

Iraqi Christians Training to Fight ISIS

When ISIS beheaded two of Matthew VanDyke's friends, journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff, he began to wonder what he could do to stop what he calls "this scourge on humanity." That's why he is in Iraq now, helping train Christians there to defend themselves against ISIS.

"I think if you believe in something, you should get out and do something about it rather than just give it a thumbs-up to the television from your sofa," he said.

Last year, he founded Sons of Liberty International (SOLI), a security firm that trains vulnerable populations to defend themselves against terrorists and insurgents. SOLI began another session of training Iraqi Christians May 11. The men are members of the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) in a primarily Christian region of Iraq where believers face extinction unless ISIS is defeated.

SOLI first began working with the NPU in December 2014 and has trained the entire battalion of more than 300 men. In addition to military training, SOLI works closely with NPU leadership, providing consultation as well as assisting with meetings between the NPU and the U.S. State Department. When the NPU begins combat operations, SOLI will provide front-line advisers to the force.

This session of training consists of instruction in leadership for NPU officers and sergeants who will be leading Iraqi Christians in the fight against ISIS. VanDyke has enlisted a former instructor at West Point to lead the training.

Unlike other security contractors, SOLI doesn't charge for its services; it operates on a nonprofit business model and is dependent on financial contributions from the public for

support. VanDyke started Sons of Liberty International, named after the Revolutionary War era Sons of Liberty, with about \$12,000 of his own money

“The Christian community in Iraq has been pushed around for a long time, and it needs to stop, and I have the right connections and experience to be able to pull something together to help them, so that’s what I’m doing,” VanDyke said.

He has a master’s degree in Security Studies from the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. As a former documentary filmmaker, he spent a lot of time in the region, travelling by motorcycle through North Africa and the Middle East from 2007-2010. Then in 2011 he fought in the Libyan Civil War on the side of the rebel forces and was wounded and captured, spending nearly six months in solitary confinement in two of Libya’s most notorious prisons, before escaping from prison and returning to combat on the front lines. His experiences in the region were the subject of the film *Point and Shoot*, winner of the Best Documentary Award at the 2014 Tribeca Film Festival.

In prison, VanDyke’s Christian faith deepened, as did his determination to help freedom fighters in the region.

“The people we are training are eager to take the fight to ISIS,” VanDyke said. “Many of their friends and relatives have left and have become refugees and will not return to their homes. And if the Christians cannot demonstrate that they’re able to secure their own lands, Christianity will be wiped out in Iraq.”

Tens of thousands of Christians fled Iraq last summer because of the threat of ISIS. After the Islamic State released a video April 19 showing the shooting and decapitation of Ethiopian Christians in Libya, two organizations that oppose religious intolerance and persecution, Open Doors USA and The

Simon Wiesenthal Center, released a joint statement, calling on the Obama administration to take steps to halt “a religious genocide of Christians” in the Middle East.

“Sons of Liberty International’s mission is to step in where the worldwide community has failed,” VanDyke said.

SOLI plans to expand to other countries, but so far it has worked only in Iraq, where the need is greatest. “The future of Christianity in Iraq is uncertain,” VanDyke said. “Supporting Sons of Liberty International is a very tangible way to make a difference.”