

**IN IRAQ, IRAN'S INFLUENCE GROWS, CHRISTIANS FACE
EXTINCTION; IN SYRIA, KURDS FEEL ABANDONED BY WEST**

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Isranet Daily Briefing, January 15, 2019

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[Timmerman, *New York Post*, Dec. 15, 2018](#)— Pink bollworms are the scourge of cotton farmers.

[America's Loyal Syrian Kurdish Allies Evade Annihilation While US forces in Iraq Face Expulsion](#): Malcolm Lowe, *Gatestone Institute*, Dec. 31, 2018—

In April 2018, we warned that President Trump's decision to withdraw US forces from Syria would be a repetition of President Obama's worst mistake, the precipitate withdrawal from Iraq that facilitated the capture of Mosul by the Islamic State (ISIS).

[The West Cannot Abandon Kurds](#): Con Coughlin, *Telegraph*, Jan. 12, 2019—

Throughout the course of the West's long and bitter campaign to destroy Daesh, the Kurds have proved themselves to be one of the most effective allies.

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IS IRAN'S INFLUENCE IN IRAQ GROWING,

OR HAS IT REACHED A PLATEAU?

Seth J. Frantzman

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[Jerusalem Post](#), Jan. 2, 2019

The leader of Iraq's second largest party, Hadi al-Amiri, called on foreign forces to leave Iraq over the weekend. Slamming US President Donald Trump's visit, in which Trump did not meet Iraqi officials, he intimated that the US should also draw down its forces. This comes at the same time as Maj.-Gen. Tamir Hayman, head of Israel's military intelligence, warned at a conference in Tel Aviv that Iraq is under growing influence of Iran.

Iran's role in Iraq is multi-layered. It suffered a slight setback in the elections in 2018 as Muqtada al-Sadr, a Shi'ite cleric and Iraqi nationalist, came in first. Amiri, leading a party supported by former and current Shi'ite militias, some of them closely connected to Iran, came in second.

Iran's influence may have peaked under former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, who was the most powerful man in Iraq from 2006 to 2014. Maliki not only presided over the period when US troops left but, according to former officials, the US under the Obama administration saw him as a strongman who would help lead Iraq as the US presence diminished. Oddly, even as the US saw him as helping preserve Iraq, he railed against the Americans. In Washington's calculations at the time this was acceptable because a certain amount of populist anti-Americanism nevertheless meant Iraq would be unified under one leader, rather than sink into instability and allow a place for extremism to grow.

Instead, the opposite happened. Maliki's authoritarianism alienated the Sunni minority and the Kurdish region. ISIS and its genocidal extremism entered the vacuum created in Sunni areas by Maliki's thuggish bureaucracy. After ISIS took over a third of Iraq and he was forced out in Baghdad, Maliki claimed that the Obama administration was "behind the creation of ISIS in order to bring down the government." Nothing could be further from the truth, but blaming America was the easiest way to excuse Baghdad's problems.

These were the kind of conspiracy theories and anti-American rhetoric that were common among segments of the pro-Iranian leadership angling to run Iraq. Under Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who replaced Maliki in 2014, Iraq had to have a kind of Janus face when it came to the US and Iran. The US would help train Iraq's army and carry out airstrikes, but the rank and file of anti-ISIS fighters would often be more sympathetic to Iran, some even carried photos of Ayatollah Khamenei with them into battle. Khamenei even warned against Iraq allowing the US to

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return and aid its fight.

To fight ISIS, the Iraqi government also partnered with tens of thousands of Shi'ite militias that cropped up after a 2014 fatwa against ISIS. This was the natural response to the ISIS threat. ISIS was massacring people across Iraq and Iraq's army was disintegrating. Militias, imbued with religious zeal and often looking to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps for inspiration, helped defeat ISIS. Some of these were extremely hostile to the US.

Groups like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq were even led by men like Qais Khazali, who had been detained by the US. Hezbollah Brigades leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis had been sanctioned by the US Treasury in 2009. He was close to IRGC Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani. Men like Muhandis, Khazali and Amiri were also influential in 2009 and 2015. Amiri's Badr Organization runs the interior ministry of Iraq and funnels its resources to former Shi'ite militia members. The Shi'ite militias were even rebranded as the "Popular Mobilization Units" and made an official paramilitary force, like the IRGC or Basij in Iran.

This is the Iranification of Iraq and it has gone on slowly for more than a decade. The pro-Iranian factions have always been close to power in Iraq since 2003. One of the necessary blind spots of US policy, and by extension other Western governments, is to pretend that these pro-Iranian individuals, some of them former militants or violent extremists, do not make up the rank and file of individuals close to power in Baghdad. It's also unsurprising they have such influence. They resisted Saddam Hussein, with many of those like Amiri going to Iran in the 1980s to fight against Saddam alongside the Iranians.

To create an illusion of an Iraqi government that is not entirely an ally of Iran, the US has sought to encourage Baghdad to reach out to Saudi Arabia and sought to push for more Gulf investment in Iraq. In 2017, Iraq and Saudi Arabia began to improve relations after decades in which they had been broken after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The US has sought to balance relations with Baghdad with its outreach to Sunni areas of Iraq and also the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The KRG has been staunchly pro-Western over the years, an island of stability in an Iraq that has suffered terribly.

Yet, the US relationship with the Kurdish region was strained in 2017 when the KRG had an independence referendum. The US worked with Baghdad and supported Baghdad sending tanks into Kirkuk, along with Iranian-backed Shi'ite

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militias, to punish the Kurdish region. Kurdish peshmerga had defended Kirkuk from ISIS from 2014 to 2017. With the war over, Washington thought the KRG could be pushed aside in favor of a Baghdad strategy. This strategy hasn't reduced Iran's role or presence. This is not because Iran is necessarily playing a greater role.

In fact, there is evidence that many Iraqis are tired of Iran. In protests in Basra, people have attacked the headquarters of various Iranian-linked militias. They think Iran is partly responsible for economic problems, as Iraq's resources are plundered by Iranians. As sanctions kick in, Iran has even more reason to plunder Iraq for its economic interests. Iraqis also complain that there is a drug trade from Iran. Some of these claims are exaggerated, but there are serious questions about the degree to which Iran sees part of Iraq as a "near abroad," a kind of colony that it can dump its products on. Is the relationship equal or does Iraq do the work for Iran?

Now the US once again faces questions about whether it will remain in Iraq. From the point of view of those who are concerned about Iran's role in the region and its attempt to create a "land corridor" to the sea via Iraq and Syria, the US role is unclear. Do US forces help block Iranian influence? So far they haven't. Trump said that US forces in Iraq will continue to fight ISIS and keep an eye on Iran. But Iran is also keeping an eye on US forces...*[To Read the Full Article Click the Following [Link—Ed.](#)]*

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WHY US FORCES MUST STEP IN TO SAVE

IRAQI CHRISTIANS FROM EXTINCTION

Kenneth R. Timmerman

[New York Post](#), Dec. 15, 2018

When ISIS fighters burst into Father Afran Sony's monastery in northern Iraq in June 2014 wielding machine guns and knives, he and his brothers rushed to protect their most precious possessions. They weren't gold, relics or even their own lives, but some of the oldest surviving manuscripts in the Christian world. For

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nearly two months, the terrorists held the handful of monks prisoner and openly—discussed whether or not to kill them because they refused to renounce their faith. But Father Afran was more focused on saving the ancient Christian texts than himself.

At one point, he and a few brothers managed to escape to a nearby village under the cover of darkness, carrying away the most precious of the ancient scrolls under their cloaks. But ISIS caught them at a checkpoint and took them back to the monastery. That's when they came up with a daring plan. "We built a fake wall in a small windowless closet right under their noses and sealed the books in barrels inside," he said. "Some of them date from the 4th century. In all, we saved 750 ancient books and scrolls." ISIS released the monks on July 20, 2014, and stayed another two years in the monastery without ever finding the manuscripts. But every other Christian relic they found, every cross and every grave, they smashed or defaced, including the tomb of Saints Behnam and Sarah, martyrs who lived more than 1,600 years ago.

Most Americans have had enough of our 15-year effort to bring peace, stability and, yes, some modicum of representative government to Iraq. President Trump repeatedly blasted President George W. Bush for going to war in 2003, calling it "the single worst decision ever made." And yet, the United States does have lasting interests in Iraq beyond eradicating weapons of mass destruction. Prime among them is one that until now we have neglected: ensuring the survival of Iraq's Christian minority and, more generally, the Christians of the East.

Why should we care? America is fundamentally a Judeo-Christian nation. More than 70 percent of Americans self-identify as Christians, and if that statistic has any meaning, then we must take seriously the passage of St. Paul in I Corinthians 12:26, when he describes the body of Christ. "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it." There can be no doubt: The Body of Christ in northern Iraq is suffering. It has been suffering for the past 15 years in ways never before imaginable. And until recently, Americans and the US government have done little to help.

These are our people. This is our duty. Through 1,400 years of Muslim domination, these communities have remained faithful, their monasteries and ancient churches largely intact. Until ISIS. Today, 150,000 Christians at most remain in Iraq, a scant 10 percent of the community that once thrived before 2003. And every day brings them closer to extinction. Merved is a 32-year old Christian woman from Bartella,

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east of Mosul, who was driven out of her home by the ISIS invasion in 2014. She lost four family members to ISIS barbarity and today lives with her four young children in a refugee camp sponsored by the Assyrian Aid Society. Asked if she was ready to return home, she shook her head violently. "I am afraid!"

While ISIS lost its occupying power after a brutal, year-long battle with Iraqi, Kurdish and US-led coalition forces in 2017, members of the terrorist group have gone underground and are forming new cells just outside of Mosul, many of them led by women. "In recent months, we have arrested 40 women just in our sector," said the national police chief for East Mosul, Gen. Aref al-Zebari. "They told our interrogators that they were protected and aided by the Turkish government," he added.

In October this year, I returned from a 10-day fact-finding mission to Mosul and the surrounding Christian villages of the Nineveh Plain, which was evangelized by St. Thomas in the 1st century AD. Many of the churches here still conduct Mass in Aramaic, the language of Jesus. But ISIS's presence lingered throughout. "Look at this grave," local councilman Luis Markos Ayoub told me, as we walked through the cemetery of Saint Georges church in Karamlesh, a Christian village just east of Mosul. "It is fresh — not because the person just died, but because the family came back here to rebury their loved one. ISIS had dug up the dead body and decapitated it, because it was Christian."

Recently the Archbishop of Canterbury called the "daily threats of murder" Christians face today "the worst situation since the Mongol invasions of the 13th century." "Many have left," wrote the Most Reverend Justin Welby in the UK's *Sunday Telegraph*. "Hundreds of thousands have been forced from their homes. Many have been killed, enslaved and persecuted or forcibly converted. Even those who remain ask the question, 'Why stay?' Christian communities that were the foundation of the universal Church now face the threat of imminent extinction."

You don't have to be a Christian to believe it's in our national interest to ensure the survival of Iraqi Christians. Congress has determined that the three-year ISIS effort to eradicate the Christian and Yazidi populations under their control amounted to "genocide." Max Primorac, the top USAID official in Iraq, said genocide is a very specific crime that calls for a specific response. "We've made 27 grants in three months, probably the fastest ever," Primorac said. "We didn't just get the memo, we are reading it." The "memo" came from Vice President Mike Pence. Just over one year ago, Pence pledged that the Trump administration would

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~~change the way the US distributed aid, to ensure it directly reached Christian and Yazidi communities...~~*[To Read the Full Article Click the Following [Link](#)—Ed.]*

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AMERICA'S LOYAL SYRIAN KURDISH ALLIES EVADE

ANNIHILATION WHILE US FORCES IN IRAQ FACE EXPULSION

Malcolm Lowe

[Gatestone Institute](#), Dec. 31, 2018

In April 2018, we warned that President Trump's decision to withdraw US forces from Syria would be a repetition of President Obama's worst mistake, the precipitate withdrawal from Iraq that facilitated the capture of Mosul by the Islamic State (ISIS). We perceived that the immediate consequence of abandoning Syria would be a Turkish-led campaign to annihilate America's Syrian Kurdish allies, who heroically bore the brunt of defeating the ISIS in Syria and capturing its capital, Raqqa.

The conclusion drawn was that the Syrian Kurds would have no choice but to appeal to Iran for help. For it was only Iran's foreign ministry spokesman who had protested vehemently against the Turkish-facilitated capture of Afrin, a Kurdish town in northwest Syria, in March by an Islamist militia. In the meantime, Turkey has sent many thousands of Kurds fleeing, who have been replaced with "displaced Syrian Arabs from East Ghouta." The Islamist militia has subjected Christians to Sharia-style dhimmitude and forced Yazidis to convert to Islam on pain of death. Amnesty International has also reported on rampant offences against property and individuals; it mentions the thousands of refugees who have fled from Afrin.

In these recent December days, the scenario then foreseen has been playing itself out rapidly. On December 14, in a telephone conversation with Turkey's President Erdogan, President Trump not merely made a final decision to remove US forces from Syria but invited Erdogan to replace them with Turkish forces. The invitation has terrified not just the Syrian Kurds but also other militias in the Syrian Democratic Forces that fight alongside them against ISIS. An example is the Syriac

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Military Council, a Christian militia that has issued its own appeal to Trump to reconsider: “The outcome of the invasion of Afrin makes visible what will happen to us. Churches will be destroyed. Christians and Yazidis, designated ‘infidels’ by Turkey’s mercenaries, will be killed and massacred ... Women of all ethnicities, now free, will be raped, enslaved and veiled.”

Trump overruled the objections of all his advisors, generals and supporters in Congress, assuring them that Erdogan had promised to deal with any remnants of ISIS in the area. Apparently, Trump is the only person among them all who ignored — or maybe does not even understand — that Erdogan had eagerly accepted Trump’s invitation not on account of ISIS but in order to inflict his Afrin operation upon the entire population of America’s loyal allies in Syria. The prospect of such a US withdrawal from Syria — and such a betrayal — has even provoked articles with almost the same title as ours, such as Mark A. Thiessen in the *Washington Post* and *Boston Herald* on December 23: “Trump repeating Obama’s mistake in the Middle East.” Search for those words on internet and you will now find others coming to the same conclusion.

Events rolled on with Trump’s unannounced arrival at a US base in Iraq on December 26. Trump declined to meet first in Baghdad with Adil Abdul Mahdi, the new Prime Minister of Iraq, but invited Mahdi to join him at the base. Apparently, Trump did not realize that he had humiliated Abdul Mahdi, as if the latter were a lackey at his beck and call. There were furious protests in the Iraqi Council of Representatives (the parliament), both from the Iran-friendly Bina Bloc - with calls for the expulsion of US forces — and from the more independent-minded Islah Bloc. The two blocs command respectively 73 and 126 seats in the 329-seat Council, thus a decisive majority. They had come together to ratify the appointment of Abdul Mahdi in October. The parliamentary leader of Islah, Sabbah al-Saadi, called for an emergency session of the Council “to discuss this blatant violation of Iraq’s sovereignty and to stop these aggressive actions by Trump who should know his limits: the US occupation of Iraq is over.” Oblivious, possibly, that he was far from welcome in Iraq, Trump told US military personnel that — as he was planning to keep them in Iraq - there was no problem in abandoning Syria: “If we see something happening with ISIS [in Syria] that we don’t like, we can hit them so fast and so hard they really won’t know what the hell happened. We’ve knocked them silly.”...[To Read the Full Article Click the Following [Link](#)—Ed.]

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THE WEST CANNOT ABANDON KURDS

Con Coughlin

[Telegraph](#), Jan. 12, 2019

Throughout the course of the West's long and bitter campaign to destroy Daesh, the Kurds have proved themselves to be one of the most effective allies. In an age when western governments on both sides of the Atlantic are reluctant to commit large numbers of ground troops, the fact that the Kurds have been prepared to fulfil the role of capturing vital territory from Daesh has made a significant contribution to the success of the United States-led coalition's operation against Daesh's self-styled Caliphate.

Working in conjunction with American and British special forces, militias such as the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces have been instrumental in helping to liberate more than 99 per cent of the territory that Daesh once controlled in northern Iraq and Syria. The two British SAS soldiers who were reported to have been seriously injured by a Daesh missile strike in Syria recently were taking part in a joint operation with the Kurds, in which a Kurdish fighter was killed. For, while the main military campaign against Daesh is winding down, coalition forces are still carrying out operations against the last remaining pockets of Daesh resistance, which are now mainly confined to remote areas of Syria not controlled by the Al Assad regime.

There is therefore much that still needs to be done if we are to ensure that Daesh is not able to regroup, and the Kurdish groups clearly have a vital role in tackling the last remnants of Daesh's 'Caliphate'. Whether the Kurds will be minded to maintain their support for the coalition cause is a moot point following US President Donald Trump's surprise announcement over the Christmas break that he intends to withdraw the 2,000 American troops based in Syria. Trump has reached the conclusion that Syria is "lost" so far as Washington is concerned, and that Russia and Iran have emerged as the dominant foreign powers in post-conflict Syria. This is certainly true — neither America nor Britain are involved in the negotiations over Syria's future.

But the prospect of American forces being withdrawn before the fighting is over,

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and before the negotiations over Syria's future are concluded, has been received with dismay by the Kurds, who fear that they are about to be abandoned to their fate by their erstwhile Western allies. It would not be the first time the Kurds have found themselves in such a predicament. Kurdish hopes of creating an independent homeland, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War, were thwarted after they failed to secure effective western support.

Now many Kurds fear that history is about to repeat itself as, deprived of the protection that the presence of American troops in the region affords, they will find themselves at the mercy of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who is fiercely opposed to any notion of Kurdish independence. Erdogan certainly pulled no punches when he addressed the issue at a recent session of the Turkish parliament, where he warned that he would "not make concessions" to the Kurds, and that preparations for an offensive against Kurdish groups based in northern Syria were nearly complete.

The Turkish leader was responding to remarks made by John Bolton, the US National Security Adviser, who was in Ankara to discuss the arrangements for the US withdrawal, and wants assurances that the Kurds will not be subjected to Turkish aggression. This is a big ask for Ankara, which regards the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the group that has overseen the operations conducted by Kurdish opposition fighters, as an offshoot of the PKK, the Syrian-based Kurdish group that has carried out numerous attacks against Turkey...

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[Israeli Intelligence: Tehran's Influence in the Region - a Growing Threat: Jerusalem Post, Dec. 31, 2018](#)—Iran could use its growing clout in Iraq to turn the Arab country into a springboard for attacks against Israel, the top Israeli intelligence official said on Monday.

[Trump's Rubicon Moment in Iraq: Praising America's 'Warriors,' Ending Wars: Seth](#)

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~~J. Frantzman, *Jerusalem Post*, Dec. 27, 2018~~—“We like to win; we are going to win,” US President Donald Trump told the troops at Al-Asad airbase in central Iraq.

[Trump Makes First Trip to Iraq as President](#): Rebecca Morin & Wesley Morgan, *Politico*, Dec. 26, 2018—President Donald Trump visited U.S. troops in Iraq for the first time during his presidency, the White House said Wednesday, after he came under criticism for not going earlier and during a tumultuous period for his national security team.

[Life Returning Slowly to Christian Homeland in Iraq](#): Kenneth R. Timmerman, *Gatestone Institute*, Nov. 1, 2018— Christians are gradually returning to their historic homeland in northern Iraq, after three years of ISIS occupation.