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Recent attacks and abductions by ISIS/Da'esh in the Middle East, notably of Assyrians

European Parliament resolution of 12 March 2015 on recent attacks and abductions by ISIS/Da'esh in the Middle East, notably of Assyrians (2015/2599(RSP))

(2016/C 316/13)

The European Parliament,

— having regard to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948,

— having regard to Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) of 1950,

— having regard to Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) of 1966,

— having regard to the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion and Belief of 1981,

— having regard to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities of 1992,

— having regard to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance,

— having regard to its previous resolutions on Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt, in particular that of 10 October 2013 on recent cases of violence and persecution against Christians, notably in Maaloula (Syria) and Peshawar (Pakistan) and the case of Pastor Saeed Abedini (Iran) ([1]), that of 18 September 2014 on the situation in Iraq and Syria, and the IS offensive, including the persecution of minorities ([2]), and that of 12 February 2015 on the humanitarian crisis in Iraq and Syria, in particular in the IS context ([3]),

— having regard to the EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief,

— having regard to the statements by the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (VP/HR) on violence and persecution against Christians and other communities in the Middle East, in particular that of 16 February 2015 on the beheading of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya,

— having regard to the Joint Communication from the Commission and the VP/HR to the European Parliament and the Council on elements for an EU regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the Da'esh threat,

— having regard to the statement by the UN Security Council of 25 February 2015 condemning the abduction of more than 100 Assyrians by ISIL,

— having regard to the UN Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic entitled 'Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria', of 14 November 2014,

— having regard to the annual reports and interim reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief,

— having regard to Rules 135(5) and 123(4) of its Rules of Procedure,

([1]) Texts adopted, P7_TA(2013)0422.
([2]) Texts adopted, P8_TA(2014)0027.
([3]) Texts adopted, P8_TA(2015)0040.

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A. whereas the promotion of democracy and respect for human rights and civil liberties are fundamental principles and aims of the European Union and constitute common ground for its relations with third countries;

B. whereas, according to international human rights law and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in particular, everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; whereas this right includes freedom to change one's religion or belief, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching,; whereas according to the UN Human Rights Committee, the freedom of religion or belief protects all beliefs, including theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs;

C. whereas the European Union has repeatedly expressed its commitment to freedom of thought, freedom of conscience and freedom of religion or belief and has stressed that governments have a duty to guarantee these freedoms all over the world;

D. whereas the United Nations and other international organisations have reported widespread serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law committed by ISIS/Da'esh and associated groups in Syria and Iraq, in particular against minority ethnic and religious groups, including through targeted killings, forced conversions, abductions, selling of women, slavery of women and children, recruitment of children for suicide bombings, sexual and physical abuse and torture; whereas there are serious concerns for the welfare of those still trapped in areas controlled by ISIS/Da'esh forces, as almost no international humanitarian assistance reaches those areas;

E. whereas ISIS/Da'esh has embarked upon a campaign to eradicate all traces of religious and faith communities other than those representing its own interpretation of Islam, by killing or expelling its adherents and destroying their holy places, historical sites and artefacts, including unique and irreplaceable heritage recognised by UNESCO as World Heritage and described as 'cultural cleansing' by this organisation;

F. whereas in the areas under its control, ISIS/Da'esh is extracting an unacceptable and irreparable price from millenarian civilisations; whereas, notably in Iraq and Syria, but also in other parts of the wider Middle East, the situation facing Christian communities is such as to endanger their very existence, and if they were to disappear, this would entail the loss of a significant part of the religious heritage of the countries concerned;

G. whereas ISIS/Da'esh targets Christians, Yezidis, Turkmen, Shi'ites, Shabak, Sabeans, Kaka'e and Sunnis who do not agree with their interpretation of Islam, and other ethnic and religious minorities, but whereas some of these communities were already targeted by extremists well before the advance of ISIS/Da'esh; whereas Christians in particular have been deliberately targeted by various extremist or jihadist groups for many years, forcing more than 70 % of Iraqi Christians and more than 700 000 Syrian Christians to flee their countries;

H. whereas in Iraq the 250 000 Chaldeans/Assyrians/Syriacs comprise a distinct ethno-religious group and it is estimated that up to 40 000 Assyrians lived in Syria before the country's civil war broke out in 2011;

I. whereas on 15 February 2015 ISIS/Da'esh released a video showing the beheading of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya; whereas the Copts, who were migrant workers from an impoverished part of Egypt, had been kidnapped in Sirte, Libya;

J. whereas on 23 February 2015 an estimated 220 Assyrians were abducted by ISIS/Da'esh near Tell Tamer on the southern Khabur River bank in north-east Syria; whereas during the same campaign the extremists also destroyed properties and holy places of the Christians; whereas dozens of Assyrians were killed during the IS assault; whereas IS reportedly issued a declaration in February 2015 requesting Assyrian villages in the Syrian Hasaka Province to pay the jizya, a tax on non-Muslims dating to early Islamic rule and abolished in 1856 across the Ottoman empire, to convert to Islam or else be killed; whereas major ISIS/Da'esh attacks have been reported on Assyrian Christian towns in the Khabur River area since 9 March 2015;

K. whereas since 1 March 2015 ISIS/Da'esh has released several dozen Assyrians, mostly infants and elderly people, following negotiations with tribal leaders, but most Assyrians are still held captive and the terrorists have threatened to kill them if the coalition bombings do not stop;

L. whereas as part of a deliberate policy of cultural and religious cleansing, IS has reportedly destroyed more than 100 churches in Iraq, and at least 6 churches in Syria, as well as a number of Shia mosques in Iraq; whereas in February 2015, IS fighters deliberately publicised their destruction of statues and other artefacts in the Mosul Museum dating back to the ancient Assyrian and Akkadian empires; whereas IS subsequently bulldozed the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud and, most recently, it reportedly destroyed the UNESCO World Heritage site of Hatra; whereas the Syrian regime has reportedly shelled churches in opposition neighbourhoods, for example in Homs in 2012 and Idlib in 2013;

M. whereas ISIS/Da'esh continues to persecute, maim and murder, sometimes in extremely cruel and unimaginable ways, members of ethnic and religious minorities, journalists, prisoners of war, activists and others; whereas war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian and human rights law continue to be perpetrated on a daily basis and on a massive scale by other conflict parties as well, including notably by the Assad regime;

N. whereas one of the roots of the ISIS/Da'esh violence is Salafism, notably the extreme Wahhabi interpretation of Islam;

1. Is shocked and saddened at the brutal actions by ISIS/Da'esh extremists against the Assyrians in Syria and the Copts in Libya, and condemns them in the strongest terms; expresses its solidarity with the families of the victims and with the Assyrian Christian community in Syria and Coptic Christian community in Egypt, as well as all other groups and individuals affected by ISIS/Da'esh violence;

2. Strongly condemns ISIS/Da'esh and its egregious human rights abuses that amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes according to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and which could be called genocide; is extremely concerned at this terrorist group's deliberate targeting of Christians, Yezidis, Turkmen, Shi'ites, Shabak, Sabeans, Kaka'e and Sunnis who do not agree with their interpretation of Islam, as part of its attempts to exterminate any religious minorities from the areas under its control; underlines that there must be no impunity for the perpetrators of these acts and that those responsible should be referred to the ICC; recalls, in this context, the unresolved kidnapping of Bishops Yohanna Ibrahim and Paul Yazigi by armed rebels in Aleppo Province, Syria, on 22 April 2013;

3. Condemns, furthermore, the attempts by ISIS/Da'esh to export their extremist totalitarian ideology and violence to other countries in the region and beyond;

4. Supports the international efforts against ISIS/Da'esh, including the military actions of the international coalition, coordinated by the United States, and encourages the EU Member States who have not already done so to consider ways of contributing to these efforts, including tracing and interdicting ISIS secret funds held overseas;

5. Calls upon the international coalition to do more to prevent abductions of minorities, such as the abduction of hundreds of Assyrian Christians in northern Syria; underlines the importance of ensuring a safe haven for the Chaldeans/Assyrians/Syriacs and others at risk in the Nineveh Plains, Iraq, an area where many ethnic and religious minorities have historically had a strong presence and lived peacefully alongside each other;

6. Urges the EU and its Member States to take a proactive and preventive approach towards the threat of ISIS/Da'esh expansion into countries and regions beyond Iraq and Syria; in this light, is extremely concerned about the situation in Libya, not least because of its geographical proximity to the EU as well as to conflict areas in Africa;

7. Urges the EU and its Member States, as well as NATO partners, to address the issue of certain countries' ambivalent roles in the conflict, in particular where they contributed, or still contribute, actively or passively, to the rise of ISIS/Da'esh and other extremist groups; is very concerned, in this context, about the financing of the dissemination of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam by public and private entities of countries from the Gulf region and calls upon these countries to stop this financing; furthermore, urges these countries to stop the financing of terrorist organisations from within their territories; calls upon Turkey to play a positive role in the fight against ISIS/Da'esh and without delay allow Christian minorities and other persecuted people fleeing from Syria to cross the border into Turkey and seek safety;

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8. Encourages the cooperation with newly emerging regional and local forces, such as the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, Kurdish groups elsewhere, such as the role of YPG in the liberation of Kobane, and the Syriac Military Council, as well as local self-governing entities in the region which have shown more commitment to human rights and democracy than their countries' rulers; salutes, in particular, the courage of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces who have done so much to protect endangered minorities;

9. Is concerned about reports of Christian minorities not having access to refugee camps in the region because they would be too dangerous for them; requests that the EU make sure its development assistance targets all minority groups displaced by the conflict; encourages the EU to use the experience and well-established networks of local and regional churches, as well as international relief organisations of churches, to provide financial and other assistance, in order to ensure that all minority groups can benefit from the protection and support of European aid;

10. Considers it imperative that the Council and the European External Action Service (EEAS) start working with international and regional partners on a post-ISIS/Da'esh scenario, taking into account the urgent need for cultural and religious dialogue and reconciliation;

11. Denounces the destruction of cultural sites and artefacts by ISIS/Da'esh in Syria and Iraq, which constitutes an attack against the cultural heritage of all inhabitants of these countries and of humanity at large;

12. Urges the EU and its Member States to cooperate with international and local partners to safeguard as much Assyrian and other cultural and religious heritage as possible from the territories occupied by ISIS/Da'esh; furthermore, urges the Council to take action against the illicit trade in ancient artefacts coming from these territories;

13. Confirms and supports the inalienable right of all religious and ethnic minorities living in Iraq and Syria to continue to live in their historical and traditional homelands in dignity, equality and safety, and to practice their religion freely; in this light, urges all UN member states to clearly speak out against the violence and in particular in favour of the rights of minorities; believes that in order to stem the suffering and the mass exodus of Christians and other indigenous populations of the region, a clear and unequivocal statement by regional political and religious leaders, in support of their continued presence and full and equal rights as citizens of their countries, is necessary;

14. Rejects without reservation and considers illegitimate the announcement by ISIS/Da'esh leadership that it has established a caliphate in the areas it now controls; emphasises that the creation and expansion of the 'Islamic caliphate', and the activities of other extremist groups in the Middle East, is a direct threat to the security of the region, as well as European countries;

15. Confirms its commitment to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief as a fundamental human right guaranteed by international legal instruments to which most countries in the world have committed and which are recognised as holding universal value;

16. Supports all initiatives, including in the EU, aimed at promoting dialogue and mutual respect between communities; calls on all religious authorities to promote tolerance and to take initiatives against hatred and violent and extremist radicalisation;

17. Urges the EU to further explore counter-terrorism policies, within the human rights framework, other than those already in place, and to continue to work with Member States to enhance policies that counter radicalisation on EU soil, the spreading of hate speech and incitement to violence online; urges EU Member States, furthermore, to work together with the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly to stop the spread of extremist and jihadist ideology worldwide;

18. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the governments and parliaments of the Member States and the Syrian National Coalition, the Government and Parliament of Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, the President of the Arab Republic of Egypt, the Council of Deputies in Tobruk, Libya, and the Libyan Government, the League of Arab States, the UN Secretary-General and the UN Human Rights Council.