

# Center for the Victims of Torture

## Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.cvt.org/blog/healing-and-human-rights/courage-resilience-and-commitment-%E2%80%93-humanitarian-work-iraq>

### Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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The United States Senate will soon vote on whether to curb the Presidents power to use military force against Iran, a development arising out of the drone strike that killed Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad January 3. This is a critically important debate for myriad reasons, one of which hasnt received nearly enough attention: the impact of U.S. foreign policy decisions on humanitarian work in the region.

I was in Iraq just a few months ago, and, along with so much of the rest of the world, Ive been discouraged to watch as conditions there have deteriorated, with recent violence against protestors, political turmoil, and now warnings of armed conflict and proxy warfare. My trip was to visit partner organizations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), located in cities throughout that region. This is the location of large-scale humanitarian efforts in support of refugees and internally displaced Iraqis whove been forced to flee their homes as a result of multiple and differing conflicts. I think people dont fully understand the extent of humanitarian work that has long been underway in the region, and of the enormous success and impact its had on survivors of torture, war atrocities, kidnappings and every form of violence imaginable.

The feeling I noticed among the humanitarian community was that while the demands for care were huge, the region was then experiencing a time of relative calm. There was a feeling of hope, of optimism for a future free from violence. People appreciated the peace and the opportunity to make real progress for the people who have been so deeply affected by decades of historical persecution, conflict and atrocities. The kinds of growth and economic development I saw reflected the confidence of the people. There was new construction everywhere new buildings, new cars filling parking lots. This kind of atmosphere is only possible when there is stability and hope.

People did tell me, however, that they sometimes asked themselves: How long will it last? Still, I believe no one would have answered: Only a matter of a few weeks.

When the U.S. withdrew troops from Turkeys southern border with Syria, people knew change was coming. This set up a new dynamic. This past week, Iranian missiles were aimed at a U.S. base in Erbil, in KRI. To do their work effectively, humanitarian workers now have to factor new threats and new violence into their daily lives. My heart is heavy as I think about the new uncertainty and fear they all must face.

The humanitarian workers I met with were grappling with collective trauma from recent events affecting numerous groups of internally displaced people (IDPs). While there, I was able to see and learn about local civil society in action, working on the critical and long-standing human rights issues that have affected so many people in the region for so long. This is in an environment where massive human rights atrocities have been a near constant feature of life in recent decades: the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88); the Anfal campaign waged by Saddam Hussein to eliminate large numbers of Kurds simply because they were Kurds; the first Gulf War and the Kurdish uprising (encouraged by the United States), which then left them on their own; and the flight of hundreds of thousands to southeast Turkey and the IDP camps in northernmost Iraq; the 2<sup>nd</sup> Gulf War and its aftermath; the rise of ISIS and the decisive role of local forces in beating that back.

During my visit, I was deeply impressed to witness our partner organizations in action these are humanitarian workers, mental health and clinical professionals working with survivors profoundly impacted by these multiple traumas. I was able to see first-hand their commitment, professionalism, creativity, determination and courage. I was witness to the sacrifices they are making to ensure their past is not their future.

I was given special access to see the programming underway, including the advocacy, the human rights education, the dialogues being organized to bring together Christians, Muslims, Yazidis, Zoroastrians and others to promote understanding, tolerance and appreciation. One program, a trauma clinic for women and girls, is designed for traumatized Yazidi women and girls in Iraq and has been operating nearly four years in response to the rampant kidnappings and enslavement by ISIS. They were among those thousands abducted, sold into slavery, forced to marry and survivors of sexual violence. The life-changing care they receive helps them cope with the unimaginable violence they endured. It is hard to imagine the individual or collective pain and suffering they survived or the emotional or physical wounds they now struggle to live with.

It is an honor that CVT is a partner in their work, that we can be supportive of their efforts in ways that were meaningful to them. In many ways, the work they are doing resembles CVTs work in its domestic clinics. Clients speak of having regained hope.

It was also very interesting to learn how the field of mental health services is growing in this part of Iraq, but how much more remains to be done. CVT is participating in building this part of the health system; for example, CVT staff are contributing to building the Masters program in psychotherapy and psychotraumatology at a new department at the University of Duhok, where we met with the University Chancellor and officials who understand how that institution can be a direct and urgent service to so many right in their community.

I came away from my visit with a strong impression that these kinds of activities will help to build a society that will ensure that human rights are better protected and defended in the future. There was a sense of optimism and hope that the region was headed for a more tranquil period where people would be able to breathe again. And so, this new violence is devastating.

The world must turn its attention not only to the conflicts in this region but to the extensive, effective and desperately needed humanitarian work that is being done there by local professionals, done with skill and extreme courage. The United States in particular must consider how its foreign policy decisions will affect this critical work. The humanitarian community has made much progress in the region, and it is incumbent on us all to do what we can to support that progress and foster more.

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