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INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING ON SAFEGUARDING
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN NORTHEAST SYRIA

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Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR PERKINS: Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for attending today's hearing on Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria. I would like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us and offering their insights and expertise on this very important topic.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, as it is known, is an independent bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA.

The Commission monitors the universal right to freedom of religion abroad, using international standards to do so, and makes policy recommendations to Congress, the President, and to the Secretary of State. But today USCIRF exercises its statutory authority to convene this hearing under the International Religious Freedom Act, and of course in this age of the coronavirus, this is the first time we are conducting a virtual hearing at USCIRF.

Before we begin today, and our focus on northeast Syria, I would like to first acknowledge that at USCIRF we recognize and we lament the tremendous suffering that the people of Syria have experienced over the last nine years.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's refusal since 2011 to relinquish or even release his iron grip on power assured that what began as a grassroots call for freedom subsequently devolved into an armed civil war.

That conflict gradually pulled regional and international players into its orbit, and it swung open the door to violent radical Islamist groups like Hezbollah, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, and the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

Although today's hearing is focused on a rare, if vulnerable, bright spot amid this conflict, the devastating scale of human suffering across this beautiful and ancient land rich in biblical history is not far from our thoughts today.

The northeastern area of Syria has

represented one of the most pivotal theaters of conflict during this tumultuous decade for the country and the entire region. It was in this area that religious and ethnic minorities--and indeed civilians from all walks of life--faced the scourge of ISIS, whose base of operations lay in the strategic center of Dayr al-Zur, and it was in the northeastern pocket of Kobane that Syrian Democratic Forces staged what began as a last stand but, with the support of U.S. military and a committed multinational force, became a four-year effort to turn back and eventually defeat ISIS.

It was also in this part of Syria that those same Syrian Democratic Forces and their supporters forged a unique initiative to introduce local governance, autonomous from the Assad regime--based on principles of inclusion, diverse representation, and personal freedoms, including religious freedom, that aligns more closely with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights than anything else in that region.

The initiative evolved into what is now

known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. At the same time, a substantive and largely successful effort was underway to transform the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, into one that better represented the ethnic and religious diversity of the area: Kurdish and Arab, Muslim and Christian, and others.

Our purpose today is not to uncritically uphold the northeast Syria as an inter-religious utopia. Instead, it is to highlight what Syria, the Middle East, and indeed the world stands to lose if we fail to uphold and support and to protect the advancement of religious freedom in this vulnerable area.

I will now turn to my colleague, Vice Chair Gayle Manchin, to discuss the progress toward advancing religious freedom that local initiatives have produced over the last several years.

Vice Chair Manchin.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you very much, Chair Tony 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 Autonomous Administration.

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 for this 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 the Autonomous Administration territory.

The Autonomous Administration has its share of interreligious and interethnic challenges, which each of its various constituent communities experience uniquely as a diverse reflection of religious, ethnic and political identities who

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 Autonomous Administration and its military counterpart, the SDF, have made substantial progress in overcoming these 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 the Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham and its fellow radical Islamist groups brings to others.

These successes 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.

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you very much, Vice Chair Manchin.

As both of my colleagues have alluded to, circumstances in the border region between Turkey and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria have deteriorated since early 2018 and again late in 2019, with significant ramifications for our topic of concern today.

First, in February of 2018, while the Syrian Democratic Forces, the SDF, was working with the U.S. coalition in fighting ISIS, Turkey and its Islamist allies, many who are known former members

of ISIS and Al-Qaeda, who are now in Turkey's Free Syrian Army, invaded and seized control of Afrin, a religious and ethnically diverse area in north-central Syria, that was at the time under the control of the Autonomous Administration.

This occupation established a deeply disturbing precedent for what was to come: not only were Kurds, Christians and Yazidis chased from their homes, and sacred sites desecrated and destroyed, but Turkey and its Free Syrian Army escorted into those abandoned homes hundreds of mostly Sunni Muslim families, who had fled regime-controlled areas.

In October of 2019, the United States announced significant draw back on its military presence alongside the SDF in northeast Syria and signaled tacit approval for Turkey to cross the border.

In December, former Deputy Assistant Secretary for Department of Defense Policy in the Middle East told Foreign Policy Magazine, quote: "Looking back at it, one could say we helped

facilitate the military incursion, because essentially we helped the Turks do reconnaissance, and since the SDF were with us, they believed they weren't going to be attacked and disabled several of their defensive positions."

That incursion and subsequent establishment of an occupation zone atop the Autonomous Administration governed territory has been disastrous for local communities. It has led to the displacement of around 100,000 civilians and persistent shelling of towns and villages, including some that are traditionally home to Muslim Kurds and Arabs, as well as Christian and Yazidi populations.

I visited northeast Syria in late 2019 where I was able to see for myself the devastation brought upon the Christian villages near the areas that Turkey had invaded. I met with religious and community leaders and heard about the remarkable religious freedom conditions under the Autonomous Administration and how that is now non-existent in the area Turkey occupies.

Turkey is now threatening the crucial population centers of Kobane and Qamishli, even as it has used the world's nearly complete inattention to forcefully repopulate abandoned towns with refugees from other parts of Syria--just as it had done in Afrin--actions that Genocide Watch has just indicated are war crimes fitting the legal definition of "Crimes Against Humanity."

This situation directly endangers the precious ethnic and religious diversity that has long marked the northeast, and it threatens the viability and stability of the Autonomous Administration--a government that has explicitly called for the United States for help and support to govern, to protect, and to provide religious freedom to civilians under its jurisdiction. The United States cannot look the other way as this disaster unfolds.

To this end, we recommend that the U.S. government exert significant pressure on Turkey to provide a timeline for its withdrawal from Syria, while ensuring that neither its military nor its

Free Syrian Army surrogate expand their area of control in northeast Syria, continue their religious and ethnic cleansing in the area, or otherwise abuse the rights of vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities.

Second, we recommend an expansion of U.S. engagement with and assistance to the Autonomous Administration, including lifting sanctions for only the Autonomous Administration-governed areas. It is also important the new Caesar Act sanctions, passed by Congress to penalize the Assad regime, are implemented in a way that does not negatively impact the Autonomous Administration.

We also recommend that the U.S. contribute to efforts, through relevant nongovernmental organizations and like-minded international partners, to fund and develop local programs to further promote religious tolerance, alleviate sectarian tensions, and advance religious freedom and related human rights. We hope these programs are used to support and expand civil society, being careful not undercut the Autonomous

Administration's governance.

In support of these recommendations, we are here today to refocus attention on conditions in north and east Syria, and to call for U.S. policy to support religious freedom in the region. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on these vital and complex issues.

Thank you, and I will now turn the floor back to Chair Perkins.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Vice Chair Maenza.

We will now turn to our panelists. And for those joining us, let me just kind of give you the rundown how we will proceed. We have four panelists. We're so grateful that they have joined us. I will introduce them individually.

You have a link or will be sent a link to the website that has their full bios so you can take advantage of that and look at their extensive history and experience, and then we will engage in some Q&A with them following all of the panelists making their presentations.

Our first panelist is Amy Austin Holmes. She is currently a fellow at the Wilson Center and Visiting Scholar at the Middle East Initiative of Harvard University, while on leave from her tenured position at the American University in Cairo.

And we're grateful that she has joined us today. Ms. Holmes, please proceed with your testimony.

DR. HOLMES: Thank you very much for inviting me to testify here today. All of us here are aware of the long list of atrocities committed by the Islamic State including: forced religious conversion, mass displacement, the destruction of churches and shrines, and the enslavements, especially of Yezidi women and girls.

The defeat of the territorial Caliphate in March 2019 was truly a historic achievement of which all 82 members of the U.S.-led Global Coalition can be proud of. But we should ask ourselves honestly: who did the most, who sacrificed the most to defeat the caliphate and ensure the continued survival of endangered

religious minorities in Syria?

Who stopped the genocide? Without question, it was the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces. Over 10,000 young women and men gave their lives to defeat ISIS. And so the reason religious minorities like Christians and the Yezidis still survive, the reason they still exist in northeast Syria, is because of the SDF.

Now, I've carried out research in north and east Syria where I conducted the first survey of the Syrian Democratic Forces in all six regions under SDF control between 2015 and 2019.

My research shows how the Kurdish-led SDF evolved into a multi-ethnic, multi-religious force in which all the indigenous peoples of the region are represented. Arabs from every tribe, Assyrians, Syriacs, Armenians, Yezidis, Circassians and Syrian Turkmen fought alongside Kurds to defeat the Caliphate. So the SDF did not just protect religious minorities from ISIS, they also included them and promoted them within their ranks.

For more than five years, the SDF were

trained by the United States and protected by American air cover until a phone call between President Trump and President Erdogan on October 6. A few days later, Turkey launched a military invasion. Turkish soldiers and Islamist militias on their payroll carved out a chunk of northern Syria, displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians, committed war crimes, and now occupy the second-deadliest site of the Armenian genocide inside Syria.

So what threats do religious minorities, and particularly Yezidis and Christians, currently face from Turkey and the Turkish-backed opposition now referred to as the Syrian National Army? They 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.

They've been forcibly displaced and driven from their homes. Their places of worship have been destroyed, defaced, and looted. Even their cemeteries have been demolished and vandalized.

The international community has failed to take action. Indeed, the partial withdrawal of U.S. forces in October 2019 created a vacuum, allowing these crimes to take place.

Christian and Yezidi organizations warned that this would happen before the Turkish intervention. I myself warned multiple times already in an op-ed. In December 2018, in The Hill, I wrote an op-ed with the title "US Withdrawal from Syria Will Endanger Kurds, Arabs, Christians."

In May 2019, I published another article, "Descendants of Survivors, Syriac Christians, Oppose a Turkish Safe Zone in Syria." I wrote numerous other articles throughout the course of 2019 warning about what would happen.

The Syriac Strategic Research Center, based in northeast Syria, issued a statement on October 20, so just a few days after the Turkish invasion began. And I quote just two sentences from this report: "Our people, the Syriacs, Chaldeans-Assyrians-Arameans, as well as the

Armenian people, are the grandchildren of the survivors of the Ottoman Turkish genocide that happened in 1915."

"Turkey plans to ethnically cleanse our towns such as Derik, al-Qamishli, al-Hassaka, and the Tel Tamer villages of the Khabour region. Should Turkey be allowed to do this we will see the end of Christianity in this area."

This is a quote from an Armenian woman from the Tel Abyad village. She says, "There are no Armenians left in Tel Abyad. There is no help for us coming from outside. Only the Civilian Council of Raqqa helps us."

Pari Ibrahim, the Executive Director of the Free Yezidi Foundation, says: "The actions of Islamist extremist groups in certain areas of Syria, including Afrin and Northeast Syria, remind us of ISIS behavior in Sinjar and other parts of Iraq."

Now I want to just speak very briefly about the impact of the Turkish intervention in Afrin on the Yezidi community in particular and

then about the Turkish intervention in 2019 on both the Yezidi and Christian populations.

So since the Turkish intervention and occupation of Afrin in early 2018, all 23 Yezidi villages in Afrin are under Turkish control--all of them. All of the 19 Yezidi holy shrines are under Turkish control, and many of them have been defaced or looted.

An estimated 90 percent of the Yezidi population have fled Afrin. Now, it is difficult to get exact statistics, but an estimated between 20 and 30,000 Yezidis were believed to have lived in Afrin prior to the Turkish intervention. Now only two to 3,000 remain.

I provided a list of Yezidis in my written testimony who have been kidnapped or killed since the Turkish occupation of Afrin began.

It's important to point out that some of the militias that are working and operating in Afrin under Turkish command demand, as I said, exorbitant sums of money when they kidnap people. For example, some people have demanded, some of the

militias have demanded ransoms of \$9,000 to secure the release of Yezidis and Kurds and others who have been kidnapped.

This is an impossible amount of money for a person living in Afrin to pay, and so even if by some miracle those Yezidis or the Kurds or others who have been kidnapped by the Turkish-backed militias in Afrin and elsewhere are able to come up with that money, for example, from family members living in Europe or the United States or elsewhere, and then secure the release, they live in constant fear of being kidnapped again, and there are family members who have had multiple members of their own family, of the same family, kidnapped repeatedly.

And so even if they survive, this is a way to force demographic change, to force those few remaining Yezidis who still live in Afrin to leave, and so this is a way to engage in ethnic cleansing and demographic change without actually killing people because they cannot afford to pay this ransom. They cannot afford that.

And I believe that U.S. sanctions on Syria

actually may increase the number of kidnappings that happen because of the dire economic situation and the fact that ordinary Syrians are having a hard time buying basic necessities, including food, and so further research is needed to understand whether our sanctions on Syria are actually increasing the likelihood of these kinds of kidnappings to happen.

In the targeted intervention in October 2019, there were 137 Christian families who were displaced when Turkey invaded during the so-called Peace Spring operation. I also provided a list in my written testimony of those Christians who have been displaced and the villages from which they were forcibly displaced.

As I mentioned, the second-deadliest site of the Armenian genocide known as Ras al-Ayn in Arabic, or Serekaniye in Kurdish, is under the control of Turkey and Islamist militias, and there is a map that I provided in my written testimony.

In areas that they occupy, the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army are attempting to

dismantle the laws that guarantee religious equality, religious freedom, and gender equality that were created by the Autonomous Administration.

This includes attempts to force Yezidis, in particular, to renounce their religion and convert to Islam.

This includes signs that have been placed in Afrin, for example, by Ahrar al-Sharqiya that demand the women wear a veil. Women have been arrested by Turkish-backed militias in Afrin and elsewhere who travel without a male relative. This is the same policy that ISIS enforced on women in areas that ISIS used to control. They required that Muslim women if they wanted to leave their homes had to travel with a male guardian known as a mahram.

And so these same policies are being enforced by some, maybe not all, but some of the Islamist militias that are part of the Syrian National Army.

There are some areas that Turkey does not yet control that are on the frontlines, however, of

the areas that they control after the so-called Peace Spring operation in the October 17 Ceasefire Agreement negotiated by Vice President Pence and Pompeo.

There are 35 Assyrian Christian villages within less than five and six miles of those front lines. Some villages are even closer while some are farther away. They're located along the Khabour Valley, and I have also provided a map to show that proximity.

So the Syrian Democratic Forces are the only armed group in Syria that has a policy of not discriminating on the basis of religion, ethnicity or gender. My survey data shows that the SDF has incorporated members of all religious groups, of all ethnic groups. Arabs from every major and minor tribe in Syria have members who have joined the SDF.

And so finally I would like to close by making a few recommendations. Again, in my written testimony, I listed 16 recommendations. I'd like to just mention a few here.

First, unless Turkey withdraws from the areas that it occupied, including Ras al-Ayn, Tal Abyad, and Afrin, it is unlikely that the original inhabitants regardless of their religion, regardless of their ethnicity, it is unlikely that they will ever return to their homes. It is unlikely that the Yezidis and Christians who lived there for hundreds of years, it is unlikely they will ever be able to return home unless Turkey withdraws.

And therefore I agree with the recommendation in the USCIRF report that was just published recently that the United States must set a clear timeline and demand that Turkey withdraw from the areas it occupied.

Number two, I recommend that USCIRF or members of Congress should host a high-level fact-finding mission and visit the areas in Syria under Turkish control, in particular the areas that they control since the October 17 Ceasefire Agreement which again the U.S. negotiated with Turkey.

The purpose of this should be to conduct,

investigate, witness, see what is happening, conduct a survey, a census, both with people that are now living in that occupied region as well as those who have been forcibly displaced and to make the findings publicly available.

And third, the current stabilization efforts of the United States and our allies in northeast Syria are insufficient. Unless homes and schools are rebuilt, grievances will emerge, the Christian region around Tel Tamer and the Khabour area lack basic necessities, including electricity and adequate roads.

And so the two main reasons that are preventing those Christians who fled, again including Assyrians, Syrian Christians, et cetera, it's a diverse Christian minority, but the two main reasons that are preventing all of them from returning is, one, the fact that Turkey either already occupies their land and their homes, or the Islamist militias on their payroll, or they're encroaching on their land.

And the lack of public services, the lack

of electricity and basic services are needed to live in that region. And so this is why the stabilization efforts of the U.S. are not sufficient. There needs to be some level of reconstruction.

And finally the U.S. should advocate for the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria to have a seat at the negotiating table in Geneva because it is unacceptable for one-third of the country of Syria to be excluded from the talks that should determine the future of Syria.

Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Ms. Holmes, thank you very much for your testimony. We will turn to questions in just a moment after we hear from other panelists.

Our next panelist, Sara Kayyali, is the Syrian researcher in the Middle East and North Africa Division, investigating human rights and international humanitarian law violations in Syria with the Human Rights Watch.

Prior to joining Human Rights Watch, she

was the legal analyst to Syrian Legal Development Programme, where she provided research and capacity-building support on human rights and humanitarian legal issues arising out of the Syrian conflict.

Sara, thank you so much for joining us.
You may proceed.

MS. KAYYALI: Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide my testimony.

Our starting point is that residents in northeast Syria have borne witness to egregious human rights violations and instability over the last decade.

The Syrian government's brutal campaign silenced citizens' demands for justice and freedom with the backing of its allies, Russia and Iran, was followed by the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in 2013. The group sustained a reign of terror by kidnapping and executing thousands who expressed dissent or who were perceived as a threat, violently restricted residents' fundamental freedoms, and damaged or destroyed religious sites.

The partial territorial defeat of ISIS in Syria strengthened the Autonomous Administration's control over the region, but it also generated a set of questions and expectations with significant human rights consequences.

But before I go into that, I want to take a step back and address the geopolitical context, which has ramifications on the human rights situation in northeast Syria.

Northeast Syria has suffered a decade of hostilities, with a large segment of the infrastructure destroyed, including by the anti-ISIS coalition. Despite its role in defeating ISIS, the Autonomous Administration's position was, and remains, precarious. Significant territory is now under its control, but it has few resources and even less international recognition to govern, resulting in an overreliance on a single actor--the United States.

The Autonomous Administration is also the detaining authority of tens of thousands of ISIS suspects and affiliated families, including at

least 14,000 non-Iraqi foreigners. The international community however has effectively absolved itself of all responsibility for these individuals, including countries whose own citizens traveled to Syria to join ISIS.

Meanwhile, Russia and the Syrian government are awaiting any opportunity to retake the territory, while Turkey treats the Kurdish-led authorities as an existential threat to be stamped out at all costs.

These dynamics, as you know, played out detrimentally last year when Turkey and Syrian non-state armed actors launched an offensive on northeast Syria following the U.S.' announcement of withdrawal.

So where are we now? Based on the above, I see three major threats to human rights in northeast Syria.

Among the most important is the question of what happens to ISIS suspects and affiliated families who the Autonomous Administration detains in deeply degrading and often inhumane conditions?

The Autonomous Administration's justice system is unable to prosecute them in a fair and expeditious manner. Their families are being held in locked desert camps in appalling conditions in places that Human Rights Watch has witnessed firsthand during multiple visits.

The international community's abandonment of these detainees not only means that those innocent among them remain indefinitely detained, but it also means that those implicated in serious crimes may never be prosecuted, denying victims their day in court.

The U.S. 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.

Relatedly, there is a question of how authorities will fulfil their obligations to support families of the people who have been

kidnapped by ISIS. ISIS detained thousands whose fate remains unknown, and more than 20 mass graves have been found in areas formerly held by the group.

In some, local teams have begun exhuming these graves, but support and resources for their efforts has been inadequate. And authorities have not coordinated or systematized the limited local efforts to take up this issue.

The coalition, and the U.S. in particular, should provide the support necessary to find out what's happened to the missing, including prioritizing obtaining information from ISIS suspects without resorting to unlawful means, sharing information with the families in a timely manner, and allocating resources and the political will necessary to heal the violations caused by ISIS and the harm that it's caused to these families.

The second major threat is Turkey's incursion into northeast Syria. As has been mentioned, in October 2019, Turkey and the Syrian

National Army invaded territory in northeast Syria that had been held by the Autonomous Administration.

Since the incursion began, Human Rights Watch has documented a number of violations by Turkey and factions it supports, including indiscriminately shelling civilian areas, carrying out extrajudicial executions, unlawfully occupying private civilian homes and looting the owners' property.

So far with the exception of one publicized case, neither Turkey nor the Syrian factions it supports have conducted any investigations into these wrongdoings. And the threat increases as we speak.

Finally, the third human rights threat that we see in northeast Syria is related to the onset of coronavirus. Coronavirus has opened the door for potentially fatal human rights violations.

Human Rights Watch has documented Turkish authorities' failure to ensure adequate water supplies that can reach Kurdish-held areas in

northeast Syria. Since the start of the year, they've actually interrupted water pumping from a station that serves almost half a million individuals in Kurdish-held territories, compromising humanitarian agencies' ability to protect vulnerable communities in the pandemic.

Allies and friends of Turkey have been silent about these abuses. But they should call out Turkey, Turkey's proxies and urge them to respect the rights of residents in areas where it exercises control.

Restrictions on aid deliveries from Damascus and Iraq have also resulted in an exacerbation of conditions and places the right to health of two million people in the region at risk. The UN Security Council had earlier allowed UN agencies to transport aid to northeast Syria, and that border crossing was mainly used by the World Health Organization to supply medical aid.

But in January, the Security Council because of Russia's threats deauthorized the crossing, and the gap left by that decision has

translated into an inability to bring in the necessary medical supplies into northeast Syria to deal with the threat of the Covid virus.

While Russia and Syria have argued that the gap can be filled with supplies coming in from government-held areas, evidence shows that the combined restrictions from Damascus and the Security Council are threatening the operation of health care centers in northeast Syria and putting residents' lives at risk.

We've called on the UN Security Council to immediately reauthorize this border crossing, but should the UN Security Council fail to do so, the U.S. should work with the UN, INGOs, and Iraqi authorities to ensure that cross-border aid for northeast Syria continues to the greatest extent possible.

Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Sara, very much.

Our next panelist, Hassan Hassan, is director of the Non-state Actors and Geopolitics

program at the Center for Global Policy. His research focuses on militant movements, non-violent extremism and geopolitics in the Middle East.

He is a contributing writer for The Atlantic, Foreign Policy, and The Guardian.

Hassan, thank you so much for being with us today, and I look forward to your testimony.

MR. HASSAN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Vice Chairs, and fellow commissioners for this opportunity to testify.

I hope the sound is clear. This is a timely hearing as the Islamic State has recently shown serious signs of resurgence across Iraq and Syria.

This resurgence threatens communities in those areas previously controlled by ISIS, which have only--I mean these communities have only recently begun to return to normalcy and rebuild. In both countries, these areas that ISIS seeks to return to are home to ancient ethnic and religious minorities that over the past two decades have increasingly come under attack, sometimes close to

annihilation.

So, you know, the latest ISIS resurgence happened because--this is an important point-- because the pressure against it started to weaken since the United States with its local allies destroyed the physical caliphate last year, last spring.

The weakening of this pressure was the result of a number of events, including brief American withdrawal from Syria that allowed Turkey to sweep in and invade some parts of the Syrian north.

Washington eventually reversed its decision to leave Syria, of course, but that already kind of left an opening for ISIS, enabled Russia to take control of much of the territory that the U.S. with its local allies spent two years liberating inch by inch from ISIS.

And also some 200,000 people were said to have been displaced by the Turkish operations in the north.

These events ended much of the good work

done in the past five, six years to properly defeat ISIS and squandered those gains. They eroded, for example, the trust in the U.S.' ability to protect the forces that heroically fought to defeat ISIS and left a sense of loss and confusion and also 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 both Syria and Iraq as well as elsewhere, with signs of increased visibility and mobility in villages and towns across the two countries.

This ability for the organization to launch a series of large-scale coordinated attacks comes at a time when, as I said, life had started to return to these areas, and members of religious and ethnic minorities lived in relative peace and thriving governance, all in relative terms.

If the current trends continue, the group's attacks and capabilities in the next year will likely reach a level that cannot be reversed without even deeper American engagement as happened

after the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011.

After the defeat of ISIS caliphate last year, minorities, as you all mentioned before, have seen remarkable progress in northeastern Syria, not just in terms of the relative peace in the context of the Syrian conflict, but also in terms of their ability to attain fundamental ethnic and religious rights that the current regime in Damascus has historically denied them because it tried to promote a totalitarian Ba'athist ideology based on pan-Arab nationalism.

This progress--and then obviously ISIS came in and destroyed--continued the job. This progress has largely been a result of cooperation with the U.S. to defeat ISIS. But it's also important to emphasize that this remains a work in progress, and recent trends, the U.S. withdrawal to the ISIS resurgence, threaten to disrupt this progress of this process.

Forces affiliated with the Christian community, with the Yazidis, are still trying to--they're still living in that anxiety. They tried

to recruit local forces concerned about future Turkish attack and the return of ISIS. Yazidi community is still looking out for disappeared women that they fear they still live within ISIS families afraid to speak out because they might be punished by ISIS families.

Finally, I wanted to emphasize that the victims of these challenges are not just ethnic and religious minorities, but also the broader social and religious fabric in that area as it transformed over the past decades, including the religious schools, religious Muslim schools that dominated the area for centuries.

In both Iraq and Syria, the mystical, for example, branch of Islam known as Sufism faced waves of attempts over the past century by the type of fundamentalism known as Wahhabism practiced in Saudi Arabia to take a foothold in that region.

In the past, these attempts came from outside. Now they exist in Syria, and they are lurking. You know they're trying to dominate the area in the form of jihadism and so on.

The Syrian conflict presented that perfect opportunity for these extremist forces from outside. As you know, during the conflict, Syrian conflict, Saudi Arabia took the lead with other countries to intervene in Syria and Syrian conflict, but they instead of supporting the moderates and the people who rebelled against the Bashar al-Assad, they supported jihadi networks and revived the jihadi networks that we saw before in Iraq and Afghanistan in the past.

So these extremists were provided with massive weapons and money and this enabled them to spread and gain strength at the expense of people, ordinary people, who just wanted to live in dignity.

So when it comes to ISIS, what starts in Syria will not stay in Syria. And this matters to the U.S. security and its interests and regional stability, prosperity and security. So this is just I think a perfect example of how the U.S. can do good, protect its interests, and be a force, a constructive force in the world at the same time.

I think the U.S. has already done a great deal for these communities in northeastern Syria from defeating ISIS to helping mothers and fathers across the area to live in relative freedom and to practice their faith so the U.S. must keep the pressure on Islamic State and not allow this organization to regroup, but also not allow this area to be subjected to renewed influence by the regime as well as regional countries determined to attack these communities.

Thank you.

[No audio.]

DR. RUBIN: Chair Perkins, Vice Chair Manchin, Vice Chair Maenza, and honorable commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the importance of safeguarding religious freedom in northeast Syria.

I have gone into significant detail in my written testimony, and so let me be brief here. I've traveled to northeastern Syria twice, first in 2014 before the United States started working with Kurds in the region, and then in 2019, and I've

seen that the Autonomous Administration has lived up to its promises with respect to religious freedom.

Turkey's intervention, however, has imperiled this progress and 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.

An intolerant ideology guides Erdogan in his disdain not only for the region's non-Muslims but also his belief that regional Kurds are not only poor Muslims but that they are enabling a war against Islam. This belief he shares with the Islamist State.

The domination of Afrin by Turkey and the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army has fundamentally eroded religious liberty. Turkish-backed administrators refuse to register locals with Kurdish names, and the Turkish administration refuses to issue identification cards to Christian and minority women who do not cover their hair or

wear conservative islamic veils.

Turkish forces have razed Kurdish and minority graveyards in the region, actions more consistent with ethnic cleansing than counterterrorism.

The abandonment of Syrian Kurds last October came from after nearly a year-long internal campaign by U.S. Special Envoy James Jeffrey, a former U.S. Ambassador to Turkey. His public remarks against the backdrop of Turkish saber-rattling were reminiscent of April Glaspie's infamous remarks days before Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. His aides were even less nuanced in private texts and chats.

While Turkey's incursion imperils religious freedom, there is much the United States can still do to advance it.

First, no U.S. envoy or diplomat shall in good faith accept Ankara's promises to guarantee religious, cultural or political freedom in Syria. The goal of U.S. policy should be to extricate Turkish forces from northern Syria. Financial

leverage worked to free Pastor Andrew Brunson, and it should be brought to bear to counter Turkish repression in Syria.

Because of the severity of the situation, Congress should also require more frequent State Department reports on violations of religious freedom specifically in northeastern Syria.

There is credible evidence that many Yezidi girls and women captured by the Islamic State remain in territories controlled by Turkey and its proxies, and yet the State Department is silent.

UNHCR has monitored returns, assisted resettlement, and is in a position to do more such work if properly funded. It takes a lot to get a conservative to argue for greater funding for the United Nations, but in this case, I've seen their work, and it is excellent.

In Iraq, it runs a lean mean operation. Congress must pressure the State Department to pressure its diplomats to investigate and help resolve the cases of kidnapped Yezidis remaining

under Turkish and Turkish proxy control.

When I was in Sinuni, just seven miles from the Syrian border, this past December, I saw proof of life come in from smugglers showing that Yezidi women who had been kidnapped were still alive and the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. Consulate in Erbil were doing very little to effect the resolution. It's easy to talk about religious freedom. It's much harder to do something about it, but there is no reason why we do not.

The United States must also resolve inconsistencies in the matter which its various departments and offices treat Syrian Kurds who share their links with the PKK.

There are many problems in PKK political culture and history, and we should not minimize these. But overreliance on Turkish intelligence has warped American understanding of the group and its evolution. To understand how cynical Turkish intelligence findings can be, consider that Erdogan now blames Syrian Kurds for sparking race riots in the United States.

De-designating the PKK need not mean embracing the group diplomatically nor abandoning Turkey as a NATO ally, but it would enhance American leverage and ability to mediate conflict.

Finally, the Treasury's Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control, so-called OFAC, waiver should favorably adjudicate the Syrian Democratic Council's request for a waiver that they applied for five years ago so that Syrian Kurds can advocate directly for religious liberty. The Syrian Kurds, as Amy had said, should not be lumped in with Bashar al-Assad.

At any rate, I go into much further, much more detail in my written testimony, but I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify here today.

[No audio.]

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: I think we're having some technical difficulties with hearing Chairman Perkins. Let's see if we can get this fixed.

CHAIR PERKINS: Okay. Can you hear me now?

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: We can.

CHAIR PERKINS: Okay. Sorry. I lost my microphone.

Michael, thank you so much. Thank all of our panelists for the testimony.

I'm going to begin our period of question and answer from our commissioners, and I would like to begin with a question that I kind of put out for all four of our panelists because as I've been listening to your testimony, very helpful and insightful, if I were to point to one issue, the greatest need, in facilitating this kind of what we would describe as a unique oasis of representative government that is paving the way for such fundamental freedoms as the freedom of religion, and, of course, this underscores once again that our Commission, while it is hard to separate religious freedom from other fundamental freedoms, that is what we try to focus on.

But if I--and please correct me if I'm wrong, but what I am hearing here is that the greatest need in facilitating this freedom is the

removal of Turkey from the region. It's not the only problem, but it seems to be the most significant, and I throw that out there to our four panelists.

Did anyone have any thoughts on that?

MR. HASSAN: Would you like me to start?

CHAIR PERKINS: Please. Go right ahead.

You can--I know it's a little different here in this virtual so don't worry about stepping on each other. Just jump right in there.

MR. HASSAN: I'm sorry. So, yes, I think obviously there is this zero sum game between Turkey and the Kurds. This was expected before even the Kurdish forces started to dominate northeastern Syria. The solution is obviously really in, you know, the U.S. has the leverage to-- is the only country that can solve this because the U.S. removes itself from Syria, then you will have renewed violence that you probably didn't see even before with the Syrian conflict in terms of Turkey and the Kurds. It's going to be rekindled, much of the violence that existed before.

So the solution is for the U.S. to play this broker role in the area. You know Turkey still occupies and controls, whatever you want to call it, a big chunk of northern Syria, and eventually Turkey has to leave that area, and these, the Kurdish population that existed in places like Afrin in the northern Syria, these have to return to their homes at some point in the future.

So there has to be a more diplomacy played by the U.S. I think the Trump administration has tried that more than say the previous administration trying to, you know, send officials to Ankara and trying to find a way for Turkey to stay away from these areas.

That didn't always work, but I think there are signs that you can actually get them to talk to each other at some point.

CHAIR PERKINS: Mr. Rubin, go ahead.

DR. RUBIN: Thank you.

Very briefly, I think it's really important to calibrate U.S. policy to the reality

of Turkey today rather than to the wishful thinking that Turkey remains what it once was. More than 30 million Turks have been educated under Erdogan.

At the same time, everyone in the military up to lieutenant colonel level and above a brigadier general level owes their career to Erdogan.

The other thing we need to recognize is that financial leverage does work with Turkey. I would agree with Hassan Hassan here in terms of we saw this with Pastor Andrew Brunson. We saw this with the fact that Turkey, and specifically Erdogan, is a bit overextended.

And the last point that I would make in terms of religious freedom is this isn't an unprecedented situation. We saw Turkey enter into Cyprus more than 45 years ago, and the reason for that incursion in Cyprus passed within six months of Turkey's invasion. And yet Turkey remains there.

We see revanchist maps published in state-controlled press suggesting that Turkey is

interested in much more than simply a counterterrorism operation, but actually fundamentally wants to redraw borders, and given the correlation between Turkey's borders and the lack of religious freedom, this is something that will be far easier to act on now than later.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Mr. Rubin.

Amy? Amy, I believe you're muted. Unmute yourself.

DR. HOLMES: Yes. Yeah, sure, just to add to what was said, I think there was a misunderstanding for a long time that this conflict was only a conflict between Turkey and the Kurds, and that is not the case.

The diversity of the region in northeast Syria, I mean it's hard to almost summarize it in a sort of quick fashion, but the grievances and the historical legacy of these Ottoman massacres that happened are still alive amongst the population, particularly the Christian minority in northern Syria and amongst the Yezidis who also suffered numerous massacres dating back to the time of the

Ottoman Empire.

And so to assume this is only a problem between Turkey and the PKK, which was founded in the late 1970s, that is wrong. These grievances go back at least a hundred years. The fact that Christians and the Yezidis are opposed to Turkey occupying their land, it has nothing to do with the PKK. It has nothing to do with that.

These are their historic grievances. These are their families who were slaughtered by the Ottomans. And it is also frankly, you know, common sense. I mean most people don't want their country occupied by a foreign military; right?

I mean would any of us want that? Right? I mean so, yes, absolutely. You are absolutely right that Turkey needs to withdraw from all of the land that it occupied in Syria because if they do not, this will only prolong the suffering of all of the civilians who have been displaced, including Christians, Yezidis, Alevis. It will prolong the larger Syrian conflict.

It will prolong also the conflict inside

Turkey between the Kurds and the Turkish state, and so, you know, you're absolutely right that it is absolutely necessary that Turkey withdraw from the areas that it has occupied for all of the reasons that have been outlined.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you very much.

Sara, did you have a comment to add?

Please go ahead.

MS. KAYYALI: Yeah, I just had a final comment. Yes, I mean the Turkish human rights abuses that have been committed to take this territory have--no one has really called them out on it and no one has really pressured them to cease and desist with these abuses.

But I think another component of what the U.S. could do that's useful, as I mentioned, really the Autonomous Administration and this region really relies on the U.S. in terms of support in dealing with the legacy of ISIS and now the resurgence of ISIS, and I think this is something that can't be ignored.

The territory that Turkey controls needs

to be dealt with, but also the territory that remains under the Autonomous Administration, the Autonomous Administration's position there is very precarious.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you.

I'm going to turn now to my vice chairs. I'll begin with Vice Chair Manchin for questions. Vice Chair Manchin. Unmute yourself, please.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Okay. Thank you, Chairman Tony.

And I would ask this question across all four of our witnesses and thank you so much for the information that you have shared with us today.

It's overwhelming and certainly brings great concern to all of us, and while that concern was there to have you just sort of exemplify it the way you have just certainly showcases it all the more.

As you look at these atrocities, and as you look at how the people are being treated, is there a common thread among the religious groups themselves to support each other? In other words,

are the Muslims, the Christian communities, are these communities sort of trying to bond or band together against this insurgence?

If so, is that helping or, if not, is that part of then a hindrance to the situation?

MR. HASSAN: Hassan again.

CHAIR PERKINS: Go right ahead.

MR. HASSAN: The same order. So I think there is great potential in that part of Syria for all these forces to work together. You can even say that the northeastern Self-Administration can work closely with other minorities like the Druze in southern Syria close to Israel where we saw recently protests against Bashar al-Assad, and in that area, that minority wanted to be, to stay away from fight and sending their young men to fight for the Assad regime elsewhere.

So we've started to see in essence a model of almost decentralized governance in much of Syria, and I think that's a good model for in terms of these religious minorities working together on various components. I think there's a great

potential. Just to give you an example, something I highlighted during my oral testimony, which is that the Sufi, the Muslim school that existed for centuries in that area, which is the antithesis of jihadism and Salafism, actually the people who had instructing orders, Sufi orders, are Kurds in the north.

So growing up in that area where I come from, eastern Syria, I saw, you know, friends and relatives would travel and spend some time with the Kurds under certain Kurdish sheikh, but there is a lot of historical relations, especially in Syria. There's not enormous kind of hostility between these components.

ISIS tried to pit these components against each other. Assad tried to suppress these forces. Now, we see an opportunity, an opening, for all these ones, you know, Muslims and Christians and others, to work together and kind of bring back that old character in that area.

DR. HOLMES: If I can jump in now unless someone else wants to.

CHAIR PERKINS: Go right ahead.

DR. HOLMES: Okay. So I think that's a very good question. I would like to point out that within the Syrian Democratic Forces, I think also there was a misperception that you had units that were only composed of Kurds and other units that were only composed of Arabs, for example, and that is not actually the case.

I mean Arabs and Kurds and Christians, they fought together, side by side, shoulder on shoulder, in these battles, in Raqqa, in Deir ez-Zor, and elsewhere. And so they fought together, and the SDF, as I can show with my survey data, has incorporated virtually members from every single Arab tribe in Syria. My Wilson Center report shows that the tribal identity, how they self-identify, when they took my survey, they identified as belonging to 46 different tribes or sub-tribes, clans, and so--and some of those tribes actually had been used by the regime in Damascus in the past, for example, to suppress the Kurdish minority.

And so I think this is at least one indication that because the SDF is so inclusive and does not discriminate on the basis of gender or religion or ethnicity that they have at least made some small steps to overcoming this past legacy of sectarianism, promoted by, of course, the Baathist regime in Damascus and also by the Islamic State, the religious hate that they propagated.

So despite, you know, shortcomings that still exist with the Autonomous Administration, the fact that they're so inclusive is, I think, making some small steps to overcoming the sectarian legacies promoted by the regime and also by the Islamic State.

CHAIR PERKINS: Is that primarily because they were forged through the external pressure and threat of ISIS where they were forced to work together or does it also have historic roots of being more open and tolerant?

DR. HOLMES: Yeah, that's a very good question. So there were, as you know, the Syrian Democratic Forces evolved out of the YPG and the

YPJ. And there are, you know, in my survey, I would ask people when they joined the Syrian Democratic Forces? So also when they were born; where they were born? And there are Arabs and Christians who joined the YPG while it was still the YPG, before it had even become the Syrian Democratic Forces, and before ISIS emerged on the scene.

So there are Christians, for example, in the northeast who joined the YPG in 2013 and 2014. So this happened even before the Islamic State, you know, actually officially emerged and began taking over parts of Syria.

So, so, yes, I mean there are, it's complex and there are a number of reasons that would take too long to discuss here, but the fact that the Islamic State then represented an enormous existential threat to anyone who would oppose their rule, not just religious minorities, but of course also Muslims who oppose the Islamic State, you know, this, of course, led then partly--that's one reason why they joined together, but even before

the Islamic State, and even before the U.S. began supporting them, there are Kurds, Arabs, Christians already who were joining together under the YPG.

CHAIR PERKINS: Mr. Rubin.

DR. RUBIN: I largely agree with Hassan and Amy, and so I don't want to repeat what they've said about integration. I do want to give one cautionary note, however, that it's not uncommon in the region for external groups, for example, some of the Iraqi Kurdish political parties, or perhaps some within Turkey, to set up sort of puppet groups and claim to be popular opposition groups.

So the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Masoud Barzani in Iraqi Kurdistan, for example, will set up an Yezidi group which basically answers to Masoud Barzani. They will set up a Christian group which basically answers to Masoud Barzani, and this extends across the border into northeast Syria.

I would say that pretty much everyone who has gone to the region will come to the conclusion that the Autonomous Administration is broadly

representative whereas many of these other groups are far less so.

CHAIR PERKINS: All right. I will turn to our Vice Chair Maenza for questions.

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much, and thank you to all of our panelists for joining us. It's been so interesting and so helpful.

Since we've all been--clearly the Autonomous Administration of northeast Syria is the only successful government in Syria. They were formed in the middle of a civil war while they were fighting ISIS, and because they formulated themselves and didn't follow the advice of a coalition of governments, you know, the government that they instituted obviously is working and legitimate.

With that being said, how is it that the United Nations, they don't have a seat the table? Especially I think, Mr. Rubin, since you discussed this, probably to you, but all of you can weigh in on this.

But how is it that they don't have a seat

at the table at the UN discussions in Geneva for post-conflict Syria although the Assad regime does, Turkey does, Russia does, and all these other players have a seat and have a say in what Syria is going to look like, but this point in time the Autonomous Administration does not?

DR. RUBIN: If I may answer that, thank you, Vice Chair.

When I went in in January of 2014, and I talk about this in my written testimony, it was before the United States officially began working in the region. It was before the decisive battle of Kobane, or really the visible rise of the Islamic State, and before I went in, I went and unofficially talked to some American diplomats because even though I don't represent the United States government, I'm not a member of the United States government, I knew I would be asked the question.

And the response I got was there were three broad objections. Number one, there was a fear of antagonizing Turkey with which the United

States has a historic partnership, NATO, and far greater.

Number two, there was a frustration that supposedly the Rojava, as it was known at the time, wasn't cooperating with the rest of the Syrian opposition, especially that which was meeting in Istanbul and based in Turkey and so forth.

And the third reason was because there were allegations that the Iraqi Kurds had--I'm sorry--that the Syrian Kurds had a cooperative relationship with Bashar al-Assad.

Let me go down all three very quickly the answers I received. Number one, of course, the Syrian Kurds said we can't help that Turkey is our neighbor. However, they thought that their cause and their actions were just and they wanted to be judged by their actions rather than how others described them.

Number two, when it came to not cooperating productively, they argued, hey, look, we not only defeated the predecessors to the Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the

region, but all we want is some notion of federalism. We don't want to be dominated as we were before.

Remember among the Kurdish population, arguably those living in Syria under Bashar al-Assad and before that Hafez al-Assad were the worst off because they would actually get their citizenship stripped.

It wasn't that--I mean the situation was bad under Saddam Hussein. It was bad in Turkey. It was bad in Iran, but arguably the situation was worse and so the Syrian Kurds said, look, we want some federal guarantees, which wasn't on the table in the Syrian opposition at the time, and therefore it was that sort of dispute, which by the way continues to some extent today.

And the last issue with regard to cooperation with Bashar al-Assad--and this hinges on the town of Qamishli where you had the Syrian government control what's called Security Square, basically three square blocks in the middle of town--basically the answer I got there was, look,

we want to fight the Islamic State or Ha'yat or its successor organizations. We don't want to have to fight the people who are surrounded in Security Square so long as they're not fighting us.

They said if we do choose to fight, then we're going to win. There's two possibilities. Either we're going to slaughter them or they're going to surrender. But if they surrender, what's going to happen to their brothers, fathers and so forth who are conscripts in Aleppo, conscripts in Damascus? We don't want to be responsible for that. We want to focus on defeating al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

So ultimately that becomes the root of this notion that they can't have a seat at the table, and then frankly Turkey has used its way and the wishful thinking within the State Department that perhaps we can't antagonize Turkey because after Erdogan goes, Turkey could change back. Again, I think that's not realistic given the passage of time within Turkey.

CHAIR PERKINS: Mr. Hassan.

MR. HASSAN: Yeah, I just want to add to the reasons that Michael laid out. I agree with that. There's another reason which is that all parties to the conflict--the Syrian regime, the Syrian opposition, Turkey--they don't recognize obviously the SDF as an entity. So they say if you want to negotiate with us, you need to negotiate as individuals or as the Kurds, for example, rather than the SDF because once you negotiate as the SDF, you recognize an entity that the Assad regime, for example, does not exist, does not recognize.

But I also wanted to kind of add a point. I think it's kind of good to balance things out a little bit, which is that, yes, the SDF includes all these components within the area. And, yes, I think the SDF in relative terms is the most successful governance, as the Vice Chair mentioned, in Syria, and I think that needs to be supported and strengthened.

And in order to strengthen that, I think we need to deal with the aspect of tokenism within the SDF. You have large numbers of Arabs and

tribes, as Amy mentioned, but these do not necessarily represent their communities. They might be outcasts or they might be misfits. Some of them are not recognized within their own community as notables.

So it's not always about the numbers. I think that builds on the success that we have today. I'm not saying it's bad. I think there is hope that this SDF can become a model not just for Syria, for the broader region, but it needs to be strengthened in that sense.

DR. HOLMES: May I?

CHAIR PERKINS: Yes, Ms. Holmes.

DR. HOLMES: Right. I mean to continue with what Hassan Hassan was saying, that the Autonomous Administration, they see themselves as a model that could be implemented even in other parts of Syria close to Assad.

Now, also going back to my survey data, I discovered to my surprise, I discovered that there are people who joined the SDF who never lived under SDF control.

I discovered there are, for example, Arabs from Aleppo who joined the SDF. There is an Arab woman who took my survey. She's from Homs. She joined the SDF.

And so there are people from regions of Syria in the south and in the west that the SDF never controlled who volunteer, you know, of their own freewill, and at great enormous risk to themselves and to their families, they left their hometowns, they left Homs, they left Aleppo and other places and joined the SDF.

So, you know, I mean this is at least an indication. Again, I don't want to overstate this, but it is an indication that there are people even in areas the SDF does not control that prefer, prefer to live in that region, and to leave their families, to leave the cities that they grew up in, and to go there and to live in that region of Syria.

And also regarding the issue of excluding the Autonomous Administration, you know, again, by excluding one-third of Syria from the talks over

the future of Syria, this will not lead to a resolution of the conflict, and you're not just excluding the Syrian Kurds, you're excluding all of the diverse people who live in that region, including Christians and the Yezidis and Arabs. You're excluding all of them from those talks.

How is that fair? How will they accept that? And so these talks in Geneva to exclude one-third of the country, it's truly unacceptable, and it is something that absolutely the U.S., it is completely in our ability to insist that they have a seat at the negotiating table.

CHAIR PERKINS: Ms. Kayyali, do you have something that you want to add?

MS. KAYYALI: Yeah, I agree with my co-panelists completely. Sort of the problem with the lack of recognition that the Autonomous Administration has been granted has meant that it's been very easy for other parties to the conflict to abuse and apply pressure not just on the Autonomous Administration itself but also on residents in northeast Syria to bring them closer.

So, for example, when we're talking about humanitarian aid entering northeast Syria, the reason there is no cross-border border crossing that allows for aid to enter is Russia wants to make the Autonomous Administration come closer to the Syrian government, and that's how it applies pressure.

It's also part of the reason why Turkey so very easily was able to go into northeast Syria, and it's also part of the reason why the Autonomous Administration is also under significant pressure internally in terms of how it's able to deal with ISIS suspects, ensure that there's accountability, and ensure that there is some sort of stability and permanence to its existence even internally.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you.

I will, Vice Chair Maenza, any other questions before I turn to other commissioners?

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: No, you can turn on to my colleagues. Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Okay.

Commissioner Turkel, did you have a

question?

COMMISSIONER TURKEL: Yes. First of all, thank you very much for our witnesses today.

This is a question for all of our witnesses. Turkey and other countries have hosted millions of Syrian refugees since the beginning of the conflict at staggering human and even financial cost.

From your eyes' perspective, what are the primary obstacles to repatriating some if not all of those refugees back to Syria at this point or anywhere else? And how does the issue of repatriation impact the religion, ethnic diversity in the region?

My second question is also for all of you. Washington Post reported in 2009 that there are close to 50,000 children from the former ISIL family being held in SDF-controlled prison, a region in northern, northeastern Syria. Do they enjoy any rights under international law? How would the international community treat these children's future status?

CHAIR PERKINS: Who would like to take that first?

MS. KAYYALI: I can start.

CHAIR PERKINS: Okay. Go right ahead.

MS. KAYYALI: Yeah, on the question of repatriation, I mean the starting point is that no refugee or asylum seeker can be forced to return to Syria. Their decision to return has to be free and voluntary, and when we speak to Syrian refugees outside of Syria, they tell you a set of concerns that they have that are still in place in Syria.

The starting point is the ongoing hostilities, and I think northwest Syria is a great example of this. The continued practices of arbitrary detention, torture, discrimination, mistreatment that we see not just in areas held by the Syrian government but also in northwest Syria under Ha'yat Sham and to a certain extent in northeast Syria as well. It all prevents individuals from returning.

But there's also the question of properties that have been confiscated and lands

from where these people have been forcibly displaced, where as my co-panelists mentions very early on in the presentation thousands have been forcibly displaced from their homes, and there does not seem to be a plan in place to allow them to return to their areas of origin should they choose to return to Syria.

So these are some of the sort of fundamental human rights concerns that would prevent refugees from returning, and they all really need to be addressed before the question of repatriation can actually be taken up seriously.

With regards to the ISIS children, this is, ISIS-affiliated children, this is actually a very, very good question because thousands of these children remain in the custody of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

The Syrian Democratic Forces have literally gone around the world in an attempt to get countries with citizens of theirs to repatriate them to allow them a chance for a free trial, or alternatively to get support to be able to pursue

international justice in northeast Syria given the fact that many countries have refused to repatriate their children.

These children do have rights under international law. They are presumed innocent until they have the chance for a fair trial, until there's evidence that they've been involved, and even if they're involved in ISIS crimes, they also have certain protections as children, and yet we're at this point unfortunately so far away from having this conversation because the international community as a whole has basically decided to ignore these 8,000 children that are trapped in these camps and detention facilities.

COMMISSIONER TURKEL: Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Nury.

Yes, Ms. Holmes.

DR. HOLMES: Yes, I fully agree with what, with what Sara just said. Just to add one additional point regarding the Syrian refugees of Turkey, according to the Turkish government's own statistics, about three-quarters, you know, the

vast majority of those Syrian refugees now living in Turkey are not from the north of Syria where Erdogan wants to forcibly return them.

And so as Sara pointed out, it is against international human rights law to forcibly deport people back into a war zone, to deport asylum seekers or refugees back to their home countries where it is not safe.

But if they were to choose voluntarily to go back to Syria, if you're from Damascus or Homs, probably you want to go back there. You don't want to go back to Tal Abyad or Ras al-Ayn or somewhere you're not even from, and that is Erdogan's plan. I mean that's what he is claiming, you know, that he wants to do.

Second of all, regarding the ISIS detainees, I also agree with my co-panelists that it is absolutely necessary to increase the pressure on our allies in Europe, for example, who, you know, failed, their intelligence services failed to prevent their own citizens from joining ISIS and going to Syria and, you know, joining this horrific

terrorist organization, and now some of them have also simply allowed, you know, they refused to take many of them back, and in many cases, there are also some cases, a woman, a German citizen, a woman by the name of Omaima Abdi, she went, she grew up in Germany, has German citizenship, she went to Syria on her own, had raised her children there for several years, and then returned, was able to return to Germany as if nothing had happened and like just lived there, continued to live there for several years until she was discovered, and now she's been tried with crimes against humanity because she participated in the enslavement of a Yezidi girl.

And so one of the recommendations that I made in my, you know, 16 recommendations of the written testimony is also to not just increase the pressure on other countries to take back their citizens who joined ISIS but also to increase funding to support research to understand women who support ISIS because there have been honestly kind of this assumption that women were victims of the

Islamic State and so they're not really as guilty as the men, and maybe they were tricked by their husbands or they were tricked by somebody.

But, you know, there are cases of women who actively enslaved other women, and that I think is not fully understood and there needs to be additional I think resources devoted to understand this issue because they now, the women in Al Hol and the two dozen other detention facilities, they're the ones who continue to spread ISIS propaganda.

They are the ones who are continuing, you know, are raising these children with these extremist ideologies of hatred, and so that is something that urgently also needs to be addressed.

CHAIR PERKINS: Interesting.

Mr. Rubin.

DR. RUBIN: I want to affirm what Sara and Amy said. I just want to add one point to what Amy said. The demographic games which we see being played out aren't just inside north, northern or north and east Syria. They actually also are being

played out within Turkey itself with regard to the refugees which Commissioner Turkel had mentioned.

For example, when Sunnis, Sunni Arabs from Syria are forced to cross the border as refugees into Turkey, rather than necessarily being registered as refugees, if they will agree to settle in predominantly Kurdish villages in southeastern Turkey or in primarily Alevi villages in Hatay, which is closer to Mediterranean, then Erdogan will actually provide them with a Turkish passport rather than--which changes the debate rather than forcing them to be refugees. So he's playing demographic games which are also going to have repercussions inside Turkey with regard to religious freedom and with regard to perhaps violence in the future.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Mr. Rubin.

I'll turn to Commissioner Bauer for a question.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Thank you, Commissioner Perkins.

First of all, this was powerful testimony,

and we really do appreciate it and thank you for it.

The Commission over the last few years, I think almost all the years of its existence, has been really a diverse body of people. There's people on the right, on the left, Jews, Muslims, Christians, et cetera. And I think I'm being accurate in saying that the situation in the Holy Land and specifically what we're seeing in Syria is something that has united all of us as just being mortified, heartbroken, to see this area of the world of all areas of the world being turned into a blood-soaked plain where the innocent are massacred with regularity.

But I want to ask you maybe an unfair question. There's a lot of evidence that the American people are weary of the Middle East. 19 years in Afghanistan and the Iraq War and what did it accomplish, et cetera.

There are elements on both the left and the right in America that have their own arguments about why we shouldn't be getting into this.

There's a lot of moving pieces. What would you say to the average American? I don't believe any of you in your testimony called for a greater commitment of U.S. troops to that region.

So let me just I guess be specific about that. Do all of you agree that it's not necessarily something that requires more U.S. troops but it requires America's diplomatic pressure, more wisdom by our government, our moral weight, or is this something you think ultimately does require because we're dealing with many great powers here, is it something that you think will ultimately require more U.S. military involvement?

CHAIR PERKINS: Mr. Hassan, we'll begin with you.

MR. HASSAN: Sure. So this is, you know, this is a good question because this is different from the Iraq War. This is not the Iraq War. This is not Afghanistan. There are two points here to make.

First one is that the American presence in Syria has an extremely light footprint. You know

American boots are not there, and, you know, fighting and so forth. They're advising, you know, they're just protecting the area from being attacked by Assad regimes and so on and so forth.

So this is minimal resources, but with exponentially good work done to stabilize Syria. The cost of leaving is that in the future the U.S. will come back even more, you know, with more soldiers, as we saw in 2014. So this is just to kind of give you an idea. Since 2011, the Obama administration tried hard to avoid Syria. So they didn't want to intervene in Syria. They didn't want to say we're going to pressure Assad to do anything except saying Assad must go.

And then in 2014, something happened, which is that ISIS established the caliphate that controlled one-third of Iraq and almost half of Syria. And the U.S. had to intervene, and we saw the cost of that intervention. Had the U.S. intervened before--not intervened, but had the U.S. exercised more diplomatic lever before, we would not have seen the destruction that ISIS had.

So moving forward, I think the U.S. presence in both Iraq and Syria is very minimal. Now the U.S. is engaged in what they call strategic dialogue with the Iraqi government to organize this presence in Iraq. The fear is that in Syria, you can't have that conversation with the Assad regime so that's more shaky in the future, but it's very important to kind of emphasize that this is not the Iraq War; this is not Afghanistan. This is just protection forces.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Mr. Rubin.

DR. RUBIN: I largely agree with Hassan in that the small number of U.S. forces which are there have a massive amplifying effect, which ultimately not only protects religious freedom but protects the American homeland.

I do want to cite my colleague Kenneth Pollack, and my friend across the aisle, who notes that pretty much any general will say you can spend money on bullets or you can spend money on investing economically and diplomatically, and it

ends up being the same amount of money.

And so if we have a choice like that, why not seek to break the isolation of Syria's most successful region, not only in turn of tolerance but also more generally religious freedom, and that will require some diplomatic rethinking, but ultimately it's a policy decision to break the isolation.

Frankly, if the United States does it, many countries will follow. I would, as I mentioned in my written testimony, when you look at a survey of American diplomacy with so-called "rogue regimes," and the definition of rogue regime I took from Bill Clinton's National Security Advisor Tony Lake, who in 1994 wrote a Foreign Affairs article defining the term. When we look at rogue regimes, whether it's North Korea, whether it's the Taliban's Islamic Emirate, whether it's Islamic Republic of Iran, one thing is certain, and that is respect for religious liberty is really the canary in the coal mine.

And if you don't, you can gauge as a

metric the sincerity of both adversaries and allies by seeing how they treat religious minorities, and at the same way it's important to intervene if you want to have substantive change in the region, intervene diplomatically and economically in order to guarantee religious freedom because religious freedom isn't just about individual liberty. The ramifications and follow-on effects are vast.

CHAIR PERKINS: Very good. Thank you, Mr. Rubin.

Ms. Holmes.

DR. HOLMES: Yeah. This is a great question, and again I agree with what my co-panelists have already said. An additional point that I would agree with Hassan on in saying this is not Afghanistan, this is not Iraq, this is a very small U.S. military presence in Syria.

It is also not about nation building; right? I mean that is not what we are doing in Syria, and that is not what I am advocating for. I think that's also not what any of the other co-panelists have advocated for. We're not doing

nation-building in Syria.

What is happening in the northeast of Syria is that this is a decentralized self-administration created by Syrians for Syrians, and all we have to do is allow them to exist and allow them to survive and not be killed by Turkey or by Assad or by ISIS; right?

I mean they are surrounded by enemies, but if this had a chance to continue to survive and, again, to continue to become more open to allow more freedom for other political parties, for opposition media, if this continues to exist, there is a chance that, you know, we can be hopeful about the future of Syria.

But if this is destroyed, if we allow this to be destroyed and Turkey to intervene again, as Erdogan continues to threaten to do, you know, I see a very dark future, very dark. And so I just want to end on the note that there is some, some optimism and some hope. But that really hinges on allowing this region and protecting the people in the region and allowing them to continue, to

continue to stay there.

Otherwise, they also will flee the country as half the population of Syria has already done. I mean they fled either internally within Syria or externally as refugees, and if we don't, the United States do not want to take in more refugees, I mean we've decreased the number of refugees we admit in the United States. We've decreased the number of asylum seekers. Then we should do what we can to allow those Syrians to have conditions in Syria that allow them to live, that allow them to buy basic services, to pay, you know, pay for food and feed their families and live in security without fearing to be invaded, you know, by Turkey or Assad or a resurgence of the Islamic State.

CHAIR PERKINS: Well said. Thank you, Ms. Holmes.

Ms. Kayyali, do you have any final comments?

MS. KAYYALI: I really have very little to add to what my co-panelists said. I would just say that in response to the question, I mean the U.S.

is already there, and it's already played a very significant role in the fight against ISIS.

I think, as Hassan Hassan said, the cost of withdrawing irresponsibly, we've already seen the consequences of even an announcement of withdrawal. So there is a responsibility on the U.S. to deal with the situation, whether it decides to stay or to go, in a very responsible and very sustainable way to ensure that what has been built in this region can survive.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you.

And our time together has come to a close as we finish this hearing, and I again want to thank all of our panelists for joining us today, taking the time to share with us your expertise and your insight. This has been very helpful and very insightful, and we're grateful that you've taken time to join us as we continue to chart a way forward, making recommendations to the administration.

And I'll just end by summarizing some of the recommendations we recently made to the

administration, to the President, to Congress, and to the Secretary of State, whom we briefed last week. The Vice Chair, Vice Chair Manchin and I briefed Secretary Pompeo last week on our report.

But our goal, as was stated, is focused on religious freedom. It's hard to extricate religious freedom from those other fundamental freedoms, but as Mr. Rubin so clearly said, that is the canary in the coal mine. If you fail to have religious freedom, it's hard to have anything else, and there's a growing body of evidence that makes very clear, if you have religious freedom, you have greater social stability, you have economic opportunity, and so it's right for the United States to focus on this area.

And as Ms. Holmes says, this is not something anyone imposed upon northeast Syria. It is of their own making. And it is, I believe, incumbent upon us to stand with them as a model of the way forward for others in that region.

I will just very quickly summarize, as we have stated in our Annual Report, we have

recommended that Syria be designated as a Country of Particular Concern because of the continuing systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act.

We have also recommended that we provide assistance to support Syria's vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities under the terms of the Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act.

We agree with what has been stated here this morning that we exert pressure on Turkey to provide a timeline for its withdrawal from Syria and expand U.S. engagement with an assistance to the Autonomous Administration including examining a potential sanctions exemption for only the Autonomous Administration governed areas as well as contributing to efforts through relevant nongovernmental organizations and like-minded international partners to fund and develop local programs to promote intra and inter-religious tolerance, alleviate sectarian tensions, and advance religious freedom and related rights.

And I believe that your testimony this morning, your spending your time with us has helped solidify these recommendations, certainly in the mind of the chair, that these recommendations are consistent with the facts that are continually brought out.

So, again, I want to thank you for joining us today. I want to thank our commissioners for taking time to be with us today. And thank those in the media and others that have interest in northeast Syria for joining us for this hearing. And we will now adjourn.

Thank you so much.

[Whereupon, at 12:08 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]