



Religious Freedom in Syria's Post-Assad Transition

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Opening remarks as prepared for delivery

Meir Y. Soloveichik, USCIRF Commissioner

Good morning, and welcome to this hearing convened by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to examine Freedom of Religion or Belief in post-Assad Syria. The hearing will now come to order. I'm Commissioner Meir Soloveichik and have had the pleasure of serving on this commission since July 2024. Thank you to our distinguished witnesses for taking the time to join us today.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. legislative branch agency. Congress created USCIRF through the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA, with a legislative mandate to use international legal standards and conventions to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad—and to make related policy recommendations to the

Secretary of State, the President, the Congress, and other parts of the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

President Bashar al-Assad and his cruel, abusive regime are, thankfully, gone. However, religious freedom violations in Syria have unfortunately not disappeared. In fact, they have dramatically escalated over the course of this year. Just eleven months ago, in December 2024, a group of rebels seized Damascus, overthrew the Assad regime, and established themselves as the transitional authorities of Syria.

The architects of this rebel takeover and the new leaders of Syria are the Salafi-jihadi militant Islamist group, Organization for the Liberation of the Levant—in Arabic, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS. If you've followed USCIRF's reporting on Syria over the past few years, you'll know HTS has figured prominently into it. Between 2019 and 2025, we recommended that the United States designate the group as an Entity of Particular Concern, or EPC, for particularly severe violations of religious freedom in Idlib. Earlier this year, the transitional authorities announced they would formally dissolve HTS. However, USCIRF is alarmed over the authorities' apparent lack of will or ability to curb this year's multitude of

sectarian mass killings, kidnappings, torture, lootings, and attacks on houses of worship targeting Alawis, Druze, Shi'a Muslims, and Christians.

One of many examples of escalating religious freedom violations in post-Assad Syria is the sectarian conflict and related humanitarian crisis still affecting Druze and Sunni Muslim Bedouin tribes in the southern province of Suweida. In July, militant actors capitalized on longstanding tensions between Sunni Bedouins and Druze in Suweida, triggering an estimated 2,000 fatalities and contributing to the displacement of up to 190,000 people over a few days. Concerningly, the transitional authorities' military intervention exacerbated the crisis—and mounting evidence indicates that state forces themselves likely committed hundreds of unlawful and extrajudicial killings, including many Druze victims. Although large-scale violence has abated, Suweida's Druze continue to face targeted killings and kidnappings and fear returning to dozens of villages which the transitional authorities still control.

This hearing will discuss these and other ongoing, systematic, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief in Syria, as well as potential U.S. policy options to encourage urgently needed improvements in religious freedom there.

I turn now to Commissioner Stephen Schneck for his remarks.

Stephen Schneck, USCIRF Commissioner

Thank you, Commissioner.

I join Commissioner Soloveichik in expressing USCIRF’s grave concerns over the pronounced deterioration of religious freedom conditions in Syria since the fall of the Assad regime. I served as Chair of this Commission in 2024, when we chose to stop recommending Syria to the State Department as a potential Country of Particular Concern, or CPC—a designation the U.S. government reserves for the most egregious state violators of religious freedom. At various points during the country’s nearly fourteen, devastating years of civil war, many different actors in Syria violated religious freedom—but the Assad regime’s violations no longer rose to the standard in IRFA to designate them as a CPC country. In fact, nonstate actors, including HTS, were the drivers of most “particularly severe” violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA.

For that reason, beginning in 2024, our Commission began recommending Syria for the State Department’s “Special Watch List” as a country that committed or

tolerated ongoing and systematic, but not egregious, violations of religious freedom. Now, as we near the end of Syria's first year since the fall of the Assad regime, our Commission convenes this hearing to consider evidence of religious freedom conditions under the transitional authorities.

USCIRF's 2025 Annual Report, which we released this past May, renewed the previous year's recommendation that the United States designate Syria for the Special Watch List—based on the Assad regime's severe violations of religious freedom throughout the majority of 2024. Unfortunately, in 2025, we have observed escalating and particularly severe religious freedom abuses in the country that the transitional authorities have failed to inhibit or adequately investigate or prosecute.

The Syrian transitional authorities have an obligation under international standards to ensure freedom of religion or belief for all people within Syria. Today's hearing will not only identify steps Syria can take to improve religious freedom for all its people but offer suggestions for ways the U.S. government can use its engagement with Syrian authorities to help advance the fundamental right of freedom of religion or belief.

I now return the floor to Commissioner Meir Soloveichik to introduce the witnesses.