

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION
OR BELIEF IN SYRIA

Tuesday, May 10, 2022

10:30 a.m.

Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Nadine Maenza, Chair
Khizr Khan
Sharon Kleinbaum

C O N T E N T S

	<u>PAGE</u>
Opening Remarks	
Nadine Maenza, Chair, USCIRF	5
Sharon Kleinbaum, Commissioner, USCIRF	9
Ethan Goldrich Deputy Assistant Secretary Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs U.S. Department of State	13
Panel I:	17
Sheikh Salem al-Meslet President Syrian Opposition Coalition [invited]	
Badran Jia Kurd Deputy Co-Chair The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria [AANES]	18
Panel II	25
Thomas Pierret Senior Researcher Aix Marseille Universite CNRS IREMAM Aix-en-Provence, France	26
Max Hoffman Director National Security and International Policy Center for American Progress	33
David Phillips Director Peacebuilding and Rights Program Institute for the Study of Human Rights Columbia University	42

	4
Dastan Jasim Doctoral Researcher German Institute for Global and Area Studies	
Doctoral Student The Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg	48
Q&A	58
Adjourn	92

P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR MAENZA: Good morning and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing today on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Syria. Thank you also to our distinguished witnesses for joining us.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, or IRFA.

The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

Today's hearing will delve into Syria's continuing political conflicts and humanitarian crises through the lens of international religious freedom, in order to both better understand current

conditions and to consider how U.S. policy towards Syria can more effectively integrate religious freedom concerns.

Our panelists today will identify the civil war's effects on a range of religious and ethnic groups throughout Syria and evaluate the role of various actors inside and outside Syria in restricting--or facilitating--freedom of religion or belief.

Finally, witnesses will discuss potential opportunities for U.S. policy to support Syria's diverse religious and ethnic communities. How can religious freedom be a part of a political solution for Syria?

This past March 2022 marked the 11th consecutive year of the Syrian crisis, one of the world's longest and most destructive political conflicts. A range of actors have committed egregious violations of religious freedom or belief against a wide variety of religious and ethnic groups.

In addition to President Bashar al-Assad's

vicious repression of Sunni Muslim opposition groups and ruthless disregard for the well-being of religious minority communities his regime claims to protect, armed opposition forces and militant Islamist groups continue to target vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities in their attempts to wrest power from the regime and from one another.

The al-Qaeda offshoot Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS--the dominant governing and religious force in the northwestern region of Idlib--brutalizes minority communities, restricting the freedom of worship in Idlib's indigenous Christians and displacing them by seizing their properties and churches.

Another consistent violator of freedom of religion or belief is the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS. Although ISIS does not currently control territory, in recent months it has increased its presence in areas such as Deir al-Zor in eastern Syria, waging almost daily attacks on the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces, or the

SDF, in the northeast that have fought to make the region stable for religious minorities and other endangered populations.

USCIRF's May 2020 hearing, "Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria," explored conditions exclusively affecting freedom of religion or belief in the north and east regions of the country.

Witnesses at today's hearing will provide an update on religious freedom conditions across the country, as well as in the same area, including the uniquely religious pluralistic and tolerant environment fostered by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, or AANES.

Following several years of efforts to better reflect the religious and ethnic diversity of northeast Syria, the AANES has come to include diverse members from a variety of backgrounds, such as Kurds, Arabs, Circassians and Turkmen of Sunni Muslim and other religious identities; Yazidis; Syriac-Assyrians, Armenians, and other Christians.

The Autonomous Administration allows

religious conversion--including from Islam to Christianity--and openly promotes cross-religious civic efforts, in stark contrast to the violent intolerance of nearby Turkish-backed Islamist militias, or TSOs, in the Turkish-occupied areas.

I will now give the floor to USCIRF Commissioner Sharon Kleinbaum.

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: 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 the 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 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, 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 these religious freedom violations in Syria, today's hearing will explore the Assad 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 now turn the floor back to Chair Maenza to introduce our witnesses.

Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you, Commissioner Kleinbaum.

Our hearing today begins with special remarks from Ethan Goldrich, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs at the United States Department of State.

DAS Goldrich is responsible for Levant and Syria engagement. His remarks today will address U.S. policy for Syria.

MR. GOLDRICH: Hello, everyone. My name is Ethan Goldrich, and I am the Deputy Assistant

Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, with a responsibility for Syria and the Levant.

I would like to begin by thanking the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for allowing me the opportunity to share our views today about religious freedom in Syria.

As you know from our human rights reporting and your own, the state of human rights in Syria is abysmal, including with respect to freedom of religion or belief. We are grateful to the Commission for organizing today's hearing to review the situation.

We greatly appreciate the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's reporting and recommendations on promoting respect for freedom of religion or belief, as well as the special reports it produces on individual countries.

The administration has made it a priority to promote accountability and justice for the ongoing atrocities committed in Syria, including against members of religious and ethnic minority groups and regardless of the perpetrator.

Promoting universal respect for religious freedom is a key U.S. foreign policy priority. We continue to strongly support efforts to realize an inclusive Syrian society that includes rights for members of all religious and ethnic minority groups. Such efforts are necessary to secure a lasting and stable peace and support the political process outlined in U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254.

Unfortunately, there are reports in Syria that members of religious and ethnic minority groups have been unjustly detained, tortured, forcibly disappeared and killed by the Assad regime.

They have been subjected to abductions, killings, and other abuses and atrocities at the hands of ISIS and reportedly victimized by other non-state armed groups that have desecrated religious shrines.

Our efforts are aimed at ending abuses by all parties, preventing future ones from occurring, and promoting accountability for those responsible.

The Department of State continues to actively engage the U.N. Special Envoy for Syria, our partners and allies, members of the opposition, and Syrian civil society and international organizations to support and advance U.N. facilitated Syrian-led efforts in pursuit of a political solution to the conflict that would safeguard human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief of all citizens.

These efforts include the U.N. Constitutional Committee process, although we have been consistently disappointed by the failure of the regime to engage in a meaningful way.

We strongly believe that stability in Syria can only be achieved through a political process that represents the will of all Syrians.

I also want to make clear that the United States will not normalize relations with the Assad regime, lift sanctions on Syria, or change our position opposing reconstruction in Syria until there is irreversible progress toward a political solution.

We look forward to working with you all to continue to promote respect for human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, as well as to call for the accountability that is essential to securing a stable, just and enduring peace in Syria.

Thank you very much.

CHAIR MAENZA: And now we will hear from two panel witnesses. Panel I is comprised of members of the Syrian political bodies in opposition to the Assad regime. The Syrian Opposition Coalition is led by Sheikh Salem al-Meslet, president, who is unable to join us today.

The Autonomous Region of North and East Syria, or AANES, is the governing body in the parts of north and east Syria.

Mr. Badran Jia Kurd of the AANES recorded his testimony from Syria in a video interview with me, excerpts which will now follow.

A transcript of the full interview is available on the USCIRF website on the page for today's hearing, and we will also have the

testimonies that will follow as well.

[Pre-recorded interview follows:]

CHAIR MAENZA: We are glad to have Badran Jia Kurd, Deputy Co-Chair of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, or AANES, join us today.

As USCIRF has reported for several years now, the Autonomous Administration has fostered an environment of religious freedom and ethno-religious pluralism that is unique in both the Syrian context and across the region.

Badran, welcome.

MR. JIA KURD: [Translated from Kurdish.] Thank you for your work and your efforts in our region.

I am very happy and I appreciate you.

CHAIR MAENZA: To begin, could you describe the Autonomous Administration's vision for religious freedom and mutual respect among different religious and ethnic communities in northeast Syria?

How does this vision stand in contrast

both to the Assad's regime's use of sectarianism and to the future objectives of other segments of Syrian opposition?

MR. JIA KURD: In fact, at the beginning of the establishment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, we considered protection of religion and belief as our foundation.

In order for everyone to be free in their beliefs and ideas, the Autonomous Administration adopted many measures.

Similarly, in terms of social contract, the Autonomous Administration, with some basic provisions, emphasized the freedom of personal belief.

In addition, all ethnic, religious and cultural groups can maintain their religious beliefs through their organization and centers.

Meanwhile, the Autonomous Administration considered the origin and source of coexistence, or "common coexistence," as its basis and shaped its structure accordingly.

In this way, it provided the grounds for all sections of society, all religions and beliefs, as well as all cultures, to live in peace and harmony with each other because the north and east region of Syria is a small example of all of Syria.

In the north and east of Syria, there are followers of many religions and sects, from Muslims to Yazidis, Christians, Alawites, Chechens, and many distinct religious, cultural, and ethnic groups.

With its mindset, thoughts, and beliefs, the Autonomous Administration could become a system for these religions and groups to live all together peacefully.

The Autonomous Administration has never made a distinction among individuals because of a person's religion, because of his/her beliefs, whether he/she is a Muslim, a Christian, or a Yazidi, and it has never said there should be a difference between this or that.

It made no distinction among them. Whether they are small or large, these groups must

maintain their identity, and they must maintain their characteristics.

Therefore, the Autonomous Administration opened its doors and declared that it is necessary for all religions and beliefs to be included in the Autonomous Administration and its affiliated organizations.

Now, without leaving a group or religion outside of the Autonomous Administration, all of them are now equally represented in all affiliated assemblies, groups and organizations without any distinction among them.

For example, there is an Office of Religious Affairs, which is headed by a Muslim, its deputy head is a Christian, and its other deputy head is a Yazidi.

Therefore, they are normally placed in all Autonomous Administration organizations. As everyone knows, since 2015 onwards, we liberated many areas from the extremist organization of ISIS: Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor.

And after the liberation, indigenous civil

councils were formed in these areas.

Therefore, in these areas, the grounds were provided for each person to be able to maintain his/her own beliefs and ideas.

There was an opportunity for citizens escaping from the ISIS, like the Christians, Yazidis, Chechens, Kurds, et cetera, who had escaped from the ISIS.

After the liberation, many people returned and pursued their beliefs in their main areas, and an important opportunity was created for these areas.

Desirable conditions were created for popular and civil organizations, women's communities, and legal communities to do their jobs.

A mentality of religious tolerance and freedom of religion or belief developed appropriately in these areas.

It is true that there was an important comeback in the liberated areas, but it did not end there.

That is, our activities are still going on in all areas of northern and eastern Syria, in areas under the Autonomous Administration, so that we can deepen and develop further the basic materials and criteria that we believe in for the freedom of religion or belief, and deepen and develop these values step by step within our community.

In fact, because extremist groups, such as ISIS, and even Islamist groups that are now known as the Syrian Opposition, and also the Syrian regime, developed policies in Syrian society and paved the way for very deep religious and ethnic differences.

For many years, it has become a kind of disease that very badly affects the mentality of our society and creates many problems in society.

CHAIR MAENZA: We've already talked a little bit about U.S. foreign policy, but how does that--U.S. foreign policy--toward Syria generally, and the northeast specifically, impact the lives of religious and ethnic minorities under the

Autonomous Administration and its ability to carry out its stated commitment to religious freedom?

MR. JIA KURD: In fact, U.S. policy is influential in the region. Therefore, if the United States has a clear and organized plan, we believe that it will bring great support to the people of the region.

On the other hand, the war happened against terrorism in our region in which the extremist groups were defeated.

This was with the support of the United States and our allies in the international coalition. Naturally, this is something that should be appreciated.

In addition, the presence of the coalition and American forces and officials inside the region is definitely important, and there is hope for security and stability.

Therefore, we would like to state again that we hope for the continued presence of the coalition and American forces, which is important for coexistence.

Their presence inside the region is essential until a political solution is found.

Therefore, it must act within the framework of this policy of coexistence, the preservation of all cultures and religions, and we declare that it has an important impact in this regard.

We say our views, and those of the U.S. administration on this issue, that all nations, all cultures, and all religions and beliefs should coexist.

Our views are the same, and both sides support this idea and project. That's why we say, the success of this project will increase dozens of times with the support of the U.S. administration.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much, Badran, for sharing your perspective today on behalf of the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria. We really appreciate you joining us.

MR. JIA KURD: Thank you very much. Thank you.

We were very delighted to be with you

again. God willing, we will meet closely here.

CHAIR MAENZA: Now, we will convene our second panel, comprised of expert witnesses Thomas Pierret, Max Hoffman, David Phillips, and Dastan Jasim, who will address conditions affecting freedom of religion or belief in Syria and related U.S. policy.

To view the panel's biographies, please see the Zoom chat feature where we will share the link to the web page.

Our first witness is Thomas Pierret, a Senior Researcher at Aix Marseille Universite in France.

His research focuses on politics and religion in modern Syria. Welcome.

MR. PIERRET: So, ladies and gentlemen, members of the committee, thank you for you invitation.

So I was asked to address two questions today. The first one is how has the Assad regime transformed the secular and democratic revolution of 2011 into a brutal sectarian conflict?

In the first months of the 2011 uprising, the regime simultaneously implemented contradictory policies.

On the one hand, it tried to convince minorities that it was fighting for their survival in the face of Sunni revanchism.

For instance, as early as 18 April 2011, that is many months before radical Islamist factions started to play any significant role in the conflict, the Minister of Interior warned that demonstrators in the city of Homs were establishing a "Salafi emirate."

Likewise, as part of its instrumentalization of sectarian tensions, the regime helped jihadi insurgents getting started by releasing hundreds of Islamist detainees.

Yet, at the same time, the regime tried to reassure Sunnis by pretending it was only at war with an extremist Islamist fringe. What Assad was probably hoping for at the onset was that radical Islamist elements within the opposition would become visible enough to frighten minorities,

mainstream Sunnis and foreign powers while at the same time remaining too weak to pose a serious military challenge.

From this viewpoint, the cause of the sectarianization of the Syrian uprising should not be primarily looked for in the regime's intentions but rather in long-standing governance practices that have shaped the revolt as well as the incumbent responses to the latter.

Cross-sectarian networks of activists did operate in the early phase of the uprising. But they were rapidly debilitated by state repression. Non-Sunni activists, in particular, found themselves isolated due to strong disapproval of their political stance on the part of the communal authorities.

Liberal activists who were not arrested, killed, or exiled sought refuge among local Sunni communities whose initially parochial challenge to the regime gradually took a more sectarian turn, largely in response to repressive practices that were themselves overly tainted by the regime's

Alawite character.

Such practices resulted from a lack of reliable manpower. Decades of sectarian stacking had provided the regime with a cohesive Alawite dominated coercive apparatus, while making Sunni soldiers largely unreliable as a tool of domestic repression.

The shortage of reliable manpower explains why as early as in the spring of 2011 the regime resorted to plainclothes Alawite militiamen to suppress protests in the coastal Sunni majority town of al-Bayda, for example.

Overreliance on Alawite manpower also accounts for the sectarian humiliations inflicted upon arrested protesters who were frequently forced by their jailers to utter blasphemy. Such practices derived from a deeply ingrained subculture prevailing among the Alawite-dominated armed forces, which for decades, most notably since the 1979-1982 failed Islamist insurgency, had considered Sunni religious conservatives as an existential threat.

I'm now coming to the second question I was asked to address, which is how has the regime co-opted religious authority mostly from the Sunni Muslim majority of Syria?

The regime's heavy-handed management of Sunni Islam has changed considerably over the last two decades. Before that, Syrian authorities privileged an informal approach. It was not official Islamic institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Endowments, but the intelligence services that managed the religious field by granting or most often denying privileges, such as authorization, authorizations to run private Islamic institutes and charities.

By the middle of this century's first decade, however, this policy of "indirect rule" was discredited because bargains and corruption had allowed the Sunni clerics to carve out some genuine autonomy from the state, which they sometimes used to openly criticize regime policies.

By 2008, therefore, the appointment of new Minister of Religious Endowments Muhammad Abd al-

Sattar al-Sayyid--still in charge--marked a major policy shift that has shaped the regime's strategy until the present day.

The new policy could be summarized as a nationalization of Sunni Islam through the expansion of the Ministry of Endowment's authority.

This process first targeted hitherto private Islamic colleges. Secondly, in 2016, the Ministry set up the so-called "Youth Religious Team" to regiment junior clerics. Very much like the ruling Baath Party, the Youth Religious Team is a patronage structure that members join in search of political and security benefits, such as positions in mosques.

A third and last major step was the recent abolishment of the position of Grand Mufti and its replacement with a collegial body called the Scholarly Committee of Jurisprudence, which is chaired by the minister himself.

These decisions sent shockwaves among the Syrian opposition, among which it was widely interpreted as a brazen attack on the country's

Sunni religious identity. Yet, the regime's decision probably had less to do with an anti-Sunni strategy than with Minister al-Sayyid's maneuvers to achieve a long-standing objective of the Sunni religious elite.

For decades, the latter has been dissatisfied with existing institutional arrangements, which excluded them in favor of a lone Grand Mufti, who was at the same time ineffective. He hardly ever issued fatwas since the 1960s, and in the case of the last Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassun held religious views they perceived mainstream or leading religious scholars perceived as repulsive, notably quasi-secularist and pro-Shia or pro-Iranian views.

By replacing the Grand Mufti with a collegial body, the regime has rewarded those religious scholars who remained loyal throughout the conflicts by granting them formal authority to police the religious field and cleanse it not only of extremist ideas but also of any opinion contrary to traditional Sunni orthodoxy.

Thank you very much for your attention.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much for your testimony.

A reminder that all the testimony from our witnesses today will be on the USCIRF website under the Syria hearing page.

Now, we are joined by Max Hoffman, Director of the National Security and International Policy at the Center for American Progress in Washington, D.C., where he focuses on Turkey and Kurdish regions, U.S. defense policy, and migration and security concerns.

MR. HOFFMAN: Well, thank you very much and thank you to the distinguished commissioners for the opportunity to testify today on the ongoing conflict in Syria and its dire humanitarian effects.

I've been asked to provide something of an overview of the security and stability challenges, particularly the threat of non-state actors in Idlib and northwest Syria, and outline the implications for the humanitarian situation, and

maybe chart some next steps on U.S. policy.

It's a lot of ground to cover, but, first, a few contextual points are I think important before diving into some details.

The fact is that Syria is not today a top-tier U.S. strategic priority. The administration is, understandably focused on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the challenge of confronting China, COVID. It's a crowded strategic picture, and that context is important for a few reasons.

The first is that it means that there is a large emphasis placed by the U.S. on sort of keeping things on an even keel, both in the Middle East generally and in Syria specifically.

And given that reality, the U.S. has welcomed most of the de-escalation and reconciliation efforts that have taken place over the last few years with the notable exception that DAS Goldrich highlighted of complete opposition to any normalization with Assad.

The second important point that that illustrates is that it's hard to realistically

recommend that the U.S. do more in Syria, beyond maintaining its presence and stabilization efforts in the northeast and continuing to provide substantial humanitarian support.

And those realities are, I think, difficult for many of us who follow this conflict slowly and are very familiar with its human costs, but they are difficult to dispute analytically.

So the U.S. approach in Syria is premised on the reality that the conflict has settled into this uneasy stasis despite continuing violence and that no political resolution is likely in the near term.

Most of the outside powers can live with the status quo. Turkey is probably the least happy with it. Iran is probably the most likely to push the boundaries. But, you know, given that, the general acceptance, the U.S. decided some time ago that its approach would be one of general de-escalation, seeking to stabilize the current contours of the war, and ease humanitarian suffering where possible.

That's a utilitarian approach certainly, but it's aimed at doing the most good for the most people. And in the areas where the U.S. has direct influence--I know David will touch on this later--that, you know, through the SDF, the main challenges are the disruptive attacks of outside powers like Turkey and Iran and their proxies, the lingering ISIS insurgency, and the challenge of managing Arab-Kurdish tensions and intra-Kurdish rivalries.

Outside of the areas where the U.S. has a direct presence, though, it's a much more limited picture, and very much focused on humanitarian aid, particularly the U.N. cross-border mechanism from Turkey on which, you know, two-and-a-half million Syrians are almost entirely reliant.

So in the north and the northwest, beyond the dire economic and humanitarian situation, the picture is defined by, first, military pressure, continuing military pressure from the Assad regime and Russia, Turkey's military presence in these areas, and the violent and ill-disciplined proxies

and armed groups that underpin that involvement.

And this area is really divided into four regions, each with distinct conditions--Afrin; the "Euphrates Shield zone," as it's known, from Azaz to Jarabulus; and the Turkish salient from Tel Abyad to Ras al-Ayn; and of course Idlib.

And Turkey has a direct military presence in all of these areas, except Idlib, administers them directly, and has settled into a long-term presence, you know, made substantial investments, built up militias under the banner of the Syrian National Army, and set up proxy councils to deliver basic services.

This is underpinned by Ankara's sort of two main goals. One was to cripple any prospect of Kurdish political autonomy, and the second was to insulate against further displacement from Syria, and they hoped provide areas where Syrians might be resettled from Turkey.

So, you know, that, I think, is an unlikely prospect given the deep roots many Syrians have put down in Turkey, but that is certainly a

primary goal.

And those primary goals I don't think are going anywhere, and that is part of why Turkey has settled into such a long-term presence and part of why also these enclaves are so reliant on Turkey.

But the provision, you know, the humanitarian conditions, the provision of basic services in these areas is complicated by a number of security factors. We mentioned the regime. There is also, of course, a lingering Kurdish insurgency in Afrin, in particular. But the biggest concern is the SNA proxies themselves, and Ankara's desire to lighten its direct security load has led them to rely on these groups.

But the chaos that they sow is a major reason why international actors can't do more to improve the humanitarian situation in these areas, and fear of these armed groups is the main reason why Syrians are reluctant to resettle from Turkey into these areas.

You know, in Afrin, which has gotten understandably a lot of attention, human rights

abuses are widespread. There is massive displacement of Kurdish residents. Turkey has resettled IDPs, particularly families of their proxy fighters from other parts of Syria into Afrin, and that legacy really shapes the continuing violence and instability of that region.

Things are--it also makes it impossible for the U.S. and the international community to really engage wholesomely to improve lives in those areas.

You know, the Euphrates Shield zone and Tel Abyad to Ras al-Ayn are a little better. Turkey is totally dominant in these areas and relies on violent proxies to administer them and has proven itself unwilling or unable to rein them in despite well-documented human rights abuses.

And, finally, there is Idlib, which is, you know, the largest outstanding issue in Syria today. You know, primarily controlled by 50,000 Syrian rebels, dominated by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and behind the protective shield of some 10,000 Turkish troops ringing the perimeter.

Within this perimeter, some three million Syrians are living in desperate conditions. It also--Idlib, of course, holds Bab al-Hawa, the primary, the only U.N. cross-border crossing in this region, and has also provided a haven for some very radical and relative autonomy for some very radical groups.

I think that, you know, the picture moving forward is characterized by a form a mutual dependency between the HTS and Turkey. HTS needs Turkey's protection to stave off a regime attack and potential annihilation by the regime backed by Russia while Turkey needs HTS to defend this area and to administer it to avoid taking on a new and substantial direct administrative burden.

I think there's a parallel balance on the Russian and regime side where the regime likely had the desire but not the ability to prosecute a decisive campaign against Idlib and reassert sovereignty, while Russia has or perhaps had the ability but not the desire to do so, being content to play the long game of trying to sort of peel

Turkey away from the western security architecture.

So, you know, I think the current ceasefire in Idlib hardly meets the definition. There's regular violence, both at the line of control between the rebels and the regime, but also constant infighting and insecurity and abuses within Idlib as in Afrin and the other areas of Turkish proxy control.

So I'll leave it there, but there's much more to get into in the Q&A.

Thank you very much.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much for that really interesting and kind of discouraging remarks, but we really do appreciate it.

Our next witness will be David Phillips, who is the Director of Program on Peacebuilding and Rights at Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights.

He is the author of several books, including *Frontline Syria: From Revolution to Proxy War*.

Oh, you're on mute.

MR. PHILLIPS: Chair Maenza, thank you for inviting me to today's hearing.

My remarks focus on violations of religious freedom by Turkey and crimes committed by their jihadist mercenary proxies in north and east Syria, the NES.

Beginning in 2014, jihadists rampaged through Armenian, Syriac, and Christian Arab communities, killing thousands and desecrating symbols of their Christian faith. Yazidis were also targeted in Sinjar and across the NES.

ISIS launched a worldwide jihad. The ISIS magazine, Dabiq, displayed images of crucified Christians as a, quote, "message of blood written to the Nation of the Cross."

It published an image of St. Peter's Square with an ISIS flag superimposed atop its holy obelisk. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi said his fighters would "march all the way to Rome," toppling crosses and abducting Christian women.

The Armenian Christian presence in Syria dates to biblical times. Additionally, up to

100,000 survivors of the Armenian genocide settled in Syria in the 1920s, seeking sanctuary for their church and civilization.

In July 2012, Armenians in Aleppo were attacked and about 170 were slaughtered. More than 100 were taken hostage and forced to pay a ransom for their release.

Armenian churches in Aleppo were destroyed. The Karen Jeppe Armenian school was ransacked, and 1,300 students were displaced.

Kessab, an Armenian Christian town in Syria's northwest, was attacked on March 21, 2014. 670 Armenian families in Kessab were uprooted, and 15 families were taken hostage. ISIS exacted protection of Gozlekçiler. When ISIS occupied a Christian community, it offered a stark choice: forced conversion, slavery, extortion or execution.

Syriacs are the second-largest Christian community in Syria, dating back to 2500 B.C. Syriacs resided primarily in the Khabur Valley of the Jazira governorate.

ISIS seized ancient churches in Homs,

Aleppo, and Damascus, converting them to mosques, madrassas and prisons. Between 2011 and 2015, hundreds of Syriacs were executed and thousands displaced.

In 2015 and 2016, the U.S., the EU, and the British Parliament all declared that the persecution of Christians by ISIS amounted to genocide.

When ISIS invaded northern Iraq in June 2014, at least 5,000 Yazidi males were killed; thousands of Yazidi women and girls were forced into sexual slavery.

When U.S. forces pulled back from Afrin, the Yazidis were left unprotected in 23 villages and towns. 19 Yazidi shrines in Afrin were destroyed by ISIS. The Yazidi Union headquarters, the statue of the Prophet Zarathustra, the Dome of Lalish, and the Ain Dara temple were destroyed.

Yazidis were taken prisoner and tortured. They were stripped of gold jewelry and personal possessions. ISIS demanded a ransom for each Yazidi of up to \$25,000. Those who could not pay

were murdered.

The Turkish administration in northern Syria settled the families of mercenaries in Yazidi villages where residents had been forcibly displaced.

The Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army invaded in the NES in 2018 during Operation Olive Branch. They beheaded Kurdish defenders, raping and mutilating the bodies of Kurdish women, cutting off their breasts and posing for selfies with their body parts. Local youth were recruited for Turkish propaganda. They were forced to carry Turkish flags and appear in videos thanking Tayyip Erdogan. Street names were translated into Turkish and Arabic youth were forced to enroll in madrassas and women were required to cover themselves.

More than 300,000 civilians fled Afrin for Til Rifat and the Shebha regions. Another 300,000 were displaced the following year during Turkey's Operation Peace Spring.

Ahrar al-Sharqiya, a jihadist group under Turkey's control, assassinated Hevrin Khalaf,

Secretary General of the Syrian Party and ten of her colleagues by the side of the M4 Highway. One jihadi kicked Khalaf's body saying, "This is the corpse of a pig."

ISIS acted as Turkey's agent in the NES. Turkey's national intelligence agency, MIT, facilitated the flow of 40,000 foreign fighters from approximately 80 countries from Sanliurfa to Raqqa in Syria. MIT provided them with weapons, money and communications equipment.

During a speech at Harvard University in October 2014, then Vice President Biden said, "Our biggest problem is our allies," who are engaged in a proxy Sunni-Shia conflict. Turkey was the lifeline for ISIS beginning in 2014. Turkey professed its loyalty to the Global Coalition fighting ISIS, but it played a double game.

To U.S. officials, counterterrorism means fighting ISIS. Turkish officials view counterterrorism as killing Kurds and destroying the PKK.

I'd like to include some recommendations

in my remarks. In accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1988, Turkey meets the criteria for designation as a Country of Particular Concern, and it should be so designated.

As an interim measure, the U.S. could put Turkey on a "Special Watch List." The U.S. should provide Turkey with specific criteria for removal from the SWL.

Turkey should be given 12 months to adopt measures leading to its removal from the Special Watch List. If it fails to act, Turkey should be designated a Country of Particular Concern.

I had the chance this morning to address a group in Afrin. We discussed these measures. Their resilience and courage is remarkable. They take heart in the fact that your Commission is convening this discussion, and I'll be providing my testimony to them and others.

Thank you very much for having the hearing and for including me.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you for that powerful testimony.

Our next and final witness is Dastan Jasim, a doctoral researcher at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies, and a doctoral student at the Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg.

Her research focuses on the civil culture of Kurds in Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey, as well as on security developments in the Kurdish regions.

MS. JASIM: Thank you so much, Nadine. Thanks very much to the Commission for having my testimony on this very important topic.

So I was asked to provide testimony on the specific governance that the specific administration also so that we have in the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria and the effects that these administrations had on religious and different minorities in northeast Syria.

There are many different groups in this area, as the previous testimonies have pointed out, and what is really important to keep in mind and to remember before looking at this is that many of

these groups actually, Kurds, Assyrians, Arameans, Armenians, are actually descendants of people that have survived genocide under the Ottoman Empire and later under Kemalist Turkey.

So these are really people that are living memory to what this region is and what this region was and what this region should not be in the future.

While there have been attempts by the Ba'ath government previously to, you know, coopt religious minorities, as has been pointed out previously, there was also a strong political oppression and security-level oppression of Kurdish, Kurdish groups, but, nevertheless, Kurdish parties, Kurdish organizations have started to organize from the 1920s on actually, especially organizing also in the context of other Kurdish uprisings.

But it was not until the Arab Spring that these organizations could really take hold and really claim territory, specifically since we all know from 2010, 2011 on, the Assad regime was not

able to fully control the whole region, and especially the three cantons, as they were called back then. Afrin, Qamislo, and Kobani, you know, declared this kind of autonomy in 2012.

Overall, the political system that we have in the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria is a bottom-up grassroots system. It's basically called a "democratic confederalism," and it is inspired by different theories of, overall, we can say libertarian socialist thinkers, like Murray Bookchin and others that have specifically looked at the post-Soviet space and have been wondering how political and social liberalization and emancipation can happen without having state-centric systems that can quickly become authoritarian, which is especially important in that case.

This is very evident in the Syrian case, and it is showing that this is not only a question of the Kurdish question. It's not only a Kurdish problem that we have here, but it's an overall question that we have that is about how do we deal

with democratization, how do we deal with centralization or decentralization, how do we deal with different groups that do not necessarily want to be assimilated, to be part of a functioning administration? How can we actually take care of these people? How can they organize themselves?

And that is a very, very crucial question because one thing that happens with societies that have to live through decades and decades of authoritarian rule, especially under the rule of late Hafez al-Assad and then Bashar al-Assad from 2000 on is that societies in these authoritarian regimes are specifically trained to not trust each other.

They are trained to work against each other. They are trained to cheat on each other, to use each other, to oppress each other. As we know, authoritarianism is not only a political system, but it is really a psychological system.

And what has happened through this kind of bottom-up system is that we have kind of developed a space there. There's kind of a space there where

both people are organizing themselves in these so-called "communes," which are then on the higher level organized as districts and regions, and then on the other side, you have a connection between these communes.

And this is working for religious communities as well. This is something that we see with, for example, Aramean communities, with Yazidi communities, that since the Yazidi and Aramean and many other communities have already been marginalized and often discriminated against by state policies, whether it's Syria, Iraq, Turkey, many other countries, they have developed their own spaces. They have developed their own kind of systems.

And these kind of systems find a place in this type of bottom-up system, while at the same time, while at the same time it is giving them possibility that this kind of self-organization, bottom-up organization, is actually following some core democratic principles, that these organizations are somehow linked to each other,

connected to each other.

This is especially important in a civil war context, and we see this most evidently in Iraq where, you know, we have a multitude of militias that have emerged in the fight against ISIS and now we have the struggle of connecting to each other, while in the Syrian Democratic Forces, while in the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria, from the beginning on, there was the point to have this decentralized system, but to actually have a system that is connecting them.

And this is what has happened and this is what has happened very much on the ground for religious minorities as well because we have had groups like, you know, the Syriac Military Council, different Syriac, different Aramean, and Assyrian and even Armenian groups, as well, as those that were on the other side of the border in Iraq fighting against ISIS.

So what happened is that a big group of minorities that have been trained to not trust each other all of a sudden have to stick together and

fight against one common enemy, which is ISIS, and this has obviously had massive repercussions, and this has led to a situation where really a lot of mistrust could be pushed away and a lot could be done to make the situation better.

Right now, we really have a situation. This is something that is really seconded by a lot of people that even before have been, you know, quite pessimistic about the situation, is that there was really a success not only against ISIS, but there was also a success against decades of this kind of authoritarian situation, authoritarian also mindset that has grown, and many people have really grown together. Many communities have grown together.

Obviously, this is right now under attack. You know, the previous speakers have really pointed this out, and it's really important to, you know, to follow up on the fact that especially in April, a lot of the attacks that have been happening, a lot of the attacks that have been happening by the Turkish Air Force were directed towards Tel Tamr,

and Tel Tamr is hosting one of the oldest Armenian and Assyrian communities that we have in the region. It was actually one of the first regions that were liberated from ISIS.

And this is really important to keep in mind, and this has been really serious. In April 2022, for example, we have the commander of the Syrian military, Syriac military forces, Orom Maroge, who was injured along with his colleague, and we also see repeatedly that troops are killed, civilians are killed, in this kind of context, and we see that a really, really old community that has literally survived genocide in 1915 is really on the verge of not having any possibility of staying there.

Now when we come to the recommendations, of course, it's important to stay realistic, but let's also stay realistic about the comparisons that we have.

We right now have a situation where there is a war. There is a direct war on the Ukrainian population and on the other side we have Russia,

which is a nuclear power. So let's say things are not looking good there anyways, but there are red lines to draw, and I think red lines are where we are drawing them when it comes to genocide, when it comes to ethnic cleansing, for which there are multiple, multiple evidences that this is happening.

So, as much as we could say in many different conflicts that, you know, it's unrealistic or it's unsafe to do this or that, it is also really right now not an option to say nothing.

We have just recently had an announcement two days ago by Erdogan that he wants to relocate at least a million Syrian refugees, and looking at the economic situation in Syria, a lot of Syrian refugees are really, you know, the lower class. They are really people that cannot survive this economic situation.

So for many of them, being relocated in these areas, which is actively reinforcing ethnic cleansing, is actually economically viable option

for a lot of these people because this is, you know, this is economically doable for a lot of these people.

I really, really recommend if it is not really a direct push but at the end of the day to really look at the issue of acknowledgement because at the end of the day people in this region, especially minorities, the religious minorities that are already under attack, they need some sort of security.

You know, you cannot expect from a group of several, maybe hundreds of people, thousands of people, to bargain with their lives, to bargain with their communities, to build a literal democratic alternative while being under attack. For a lot of these people, at the end, migrating for the good is the next best option.

And if we are allowing that, well, that is basically facilitating ethnic cleansing, and on the other side, we have just recently heard a statement by President Joe Biden that there is a possibility to sell F-16 jets to Turkey this year. These are

things that can be not done.

These are things that you cannot do. These are things that you cannot provide for Turkey to continue this kind of stuff. So we're not going for the very utopian ideas, utopian solutions, but very specific solutions, and that would be for now to cut the arms sales and to specifically go for some kind of recognition.

If it's not in Syria right now, there are many types of recognition and even decriminalization of Kurdish movement and these affiliated groups, not only in Syria but above from Syria.

Thank you so much.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much for that testimony, a combination of encouraging and then, of course, the huge problems that we're facing and the limit of U.S. policy in there with, so far, with dealing with some of them.

So now we're going to go to a time of questions and answers with my colleagues I'm looking forward to.

And I'll go ahead and start with a two-parter. Really on USCIRF recommendations, we've made some pretty bold ones to support religious freedom in Syria, and one of them was to, for the U.S. government to do a general waiver for sanctions in the northeast.

We often make recommendations to punish with sanctions and why not reward by lifting sanctions?

We'd love to hear your comment on the potential effects of that, both on the northeast but also on the Assad regime.

And the second part would really be our other recommendation to include AANES in a political solution. Obviously, Turkey is not going to allow. I mean they're going to war with, you know, they're attacking. They're not going to allow us since they do control the opposition at this point.

Could the U.S. do a parallel process with the AANES in Geneva, something like that, in order to make it so that the one successful government in

Syria that controls one-third, that has these positive conditions, so that they could be a part of the solution?

So I'll jump to you, first, David. And you're mute.

MR. PHILLIPS: Thanks very much, Nadine.

The problem with governance in Syria was always centralization, and the fact that the NES has been a laboratory for democratic developments and human rights is noteworthy. It deserves support. As a laboratory, there are some important lessons learned about decentralized governance, about women's rights, environmental sustainability.

When we look towards a longer-term solution for Syria, the principles and lessons learned from the NES provide important instruction as to how Syria can be governed in the future.

So we should be supporting this laboratory as a haven for religious freedom, as a bastion of human rights, and then as we think a little bit about the Constitutional Committee that the U.N. has been forming, we should look at those lessons

learned and try to apply them more broadly nationwide.

I think the same thing can be said about Iraq. The problem with Iraqi governance has always been the centralization of power. So the more we defuse power to the regions in both Iraq and Syria, the more stable and peaceful those countries can be.

CHAIR MAENZA: Any of the other witnesses like to jump in on that? Go ahead, Max, and then Dastan.

MR. HOFFMAN: Sure. Well, I think that, you know, the prospect of a fundamental political settlement still remains very far out of reach, and I think that the, you know, the U.S. position has been reinforced by President Biden's clear presidential level commitment to the SDF and to the mission in north and east Syria.

And while that mission is still very carefully couched in terms of--and legitimately couched in terms of keeping the pressure on ISIS--I think that there has always been for some U.S.

officials anyway this secondary level of, you know, the calculation that if by maintaining the SDF's relative autonomy and the U.S. deterrence against the Assad regime and the Russians and, for periods anyway, Turkey and its proxies, that, you know, by maintaining leverage and control of this portion of the country, it would give bargaining power at the eventual table, you know, of an eventual political settlement.

I think that logic still holds. Of course, it's very--there are just very difficult questions around maintaining the deterrence. You know, how do you respond to Turkey's use of drones or the shelling and, you know, the skirmishing that goes on along the line of the kind of salami-slicing approach that occurs along the line of control and along the M4 in the north, or along the Euphrates in Deir ez-Zor. It's an extremely difficult thing.

Now the other challenge, of course, is that Iran, the regime, Turkey, are all trying to undermine this experiment in autonomy and are

trying to do that principally through pressure on the borders, which I just talked about, but also they're trying to peel off certain factions and groups within the Autonomous Region, and, you know, there I think there are two key pieces.

One gets back to your question, and I'm mindful of trying to answer it. One is the economic and social conditions, which are, you know, dire, and the drought and the general economic crisis that have just made them worse in the east.

And so if a sanctions waiver is an important part of improving those conditions, then I think it's something that should certainly be considered and be done.

You know, the other piece is just what the Biden administration has done last year in announcing new and sustained assistance for all of Syria, including the Autonomous Region.

The other piece, though, is really, is something the U.S. can cajole the AANES to do but can't force them to do, and that is to ensure that

alongside this religious tolerance, there is a broadening of the political base and political foundation for the AANES.

And, you know, in that vein, I think the recent last couple of months have been somewhat discouraging in terms of the attacks on KNC offices in the northeast, and that's a long-term challenge, right, because, both because this, the AANES really one stands a chance long-term if it is genuinely broad-based and inclusive politically as well as socially and religiously and ethnically.

But also because if the U.S. and the international coalition is ever able to change Turkey's policy, perhaps in the wake of an election next year, it will, as a necessary component, it will have to include the ability to demonstrate that this is not, in Turkey's eyes, that the Northeast is not a PKK statelet.

And whether or not, you know, those of us on the panel fully agree with that interpretation or not, I think that is the reality in Ankara that we just have to try to grapple with.

So, hopefully, I somewhat answered your question, but--

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much.

Dastan.

MS. JASIM: Thank you.

Well, to also add something on the point of the sanctions waiver, of course the sanctions waiver would be really helpful because Northeast Syria is really struggling economically and also Northeast Syria is hosting a multitude of not only civilians but also thousands of IDPs adding to thousands of ISIS fighters and ISIS detainees that somehow the Administration is left alone with although this has been somehow an international fight against terror.

So that is important, but the question is even if you have this waiver, how does stuff get into the country? We have the situation, as was already mentioned, we only have Bab al-Hawa allowed to be official U.N. border crossing, but then we have no waiver for Yaroubiya border crossing. You know, we repeatedly have issues because of Semalka

border crossing.

So people really quickly talk about the issue of smuggling when it comes to Kurds, but if you have international regimes that are effectively drawing borders that do not allow anything to go from the one side to the other side, then that's why you have smuggling.

And what we have seen right now is that in the last months the Iraqi government is actually building a wall between Syria and Iraq. They are specifically doing that precisely on the routes where in 2014 all of these Yazidi people that were fleeing from ISIS genocide could have been saved.

And to this day, we know from Yazidis, for example, that they often get medical treatment or they get other stuff from the other side in Syria. They just go there and, you know, have possibilities there to also engage, to also get services done, to have an economic relationship, all of these things.

And these are realities, not because people love smuggling or people love illicit stuff,

but because, you know, these are regions that have historically been deprived of this kind of possibility to have autonomous trade, to really engage and to be a part of this region.

So this is very important to keep in mind, but there should also be a legality in which how it can deal with other countries and, you know, use this kind of waiver.

The second issue is I want to second on what Max said. Of course, it's very important to have a broad political base, but, you know, we should always remember the first Kurdish example, was just Iraqi Kurdistan, where I am right now, and, you know, in the '90s, everything was done to specifically to--we had the Washington agreement. We had Madeleine Albright bringing two sides together and both of them signing officially that they won't do anything to fight against the PKK.

They will do everything that Turkey wants, and still we're here in 2022 and Iraqi Kurdistan is being attacked almost everyday from various positions.

So the issue is probably not really--and, you know, these are not really easy answers. These are not easy recommendations, but this is the underlying issue after 31 years of practice that we have seen in Iraq is that at the end of the day it is about Turkey not accepting that they have a Kurdish question and that they are actively occupying Kurdistan. This is just the point.

And they are occupying Armenian land. They are occupying Assyrian land. That is just what is happening. And at the end of the day, I'm sure there can be a political solution with KNC, but that is not an internal Kurdish fight. It is a proxy war. It is unfortunately a proxy war. KNC can be on whatever side they want to be, but KNC is actively on the Turkish side as much as the KDP and Iraq is on the Turkish side.

If they choose to be that, they can be that, but that is just actively following a proxy scheme, and that is the big problem. So we should really keep an eye on Turkey and we should also keep an eye on the elections next year, which are

going to decide what policymakers are actively going to be in charge in Ankara, who are going to be the decision-makers, who, what kind of military budget they are going to set up.

That is very, very important to keep in mind, and then there is the thing, Turkey is not--like Turkey's regime and Turkey's approach is not an unchangeable fact. At the end of the day, this system is pro forma democratic, and there is a lot of people in this country that are unhappy with the situation--people like Osman Kavala that are still in prison.

So I think for the U.S., it's very important to have a transnational approach. This is transnationally about democratization.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

I know, David, your hand is up again. Go ahead. Wait. You're mute.

MR. PHILLIPS: It's so important that we have a realistic approach towards Turkey. We should see it as it is, not as it was or we wish it to be.

Right now Turkey is a toxic influence in the region. Columbia University is going to be publishing a major study this week looking at collusion between Turkey and Russia. Turkey has been aggressing across the region, in Nagorno-Karabakh, in Artsakh.

The U.S. needs to see Turkey, not as we wish it were, but as it is. We should adjust our policies accordingly. That kind of adult conversation is the best way to bring Turkey back in the tent. With elections coming up, Turkish voters have a chance to express their concerns and to talk about reform and regime change through a democratic process, which is indigenous and homegrown.

The only basis for that is seeing things realistically and adjusting U.S. and international policy accordingly.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

Any others? If not, I'll hand off to my colleagues to ask questions. Would either of you like to ask a question?

Go ahead, Commissioner Kleinbaum.

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: Thank you. Thank you so much and whomever would like to respond to this.

Syria has had a long and rich history of having a Jewish community for really over a thousand, maybe even 2,000 years, and there have been reports that Assad has been reaching out to the diaspora Syrian Jewish community.

And I'm wondering if anybody can enlighten us about that element of this situation?

David, do you want to speak?

MR. PHILLIPS: I can say a word here.

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: Thank you.

MR. PHILLIPS: I visited Syria with my father maybe 20 years ago. We interviewed members of the Syrian Jewish community. The purpose of it was to look at minorities, ethnic and religious, and I can say that during our meetings, the Syrian Jews were terrified of speaking freely. They knew there were minders in the room, and they were worried that their message would be recorded and

there would be reprisals and incrimination.

I don't think very much has changed. We need to see the regime in Damascus realistically. The more pluralistic and tolerant Turkey--excuse me--Syria becomes, the more we can move forward with the Constitutional Committee and other negotiations.

We don't want Syria to be a pariah state forever, but Syria has to earn its way back into the family of nations by demonstrating religious tolerance and an inclusive and transparent system of governance, based on human rights and respect for religious and ethnic minorities, including Kurds.

CHAIR MAENZA: Yes. Thomas.

MR. PIERRET: Yes, well, just on the question of the Jewish community in Syria, I know little about it, but I suspect, you know, this community might be entirely extinct today because I remember like 15 years ago in a place like Aleppo, I talked with some friends, who told me about the Jewish people, but they were talking--I mean

according to them, it was a handful of people, of elderly people.

So I suspect that 15 years later, there might be no one left, and there were a little bit more in Damascus but also mostly elderly people so-
-yeah.

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: It's true, there is a huge Syrian Jewish diaspora here in the United States that came before Assad obviously, really mostly in the '50s.

But the question is that we've just been hearing some mention that Assad has been actively courting members of the large Syrian Jewish diaspora. So do you have a sense of what that goal is? Is that true?

Is that something that you've heard as well? But, absolutely, most of the Syrian Jewish community fled Syria in the '50s and actually early '60s.

MR. PIERRET: Yeah. No, sorry, I don't know anything about the diaspora. I just had, I think the most, the last people left actually in

the '90s--

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: Yeah.

MR. PIERRET: --when they were granted visas then, and they were allowed to leave.

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: But the big numbers--yes, absolutely, you're right. There's--I doubt there's much left there.

But the question is, is Assad trying to court the Jewish diaspora as we've been hearing or is that just not--

MR. PIERRET: I have no idea. I'm sorry. No.

CHAIR MAENZA: Dastan and then David.

MS. JASIM: I would just like to say a word about the strategy that is behind this kind of approach, you know. I mean they are kind of, you know, spreading these kind of words here and there. This is both the case for Syria, sometimes for Turkey, Iraq, as well.

What we're seeing is that, you know, we still have a very antisemitic discourse that is happening both in this region as in many, many

other countries in the world, and this antisemitic discourse is, in many cases, trying to deny that there is any indigenous Jewish people to this region.

So what sometimes these actors are trying to do is that they're saying, well, we can kind of give you back the claim to indigenous if you just come to our political side. We're going to protect you and then you're going to somehow be where you belong to.

And this is what has been happening with many countries that are now after decades trying to claim their Jews in an attempt to present themselves in a, you know, open-minded or let's say tolerant way and also to get into discourse, et cetera, in general, catching attention.

But I would say the essence of these kinds of approaches are inherently antisemitic because this is specifically saying, well, you know, if you follow our lead, then you're allowed to exist in this and that country, but wherever you are right now, you are not safe. You cannot be there.

And that is something very dangerous that this reproduces because the issue with that, you know, not only we should be for religious freedom, but we should be for religious groups being able to govern themselves, to have some kind of, you know, say in what is happening.

It's not only them always having to live under some kind of big ruler that is protecting them. That has been the discourse under Ba'athism for decades. This cannot be the claim above from that, and that is actually, you know, this is the prospect that we have in Northeast Syria that should be about these people being equals, these people being able to govern themselves, to rule themselves, to be active citizens.

And this kind of discourse that they are spreading this kind of--I really have to say, you know, fake claims that they are spreading are actually just reproducing this image of "religious minorities," quote-unquote, being, you know, coerced under some kind of authoritarian rule.

CHAIR MAENZA: David.

MR. PHILLIPS: I can't speak to the details of outreach to the diaspora, but I can say that this outreach is cynical and it's politically motivated.

Efforts to curry favor with Jews worldwide and Jews in the United States are really entirely about normalizing relations with the U.S. It looks at the APAC model and views it as an influential body. It's trying to manipulate APAC so that Syria can be in Washington's good graces.

Fundamentally, dialogue is a good thing, but, finally, Damascus should be judged not by what it says, by what it does.

CHAIR MAENZA: Right.

MR. PHILLIPS: The jury is definitely out on that.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

Commissioner Khan. Commissioner Khan, I think you are mute. Commissioner Khan, would you like to ask a question?

COMMISSIONER KHAN: I sat in awe of our experts' presentation. I have a very narrow

question while I pay tribute to your valor and for being the voice of the voiceless. Thank you, thank you for your courage and your continuing work.

My very narrow question is from the Commission's perspective, within the limits of our mandate, what are your recommendations that we would be doing, we could be doing, to make sure that concerns are addressed?

Our report highlights some of the concerns that you have expressed, but in addition to providing a platform, is there anything else that you suggest we could be doing, we should be doing, to address the concerns that you have expressed in your testimony?

Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: David, do you want to start? Go ahead.

MR. PHILLIPS: In the spirit of decentralization, the topics that we're talking about today should be discussed among Syria's different communities.

They should have a voice. They should

have input. If we're formulating policy recommendations for the U.S., we should take their concerns on board.

So to speak directly to your question, Mr. Khan, the more we engage the victims of persecution in solutions to remedy persecution, the closer we get to a more tolerant and open society. We're far from that place in Syria, but this hearing could be localized, starting in the north and eastern part of Syria, and involving other communities so that their views are heard and incorporated into a set of policy recommendations.

CHAIR MAENZA: Yes, go ahead, Max.

MR. HOFFMAN: Well, I would certainly echo what David said, I think. That is an important role.

The other two things I would highlight are, you know, we are shifting into the phase of accountability and reconciliation, and in parts of Syria, reconstruction, and so along those lines, focusing your attention (a) on continuing to bring attention to the abuses, and particularly in a

place like Afrin, the need to document, to continue to draw attention to the abuses, and eventually to move towards, you know, a model of reconciliation where those displaced can return, can have access to their old homes and businesses.

I think that's the only, that's the only way we can cultivate long-term stability, and the same goes, of course, for the northeast.

But the other part is that this Commission and its constituents, it's a different constituency than the kind of traditional humanitarian assistance community. But the interests completely overlap; right?

You know, the conditions for religious minorities and ethnic minorities, as well, will be helped significantly if just basic economic conditions improve, if basic services can be restored, and so mobilizing to the extent you can, mobilizing political support and attention around the ongoing humanitarian efforts in Syria is, I think, absolutely critical.

And, you know, that--there's a complicated

piece to that because many parties, but particularly and most egregiously the regime, have tried to weaponize humanitarian aid as a tool of sovereignty, and, so, navigating that is very tricky.

That gets back to, I think, Rabbi Kleinbaum, your question about, and David's very good response, I think, about how the regime I think is beginning this long-term effort of trying to recover its image and regain some basic legitimacy in the eyes of the international community.

I don't think we can allow that to happen, but we still have to continue to engage on the humanitarian issue. So that's a difficult path to chart, but I think that, Commissioner Khan, your, well, all of your voices on that front would be helpful. So--

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

Dastan and then back to David.

MS. JASIM: Thank you so much.

Yeah, I think I would really say, you

know, it's the mandate of the Commission is limited and the mandate of many institutions is limited so at the end of the day you guys probably know best how to do your job.

But I think pretty much the three key points that I would focus on, and with that I'm definitely also seconding what my previous colleagues have said--the three most important things are peace, status and prosperity.

Peace because there is constant attacks on these areas, like we're really facing a situation where these ethnic cleansing campaigns are almost successful. Like at this point, the Autonomous Administration is governing mostly people that belong to the majority society because so many other people have been actively displaced. This is like happening, you know.

These areas are still under occupation. These people are still living under permanent attacks. So doing whatever can be done to at least stop the war, stop the fighting, stop the constant attacks.

And part of that would not be to be exporting weapons the whole time to Turkey is the first point and to urge the government administration to not do that.

The second point is the status--some type of acknowledgement of these groups because otherwise it's going to be a permanent fear. Not only vis-a-vis Turkey but also vis-a-vis the people that are threatened by Assad.

We know that Assad is actively threatening people that are, for example, Arabs that organize themselves in Raqqa and--you know they are sending in threats. They are sending in leaflets telling them as soon as we're taking over these areas, you will see what you will get.

And what we see is that not only Assad but also Iran is expanding their presence in this area. So giving status and some security to these people that are really on the front-line of the international war against terrorism should really be the least.

And the third point is we need prosperity

because we talked about humanitarian engagement, you know. And one way, as cynical as it seems, looking at the Iraqi Kurdish precedent, I have to say that I am somehow happy that this place has not become a huge NGO-dependent semi-autonomy that cannot produce stuff for itself, that is indefinitely, you know, dependent on donors and all this kind of stuff.

We cannot afford that. What is really strong is a northeast Syrian autonomy that is able to produce industrially, agriculturally, on many, many levels, and to really be economically self-reliant. Those are really the three most important points that any policy and any recommendation has a focus on.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

During our recommendations, part of the reasons we had recommended the sanctions is we knew they're going to either become an aid economy or a commerce economy, and the U.S. is going to decide that. So we're hoping that those recommendations get followed for that reason.

David. And you're mute.

MR. PHILLIPS: Max, you spoke about the model of reconciliation. Of course, we all believe that reconciliation is critical to a peaceful and prosperous future.

But reconciliation needs to be reality-based. We can't allow the regime in Damascus to whitewash its crimes. So these kinds of discussions are important, not only today, but going forward in the future.

Also, when we come to peace, it can only be achieved through justice, and there have been terrible violations in human rights, crimes against humanity. Those can't be pushed aside. They need to be fully exposed and discussed in order for the society to heal and to move forward.

And I just want to also address Dastan's point about weapons in the region, and the reason why Turkey was barred from the F-35 stealth-fighter program is because it acquired S-400 missiles from Russia. When Turkey was asked to share the S-400 system with Ukraine, it declined.

Giving them advanced F-16 technology is completely inconsistent with a realistic approach to Turkey's role in the region. So if we want to see reconciliation, it needs to involve dialogue between Syria, the extent to which external powers influence that or manipulate events need to be guarded against, and weaponizing, giving additional sophisticated weapons to Turkey, which, by the way, it used on April 17 when it attacked northern Iraq, is totally inconsistent with the idea of promoting peace and harmony in the region, and allowing social harmony to prevail in war-torn societies.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

Thomas.

MR. PIERRET: Yes, I'm sorry if it's not a very practical recommendation, but I'd like to emphasize an important distinction as far as the regime is concerned, which is between religious freedom and religious tolerance, because if you look at the regime, I mean its record in terms of religious tolerance towards communities like, you know, Christians or Druze, I mean it's almost

decent if you want.

But there are very serious problems of religious freedom, which actually mostly concerns the Sunni majority. And if you look at the daily life of a Sunni cleric is like, you know, going through, you know, requesting authorizations for absolutely everything; right. Any basic religious activity requires, you know, clearing from or clearance from the security services.

And this, you know, this securitization of Sunni religious activities is a function of the regime's very nature, i.e., its exclusive nature. So I don't think you can really expect anything from this regime in terms of religious freedom as long as there is no comprehensive political settlement.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

It's really interesting the way that you distinguish the difference, and do you see the regime going after, Thomas, religious minorities because of their religious identity? And obviously, it sounds like the Sunni Muslims, they

do.

And, you know, in terms of the Christian community, you know, there seems to be an especially harsh, you know, they get freedom as long as they support the regime. Can you speak a little bit about that?

MR. PIERRET: Yes, of course. I mean that's same for everyone, I mean all communities are safe as long as, of course, they're politically loyal.

But I would say that regime's interference in like the internal organization of each religious community, you know, differs widely from one case to another. I would say, you know, if you take Christians, as long as they're loyal, they are more or less free to manage their own religious affairs.

You know, the regime does not appoint top Christian clerics, right, which, on the contrary, they do with Sunnis. Okay. They decide who does what at every single position.

So, yeah, that is a very different situation, and then, okay, I'm going into details about, you know, all communities, but I think there

is a significant difference between the Sunni majority and everyone else in that respect for, you know, because it's seen as an existential threat, which, you know, other minorities aren't.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

David.

MR. PHILLIPS: You recall the millet system. As long as you were loyal to the regime and you paid a tax, you could administer your own affairs. The same holds true in many former Ottoman territories.

Lasting reform needs to address decentralization and the rights of ethnic and religious minorities in a profound and constitutional way so that their interests are really looked after and promoted.

Window dressing won't do. Millet system is long gone, so real control of local institutions, real self-rule for religious and ethnic minorities is the way forward in Syria and other former Ottoman territories.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

We are running out of time. I want to give any of our witnesses or commissioners if they have anything else they'd like to add before we close?

MR. PHILLIPS: Just a word of thanks to you, Nadine, and to the Commission for convening this important discussion. We hope it's an ongoing dialogue and that it gets decentralized to the region so we hear local voices.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you. I appreciate that.

And I do want to say that, you know, a special thanks to the administration for really engaging with us very regularly and having an open door to discuss all of these things, and Capitol Hill has been the same. The different commissions and committees there have also opened their doors.

So even though, you know, other things like Ukraine and Russia, other topics, of course, sometimes take all the air in the room, there is an understanding that the way forward hasn't been working for Syria, and part of it, as we've been

saying at USCIRF, is religious freedom really hasn't been at the table.

Oftentimes with these security situations, it's easier to push those aside and say we've got to deal with all these other things right now, but what happens is you end up with, as Deputy Assistant Secretary talked about the lasting of stable peace, you need religious freedom, and so to not have that be a part of it is actually not a way for a long-term solution.

And I think that is what we've tried to bring to the table with the discussion is how do we get everyone back again? But bring this component in and raise that part. If we're going to find a lasting solution, then we've got to consider that.

And we really appreciate all of you witnesses. Your professional work, your scholarship on this has been--we've all relied upon. So we appreciate your participation today and your continued work.

So thank you so much. And thanks to all of our guests for joining today. I hope this was

informative. Again, all of the testimony is on the USCIRF website so you can read each of their testimonies.

Some of them have maps, other information that will be helpful, and we appreciate your following our work. Have a wonderful day. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 12:03 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]