Testimony before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

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Statement of Dr. Dastan Jasim

Institutional Foundations and Legal Guarantees in North-East Syria

I, Dr. Dastan Jasim, a political scientist and conflict researcher, hereby offer my written testimony about religious freedom in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. I am an Associate Fellow at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies and was a Visiting Fellow at the American University of Iraq in Sulaimaniya. I was furthermore responsible for research on the Kurdish conflicts in Iraq and Syria for the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Studies.

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria is a multiethnic de facto autonomy established in 2012 amid the Syrian uprising against Bashar al-Assad and the dictatorship in Syria. It quickly developed as a third path between Assad's regime and the opposition forces, which rapidly adopted nationalist and Islamist rhetoric. Particularly in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the group was the main force on the ground and is to this day the prime ally of the U.S. in the fight against terror in the region. The Administration is firmly rooted in the transnational Kurdish national liberation movement, which has sought for decades to fight for the equal rights of Kurds, who have been treated as second-class citizens since the 1960s, if they were recognized as citizens at all, since many were denied citizenship. They have faced discrimination based on their ethnic and religious identities, as many Kurds in the region practice the Yazidi religion, and other ethnic groups like Arameans, Assyrians, and Armenians live in the area and practice the Christian faith.

As by the Social Contract, the constitution of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) that has repeatedly been adapted and renewed since 2014, the administration formally recognized the rights of religious minority communities including Christians, Druze, Yezidis and others to freely follow their religion and self-organize within the framework of AANES's stated values of pluralism, equality and participatory governance. The document commits to minority communal representation, autonomous local structures, and protection of worship rights. In legal form, this constitutes a significant advance for minority rights in the region. The presence of representatives of these various societal groups in the grassroots democratic structure of the autonomy is testimony to that, and the newly found trust among members of different religious groups, especially grounded in the common fight against ISIS, has been an effective counterforce to decades of Assad-induced divide and rule policy between minority groups in the country.

However, the implementation of these guarantees has proven to be very fragile, mainly due to ongoing attacks by Islamist militias supported by Turkey and the current regime under Ahmad al-Sharaa, the presence of ISIS sleeper cells, and the thousands of ISIS detainees for whom no international solution exists. Additionally, strategic concerns by minority groups such as

Christians, who do not want to be targeted under shifting power structures for siding with the Kurds, are key examples to how complicated it is for religious minorities these days to gauge who they can make political alliances with. While the social contract offers a normative standard and the Kurdish population remains one of the most progressive and open in the Middle East, the environment for religious minorities across the region, therefore, continues to be shaped by violence, displacement, and external interference.

The Fall of the Assad Regime and Minority Displacement

On 8 December 2024, the long-standing rule of Bashar al-Assad officially collapsed, when opposition forces, spearheaded by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) under Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known under the nom de guerre Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, and other factions, captured Damascus, marking the end of more than two decades of Assad's presidency. In the post-regime vacuum, religious minority communities in AANES found themselves caught between institutional promise and security collapse. This is due to the fact that both HTS as well as other Islamist militias from the Syrian National Army (SNA) were not only heavily supported by Turkey in invading Kurdish lands in Afrin in 2018 and around Girespi and Serekaniye in 2019 but are well known and well established Islamist fighters that bear the responsibility of thousands of Kurds, particularly Yazidis killed in the region since the very beginning of the Syrian civil war.

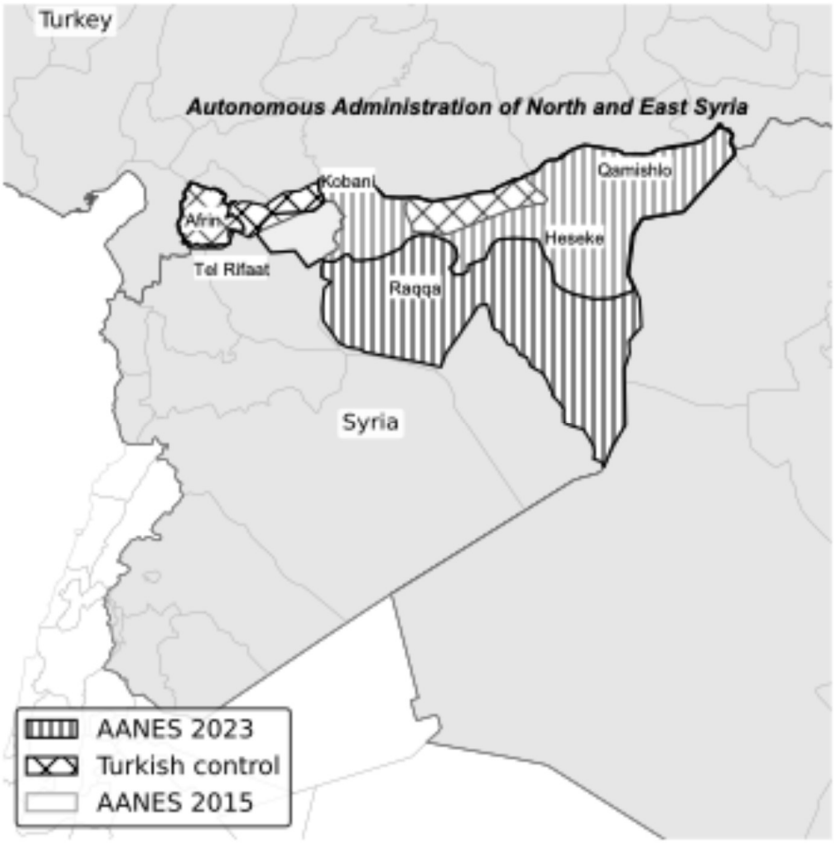

Figure 1: Development of Territories controlled by AANES (Map by author)

While public reporting on the abuse of religious minorities by these Islamists started slowly with news on the attacks on Alawites in Latakia in Spring 2025 or on Druze in Suwayda in Summer 2025, the attacks against Kurds in AANES and particularly Yazidis started right from the first hours of the takeover. This has been particularly tragic, as these populations were residing in Tel Rifaat camps south of the Afrin region, as they were already displaced due to the Turkish takeover of Afrin in 2018. For instance, Yezidi families fled from the Shehba camp to the NES region after militia attacks and massacres, underscoring how the statutory rights of minorities overlay a landscape of ongoing trauma and displacement. Kurdish students in the Latakia region were also reportedly killed during the chaotic transitional period, highlighting the rising trans-regional vulnerability of minorities. Solidarity protests for Christian and Druze communities surfaced in places such as Qamishlo and Heseke, emphasising how the departure of the Assad government did not equate to automatic safety for religious minorities.

Nevertheless, Mazloum Abdi, the General Commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), met with Ahmed al-Sharaa in Damascus on 10 March 2025 to negotiate the future of the autonomous administration and its forces within the new Syrian political landscape, hoping to avert such future massacres by gaining a political agreement. The meeting resulted in an initial framework to integrate the SDF and internal security units into the national defense structure while maintaining their internal cohesion and command. Both sides agreed to coordinate on security, border control, and the management of key resources, and to open further discussions on constitutional recognition of the region's self-administration and cultural rights. For the leadership in the northeast, the encounter represented cautious recognition of their political legitimacy but also a test of whether the Sharaa government would translate these commitments into genuine decentralization rather than renewed central control.

Sharaa, HTS, al-Nusra and the Legacy of Extremism

The figure of current Syrian interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa, also known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, warrants close attention. Emerging from the Syrian insurgency, he was an al-Qaida operative in Iraq in the 2000s. He led al-Nusra Front, the al-Qaida affiliate in Syria after 2011, before transforming it into HTS in 2017. Al Nusra's early years were defined by suicide attacks, sectarian targeting, and an ideology that denied space to minorities such as Alawites, Druze, and Christians. The group also fought the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) in the early days of the AANES, launching assaults on Afrin, Kobani, and Tel Rifaat under slogans that echoed Ba'athist accusations of Kurdish separatism.

Sharaa's current political model indeed blends Islamist governance with Arab nationalist mobilization and strong anti-Kurdish rhetoric. His movement uses the language of Sunni Arab supremacy, often portraying Kurdish self-rule as a foreign or Zionist plot. Many of his supporters openly praise figures like Saddam Hussein, reflecting how Ba'athist and Islamist discourses have merged into a single framework of exclusion. This continuity shows that beneath Sharaa's rebranding as a political leader lies an ideology that still treats Kurdish autonomy as a threat to national unity rather than a legitimate form of pluralism. This fundamental ideological tendency, deeply entrenched in the pro-Sharaa factions of Syrian society in Syria and abroad,

makes it incredibly hard to see a base under which the April agreement could be institutionalized and under which a progressive project like AANES can have a guarantee of survival.

Sharaa's main selling point is that he turned his organization from an insurgent faction into a semi-state actor and was able to manage thousands of internally displaced Syrians in and around the Idlib region in north-western Syria in times when the West, particularly the EU, did everything to avoid new refugee movements. His role in the overthrow of the Assad regime allowed him to position HTS and its affiliates at the center of the transitional governance structure. By redistributing formerly Assad-run businesses to his family members and political aides, and by opening Syria to foreign investment now that Western sanctions against Syria have been lifted, he creates an economically self-interested base to entrench his legitimacy.

In January 2025, he was appointed president for the transitional period, authorized to form a legislative council until a new constitution is drafted. Yet his record, the inclusion of commanders accused of abuses, and the persistence of anti-Kurdish and anti-minority rhetoric raise serious doubts about whether this leadership can support an inclusive postwar order. One such figure is Mohammad Hussein al Jasim, known as Abu Amsha, commander of the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade, a Turkish-backed militia active in Afrin, Girespi, and Serekaniye. The U.S. Treasury has sanctioned the group for human rights abuses, including the forced displacement of Kurdish families, abductions, property seizures, and sexual violence. Abu Amsha's appointment as an advisor for security affairs within Sharaa's administration demonstrates how militias implicated in violence against minorities have been absorbed into new power structures in North and East Syria. This integration of perpetrators into governance further erodes the promise of minority protection enshrined in the AANES Social Contract.

Turkey's Role in the Destruction of North and East Syria

Turkish operations in northern Syria further complicate the situation for religious minorities. Between late November and early December 2024, Turkish-backed forces launched operations such as "Dawn of Freedom" and offensives in Manbij and Kobani, which caused widespread civilian displacement and infrastructure destruction. In the Turkish-occupied zones of Afrin and Serekaniye, minority Yezidi, Kurdish, and Christian communities have reported ongoing harassment, arbitrary detentions, and forced demographic change. Human Rights Watch, as well as the Rojava Information Center, documents the routine extortion and abuse of civilians by SNA factions. These security and demographic pressures risk rendering meaningless the formal guarantees of religious freedom and self-organization in the AANES legal charter.

Overall, none of the mentioned developments can be understood without regarding the Turkish role in it. Turkey has been the most decisive external actor in shaping the fate of North and East Syria. Its involvement goes far beyond border security and represents a long-standing strategy to eliminate Kurdish self-administration and the pluralistic model of the AANES regarding women, religious minorities, and all parts of Syrian society. While claiming to combat terrorism, Turkey repeatedly attacked Kurdish regions during the most critical phases of the joint anti-ISIS campaign. In August 2016, as the Syrian Democratic Forces advanced toward Raqqa, Turkish forces launched Operation Euphrates Shield, occupying Jarablus and al-Bab and halting the Kurdish front. Again, in October 2019, only months after the liberation of Baghouz, the last

ISIS stronghold, Turkey invaded Girespi and Serekaniye, displacing over 200,000 civilians and killing hundreds. Despite these direct attacks on its leading partner against ISIS, the United States did not intervene, prioritizing its alliance with Turkey over the protection of the local population.

Turkey's actions are not isolated military incidents but part of a broader geopolitical project. Through its control over occupied areas such as Afrin, Girespi, and Serekaniye, Ankara runs parallel administrations, introduces the Turkish lira as legal tender, controls schools and local councils, and integrates these regions economically and institutionally into its own provinces. Turkish companies dominate local trade, and the administration operates under direct oversight of Turkish governors from bordering districts. This form of annexation is accompanied by demographic engineering, where Kurdish and Yezidi residents are displaced and replaced by Arab families loyal to Turkey or by former militia members. Life for non-muslim communities is rendered impossible.

Beyond the battlefield, Turkey has built a network of proxy forces and paramilitary organizations, most notably SADAT, which has facilitated recruitment, training, and logistical support for Islamist groups, including ISIS fighters who received medical care in Turkish border towns. Turkey has also become a central transit state for ISIS members moving between Iraq, Syria, and Europe. This pattern reveals that Ankara's policy toward jihadist actors is shaped less by ideology than by its strategic interest in weakening Kurdish forces.

International silence has enabled this expansion. The 2016 EU-Turkey anti-migrant pact turned Ankara into Europe's gatekeeper, giving it political leverage and shielding it from accountability for human rights violations in a time when Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's authoritarian turn was the most evident. Meanwhile, Turkey's growing military industry, centered on its Bayraktar drone systems, has elevated its global status and allowed it to wage sustained air campaigns against Kurdish areas without international condemnation. These drones, produced by companies closely linked to the ruling AKP, have become the cornerstone of Turkey's military dominance in Syria and Iraq, and there is no doubt that without Turkish training and equipment, HTS and SNA would not have been able to make the advances that they made in recent years. Turkey's hostility toward Kurdish autonomy, therefore, cannot be separated from the broader question of religious freedom and minority protection in North and East Syria. The destruction of Kurdish-led institutions, the forced displacement of Yezidis and Christians, and the empowerment of extremist militias are not collateral effects of the war but the direct outcome of Ankara's regional strategy. As long as this policy remains unchallenged and Western governments continue to treat Turkey as a strategic ally, the survival of the AANES and the protection of its religious communities will remain structurally impossible.

Given the fact that refuge to the West is broadly rendered illegal and highly dangerous, this amounts to a de facto push of marginalized communities into the fatal hands of Islamist occupation.

Conclusion: Anti-ISIS Efforts, U.S. Policy Ambiguities and Minority Rights

The region remains central to the global fight against ISIS, yet international policy toward it continues to be defined by contradiction. While the AANES and its military structures have been indispensable partners in counterterrorism, the United States has sent inconsistent and often contradictory signals. U.S. officials have repeatedly affirmed support for the Syrian Democratic Forces. Yet, President Donald Trump's invitation to Ahmad al-Sharaa, without extending the same to AANES representatives, illustrated the selective legitimacy granted to local actors. This ambivalence creates deep uncertainty for the religious and ethnic minorities of the northeast, who depend on external recognition for the protection of their fragile autonomy.

When asked in October 2025 how Washington envisions integrating the AANES into the future Syrian state, former CIA director David Petraeus suggested that Kurdish forces could play a role similar to that of the Kurdish Peshmerga in post-2003 Iraq, functioning within the Syrian army as specialized anti-terror units. Yet this vision reflects a fundamental flaw in U.S. policy: it reduces Kurdish participation to a security function while denying them full institutional and political representation. The precedent of Iraq, where Kurdish authority was anchored in constitutional guarantees and negotiation leverage, stands in sharp contrast to the current U.S. approach in Syria.

This contradiction is most visible in the operations that eliminated ISIS leaders Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in 2019 and Abu Ibrahim al Hashimi al Qurayshi in 2022, missions conducted with the essential assistance of the SDF's YAT anti-terror forces in the very areas of Idlib controlled and monitored by Turkey. The irony is striking: while Kurdish troops risked their lives dismantling ISIS in zones overseen by Turkish intelligence and in HTS territory, the same actors have been allowed to bomb their towns and occupy their territories without consequence. This dynamic encapsulates the broader failure of U.S. and Western strategy in Syria: an approach that valorizes Kurdish sacrifice while undermining Kurdish survival. The 2023 Social Contract of the AANES enshrines freedom of religion and self-organization for minorities, yet these promises exist within a structural reality of violence, occupation, and impunity. The transition from insurgency to governance has empowered actors such as Sharaa and Abu Amsha, whose records of sectarian violence stand in direct opposition to the pluralistic ideals that define the northeast. The inclusion of such figures in national structures has perpetuated systems of exclusion rather than reform.

For the United States and its allies, the central challenge now lies in transforming formal commitments into lived protections. This requires linking all forms of assistance to the enforcement of minority rights, imposing real sanctions on armed groups integrated into governance, and investing in independent local institutions capable of accountability. Without a decisive shift toward protecting the AANES as a legitimate political entity rather than a temporary military asset, the region's minorities will continue to hold rights only on paper while living under the threat of renewed persecution.

If this path continues, the legacy of North and East Syria, a rare experiment in coexistence, gender equality, and religious freedom in the Middle East, will not be destroyed by open warfare, but by the slow attrition of indifference. For those unwilling to live under the rule of a former al-Qaida technocracy, there will simply be nowhere left to turn.