



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Testimony by:

DAVID L. PHILLIPS

Director, Program on Peacebuilding and Human Rights

Institute for the Study of Human Rights

Columbia University

Testimony to:

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

the status of freedom of religion or belief within the ongoing conflict in Syria.

May 10, 2022

Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to today's hearing by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). My remarks focus on violations of religious freedom by Turkey and crimes committed by their jihadist mercenary proxies in north and east Syria (NES).

Before proceeding, I would like to thank USCIRF for advancing American and universal interests by calling attention to human rights violations related to religion and the weaponization of religion by bad actors who target peaceful populations and symbols of religiosity.

Violations of religious freedom in NES occurred in two waves. During the first wave, beginning in 2014, jihadists rampaged through Armenian, Syriac, and Christian Arab communities, killing thousands of people and desecrating symbols of their Christian faith. Yazidis, the majority of whom are Zoroastrian, were also targeted in Sinjar and across the NES.

Christians and other minorities in Iraq were also targeted. Between 2014 and mid-2019, the number of Christians in Iraq had dwindled from 1.5 million to as low as 120,000, a decline of more than 90 percent within a single generation.¹

In Syria, the size of the Christian population has fallen by two-thirds since the country's civil war began in 2011, when Christians numbered more than 2 million.² Only 30,000 Christians remained in Syria by the end of 2016.³

In the second wave, Turkish armed forces played a more conspicuous role, invading the NES. In addition to actions by the Turkish Armed Forces, Turkey's National Intelligence Agency (MIT) orchestrated support for jihadis who committed crimes against Christians on Turkey's behalf.

Armenian Christians

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as ISIL) stormed across the Iraqi border from Syria in June 2014, targeting "apostates" – Shiites, Kurds, Yazidis, and Christians. Sixty thousand Christians in Mosul were executed, displaced, or trafficked as sex slaves. The same fate befell Christians in the Nineveh Plains and NES.

The Christian presence in Syria dates to biblical times.⁴ Additionally, up to 100,000 survivors of the Armenian Genocide settled in Syria in the 1920s, seeking sanctuary for their Church and civilization.⁵

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; seven disappeared.⁶ Ten of

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48333923>.

² <https://religionnews.com/2019/10/23/christianity-may-disappear-from-syria-and-iraq-a-call-for-international-intervention/>

³ Minority Rights Group International, "Christians, Armenians and Assyrians," March 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/christians-armenians-and-assyrians/> (Accessed July 26, 2019).

⁴ Matthew 4:24.

⁵ Field interviews by the author, 2019.

⁶ Zara Sarvarian, "70,000 Syrian Armenians Have Fled During the War, and Few will Return." World Watch Monitor, June 27, 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>.

17 Armenian churches in Aleppo were destroyed. Aleppo's Karen Jeppe Armenian school was ransacked and 1,300 students were displaced.⁷

The Armenian National Institute documented the existence of chapels in Syria, Iraq as well as Lebanon where the Catholicosate was built in Antelias. The most elaborate of these chapels was found in Der Zor, Syria, also the site of the largest death camp during the Armenian Genocide. Islamic State terrorists razed the Der Zor complex in 2014. ISIS militants, who committed genocide against the Yazidi people and persecuted local Kurdish populations, acted at the behest of their sponsors in Turkey.⁸

Kessab, an Armenian Christian town in Syria's northwest, was attacked on March 21, 2014. Thousands of jihadists used five different border crossings, including the Gozlekçiler crossing, to enter Syria from Turkey. Many cars with Syria license plates ferried fighters from the Turkish base at Kayapınar to the front line. Six hundred and seventy Armenian families in Kessab were uprooted; 15 families were taken hostage. The Armenian Assembly of America and the Armenian National Committee condemned that attack on Christians and minority populations in Syria, documenting Turkey's involvement.⁹

Jihadis organized under the black banner of ISIS, launching a worldwide jihad against Christians. The ISIS magazine, *Dabiq*, displayed images of crucified Christians as a "message of blood written to the Nation of the Cross".¹⁰ It published an image of St. Peter's Square with an ISIS flag superimposed atop its holy obelisk. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the ISIS founder and self-declared caliph, said his fighters would march "all the way to Rome", toppling crosses and abducting Christian women.

Christians who remained in ISIS-occupied lands were required to convert or pay for their protection. ISIS used Islamic law to justify a protection tariff called "Jizya".¹¹ When ISIS occupied a Christian community, it offered a stark choice: forced conversion, slavery, extortion, or execution.

Syriacs

Syriacs are the second-largest Christian community in Syria. Assyrian civilization dates to 2,500 BC. Assyrians, who self-identify as Syriacs, Arameans, and Chaldeans, pioneered the ancient Aramaic language. The Syriac Ancient Church traces its history to St. Peter and St. Paul in the First Century.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://www.armenian-assembly.org/post/armenian-national-institute-website-now-includes-327-armenian-genocide-memorials>.

⁹ "Reports Cite 80 Dead in Kessab; Churches Desecrated," Asbarez, March 24, 2014, <http://asbarez.com/121007/reports-cite-80-dead-in-Kessab-churches-desecrated/> (accessed August 18, 2019).

¹⁰ Talmazan, "Life Under ISIS Led These Muslims to Christianity."

¹¹ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, "Syria: The Situation of Christians, Including Whether Christians are Perceived to be Loyal to President Assad", (2013-July 2015).

Syriacs resided primarily in the Khabur Valley of the Jazira governorate. ISIS seized ancient churches, some nearly 2,000 years old, in Homs, Aleppo, and Damascus, converting them to mosques, madrassas and prisons. ISIS tore down holy crosses and defaced tombstones in church graveyards.

Between 2011 and 2015, hundreds of Syriacs were executed and thousands displaced. ISIS attacked 35 Assyrian Christian villages along the Khabour River in February 2015. It kidnapped 253 Assyrians, including women and children, causing 3,000 to flee. ISIS occupied 35 Christian villages on the outskirts of Hasakah in February 2015. It attacked Syriac communities near Homs in August 2015, killing more than 200 civilians.

Thirteen nuns were kidnapped by the al-Nusra Front in December 2013, and held for ransom.¹² ISIS ransomed their Assyrian captives for \$1,000/each. Christian institutions, including schools and hospitals were destroyed. ISIS filmed and broadcast the beheading of priests and community leaders. Eleven execution videos portrayed their murder and the desecration of churches.

The Syriac Military Council (SMC) was the largest Christian militia in Syria. Its two thousand fighters sought to protect the Assyrian Christian community. The SMC defended Christian villages from ISIS in 2016, fighting alongside the People's Protection Units (YPG) comprised of Syrian Kurds.

Pat Robertson stated, "Syrian Christians fear they'll be wiped out. It appears that US policy has the potential to put 2,000 years of Christian tradition and history at-risk."¹³ Tony Perkins, head of the Family Research Council, noted that Turkey's invasion "did shake the evangelical community." According to the Southern Baptist Convention, "Kurdish Christians stand for freedom and human dignity. What they are now facing from Erdogan's authoritarian Turkey is horrifying beyond words".¹⁴

On February 3, 2016, the European Union declared that the persecution of Christians by ISIS amounted to "genocide." The US government labeled it "genocide" in March 2016 and the British parliament denounced ISIS atrocities as "genocide" in April 2016. In the preface to the 2016 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson wrote: "ISIS is clearly responsible for genocide against Yazidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims in areas it controlled." It is responsible for "[the] rape, kidnapping, enslavement and death" of religious and ethnic minorities.

Yazidis

ISIS invaded northern Iraq in June 2014 and carried out a genocide of Yazidis in the Sinjar area, resulting in their expulsion or flight. At least 5,000 Yazidi males were killed. Thousands of Yazidi women and girls were forced into sexual slavery. Yazidis, most of whom are Zoroastrian, were subject to forced conversion by ISIS.

¹² Minority Rights Group International, "Christians, Armenians and Assyrians."

¹³ "Christian Groups Aren't Happy with Trump over His Syria Pull-Out." *Relevant Magazine*, January 17, 2019.

¹⁴ Russel Moore, Twitter post, October 2019, .51am, <https://twitter.com/drmoore.status/118193017535906113?lang=en>.

The Yazidi people lived in lands from Sinjar in Iraqi Kurdistan, across the Nineveh Plains into the NES.¹⁵ The existence of ancient Yazidi temples and shrines confirm their historical claims to this territory. When US forces pulled back from Afrin, Yazidi “infidels” were left unprotected in 23 villages and towns,¹⁶ including the Shirwa area (Mount Lilon), the Sheran area (Shikaka), and the Janders area (Faqira, Qujuma, Qilah, Ishkan-e Sharqi, Jiqlah, Kafr Zit, and the district center of Afrin.

Nineteen Yazidi shrines in Afrin were destroyed by ISIS. The Yazidi Union headquarters, the statue of the Prophet Zarathustra, and the Dome of Lalish were also destroyed. In February 2018, Turkish warplanes bombed the Ain Dara temple, which was built in 1300 BC. The Sheikh Junaid shrine and Abdul Rahman in the village of Fakira, and the Hanan shrine in the village of Mashala were destroyed. Turkey seized the largest Yazidi shrine in Syria, located at the top of Mount Sheikh Barakat, overlooking Darat Izza, and turned it into a military headquarters.

On August 6, 2020, Turkey’s Directorate for Religious Affairs laid the foundation of the Imam and Khatib Sharia school over the ruins of a Yazidi shrine. Championed by Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP), the project was funded by the Sheikh Abdullah Al-Nouri Kuwaiti Brotherhood Association. The Afrin Local Council, a body of the Turkish occupation, inaugurated the Imam Al-Khatib School on September 23, 2021 advancing its goal of promoting Islamist education to change the culture of people in the region.

Yazidis were taken prisoner and subject to torture. They were stripped of gold jewelry and personal possessions. ISIS demanded ransom of up to \$25,000/Yazidi. Those who could not pay were murdered. The Turkish administration in the NES settled the families of mercenaries in Yazidi villages whose residents had been forcibly displaced.

Many Turkish-backed jihadi groups participated in the murder of Yazidis and the destruction of their religious and cultural sites. These groups include Faylaq al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham. The al-Hamza Division and Jaysh al-Sharqiya desecrated Yazidi shrines such as the Sheikh Ali shrine in the village of Basofan. The Sheikh Gharib shrine in Sinkerli village in Shara district was destroyed. The Qara Jarna shrine near Medanki, the King Adi shrine in Kibaar village, the Barsa Khatun and the Sheikh Hamid shrines in the village of Qastal Jindo, the Qara Jarna shrine near Medanki, the Barsa Khatun and Sheikh Hamid shrines in the village of Qastal Jindo were all destroyed.

Crimes against Yazidis were also committed by mercenaries of the Northern Storm Brigade, organized by Turkey and funded by Qatar and Kuwait. Another group, Ahab Allah, attired in ISIS clothing (short pants and long beards), occupied village mosques and forced Yazidis to

¹⁵ Turkish-backed militants persecuting Christians, Yazidis after US troop pullback: USCIRF By Samuel Smith, CP Reporter.

¹⁶ Turkish-backed militants persecuting Christians, Yazidis after US troop pullback: USCIRF By Samuel Smith , CP Reporter.

recite Islamic prayers and attend religious lessons. No monument was spared. The Ain Dara Temple was bombarded and destroyed.¹⁷

Afrin

Turkey long sought to establish a security cordon on Syrian territory along the Turkey-Syria border. When the AKP suffered a major setback in elections of March 2019, losing control of local government in many municipalities, Erdogan blamed Turkish citizens of Kurdish origin and lashed out at Kurds in NES whom he accused of collaborating with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Turkey massed troops on its border with Syria, threatening military action unless the US allowed Turkey a buffer zone over 400 kilometers wide and 32 kilometers deep (250 by 20 miles). Erdogan planned to relocate 2.5 million Turkmen and Arabs to the security zone. He also threatened to flood Europe with refugees. According to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff James Votel, US efforts to “placate our Turkish allies” failed because Turkey “repeatedly reneged on agreements.”¹⁸

President Donald J. Trump and Erdogan spoke on December 14, 2018. After their conversation, Trump announced the complete withdrawal of US troops from Syria and endorsed Turkey’s plan to “clean” Kurds from their villages.¹⁹ The Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) beheaded Kurdish defenders, raped and mutilated the bodies of Kurdish women, cutting off their breasts and posing for selfies with their body parts. Alevis, Yazidis and Christians were expelled during “Operation Olive Branch”, a cross-border operation in the NES. Only three Christian families remained in Afrin.²⁰

Mosques proliferating across the NES. Their construction was financed by the Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkey and Islamist charities in Kuwait and Qatar. Last October alone, mosques were built in the villages of Ali Karo, Qurna and Bulbul town. The Bait Al-Amal Association built the mosque in Ali Karo village and the White Hands Association built the Qurna and Bulbul mosques.

Local youth were recruited for Turkish propaganda. They were forced to carry Turkish flags and appear in videos thanking Erdogan. The NES demography also changed. Kefer Cene district was completely Arabized through the settlement of Arab fighters and 4,000 Arab families. At least 300 families of FSA members were relocated to villages of Shiye and Cindirese. Plundering of private homes was widespread. Street names were translated into Turkish and Arabic. Youth who remained were forced to enroll in madrassas. Women were required to cover themselves. More than 300,000 civilians fled Afrin for Til Rifat and Shebha regions, where they received aid from the Kurdish Red Crescent.²¹

¹⁷ Yazidis' Union Afrin, Syria

¹⁸ Diana Stancy Correll, “Withdrawing from Northern Syria Could Not Happen at a Worse Time”, *Military Times*, October 9, 2019.

¹⁹ Voluntary Repatriation, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, <https://www.unhcr.org> (accessed March 8 2020).

²⁰ Human Rights Organization, Afrin- Syria.

²¹ Violation Observatory Center in North Syria.

Another 300,000 people were displaced by “Operation Peace Spring” in October 2019. Ahrar al-Sharqiya, a jihadist group under Turkey’s control, assassinated Hevrin Khalaf, Secretary General of the Syria Party and 10 of her colleagues by the side of the M4 Highway. One jihadi kicked Khalaf’s body saying, “This is the corpse of a pig.”²²

Turkey’s Role

The Syrian regime ignored warnings from President Barack Obama against using chemical weapons (CW). It attacked Ghouta, a Damascus suburb, with sarin and mustard gas on August 21, 2013. As many as 1,729 people died, including children. Evidence exists of other attacks using CW.

Erdogan was furious with Obama for failing to enforce his red line and assumed primary responsibility for defending Sunnis in Syria’s civil war. MIT facilitated the flow of jihadis and jihadists from Turkey to Syria. About 40,000 foreign fighters from approximately 80 countries joined the fight to establish an Islamic caliphate in Northern Syria. MIT provided them with weapons, money, and mobile phones. Jihadis wounded in Syria appeared at hospitals in Turkey treated for battle wounds.

During a speech at Harvard University in October 2014, Biden said, “Our biggest problem is our allies” who are engaged in a proxy Sunni-Shiite war against Syrian President Bashar Assad. “What did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad – except that the people who were being supplied were [Jabhat] al-Nusra and al-Qaida and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world”²³

Turkey was the lifeline for ISIS beginning in 2014. Despite its claim to be a member in good standing of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, Turkey’s support for violent Islamism was consistent, and continues to this day.²⁴

Targeting of Christians and religious minorities also occurred in Turkey. Turkey’s Ministry of Religious Affairs (DIYANIT) took control of Hagia Sophia and turned it into a mosque. Alawites, who belong to a branch of Shiism, were also targeted as the AKP pursued its goal of restoring the caliphate in Istanbul.

Turkey professed its loyalty to the Global Coalition Fighting ISIS, but played a double game. Turkish diplomats pledged support against terrorism. To US officials, counterterrorism means fighting ISIS. Turkish officials view counterterrorism as killing Kurds and countering the PKK. They allege ties between Syrian Kurds and the PKK, disparaging efforts by Syrian Kurds to establish grassroots democracy, environmental sustainability, and women’s rights in the NES.

Erdogan and other Turkish officials frequently threaten cross-border attacks. Turkey launches air strikes, using F16s and armed drones, to support the field operations of its mercenaries in the

²² Kareem Khadder, Jennifer Deaton, and Sharif Paget, “Kurdish Politician and Ten Others Killed by Turkish-Backed Militia in Syria, SDF Claims,” CNN, October 13, 2019.

²³ [Biden 'clarifies' comments implying UAE support for extremists | Joe Biden | The Guardian](#), October 5, 2014.

²⁴ <https://time.com/5885650/erdogans-ottoman-worry-world/>

NES. Turkey's Armed Forces unilaterally attacked PKK bases in Iraqi Kurdistan as recently as April 17, 2022. Turkey's war mongering and support for ISIS-affiliated jihadi groups represent the greatest threat to religious freedom and regional stability.

Recommendations

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1988 requires the executive branch review the status of religious freedom worldwide. The law defines particularly severe violations as "systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom," including violations such as: torture; prolonged detention without charges; forced disappearance; or other flagrant denial of life, liberty, or security of persons.

Turkey meets the criteria for designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) and should be so designated.

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

Turkey should be provided with twelve (12) months to adopt measures leading to its removal of the SWL. If it fails to act, Turkey should be designated a CPC.