



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

June 2020

SAFEGUARDING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN NORTHEAST SYRIA

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

On June 10, 2020, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a virtual hearing on *Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria*. This hearing highlighted opportunities and challenges related to religious freedom in areas governed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), as well as those areas invaded and/or occupied by Turkey, and a number of policy recommendations were suggested to further U.S. government efforts to strengthen religious freedom in the region.



Michael Rubin, USCIRF Commissioner Gary Bauer, Hassan Hassan, USCIRF then-Vice Chair Nadine Maenza, Sara Kayyali, Amy Austin Holmes, USCIRF then-Vice Chair Gayle Manchin, USCIRF then-Chair Tony Perkins, Commissioner Nury Turkel.

USCIRF then-Chair [Tony Perkins](#) led the hearing, which included an [array of witnesses](#) from different perspectives on religious freedom and U.S. policy in Syria. In his opening remarks, Chair Perkins called attention to the “rare bright spot” of the Syrian Democratic Council project to create local governance separate from the Assad regime, based on principles of inclusion, diverse representation, and universal rights, including freedom of religion or belief. He stated, “Our purpose today is not to uncritically uphold northeast Syria as an inter-religious utopia. Instead it is to highlight what Syria, the Middle East, and the world stands to lose if we fail to uphold, support, and protect the advancement of religious freedom in this vulnerable area.”

In her opening remarks, then-Vice Chair [Gayle Manchin](#) stated, “It is noteworthy that when religious and ethnic minorities fled Turkey’s takeover in Afrin in early 2018, most of those displaced persons sought and found refuge in the Autonomous Administration’s territory.” Then-Vice Chair [Nadine Maenza](#) elaborated on Turkey’s threat to religious freedom in Syria over the past two years, noting that its occupation of Afrin, “set a deeply disturbing precedent of what was to come,” including the destruction of holy sites, the flight of civilians, and persistent shelling of Muslim, Christian, and Yazidi villages.

[Amy Austin Holmes](#), a Fellow at the Wilson Center, asserted that the Kurdish, Arab, and Christian Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) not only protected religious minorities but also included them in their ranks. Additionally, she quoted a recent statement from the Syrian Strategic Research Center: “On the 10th of October 2019, the Turkish army invaded our lands and attacked our people using former ISIS [the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria], Al Qaeda, and other radical Islamic fighters. These fighters, which are paid by NATO ally Turkey, have committed human rights abuses, declared they will ethnically cleanse the area and support the same ideology as groups like ISIS.” Holmes further pointed out the extent of worsening conditions for religious minorities under Turkish occupation: Yazidi holy shrines are under Turkish control, women are routinely arrested for not wearing a veil, and 137 Christian families have been displaced. She explained that members of these communities “have been killed, disappeared, kidnapped, raped, detained, subjected to forced religious conversion, and held for ransom until their families pay exorbitant sums of money to secure their release. Their places of worship have been destroyed, defaced, and looted. Even their cemeteries have been demolished and vandalized.” She also highlighted the long list of atrocities committed by ISIS.

Holmes closed with the following recommendations:

- The U.S. government must set a clear timeline and demand Turkey withdraw from the territory it occupies;
- USCIRF and members of Congress should host a high-level fact-finding mission to visit the areas Turkey has controlled since the October 2017 cease-fire agreement;
- The current stabilization efforts of the U.S. government in northeast Syria are insufficient, as is the lack of public services, such as electricity and adequate infrastructure, which are preventing Christians from returning to their homes; and

- The U.S. government should advocate for the inclusion of AANES representatives in multilateral peace negotiations in Geneva, Switzerland to resolve the Syrian conflict.

[Sara Kayyali](#), Human Rights Watch’s Syria Researcher, provided an overview of geopolitics in the region along with documented evidence of human rights violations. “The partial territorial defeat of ISIS in Syria strengthened the Autonomous Administration’s control over the region. But it also generated a sense of questions and expectations, with significant human rights consequences,” Kayyali said at the beginning of her testimony.

Kayyali identified the top threats to human rights in northeast Syria:

- ISIS suspects, including women and children, have been abandoned by the international community. They continue to be detained in deeply degrading and often inhumane conditions within AANES’ nascent justice system. The United States has actively been pressing countries to repatriate their citizens, but it could do more. It is uniquely positioned to help the Autonomous Administration improve conditions in camps and detention facilities, and work with local authorities to ensure that all those detained receive a fair hearing;
- ISIS detained more than 8,143 individuals, including five prominent Christian leaders, and gained control of more than 20 Shi’a Muslim and Yazidi mass graves;
- Turkey, and the Syrian factions it supports, have indiscriminately shelled civilian areas, carried out extrajudicial executions, unlawfully occupied private civilian homes and shops, and forcibly displaced aid workers; and
- Turkish authorities have disrupted the delivery of adequate water supplies and humanitarian aid to AANES-governed areas in northeast Syria. This includes medical supplies and personnel needed to prevent, contain, and treat COVID-19.

[Hassan Hassan](#), Director of the Non-State Actors and Geopolitics program at the Center for Global Policy, asserted that a challenge for the AANES is the potential resurgence of the Islamic State: “The latest ISIS resurgence happened because ... the pressure against it started to weaken, since the United States, with its local allies, destroyed the physical Caliphate last spring. The weakening of this pressure was the result of events, including the withdrawal from Syria that allowed Turkey to sweep in and invade parts of the north.” Hassan also highlighted the erosion of trust toward the United States as countries like Saudi Arabia and Russia have been taking advantage of the conflict in the region.

Hassan closed with the following recommendation:

- The U.S. government must keep pressure on the Islamic State. The United States must not allow the organization to regroup, receive influence from the regime, or from neighboring countries determined to attack these communities. The defeat of the Caliphate created an environment of extensive religious freedom in the area.

Michael Rubin, a Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, emphasized the stark contrast between AANES and Turkey. “The Autonomous Administration has lived up to its promises with respect to religious freedom. Turkey’s intervention, however, has imperiled this process and has fundamentally eroded religious liberty. Rather than eradicate terrorism, Turkey has enabled it. Rather than respect the region’s diversity, Turkey has engaged in ethnic cleansing.”

Rubin recommended that:

- U.S. policy should demand the extrication of Turkish forces from northern Syria and use targeted sanctions to do so;
- The U.S. government should resolve the designation of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) as a terrorist group as part of its regional policy;
- The State Department should mandate biannual reports that specifically address religious freedom in areas seized by Turkey and its proxies;
- The State Department should investigate the kidnapping of Yazidi girls and women by the Islamic State; and
- The U.S. Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) should favorably adjudicate the Syrian Democratic Council’s application for a waiver.

Chair Perkins concluded the hearing by stating that religious freedom “is not something anyone imposed on northeast Syria. It is of their own making ... I believe it is incumbent upon us to stand with them as a model of a way forward, for others in that region.”

In a [statement](#) submitted for this hearing, Genocide Watch reported: “In areas under Turkey’s control, civilians have been subjected to horrific crimes against humanity committed by Turkish forces and Turkish supported militias. Kurdish towns have been bombed and destroyed, some with white phosphorus, a war crime.”

USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government:

- Designate Syria as a Country of Particular Concern;
- Provide support for Syria’s vulnerable ethnic and religious minorities under the terms of the Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act;
- Exert pressure on Turkey to provide a timeline for its withdrawal from Syria;
- Recognize the AANES as a legitimate, local government, expand U.S. engagement with the AANES, and lift sanctions from all areas it governs. Ensure the AANES is protected from unintended harm from broader U.S. policy regarding Syria, including exempting the AANES from potential sanctions under the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019;
- Contribute to efforts, through relevant nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and like-minded international partners, to fund and develop local programs to promote intra- and interreligious tolerance, alleviate sectarian tensions, and advance religious freedom and related rights. Care should be taken to ensure these efforts do not undermine the local governance of the AANES; and
- Demand the inclusion of the AANES in all activities pursuant to U.N. Res. 2254, including Geneva-based talks to resolve the Syrian conflict, “as the basis for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition in order to end the conflict in Syria.”



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