



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Freedom of Religion or Belief in Syria

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Nadine Maenza, USCIRF Chair

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 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, 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 toward 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 in formulating a political solution for their country.

This past March 2022 marked the 11th consecutive year of the Syria crisis, one of the world's longest and most destructive political conflicts. A range of actors have committed egregious violations of freedom of religion 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 the 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 (HTS)**—the dominant governing and religious force in the northwestern region of Idlib—brutalizes minority

communities, restricting the worship of 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 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 Northern 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 that same area, including the uniquely religiously 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 northeastern 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; and Syriac-Assyrians, Armenians, and other Christians. The AANES 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 Islamists militias or TSOs in the Turkish-occupied areas.

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