

**USCIRF Hearing on Safeguarding Religious Freedom Conditions in Northeastern
Syria
Hassan Hassan
Director, Non-state Actors and Geopolitics, Center for Global Policy
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Chairman Tony Perkins, Vice Chair Gayle Manchin, and Vice Chair Nadine Maenza,

Thank you for holding this important hearing at a critical time as the Islamic State (ISIS) has recently shown serious signs of resurgence across Iraq and Syria, threatening communities in the northern parts of Iraq and Syria that only recently began to return to normalcy and rebuild after a period of quiet last year. In both countries, the areas where ISIS seeks to return are home to ancient ethnic and religious minorities that have increasingly come under attack, and sometimes close to annihilation, over the past two decades.

The latest ISIS resurgence happened because the pressure against it, since the collapse of its physical caliphate last year, started to be lifted, because of a series of events, including a brief American withdrawal from Syria that allowed Turkey to sweep in and invade some parts of the north.

President Donald Trump's announcement in October that the United States would withdraw from Syria was followed promptly by a Turkish attempt to invade Syria and expel the Kurdish-dominated and U.S.-backed Kurdish forces from the north. This led to the displacement of an estimated 200,000.

Washington eventually reversed its decision to leave Syria, but the map of northeastern Syria had already changed, and the confusion left an opening for ISIS. The chaos then led the Kurds to strike a deal with Russia and the Syrian regime in a desperate bid to stop Turkey from seizing their areas.

(On the other side of the border, Iraq also faced crippling challenges that benefited ISIS, such as unprecedented mass protests that rocked Baghdad and the south and forced the government to resign, followed by political paralysis as Iraqis tried and failed (until last week) to agree on a new prime minister. Additionally, growing tensions between the United States and various Iraqi forces since December, which peaked after the killing of Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani on Iraqi soil, made it harder for Iraqi or international forces to focus on ISIS.)

Squandering the Gains

These political developments in Iraq and Syria undid much of the work done in the past two years to properly defeat ISIS, and squandered those gains. They eroded trust in the U.S. ability to protect the forces that heroically fought to defeat ISIS, and those events left a sense of loss and confusion and enabled the group to find gaps to rebuild and regenerate.

So, since April this year, there has been a spike in attacks by the terrorist organization in Syria and Iraq, and elsewhere, with signs of increased visibility and mobility in villages and towns across the two countries. The ability for the organization to launch a series of large-scale and coordinated attacks comes at a time when life started to return to these areas, and members of religious and ethnic minorities live in relative peace and thriving governance.

If the current trends continue, the group's attacks and capabilities in the next year will likely be comparable to its activities in 2012 and the early months of 2013, albeit not on the scale of the exponential growth seen later that year or in 2014. In other words, ISIS is recovering but it has not yet established a firm foothold that would enable it to frequently carry out large-scale attacks in Iraq and Syria, a scenario that will depend largely on continued U.S. support.

Setbacks for Locals and Minorities

These changes are critical. Minorities have seen tremendous progress in northwestern Syria, not just in terms of the peace and quiet in that area over the past year or so, but also in the sense that they could finally attain fundamental ethnic and religious rights that the current regime in Syria has historically denied them as it tried to create a uniform Baathist ideology based on pan-Arab nationalism.

This progress has largely been a result of cooperation with the U.S. to defeat ISIS. However, this remains work in progress, and recent trends — the U.S. withdrawal and the ISIS resurgence — threaten to disrupt this process.

The Assyrian Christian community Bethnahrin Women's Protection Forces continue to recruit and to train local forces. They are very concerned about the Turkish-backed offensive and what it will mean for Christian communities going forward. They also say they are concerned about the return of ISIS and its implications on protecting religious freedom. The Yazidi community continues to feel the impact of the tragedy of the Islamic State's genocide. The Yazidi House in northeastern Syria is focused on finding young women who might still be held by families of ISIS and living inside al-Hol camp. Fear means that they are sometimes not willing to tell camp authorities that they are from the Yazidi community. The Yazidi House is working hard to reunite families separated by this tragedy since 2014. Overall the U.S. presence continues to give leverage to the Syrian Democratic Forces.

So we have a case of fragile stability that depends largely on continued U.S. support against both ISIS and the vicious regime in Damascus.

Historical Annihilation of Religious Diversity and Tolerance

As someone from that region in eastern Syria, I saw how the social and religious fabric in that area transformed in recent decades, affecting not just ancient religious minorities but also the moderate Muslim religious schools that dominated that area for centuries.

In both Iraq and Syria, the mystical branch of Islam known as Sufism struggled to resist repeated attempts over the past century by the type of creeping fundamentalism practiced in Saudi Arabia to take a foothold in that region. In the past, those attempts came from outside in the form of raids and foreign influence. Today they exist in the form of jihadism that operate inside Syria and Iraq.

The Syrian conflict was an opportunity for these extremist forces. For example, when Saudi Arabia and other countries interfered in the Syrian file and took the lead, it supported jihadist networks in Syria, directly through the government or by allowing individuals to support them, as they did in the Afghan war against the Soviet Union at the end of the 1970s. These forces were provided with weapons and money, and this enabled them to spread and gain strength.

The U.S. has done a great deal for these communities, from defeating ISIS to helping mothers and fathers across the region to live in freedom and to practice their faith. The U.S. must keep the pressure on the Islamic State and not allow this organization to regroup, and not allow this area to be subject to renewed influence by regional countries determined to attack these communities. When it comes to ISIS, what starts in Syria will not stay there and this matters to U.S. security and its interests in regional stability, prosperity and security. So this is just a perfect example of how the U.S. can protect its interests and be a force of good in the world.

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