

A  
STRATEGIC  
CASE

*For a Safe Haven in  
Northern Iraq*

ROBERT NICHOLSON



Ninevah Plain © Philos Project

[W]e are preparing for future efforts to liberate occupied territory – with an eye to the protection of minority communities. In particular, the liberation of Mosul, of Nineveh province in Iraq, and parts of Syria that are currently occupied by Daesh, and that will decide whether there is still a future for minority communities in this part of the Middle East. For those communities, the stakes in this campaign are utterly existential....

So we must bear in mind, after all, that the best response to genocide is a reaffirmation of the fundamental right to survive of every group targeted for destruction. What Daesh wants to erase, we must preserve....This means that, as more areas are liberated, residents will need help not only to repair infrastructure, but also to ensure that minorities can return in safety, that they are integrated into local security forces, and that they receive equal protection under the law....

I say to all our fellow citizens and to the international community, we must recognize what Daesh is doing to its victims. We must hold the perpetrators accountable. And we must find the resources to help those harmed by these atrocities be able to survive on their ancestral land.

-US Secretary of State John Kerry (March 17, 2016)

# A Strategic Case for a Safe Haven in Northern Iraq

As the battle for Mosul gets underway, a new consensus is emerging about what should come next: The creation of a safe haven for Iraq's three largest minority groups in the northern part of the country. On Saturday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel called for the creation of a safe zone in the Sinjar District of Northern Iraq for Yazidis who have suffered genocide at the hands of the Islamic State. Famous Yazidi spokeswoman Nadia Murad, recent winner of the Vaclav Havel Human Rights Prize, immediately endorsed Merkel's statement on social media. Meanwhile, the Iraqi Turkmen community – also victimized by ISIS – is calling for an independent province in the nearby Tal Afar District. These efforts dovetail with current efforts by Assyrian Christians, with support from members of the United States Congress, to establish a multiethnic province on the Nineveh Plain northeast of Mosul. The United States government, together with its global partners, should mobilize its political, economic and military assets in support of his project as it helps plan for a post-ISIS Iraq. By creating a contiguous safe haven

that encompasses Sinjar, Tal Afar and the Nineveh Plain – a safe haven that will transition to a self-administered province or series of provinces inside the federal Republic of Iraq – the U.S. and its partners will fill the void left by ISIS with a positive model for local self-government that will help inform political transitions in other parts of Iraq, Syria and the wider Middle East. The moral arguments for a minority safe haven are intuitive. Indigenous communities that withstood genocide should be protected as they return to their ancient homeland. They belong there. They want to stay. If we can help them, we should. "This safe haven is the last chance we have," said one Assyrian refugee, "or Christianity will be finished in Iraq." But U.S. foreign policy rarely turns on moral arguments. Millions of people are suffering around the world, and we cannot help them all. Cases are triaged and attended to only when they fall within our strategic self-interest. The question: Does the creation of a safe haven in Northern Iraq serve our interests? The answer: yes. The creation of a safe haven fulfills operational needs in the war against ISIS; it secures our

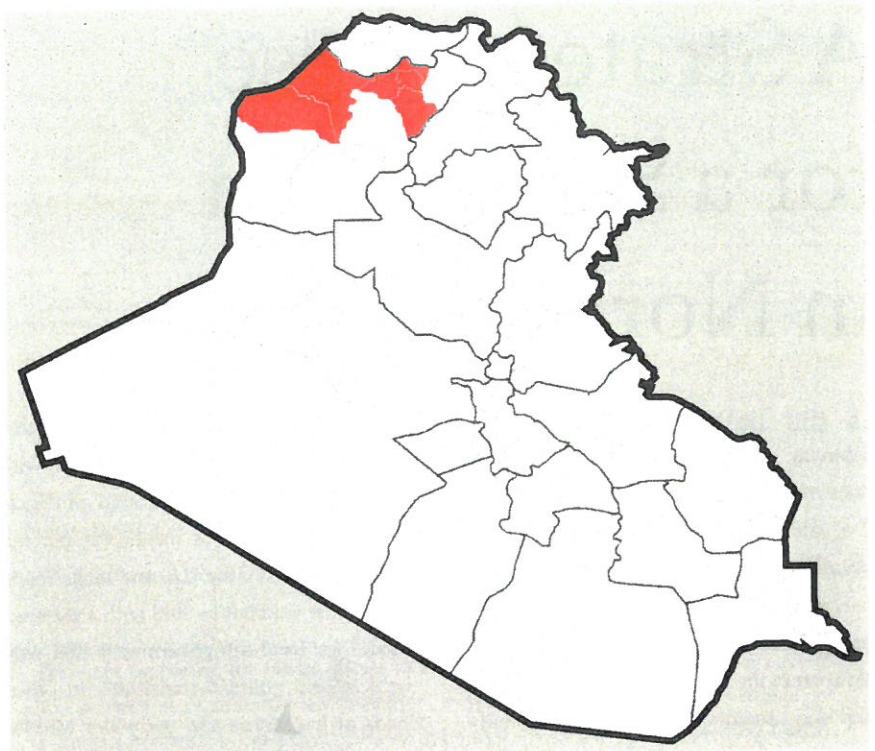


Figure 1: Proposed safe haven in northern Iraq

current \$9 billion investment in prosecuting that war; it strengthens and concretizes U.S. strategy during an exceptional moment of chaos and transition in the Middle East; and, in stabilizing Iraq, it helps stabilize the entire region. Three specific interests will be highlighted here: territorial, political and geopolitical.

### **Territorial Interests**

*Creation of a safe haven will weaken ISIS and its offshoots; it will establish a zone of stability in a lawless region; and it will protect disputed lands against a post-ISIS vacuum.*

Territorial stability is in America's self-interest. Failed states, lawless regions and ungoverned spaces are not. ISIS was the first Islamic terrorist group to make the procurement of territory a core objective. Since then, it has turned its territory into a launching pad for nihilistic violence and tyranny to other parts of the world. While at first ISIS appeared little more than a "jayvee" outfit next to Al-Qaeda, its use of land and government ultimately made it far more dangerous. Territory, it turns out, matters a great deal.

The idea that grass and dirt should matter in our digital age seems old-fashioned. But space and geography still determine much in the course of human events; in military matters, they determine even more. ISIS cannot be defeated from the sky. It is a territorial force that can only be defeated by a territorial counter-force, and that counter-force must have mass and take up space. Geography matters, but so do ideas. A genocidal ideology has found a territorial base in Iraq and Syria. The U.S. and its partners must seize and de-terrorize that territory, turning it into a safe haven for pluralism and freedom. As Chris Seiple, President Emeritus of the Institute for Global Engagement, has written:

“A safe haven would ... “theographically” – theology + geography – delegitimize ISIS. Taking land that ISIS has declared a part of its “caliphate,” and then using that land to protect those against whom ISIS had perpetrated genocide, would constitute a direct threat to the identity and theological purpose of ISIS.”

In addition to military utility and psychological effect, territory also plays an important role in post-conflict reconstruction. Minorities deserve justice, but justice is impossible without some basis of order. Facilitating the return of Yazidis and Christians to their homes requires a zone of stability – a structural framework that will give them the space they need to rebuild their communities.

The creation of a safe haven will carve out that zone, conveying tangible benefits to genocide victims and everyone else living in the shadow of ISIS’s former caliphate. In the chaotic maelstrom of today’s Middle East, the importance of such a safe space cannot be overstated. The creation of a safe haven will also assuage territorial tensions between the Central Government of Iraq and the regional government of Iraqi Kurdistan. Although the territories in question have belonged to Iraq since Iraq became a state, and have in a more significant way belonged to the ethno-religious communities who have lived there for centuries and millennia, the Kurdistan Regional Government has laid claim on them in recent years, causing a messy dispute that allowed ISIS to conquer the area with almost no opposition, as both the Iraqi Security Forces and the Kurdish peshmerga – neither side feeling particularly responsible for it – vacated their posts and left the unarmed minorities to fend for themselves. For this reason, areas liberated from ISIS must not revert back to the vacuum-like *status quo ante*. Until the Baghdad-Erbil territorial dispute is adjudicated in accordance with the Iraqi Constitution, the U.S. has strong interests in protecting against a void where rights are claimed and duties are evaded. Only the minorities will suffer. Meanwhile, both Baghdad and Erbil have a vested interest in seeing this disputed area come under third-party administration for the time being, until arbitration is facilitated under the relevant Iraqi law.

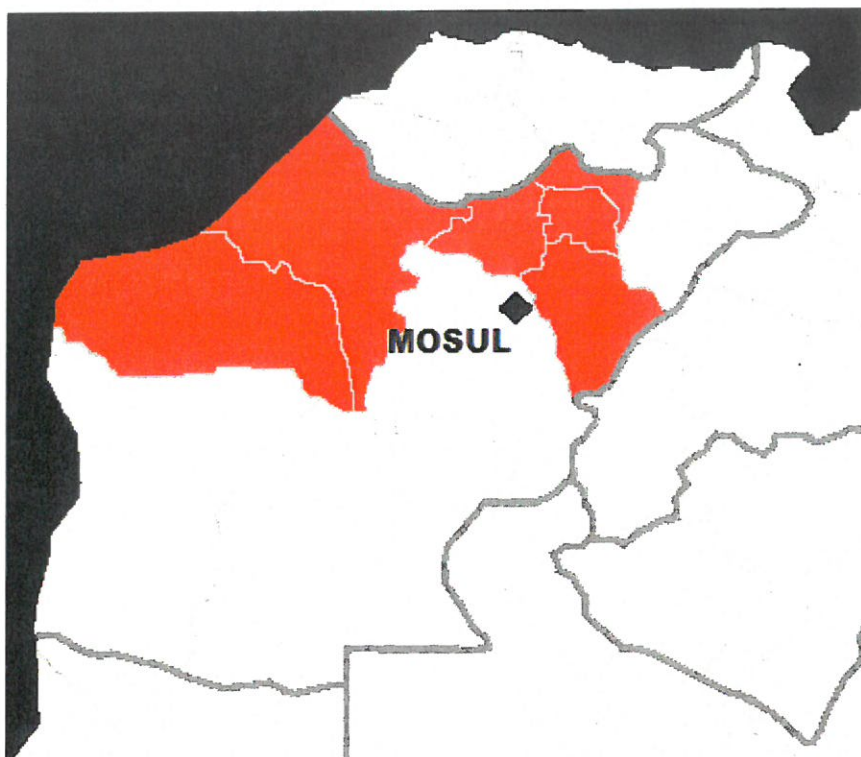


Figure 2: Proposed safe haven (close up)

### Political Interests

*The creation of a safe haven will help move Iraq toward greater federalism; it will allow minority communities greater political participation; it will diversify Iraq's political landscape and strengthen the cohesiveness of the country; and it will reinforce Iraqi military capabilities in the country's vulnerable northern reaches.*

A cohesive and healthy Iraq is in America's self-interest. Yet the future of Iraq has been the subject of intense debate since the U.S. withdrawal in 2011. Given its checkered demography, Iraq seems resistant to any universal solution. In a classic 2009 Foreign Policy essay, Robert Kaplan called it the most "geographically illogical" state in the Fertile Crescent.

But while Kaplan may be right, Iraq is hardly more illogical than other states nearby. And unless we are prepared to raze everything to the ground, it behooves us to preserve Iraq as a single, sovereign unit. Many experts agree that the best solution for Iraq is a federal one: a broad decentralization of power from Baghdad to the regions, provinces and districts that make up the country, recognizing its underlying ethnic and religious diversity and empowering local communities to govern their own internal affairs. In the words of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, "If we don't decentralize, the country will

disintegrate. To me, there are no limitations to decentralization.”

Federalism is a fundamental principle that undergirds the entirety of Iraq’s 2005 Constitution, and many of Iraq’s current problems ultimately stem from a failure to put this federalism into practice. The state is simply too big and diverse to be managed from Baghdad. The creation of a safe haven in Northern Iraq will revive Iraq’s constitutional commitment to federalism and spur new momentum toward similar devolution in other parts of the country.

But the creation of a safe haven is by itself not enough to ensure the survival of Iraq’s minorities; next must come the transition of this safe haven into a province or series of provinces under the framework of the Iraqi government. Geographic empowerment must lead to political empowerment. Asking whether Christians or Yazidis can survive in Iraq is less useful than asking if they can flourish there, and flourishing means that they are in some sense masters of their own fate. Freedom to influence the political process is the best measuring stick for whether they have a real future in the country. Notably, the Iraqi government is already moving in this direction. In late 2010, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani said, “[T]here are areas where Christians are the majority in Iraq, and we do not oppose the formation of a province,

especially in one of these areas, because local governance is one of the goals of the Iraqi parliament and constitution, which stipulate that Iraq is a federal democratic state.”

“We believe that the only safe and peaceful future for the Turkmen in the Mosul Province is to live together with other minorities; the Assyrians, Ezdis and Shabaks, as we have a peaceful history with them, in a newly established, autonomous, democratic, multi-ethnic and multi-religious secular safe haven. This new region will be a model for the rest of Iraq and the Middle East to prove how different ethnicities and religions can co-exist in one area and it will be a good outcome for western effort wasted since 2003. We believe that the only safe and peaceful future for Turkmen in Mosul is to live together with the minorities, as we have peaceful history with them. If a Sunni region is established alongside a Kurdish region, the international community, the Iraqi Parliament, and all decision-makers in Iraq should support and give the right for Turkmen and other minorities in northern Iraq to establish a new region in Mosul that includes three governorates: Talafar, Sinjar and Nineveh Plain.

-Ali Akram Al Bayati, Turkmen Rescue Foundation (May 7, 2016)

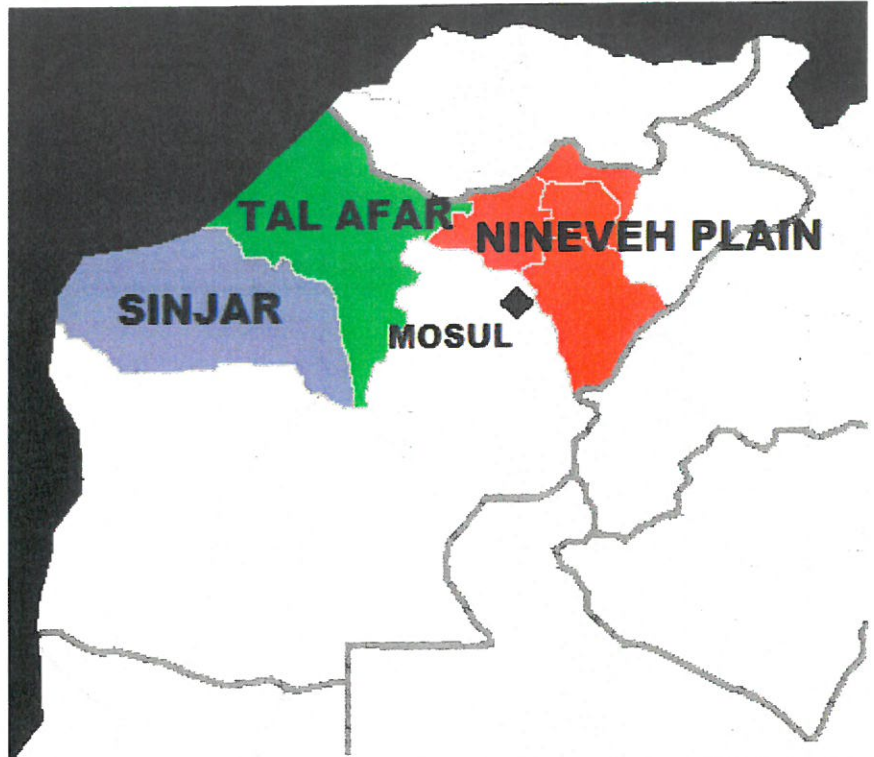


Figure 3: Proposed safe haven (comprising Singer, Sal Afar, and the Ninevah Plain districts)

On Jan. 21, 2014, the Iraqi Council of Ministers agreed to turn the Nineveh Plain and Tal Afar, among other areas, into new provinces pursuant to the Iraqi Constitution – a decision that was put on hold with the invasion of ISIS. The U.S. and its allies must vocally support the Iraqis as they resume their transition toward federalism and empower the country's minority communities for self-governance. The creation of a self-governing province will give Iraq's minorities a legal basis for political participation, consolidate their collective voice, and offer them a measure of demographic security that will further encourage their success in Iraq's political system.

Greater participation of minorities will, in turn, help ease sectarian tensions in the country. The post-2003 political history of Iraq has been a tale of feuding Sunni and Shi'i Arabs and disinterested Kurds who seek their own benefit. Introducing a sizeable number of minorities into parliament – Turkmen, Yazidis and Assyrians, among others – will diversify opinions, break stalemates, infuse a new energy into Iraqi patriotism and create new opportunities for mediation. This broadening of the political discourse will serve to bind Iraq's human mosaic more firmly.



The safe haven will not only produce political benefits in Baghdad, it will also produce security benefits on Iraq's northern frontier. This rugged area is geographically and demographically remote from other parts of the country, and the reach of the central government has always been rather weak. Allowing minority communities to protect their homelands using local security forces with a national security mission will serve to reinforce the capabilities of the Iraqi Security Forces precisely where they need it most. Loyal to land and country, these minorities will ensure that Iraq's northern reaches are protected against foreign attack.

### Geopolitical Interests

*The creation of a safe haven will increase regional stability by blocking expansionist foreign powers; it will provide an example for other Middle Eastern countries moving toward federalism; and it will demonstrate in microcosm that coexistence and good governance is possible in the region.*

Regional stability is in America's self-interest. Everyone agrees that ISIS must be destroyed, but ISIS is just one regional problem among many. The political map of the Middle East is in an unusual state of flux. National borders have broken down; non-state actors have proliferated; the Syrian civil war continues; Iranian paramilitary activity has reached an all-time high; Turkish forces have invaded both Syria and Iraq; Russia has intervened

and plans to stay indefinitely; manned and unmanned aircraft fill the skies, dropping ordinance on civilians and combatants alike; ethnic and religious militias battle on the ground, taking and retaking cities in an endless cycle of violence. We find ourselves in a situation in which nothing is certain and U.S. influence is almost nonexistent. Regional instability seems likely to get worse. Something needs to change. Unless the U.S. plans to relinquish all presence in the region, it must, together with its partners, establish a territorial zone of influence that cannot be challenged— a beachhead that will serve to reassert American strength, protect returning minorities, and block expansionist powers like Iran and Turkey

We ask the United Nations, US, Canada, UK, EU, NATO and other members of the international community to intervene with the Iraqi Government, supporting the creation of an "Autonomous Region" for the Yezidis, Chaldo-Assyrians, and other minorities in the Sinjar region and Nineveh Plain under the protection of international forces and directly tied to Baghdad's Central government. This right is guaranteed under the Iraqi constitution, article 125, but it needs implementation! This is the only way we can survive in the Middle East.

-Mirza Ismail, Chairman, Yezidi Human Rights Organization International (Dec. 9, 2015)

from infiltrating areas liberated from ISIS. The U.S. mission must be limited to assisting the Iraqi government by providing security inside the safe haven until 1) Iraqi Security Forces are sufficiently in control of Mosul and its environs, and 2) minorities are able to return and stand up their local security forces and self-governance systems. We must have a mission beyond defeating ISIS; otherwise our fight will have been in vain. The creation of a safe haven should be viewed as part of a larger regional strategy focused on decentralization and empowering local communities. The old Middle Eastern order of highly centralized autocracies has collapsed. Governments no longer have the legitimacy or ability to control their diverse and restive populations. As states break apart, the region's "deep map" is exposed underneath: an organic arrangement of ethnic and religious blocs that have existed there for centuries. Moves to devolve power from repressive governments to these communities have increased since 2003, and today, forced by necessity after the Arab Spring, regional and global powers are beginning to see that this devolution is inevitable.

Federalism can save the Middle East. The same solution that will strengthen Iraq can also strengthen Iraq's neighbors. Federalism moors authority on more authentic and sustainable political structures close to the people, increasing accountability and good governance. Small



Ninevah Plain © Philos Project

is beautiful; small is meaningful. Intissar Kherigi, a Tunisian-British researcher, put it well:

"By creating new regional and local elected bodies with a popular mandate to promote the interests of their region and directly accountable to their inhabitants, a counterbalancing force can emerge to challenge the existing system of regional inequalities and the policies and power structures that sustain it."

"The Assyrian General Conference believes in a democratic, pluralistic and federal system, and the conference demands an Assyrian Federal State in Nineveh's plain and in all the other historical places where our people live along with the other national constituents and sects such as Turkmen, Yezidis, Arabs, Shabak and Kurds."

-Final Statement of the Assyrian General Conference, Aug. 7, 2005

## A Strategic Case for a Safe Haven in Northern Iraq

I recently described the need for U.S. policymakers to shift their thinking in this direction:

The fundamental disease of the Middle East is a crisis of identity coupled with bitterness toward the West and a paralyzing fear of rival communities. Contrary to popular conceptions, the Middle East is not a monolithic sea of Islam or a swarming hive of hostile Arabs. It is a mosaic of religions and denominations, languages and ethnicities, cultures and subcultures that have intermingled but remained disparate for thousands of years.

America should seek to play upon this reality, not struggle against it. The problem with U.S. foreign policy is that it tries to make the region look like America: a multinational melting pot that transcends group identities for the sake of a greater good. A better policy would be to nudge the region toward the European model: a consortium of particularistic and self-interested nation-states that maintain their own ethnic and religious identities, perhaps under the banner of a larger transnational union.

The American strategic vision, whatever its final form is, should work toward fostering a Middle East comprised of self-determining nation-states living in light of their heritage under the principles of freedom, coexistence and rule of law. The peaceful character of these states will

derive not from autocracy and fear, but from the populations' shared sense of history and common vision for the future – in other words, from their desire to act out their collective will as a people. A successful minority province in Northern Iraq will provide a tangible model for other states in the region looking to devolve power to the periphery. Syria, Lebanon and Libya are facing ethnic and religious conflict not unlike that of Iraq. Demonstrating the power of federalism to diminish conflict and restore order will be invaluable for guiding the necessary political transitions that lie ahead. If the U.S. has a strategy in the Middle East, federalism should be at the center of it.

As people of Sinjar, we have made our decision... We want Sinjar to become an independent province in order to get rid of the administrative routines that have held us back from re-building the city.

-Mahma Khalil, Mayor of Sinjar (Jan. 10, 2016)

### Conclusion

The outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 opened a rich public debate about American intervention in that country. Several senior scholars and officials went on record to support safe havens as the best way to repatriate refugees, provide humanitarian relief, and protect U.S. interests in any final peace agreement.

## A Strategic Case for a Safe Haven in Northern Iraq

Both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton have tipped their hats toward safe havens at various times. The vice-presidential candidates have done the same. But for some reason, almost no one is discussing a safe haven in Iraq.

This silence is strange, given that Iraq suffers the same problems as Syria, but offers a much better chance of success. ISIS straddles both countries and Iraq faces chaos second only to that of Syria. Meanwhile, Iraq is free from the outsized influence of foreign powers like Russia and Hezbollah. Iraq maintains open lines of communication with Washington. Both the Iraqi Security Forces and Kurdish peshmerga are officially on our side, and local Assyrian and Yazidi forces are ready to fight for their homeland. Arguments against safe havens in Syria usually focus on the complex wartime environment. Iraq, though complex, is still open to American influence and offers a foothold that we don't have in Assad's backyard. Make no mistake: This cannot be an American project. A solution cannot be imposed from the outside. The creation of the safe haven and subsequent self-administered province(s) must be done in coordination with the government of Iraq and governed by the minorities themselves. However, to the extent that the U.S. retains strategic interests in the Middle East, and in Iraq specifically, this project lies squarely within them. It establishes a zone of territorial order, fortifies Iraq's political future, and helps

stabilize a region threatening to spin out of control. It reasserts American leadership, checks the territorial ambitions of expansionist powers, and begins a long-overdue transition from autocratic to local and legitimate governance.

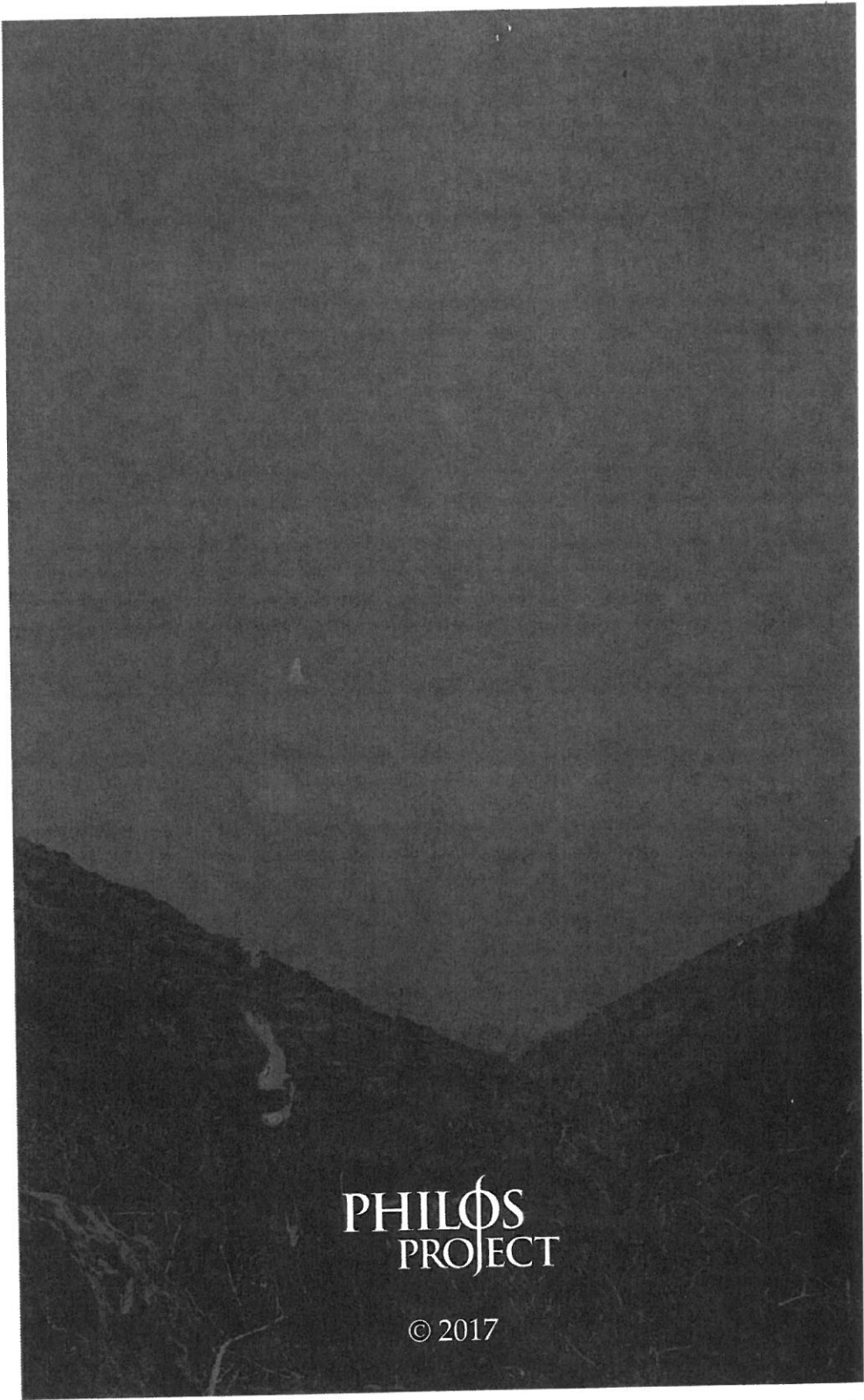
Liberating territory from ISIS is easy; planning for the stable future of that territory is something else entirely. Yet without such a plan, our efforts to defeat ISIS are in vain. This is a plan that can work. It is discreet and achievable. It serves to reiterate our commitment to pluralism, freedom of conscience, and rule of law in a way that aligns with our strategic self-interest. Coincidentally, it's also what the genocide victims want and deserve.

[T]here are areas where Christians are the majority in Iraq, and we do not oppose the formation of a province, especially in one of these areas, because local governance is one of the goals of the Iraqi parliament and constitution, which stipulate that Iraq is a federal democratic state. [...] We believe that attention should be focused on healing the wounded Christians and to provide humanitarian aid and not to encourage them to leave Iraq for European countries because that is not in their interest nor in the interest of Iraq, and we do not want to displace a dear part of the Iraqi population, especially since the Christians are the indigenous people of Iraq, who lived in Iraq since the advent of Christianity, played a role in civilization and culture of Iraq.

-Iraq President Jalal Talabani, Interview with France 24 (Nov. 17, 2010)



Robert Nicholson is the Executive Director of The Philos Project, an American nonprofit that seeks to promote positive Christian engagement in the Middle East. Robert is also the co-publisher of *Providence: A Journal of Christianity and American Foreign Policy*. He holds a BA in Hebrew Studies from Binghamton University, and both a JD and MA in Middle Eastern history from Syracuse University. A former U.S. Marine and a 2012-2013 Tikvah Fellow, Robert has published articles in, among other places, *The American Interest*, *Jerusalem Post*, and *Times of Israel*. His work focuses on spreading the vision of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Middle East based on freedom and rule of law.



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"Iraqi Christian Relief Council's funding is critically important and enables vital programming to support internally displaced [Christians] to mitigate the effects of displacement. A lot needs to be done before they can return to their homeland, rebuild their lives, and ensure their future security."

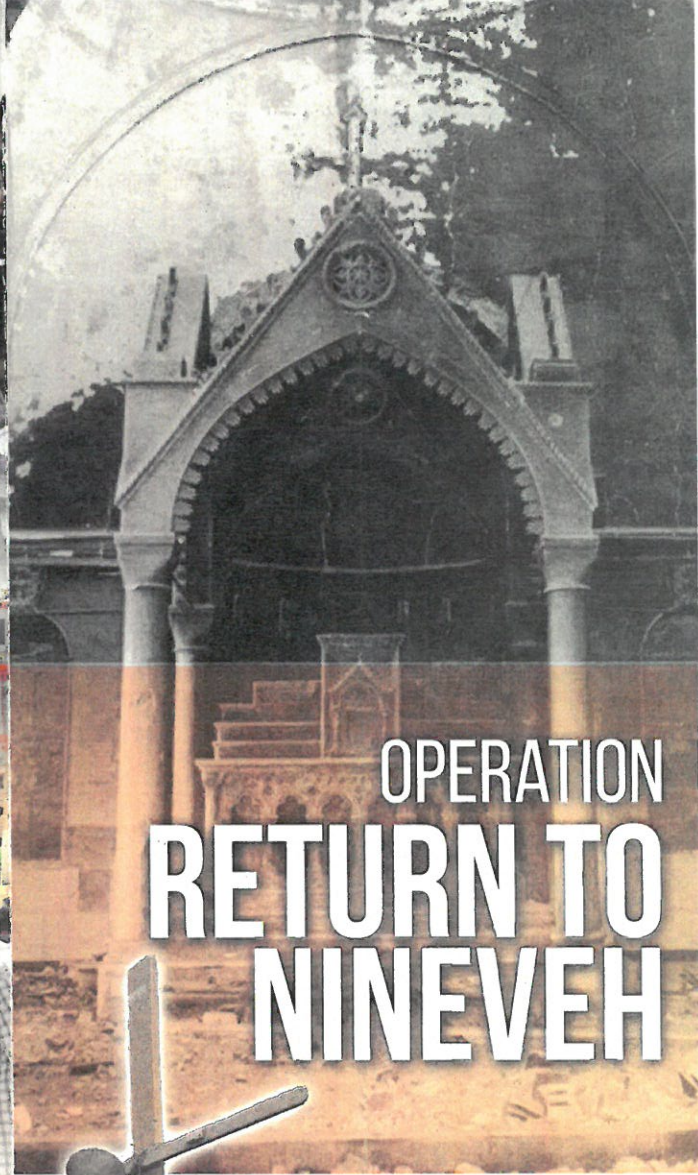
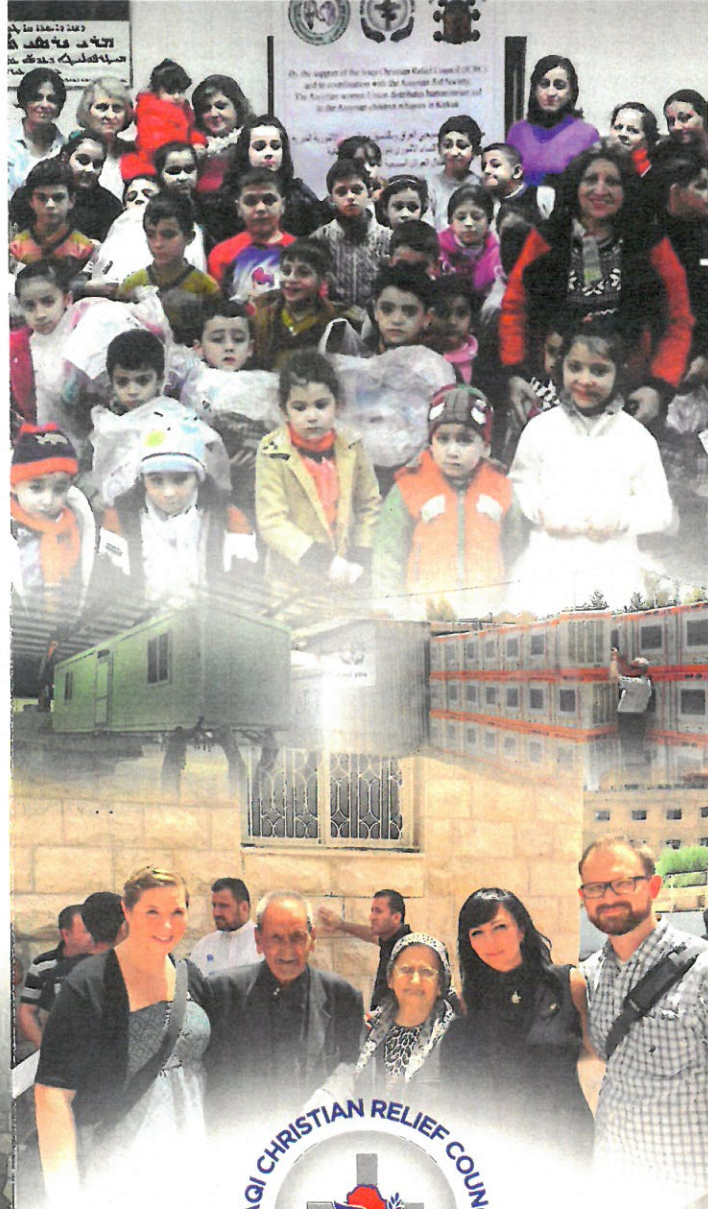
**-Humanitarian Nineveh Relief Organization**

"Since 2007, the Iraqi Christian Relief Council, a 501c(3) organization, has tirelessly advocated for the persecuted Church in Iraq, has educated Americans across the country on the reality in which our fellow Christians live and has raised funds for basic necessities."

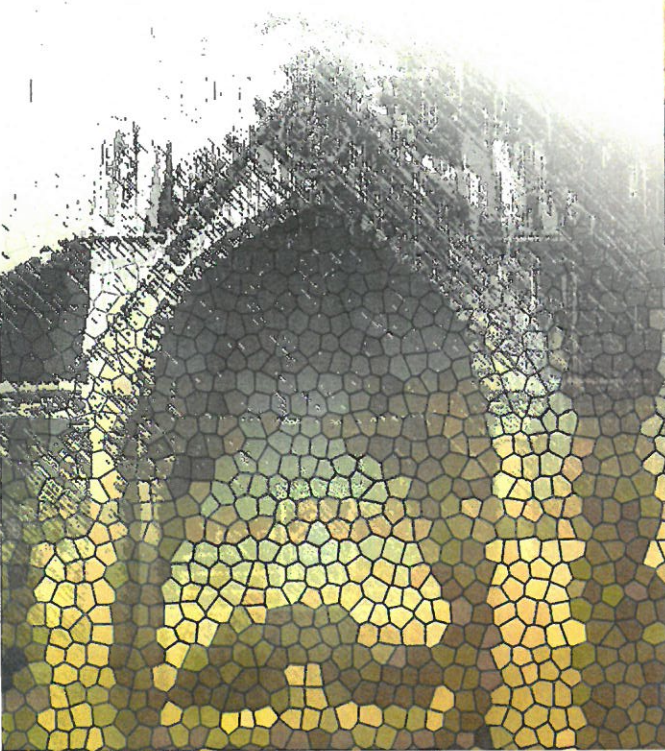
**Frank Wolf, former Congressman**

"We present our thanks and appreciation to the Iraqi Christian Relief Council, especially Miss Juliana Taimoorazy, for the continued support to the Assyrian Church of the East families in Amman, Jordan."

**Rev. Shmoel Maqdis**



**OPERATION  
RETURN TO  
NINEVEH**



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**VictimsOfISIS.org**

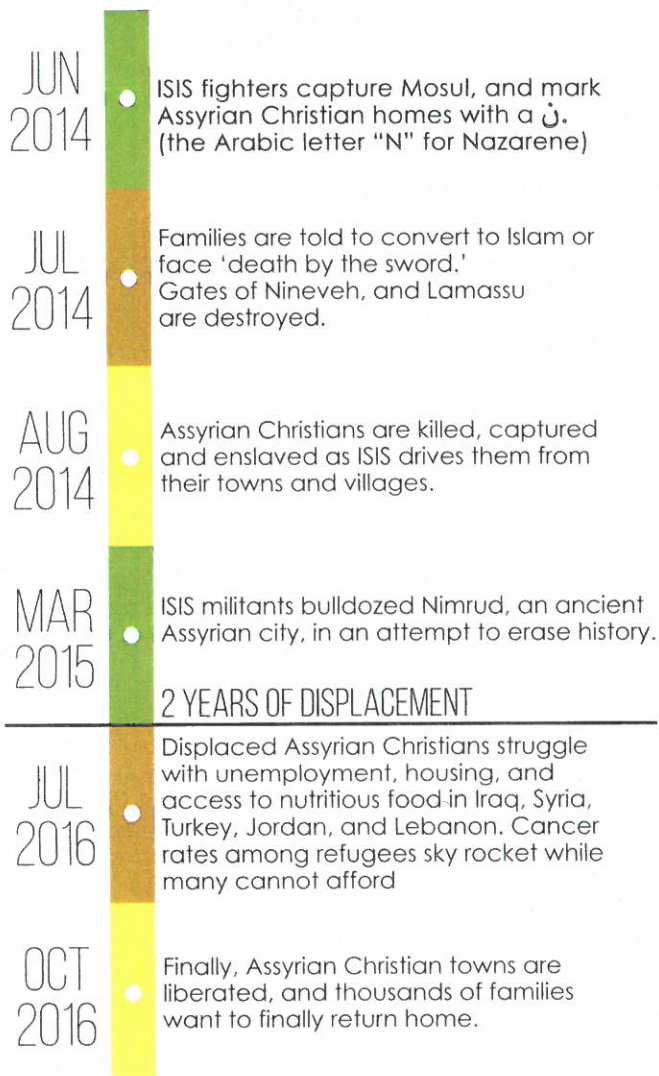
**f** IraqiChristianReliefCouncil

**t** IraqiChristian

## Persecuted Church

Despite repeated persecution since the 1st century A.D., Assyrians have kept Christianity alive in Iraq. After seizing Mosul, ISIS attacked Christian towns forcing 150,000 Assyrian Christians to flee their homes. Now, Christian towns are liberated and family dream of returning home.

### A history of ISIS genocide against Assyrian Christians in Iraq








## Operation Return to Nineveh

funds the cleanup and reconstruction of Assyrian Christian towns and churches destroyed by ISIS.

Donations make a real difference in preserving the 2,000-year-old roots of Christianity in Iraq.

### Your impact since 2014

	<p><b>Safer and better lives for 130,000 Assyrian Christians in 2014 and 155,000.</b></p>
	<p><b>Medicine, surgery, emergency medical transport.</b></p>
	<p><b>Shelter, tents, warm blankets, mattresses.</b></p>
	<p><b>Diapers, clothing, and toiletries.</b></p>
	<p><b>School and educational activities for children.</b></p>
	<p><b>Essentials for winter and summer, such as blankets and air conditioners.</b></p>



## How you can help

rebuild destroyed Assyrian Christian communities and churches

**\$75**

Medicine for one Assyrian family for a month.

**\$100**

Food for one family returning home for a month.

**\$250**

Beds for volunteers cleaning up.

**\$500**

Tools for volunteers repairing destroyed business districts.

**\$1,000**

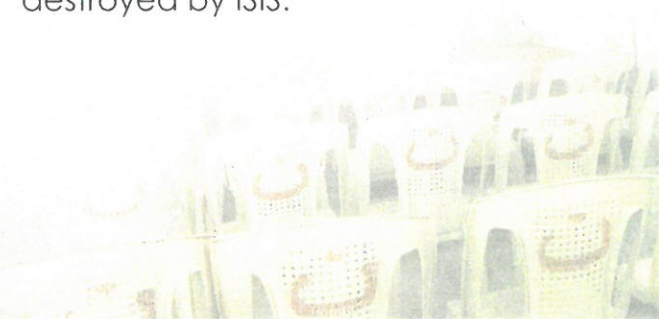
Cleanup and repair of a damaged family home.

**\$2,500**

Fund the repair of infrastructure of roads and water systems.

### Adopt a church

Be a part of our sister church program to fund the reconstruction of a church destroyed by ISIS.





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Christ



Iraqi Christian Relief Council

**Hear Them. Heal Them.**

Save the Flickering Light of Christianity in Iraq!

1 Corinthians 12: 25-27

... <sup>25</sup> that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

<sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.



Iraqi Christian Relief Council

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# A Brief History of Iraqi Christians

Modern day Iraqi Christians (Assyrians also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs) are descendants of the two great empires, Assyria and Babylonia. They rose to power and prosperity in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. Due to the fall of the Assyrian empire in 612 B.C., the inhabitants of the empire were reduced to a small nation living at the mercy of their overlords in the vast and scattered lands in the Middle East.



The history of indigenous Aramaic speaking descendants of the great empire spans over 6,760 years.

Ethnically, the Assyrians are not Arabs, they are not Turkish, and their religion is not Islam. Their faith is grounded in Christianity with their unique language shared by our Lord, Jesus Christ.



Thousands of parents have had to bury their children.

Since 2003, Iraqi Christians were ordered to either:

- Convert to Islam
- Pay protection tax (Jizyah)
- Leave Iraq without their belongings

Or

- DIE



- Churches have been bombed over 100 times.
- Ancient churches have been turned into mosques.
- Christians have been crucified.



Since 2003 thousands of children have been brutally murdered.



In February of 2008, the Catholic Archbishop of Mosul was kidnapped and in March, they found his body on the street.

In five years, tens of priests & deacons were:

- Kidnapped
- Beheaded
- Assassinated
- Their body parts found scattered around the churches



Since 2003, approximately one million Assyrian Christians have been forced to become refugees inside and outside Iraq.



# Help Change Their Lives

Iraqi Christian Relief Council, a 501c3 status organization, in coordination with entities and organizations in the United States of America, are responsible for educating the Americans of the religious and ethnic cleansing being inflicted on Christians in Iraq. Our objective in raising awareness among the Americans is asking for their prayers, raising, and delivering financial assistance for the Iraqi Christians affected by these atrocities.

*All contributions are tax deductible as allowable by law.*

## You Can Get Involved Now!

Visit our website and donate:  
[www.iraqichristianrelief.org](http://www.iraqichristianrelief.org)

Send donations to:  
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 Glenview, IL 60025

Send emails to:  
[Info@iraqichristianrelief.org](mailto:Info@iraqichristianrelief.org)

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 847.401.8846