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INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN SYRIA'S
POST-ASSAD TRANSITION

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Virtual Hearing

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

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Meir Soloveichik
Stephen Schneck

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P R O C E E D I N G S

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: 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 I've had the pleasure of serving on this Commission since July of 2024.

Thank you to our 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 is gone as 11 months ago, in December 2024, a group of rebels seized Damascus, overthrew the Assad regime, and established themselves as the transitional authorities of Syria.

However, religious freedom violations in Syria have, unfortunately, not disappeared. 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, which has figured prominently in USCIRF's reporting on Syria over the past few years.

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 lack of 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 the 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 numerous

unlawful and extrajudicial killings, including of 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 my colleague Commissioner Stephen Schneck for his opening remarks.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, Commissioner Soloveichik.

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 had the honor to serve 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 14 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 the country as a Country of Particular Concern.

In fact, non-state actors, including HTS, were the drivers of the 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 of its people, but will offer suggestions for ways the United States government can use its

engagement with Syrian authorities to help advance the fundamental right of freedom of religion or belief.

With that, I return the floor to Commissioner Soloveichik to introduce the witnesses.

Commissioner. Commissioner, you're muted.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you, Commissioner Schneck. My apologies.

Thank you again for all the witnesses for joining us, and our first witness is Aaron Zelin, the Gloria and Ken Levy Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a Visiting Research Scholar in the Department of Politics at Brandeis University.

He is a long-standing expert on HTS's evolution and U.S. policy surrounding that and other militant groups.

In 2022, Dr. Zelin served as our expert guest for the USCIRF Spotlight podcast episode: "The Suffocating Hold of HTS on Northwest Syria."

Dr. Zelin, thank you joining us and please

proceed with your testimony.

DR. ZELIN: Thank you so much and thank you for everybody tuning in, in the U.S., maybe in Syria, or in Europe.

Thank you to the Commissioners Soloveichik and Schneck, as well as members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, for inviting me to testify today on Religious Freedom in Syria's post-Assad Transition.

Discussing these issues, I'd argue, is complicated by the fact that religious freedom in the new Syria is not necessarily black or white.

It also comes in the context of a country that is attempting to exit 14 years of civil war and 54 years of a police state.

Nor does it help that the prior regime was sectarian in the nature and focused much of its political suppression against the majority Sunni Arab population.

Therefore, certain actions that some perceive as sectarian can also be seen by those in power now as political in nature because they're

arresting former regime officials involved in war crimes during the Syrian civil war.

That being said, there have also been actual crimes over the past 11 plus months now. Therefore, distinguishing between these dynamics is important for determining the true scope of the issue in the new Syrian environment.

When we look at sort of the legal aspect of this, Syria's new Constitutional Declaration, which is the main reference point during the transitional period and is supposed to last for five years, has a number of provisions related to religion and religious freedom, and generally speaking people are able to, you know, follow and practice however they would like.

That being said, the president is only allowed to be from a Muslim background, which takes out a certain percentage of the population, depending on if you're only talking about a Sunni Muslim or if you expand it to other Muslim sects, which the new government has not really explained in greater detail.

That being said, in terms of the issues that we see, it's not so much that people can't practice their religion, but it's more sectarian dynamics of individuals in communities in particular.

I actually have had the opportunity to travel to Syria twice now since the fall of the regime, meeting with people in the government but also minority communities, as well, including in Suweida.

When I spoke to President Ahmed al-Sharaa, actually six weeks or so ago, he told me that the state is not under any sect and that Syria does not have majorities and minorities, just the law.

Rather, the government's focus is on individual competencies and merit, and he said that that will not satisfy everybody, which, you know, highlights that for them they're trying to move beyond sort of the way the old regime did things, but that's also created a lack of trust amongst many minorities since they don't feel that they're necessarily part of the process.

Of course, the government has engaged at varying levels, whether the national level or local level, with all of the different minority groups in the country.

However, it is noteworthy that Sharaa himself has not met with any Ismailis or Alawites, at least publicly.

Many of my colleagues here are from some of these communities so I think it would behoove myself to let them speak about their communities more in depth.

However, it is worth noting, of course, and is well-known at this point, of the massacre that happened against Alawites on the coast in March, the one against the Druze in July in Suweida.

We also saw the Islamic State attack against the Christian Church in the Damascus region, and more recently it's worth noting a disturbance that happened at the opening of a rehabilitated Shi'a Musaneah [ph] in the Damascus suburbs.

And so these are just a few of number of incidences. I get into more details, of course, in my testimony online, but again I'll defer to my colleagues on the call who are from these communities.

Therefore, I want to talk more about what I think is worthwhile for the U.S. government to do and to understand some of these broader contexts.

There is a huge epidemic now of vigilantism within Syrian society, and, of course, a lot of it does target minority religious groups, but it is also worth considering that Sunnis have been targeted as well.

And this goes to a fundamental issue related to Syria's transition thus far: the incomplete and slow transitional justice process.

It's true the new government has set up a commission related to transitional justice, which was announced urgently in mid-May and began its work in late August.

It's had meetings with local stakeholders and even traveled to Rwanda to learn about the

experience there, of course, after the genocide in Rwanda.

And when I've talked to folks in the government, they claim that the commission is doing good work behind the scenes, but they worry that publicizing it will undermine the process.

But the biggest issue today now in Syria is the lack of trust amongst many communities and therefore lack of transparency is undermining all of this.

It's worth noting because there is no process to deal with bringing people involved in war crimes during the war to justice, many within the majority population see former regime officials roaming the streets that were involved in crimes against their, you know, individuals or their families and friends, and that has led many to decide to take matters into their own hands instead of against, instead letting the state deal with it.

And if the authorities do not get this problem under control, it could further undermine the trust in the process, as well as create a new

cycle of violence that has been increasing over time.

Therefore, from the perspective of the United States, it's imperative to help the new authorities get this vigilante issue under control by getting a better handle on who in society has access to weapons.

One of the biggest problems within the government is it does not have a monopoly on violence and that there has been no decommissioning of people that have been involved in this civil war with weapons, and therefore the country is awash in these issues amongst all communities.

Washington also needs to urge authorities in Damascus to be more forthcoming about the transitional justice process so that there is greater trust regarding how past wounds will be healed and resolved.

Additionally, Washington should advocate for Syria to have another national dialogue, as well as also a local dialogue amongst communities.

Having a dialogue that lasts only eight

hours and doesn't include many people that felt left out of it, and what happened in February does not heal the issues that happened during the war, during the 14 years, or the 54 years or so that the Assad regime was in power.

This is important to try and redo this process because a lot of trust has been lost by the new government since many feel unrepresented or part of the process itself.

It might be worth attempting to restart the true national dialogue that is not just one day but an ongoing project that not only happens at a national level but also an institutional project at the local level too to build trust amongst communities.

This will hopefully provide some goodwill back to the government and also try and bring trust back to everybody so that people can move forward.

Otherwise, this type of violence will continue and undermine the trust that many people have in the new government. The hope is this will all create a better environment for all Syrians to

move toward a better future now that the war is over.

I'll leave it there for now. Thank you.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you very much for your testimony, Dr. Zelin.

We now welcome Rita Koefoed Khairbek. Ms. Khairbek is a psychology researcher and lecturer, hailing from Latakia, Syria.

She is editor of the Alawite Project's Research Circle, a member of the Association of Syrian Alawites in Europe, and founder of the Organization of Syrian Women for Development in Norway.

Ms. Khairbek, please proceed with your testimony.

MS. KHAIRBEK: Thank you.

My name is Rita Khairbek, a Syrian Alawite therapist-researcher from Latakia. My work centers on stress, sleep and trauma.

I contribute to the Alawite civil documentation and civilian support.

Alawites are a nation Syrian community,

part of the country's fabric centuries. We live mainly along the coast and parts of Homs and Hama, with families also in Lebanon and Turkey.

We're not a political faction; we are doctors, teachers, farmers, engineers, and students.

Our faith is our tradition. We observe diverse practices, season gathering and small shrines in our homes rather than large mosques.

In short, we are more religious group in Syria's mosaic asking only to live as equal citizens with safety and dignity.

From 8th of December, the fall of the regime, Alawites were purged from hospitals, schools and public offices, punished by birth, not by deed.

They came so-called isolated, so-called isolated incidents: disappearing at checkpoints; farmer was found in his field, killed in his field; a student beaten after his accent giveaway. On streets and platforms, crowds call for our deaths.

Authorities did not restrain it. The line

between hate speech and murder disappeared.

7th of March, as if there's no tomorrow, as we call it, as Alawites. On the night of sixth of March, there were open calls for jihad against "Nusri," our historic name.

By dawn on 7th of March, it was not only local government who moved units of what is called "general security" along with foreign jihadists, a hard-line Islamist, stormed the coast, also pushing into Masyaf and Salhab in Hama countryside.

They didn't look for military targets; they looked for Alawite neighborhoods and Alawite name. The result was door-to-door killing.

Our community documentation records nearly 5,000 Alawites killed in two days, including about 300 children.

We perceived Shadi Wasel's last word from [?] episode. He said, I quote: "We are just Alawites. We are not remnants of the regime." Speaks for us. Don't forget us.

Another story for a 12-year-old boy, Najm, was shot along with his father. His last words

were, "Mom, my stomach, it hurts."

This was not just politics. It is an ideology largely by religious judgment and texts that have for centuries branded Alawites as unbelievers whose blood and property are permitted.

The same channels that glorified killing the Alawites later filmed Druze being killed from July 13. The same speech, the same permission to wipe off.

We are hearing in real time the sound of a process we swore humanity would never allow again. Kidnapping and sexual violence against Alawite women. Why does this qualify as genocide?

Since February 2015, abduction of Alawite women has increased. Women have been taken from roads, buses, checkpoints, workplaces, homes.

Some family have evidence that women are being held in Idlib. Many others have disappeared. The case of Rawan Ali gang-raped, because she's an Alawite, came to light, not because it was isolated incident, but because it could not be fully hidden.

We recognize this pattern from the Yazidi

women, women reduced to forced marriage and slavery, justified by text that label us as non-Muslims and heretics. This is a genocidal technique, terrorizing the community through its women, destroying its future through its daughters, and make testimonies dangerous.

After that 7th of March targeted killing and humiliation continued. [?], a young man, Alawite young man, was beaten to death at the checkpoint for refusing to bark as a dog. [?] was shot for refusing to kneel. Teachers, engineers and workers were targeted and killings across Alawite community.

We ask, therefore, we ask, to recognize the word genocide, dehumanization, discrimination and isolated boundary testing massacres, the long destruction of our community life, women abducted, children orphaned and shrines destroyed. This is sequence.

As a therapist, I see the after image, chronic fear, sleepless children, maps where our presence is rubbed out. Genocide is not only by

body; it's by symbol and by the slow destruction of our name.

So we ask three things from the United States of America. Condition the partnership to the new authorities on protection of the minorities.

Create an independent investigation separate from the state and protect the survivor and sustain civil society on the coast.

As women, as an Alawite, as a daughter, as a granddaughter, I carry this redress from the coast and from the diaspora. Let our elders visit our shrine without fear. Let our children go to school and come home, let our families work, our fields, clinics and classroom without being marked for who we are.

Let our women walk the streets unafraid and harassed and let our name be spoken without an apology. Help us make "never again" not a slogan that we whisper over graves, but a duty carried out in daylight now.

Thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you, Ms. Khairbek, for your testimony.

Our next witness is Nuri Kino, founder of A Demand for Action, a Sweden-based advocacy and humanitarian organization that has advocated for diverse religious and ethnic communities in Syria, Turkey, and Iraq.

Mr. Kino, please proceed with your testimony.

MR. KINO: Commissioner Soloveichik, Commissioner Schneck, distinguished commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Nuri Kino, and I'm an investigative journalist and founder of A Demand for Action, an organization created to amplify the voices of persecuted minorities in the Middle East.

I belong to the Syriac Orthodox Church. We speak the language, the mother tongue of Jesus. Yet in the very land where that language was born, our communities are disappearing.

I am not here to speak as a member of this community. I'm here as an investigative reporter,

fact-checker, and human rights advocate to present verified facts.

Before 2011, there were up to 1.5 million Christians in Syria. Today, fewer than 300,000 remain. In Aleppo alone, from 100,000 to 25,000.

In the Khabur area in northeast Syria, from 30,000 to a couple hundreds. This is the story of the Christians and the other indigenous minorities of Syria.

Let me start with a young woman named Mariana. She was 19 years old, killed, together with 24 others in the Saint Elias Church bombing in Damascus on June 22.

Over 60 others were wounded and hundreds of thousands, or rather millions from all faiths and denominations of Syria are mourning.

At her funeral, her mother held her hand through the coffin window as church bells tolled. Friends and families threw sweets on her coffin, the wedding tradition, since she would not be able to become a real bride.

That burial became a symbol of something

far larger. The ethno-religious cleansing of Syria's ancient minorities of its Christian indigenous people.

For over a decade, extremists targeted Christians precisely for their faith. More than 120 churches destroyed. Thousands kidnapped. Whole regions emptied.

And after the fall of the dictator Bashar al-Assad's regime, unfortunately it did not stop. Let me tell you about a couple of attacks in some of the cities.

In Hama, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese was attacked. In Suweida, Saint Michael's Church was burned to the ground. In [?], Christian families were kidnapped and their homes torched.

Even the graves of the dead have been desecrated, as if to say you don't belong here even in death.

What is happening now is ethno-religious cleansing. A slow systematic removal of indigenous minorities through fear, violence and dispossession.

Yet, the international community has largely responded with silence.

Sanctions were eased without guarantees for minority protection. We saw it live in our cell phones. Syrians from different faiths pleading for their lives, heart-wrenching videos, one after the other, but no action was done.

During the pogroms of Alawites, there were some condemnations, but what was done to stop the violence? When Christians and Druze were massacred, sympathy; action, no.

And the videos keep coming up in our devices. Speeches don't stop immigration.

Christians refused to abandon 2,000 years of faith and memory in their beloved motherland. But fear and hopelessness are pushing them to leave. Thousands have applied for asylum. If any country opened its doors wide, few would remain.

The U.S. administration should take the opportunity to push Syria in the right direction. While interim president represents the majority, the minorities are holding their breath.

We understand that the U.S. needs a stable and constructive new partner in the Middle East. And all that is good.

But as a defender of human rights and the protection of the weaker, the U.S. should also make demands from their new partner.

So what can be done? First, make U.S. aid and easing of sanctions dependent on clear, measurable, religious freedom benchmarks verified by independent monitors.

Second, deploy U.S. diplomatic pressure and if necessary security guarantees to protect the sacred Christian sites in Hama, Homs, Suweida, and Damascus before the next church is burned or the next grave is desecrated.

Third, fund and empower local Syrian and aid and human rights defenders, especially minority-led organizations.

Fourth, appoint the U.S. Special Envoy for Religious Freedom in Syria, with a direct line to the Secretary of State and then mandate to be on the ground.

These are the minimum steps required to stop the 2,000 year old community from disappearing on our watch.

Maryana now lives, lies six feet under. Her funeral became a symbol of what happens when an entire people is silenced. Not only young woman was buried that day, but a part of Syria's history, its pluralist, its humanity. The doctors, engineers and teachers Syria needs are vanishing along with indigenous communities.

If the world allows that to happen, Syria will not only lose a culture, it will lose a piece of its soul.

I live in Sodertalje, Sweden, a small town of 100,000 inhabitants. I can name 12 medical doctors who have fled from Syria. There are probably hundreds more. The Syria without its ancient and indigenous people is a Syria without pluralism, the pluralism, without balance and without hope.

Will the U.S. act? Thank you.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you, Mr.

Kino, for your testimony.

Our final witness is Dr. Jamil Ammar, a Syrian Druze lawyer, scholar and advocate, who teaches at Yorkville University in Ontario and collaborates with the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security, and Society.

Dr. Ammar, please proceed with your testimony.

DR. AMMAR: Commissioners, ladies and gentlemen, good morning. I'm absolutely honored to be testifying before you today.

The latest sectarian events against the Druze in Syria are complex, layered and oftentimes obscured by conflicting accounts.

Yet, with accurate data, sound methodology, and step from the noise, a clearer picture emerges, revealing four consistent strategic policies that have been tested first against the Druze in a smaller scale in Jaramana and Sahnaya, and then later applied at a much larger scale against the Druze in Suweida.

We have conducted extensive research to

study and document this, which we're going to share with the honorable Commission with more details.

Due to time constraints now, I'm going to be very brief.

So the first strategy deployed by the Syrian government before the events against the Druze, first in Ashrafiyat Sahnaya in March and later against Suweida was deception and incitement.

The Syrian interim government has launched an effective disinformation campaign by deliberately misrepresenting real events on the ground to shape public perceptions on the event and to incite hatred against minorities.

For example, in Ashrafiyat Sahnaya, they spread a rumor that a woman from the Bedouin tribe was assaulted by a Druze group from Ashrafiyat Sahnaya, who removed her scarf despite the fact that the father of this girl went public online and denied these claims and assured the public that his daughter was not assaulted.

There was a huge campaign of it on social media. During the discussion with the Bedouin

tribe and the government in Ashrafiyat Sahnaya, which did not reach any result, once they finished and left the mosque, from there, there were already 500 armed men from the Syrian government and the Bedouin tribe with ten DShK cars

DShK cars are four-wheel drive with machine gun installed on the top of it.

In the case of Suweida, the campaign of hate started on March 25. Then on April 25, a fabricated audiovisual insulting the Prophet Mohammed was created and attributed to a sheik from the Druze community, and then immediately before the events against the Druze in Suweida, there was a very big rumor that the Druze have massacred 200 people from the Bedouin and then raped their women.

The question of rape while publicized heavily across all Syrian news channels, social media and TV, including on al Jazeera, which was used to justify the descending of a few thousands of Bedouin from all Syria to help and to defend the honor of these victims, which today have not been verified.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are talking sectarian engineering, rather than sectarian by passion.

The second strategy used by the Syrian government is state disarmament by a proxy violation. In both campaigns, in the Sahnaya first, and then in Suweida.

The Syrian security forces will go first to the Druze area, check for weapons. In many cases, they will not abuse the population, treat them with respect, take their arms and withdraw, and then immediately the Bedouin tribe will get in and commit massacres.

During the sectarian event in Ashrafiyat Sahnaya, Mr. [?], the guy responsible for [?], switched his mobile up. In the Suweida, the same thing repeated with one major difference. It was noticeable with evidence that HTS fighters were involved with violence from the get-go.

The third strategy that the Syrian interim government utilized effectively is indiscriminate killing and mass destruction.

In the case of Ashrafiyat Sahnaya, what is troubling is that the campaign was against a few people who don't want the Syrian armies to enter the Druze area.

Yet we looked at the killing, 42 people have been killed. One of them, Mr. Hussam Warour, was the mayor of the municipality of Ashrafiyat Sahnaya, a clear supporter of the government.

He was killed with his son.

The same repeated in Suweida. The campaign against the Druze in Suweida was targeting against one particular, if you like, coalition, the Hajeri coalition. If you look to the victims in Suweida, the Syrian forces and the Bedouin actually attacked the party that supported the Syrian government.

They assaulted the second and the third highest religious authorities in Suweida, [?] and Hennawi. They [?] students, even looked to the Christians in Suweida who have been spared the hate campaign, still the attacking forces burned five, six churches and desecrated the cemeteries, as one

of my colleagues mentioned.

The scale of destruction is unbelievable. You are talking about 32 villages, 25 of which are completely obliterated. And those in general represent around 30 percent of the total fertile space of Suweida. It's actually the breadbasket of Suweida.

Final strategy is strategic gamesmanship. After all this event, Mr. al-Sharaa, the interim president, went on televised speech and publicly thanked the Bedouins, quoting, "for their courage and defending themselves against the so-called outlaws, separatist Druze."

How to move forward? Ladies and gentlemen, wishful thinking is not strategic foreign policy. Rather it is a transactional security risk.

We urge you to consider the following. Number one, we need to pay attention to what is being taught currently across Syria in schools, universities, and mosques.

Whoever earned the curriculum in Syria

will control the future. The extreme fictions of HTS have taken control of education system and start to lay down and prepare the coming generation of extremists. We urgently need to pay attention to this.

Number two, the United States government needs to open a little bit consultation with the diverse Druze community.

It is not fruitful to focus dialogue with any particular group because the Syrians are divided.

One quick suggestion would be in order to protect minorities in Syria, actually the United States need to empower moderate Syrian Sunnis because moderate Syrian Sunni are under the same pressure like minorities because currently why we have Mr. Sharaa and his prime minister in front of the TVs, we have another shadow government that actually controls the Syrian government.

I will hold my remark at this. I'm running out of time, and I hope I will be able to elaborate more during the Q&A.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you very much, Dr. Ammar.

We'll now proceed to questions from the commissioners to the witnesses regarding their testimonies, and I'll begin drawing on both the testimony of Dr. Zelin as well as Ms. Khairbek.

Dr. Zelin, you referenced both the complexity of the current situation in Syria as well as the ongoing violations on freedom of religion or attacks on different religious communities. Ms. Khairbek, you spoke of attacks on Alawis right now.

And so I guess I'll begin with the question of how do you think the current authorities, the transitional authority in Syria, should seek to, on the one hand, hold responsible individuals of any religious background for crimes in which they were complicit during the previous regime while ensuring at the same time that there is no sectarian prejudice or attacks against Alawis or other religious minorities?

So if we can begin with Dr. Zelin and Ms. Khairbek, and if any other witnesses want to speak to this as well, please.

I think you're still muted. I don't hear you. I'm sorry.

Commissioner Schneck, do you hear Dr. Zelin?

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: I am not. I wonder if maybe we can move to Ms. Khairbek while we work that out.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHNIK: Yes. Ms. Khairbek. We'll come back to Dr. Zelin. My apologies.

MS. KHAIRBEK: Can you just highlight the question for me?

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHNIK: Yes. Say the question again?

MS. KHAIRBEK: Yes.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHNIK: Sure. Okay.

So the question is how should, on the one hand, the current authorities in Syria hold responsible anyone from any religious background

that was complicit in the crimes of the Assad regime, while at the same time ensuring that there are no sectarian attacks against Alawis or any other religious minorities?

MS. KHAIRBEK: Well, to start with, my community, in fact, we have, publicly have said that, that we wanted the transition justice to be in place, and we have asked, just to make it clear, that the authority did not have, meet with any Alawites leader or men and women at all. They didn't have any dialogue.

And we publicly have said that we want, just give us lists of people who you want them, and then we can as a community lift them to justice, and this has never happened.

This has never happened. And you're talking about hold these criminals accountable. I don't know how we're going to hold 200,000 people who stormed into the coast after calls of jihad and filmed themselves killing people and massacring. I don't know how we're going to hold them accountable.

I think the only way I see it is to have a kind of like a decentralization of Syria, of these forces. The security of the Alawite community should be from the Alawite men, and maybe also women who never committed any crime, were never had any links to the former regime. Come on, we are four million people.

We are very diverse society. We cannot be all of us stand as regime, the old regime. So I think it's one of the ways to hold the authority accountable.

U.S. can also suggest to have a dialogue with the community on the ground, and we do ask for also a kind of securities, local securities from the Alawite communities.

But the question is kind of like I don't know how, how they ask for 200 men to come to justice. I just said that the people, the same people, we saw them killing, and very proud of themselves killing in the coast the 7th of March.

We have seen the same people in Suweida, the same individuals. We have seen them indigenous

in Suweida.

So I don't know how the authorities would hold these people accountable, especially if they are leading militias.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you.

Dr. Zelin, let's try you now again.

DR. ZELIN: Can you hear me now?

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Yes, we do.

Thank you.

DR. ZELIN: Okay. Perfect. Thank you so much.

I mean I think the government needs to have a real transitional justice process where they go after the worst of the worst from the Assad regime.

So far, they have arrested many people related to the regime, but there isn't much transparency in this process at all.

They're arrested, and you don't hear anything else about what happens next in terms of any trial or any follow-up related to it.

In terms of people within their own ranks,

I mean if somebody is involved in a crime, I think they should be arrested as well, and the government also needs to do a better job with decommissioning people that are not actually in the Ministry of Defense or in the Ministry of Interior.

As my colleague here, Ms. Khairbek, mentioned, there was 200,000 people involved in the massacre. Obviously, most of those people were likely not in the Ministry of Defense or in the Ministry of Interior, let alone previously in HTS since HTS only had about 30,000 people before the fall of the regime within its forces.

And so the new government needs to do a much better job in getting weapons from local populations that might have it so that things like this don't happen again.

Another thing that the government must do is to make sure that, you know, within its media, whether official or unofficial, is that there isn't any type of incitement.

I know that at least on the official level, they are trying to work on that from what

I've heard, but it's obviously not done enough.

And then if you're just talking about random people online, of course, that's much more difficult to deal with since, you know, most technology companies nowadays don't really stop that type of activity.

And so one of the issues would be also working with technology companies to hopefully make sure that inciteful messaging from any side is not allowed on these platforms.

I mean I know that they try and do this related to content from the Islamic State because that's seen as a threat related to the U.S. also.

However, anything in many local contexts in Syria or in other countries for that matter, let alone outside of English and other languages, these technology companies fail at it.

It also doesn't help that outside countries have been pumping disinformation into the media space online as well, especially Iran and Israel, which is further complicating the situation.

So I'll leave it at that for now.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you.

Dr. Ammar, did you want to add something here?

DR. AMMAR: Yes, Commissioner. First, I want to thank you for really important question.

I do believe the answer to your very complicated question is simple. If you apply for a job in the United States, for example, usually you need a recommendation letter. People will ask for two recommendation letters.

In Syria, currently, in the justice system and somewhere, in most cases, but not all, you need actually [?] from the religious entity, lawyer with the HTS to recommend you to be appointed at any actually meaningful position.

So currently in the justice system in Damascus, I am a lawyer myself, in the bar, Damascus Bar Association and Damascus Country Bar Association, the overwhelming majority of people, who don't even have law degree, they have a degree in Sharia law, and in a country like Syria, Sharia

law is one thing, and the law itself is another.

So the start to hold offenders, perpetrator accounted should start by enable technocrat qualified in justice to lead the process.

And when I say enable technocrats, I am aware of the committees established by the Syrian government to investigate the atrocities committed first against the Alawis.

And then in Damascus and now later against the Druze. But if history teaches anything, in Syria, in general, those commissions see very little actual results.

And back to Dr. Zelin's points, trust is at all time low so we need to start building the trust. How do you build the trust? By assigning people who have the integrity, the authenticity, the credibility across the [?], which leads me to something extremely important.

The minorities, Syrian minorities can be saved by Syrian Sunni, by the normal average Syrian Sunni who have no issues with minorities.

The minorities have a clash point currently with the extreme factions of HTS, not with the Syrian in general, because make no mistake, Commissioners, currently, the entire key position in Syria under the very firm grip of HTS, and its religious clergy.

So if we start by enabling normal Syrian Sunni to take control, as time goes by, we will be able to hold perpetrator accountable, being Druze, Alawis, Christians, or Sunni.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you, Dr. Ammar.

Mr. Kino, please.

MR. KINO: Sorry. I was muted.

I have carefully as an investigative journalist and in my op-eds, for example, in Newsweek, followed both the pogroms and massacres of the Alawites and of the Druze, and also all this violence against Christians actually in most part of the country.

And there have been a lot of discussions,

and I'm very, very, I must say this is wrong word to use here, but very happy to hear Dr. Ammar and Ms. Khairbek on their enormous knowhow of the situation, which is very valuable.

And to start with, what is very important is that all the Syrians, a Syria for all Syrians, meaning that all Syrians should also be involved in, for example, the constitution, the building of the new constitution, and that it will be free of religious influence because all this hate speeches, online hate speeches that unfortunately are growing bigger for I would say actually every day, and that's also what [?] both in Suweida and [?] in those, you know, areas for the Alawites.

So we need to, if the new, if the interim government and U.S. as its partner really wants to build trust, as Dr. Zelin started with, but build the trust, should be by also showing that everyone, all the sects, all the faiths, and all the ethnicities are represented in every single part of building the new Syria, which we unfortunately now cannot see.

And since we do not see that, it does inspire the extremists, and as Dr. Ammar pointed out, most Sunni Muslims, most Syrians, no matter their faith, wants to live side-by-side.

Syria before 2011 was not a country where neighbor asks another neighbor what faith do you belong to, what denomination do you belong to? It was a country of proud Syrians, even though they lived under the cruelest dictator and dictatorship.

And also there have been a lot of discussions and meetings and conferences about is it federation, as Ms. Khairbek said earlier, or is it self-administration or should it be decentralized and should they have their own, their own police force, their own security forces?

Or should that also be included in centralization of Syria?

And I think also I would actually would ask, if I may, Commissioners, ask Ms. Khairbek and Dr. Ammar what they think they about federation, self-administration, decentralization, or centralization of the country.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you.

Would either of the witnesses like to reply to that?

MR. KINO: Sorry. Yes. Thank you.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Please.

DR. AMMAR: If I may?

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Yes, please, Dr. Ammar.

DR. AMMAR: Thank you so much for your excellent question, Mr. Kino.

So in my humble opinion, the treatment, the cure should never be worse than the disease itself.

So in our response to the atrocities committed against the Alawis first, who are going under unimaginable stress, and later against the Druze, we should not emotionally response to the pressure exerted upon us by the HTS.

In my humble opinion, one of the most important strategic goals for the extreme factions of HTS to establish an Islamic state with no minorities.

That's why there were pushing publicly humiliating the Druze online, live video, to enforce them to react emotionally, which they did, and ask for independence.

In my opinion, a divided Syria, fragmented Syria, it's in no one's interest. Extreme groups, and Dr. Zelin can correct me here if I'm wrong, extreme groups thrives during instabilities, in fragmentations.

A divided Syria is likely to pose more risk against the Alawis, the Druze, the Christians than reasonably managed Syria because that will open the floodgate of violence and give the extreme functions, who are in their hundreds of thousands currently, to lash out against the minority.

So what we need here is thinking of having independent sectarian basis state, which I totally understand—I am from the Druze community and try to tell someone who lost his son or daughter, hey, you need to work and to live with those in Damascus again, it's very hard.

I totally understand, but what we need to

do here is to work together to empower those within the small circle of Mr. al-Sharaa, who are genuinely willing to move Syria from pariah state into a modern state because currently those are the actual minorities of Syria.

Ladies and gentlemen, today, not only the Sunnis supporting HTS are radicalized. Today even the minorities in Syria are under the risk of being radicalized as well because they need to defend themselves.

So even communities that culturally speaking because the Druze are not known for being very religious and committed, the huge ideological pressure against them from the extreme faction of [?], they close down.

So what do we need? In my humble opinion, to work with verifiable barometers to give Mr. al-Sharaa a strong, consistent, verifiable incentive to do the right thing.

The right thing here is to rule Syria by real Syrians, by actual Syrians, not from someone from Australia controlling the [?] of Syria, not by

bringing all that ahead of HTD from Idlib and replace them with every technocrats in Damascus.

Currently the Sunni community in Damascus and in Aleppo under huge stress because if you think about it, if you leave the minorities for a second, you will see that the HTS fighters look suspiciously at the Sunnis, the Syrian Sunnis themselves that live in Damascus with 5,000 years of civilization.

Still they are not trusted. So I basically speaking think the answer is unified Syria. However, the status quo is not sustainable. We cannot allow Mr. al-Sharaa after whatever happened to have a central government that controls everything.

We have to account for the security for the Druze by giving them some kind of autonomy like some kind of assurance that they will be one million percent safe and these atrocities will never be committed without going independence full way.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you very much.

Commissioner Schneck, do you have a question for our witnesses?

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: I have. I have two, if I might.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Of course.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: The first question I want to ask, I thinking here particularly about Ms. Khairbek and Dr. Ammar in regards to the Druze and the Alawis, but perhaps for the whole panel.

I'm curious about the threats and the instances of kidnapping and sexual violence, including forced marriage, on minority religions in the country.

And I wonder if the witnesses might speak to that and offer some discussion? Perhaps, Ms. Khairbek, you might start.

MS. KHAIRBEK: Yes. In fact, first of all, thank you. I didn't thank you in the beginning to joining you.

In fact, during my work of documentation

of sexual abuse, rape and kidnapping, we have spoken to many survivor women, in fact, who came back from Idlib or just escaped or, first of all, they have told us that they are afraid to talk extremely because they have been threatened if they are talking, they can come after them.

One of these cases I had mentioned, it's Rawan Ali. Rawan had gone publicly and spoke about her experience, about the rape, that she was going to her work and three men of what's called General Security gang-raped her, and they said we are raping you because you are Alawite.

And then throw her on the road naked. In fact, who helped her, they were a family, a Sunni family, Bedouin family was there. So I think it's very critical now, especially many of those survivors are in Syria, and they are extremely afraid.

The family, the families are afraid. The kids, their kids are afraid. You know, there's a lot of like married women who have been kidnapped also who have kids.

They are extremely afraid to speak out so I think now is the horror is like is what's the horror, the shame, of course, also the shame, and, of course, after the authority have this kind of investigation saying that most of these Alawite women have escaped with their lovers is dishonoring us, in fact, in the society like Syria.

So, basically, what has happened now, it's giving more opportunities and kind of like immunities to these abusers to kidnap more women, and if a woman would speak, she is a liar. Nobody is going to believe her.

And I think as a psychologist, I know this process very well. I know how traumatizing it is, and I know how the society reacted. So, for now, I think to speak up, it's very critical, and especially with the circumstances in Syria now in the Alawites community.

Thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, Ms. Khairbek.

Dr. Ammar, would you like to address the

situation?

DR. AMMAR: Thank you, Commissioner.

So, in the case of violent, sexual violence against the Druze, in my humble opinion, was used for a different, for a different strategy. So it's not uncommon for women to use as a weapon of force.

So what happened in Suweida, and here I just want to be, I want to issue this disclaimer that due to culture reasons within the Druze community, I cannot provide any names.

I cannot verify the story I'm going to share with you. So I want to make this in the open. So what happened in the Druze case, there was one particular incident with one particular family with everybody knows, but nobody talk about.

The first killed the men and the kids, and then they raped the women. After that, they stripped them from their clothes, and then they killed them, and they piled them at the edge of other in the village and they left them for everyone to see.

In my humble opinion, this is ISIS-like psychological war can be. So the idea was to scare the Druze out of their area. They wanted, you know, the cultural reason in the Middle East, women have a very special place, and extreme groups use this psychological intimidation to enforce people to flee.

So that is the only incidence I'm aware of that they did that. There were other incidents, some touching violations, but there wasn't full, full rape.

Beyond this particular case I'm sharing with you, Commissioner, I have no other stories to cite.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, Dr. Ammar.

Mr. Kino, anything in regard to the Christian community and this issue?

MR. KINO: One of the survivors of the Suweida massacres was a young Christian lady. Her uncle was the priest or the pastor of one of the

churches, and they were there for the weekend, and, you know, they came from, from the villages to the city.

22 people from the same family were massacred. She survived only by pretending to be dead. After it was revealed that she survived, she's pregnant and now hidden because of the fear or being abducted.

And why I'm telling this story and the interview I made with her just days after the massacre is because that and all the abductions, the recent abductions of both men and women of Alawites and Druze, but also the killings of Christians like Elias in Jaramana last week, a jeweler that I knew who they robbed and killed, are signaling to the minorities that you don't belong.

There is no one to protect you, and that's actually the most dangerous part of all of this. Many of the Alawite women that were abducted, but also the Druze women, nobody even knows if they were abducted or if they were killed during the massacres.

But what all this says, but what all this violence is signaling to the ancient minorities of Syria is leave. And that's why they need to be presented.

They must be involved in any case of the constitution, the building of the law, and the curriculum of the schools. Both Dr. Ammar and Ms. Khairbek can probably witness that most of the students that fled universities from the minorities or from the indigenous people have not, have not been given the opportunity or given the possibility to return to their studies.

So they've stopped their studies because of the hate speeches. I think both Dr. Ammar and Ms. Khairbek have several of those cases that they can tell us about and also about the abductions. Whether they are abducted or killed, nobody knows.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, Mr. Kino.

Chair Soloveichik, let me turn it back to you at this point. I don't know how much you want to pursue this line of discussion.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Did you have another question, Commissioner? I think you mentioned you had one more.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: I do, Meir.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Please.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: It's on a different topic. Is that, is that all right?

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: That's fine. Yes, please, Yeah.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you.

I'm very concerned about the situation of the foreign fighters in Syria these days, and you know their relationship with the regime and the capacity that we've seen for them to go rogue here.

And this I offer to all of the panelists. What concrete actions can the transitional authorities take to balance their stated goal about uniting Syrians of various religious backgrounds with this very dangerous reality of thousands of foreign fighters living in Syria who seem to be committing—in fact, we know are committing violence against religious communities and theological

dissenters?

Dr. Ammar, you have your hand up. Would you like to begin?

DR. AMMAR: Thank you, Commissioner.

It's really an excellent question. You know, as the Scots say, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating."

Now if the interim government, the Syrian interim government, actually believes in moving Syria from a pariah state into an actual state, this is where the rubber meets the road.

Extreme groups, jihadi groups, do not believe in statehood. They believe in nations building.

Now statehood means Syrians should live in Syria. Syria belongs to the Syrians. When you speak about an Islamic nation, a fighter from Chechnya, from Uzbekistan, from Pakistan, from China, are part of the nation.

So basically how the Syrian government handles foreign fighters is a key in drawing a clear picture on how strategically the Syrian

government or to what extent it is actually serious in making this a state.

What I would like to volunteer, however, is that in my humble opinion, I don't believe that Mr. Ahmed al-Sharaa has the ability to handle this extremely explosive fire within the coming year or two because while we understandably talking about the so-called foreign fighters, actually this is the tip of the iceberg.

You have small cream of Syrian local fighters who are not less dangerous than the extreme fighters. They are in the back, and they have a huge influence.

So while we understandably paying attention to the foreign fighter, this question is much serious than that. So if we are to handle the question of foreign fighter, Mr. Ahmed al-Sharaa needs tons of help because the country could plunge in a sea of blood given how entrenched extreme fighters, foreign fighters.

They have link to the Syrian community. They have families. They married. They have kids.

And therefore from this particular perspective, this is very dangerous.

Now, currently, already, one of the most important economic players in the entire Syria is an Australian, and many of you might have heard of him. Revealed by Reuters. So he controls the financial nerve of the country, deals with the so-called, Assad supporters.

He blackmailed them, gets cash, and then they transfer the cash to Idlib.

Back to your answer, I believe this particular question cannot be answered before considering the inclusive of all Syrians at the top of which is the Kurds to have an actual Syrian army, an actual state that could handle this danger.

Back to you. Thank you.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, Dr. Ammar.

Dr. Zelin, would you have a comment on this as well?

DR. ZELIN: Sure. I agree with Mr. Ammar

in everything he's saying about the complications of the government being able to actually do anything.

Part of it is that the Praetorian Guard of Sharaa in many ways is the Uyghurs. And so he's not going to drop them because they're securing his own security. Plus the new government has also created a unit within the Ministry of Defense, Unit 84, which is for the foreign fighters.

Sharaa has claimed that he's going to try and Syrianize all of these individuals. However, we've obviously seen them involved in various activities already discussed.

And so the key question is whether as the new state develops and they recruit more people into the military and if the SDF actually integrates, whether it will provide more space for him to go after those that break the law since I don't think it will roll over to every single foreign fighter, but the most extreme people that are not in line with the vision for the future.

And I think the example of what happened

in the 1920s in Saudi Arabia is instructive where you had this extreme Bedouin group of people involved in helping the Saudi state create its third state, but they're also involved in a lot of massacres and violence that was more extreme.

And eventually the Saudi state cracked down upon them and they were stopped in their tracks essentially.

So I think eventually, and hopefully, there is a space given if they recruit outside of sort of what had previously only been in northwest Syria to a broader base of individuals into the military, as well as bringing in SDF, that it could provide more cover to potentially crack down upon the most extreme of these individuals.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you.

Commissioner Soloveichik, thank you.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you, Commissioner Schneck.

I'd like to follow up on two different testimonies, Dr. Ammar's and Mr. Kino's.

Dr. Ammar, you mentioned that those

outside of Syria should engage with I think as you put it the diversity of the Druze community, and I'm interested in your thoughts as to how best that could be achieved.

Maybe you could explain a little bit more about what that means when, of course, as one reads about Syria and what is taking place, and one encounters references to this diversity, what would be the best way for representatives of the United States to engage this diversity as you mentioned?

And, then, Mr. Kino, I'd like your further thoughts, if you can, on what assurances this, this ancient Christian community in Syria would need for them to feel comfortable remaining in their homeland?

And what can and should be done in order to make them feel safe in that the Christian community remains in the area where they've been since the beginning of Christianity itself?

So maybe we'll begin with Dr. Ammar and then Mr. Kino.

DR. AMMAR: Thank you so much,

Commissioner.

If you allow me to very briefly take one step back and explain why this is relevant.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Sure.

DR. AMMAR: So, strategically, from the dawn of 2025, the Syrian interim government tried strategically to select the individuals, for example, from the Druze community they would like to have dialogue with.

So while the Syrian interim government met with a wide range of autocrats, academics and politicians from the Druze community, they focused in terms of influence with a key figure, in particular, Sheikh al-Hajeri, and after Sheikh al-Hajeri, the other two individuals, Hannawi and Jarbuwa.

Now in the Syrian Druze community, Mr. al-Hajeri is known for his attribute that is not usually seen as very friendly with the Syrian government, the other two a little bit more accommodating.

It's very important to know that Mr. al-

Hajeri raised significant number of demands that the overwhelming majority of Syrians agree on, such as, you know, inclusive institutions, inviting others to participate, transparency, things of that sort.

But long story short, al-Hajeri is usually seen or depicted as a little bit more hostile with the Syrian government vis-à-vis the other group, al-Hannawi and Yusuf Jarbuwa, who are seen as little bit more accommodating.

For mysterious reason, the Syrian interim government always focuses on Mr. al-Hajeri, expand his image, make him the reason behind all attacks, while ignoring the rest, not only the other religious figures who are in favor of talking with Damascus, actually ignoring the overwhelming majority of the Druze autocrats, politicians, who tried to coordinate with the Syrian government.

But the Syrian government prefers to deal with the Druze religious community for a simple reason. HTS has almost 20 years of experience under their belts.

They have been in Iraq and been to Syria. Honestly, they can easily outgun, outmaneuver the Druze religious minority, who are not mastered or skilled in the art of warfare or, you know, security operations.

So, in my opinion, the HTS prefers to deal with religious authority in the Druze community by saying, hey, we are respecting you. We want to honor you, all the religious community. That's why we are dealing with them.

But, in reality, the strength of the Druze community lies in its diversity. The Druze have tons of expertise in all directions. Therefore, all of them are out of the way. That's why you will see this emotional tit for tat where a small group of the Druze community lashing out against the Sunni extremist factors, which enabled this war to carry on.

How we move? I think the United States without excluding anyone should keep an open eye and go around. There are many significant well-established politicians, academics, thinkers in the

Druze community who have the strategic vision to meet whoever is willing to talk from the Syrian government, whoever is willing to work in the process of building a state that ensures the stability and the safety of all Syrians, not only the Druze or the Christians or the Sunni.

Currently, I don't like to speak for the Alawis. My colleague can speak. Currently, literally, you can kill anyone from the Alawis sect and say he was or she was one of the Syrian supporters, President Assad [?]. He was [?] however.

So basically by being, for example, Alawis, in and of itself, enough justification to kill anyone, and, of course, there would be investigation and, of course, the state will say, hey, we acknowledge there is something wrong.

Why is that? Because the entire Syrian question is viewed from ideological lens. From HTS, those who actually in power, believe in the interpretation of faith. They look at the Druze, at the Alawis, at the Christians, as unbelievers or

infidels.

To answer this risk, we should not, not marginalize but to try to include more forces apart from the religious community and the minorities so that we enable more autocrats from the Sunni community, as well, to have a normal dialogue because currently even if we don't see it at the surface, it's the religious figures talking to religious figures.

And with my humble assessment for the supporter of HTS, it's a little bit too late for the religious authorities. It's a little bit too late for them to think of the Druze as normal citizens.

For them, the Druze are infidels that, you know, should be contained at least, if I say. So that's why the United States needs to keep an open mind and try to reach out to other key figures in the Druze community who are not necessarily in line with the religious authority without excluding the religious authority because I know that some of my own community will say, hey, you don't like to be

represented by those.

Of course not I want. But the only way we can move forward in a state called Syria if we put the religion aside and start to think as a Syrian.

Thank you, Commissioner.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you very much, Dr. Ammar.

Mr. Kino, please, as we've seen in many locations in the Middle East, historic Christian communities in crisis, and certainly that's true of the Christian community in Syria.

So what can be done for them to feel, the Christians in Syria to feel safe?

MR. KINO: Thank you, Commissioner.

As Dr. Ammar stated, the biggest problem has and is being called infidels and feeling that they are not wanted.

In order for Christians to remain in Syria, they need to feel we are wanted here. We have dignity here and we have future here. And how will they get that dignity and get that trust?

Well, legal protection of Christian

identity. That's number one. Meaning full seats in local and national councils, equal access to public jobs, equal court rights, and then the closed schools, to restore the Syriac, Armenian and Greek and Melkite churches, and that the schools are having the funds to pay salaries, schools all over Syria actually.

And then I must go back to the constitution, you know, because without having equal rights, hundred percent equal rights, the constitution with no influence of any religion, they will not feel trust.

And then as I said in my speech earlier, the sanctions must depend on clear measurable religious freedom benchmarks.

And the U.S. should appoint a Special Envoy for Religious Freedom in Syria because all this will signal for all faiths, all Syrians, that there are moves, there are steps done to make sure that Syria will be pluralistic and a Syria for all Syrians, so, and, as I said earlier, to empower the local Syrians.

And one question that we haven't or item that we haven't spoken about is the Kurdish-led northeast Syrian self-administration.

Is that a model that, is it realistic to all Syria, also for the Druze, or also for the Alawis, and where in that part would the Christians be, in Wadi al-Nasara, where we had killings and a massacre just a month ago?

And so I would say the solution is to feel included and protected and respected and having the dignity. 2,000 years is about to disappear.

I mean the massacre of the priest in Suweida has shocked all Syrians, and, of course, scared the Christians.

And then we have the church bombing, and then we have daily violence against Christians, and personally, also, in the diaspora, not just in Syria, the most harming are the hate speeches.

So, and that also has to be dealt with. I mean the U.S. and its new partner, the Syrian interim government, must be prepared to speak out about the hate speeches.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you very much, Mr. Kino.

I think we have time for one more question. Commissioner Schneck, any other questions for our witnesses?

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thanks, Commissioner Soloveichik.

Since Mr. Kino raised the issue of the constitution, I remember, in fact, what Dr. Ammar said in this regard. I'd kind of like to go back to that though.

You know, given the semi-autonomous situation in the north and east, and the role that the SDF continues to play there, and given the situation that we saw with the Druze in Suweida and with the Alawis along the coast, I wonder, and I offer this to the whole group, I wonder if the constitution could be structured in such a way to recognize these geographical areas in some fashion?

Federation was mentioned. But Dr. Ammar seemed to think that that was a bad idea. But I

wonder if the constitution should reflect the on-the-ground situation of these religious minorities geographically?

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: It's an incredibly important question. We have just a few minutes left so if the witnesses can answer this question with brevity, that would be incredibly appreciated. Very important question.

Witnesses, please.

DR. AMMAR: I'm happy to go if--

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Yes, please, Dr. Ammar, go ahead, please.

DR. AMMAR: Thank you. Thank you so much.

So, very quickly, I would like to handle that question from a security point of view because we are handling, we are dealing with a previously designated terrorist group, like country in charge.

And never in the history of extreme group, an organization that has successfully moved from terrorism to state building.

Now, historically extreme groups used certain layers or vehicles to rally support for

their cause. Some of them, animosity towards the Christian West or the Jews. Currently, this is no longer an option.

HTS leaders are shrewd enough to understand they can no longer move forward with this agenda against the Jews or against the Christian.

And HTS in particular was very, very early on from 2014 was careful about this, and they have conducted review of their media strategy, led by two particular scholars, al-Tusi [ph], and Abu Mohammad Makisi [ph], and they have provided a number of suggestions.

One of them that you know what, if you would like to establish an Islamic state in Syria, stop making these outlandish statements against the West, against Israel, against the Jews.

Literally I'm quoting. Said even if Jews are our worst enemy, don't say it for now. You need to present yourself in a more media friendly strategy.

Now, currently, to rally support, Mr., the

extreme faction of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, use minorities' independence as a cause to rally support so the Alawis, the Druze are seen as separatists.

So this separatist movement has rallied not those religious figures, and even nationals from the Sunni community, who said, okay, those Druze and the Alawis would like to have their own state.

So strategically speaking, while 100 percent we should acknowledge the specificities of Syrian minorities, especially after the bloodshed in the Druze, Alawis and Christian areas.

But I reiterate, federalism, in my humble opinion, is not an ideal. There is, in my opinion, there is no, this is not a viable situation for the Druze, in particular.

There are different reasons. I'm aware we are out of time to highlight why. What happens for the Kurds is different from what worked for the Druze.

For the Druze, I think decentralized

government that enables the Druze in Suweida to have full confidence that this will never be repeated again, enabling them to handle themselves to some extent while still working within the umbrella of a Syrian state, not Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, might be the viable option for national, regional and international security.

Thank you. Back to you, Commissioner.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you very much, Dr. Ammar.

We've come to the end of our time. I want to thank all the witnesses for offering us their analyses on this very, very important subject.

This hearing is now adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:00 o'clock noon ET, the hearing was adjourned.]