



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Gayle Manchin, Vice Chair

Thank you very much, Chair Perkins.

Since our 2019 Annual Report, and again in this year's report, USCIRF has paid particular attention to the relative positive opening for freedom of religion or belief that has emerged under the AANES. There, we have seen religious freedom take root and Syria's remarkable diversity flourish. Muslims may practice as they see fit; Yazidis are protected from radical Islamist violence; Christians can express their faith freely and openly, including converts from other traditions; and even the non-religious have a safe haven—a true rarity in the region. 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 safe refuge there in AANES territory.

The AANES has its share of interreligious and interethnic challenges, which each of its various constituent communities experience uniquely as a diverse collection of religious, ethnic, and political identities jostle for influence. Christian communities have complained of the role of Kurdish nationalism in local school

curriculum, for example, and some ethnic Arab tribes have been wary of closely cooperating with authorities who they perceive as Kurdish-dominated. However, to their credit, the AANES and its military counterpart, the SDF, have made substantial progress in overcoming such concerns. In fact, the Lead Inspector General's Report to Congress on Operation Inherent Resolve for the first quarter of 2020 recognized those lingering concerns while noting that "the SDF and SDC made 'great strides' toward incorporating Arab military and civil leaders, as well as Syriac Christians, into military and political deliberations." This openness among authorities in northeast Syria to promote religious freedom and to improve its own inclusivity stands in stark contrast to the Ba'athist cult of personality that reins over regime-controlled areas as well as to the religious oppression that Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham and its fellow radical Islamist groups bring to others.

These successes also stand in stark contrast to the poor conditions in territory that has fallen under the control of the Turkish military and its allies inside Syria. I will now turn to my colleague, Vice Chair Nadine Maenza, to discuss this particular threat.