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As The World Watches

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Spotlight Syria:

Congressman accuses White House and State Department of neglecting religious minorities; others follow suit

In 2015, President Barack Obama pledged to admit more than 10,000 Syrians fleeing the civil war, but with an asterisk: the near absence of religious minorities, including Christians, Yazidis and Shia Muslims. It is an omission that some have charged is discriminatory but, at the very least, has left some of the world's most vulnerable hanging in the balance.

Jesus' face, in agony and crowned with thorns, was imprinted on the small rectangular religious medal dangling from Issam Khoury's neck. Khoury alleges that he was also brutalized by soldiers, dragged through the street and had his face smashed.

An outspoken opponent of Syrian strongman Bashar Assad, Khoury, 39, arrived in New York City from Syria by way of Lebanon on May 11, 2014. Four months later, he requested political asylum.

"Most Syrian Christians in my country and in the United States support Bashar Assad," Khoury said. "My dissenting view sets me apart."

Regardless of politics, he said that when he arrived in the United States there were so few Syrian refugees and asylees from the Syrian civil war that he hoped for more to be admitted — including more religious minorities.

"The United States is a big country, and it can be generous to those in need no matter their religion," Khoury said.

Like many opposed to Assad, he was disheartened by what he labeled "inaction" on the part of the United States, especially in Aleppo, where he alleges that an indiscriminate bombing campaign has left tens of thousands dead. His most recent posts on his website, www.issamkh.com, examine the viability of establishing a safe zone in Syria, effectively a no-fly zone enforced by the United States that he hopes may mitigate the exodus of Syrians fleeing the bombing campaign and the violence in their country.

The United Nations estimates that there are 4.8 million Syrian refugees and, on Sept. 8 2015, President Barack Obama offered Khoury a glimmer of hope that the U.S. government was willing to help: In a nationally televised press briefing, White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest announced the president's intention to admit at least 10,000 Syrians fleeing the civil war.

"We know the scale of this problem. It's significant, and there are millions of people who have been driven from their homes," Earnest said. "But what we can do is make sure that we are doing everything we can to try and provide for their basic needs."

The Obama administration was not doing anything radically different from previous presidents who faced large-scale refugee crises. To name a few, Eisenhower allowed 31,915 Hungarian refugees to stay following the Soviet Union's successful campaign to quash the 1956 Hungarian revolt. And in 1975, President Ford allowed 360,000 refugees to be admitted, most of them from Vietnam.

Often mislabeled as an "executive order," it is actually called a "Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions." Under U.S. law, the president has the authority to determine, in consultation with Congress, the number of refugees the United States will admit in a given year as well as setting target numbers for specific nationalities.

Still, critics, especially those on the right, treated the president's refugee determination as an unprecedented threat to national security due to the Muslim faith of 99 percent of the refugees.

Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-AL), who was tapped by President-elect Donald J. Trump to serve as U.S. attorney general and was previously denied a federal position for racially insensitive remarks, attacked Obama's directive based on fears that an untold number of terrorists were among the refugees to be resettled in the United States.

"The 10,000 Syrian refugees his administration will admit this fiscal year represent a nearly 500 percent increase over the roughly 1,600 Syrian refugees who were admitted last year," Sessions wrote in an August 2016 press release. "This radical increase places the safety and security of the American people at risk, there will surely be consequences."

In the aftermath of the November 2015 Paris attacks, in which Syrian passports were found among those who allegedly perpetrated it, Sessions and other Republicans redoubled their criticism of the refugee program.

Obama's rebuttal was quick and sharp.

"Apparently they are scared of widows and orphans coming into the United States," Obama said. "That doesn't seem so tough to me."

Another criticism was more bipartisan, congressional Republicans and Democrats flagged the near absence of religious minorities among resettled Syrian refugees as a problem to fix. The State Department's Refugee Processing Center lists 14,584 Syrian refugees admitted between Jan. 1, 2016 and Dec. 9, 2016, of which 97 were Christian, or 0.7 percent. Those aiding Christians and other religious minorities argue that 0.7 percent neither reflects the pre-war demographics of Syria nor the precarious situation for religious minorities still under threat from ISIS. They allege discrimination.

According to the CIA World Factbook, Christians comprised 10 percent of Syria's pre-war population. But on Feb. 12, 2016, Pope Francis and Russian Patriarch Kirill commemorated ISIS's

killing of 21 Coptic Christians by issuing a joint statement condemning the mass exodus of Christians from the Middle East as well as a plea for the world to act:

“It is with pain that we call to mind the situation in Syria, Iraq and other countries of the Middle East, and the massive exodus of Christians from the land in which our faith was first disseminated and in which they have lived since the time of the Apostles, together with other religious communities.”

One month later, the Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo, Antoine Audo, spoke at the United Nations’ Geneva headquarters and reported that Syria’s Christian population has fallen from 1.5 million to 500,000 due to five years of war and targeted persecution.

Congressman Chris Smith (R-NJ), a leading critic regarding the lack of religious minorities admitted to the United States, said that Obama had the executive authority to direct the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development to help both fleeing religious minorities and those who choose to stay. But since he had not acted, congressional legislation was necessary.

Smith, along with more than two dozen Republican and Democratic members of Congress, co-sponsored H.R. 5961: the Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act of 2016. “At the stroke of the pen, Obama could have — but didn’t — accomplish what this legislation aims to do,” Smith said.

Brought to the House floor on Sept. 9, H.R. 5961 is designed to ease access to the overseas application process for religious minorities fleeing ISIS who want to come to the United States through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program as well as supply much-needed humanitarian aid to those who want to stay. Other legislation has been proposed with similar goals as well. The State Department categorically denies the underrepresentation of religious minorities from Syria.

“The demographics of Syrian refugees resettled in the United States reflect the demographics of the Syrian refugee population,” said Danna van Brandt, a public affairs officer for the State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration.

The State Department bases most of its refugee referrals on the United Nations Refugee Agency, known as the UNHCR, and its numbers are not radically different from the 0.7 percent admitted by State.

"Overall, there are 4.8 million Syrian refugees registered in countries neighboring Syria, of whom about 1.4 percent belong to minority religious groups," said Matthew Saltmarsh, senior communications officer of the United Nations Refugee Agency.

In November 2015 letter, Congresswoman Anna Eshoo (D-CA), a co-sponsor of the bill, urged Secretary of State John Kerry to acknowledge that a genocide was being committed and enact policies to protect religious minorities:

“We’re witnessing the systematic extermination of Iraq and Syria’s entire ethno-religious minority populations, and the atrocities perpetrated against each of these vulnerable groups shock the conscience of civilized humanity.”

Eshoo also wrote a letter of support for Sister Diana Momeka, an Iraqi Dominican religious, to speak in front of Congress and inform her colleagues of the genocide. Momeka was selected for a special delegation: witnesses of ISIS’ brutality to speak in front of Congress about the genocide being perpetrated by the Sunni terror organization. Except the State Department, singled her out as someone at risk of declaring asylum and denied her visa request at the U.S. consulate in Erbil, Iraq.

As for Momeka, she denies any intention to declare asylum. She lived in the United States for seven years and spoke fondly of the Americans that she met, especially former Congressman Frank Wolf (R-VA). Yet the experience at the consulate “wasn’t a pleasant at all.”

Things got off to a rocky start when consular officers initially told her that she had voluntarily abandoned her residency status in the United States because she was not able to present the necessary paperwork.

“I forgot my residency papers in the rush to flee after ISIS got into our town,” Momeka said.

Pressure from Eshoo and others preceded the State Department’s about-face allowing her to enter the United States.

“The whole experience was horrible: The staff was so rude,” Momeka said. “They said to me, ‘Since you’re an IDP, who says that you’re coming back?’”

Lisa Jones, Executive Director of Christian Freedom International, a nonprofit that provides aid to persecuted Christians throughout the world including the Middle East, said that the State Department often denies visas to religious minorities from countries where they are persecuted because they may attempt to declare asylum once in the United States.

“Basically, no country will issue a visa to anyone who they think may be planning to seek asylum,” Jones said. “Your prospective visa-seeker has to have an extremely well-documented reason for travel, and since everyone knows that Christians are trying to get out of countries of oppression, and since in those countries you have to have your religion on your ID, it’s a brick wall.”

Jones advocated for the release of 27 Chaldean Catholics from Iraq who were apprehended while crossing into California from Mexico. The Iraqis were held at the Otay Detention Center near San Diego.

“Several of the detainees were sent home within days of our report,” Jones said. “I have not been able to verify anything for the rest of the group since September, but it is possible they were sent back as well.”

Requests to interview the detainees and determine their whereabouts were unsuccessful. A FOIA request from the American Center for Law and Justice was submitted three months ago in order to ascertain why the United States government seems slow in aiding religious minorities from Iraq and Syria.

“What we’re trying to compel is why there has been such resistance to stating the obvious: that a genocide is being committed,” said Jay Sekulow, chief legal counsel for ACLJ. “There is a real problem with real consequence, but what we’re not seeing is real action.”

Two archbishops from Iraq and Syria were more blunt in their criticism. In an Aug. 4, 2015 press conference, Bashar Warda, Chaldean Archbishop of Erbil, Iraq, and Melkite Archbishop Jean-Clement Jeanbart of Aleppo said that if the U.S. government would not aid the Christian communities displaced by ISIS, then they should not be discriminated against when applying for visas to the United States.

“Our people are asking these questions: How come we apply for the American visa and are denied?” Warda said. “This is a clear case of persecution.”

Warda did praise the Knights of Columbus, who compiled a comprehensive 300-page report documenting the attempted genocide earlier in 2015. Supreme Knight Carl Anderson testified before Congress several times and, quoting Pope Francis, he clarified what was at stake.

“Pope Francis has been in the forefront in calling attention to this ongoing attempt at extermination,” Anderson said. “About these Christians, he declared that ‘a form of genocide’ — and I stress the word ‘genocide’ — is taking place, and it must end.”

Soon afterward, in March 2015, the House of Representatives unanimously declared that ISIS was committing genocide against Christians and other religious minorities. Kerry reaffirmed that conclusion.

“Carl Anderson and the Knights basically did the State Department’s work,” Smith said.

While headaches and long lines are in store for religious minorities navigating the American-style bureaucracy of refugee admissions, for those who hope to stay, rebuilding their communities will be a Herculean task. And for Momeka, survival comes first.

“The whole community is in the survival mode,” Momeka said. “We don’t know if our towns will be liberated, and we are just trying to survive.”

As a member of the Syriac Catholic Church, which traces its roots back to churches founded by St. Thomas, she and her Mosul-based Dominican congregation had a harrowing flight from Mosul on Aug. 6, 2014.

In the aftermath, just four days later, she helped start a nonprofit, Humanitarian “Ninevah Relief” Organization, <http://www.hnroiraq.org/en/our-mission>, to help targeted religious minorities, including Christians, Yazidis and Kakais, receive medical care and support.

Several from her hometown are still being held by ISIS, including a mother and daughter. The woman’s daughter, Christina, is now 5. But Momeka’s sense of abandonment by those she expected to help was a singular anguish. The lack of media coverage and the failure of fellow Christians to respond after ISIS’ persecution really bothered her.

“It was like nobody cared at all about us Christians,” Momeka said. “When you have an injured child, you don’t just abandon her. You help.”

H.R. 5961 is designed to aid not just victims of ISIS, but those of Assad as well, like Khoury. In Section II, Paragraph 3, it cites a report dated Feb. 3, 2016 from the Independent International Commission of Inquiry, which states that “detainees held by the Government, were beaten to death, or died as a result of injuries sustained due to torture.”

Khoury’s description of Assad’s Syria is reminiscent of “The Man in the High Castle,” in which any perceived threat to a totalitarian regime justifies the detention, torture and possible execution of the accused.

Vigilant background checks at military checkpoints and airports in which vying governmental agencies compete with one another to track down dissidents or other enemies of the state are the norm, and accusations from a jealous colleague are rumored to be cause enough to land a person in prison.

“If you have a problem with me, maybe you can make a report about me saying how 10 years ago I spoke out against Assad and that security should arrest me,” Khoury said.

In his case, there was never any doubt that he spoke against the Assad regime — his website proves that. In addition to being blacklisted, Khoury said that he experienced several violent confrontations with regime soldiers and security personnel. He was apprehended and imprisoned twice for several months.

Khoury estimates that the prison cell was about 3.2 feet by 4.9 feet and that there were usually 11 people crammed in — sometimes as many as 17.

“And the smell, you cannot believe, the smell. You cannot. You cannot,” Khoury said. “The first two days, I cannot sleep so I put my nose and my lips near the window.

He also said that it was like a sauna during the day and he lost 34 pounds in one month.

Another confrontation occurred in his village, Aljodida, and involved soldiers attempting to attach him via a chord to the back of their vehicle so they could drag him to death. And the last incident happened in 2011 when he was pulled over at a checkpoint and the police smashed his face.

“The Syrian regime sent bad person called a ‘shabiha’ to hit me, and he destroyed my nose,” Khoury said, gesturing towards his face. “I had an operation to return my face like what you see now.”

Khoury describes the pain caused when he came back from having his face reconstructed after an incident in which his face was beaten in by guards at a checkpoint.

“My older daughter was scared of me, and that made me so sad,” Khoury said.

He alleges that during both times that he was imprisoned, he was interrogated by three soldiers: one in front of him, another on the left and a third one on the right. With his face bound, he was ordered to address whichever soldier asked the question, but before he could finish, another soldier would use an electric prod or hit him in the face.

“The security does this because they think you will be more likely to speak the truth,” Khoury said.

Smith has criticized the administration for not intervening in Syria against Assad or against ISIS.

On May 26, 2016, Smith chaired a subcommittee of the Committee on Foreign Affairs in which he condemned the administration’s inaction in both Syria, against Assad, and in Iraq, against ISIS. While calling out the Assad regime for “targeting and killing tens of thousands of civilians,” he spoke of the genocide being committed across Syria’s “porous” border with Iraq, which began in 2014.

“By early August, Yazidi men, women and children were trapped on Mount Sinjar facing annihilation when the U.S. initiated airstrikes to save them,” Smith said. “However, beyond that, it soon became clear that the administration had no comprehensive plan to prevent ISIS from continuing to commit genocide, mass atrocities and war crimes — or to roll ISIS back.”

Starting in 2013, Smith has chaired nine hearings on the genocide and said that he was disappointed by the State Department’s lack of due diligence in acknowledging that ISIS was committing a genocide against Christians and other religious minorities.

In response to Smith’s criticism, Ernst, the White House press secretary, was dismissive.

“Can Congressman Smith point to a single public utterance in the last year in support of the Obama administration’s effort to increase the number of refugees from the region?” Ernst asked. “If not — and I would be surprised if he could — I am not sure how anyone can conclude that his criticism is legitimate.”

Ernst emphasized the “bitter” congressional opposition to the creation of the Syrian refugee resettlement program and that Smith did little to defend it, only using it as an opportunity to criticize the administration.

That criticism may reach critical mass with the election of presidential candidate Donald J. Trump, whose rhetoric indicates that the entire Syrian refugee program may be an early casualty of his administration.

“When I’m elected president, we will suspend the Syrian refugee program and we will keep radical Islamic terrorists the hell out of our country,” Trump said during a campaign rally in Manchester, New Hampshire on Nov. 7, 2016.

And at a “Thank You” tour rally in Cincinnati, Ohio on Dec 1, 2016 he reiterated his scorn for refugee programs following an incident in which a Somali refugee drove his car into a crowd at Ohio State University.

“Your state has just experienced a violent atrocity at the great Ohio State University,” Trump said. “And these security threats are stupidly created by our very, very stupid politicians: refugee programs.”

Despite multiple inquiries over the course of several months, the president-elect has declined to comment about his comments.

Dismantling refugee programs, however, may not be a quick process, at least according to Tammy Lin, an immigration lawyer who specializes in aiding religious minorities.

“As a country, we’ve always accepted people who have fled atrocities in other countries and have started new lives, and I would like to believe that the United States will continue to do that in the future,” Lin said when asked if she was afraid that Trump would make good on his promise.

Her own family came as refugees to the United States in 1949 during the Chinese Civil War. Lin expressed doubt that a Trump administration — or any administration — could quickly overturn the refugee system given that it is based on international law, but she did affirm that the priority status requested for religious minorities by the proposed legislation is not unprecedented.

The refugee process includes three visa applicant categories Priority 1, Priority 2 and Priority 3. H.R. 5961 would grant P-2 status to religious minorities who are under threat of genocide, which they do not currently have.

“It basically means that they can skip an initial step in the application process,” Lin said.

Iraqis who worked with the U.S. military in Iraq are the most recent example of a designated group granted expedited status. Without P-2 status, they would have to leave their country and go to a UNHCR office in order to be identified as refugees. In very limited instances, such as when there are no United Nations refugee offices present, a humanitarian agency can provide the referral. This is not the case in Syria or Iraq.

“Normally, a prospective applicant to the United States has to be identified as a refugee before they are referred over to U.S. refugee processing,” Lin said. “With P-2 status, they can proceed without that referral.”

State Department officials —as well as the State Department website — claim that their admission of religious minorities in Fiscal Year 2016 closely matched the 1.4 percent of Syrian refugees who register with the UNHCR as religious minorities, but critics disagree.

Jones, the executive director of CFI International, said that the host country staffs the United Nations offices with their own people, which makes it harder for Christians and Yazidis to register without fear of reprisal. She also reiterated claims that in camps, including those run by the United Nations, religious minorities are especially vulnerable to sexual violence and discrimination. That is one reason Smith gave for the P-2 visa status so religious minorities could leapfrog the United Nations Refugee Agency altogether. Andrew Walther, who met with religious minorities in Iraq in order to compile the Knights of Columbus genocide report agrees with Jones’ assessment as well. As does Momeka.

“The problem is that the United Nations doesn’t want to sound like they are not doing a good job,” Jones said.

When pressed on the potential lack of security for religious minorities at the United Nations camps and offices Saltmarsh, the senior communications officer for UNHCR, responded with this statement, as well as the disclaimer that most of the camps are not run by the UNHCR:

“In camps, most notably for the internally displaced in Iraq, the UNHCR has sought to ensure religious minorities — for example Christians and Yazidis — are not excluded from the support that they need,” Saltmarsh said. “Security in the camps is controlled by host governments.”

In November 2015, Adiba Qassem went to the Ankara office of the UNHCR in order to register her sister and three brothers as refugees. Qassem said that her immediate family passed through a Kurdish checkpoint a mere 30 minutes before ISIS captured her town of Khanosor, Iraq. Qassem is a Yazidi, a religious minority group that pre-dates both Islam and Christianity.

She alleges that 70 of her family members were killed or taken captive by ISIS and that her non-Yazidi neighbors from the nearby towns of Beer Qasim and Beer Jari pledged to protect the Yazidis, but ended up participating in the genocide, including the rape of her cousins.

“My cousins they got raped by our neighbors, you know,” Qassem said. “We don’t know what happened after that.”

Qassem still works in Iraq as a stringer for foreign journalists who want to go to the frontlines with ISIS, and she visits Yazidi refugee camps regularly. She claims to have helped 380 Syrian refugees fill out their visa applications, with Australia as the country which granted the most admissions.

At the United Nations office, her goal was to get her siblings out, but she was disappointed. There were Turkish officials running the office.

“They were looking at us like we are nothing,” Qassem said. “They didn’t take care of us even though we were refugees and lots of things happened with us.”

After taking down her siblings’ information, the official informed Qassem and her siblings that they would be contacted in 2017. She decided not to wait and smuggled them out instead. Her brother, Maher, is currently in Germany while her parents are in the Diyarbakir refugee camp in Turkey.

When filling out applications for the Syrian refugees, a process that some have likened to applying for colleges, Qassem did not fill out any to the United States because she said that they were not welcome there, but hoped that the mentality would change.

“It’s really easy to be a refugee: It could be you, it could be anyone, so we need everyone to help us,” Qassem said. “We need all the countries to help us, and I think this world is for all of us and we have to share it.”

In the meantime, while Khoury has often complained about the snail’s pace progress of his visa application, he recently found out that on Jan. 7, 2016 — just 13 days before Trump assumes the office of the presidency — he will be interviewed to determine if he is eligible for asylum.

But the cost for Qassem, Khoury and other religious minorities who experienced persecution and torture may come at the loss of their faith, the very thing that makes them different.

Qassem said that before the genocide, she was very zealous in her Yazidi faith. In the aftermath, she claimed to have none.

“Where is God? Why he didn’t help them?” Qassem asked. “And you know, the Yazidi people they are such a peaceful people. We never kill anyone. We never do anything with anyone. But where is God?”

Khoury's religious sentiments are similar. On his paperwork declaring political asylum, he had checked "Christian," but now he self-identifies as atheist, mentioning that it is hard to believe in God after experiencing such suffering. As for his religious medal, with image of Jesus suffering, he said that he will always wear it.

"Before the death of my mother, she asked me to put on that necklace, and I promised her," Khoury said. "I love the story of Jesus, because he loves peace and hates violence."