

Remarks by the Vice President at In Defense of Christians Solidarity Dinner

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Remarks

Foreign Policy

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THE VICE PRESIDENT: Thank you, Carl. Thank you for your eloquent words. Thank you for that overly generous introduction. To Patriarch Rai, to Patriarch Yazigi (ph), to Archbishop Oshagan, Archbishop Kawak, Metropolitan Joseph, to Mother Olga, all the faith leaders from across the Middle East who are here with us today, to distinguished members of Congress, to all of our honored guests, it is deeply humbling for me to join you here tonight at the Fourth Annual National Advocacy Summit and Solidarity Dinner for an organization that is making a difference in the life of believers all across the world — In Defense of Christians. Thank you for the honor of joining you today, and thank you for all that you do. (Applause.)

And I bring greetings from my friend of mine and a friend to all who are persecuted for their faith around the globe, the 45th President of the United States of America, President Donald Trump. (Applause.)

The President asked me to be here tonight because we both believe, along with all of you, that “American leadership” is crucial to “securing the future of Christians in the Middle East” and to protecting all who are persecuted across the wider world.

And under the leadership of President Donald Trump, I can assure you: The United States of America will always stand with those who suffer for their faith, and we will always support them in the hour of their need. (Applause.)

Let me begin this evening by recognizing everyone gathered here for your compassion, for your commitment to those who have refused to be conformed to this world, as the Old Book says, willing to be mistreated outside the city gates for their faith.

Andrew Doran and all the members of In Defense of Christians, thank you. Thank you for your leadership in this noble cause. (Applause.) The Bible tells us that we’ll know followers of Christ by their fruits. Since the founding only three years ago, your work and

your testimony has been evident for all to see.

And to Carl Anderson and the Knights of Columbus, thank you for your extraordinary work caring for the persecuted around the world. (Applause.)

And to Mother Olga, thank you for raising your voice on behalf of the victims of persecution in your homeland and across the Middle East. We are all inspired by your faith. (Applause.)

And let me also thank two leaders of Congress in particular who are with us here tonight, two men that I had the opportunity to serve with when I was a member of the House of Representatives. They are tireless defenders of believers across the Middle East and the wider world, my friend Congressman Jeff Fortenberry and the recipient of tonight's Cedars of God award, my friend Congressman Chris Smith. (Applause.)

And finally, allow me to thank all the faith leaders who traveled from near and far to be with us tonight — leaders of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Antiochian Orthodox Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Melkite Catholic Church, the Maronite Catholic Church, and so many other faith traditions from across the Middle East. I had the opportunity to meet with many of these leaders at the White House not long ago. And I know I speak on behalf of everyone here when we look at these great examples of courage and faith, your witness in an inspiration to us all, and it's an honor to share this evening with you. (Applause.)

Truthfully, we are here because of you.

The Bible tells us that: "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted," and the flocks you shepherd are among the most persecuted in all of the world. It's largely what brings us here tonight.

Nearly 2,000 years ago, the disciples of Jesus left their home country. They left their land, radiating outward from Israel in every direction, bringing with them the Good News that is proclaimed to this day. But sadly today, Christianity is under unprecedented assault in those ancient lands where it first grew.

In the mountains of Syria, the valleys of Lebanon, on the plains of Nineveh, the plateaus of Armenia, on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates, the delta of the Nile, the fathers and mothers of our faith planted seeds of belief. They've blossomed and borne fruit ever since. But now that garden of faith, generations in the making, is under threat. It's under threat of persecution and mistreatment. Many of the Christian communities that first embraced the message of Christ are today the targets of unspeakable acts of violence and atrocity.

In Egypt, we see the bombing of churches during Palm Sunday celebrations — a day of hope transformed into a day of horror.

In Iraq, we see monasteries demolished, priests and monks beheaded, the two-millennia-old Christian tradition in Mosul clinging for survival.

In Syria, we see ancient communities burned to the ground, believers tortured for confessing Christ, and women and children sold into slavery.

Let me assure you tonight, President Trump and I see these crimes for what they are — vile acts of persecution animated by hatred for Christians and the Gospel of Christ. And so too does this President know who and what has perpetrated these crimes, and he calls them by name — radical Islamic terrorists. (Applause.)

The practitioners of terror seek to stamp out all religions that are not their own, and believers of many backgrounds have suffered grievously at their hands — Yazidis, Druze, and even their fellow Muslims.

Yet these barbarians harbor a special hatred for the followers of Christ. And under the unwavering attacks, Christianity now faces an exodus in the Middle East unrivaled since the days of Moses.

It's heartbreaking to think that the Christian population in Syria has been cut in half in just the past six years — plummeting from over 1.25 million to only 500,000 today.

In Iraq, the followers of Christ have fallen by 80 percent in the past decade and a half. And across the wider Middle East, we can now see a future in many areas without the Christian faith. But tonight, I came to tell you: Help is on the way. (Applause.)

President Trump and our entire administration are working tirelessly to protect these ancient communities. But to stop the flight, to end the suffering, we must first confront the enemy that's driving believers away. That's why under President Donald Trump, we are taking the fight to terrorists on our terms, on their soil. (Applause.)

The truth is radical Islamic terrorism is a hydra with many heads, but no matter what name they go by, or where they try to hide, our administration is fully resolved to destroy them root and branch.

And nowhere is our resolve more evident than in the fight against the embodiment of evil in our time: ISIS.

That brutal band of savages shows a viciousness unseen in the Middle East since the Middle Ages, attacking any and all who reject its apocalyptic mania — like a young woman named Kahlia. Kahlia is a follower of Christ in her mid-50s, and the Knights of Columbus have told her story to the world. She was taken hostage in her homeland of Iraq. And during her captivity, the terrorists of ISIS demanded that she convert. They held a gun to her head. They held a sword to her neck, but steeled by her faith, she refused. And with that faith, she fought back.

She was beaten for her fearlessness, threatened with death on a daily basis, but as she told her captors, Jesus had died for her, so she was willing to die for Him.

Kahlia's faith is an inspiration. It carried her through this terrible ordeal. She still lives, but tens of thousands of fellow believers and those from so many other faith traditions have lost their lives at the hands of ISIS.

Well, under the leadership of President Donald Trump be assured this administration calls these vicious actions by ISIS what they truly are — they are genocide and they are crimes against humanity. And we will call them what they are. (Applause.)

As a candidate, our President pledged to “crush and destroy ISIS.” And today, thanks to the courage of American Armed Forces and the resolve of our Commander-in-Chief, I'm pleased to report that ISIS is on the run.

Three years ago, those barbarians celebrated in the streets of their self-declared capital in Raqqa. They proclaimed the start of a thousand-year caliphate as they raised their black flags across the region, but those black flags no longer fly in Raqqa. (Applause.)

Just last week, American and allied forces liberated Raqqa, and across Syria, and Iraq, the caliphate is crumbling. And you can be assured, we will not rest, we will not relent until we hunt down and destroy ISIS at its source — so it can no longer threaten our people or anyone who calls the Middle East home. (Applause.)

But for the believers in that ancient land, we know that victory in combat is only half the battle. Just as important as driving ISIS out of existence is making sure that we provide aid and comfort to those who have suffered so much loss and grief and ensure that they can avail themselves of their right to return.

As countries and governments throughout the region begin to restore order, I promise you that the United States of America will strive to ensure that they respect the religious freedom of all of their citizens.

The right to worship according to the dictates of our conscience is at the very heart of who we are as Americans, as men and women created in the image and likeness of God. And protecting and promoting religious freedom is a foreign-policy priority of the Trump administration. (Applause.)

As evidence, President Trump has nominated a great leader and a great man of faith to be our Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, Governor Sam Brownback. (Applause.)

And this President, you can know with confidence that America condemns persecution of any faith in any place at any time, and we will stand against it with all of the might of this great nation.

In fact, President Trump has directed me to go to the Middle East in late December. And I promise you one of the messages that I will bring on the President's behalf to leaders across the region is that now is the time to bring an end to the persecution of Christians and all religious minorities. (Applause.)

And as we begin to see the tides of terror recede, I can assure you that President Trump is committed to help persecuted peoples reclaim their lands, return to their homes, rebuild their lives, and replant the roots in their ancient place of birth.

Many in this room have rightly observed that the Christians and persecuted peoples of the Middle East have not been getting the relief they need.

The last administration devoted well over a billion dollars in humanitarian aid to the Middle East, but routed the lion's share through programs run by the United Nations.

Yet the United Nations has too often failed to help the most vulnerable communities, especially religious minorities. The result has been that countless people continue to suffer and struggle needlessly.

Here's the sad reality: The United Nations claims that more than 160 projects are in Christian areas, but for a third of those projects, there are no Christians to help. The believers in Nineveh, Iraq, have had less than 2 percent of their housing needs addressed, and the majority of Christians and Yazidis remain in shelters.

Projects that are supposedly marked "finished" have little more than a U.N. flag hung outside an unusable building, in many cases a school.

And while faith-based groups with proven track records and deep roots in these communities are more than willing to assist, the United Nations too often denies their funding requests. My friends, those days are over. (Applause.)

Our fellow Christians and all who are persecuted in the Middle East should not have to rely on multinational institutions when America can help them directly. And tonight, it is my privilege to announce that President Trump has ordered the State Department to stop funding ineffective relief efforts at the United Nations. And from this day forward, America will provide support directly to persecuted communities through USAID.

We will no longer rely on the United Nations alone to assist persecuted Christians and minorities in the wake of genocide and the atrocities of terrorist groups. The United States will work hand-in-hand from this day forward with faith-based groups and private organizations to help those who are persecuted for their faith.

This is the moment. Now is the time. And America will support these people in their hour of need.

We stand with those who suffer for their faith because that's what Americans have always done, because the common bond of our humanity demands a strong response. And so as a nation, we pledge to support them in these trying times, and every day — every day — I know the American people offer forth a chorus of prayers for these communities from our hearts to the heart of heaven.

As I close, allow me to say with confidence that I truly believe that the people of faith in the Middle East have better days ahead of them. And I take my lessons from what I've seen in the past in my very brief occasions to visit that part of the world.

It was a little over a decade ago, back in 2004, I took my first trip to visit Iraq. I was a member of Congress at the time. I traveled with a group of my fellow congressmen right after initial combat operations had come to an end. It was a remarkable experience for me to see what American forces had brought about liberating Iraq from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein.

But the experience of meeting with community leaders and political leaders and so many others was moving to me to say the least. But I'll never forget my experience in a southern city in Iraq called al-Basrah. And I'll never forget what I saw there.

We walked along the city streets, still recovering from years of oppression and tyranny and the ravages of war. But I watched an encounter that took place as we arrived at a small building between a local Muslim Imam and a Christian bishop. And as I stood by, I saw the two of them embrace one another warmly. And the interpreter who was with me started to tell me that they were speaking about the condolences that the Imam had conveyed to the Bishop of the passing of the Bishop's mother. And it was obvious to me that there was strong connection between the two.

But this small-town boy from Southern Indiana watched with admiration at this encounter. And I turned to the person who was seeing us through from the State Department. And I said, that's wonderful to see. And I said, how long has there been a Christian church in al-Basrah?

And he smiled and said, about 1,500 years. (Laughter.)

My friends in that moment, I saw the beauty of what that part of the world has been for millennia, a place where believers of so many different backgrounds have lived together in peace and in community. And I believe it can happen again. It can be a place again where disparate faiths are flourishing, uncorrupted by the cancer of violence and fanaticism. I saw a place where everyone could, as the Old Book said, sit under their own vine and fig tree, and none could make them afraid. And I believe it will be again.

So tonight, standing before all of you, I do believe that that part of the world can — and will — be that place once more.

I say this with confidence because I look out at all of you and I see the compassion evidenced in an evening like this, the impact that you're having all over the world.

And I say it because I have faith. I have faith in the good people of America and the President that they've elected, the Congress that represents them, that together we will continue to stand with people of faith all across the Middle East and that wider world in the hour of their need.

I have faith in those courageous believers in those ancient lands that they will persevere through this crucible of persecution, that they will again find their way home with renewed hope and strength.

And finally, I have faith because I'm a believer. And I believe that He who said that when you pass through the waters, I will be with you; that He who said, I will never leave you or forsake you, never will; that He will stand with His people wherever they are in this country and all the countries that are in our hearts this night; and He'll see the faithful through these troubled times.

I truly believe that He himself will breathe new life into the community of Christ in that corner of the world where it all began, so help us God. (Applause.)

So God bless them. God bless all of you and may God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

END

7:02 P.M. EDT