



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Nadine Maenza, Vice Chair

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 in late 2019, with significant ramifications for our topic of concern today.

First, in February 2018—while the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was working with the US 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 AANES.

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 2019, the United States announced significant drawdown of its military presence alongside of the SDF in northeast Syria, and signaled tacit approval for Turkey to cross the border. In December, Former Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Department of Defense Policy in the Middle East, told Foreign Policy Magazine, “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 get attacked, and disabled several of their defensive positions.”

That incursion and subsequent establishment of an occupation zone atop AANES-governed territory, has been disastrous for local communities. It has led to the displacement of around 100,000 civilians and the 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 NE Syria in late 2019 where I saw for myself the devastation brought upon the Christian villages near the areas Turkey had invaded. I met with religious and community leaders and heard about the remarkable religious freedom conditions under the AANES, and how that is 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 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 AANES—a government that has explicitly called on 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 that 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 AANES, including lifting sanctions for only AANES-governed areas. It is also important that the new Caesar Act sanctions, passed by Congress to penalize the Assad Regime, are implemented in a way that does not negatively impact the AANES.

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 to undercut AANES' 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.

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