



## U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

### **Freedom of Religion or Belief in Syria**

*Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery*

#### **Sharon Kleinbaum, USCIRF Commissioner**

Thank you very much, Chair Maenza.

I join the Chair in welcoming you all to today's hearing.

As Chair Maenza outlined, the Assad regime has played a significant role in creating, maintaining, and escalating conditions inhospitable to freedom of religion or belief in Syria.

Syria has a rich heritage of diverse religious and ethnic groups—however, the Assad regime has trampled on and exploited that diversity for its own corrupt and violent ends. The civil war began in 2011, when a peaceful grassroots uprising calling for greater freedom triggered a ferocious crackdown by the government

with the support of its military and international allies such as Russia, Iran, and Lebanese Hezbollah. Today, the Assad regime—aided by those partnerships—has regained control of approximately 70 percent of Syria. It has done so with heinous methods such as deploying chemical weapons and targeting civilian infrastructure. Indeed, the same regime that has styled itself as a protector of religious minorities has demolished religious minorities' houses of worship during clashes with opposition groups in contested areas. Meanwhile, in the areas it controls, the administration has marginalized and vilified members of the Sunni Muslim majority in relation to Assad's own Alawi branch of Islam, redistributing Sunni religious authority to government ministries and disingenuously characterizing most Sunni Muslims as violent extremists who threaten both religious minorities and the modernism of the state. Likewise, Assad and his Ba'athist cronies continue to strip religious minorities of their autonomy—for example, formally classifying Yazidis as a sect within Islam, forcing them under the legal and religious jurisdiction of a religion to which they do not subscribe.

While Turkey has crucially hosted millions of Syrians displaced by the regime's violence, it also wields significant influence on the Istanbul-based opposition and has increasingly contributed to religious and ethnic repression in northern Syria. Its direct occupation and military operations in that area have devastated at-risk religious minority communities such as the Christian-majority town of Tel Tamer.

Its actions around Afrin have included forcibly purging the local Kurdish, Yazidi, and Syriac-Assyrian Christian populations and replacing them with Sunni Arabs displaced from other parts of Syria and refugee camps in Turkey. Further, its armed proxies—Islamist Syrian militias sometimes called Turkish-Supported Opposition groups, or TSOs—pose an additional grave threat to religious freedom. TSOs such as factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA), formerly known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), wage campaigns of religious and ethnic cleansing, terrorizing Yazidis and Kurds with shelling and targeting these communities’ women and girls for kidnapping, sex trafficking, and lethal torture. As long as Turkish-backed Syrian opposition groups ignore or trample religious freedom in the areas they hold, there is no real chance for religious minorities—or any civilian communities—to find peace and stability, much less to thrive and prosper.

In addition to a discussion of the role of non-state actors and regional powers—especially Turkey—in committing religious freedom violations in Syria, today’s hearing will explore the Assad’s regime’s numerous blows to freedom of religion or belief in areas of the country under its control as well as in contested regions in which it has attempted to crush its opponents. We will hear from expert witnesses who will document the many ways in which the Assad regime has violated, exploited, and immeasurably damaged the essential rights of the Sunni Muslim

majority, numerous religious minorities, and the very religious diversity and coexistence that once characterized Syria prior to the present conflict.

**I will now turn the floor back to Chair Maenza to introduce our witnesses.**

**Thank you.**