



ADF INTERNATIONAL

The Role of Religious Freedom in Light of Daesh

By Michael Farris

Speech by Michael P. Farris, President, CEO and General Counsel for Alliance Defending Freedom at the UN event Peace, Reconciliation and Justice: The Future of Religious Minorities Victimized by Daesh/ISIS, November 2017

So let me begin by offering my sincere thanks to the Holy See and the UN NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief for inviting me to speak today. This issue, the future of religious and ethnic minorities victimized by Daesh, is of critical importance to me personally and to my organization. So it is a privilege for me to be able to be here today with people of like mind to think through the role of the international community in bringing about peace, reconciliation, and justice in light of the recent and ongoing atrocities committed by Daesh in Syria and Iraq.

After so many years of bad news related to Daesh, it is welcome to finally have good news. Daesh seems to be crumbling, and as we have heard from the Permanent Representative of Iraq and the Deputy Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom, international mechanisms are finally in motion to collect and preserve evidence of these atrocities and ultimately hold the perpetrators to account. But, although it may not seem like it, we are now at a particularly dangerous moment.

There is a danger that we would feel the temptation to fly the victory banner too early, to think that the mission is soon to be accomplished. Nothing could be further from the truth. The incredibly important justice and humanitarian work that is now underway—work that our organization believes in and is firmly committed to continuing to participate in—this incredibly important work is only the first step in a much broader project. That project is the one of securing the protection of human rights, and particularly the freedom of religion for all people everywhere.

I know that this idea is not new to you. I know that you're all aware that the United Nations was founded partially in response to terrible crimes committed against religious minorities. And you all know that the freedom of religion therefore has been woven into the fabric of international law at the most fundamental level. The Universal Declaration of Human rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and so many other foundational documents of both international law generally and the United Nations specifically affirm that the equal and inalienable right to religious freedom is one of the foundations of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.

And it is precisely because we are all so familiar with the centrality of religious freedom to international law that we should all be so ready to recognize the events in Iraq and Syria as skirmishes in an older and broader struggle, the struggle for humans to be able to exercise that equal and inalienable right to religious freedom that we all possess and in so doing to make possible freedom, justice, and peace in the world. What Daesh has made abundantly obvious is that this struggle is far from over.

What has been happening in Syria and Iraq is the extreme instance that proves the deep need humans have for the freedom of religion. Because of their religious convictions—convictions grown out of history, community, intellectual exploration, and many other things—Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities in Syria and Iraq have been targeted, abused, robbed, displaced, raped, murdered, massacred. It is particularly troubling for such acts to be carried out on the basis of people's religious beliefs. It calls to mind all of the martyrs who have bravely gone to their deaths rather than deny their faiths, who have courageously refused, despite the threat of death, to betray God, their communities, and their own consciences by publicly lying about their beliefs.

No one should face death for peacefully living their lives in accordance with their best understanding of what is divine, holy, good, and just. But, then also, no one should face any penalties whatsoever, legal or otherwise, for living their lives in accordance with their best understanding of what is divine, holy, good, and just. The greatest possible crime against religious freedom is the very crime we have witness Daesh carry out against religious minorities in the Middle East. Genocide—the act of eradicating, in whole or in part, a group of people on the basis of its religion, nationality, ethnicity, or race—is unspeakably evil. But all lesser crimes against religious freedom are evil as well. No one should, on the basis of religion, be denied the opportunity to speak publicly about her beliefs, gather publicly with people of like mind, form legally recognized organizations and groups, own property, run businesses, stand for elected office, or engage in any of the other innocent activities regularly permitted to citizens.

When thinking through the role of religious freedom in light of Daesh, we need to see clearly the connection between the most extreme and the least extreme violations of the freedom of religion. And we need to prevent even the least extreme violations, not only because they are wrong in themselves but also because lesser crimes too often open the gateway to greater crimes. If people are prevented from owning businesses due to their religious beliefs, it may soon seem reasonable and become easier to target them in other ways. And as it becomes more and more accepted to impose legal or financial disadvantages on the basis of religion, it can easily come to seem more acceptable to inflict real physical harm on the basis of religion.

So, as we think through the future of religious and ethnic minorities victimized by Daesh, we need to get these next steps right. Daesh must be held to account. ADF International is doing everything we can to support the Mechanism for Syria and the up-and-coming Investigate Team for Iraq, and we invite all of you to join us in ensuring that these procedures are successful. It would be better to prevent crimes. But when crimes cannot be prevented, they must be punished, or the system of law that the crimes violate is shown to be meaningless. The laws that protect freedom of religion are not meaningless, and now is the time to prove it.

And, in addition to justice, the victims of Daesh need our assistance. International law, and the whole community of nations that affirm it, were unable to protect them from the atrocities they recently underwent. But there is much that we can do to help people to get back on their feet through aid and resettlement efforts. And I want to point out that some of the organizations here today—the Knights of Columbus, Aid to the Church in Need, and others, are making a remarkable difference in this regard.

Finally, these terrible events ought to spur us to repairing and strengthening international and domestic religious freedom campaigns. As part of our efforts to spread awareness about the tragedies in Syria and Iraq and to galvanize political will toward a response, ADF International published a book about what happened and what might be done moving forward. The title of that book is *Never Again*. If these tragedies never happen again, it will only be because the entire international community saw just how much more was to be done to ensure freedom of religion and joined together to do it.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to joining with you in the work ahead.