



Trump backtracks on protecting persecuted Middle East Christians

James Reinl

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The Trump administration has dropped plans to help persecuted Christians from the Middle East gain refugee status in the United States and will instead "boost security" in conflict zones and former conflict zones so they can stay in their home countries, an official told *The New Arab*.

Sam Brownback, the US State Department's global ambassador for religious freedom, said the US had spent "hundreds of millions of dollars" on stabilising the turbulent region to halt the departure of Chaldeans, Yazidis, Assyrians and other ill-treated minorities.

"In the past we've seen this just huge exodus of - particularly Christians - from the Middle East, and in the past it's always been, okay, let's just grant people asylum status in the West, whether it's Europe, Canada, the United States, Australia," Brownback told TNA.

"Those are still being granted, but what's happening this time is that the administration has leaned in and said we want to be able to allow these historic communities to be able to stay in the region and be able to have a safe, free life."

Brownback, a former Republican governor of Kansas, said he visited northern Iraq in July. There, he said, US and European aid projects had helped decimated Christian towns and villages grow back to about half their former size.

"It was about of half of some of the minority faith communities that had moved back to their home area. And the churches were being rebuilt and the homes were being rebuilt... so these historic, ancient communities could stay there," he said.

In the 1990s, Iraq was home to as many as 1.4 million Christians, two-thirds of whom were Chaldean Catholics, in communion with Rome. Fewer than 250,000 remain today, according to estimates in the US government's annual report on religious freedom.

They suffered badly after the 2003 US-led invasion sent Iraq spiralling into inter-factional chaos, and were targeted there and across the border in Syria's on-going civil war.

During the 2016 US election, President Donald Trump, then a candidate, said that despite the persecution it was "almost impossible" for Middle Eastern Christians get official status in the US. "It's all going to change," he said.

Since taking office, Vice-President Mike Pence, who rallies support among Trump's evangelical Christian fan base, has warned that the survival of Christian communities in the Middle East was at risk and that the US would help.

"The reality is, across the wider world, the Christian faith is under siege," Pence told a 2017 conference dedicated to persecuted Christians. "And nowhere is this onslaught against our faith more evident than in the very ancient land where Christianity was born."

Despite these promises, the numbers do not bear Trump and Pence out. A study this month by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, found that Christians have been caught up in the wider ban on travel from the Middle East's Muslim-majority countries.

Overall, the number of Christian refugees to the US has fallen 64 percent, compared with the final months of the Obama administration. In particular, the number of Syrian Christian refugees has dropped by 94 percent, while those from Iraq have fallen by 99 percent.

Even Christians from the Middle East who have lived and worked in the US for years have been caught in the administration's wider crackdown on immigration, with dozens of Iraqi Christians now in immigration centres at risk of deportation.

In May 2017, US authorities began arresting hundreds of Chaldean Christian and other Iraqi immigrants in Michigan and elsewhere, saying they had broken immigration laws. They were threatened with deportation.

The contrast between the administration's rhetoric and its actions has disappointed some evangelicals who turned out for Trump in 2016, and prompted accusations of hypocrisy from Christian activists, rights groups and some lawmakers.

"President Trump promised to help the Christian refugees, but actions speak louder than words. Thus far, the numbers aren't there," said Mark Arabo, an advocate for persecuted Iraqi Christians at the Minority Humanitarian Foundation.

"He promised us safety, he promised us a home, and what do we have to show for it? Nothing. But he could change that. The money they're sending is not reaching the people who need it the most, and we're still getting calls from Chaldeans who are desperate to come to the US."