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# USCIRF Hearing on freedom of religion or belief in Syria

## *Peace can only be achieved through justice*

By Dr Zsuzsa-Anna Ferenczy for Human Rights Without Frontiers (\*)

HRWF (05.11.2022) - On May 10, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) organized a hearing on freedom of religion or belief in Syria to examine the current conditions in the country. The hearing, moderated by Nadine Maenza, USCIRF Chair, highlighted opportunities for U.S. policy to support Syria's diverse religious and ethnic communities in formulating a political solution. The main question the invited expert witnesses addressed was how US policy can more effectively integrate freedom of religion or belief issues in its focus on Syria.

At present, religious freedom in Syria remains threatened. The regime of President Bashar al-Assad systematically discriminates against members of religious groups outside the President's own Alawi branch of Islam, destroys religious minorities' houses of worship during clashes with opposition groups, and actively strips both religious minorities and the Sunni Muslim majority of their autonomy and religious authority. Armed opposition forces and militant Islamist groups target vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities in their attempts to wrest power from the Assad regime and one another.

The al-Qaeda offshoot Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) continues to displace religious minority communities in the northwestern region of Idlib, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has increased its presence in eastern Syria, further destabilizing the region. Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition groups leverage their Turkish financing and military support to wage campaigns of religious and ethnic cleansing in Afrin. In contrast, there are promising environments for religious freedom and intrareligious cooperation in Syria, including areas in the north and east governed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

**Ethan Goldrich**, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs of the U.S. Department of State stressed that the state of human rights with regard to freedom of religion or belief in Syria is dismal. The United States urges an end to abuses by all parties and promotes accountability for ongoing atrocities against all minority groups, this remains a key US foreign policy priority, he added. The US also continues to engage the UN envoy for Syria to support a UN-facilitated Syria-led efforts.

**Badran Jia Kurd**, Deputy Co-Chair of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) emphasized that in this part of Syria there several different groups coexist, without distinction made between them, whether Muslim, Christian or Yazidi. Religious tolerance and freedom of religion or belief are developed within the Administration, in a system accommodating all religions, where they can maintain their identities. The Autonomous Administration is offering an opportunity for all citizens who fled from ISIS, of all faiths. ISIS and the regime paved the way for deep religious

divisions, affecting the mentality of the society long-term, he cautioned. Looking forward, a political solution is needed, that enables the preservation of all cultures and religions, in coexistence.

**Max Hoffman**, Director of the National Security and International Policy, Center for American Progress, stressed that the US welcomes reconciliation efforts in Syria in the last few years, with a complete opposition to any normalization of Assad in power. Yet, the US should do more in the country, going beyond what it does at present, he stressed, keeping in mind that no political resolution is likely in the near term.

**David Phillips**, Director of Peacebuilding, and Rights Program at the Institute for the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University spoke of Turkey's role in the current situation in Syria. Mindful that Turkey acted as a lifeline for ISIS in the past, the US should adjust its policy regarding Turkey according to the reality at present, and see Turkey as it is, not as it wishes to see it. He also spoke of the situation on the ground more broadly, recalling that in 2014, the jihadists rampaged through Christian, Yazidi communities, launching a worldwide jihad against them. Armenian Christians, who have been present in Syria since biblical times, were attacked, taken hostage, had their churches destroyed and families uprooted in and around Aleppo, with options ranging from forced conversion, to slavery, extortion or execution. In 2015 and 2016, the US and the EU declared the persecution of Christians by ISIS as genocide.

The expert witnesses agreed that going forward accountability for crimes committed is key. They recommended that the US engages the victims of persecution in order to cultivate long-term solutions as it addresses religious freedom in Syria.

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