

ASSYRIAN
POLICY
INSTITUTE

STATUS OF ADVOCACY REPORT

2019-2020

Updates on our policy advocacy work.

ABOUT ASSYRIANS

An estimated 3.5 million people globally comprise a distinct, indigenous ethnic group. Tracing their heritage to ancient Assyria, Assyrians speak an ancient language referred to as Assyrian, Syriac, Aramaic, or Neo-Aramaic. The contiguous territory that forms the traditional Assyrian homeland includes parts of southern and southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, and northeastern Syria. The Assyrian population in Iraq, estimated at approximately 200,000, constitutes the largest remaining concentration of the ethnic group in the Middle East. The majority of these reside in their ancestral homelands in the Nineveh Plain and within today's Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Assyrians are predominantly Christian. Some ethnic Assyrians self-identify as Chaldeans or Syriacs, depending on church denomination. Assyrians have founded five Eastern Churches at different points during their long history: the Ancient Church of the East, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church. The majority of Assyrians who remain in Iraq today belong to the Chaldean and Syriac churches.

Assyrians represent one of the most consistently persecuted communities in Iraq and the wider Middle East.

**ASSYRIAN
POLICY
INSTITUTE**

ABOUT THE ASSYRIAN POLICY INSTITUTE

Founded in May 2018, the Assyrian Policy Institute works to support Assyrians as they struggle to maintain their rights to the lands they have inhabited for thousands of years, their ancient language, equal opportunities in education and employment, and to full participation in public life.

www.assyrianpolicy.org
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For questions and media interviews,
please email info@assyrianpolicy.org.

2019-2020

STATUS OF ADVOCACY REPORT

The Assyrian Policy Institute (API) is actively engaging U.S. Government officials and representatives to advance policies that align with our policy research agenda. API research, education, and capacity-building efforts do result in opportunities to also help policy-makers better understand policy conditions facing Assyrians in the Middle East and the chance to elaborate on policy solutions published in API reports. The *API Status of Advocacy Report* is published biennially to highlight our priority issues and latest in policy advocacy work.

Policy advocacy is a specific form of advocacy, of which there are many. It is the process of taking action, using various strategies, to influence the creation and development of public policy. It makes use of targeted actions aimed at changing policies, positions, programs, and/or funding priorities of the government. Our advocacy reflects our nonpartisan approach as we encourage all policymakers to make issues impacting Assyrians a priority. Specifically, our policy advocacy seeks to:

- Establish new policies that would create conditions of equality for Assyrians in the countries that form their ancestral homeland
- Improve existing policies that are intended to aid Assyrians in the Middle East
- Amend pieces of legislation that negatively impact Assyrians in countries like Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran

In addition to engaging government officials, our approach to advocacy accounts for the need to engage a variety of audiences on our policy priorities, including public awareness campaigns, publishing authoritative reports that provide informed, balanced recommendations, and public speaking engagements.

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INTRODUCTION

Though the immediate threat of ISIS was defeated in the early months of 2017, the large-scale, forced emigration of Assyrians from Iraq has persisted. A number of significant issues beset the Assyrian population in Iraq and jeopardize in very real terms their future survival in their ancestral lands. Forms of direct persecution targeting Assyrians are varied, but include: widespread abuses of human rights, attacks on democratic processes, the systematic appropriation of Assyrian lands, the denial of freedom of speech and opinion, state-level organized crime targeting minorities, other forms of ethnically and religiously-motivated prejudice, and a long-term project to annex the Nineveh Plain to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

Based on extensive research and on-the-ground expertise, the API continues to prioritize security policy advocacy as the only viable way forward for Assyrians in Iraq. More specifically, the API continues to advocate for U.S. support for the expansion and training of the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) as a feasible and tested solution to security challenges in the Nineveh Plain. Sustainable and trusted security lies at the heart of all prospects for a future for Assyrians in Iraq, and is a necessary precursor for the large-scale repatriation of Assyrians, effective redevelopment efforts, and fulfilling the long-term goal of the establishment of a Nineveh Plain Governorate.

This report provides a summary and analysis of the API's policy advocacy work between 2019 and 2020. It focuses exclusively on the API's engagement with the Trump-Pence Administration on U.S. policy concerning the future of security in the Nineveh Plain, namely with the Office of the Vice President, the National Security Council, the Department of Defense, and the Department of State. This policy advocacy work was executed in partnership with the Nineveh Plain Defense Fund (NPDF), and in direct consultation with the military and political leadership of the NPU in Iraq.

In addition to security policy advocacy, the API has consistently engaged U.S. officials and staff across numerous levels and institutions, including Members of Congress, on various issues affecting Assyrians in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Iran, Jordan, and Lebanon; however, the scope of this report prioritizes our advocacy in relation to the question of the future of security in the Nineveh Plain as the most urgent and actionable policy. Once again, the focus on security is premised on the fact that humanitarian and political solutions are dependent on a security policy that locals trust and one that can facilitate return. ■

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Iraq, and more specifically the Nineveh Plain, represents the only hope for a sustainable future that maintains the vital connection of Assyrians to their lands and heritage. Without an urgent solution to critical security and political issues, the ancient language and culture of the indigenous Assyrians could disappear entirely within the next decade. This is the human dimension of the ongoing territorial dispute over the Nineveh Plain that is too often obscured by overarching geostrategic priorities.

More than four years since the liberation of the Nineveh Plain from ISIS control, minimal progress has been made towards long-term stabilization, and the Nineveh Plain remains divided among contesting actors, including the Iraqi Army, Kurdish Peshmerga, Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Forces, and the Christian Assyrian-led NPU.



Current U.S. policy directly empowers both the Iraqi Army and the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) Peshmerga forces. Exclusive U.S. support for the Iraqi Army and Peshmerga and the withholding of support for legitimate local security forces such as the NPU reinforces a status quo condition that both marginalizes and endangers Assyrians. The status quo U.S. approach to the question of security in the Nineveh Plain has resulted in disastrous consequences for Assyrians, Yazidis, and other ethnic and religious minorities, reflected in the decimation of their populations since 2003. The impact of such policies, through which the security of Assyrians and other marginalized peoples is entrusted to Iraq's dominant ethnosectarian groups, have serious implications for stabilization and democratic governance—the factors which would enable true reconciliation and lasting peace. This policy framework fostered the enabling conditions for ISIS to ethnically cleanse the Nineveh Plain in 2014.

It is widely understood that there remains a serious need for continued U.S. assistance in Iraq; this is especially true for communities like Assyrians—the vast majority of whom lack confidence in the governing authorities and perceive the role of the U.S. to be critical to their survival. While the U.S. cannot order the Government of Iraq to adopt a policy position, strong U.S. advocacy in support of the policy of minority self-security is of prime importance. The current phase of the conflict, where ISIS no longer controls territory but still threatens peace, presents an opportunity for the U.S. Government to re-engage the Government of Iraq in a way that breaks from the failed policy framework of the past in order to advance policies critical to the survival of the Assyrians and other minoritized peoples in the Nineveh Plain.

The U.S. has taken decisive action against the Iranian-backed PMF forces that have gained a foothold in the region by sanctioning the militia leaders of PMF Brigades 30 and 50; yet at the same time, it continues to legitimize the KRG's security presence in northern Tel Kayf District. The lack of a clear U.S. position on the future of security in the Nineveh Plain undermines federal authority, prolongs territorial disputes, and reinforces the conditions that left minorities vulnerable to genocide: security controlled by the KRG in areas officially administered by the federal government in Baghdad.

The fate of minorities in Iraq is a stated priority for the United States, and the issue has received unprecedented attention from the previous Administration, acknowledging that Assyrians and Yazidis, among others, are critical to diversity in Iraq. However, as nearly half-a-billion in USAID dollars have been funneled into the Nineveh Plain to promote redevelopment and repatriation of local populations, the U.S. has distanced itself from the key political and security issues that subvert the potential good that could be created by those new spending programs. This approach only strengthens the harmful status quo which has been sustained by U.S. Administrations since 2003 and represents a critical policy failure. If the U.S. does not reassess this approach, the next decade could see the end of the Christian Assyrian presence in Iraq.

Status quo policies translate into policies of second class citizenship for Assyrians and Yazidis. The Government of Iraq and the U.S. Government have the opportunity to break with the detrimental policy framework of the past and to pursue new and informed policies that enable conditions of real equality for Iraq's most vulnerable peoples. ■

TANGIBLE SOLUTION: U.S. SUPPORT FOR THE NPU

Notwithstanding the many hardships faced by Assyrians in Iraq, in general, they wish to remain in their homeland. The longer the question of security remains unresolved, the greater the likelihood that the Assyrian population will continue to decline, and the more unlikely it becomes that internally and externally displaced Assyrians will return home. The API maintains that legitimate Assyrian political and civil society representatives in Iraq (meaning they are not funded or appointed by more powerful non-Assyrians actors) must be directly involved in shaping the policies that will determine their future.

The NPU is a 600-strong Christian Assyrian force operating under the authority of Nineveh Operation Command in Al-Hamdaniya District of the Nineveh Plain. The NPU also maintains a recruitment list of over +3000 names. It is registered under the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) structure, but it is part of the branch which reports as intended to Iraq's National Security Service (NSS), and is accountable to the Office of the Prime Minister. NPU-administered areas have seen the highest rates of return among Christian Assyrians—producing higher rates of return than the Iraqi Army and KRG Peshmerga. See page 9 for data concerning the differing rates of return to the post-ISIS Nineveh Plain. The differing rates of return are the primary and most objective indicator of a security policy preferred by local populations.

The policy of minority self-security within a legal, legitimate structure of authority that is transparent and accountable, successfully exemplified by the NPU, is the only policy proven to facilitate Christian Assyrian return to the Nineveh Plain in significant proportions. This dynamic is captured perfectly by the differing rates of return to the Nineveh Plain. The data concerning rates of return shows that the NPU has been the most effective force on the ground in facilitating the return of local populations. In testimony provided at a September 2019 hearing hosted by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Middle East Bureau at USAID, Hallam Ferguson, testified that rates of population return are higher in Qaraqosh (Bakhdida) due to “comparatively good security.”¹

Furthermore, the NPU acts as a stabilizing actor in the region, resisting the presence of hostile actors, and is uniquely motivated to defend local populations. The expansion and empowerment of the NPU could also enable the Government of Iraq to regain control of Ninewa Governorate and elevate the Nineveh Plain above the Baghdad-Erbil dispute in order to prioritize the needs of

¹ Hallam Ferguson, Testimony before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, hearing on “Religious Minorities’ Fight to Remain in Iraq.” (9/26/2019) Video from: www.uscirf.gov/uscirf-events/congressional-hearing-religious-minorities-fight-remain-in-iraq.

local communities. Re-establishing federal control of these areas is necessary to rebuild local governing institutions, diminish local tensions, and reduce territorial contestations. The Nineveh Plain's security sector also significantly impacts U.S. objectives in Iraq. The 2017 United States National Security Strategy lists three primary policy goals for the Middle East:

- Deny safe havens or breeding grounds for jihadist terrorists;
- Prevent regional domination by any power hostile to the US—namely Iran; and
- Facilitate the region's stable contribution to the global energy market.²

The U.S. should recognize the intrinsic value of the NPU as frontline soldiers in a contested territory where locals who are directly invested in the same strategic goals and share the desire for sustainable democratization in Iraq can make an immediate impact as a defensive force with strong intelligence capacities as locals. The NPU can fulfill these objectives while also fulfilling stated objectives concerning minority populations. The NPU can serve as a bulwark against growing Iranian influence, a local security partner in defense of all essential and basic freedoms, and can serve as a stabilizing force within Iraq's most strategically contested territory. Insofar as the individuals that form the NPU are drawn from the populations of the towns in question, they represent a crucial element in the repopulation of these towns and the building of trust in security and political frameworks.

The NPU has received some training and modest support from the US-led Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve as the only Christian Assyrian force officially recognized by Nineveh Liberation Operations Command.³ Yet the NPU has not received the level of support afforded to other NSS-administered forces, such as the Sunni Arab Tribal Mobilization Forces (TMF), after the Nineveh Plain was successfully liberated from ISIS. In fact, the U.S. remains vague about what role legitimate local forces like the NPU should continue to play.

The policy of minority self-security advances equality for Assyrians in Iraq, creates an environment that will sustain the return of local populations, and lays the groundwork for a long-term solution for minorities in the form of the establishment of a Nineveh Plain Governorate. It is for these reasons that the API advocates for increased financial and logistical U.S. support for the NPU as part of Iraq's official security forces. ■

² National Security Strategy of the United States of America, The White House, December 2017, 48.

³ Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve. 2016. "Jun 18: React to contact training." Facebook, July 2, 2016. www.facebook.com/CJTFOIR/photos/?tab=album&album_id=1717573931842074.

RATES OF ASSYRIAN RETURN TO THE NINEVEH PLAIN⁴

| Village | Security Arrangement | Pre-ISIS Population | Current Population | Current Percent of Return |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| Alqosh ¹ | Peshmerga/ <i>Asayish</i> | 6,000 | 4,500 | 75% |
| Bakhdida (Qaraqosh) | NPU | 50,000 | 35,000 | 70% |
| Baqopa | Peshmerga/ <i>Asayish</i> | 1,000 | 250 | 25% |
| Bartella ² | NPU and Brigade 30 | 10,000 | 3,000 | 30% |
| Bashiqa ³ | Iraqi Army; formerly Brigade 50 | 4,500 | 1,250 | 28% |
| Batnaya ⁴ | Iraqi Army; formerly Brigade 50 | 2,500 | 50 | 2% |
| Karamlesh | NPU | 3,000 | 1,500 | 50% |
| Tel Keppe (Tel Kayf) | Brigade 50 | 3,000 | 200 | 7% |
| Tesqopa (Tel Eskof) | Peshmerga/ <i>Asayish</i> | 10,000 | 2,000 | 20% |
| All | | 90,000 | 47,750 | 53% |

¹ The ISIS never assumed territorial control of Alqosh despite the fact that it was abandoned by the Peshmerga on August 6, 2014. Therefore, it was left fully intact. The Peshmerga reasserted its authority in Alqosh on August 9, 2014. However, in some cases returns were protracted due to lack of necessary confidence in KRG-affiliated security forces. Twenty-five percent of Alqosh's pre-ISIS population remains externally-displaced.

² Following the liberation of the Nineveh Plain, the NPU was the dominant force in Bartella, however, its authority has become increasingly constrained as Brigade 30 has expanded in size and influence with the support, financial and otherwise, of the Badr Organization and nonlocal PMF forces.

³ From late October 2016 to October 2017, security in Bashiqa was controlled by Peshmerga forces until their withdrawal from the area when Iraqi forces led a campaign to restore federal authority in the region, enabling Brigade 50 to develop a temporary presence in Bashiqa. Most returnees of Assyrian background returned to Bashiqa between August and October 2017. Brigade 50's presence hindered additional returns. Bashiqa is now controlled by Iraqi Army forces, but many displaced persons continue to lack the necessary confidence in current security arrangements.

⁴ Following its liberation from ISIS, Brigade 50 controlled Batnaya until Iraqi Army forces replaced them in the early months of 2019.

⁴ Initial data was provided by the Nineveh Plain Defense Fund (NPDF), an U.S.-based NGO that works to support the Nineveh Plains Protection Units with non-munitions/non-lethal support. Estimated return rates were then verified by the API through interviews with local leaders and NGOs.

AT A GLANCE: POLICY PRIORITIES

- **Highest Priority:** U.S. funding and support for the Nineveh Plain Protection Units, including support for its expansion and full deployment into all Assyrian towns and villages in the Nineveh Plain pursuant to its initial authorization;
- U.S. support for the advancement of the creation of a Nineveh Plain Governorate in accordance with Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution and pursuant to the Iraqi Council of Ministers decree issued on January 21, 2014;
- Continued U.S. funding and support for infrastructure and economic development in the Nineveh Plain which empowers secular entities and addresses long-term needs.

OVERVIEW OF KEY MEETINGS

The table below displays the meetings held between senior U.S. officials and representatives of the Assyrian Policy Institute (API) and the Nineveh Plain Defense Fund (NPDF) in 2019 and 2020 pursuant to the advocacy objectives outlined on pages 7-10 of this report. During these meetings, specific policy proposals were presented and submitted by the NPDF on behalf of the NPU. The NPU proposals focused on force expansion and force posture within the framework of maximizing indigenous Assyrian return and optimizing the humanitarian benefits of USAID spending that is currently having negligible effects on facilitating return—except in those areas secured by the NPU. NPU security policy proposals are also framed to facilitate essential political policies, especially the need to implement the Iraqi Council of Ministers January 21, 2014 decision to begin the process of creating a Nineveh Plain Province.

These proposals were developed in direct consultation with NPU military and political leadership in Iraq. In addition to the meetings listed below, the API and NPDF maintained regular contact via email with the various offices and departments.

| DATE | MEETING |
|----------------|--|
| SEPT. 12, 2019 | Office of the Vice President <i>White House</i> |
| SEPT. 12, 2019 | Office of Iraq Affairs <i>Department of State</i> |
| SEPT. 13, 2019 | Office of the Secretary of Defense (Iraq Policy Team) <i>Department of Defense</i> |
| OCT. 09, 2019 | National Security Council <i>White House</i> |
| OCT. 09, 2019 | Office of the Vice President <i>White House</i> |
| DEC. 19, 2019 | National Security Council <i>White House</i> |
| FEB. 20, 2020 | Office of the Vice President <i>White House</i> |

| | |
|----------------|--|
| FEB. 20, 2020 | National Security Council <i>White House</i> |
| FEB. 27, 2020 | Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs <i>Department of State</i> |
| FEB. 27, 2020 | Director, Office of Iraq Affairs <i>Department of State</i> |
| FEB. 27, 2020 | Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations <i>Department of State</i> |
| FEB. 27, 2020 | Acting Director, Office of the Special Presidential Envoy to Counter ISIS <i>Department of State</i> |
| JUNE 24, 2020 | Office of the Secretary of Defense (Iraq Policy Team) <i>Department of Defense*</i> |
| AUG. 25, 2020 | Deputy Assistant Secretary for Iraq Affairs <i>Department of State*</i> |
| SEPT. 11, 2020 | Office of the Vice President <i>White House*</i> |
| OCT. 19, 2020 | Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East <i>Department of Defense*</i> |

**Meeting held virtually due to Covid-19 pandemic.*

Meetings at the White House included the following officials:

Deputy Assistant to the President/Deputy National Security Advisor to the Vice President

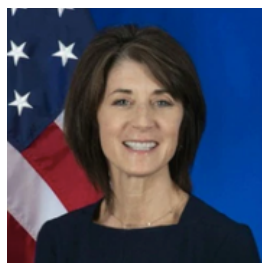
Special Advisor to the Vice President for the Middle East

Iraq Director, National Security Council

Director of Defense Strategy and Policy, National Security Council



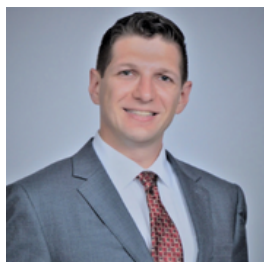
Joey Hood
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs



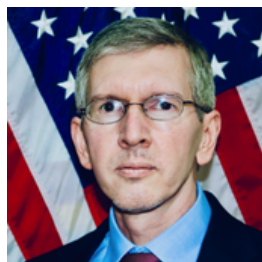
Dr. Denise Natali
Assistant Secretary of State for Conflict and Stabilization Operations



Simone Ledeen
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East



David Copley
Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iraq Affairs



Rob Waller
Consul General for the U.S. Consulate in Erbil (present), Director of Iraq Affairs (at the time of meeting)

UNDERSTANDING OUTCOMES

Between September 2019 and October 2020, consistent negotiating activity took place with senior officials in the Trump-Pence Administration. The various offices and senior officials listed on pages 11-12 received multiple briefings from an API-NPDF delegation concerning shared policy priorities related to security and governance, with an emphasis on the critical importance of indigenous Assyrian self-security. Officials at various levels acknowledged the important role the NPU has played in facilitating the return of local populations and maintaining stability in a hostile environment.

Deliberations took place over the course of 14 months, during which the policy proposals received meaningful consideration from officials at the White House, Department of Defense, and Department of State. The outbreak of Covid-19 in March 2020 caused some disruptions to scheduled meetings, but deliberations resumed in June 2020. The API-NPDF delegation looked for practical measures to be taken in order to advance discussions on this policy option. Despite the good intentions and efforts of career officials who consistently helped to advance consideration and deliberation of the NPU policy, the delegation was unable to make tangible progress at this crucial juncture due to the counterposed efforts of political appointees who supported alternative and directly opposed policies.

Whereas career officials enter the government through competitive means, political appointees are selected by the serving U.S. Administration and customarily tender their resignations upon the inauguration of a new President. Political appointees are selected on the basis of affiliations with a political party. In most cases, political appointees form the majority in the higher echelons of a department. Their mandate is to provide top-down direction with respect to the political and policy priorities of the current U.S. Administration.

Furthering negotiations on the policy proposals were linked to support for the proposals from political appointees, notably at the Department of Defense. However, in a virtual meeting held on October 19, 2020, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (DASD) for the Middle East, a core part of the Trump Administration's Middle East policy team, rejected the proposals to provide assistance to the NPU. As justification, the DASD referenced open-ended, non-directive authorization language that enables the selective application of highly vague legislation that effectively reinforces the status quo security policies that are destroying the Assyrian population in Iraq.

The current Administration's rejection of the proposals to support the NPU must be understood as a policy choice that endeavors to maintain the status quo policy framework upheld by previous Administrations. In the context of U.S. funding and support for the Tribal Mobilization Forces (TMF)—a U.S.-backed program for mobilizing, training, and equipping Sunni Arab forces under the PMF structure—it can be concluded that the legislation referenced by the DASD was selectively applied to the proposals concerning support for the NPU. With regard to the Sunni Arab-dominated TMF, the U.S. was not only the source of funding, but also developed the design and structure of the program. In reference to the program, a representative at the U.S. Consulate General in Erbil stated:

“The idea was to mobilize them and allow them to deal with their own territory. These are local guys. They know who belongs there. It also tends to help with returns; people are more likely to go back when they know who is securing it and when they can settle their own grievances. [...] The idea was that this would be a form of ‘grassroots reconciliation’—reconciliation in the sense of these [Sunni] groups not being disenfranchised and excluded from Iraqi forces and government.”

U.S. funding and support for the TMF demonstrates the U.S. Government's acute awareness and understanding, as reflected in the above comments, of the importance of legitimate, local security establishment in addressing security threats, facilitating the return of local populations, and tackling broader issues of political exclusion and disenfranchisement.

The decision to withhold comparative support from the NPU, which operates under the same structure of authority in Iraq, represents the U.S.'s prioritization of the interests of other stakeholders in the region, notably the KRG, which opposes the expansion of the NPU. It reflects the Trump-Pence Administration's willingness to uphold security policies that allow for the continued subjugation and persecution of the Assyrian people and sustains the status quo that it inherited. ■

⁵ Gaston, Erica. "Sunni Tribal Forces." Global Public Policy Institute, August 30, 2017. www.gppi.net/2017/08/30/sunni-tribal-forces.

HISTORICAL PRECEDENCE: THE STATUS QUO

It must be understood that this policy framework is not unique to the Trump-Pence Administration. In fact, these policies have been upheld by consecutive U.S. Administrations since 2003, beginning with the Bush-Cheney Administration.

In June 2006, the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, in conjunction with the U.S. Army Joint Operations Center, ordered the creation of a police force in the Nineveh Plain drawn from the local population known as the Nineveh Plain Police Force (NPPF). This policy was in line with a speech given by President Bush that same month in which he stated that “as the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down.”⁶ While the full-force structure was to include 5,000 officers, the initial order authorized 711 officers. However, fulfillment of the order was blocked by the KRG, whose leadership deemed the NPPF to be a threat to its agenda of annexing the Nineveh Plain to the KRI.⁷ The order remained blocked for a period of two years, until former U.S. Senator Mark Kirk (R-IL)⁸ confronted the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq about the issue in a State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs hearing in Washington, D.C.⁹

Efforts from the U.S. Government to remove the political blockages by the KDP were temporarily effective. Within two weeks of the hearing, Iraq reported the commencement of NPPF recruitment and training. However, just four months after training and deployment, the Kurdistan Democratic Party-controlled Ninewa Governorate issued orders to reassign and demobilize the NPPF. To further undermine the Assyrian-led effort to establish a local police force in the Nineveh Plain, the KRG established its own Christian Assyrian security force operating under Peshmerga command. The Bush-Cheney Administration accepted and legitimized the KDP's actions through its continued support for KRG security forces and a discontinuation of support for security policies that would integrate Assyrians as equal and legitimate security partners.¹⁰

The best opportunity to fundamentally change these policies came in 2011-2012, under the Obama-Biden Administration, when former Senator Kirk proposed and helped pass congressional appropriations legislation (legislation which appropriates federal funds to specific federal government departments, agencies, and programs) which stated:

⁶ Office of the Press Secretary. "President Bush Visits Troops in Iraq." White House, June 13, 2006. www.georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/06/20060613-2.html.

⁷ Hanna, Reine and Gregory J. Kruczek. *Contested Control: The Future of Security in the Nineveh Plain*. Assyrian Policy Institute, June 1, 2020. www.assyrianpolicy.org/contested-control.

⁸ Note: Mark Kirk was serving as a Member of the House of Representatives on the House Appropriations Committee at the time of this hearing. He later went on to serve as a U.S. Senator.

⁹ Canon, Waleeta. "Ambassador Crocker Discusses Assyrian Police Force, Refugees on Capitol Hill." *Zinda Magazine*, April 10, 2008. www.zindamagazine.com/html/archives/2008/04.14.08/index_mon.php#newsdigest.

¹⁰ Hanna and Kruczek, *Contested Control*.

[the] Committee continues to recognize the importance of providing targeted assistance to ethno-religious minorities in Iraq to help ensure their survival, especially those living in the Nineveh Plains region. The Committee directs the Department of State to submit a report, not later than 90 days after the enactment of the act, detailing U.S. efforts to help these communities, including assistance consistent with Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution; assistance in building an indigenous community police force in the Nineveh Plains; and efforts to support NGOs in the region.¹¹

Despite extensive efforts by Assyrian-Americans to advance policy development and implementation pursuant to this policy framework, the Obama-Biden Administration failed to act on the legislation, and only reinforced the status quo established by the previous Administration, ultimately reinforcing the enabling conditions that would allow ISIS to ethnically cleanse the Nineveh Plain just two years later.

It remains unclear which policies the Biden-Harris Administration will adopt. However, relevant legislation authored and proposed by President-elect Biden during his tenure as Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is deeply troubling. In 2007, then-Senator Biden introduced Senate Concurrent Resolution 37, which proposed a partition of the Iraqi state along ethno-sectarian lines, i.e. the creation of separate 'federal regions' as a means to 'actively support a political settlement among Iraq's major factions'.¹² Writing in the *New York Times*, then-Senator Biden asserted that the U.S. must "establish three largely autonomous regions with a viable central government in Baghdad. The Kurdish, Sunni, and Shiite regions [...]."¹³ Though this policy failed to gain support and was resoundingly criticized, it reflected an extreme form of institutionalizing the status quo which has proven harmful to marginalized groups such as Assyrians.

Again and again, Assyrian-Americans have watched in frustration as policymakers rejected viable policies that would enable conditions of equality for Assyrians in Iraq in favor of policies that reinforce their second-class status in the country. The struggle against this policy framework has made the already arduous effort to preserve the Assyrian presence in Iraq more difficult.

With the inauguration of President Biden, and the accompanying change of administration, prospects for a shift in policy are uncertain. The Biden-Harris Administration must take policy action to demonstrate they have learned from the failed policy framework that has driven Assyrians to the brink of extinction in their ancestral lands. The policies that take shape over the course of the next four years will determine the future for Assyrians in Iraq, thus the need for urgent action cannot be overstated. ■

¹¹ Senate Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Bill, 2012 – 112th Congress (2011-2013).

¹² Senate Concurrent Resolution 37 – 110th Congress (2007-2008).

¹³ Biden, Joseph R. "Unity Through Autonomy in Iraq." *The New York Times*, May 1, 2006. www.nytimes.com/2006/05/01/opinion/01biden.html.

LOOKING AHEAD: CONTINUING THE MOMENTUM INTO 2021

There is a large gap between stated priorities with regard to ethnic and religious minorities in the Nineveh Plain and U.S. policy priorities in Iraq—between what is being said in Washington and what is being achieved on the ground. Flaws in U.S. policy that are self-evident on the ground in the Nineveh Plain are all too easily ignored in Washington, where U.S. interests take precedence over human rights. Achieving policy changes will require us to mount an advocacy campaign that unfolds on multiple fronts—and to push for those changes in the face of fierce opposition.

The legitimacy of the policy proposals concerning U.S. funding and support for the NPU has been proven and acknowledged in the ongoing dialogue with senior U.S. officials. In 2021, the API will look to engage the Biden-Harris Administration to present and advance this policy.

As the advancement of deliberations is directly linked to amending flawed legislation, one of our urgent priorities is producing applied policy documents that can empower activists to pursue an effective Congressional advocacy strategy as part of a collective effort with a nationwide scope. Bipartisan support from Members of Congress is critical for the advancement of this policy which is consistent with U.S. stated objectives in Iraq.

The API will continue to press for changes to policies and systems that stand in the way of a future for Assyrians in their homeland. But this advocacy is broader than the work of the API alone, and must draw strength from our vast network of partner organizations, volunteers, and supporters throughout the United States and the world. As we continue to scale up our own advocacy work and realize our strategic initiative goals, we will keep collaborating with our own network and cooperating with external organizations.

The coming year promises many exciting developments as we more deeply involve activists who care about the issues affecting Assyrians in our advocacy efforts and expand the ways that supporters as a whole can help advance these policies. ■

CALL TO ACTION

■ Contact your representatives.

Contacting your representative is one of the most effective ways to call attention to an issue that matters to you—their constituents and voters.

Contact your representatives:

- To inform them that the National Defense Authorization Act should explicitly indicate the need to work through the appropriate governmental channels in Iraq to support the NPU directly in order to meet the objectives of the National Security Strategy that can be affected by developments in the Nineveh Plain and in order to establish a meaningful return on the +\$500 million USD spent by USAID to facilitate return but is failing to do so, except in those areas secured by the NPU;
- To ask them to insert language in the relevant defense appropriations legislation to provide material support for the NPU pursuant to actualizing the authorization language;
- To request that they raise questions in relevant committee hearings to have Department of Defense, Department of State, and USAID officials explain why direct support for the NPU is not forthcoming when it has been established that there is: (i) a direct correlation between the presence of the NPU and higher rates of return for victims of ISIS, and (ii) modest, or negligible, correlation between spending millions in USAID funds and rates of return for victims of ISIS.

■ Sign-up for API's action alerts.

Stay informed and up-to-date by signing up for API's action alerts. You will receive important updates via email and/or text. Visit assyrianpolicy.org/alerts for more information and to sign-up.

■ Help raise awareness.

Take small actions to amplify the voices of Assyrians in Iraq. Social media is an important tool that can be used to bring about better understanding of both the challenges facing Assyrians and the necessary solutions.



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