



Photo by Matt Cardy/Getty Images

Just last month Vice President Mike Pence told the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians that “Protecting and promoting religious freedom is a foreign policy priority of the Trump administration.” Protecting Christians specifically, he added, was of enormous importance. “The suffering of Christians in the Middle East has stirred Americans to action, and it brings me here today.”

So it’s all the more shocking that more than 100 Chaldean Iraqi Christians were arrested in the Detroit Metro area by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents over the weekend, all of whom are now threatened with deportation — back to a country where they will be in mortal danger exactly because of who they are and how they worship.

This afternoon the Huffington Post reported the American Civil Liberties Union has filed a class-action lawsuit over the detentions and proposed deportations. “Not only is it immoral to send people to a country where they are likely to be violently persecuted, it expressly violates United States and international law and treaties,” Kary Moss, the executive director of the ACLU of Michigan told the Huffington Post. “Our immigration policy shouldn’t amount to a death sentence for anyone.”

Indeed, local area activists and aid groups insist that deportation of Christians to Iraq is tantamount to a death sentence. As news of the arrests reached the community, church leaders and lay people alike were angry and dismayed — and protestors took to the streets to demand their family members be returned.

"Chaldeans have been targeted by ISIS and subjected to genocide, as have other religious minorities," said Representative Anna Eshoo (D-CA), who is herself Chaldean Catholic of Assyrian descent, in a statement. "Their deportation represents a death sentence should they be deported to Iraq or Syria."

The community is reeling from the crackdown. "Yesterday was a very strange and painful day for our community in America," Bishop Francis Kalabat of the Chaldean Catholic Eparchy of St. Thomas the Apostle of Detroit said in a statement on Monday. "There is a lot of confusion, and anger."

For its part, ICE explained that it was basically just following orders:

As part of ICE's efforts to process the backlog of these individuals, the agency recently arrested a number of Iraqi nationals, all of whom had criminal convictions for crimes including homicide, rape, aggravated assault, kidnapping, burglary, drug trafficking, robbery, sex assault, weapons violations and other offenses. Each of these individuals received full and fair immigration proceedings, after which a federal immigration judge found them ineligible for any form of relief under U.S. law and ordered them removed.

But prior to the Trump administration, even though these Iraqi nationals were theoretically eligible for deportation, these Chaldean individuals had essentially been allowed to remain in the country with the condition that they check in regularly with immigration officials and stay out of trouble with the law. They were not seen as a priority.

"My dad is Christian and Donald Trump is sending him back to a place that is not safe whatsoever," Cynthia Barash, whose father was caught up in the sweep, told CNN. Moayad, her father, had been charged with a marijuana-related crime decades ago. Most of those arrested have lived in the United States for many years.

Moayad, and others like him, have fallen victim to a deal made between Donald Trump and the government of Iraq. Iraq was initially included in Trump's travel ban back in January. The country was subsequently removed, following negotiations that paved the way for the country to receive back Iraqi nationals who had run afoul of the law.

But most of the Iraqis in question have already served time for the crimes committed, sometimes decades ago. "If the offenses they committed have already been 'paid for' by serving an appropriate sentence," Rep. Eshoo said in her statement, "facing a death sentence via deportation is disproportionate and unjust."

Who are the Chaldeans?

Chaldeans are Catholics from Iraq who speak Aramaic, an ancient Semitic language once widely spoken in the Middle East (it's sometimes called the language of Jesus) and now only commonly used by perhaps 500,000 people around the world. The Chaldean Community Foundation estimates some 121,000 Chaldeans live in the Detroit area, the largest concentration of Chaldeans outside the Middle East. Some 200,000 more live in other parts of the United States.

While the American branch of the Chaldean community began to build in the early years of the 20th century, it truly swelled after the first Gulf War, when around 30,000 refugees from the community arrived in the US. Under Saddam Hussein, life became much more difficult for Chaldeans in Iraq.

And in recent years, what had been a difficult life turned impossible. When ISIS took over Nineveh province, and the city of Mosul specifically, in June 2014, Christians fled in ever greater numbers. Staying was literally no longer an option.

"These are Christians that will be slaughtered as they arrive in Iraq. It's inhuman, it's unfathomable, it's unbelievable and we will file a federal lawsuit asking for a stay," Mike Arabo, president of the Minority Humanitarian Foundation, which aids victims of ISIS, told CNN.

“We're not treated like people. We're treated like objects.”

"These people have been declared victims of genocide by both the Obama administration and the current administration," Nathan Kalasho, the director of an area charter school largely populated by Chaldean children, told the Detroit Free Press.

Indeed, just last May, then-Secretary of State John Kerry said as much. “In my judgment,” he said, “Daesh is responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control, including Yazidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims.”

“It's not fair,” Lily Butris, age 12, whose father, Haydar, had been caught up in the raid and was now facing possible deportation, told the Detroit Free Press. “I don't know why they want to rip families apart. This country was built on immigrants. ... We're not treated like people. We're treated like objects. That's not OK.”

"Do you know how hard it is to have your father, who means everything to you, just taken away from you, having that scared feeling you're never going to see him again?" Butris asked.

Meanwhile, protestors gathered outside an immigration detention center in downtown Detroit with no idea when, or if, they would be reunited with their family members again.

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