigrants were halted by a legal challenge spearheaded by the ACLU. Miriam Aukerman, senior staff attorney at the ACLU of Michigan, explained that out of the roughly 1,400 Iraqi nationals who had final orders of removal, around 800 have criminal records. But many of the criminal infractions are minor or years old and hundreds have no criminal record whatsoever.

Aukerman said the administration has been “calling out Iraq (for religious persecution), but at the same time using every tool in the tool book to force Iraq to take back people who will be tortured or killed if they are repatriated.” —Religion News Service