



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Tony Perkins, USCIRF Chair:

Good afternoon 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 to offer their expertise on this topic.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, 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 or belief abroad, using international standards to do so, and makes policy recommendations to Congress, the President, and the Secretary of State. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this hearing. This will also be the first time we are conducting a virtual hearing at USCIRF.

Before we focus today on northeast Syria, I would like to first recognize and 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 share 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 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 is not far from our thoughts.

The north and east of Syria has represented one of the most pivotal theatres of conflict during this tumultuous decade for the country and region. It was in this area that religious and ethnic minorities—and indeed civilians from all walks of life—faced the scourge of the ISIS, whose base of operations lay in the strategic center of Dayr al-Zur. And it was in the northeastern pocket of Kobane that Kurdish-led forces staged what began as a last stand but, with the support of the 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 Kurdish-led forces and their supporters launched an initiative to introduce local governance, autonomous from the Assad regime—based on principles of inclusion, diverse representation, and personal freedoms. That initiative evolved into what is now known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, or the AANES. 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 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 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.