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“Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle”

Rep. Christopher Smith
Joint Hearing Statement

Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and Internat'l Orgs.
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
6.25.2013

Good afternoon, and welcome to today's joint hearing of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations and the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa as we turn our attention to an overlooked aspect of the crisis in Syria—the religious minorities caught in the middle of the conflict and apparently targeted by government forces as well as rebel groups.

More than 93,000 Syrians have been killed in this horrendous and seemingly endless civil war. More than 4.25 million people are displaced within Syria, with millions more fleeing to safety in the surrounding countries of Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq. It is disturbing to note that one in five of the refugees is Christian although Christians in Syria make-up one in ten of the pre-war population of 22 million people. This would seem to indicate that Christians are even more fearful for their lives and safety than other segments of the Syrian population.

Before the war, Syria was a fairly pluralistic society, with Alawites, Shias, Ismalis, Yezidis, Druze, Christians, Jews, and Sunnis living in relative peace, side by side. The situation was far from perfect, as President Bashar al Asad's regime had a vast security apparatus in place with members inside each of the religious communities to monitor their activities.

The Asad government was guilty of serious human rights violations, including the summary imprisonment and execution of political opponents. But relations between the various religious groups were generally not violent.

That civil co-existence has ended with the war. In February of this year, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic reported that, “The conflict has become increasingly sectarian, with the conduct of the parties becoming significantly more radicalized and militarized.”

This followed on an earlier Commission report stating that, “Entire communities are at risk of being forced out of the country or of being killed inside the country. With communities believing – not without cause – that they face an existential threat....”

We know that early in the civil war, Asad came to view the Christian minority with suspicion, accusing churches of laundering money and goods for opposition forces and forbidding banks from transactions for certain churches.

There is also evidence that the Assad regime encouraged sectarian tensions in order to maintain power—perhaps believing that if the people were afraid of Islamists commandeering a nominally secular state, the people would be more likely to support Asad over the opposition.

In December 2012, *Time* Magazine reported allegations that the Asad regime was paying individuals to pose as opposition supporters and chant slogans at protests including “The Christians to Beirut, the Alawites to the grave.”

Our own government has voiced concern about the particular threat posed to Christians in Syria. According to the State Department’s International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, “The regime continued to frame opposition actions as targeting the Christian population. At the same time, it increased its own targeting of Christian and Alawi anti-regime activists in order to eliminate minority voices that might counter its narrative of ‘Sunni-Sponsored violence’.”

Religious minorities seem to fear the opposition forces. Some prominent opposition groups (such as the Muslim Brotherhood) have a religious basis which has been seen as threatening to Syria’s Alawite and Christian minorities.

Smaller opposition factions, such as the Al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist al-Nusra Front, take explicitly sectarian positions. There are reports of incidents in which rebel forces engaged in sectarian violence, such as burning Shi’ite mosques.

Christians are perceived by many in the opposition to be Asad loyalists, possibly due to Asad’s aggressive recruitment of Christians into the regime militias at the start of the civil war. Other reports indicate that the Christians attempted to remain neutral either out of pacifism or concern about their rights under opposition forces.

Christian neutrality was perceived by some opposition groups as loyalty to the regime. In December 2012, a rebel force believed to be associated with the Muslim Brotherhood released a Youtube video entitled, “Warning mainly Christian cities in the province of Hama”, and promising attacks if they continue to support and house the pro-Asad forces.

Christian leaders have been targeted, such as the April 2013 kidnapping of Mor Gregorius Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Church and Bishop Boulos Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church—both men still have not been returned.

The Druze community reports being targeted as well. In March 2013, a Druze leader reported to Christian Solidarity International, “Our people get stopped at checkpoints and are asked which sect they belong to. Once the militias hear that they are from Swaida [a province where 90% of the population is Druze], our men disappear.”

The al-Nursa Front, a U.S. designated foreign terrorist organization, has been blamed for much of the sectarian rhetoric and violence, but dozens of the opposition groups ascribe to Islamist or Salafist-jihadist ideologies and mingle with the Free Syrian Army—which the U.S. may now be supporting.

Over the last three years, the United States has committed to providing \$250 million to various opposition groups in Syria—at least \$117 of which has already been funded, largely to the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces. With the chemical weapon red line crossed, the Administration has also agreed to provide ammunition and small arms.

It is not clear whether any of this new lethal assistance will go to the Free Syrian Army and its worrisome opposition groups.

The Administration has also committed to send an additional \$300 million in humanitarian aid to “vulnerable groups” in and surrounding Syria. It is not clear whether distribution of this aid will be informed by the plight of religious minorities.

I am very concerned that the Administration may not be taking seriously the targeting of religious minorities. Too often, we have heard from this Administration that they have bigger issues to deal with than the vulnerability of religious minorities.

In the last two appropriations cycles, we have directed the Administration to condition aid to Egypt (\$1.3 billion dollars) on certification that Egypt is acting to protect the religious freedom of its minorities. The Administration (both Secretaries Clinton and Kerry) refused to do so. Perhaps not surprisingly, the government of Egypt continues to allow attacks on Coptic Christians with impunity.

Money talks. The United States should be using assistance to ensure recipient countries and entities have a plan that is implemented to protect vulnerable religious minorities. This is all the more critical in situations like Syria, where we are providing lethal aid in what has become sectarian tinderbox.

Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

Deputy Assistant Secretary Thomas O. Melia

Testimony

HFAC hearing “Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle”

June 25, 2013, 3pm

Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations

Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa

Chairman Smith, Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to discuss the situation for minorities in Syria.

Syria is comprised of a rich myriad of religious and ethnic groups. Syria’s population is approximately 22.5 million, although emigration has increased due to ongoing violence, unrest, and economic hardship. According to the State Department’s International Religious Freedom report for 2012, Sunni Muslims constitute 74 percent of the population, and include: Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Chechens, and Turkomans. The Alawis, Ismailis, and Shia constitute 13 percent. The Druze account for 3 percent. Christian groups, who have an ancient presence in Syria, constitute the remaining 10 percent, although the Christian population may be closer to 8 percent due to recent emigration due to the conflict.

Syria looks disturbingly different today than it did at the start of the revolution. What started as a peaceful demand for human rights in Deraa has turned into a devastating conflict nationwide with a growing human toll. The Asad regime continues to commit gross and systematic violations of human rights. According to the U.N., more than 93,000 Syrians have died since the beginning of the conflict and the number is rising. More than 1.6 million people have left their homes in Syria to seek refuge in another country – a number that could more than double by the end of 2013. And nearly 4.5 million Syrians are internally displaced, all out of a total population of only 20 million. The last several months have been particularly concerning. We have seen increasing sectarian undertones in the horrific massacres of Bayda, Baniyas, and Qusayr. Indeed, the UN Commission of Inquiry’s June 4 report underscores that crimes against humanity have become a daily reality for the people of Syria. The regime has provoked and attempted to divide Syria’s population by driving a wedge between the minorities and Sunni majority. The regime continues to target faith groups it deems a threat, including members of the country’s Sunni majority and religious minorities. Such targeting included killing, detention, and harassment. Regime attacks have also destroyed religious sites, including more than 1,000 mosques.

The attacks on Qusayr marked a dangerous new precedent of direct sectarian threats by Hizballah’s forces that are fighting at the behest of the regime. During the June session of the UN Human Rights Council session, we co-sponsored an urgent debate and resolution on the regime and Hizballah’s attack on Qusayr. Unfortunately the regime did not halt its attacks. Over 200 civilians were killed and many more wounded who now desperately need humanitarian assistance.

There are reports the regime is now moving north to Aleppo as well as calling on Shia civilians to fight against the Sunni population.

We have also seen al-Qaida-linked groups and other violent extremist groups engaged in gross human rights abuses. We have seen several reports of violent extremists conducting massacres of Shia civilians as well as destroying a Shia mosque. Many Christians have reported receiving threats on their lives if they do not join the opposition efforts against the regime, have been driven from their homes and killed in mass as presumed supporters of the regime. We have also seen increasing lawlessness in the northern areas and increasing threats to civilian security, including kidnapping, rape, and looting. Syrian Orthodox archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim and Greek Orthodox archbishop Paul Yazigi were kidnapped April 22 by persons unknown, and remain missing. The Nusrah Front has claimed responsibility for bombings across the country. A 15-year-old boy was executed for blasphemy this month by extremists in Aleppo who, reports suggest, have come from outside the country to fight the regime. As you know, the Obama administration designated the Nusrah Front in December 2012 as an alias of al-Qaida in Iraq, and supported a similar designation by the UN Security Council as well. We did that to warn others in the Syrian opposition of the risks that they take by working with the Nusrah Front.

These groups do not support the aspirations, nor do they reflect the mindset, of the vast majority of the Syrian people, or even the vast majority of the active Syrian opposition. The atrocities committed by these extremist elements should not be conflated with the efforts by the moderate opposition, including the Supreme Military Council, to seek an end to the Asad regime and to facilitate a political transition. In fact, the list of acceptable targets for these extremist groups is increasingly long, and includes Sunnis. In a recent interview with the *Economist* magazine, one Nusrah Front fighter stated that even Sunnis who want democracy are “unbelievers” who deserve to be punished.

Sectarian based retribution plays directly into the regime’s and violent extremists’ hands. It does not move the country closer to the inclusive, post-Asad future that Syrians have been struggling to achieve. We have been very clear that all sides in this conflict must abide by international humanitarian law and we continue to urge all Syrians to speak out against the perpetration of unlawful killings against any group, regardless of faith or ethnicity. In our conversations with opposition military leaders, we have consistently urged opposition groups to respect international law and human rights, and applauded those groups that signed on to the code of conduct issued by the Free Syrian Army in the fall of 2012. We are encouraged by the actions of our political and military opposition partners to work towards and speak out in favor of these shared goals, and are working to use our assistance to improve the capacity of these proven actors.

We continue to try to help bring an end to the violent conflict in Syria by strengthening the moderate opposition, blocking the Asad regime’s access to cash and weapons, facilitating a political transition to end Asad’s rule, providing humanitarian assistance, and laying the groundwork for an inclusive democratic transition, including accountability for the egregious violations committed. We are also working closely with our allies to stem the flow of money and resources to violent extremist groups.

We believe that a political transition is the best solution for the crisis in Syria. We support the letter and intent of the June 2012 Geneva Communiqué, which calls for a transitional governing body with full executive powers and formed on the basis of mutual consent. We have been clear that there is no role for Assad in a transitional government; he has lost his credibility and must be held accountable.

Our and our partners' efforts to strengthen the moderate opposition and change the balance on the ground include diplomatic outreach to improve the representativeness and connectedness of the opposition bodies themselves. We have repeatedly encouraged the political opposition to include grass roots activists from inside Syria, minorities, and women from all communities in their leadership. We hope that their upcoming meetings will produce more diverse and inclusive membership and leaders who reflect the diversity of Syria's opposition.

We regularly track violations and abuses committed in Syria by all parties, and regularly reiterate our call for all parties to the conflict in Syria to protect and to respect the rights of all civilians, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or gender. We have been absolutely clear that those responsible for serious violations of international human rights law and humanitarian law must be held accountable. As we have noted at the UN, the international community must continue to support documentation and other efforts to lay the groundwork for justice and accountability processes, and to support Syrian efforts as they identify how best to bring to justice those who have committed these heinous acts. As we look toward expanding our engagement with the Syrian opposition, efforts by the United States and the international community focused on justice, accountability, and conflict resolution will be critical to ensuring the protection of human rights during Syria's transition. By helping Syrians to accelerate their efforts to lay the groundwork for eventual criminal trials, we aim to deter current and potential perpetrators of these crimes, as well as sectarian vigilante justice or collective reprisals.

The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) at the State Department is supporting Syrian civil society so they can more effectively coordinate to advocate for human rights and democracy concerns. We are also bolstering efforts to lay the groundwork for future transitional justice initiatives, by supporting the documentation of violations and abuses committed by all sides of the conflict, and education about locally-owned accountability and transitional justice mechanisms. We are also promoting conflict mitigation and reconciliation by supporting positive cross-sectarian engagement, coalition building, and targeted humanitarian assistance and conflict prevention training at the local level. We support these activities by partnering with large inter-faith and ecumenical non-governmental international organizations and universities with experience working in Syria. A broad range of Syrian ethnic and religious minority groups are included throughout our efforts.

We are also honoring the work of human rights activists, such as female Syrian Alawite activist Hanadi Zahlout, who recently was selected for the 2013 Department of State Human Rights Defender Award. It is critical for Syrians and the international community to understand that Syria's minorities hold a range of political views and associations, despite the Assad regime's efforts to act as their sole representative and protector against the Sunni majority. Not all Alawites support the regime or the abuses committed by pro-regime militias, just as not all Sunnis support the opposition. Ms. Zahlout has been active on human rights issues in Syria since before the revolution, and was a founding member of the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) which are

an integral part of the opposition infrastructure. She is providing education and messaging on anti-sectarianism, as well as raising awareness about current threats to the security of minority communities and concerns about their role in a future transition.

Other U.S. backed transition assistance programs are helping to provide vital services such as food, water and electricity to local community groups, which help establish credible alternatives to new extremist elements among opposition groups. We supplied over 6,000 major pieces of equipment, including communications gear, to enable activists to coordinate their efforts. We boosted radio signals, extending the reach of broadcast on FM stations, and funded media outlets. We then used those media platforms to address sectarian violence and issue public service messages on chemical weapons exposure.

We also have trained and equipped thousands of local leaders and activists – including women and minorities – from over 100 Syrian opposition provincial councils. These graduates are empowering local committees and councils from Damascus to Dayr az Zawr to Idlib to better provide for the needs of all members of their communities. And we are looking to improve civilian security through training and some non-lethal equipment to opposition police and judges. This is critical to addressing the security vacuum in liberated areas easily exploited by extremists.

Finally, to ensure that our assistance reaches its intended targets and does not end up in the hands of extremists, we will continue to vet recipients using the formal processes that have been established across various government agencies.

The United States stood with the Syrian people at the outset of this conflict, beginning with U.S. support for activists and civil society during the early protest movement. We stand with the Syrian people today, with ongoing and increasing efforts to strengthen the opposition and civil society. And we will continue to stand with them going forward, until the day that we can together welcome a new Syria, one where the Syrian people can enjoy a free, stable, and democratic country without Asad.

We look forward to working with Congress toward this goal. Thank you again for the invitation to testify before your committee today. I am happy to take any questions you might have.

Testimony

Before the

**Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and
International Organizations**

and the

Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

on

Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle.

By

Dr. M. Zuhdi Jasser

Commissioner

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

June 25, 2013

I am Dr. M. Zuhdi Jasser, a Commissioner at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Thank you for the opportunity to testify today before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations and the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa on *Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle*. This important hearing highlights the increasingly sectarian nature of the Syrian civil war, which is well into its third year, and the widespread implications both for religious freedom or belief and the regional stability. I will mention up front that the war in Syria hits especially close to home for me not only as a USCIRF commissioner but as the son of Syrian immigrants. Many of our immediate and extended family still call Syria home and remain in the crosshairs of this civil war and humanitarian disaster.

USCIRF has been monitoring closely the crisis in Syria and in April issued a special report, *Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria*. The report, USCIRF's first ever on Syria, highlighted that the Syrian people have experienced egregious violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. The international community, including the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and numerous non-governmental organizations, all agree that the Assad regime has committed gross abuses of human rights and violated its obligations under the 1949 Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I. Extrajudicial killings, rape, and torture have all been well-documented. And most recently, President Obama has confirmed that the regime has utilized chemical weapons. Some groups associated with the opposition also have committed crimes against humanity.

If the crisis continues and current conditions persist and intensify, the Syrian people will experience indescribable horrors perpetrated against them, and an entire generation of young Syrians will be lost. The international community must come together to deal with the crisis both within Syria and in neighboring countries. If it does not, the crisis will spread beyond Syria and into the region and beyond.

In my testimony, I will focus on the increasing sectarian nature of the Syrian crisis, the effects on religious minority communities and the impact on the region. I also will report on some findings based on a June 1 -11, 2013 UNHCR delegation trip in which USCIRF participated that included speaking with refugees. I will conclude with some recommendations for your consideration.

The Nature of the Conflict

Since the conflict began, all religious communities in Syria have experienced religiously-motivated violence against their persons, places of worship, homes, businesses, and villages, towns and cities. For example, the London-based Syrian Network for Human Rights reported in September 2012 that the regime had already destroyed more than 500,000 buildings, including churches and mosques. The same NGO reports that 1451 mosques were targeted by the regime and that at least 348 mosques have been destroyed completely. The opposition reportedly has attacked four mosques, in each case because the Syrian army used the minaret as a sniper position.

While religious minority communities will be more vulnerable in a post-Assad Syria should extremist groups take power, it is important to note that the Assad regime overwhelmingly has targeted Sunni Muslims and committed the most egregious human rights violations against them. Additionally, women and children have been adversely affected: nearly three-quarters of all refugees who have fled to Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and beyond are women and children under the age of 17.

The regime's actions have created a humanitarian crisis that the world has not seen in recent memory. The United Nations reports that at least 93,000 individuals have died, that there are more than 1.6 million refugees, and 4.2 million Syrians have been internally displaced. It is estimated that by the end of 2013 more than half of Syria's population, or over 10 million people, will need urgent humanitarian assistance from the international community.

The Assad regime has turned a peaceful political protest with no religious or sectarian undertones into an overtly sectarian conflict. Regime-associated individuals (and to a lesser extent the opposition) that were born and bred in Syria now are supported by foreign military aid and training, and with inflows of foreign fighters by groups the United States has designated as terrorist organizations. Additionally, countries that the U.S. considers allies are supporting the warring parties. The regime and foreign fighters in particular fuel the sectarian fires of this conflict. As the sectarian nature of this conflict widens, individuals will be targeted not only because of their perceived or true allegiance to a particular political side, but simply because they follow a particular faith.

Additionally, the massive numbers of refugees fleeing Syria are destabilizing an already unstable region. Economically and politically unstable countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon have been put under severe economic pressure by hosting hundreds of thousands of Syrians.

Background

Syria's pre-conflict population of 22 million had broken down as follows: Sunni Muslims constituted Syria's largest religious community, making up roughly 75% of the population. Alawites, adherents to an offshoot of Shi'a Islam, made up about 12% of the population and various Christian denominations about 10%. Other religious communities in the country include Druze (4%); Yezidis (1%) -- whom the government categorizes as Muslims; and a very small Jewish community found in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo.

These figures reflect that Syria historically has been a religiously diverse country where its people have traditionally lived together without religious or sectarian animosities. However, some argue that sectarian divides existed under the surface due to the Assad regime favoring religious communities loyal to his government.

Prior to the conflict, the Assad family's government selectively permitted freedom of religion or belief based on its political calculations. The Assad government tolerated the country's smallest religious minority groups, including Christians, permitting them to worship freely, as long as they did not politically oppose his regime. With regard to Sunni Muslims, the Assad regime limited their religious freedom by controlling how their imams were selected, as well as

imposing other restrictions. Also limited under Hafez and Bashar Assad was the Sunni Muslim majority's ability to participate in the government and have political parties.

The Assad family's brutal authoritarian rule for over 40 years created the political conditions for the current conflict. Under both Hafez and Bashar, no political opposition was allowed and Syrian security forces perpetrated egregious human rights abuses to oppress anyone critical of the government. Due to these conditions, dozens of groups -- domestic and foreign -- have emerged in opposition to the regime. They vary widely in composition, from where they are drawn from, and their goals. Some of these groups, including the internationally-recognized Syrian Opposition Council, espouse democratic reform. Others, however, are motivated by religious ideologies espousing violence, such as the U.S.-designated terrorist organization al-Nusra Front. The varied nature of these groups affects their ability to find consensus and work together, further complicating the current and future situation for human rights and religious freedom in Syria.

Religious Minorities Caught in the Middle

By and large, religious minority communities, including Christians, Druze, Ismailis and other non-Alawite minorities, have attempted to disassociate themselves from the conflict and stay above the fray. However, circumstances increasingly are forcing them to take a position either in favor of the regime or the opposition.

From the beginning of the conflict, the Assad regime used sectarian rhetoric and military strategy as tactics to discourage Christians and other religious minorities from supporting and joining the opposition. The regime refers to the opposition and all Sunni Muslims as both extremists and terrorists who seek to turn Syria into an Islamic state which would be unwelcoming to religious minority communities. Assad and government officials stoked fears among Christians, citing the plight of Egyptian Coptic Christians and Iraqi Christians to depict what would happen to Syrian Christians should the opposition be successful. The presence of foreign terrorists affiliated with al-Qaeda and the wide deployment of Shabiha (regime terror squads) gives credibility to this argument.

The Assad regime and its most loyal supporters, predominately Alawites associated with the Ba'athist political party, appear to view opposition forces, predominately Sunni Muslims, as a threat to, not only to their ability to remain in power, but also the very existence of their religious community in Syria. However, the Alawite community is not monolithic. Some Alawite elites have abandoned the al-Assad regime for the opposition and denounced the violence perpetrated against civilians. In March 2013, a group of Alawites opposed to al-Assad and supporting a democratic alternative met in Cairo to discuss a declaration supporting a united Syria and preventing sectarian revenge attacks.

In February 2012, regime forces raided the historic Syriac Orthodox Um-al-Zennar Church in Homs. Additionally, the regime has bombed and desecrated a number of other Christian churches in Syria. Anti-regime activists have reported that the regime plants individuals within refugee camps and in key localities both within and outside Syria to stoke sectarian fears. In late December 2012, *Time Magazine* reported allegations that the regime and local government

officials provided up to \$500 per month to individuals to pose as opposition supporters and graffiti buildings or chant slogans at protests including “The Christians to Beirut...”

The opposition also has targeted religious minorities. Just a few weeks ago the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA) reported that armed rebels affiliated with the Free Syrian Army raided the Christian-populated al-Duvair village and massacred all its civilian residents, including women and children.

Also, after more than two months we still do not know who kidnapped two Orthodox Bishops, Yohanna Ibrahim and Boulos Yaziji, or why. This kidnapping reportedly occurred near the town of Kafr Dael, near Aleppo in northern Syria. Most individuals allege that they were kidnapped by opposition fighters, while some opposition groups claim regime affiliates kidnapped the Bishops to further inflame sectarian fears.

These are not the only incidents against Christians during the war. In January 2013, the NGO Human Rights Watch reported that opposition forces destroyed and looted minority religious sites in northern Syria. Human Rights Watch also reported that two churches were stormed and ransacked in the villages of Ghasaniyeh and Jdeideh, in the region of Lattakia, in November and December 2012. Various reports indicate that the Christian population of the city of Homs—approximately 160,000—has almost entirely fled for safety, with reports suggesting that only 1,000 Christians remain. In late 2012, opposition forces reportedly attacked churches and occupied as safe houses an evangelical school and a home for the elderly in Homs.

A Sunni-Alawite War?

Assad’s tactic of dividing the Syrian people along Sunni-Alawite sectarian lines appears to be succeeding. To ensure continued Alawite support for the regime, the government capitalized on Alawite fears of Sunni rule by spreading rumors of Sunni atrocities against Alawites and depicting the conflict as a fight to prevent Alawite extermination. For example, in late December 2012, *Time Magazine* reported allegations that the regime and local government officials also paid individuals to pose as opposition supporters and graffiti buildings or chant slogans at protests including “...Alawites to the grave.”

In response to their growing fears, civilian Alawites formed the pro-Assad and government-supported domestic militia such as Jaysh al-Sha’bi and Shabiha. The U.S. government has designated both as terrorist organizations that have committed gross human rights violations in Sunni communities.

The government’s language and violence, including indiscriminate bombings, extrajudicial killing, and torture of the largely Sunni opposition and non-combative Sunni Muslim communities, has led Sunnis increasingly to view the conflict not as a regime’s attempts to stay in power, but rather an Alawite-led attack against Sunni Muslims.

The al-Assad regime, including its army, security forces and related militias, has targeted Sunni Muslims. In May 2013 the regime killed more than 200 civilians, including women and children in al-Bayda, a massacre described by many as the worst sectarian attack against Sunni Muslims during this conflict. On May 25, 2012, in what has become known as the Houla massacre, 108

Sunni Muslims, including 49 children, were killed in two opposition-controlled villages in the Houla region of Syria just north of Homs. In the aftermath, the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) determined that most of the victims had been “summarily executed” and “entire families were shot in their houses,” and that regime-supported *Shabiha* were the most likely perpetrators. Reportedly some victims had pro Shi’a or regime slogans carved into their foreheads. In July 2012, more than 200 Syrians, mostly Sunni Muslim civilians were killed in a village in the opposition-held Hama region. The Syrian army attacked the village with helicopters and tanks, followed by militia forces reportedly killing civilians including women and children “execution style.”

USCIRF staff members Tiffany Lynch and Sahar Chaudhry, who recently travelled to the Middle East to speak with Syrian refugees about religious freedom conditions in Syria, were told of some of the tactics the regime uses to increase sectarian divides between Sunnis and Alawites. One tactic used by the regime is to force Sunnis to proclaim that Assad is their god and they are loyal only to him - if they are unwilling to do so, torture and death are likely. A former Syrian officer told USCIRF staff that regime forces only killed Sunnis and that his senior officer continuously reiterated that they were fighting Sunni terrorists. When this officer refused to kill women and children the Army accused of being Sunni terrorists, he was arrested and tortured for months until he was released and was able to defect and travel to Jordan.

Some Syrian refugees in Jordan and Egypt expressed to USCIRF staff strong anti-Alawite sentiments, including referring to Alawites as “dogs.” They made these comments largely in the context of their perceiving Alawites as being pro-Assad and anti-Sunni Muslim, rather than their making a derogatory statement against the Alawite faith.

There have been reports of groups attacking Alawites and Shi’a Muslims. For example, a December 2012 video released by Saudi-sponsored Takfiri Wahhabi, a Sunni opposition group, shows a Shi’i mosque that was burned down and dozens of individuals congratulating each other. Also in December 2012, a suicide bomber detonated explosives in a Damascus suburb wounding 14 people and damaging one of Shi’i Islam’s holiest shrines, a mausoleum of the Prophet’s Muhammad’s granddaughter.

Outside Actors Stoking Sectarianism

A number of outside actors are entering Syria and stoking the sectarian nature of the Syrian civil war, including Hezbollah, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards, and Shiite fighters from Iraq – all in support of Assad.

Additionally, over the last two-plus-years the dozens of groups which constitute the opposition include a number of foreign groups motivated by religious ideologies espousing violence, such as the U.S.-designated terrorist organization al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate. Like the regime, some of the more extremist groups utilize sectarian rhetoric and iconography to perpetuate fear and sectarianism. While al-Nusra, al-Qaeda and other extremists groups and fighters undoubtedly are becoming more influential, the numbers of their fighters in Syria are in dispute. Still, the majority of fighters in Syria are Syrians.

In conversations USCIRF had with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Egypt, the refugees – all of whom were Sunni Muslims -- by and large expressed disagreement with the religiously-motivated ideologies of the extremist groups. However, they supported the end goal, removing Assad from power.

Religious Minorities in the Refugee Crisis

Despite being caught in the middle of this conflict and in a precarious situation, religious minorities in Syria are not fleeing the country in the numbers anticipated. Of the more than 1.6 million Syrian refugees in the Middle East and North Africa, the overwhelming majority are Sunni Muslims. UNHCR reports that at the end of April less than one percent of each minority community -- Christians, Alawite, Ismaili, Mandaean and Yezidi -- are registered in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon.

There are reports that upwards of 300,000 Christians are internally displaced. Unfortunately reports for other communities are not available.

The small number of minorities in the refugee population reflects two displacement trends among these communities, especially among Christians and Alawites. The first is that Christians and Alawites are moving to their home areas or to regime-held areas because these areas tend to be safe from regime bombing. This suggests that as the conflict drags on longer than some had anticipated some Christians and Alawites are joining their-co-religionists, and perhaps buying into the government's rhetoric that they are safer with the government than with the opposition. . Second, evidence suggests that if Christians and Alawites do flee the country to Lebanon or Jordan, for instance, they are not registering with the UN refugee agency.

As USCIRF staff was told while meeting with refugees, Christians and Alawites fear identifying themselves as refugees for two reasons that highlight their precarious situation trying to exist between the two warring parties. One, they do not want other refugees to perceive them as supporting the Syrian government simply because of their religious affiliation. And second, if they should go home and the Assad government remains in power, they do not want government officials to view them as disloyal to the regime by having sought safety in another country.

It is believed that a small percentage of minority refugees are trying to pass as Sunni Muslims by, among other measures, wearing the hijab, to protect them from possible backlash.

Effects on the Region

As mentioned, more than 1.6 million Syrians have fled the country, thereby creating a massive humanitarian crisis and an emerging destabilizing threat to the region. Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey now each host more than half a million Syrians. Although Egypt currently is hosting 80,000 refugees, it is expecting at least an additional 120,000 Syrian refugees by the end of the year.

These refugees are putting enormous economic and political strains on already weak governments in the region. In Jordan, 80 percent of all refugees live outside of camps and no Syrian refugee camps exist in either Lebanon or Egypt. Instead, refugees live in cities and towns, competing with Egyptians, Jordanians, and Lebanese for housing, jobs, and access to services such as health clinics and schools.

For Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt, all countries that already have pre-existing economic and political challenges, hosting and providing for the large number of refugees is creating further destabilizing conditions. Further destabilization of countries in this already troubled region will have negative implications for the region, as well as beyond, including for U.S. national security.

Alarming, Syria's sectarian conflict now appears to be spreading beyond its borders, including to Lebanon and Iraq. In the last month, Lebanon has experienced fighting between Alawite and Salafist groups. In addition, it is widely argued that the spike in sectarian violence in Iraq that has left about 1,000 people killed is a direct spillover effect from the Syrian crisis. This is the largest death toll Iraq has experienced since 2006-2007

Additionally, scarce resources and jobs in all host countries are further exacerbating local tensions, potentially causing further economic and political destabilization. The international community will disregard these tensions at its peril.

Some analysts have suggested that a significant number of Syrians and current refugees will seek entry into Europe and that European nations need to both focus on aiding refugees in current host countries and start planning for inflows to Europe.

Recommendations

In late April, USCIRF released the special report, *Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria*, in which the Commission provided recommendations grouped in four categories: 1) Promoting Protection for Religious Freedom in Syria; 2) Prioritizing Human Rights in U.S. relations with the Friends of Syria Group; 3) Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief through U.S. Programs; and 4) Addressing the Situation of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees.

While USCIRF offered 20 recommendations in the report, below are seven key recommendations:

- The U.S. should, where appropriate, assist the Syrian Opposition Coalition and any future post-Assad government to provide security to protect likely targets of sectarian or religious-motivated violence, including areas where religious or minority communities live or congregate, as neighborhoods, religious sites and places of worship;
- To offset the influence of extremist groups who are establishing Shariah courts in liberated areas, the U.S. government should provide technical training and support to local councils, courts, lawyers and judges on domestic laws and international standards relating to human rights and religious freedom;

- As other nations such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar are vying for influence to shape Syria towards their goals, the U.S. government should form a special coalition with like-minded partners among the Friends of Syria to fund and develop efforts to promote intra- and inter-religious tolerance and respect for religious freedom and related rights to ensure that a future Syria respects these fundamental freedoms;
- The U.S. government should ensure that all international cooperation with the SOC emphasizes the importance of ensuring the rights to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of opinion and expression, as well as protection of minority religious communities;
- The U.S. government should direct U.S. officials and recipients of U.S. grants to prioritize projects that promote multi-religious and multi-ethnic efforts to encourage religious tolerance and understanding, foster knowledge of and respect for universal human rights standards, and develop the political ability of religious minorities to organize themselves and convey their concerns effectively;
- The U.S. government should establish a refugee resettlement program for Syrian refugees fleeing targeted religious persecution from Syrian government forces, affiliated militias, or non-state actors opposed to the al-Assad regime; and
- In anticipation of any mass exodus of religious minorities who could be targeted for sectarian reprisal attacks in refugee camps, encourage UNHCR to make preparations for increased refugee flows of religious minorities, to develop a protection program to ensure their safety in refugee camps, and to sponsor interfaith dialogues among the various refugee communities.



One Free World International
El Shafie Ministries

**RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN SYRIA:
CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE**

A STATEMENT BY

REV. MAJED EL SHAFIE

**PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER OF
ONE FREE WORLD INTERNATIONAL**

BEFORE THE JOINT SUBCOMMITTEE OF

**THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH, AND HUMAN RIGHTS
CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH (R-NJ), CHAIRMAN**

AND

**THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA
ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN (R-FL), CHAIRMAN**

**OF THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

JUNE 25, 2013

I. Introduction

My name is Reverend Majed El Shafie, and I am the President and Founder of One Free World International (OFWI), an international human rights organization based out of Toronto, Canada. I would like to thank the members of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights for the opportunity to present our comments and recommendations on this most urgent issue of the plight facing religious minorities in Syria.

For those who are not familiar with my background, I was born in Egypt to a prominent Muslim family of judges and lawyers. After I converted to Christianity and began advocating equal rights for Egyptian Christians, I was detained and severely tortured by Egyptian authorities. Sentenced to death, I fled Egypt by way of Israel and settled in Canada in 2002, establishing OFWI to share a message of freedom, hope, and tolerance for religious differences and to promote human rights in this area through advocacy and public education.

Our mission and calling at OFWI is to stand up for religious minorities and individuals around the world who are being persecuted because of their personal beliefs. We advocate on behalf of all those who are persecuted for their beliefs, regardless of religion or creed. Among other things, our work involves direct interventions with foreign governments on behalf of minorities in general or on individual cases, educating our own politicians and citizens about religious freedom and abuses of human rights in this area, humanitarian aid, and rescue missions. Our goal in putting forward the present recommendations is to encourage the United States to live up to its responsibility as a world leader and take a principled stand for justice and freedom for religious minorities in Syria who are voiceless, vulnerable, and desperate.

Today Syria is at a cross-roads. Tens of thousands of Syrians have been killed in the conflict and the United States is in a position to help determine whether this country goes down the path of freedom and respect for human rights or a path of extremism, oppression, and continued violence. To its credit, the United States has repeatedly and publicly reiterated its commitment to promote and defend freedom of religion in this region and around the world. While such public endorsements of religious freedom are an important first step, the U.S. must back its words up with action in protecting Syrian Christians and other minorities both now, while the conflict rages, and in preparing its strategy for a post-conflict Syria.

II. Religious Freedom

1. Freedom of Religion as a Human Right and in International Law

Freedom of religion is a fundamental, universal right that speaks to the very core of what it means to be human. The basic freedom to believe in (or not believe in) and to practice the religion of one's choice (or equally to refrain from any religious practice) forms the very basis of human dignity and is a pre-requisite for true equality under the law. After all, our ability to observe such beliefs about who we are in this universe is unique to humans among the living

beings on this planet. As a result, the right to religious freedom is recognized both by U.S. and international law as foundational and intrinsic to any truly free society, and without freedom of religion, experience has shown there can be no democracy, peace, or security.

Recognition of the rights of individuals and nations, minorities and majorities, is basic. Ultimately everyone is in some respect or at some time or place a member of a minority and one need only consider one's own position but for a moment in order to see the importance of respecting the rights of others and the universal nature of this principle, known in the Christian tradition as the Golden Rule, or "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you".

Human beings have learned this painful lesson the hard way over thousands of years of violations of this foundational principle. In fact, the United States of America was built to a large extent on the hopes of those who fled Europe centuries ago in order to be able to worship freely, and much of the unique character of the American culture, way of life, and legal institutions is based on this very foundation. Over the last century, communities and humanity as a whole have joined together to seek ways to promote respect for these painful lessons by enshrining this principle in constitutions and international documents such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR).

The UDHR, while not in itself binding, is considered by international law experts to reflect customary international law which in turn is binding on states. The UDHR states in Article 18 that,

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.¹

However, it is not necessary to rely on general principles of morality or international law or even less on mere declarations of principle or aspiration in order to establish the rights of religious minorities. A large part of the world community has expressly agreed to submit to binding international law in this matter by signing or acceding to the ICCPR, including Syria which acceded to this covenant on April 21, 1969. Article 18 states that,

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. ...²

¹ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, GA Res. 217(III), UN GAOR, 3d Sess., Supp. No. 13, UN Doc. A/810 (1948).

² *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 19 December 1966, 999 UNTS 171, online: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights <<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/ccpr.htm>> accessed 12 November 2011.

2. Religious Freedom and Syria

a. The al-Assad Regime

Syria is a predominately Muslim country, but unlike most other Muslim countries reports of persecution of religious minorities have been relatively rare in the past. The country's totalitarian secular, socialist regime under President Bashar al-Assad has been concerned primarily with safeguarding its own status through preventing social discord by emphasizing the secular nature of the state. In this the regime has been ruthless and torture has been a common and routine technique to suppress dissent. Moreover, despite its own secular posture, it has been the primary supporter of such extremist Islamist factions as Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran and its hostile position against Israel has been a continuously destabilizing factor in the region.

Nevertheless, under President Bashar al-Assad's secular Ba'athist party, Syrian minorities shared a relatively equal existence with their Muslim compatriots. Despite the regime's many other failings – and these have been great – its minorities experienced a measure of prosperity in business, education, and society. In fact, the country shares many similarities, both in terms of its history and the implications for religious minorities of current events, with that of its former ideological partner, Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

The constitution gives Islam a certain prominence, for example by requiring that the president be a Muslim and recognizing Islamic jurisprudence as a principal source of legislation. In practice President Assad's Alawite sect of Shi'a Islam has enjoyed some minor benefits as compared to other groups including the Sunni Muslim majority (at 74% of the population) and other Shi'a Muslims. Otherwise, however, the regime has been concerned with religious activity primarily to the limited extent that it affects public order and the status quo. On a certain level, this makes the regime an "equal opportunity oppressor".

The Syrian constitution also includes a provision affirming freedom of religion. A historic Christian community, whose presence in Syria stretches back to the earliest years and even months of Christianity and pre-dates the existence of Islam by hundreds of years, accounts for less than 10% of the population today. Christians belong primarily to various Orthodox and Catholic confessions but also include Armenians, Protestants, and others. Syria has been the home to some of the oldest Christian communities in the world without interruption since the birth of Christianity very close to 2,000 years ago. Other minorities represented are the Alawites and other Shi'a Muslims, Druze, Yezidis, and others, including a few isolated and elderly Jews. Under Assad's Ba'athist regime, these traditional communities have been able to worship within tight restrictions and, while Alawites form the core of support for the Assad regime, Christians, Sunnis and others could be found in prominent positions in government and business life.

On the other hand, any religious activity that was deemed to be subversive or threaten the regime or its secular nature or to threaten public order, including relations between religious communities, has long been of concern to authorities and pursued without mercy. As a result, the government has strictly monitored and controlled all religious activity. For example, in September 2010 it shut down eight house-churches in the north of the country in what at the time

was believed to be the beginning of a crackdown on unauthorized Christian activity. The brunt of the regime's brutality, however, has been focused on those belonging to groups determined to be extreme Islamist groups. It has walked a fine line to keep religious extremism from threatening its position by tightly controlling Muslim religious activities while simultaneously appeasing Muslim extremists in ways that often impacted on minorities.

Proselytizing was not technically illegal, but was actively discouraged and effectively forbidden as it was treated by the regime as a threat to relations among religious groups. Religion was kept strictly out of public life nor were one's religious beliefs safe to discuss with friends or neighbours for fear of being charged with proselytizing and seeing a lengthy sentence in the harsh Syrian prisons.

Christians were not actively pursued by the regime for their religious beliefs or activities apart from claims of proselytizing. However, despite its claims to protect the Christian minority the government did not necessarily come to the aid of Christians when they were in danger. On the other hand, when any excuse could be found to implicate Christians, the government would not spare any measures in pursuing them. For example, in October of 2004 two Christians were brutally murdered by a Muslim gang and a police officer after one of them requested that a rowdy group of Muslims leave his café when the Muslims' card-game turned violent. When the authorities refused to act on these crimes, some of the dead men's friends took matters into their own hands destroying some property belonging to some of those responsible. While the authorities took no action on the murders, this property damage resulted in the rapid arrest of 42 Christians, most of whom were unrelated to the events. As a result of such attitudes and treatment whereby victims and other innocents are pursued as criminals, an ancient Christian community has long lived with the constant knowledge that they must tread very carefully for their own protection and that of their loved ones and community.

Converts, on the other hand, have faced a much different situation. As in other Muslim countries, while conversion to Islam is recognized, conversion from Islam to any other religion is illegal under Shariah law. While religious identity was effectively kept out of public life, laws governing personal status are determined by a person's religious identity. This left converts vulnerable because conversion is not recognized by the Syrian government and so they continued to be dealt with under Islamic laws concerning personal status. From a practical perspective, conversions were not directly punished by the government but by the local community or the convert's family who would find ways to implement the Shariah death penalty against the apostate while the government turned a blind eye. The government itself, however, also readily used pretexts or excuses to penalize converts on other manufactured grounds. In the meantime, Syrian society is very close-knit, as in other Muslim and Middle Eastern countries, and converts were not able to relocate and typically had no choice but to leave the country.

b. The Current Status of Syrian Minorities

The current conflict in Syria has altered the situation for religious minorities in that country radically. They are no longer accepted, even if begrudgingly, as an established part of a secular regime. Religious minorities – and particularly the historic Christian community – are now caught between a desperate regime, vicious at the best of times, which is fighting for its life

against rebels riding a wave of successful popular uprisings against dictatorial regimes elsewhere in the Middle East that were largely driven by Muslim extremists.

While the situation in Syria is different in some ways from the regime changes that have taken place in the region, there are many similarities. The circumstances facing Syrian minorities are eerily familiar and yet somehow more tragic as extremists have strengthened and consolidated their positions in the region cutting off options for minorities. The Syrian conflict began with peaceful protests against the regime's authoritarian rule. The Syrian uprising began mostly as a genuine popular uprising driven primarily by moderate and liberal Syrians fed up with the Assad regime's tactics and encouraged by the apparent success of the other uprisings in the region. However, as the regime responded to peaceful protests with heavy-handed measures, extremist groups saw an opportunity and rapidly became more and more involved and the conflict rapidly escalated.

The Assad regime is trying to maintain its hold on power against disparate rebel forces that are openly and violently, and in many places successfully, defying the regime. As a result, it has no available capacity to protect its minorities. There have also been reports that the regime itself has intentionally attacked minorities, although it is difficult to determine whether these attacks were actually perpetrated by the regime or by rebels. Moreover, where minorities have been caught in attacks committed by the regime, this has generally been as a result of the regime's broader crackdown against the uprising and not because of any specific targeting of minorities. In either case, however, attacks by the regime against any of its unarmed civilians are despicable crimes and we do not condone any such action; but if we are to find a lasting and equitable solution for the minorities, we must begin by being honest and accurate in characterizing the threats facing them.

In the meantime, we tend to refer to "the rebels" in shorthand, as if they were a cohesive group with compatible motivations, goals, and methods. However, nothing can be further from the truth. Rather than a somewhat homogeneous rebel force, the rebels in Syria are composed of several groups with radically different and often competing agendas, particularly with regard to



A Syrian man shows marks of torture inflicted after rebels took control of a Christian area of Aleppo. (Photo: James Lawler Duggan/AFP/Getty Images)

their future plans for Syrian society, including its minorities. The moderate, liberal factions are simply tired of Assad's authoritarian methods and wish to implement a liberal, secular democracy. The Muslim extremist and terrorist elements, on the other hand, have very specific goals for turning Syria into an Islamist haven governed by Shariah law which will provide a base from which to attack western interests in the region and beyond.

These Islamist factions, which include Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist, and al-Qaeda-linked groups and are rapidly overtaking the undisciplined and poorly organized rebels as they have in other countries, operate on the assumption that minorities, particularly Alawites and Christians, support the regime. As a result, minorities are targeted both for their politics and as minorities who must either convert or be killed. Many towns captured by rebels have been cleared of their Christian populations either with the Christians fleeing the on-coming Islamists or being forced out by threats that they must convert, flee, or be killed. Demands for the payment of *jizya*, a form of protection money imposed on non-Muslims, have been seen as well.

Reports about rebel activities in towns they come to control are conflicting and it is very difficult to confirm what actually happened in individual incidents such as the captures in the spring of 2012 of Qusayr and sections of Homs, as well as multiple Christian towns and villages. Some reports indicate that rebels have made ultimatums to Christians and other minorities, in some cases to convert to Islam and in others to join the fight against the regime, or be killed, causing minorities to flee. Reports from rebel groups, on the other hand, deny any ultimatums and claim that the minorities fled voluntarily. What is clear is that Christians are fleeing the approaching rebels amid reports of Shariah courts, threats, kidnappings, rapes, and extortion.

Numerous car-bomb attacks have been placed as if with a strategic plan in place to specifically target minorities. These include bombs in minority neighbourhoods, like the mostly Christian and Druze neighbourhood of Jaramana, or placed close to churches or Christian charities. Some have caused only property damage while others have apparently been carefully and fatally timed to coincide with worshippers going to services or mourners participating in a funeral procession.

In April 2013 two bishops representing the Greek Orthodox and Syriac Orthodox churches were kidnapped by rebel forces in Aleppo. Their condition and whereabouts are still unknown, but the targeting of priests and other religious leaders is a familiar tactic of Islamist groups that sends a chilling message to minorities: if their religious leaders are not safe, no one is safe. Many who might have stayed are persuaded to flee, leaving the diminished minority even more vulnerable.

In early June 2013, a 14-year-old young Muslim boy named Mohammad Qatta serving coffee at a coffee shop in Aleppo was killed in an impromptu public execution by rebel gunmen for an off-handed comment referencing the Muslim prophet Mohammed. While details of the event are unclear and this is not strictly speaking an attack on minorities, it is a graphic example of the priorities of large segments of the rebel forces and an indication of the direction the country is headed if extremist forces succeed in consolidating their control of those forces. Incidents such as this add to the fears of minorities and increase their motivation to leave for safer areas controlled by the regime or to flee the country entirely.

Also in early June 2013, dozens of Shiite Muslims in the town of Hatlah were massacred by rebels claiming to be targeting pro-government militia members. Increasingly throughout the conflict there have been reports that rebels have looted and destroyed religious sites after taking control of minority areas, including a Shia place of worship and two churches in Idlib and Latakia governorates respectively as documented by Human Rights Watch.³

³ "Syria: Attacks on Religious Sites Raise Tensions", 23 January 2013, online: Human Rights Watch <<http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/01/23/syria-attacks-religious-sites-raise-tensions>>, accessed 21 June 2013.

c. What Does the Future Hold?

As already mentioned, the situation in Syria bears many similarities to Iraq, with the exception that the recent regime change in that country was brought about by outside forces led by the American military invasion and occupation. Nevertheless, the experience of religious minorities in Iraq is instructive of what can be expected to take place in Syria. In the violence that followed the fall of Hussein's regime, Iraqi Christians were targeted by both Sunni and Shi'a militias. Christians fled as refugees in numbers vastly disproportionate to their share of the population, leaving their ancient community reduced to about half of its pre-invasion size in a period of less than ten years. While some have returned, they face an uncertain future in a country where their own government has no ability or interest to protect them or other minorities from Shi'a and Sunnia groups engaged in on-going sectarian violence and religious extremists. But whether they have returned, found a new home in another country, or are still waiting for a resolution to their situation, the human toll of the experiences Iraqi minorities have endured is incalculable.

The irony in this tragedy is that many Iraqi Christians who have returned have only done so because they simply had no other option. Syria, where they had sought refuge from the Iraqi crisis, is no longer safe for them and now they are being forced to flee yet again. If Syria, which was a safe haven for Christians in the region, is no longer safe, where will Syrian Christians flee? Yet in some areas they are afraid to leave their homes to go to work or buy food.

We, along with others, have argued that the situation in Iraq had all the hallmarks of the beginnings of genocide. Even though we no longer hear of daily attacks, the violence has not ended and, while it may take a little longer, the goal of the extremists remains to rid Iraq of its minorities. Our concern is that Syria will turn into another Iraq and worse – that Muslim extremists will take advantage of this opportunity to cleanse Syria of the “infidels” – Christians and other minorities – and establish an Islamist state. In fact, this process has already begun. Christianity, which has been in Syria since the months and years following its establishment, is in danger of being eradicated if this crisis is managed poorly or half-heartedly.

III. Religious Freedom in U.S. Foreign Policy

Religious freedom cannot be separated from the more ‘traditional’ focuses of diplomacy and international relations – such as peace, security, and, more recently, fostering democracy. Such an approach is not only morally untenable, but also fundamentally flawed, especially in a highly religious area such as the Middle East. Despite the best efforts and predictions of western secular humanist academics and prognosticators, religion holds an enduring and even increasing relevance in our 21st-century world. In these circumstances, the absence of religious freedom has far-reaching implications beyond individual abuses that must be taken into account in the formulation of foreign policy. This statement is not intended to diminish the importance of individual cases – even if one solitary individual in a remote part of the world was denied his or her right to their beliefs and practices, we ought to treat it as an assault on the humanity of each and every one of us. However, the lack of religious freedom takes on a different dimension when entire communities and societies are affected.

Even a cursory review of history shows that societies that restrict religious freedom are far more likely to experience profound social upheaval that jeopardizes the long-term survival of democracy. The importance of religious freedom as a fundamental pre-requisite, not only for the existence of stable, rights-based democracies, but also for international peace and security and the freedom of every human being, was recognized by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when she stated that,

...it is [the United States'] core conviction that religious tolerance is one of the essential elements not only of a sustainable democracy but of a peaceful society that respects the rights and dignity of each individual. People who have a voice in how they are governed—no matter what their identity or ethnicity or religion—are more likely to have a stake in both their government's and their society's success. That is good for stability, for American national security, and for global security.⁴

(emphasis added)

Moreover, the foundational role played by religious freedom in the United States is eloquently expressed in the preamble of the *International Religious Freedom Act* of 1998 (IRFA), where Congress stated that:

The right to freedom of religion undergirds the very origin and existence of the United States. Many of our Nation's founders fled religious persecution abroad, cherishing in their hearts and minds the ideal of religious freedom. They established in law, as a fundamental right and as a pillar of our Nation, the right to freedom of religion. From its birth to this day, the United States has prized this legacy of religious freedom and honored this heritage by standing for religious freedom and offering refuge to those suffering religious persecution.⁵

(emphasis added)

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the United States has had the unenviable position of being the world's lone super-power. This position certainly has its challenges; while many look to the United States to guarantee their security, at the same time they resent their dependency and therefore seek to reject American influence and values, especially in areas where they feel their culture and identity may be vulnerable, religious identity being one of the most obvious. However, promoting religious freedom is one area where the United States must not give in to the challenges of its role. Rather it must vigorously, but tactfully, pursue the establishment of conditions in which every member of the human community can pursue their religious beliefs and identity with only their conscience as their guide and not the dictates of the state or oppressive religious leaders. This is a critical determinant not only for peace and security in far-flung countries around the world, but ultimately for the peace and security of American citizens in their homes across the United States.

At the same time, freedom of religion in Syria must not be viewed as merely a 'means to an end,' as this will inevitably lead to the compromising of the 'means' (religious freedom) for the sake

⁴ Remarks by Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks at the Release of the 13th Annual Report on International Freedom", 13 September 2011, online: State Department < <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/09/172254.htm>> accessed 12 November 2011.

⁵ U.S., Bill H.R. 2431, *International Religious Freedom Act of 1998*, 105th Cong., 1998, § 2(a)(1) (enacted).

of the ‘ends’ (national security). Religious freedom is an end in itself. Any diplomatic initiatives on behalf of religious freedom must be premised on a commitment to its intrinsic value as an inalienable right vested in individuals on the basis of their humanity alone.

Section 2 of IRFA clearly states that

(b) It shall be the policy of the United States ...:

...

(3) To be vigorous and flexible, reflecting both the unwavering commitment of the United States to religious freedom and the desire of the United States for the most effective and principled response, in light of the range of violations of religious freedom by a variety of persecuting regimes, and the status of the relations of the United States with different nations.

...

(5) Standing for liberty and standing with the persecuted, to use and implement appropriate tools in the United States foreign policy apparatus, including diplomatic, political, commercial, charitable, educational, and cultural channels, to promote respect for religious freedom by all governments and peoples.⁶

(emphasis added)

In order for the United States to live up to its responsibility as the ‘leader of the free world,’ it is not enough that the American government respect the rights and freedoms of its citizens within U.S. borders. The United States must ensure that its foreign policy is consistent with the fundamental values that form the basis of American society and identity. There is no question that freedom of religion is one of these fundamental values.

Freedom of religion is absolutely intrinsic to the broader system of rights and freedoms that underpin the United States as a society and a nation. As President Obama acknowledged as much in his 2009 Cairo speech when he stated, “[f]reedom in America is indivisible from the freedom to practice one’s religion.”⁷ Ever since the birth of the United States, American leaders have recognized that no society can be truly free if it denies an individual’s inviolable right to believe and practice his or her religion of choice. For U.S. foreign policy on Syria to be truly ‘American’ it must be reflective of and consistent with core American values, including the centrality of freedom of religion. Overlooking violations of religious freedom is to legitimize those actions and undermine the very principles that underlie American identity and society.

For all these reasons, the United States is obligated, morally, legally, and out of its own national security and self-interest, to take every measure within its power to ensure that religious minorities in Syria are able to exercise their full rights as human beings and citizens and, in particular, able to hold to and observe their religious beliefs and practices without fear.

⁶ IRFA, *supra* note 5 at §2.

⁷ “Remarks by the President on a New Beginning at Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt”, 4 June 2009, online: The White House, Office of the Press Secretary <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>> accessed 12 November 2011 [“A New Beginning”] (emphasis added).

IV. Recommendations for U.S. Foreign Policy in Syria

In June 2009 President Obama declared in Cairo that, “[f]reedom of religion is central to the ability of peoples to live together”.⁸ Any U.S. foreign policy efforts aimed at promoting democracy, social stability, peace, and security in Syria without taking into account the issue of religious freedom and the security of religious minorities will effectively ignore one of the fundamental sources of the problems and is destined to fail. It will not only be highly ineffective, but will also risk exacerbating tensions and insecurity in the region. Estimates are that over 5 million people have been displaced from their homes due to the current conflict. That is just under one in four of Syria’s 22 million citizens. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, about 1.6 million of those are refugees in surrounding countries, including one million who have fled in the first five months of 2013 alone.⁹

These refugees have fled primarily to the countries that share land borders with Syria although there are also a significant number in Egypt. All of these countries, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey, face significant internal challenges of their own even without adding to their policy agenda the enormous burden of assisting hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees. Lebanon has continuous challenges with a population identified along religious lines and the political challenge of containing Hezbollah, but has so far managed to avoid the impact of the so-called “Arab Spring”. Jordan, on the other hand, has seen demonstrations related to the Arab Spring, and while they have not spread or taken root as a full-fledged uprising in that country, the Jordanian government is certainly not in any position to take its authority for granted. In Turkey, in the meantime, tensions have been rising over the past weeks over political protests and the government’s handling of those protests, while Iraq still has not achieved any lasting stability after the invasion and subsequent withdrawal of American and allied troops. Under these conditions the potential destabilizing force of millions of Syrian refugees in the region that is the Middle Eastern powder-keg is all too real.

In light of the frightening prospects for religious minorities in Syria, the United States must use all foreign policy tools at its disposal both to address the on-going violations, examples of which are described above, and to ensure long-term protection of the rights of religious minorities. As history has shown, diplomatic engagement and political dialogue – however sustained and constructive – is often insufficient. In order for U.S. policy in Syria to be effective, diplomatic efforts must be backed by a demonstrable commitment to take substantive policy measures and stand behind the diplomatic measures.

For some time the United States has expressed its disapproval of the Assad regime’s activities by maintaining sanctions against the regime. While by no means condoning the actions of the Assad regime, it has nevertheless sought to remain on the sidelines of this conflict and to express its support for the aspirations of the Syrian people through humanitarian aid and diplomatic support and statements.

⁸ “A New Beginning”, *supra* note 6.

⁹ “Stories from Syrian Refugees: Discovering the Human Faces of a Tragedy”, online: UNHCR information portal <<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/syria.php>>, accessed 16 June, 2013.

1. Military Support for the Rebels

Over recent weeks the United States has committed to providing small-scale military support to the Syrian rebel groups on the grounds that evidence which has surfaced about the regime's use of chemical weapons shows that the regime has crossed a "red line" demanding action. While we do not in any way condone the use of chemical weapons in any circumstance, we have serious and grave concerns about the United States' new policy direction and what it will mean for religious minorities and a speedy and just resolution to the violence afflicting the Syrian people.

Providing any kind of military support for the rebels is an extremely dangerous move and a no-win policy that will have disastrous consequences for Syrian minorities and American security interests. Unfortunately, the United States has gone down this road before. In the 1980s it supported Afghan rebel forces fighting against the Soviet Union's invading troops; the result was the Taliban, a safe-haven for terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda, and a dozen-year military engagement by American troops that remains on-going. Also in the 1980s, the United States supported Iraq in its war with Iran; the result was the regime of Saddam Hussein, two wars, an invasion and full-fledged occupation, and thousands of American lives lost. As recently as the last two years, the United States supported rebels in Libya; the result was an attack on the American diplomatic mission resulting in the killing of the ambassador and three other embassy personnel and wounding of many more. Our question to American policy-makers is simple: how will Syria be any different?



A church in Homs, damaged during fighting between security forces and rebels. (Photo: Reuters)

We firmly believe that the United States has the settled intention to do everything within its power to ensure that these arms supplies do not find their way into the control of religious extremists or terrorists. These people have no scruples about using American-supplied weapons against religious minorities, whether as proxies for the Assad regime or quite simply in their capacity as religious minorities. Unfortunately, despite the best of intentions there is absolutely no way to guarantee that this will not happen. In fact, even if the moderate groups can be trusted to use these arms for their intended purpose of defending against the regime, the extremists are rapidly consolidating their position and influence over the rebels and establishing Shariah law in areas where they are in control. Under these circumstances the only thing we can truly be certain of is that, whether they are small arms or something more substantial, some or all of any weapons provided to the rebels will wind up in the hands of extremists. At that point these American weapons will be used against Syrian civilians and particularly against religious minorities, as well as against Israel, America's most important ally in the region. This is simply a matter of time.

If, however, the United States decides to go ahead with its military aid despite the obvious signs, it must demand accountability from the rebels for any aid it provides. This means that any weapons supplied must be returned to the United States once the conflict is resolved. Furthermore, if there is any evidence that weapons or ammunition provided by the United States or other western countries have been used against minorities or other civilians or against the state of Israel, all further military aid or support, as well as development and humanitarian aid must be stopped immediately with no exceptions.

2. Humanitarian Aid

To date the United States has committed more than \$500 million in humanitarian aid to ease the suffering of Syrian civilians. This is a critical and compassionate measure that must be maintained as long as there is a need. However, American aid must not be implemented in any way that would support or grant legitimacy to any parties in Syria that refuse to respect the rights of Syrian minorities. In order to ensure that this does not happen, the United States must create an explicit link between eligibility for American aid and respect for human rights. It must ensure that aid is given only through groups that are responsible and accountable for those funds and for their treatment of religious minorities and that such support does not function directly or indirectly to support extremist elements.

The legislative authority for such an explicit link between aid and religious freedom already exists within IRFA and the *Foreign Assistance Act* of 1961. Section 2(b) of IRFA clearly states that it “shall be the policy of the United States ... to seek to channel United States security and development assistance to governments other than those found to be engaged in gross violations of freedom of religion.”¹⁰ Moreover, section 405(a) of IRFA¹¹ empowers the President to authorize the “withdrawal, limitation, or suspension of” both “development assistance” (paragraph 9) and “security assistance” (paragraph 11) in accordance with the *Foreign Assistance Act*. Section 116(a) of the *Foreign Assistance Act* further states that “no assistance may be provided under this part to the government of any country which engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of international human rights,”¹² including “particularly severe violations of religious freedom.”¹³

If this authority applies to government recipients of American aid then it goes without saying that the same principle must apply equally to non-governmental or opposition groups. If the United States is serious about its commitment to religious freedom, it must take action based on this authority given to it by Congress to compel the parties in Syria to respect the rights of minorities.

¹⁰ IRFA, *supra* note 5 at § 2(b).

¹¹ *Ibid.* at § 405(a).

¹² *The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as Amended*, Pub.L. No. 87-195, § 116(a), 75 Stat 424 (enacted September 4, 1961, 22 U.S.C. § 2151 et seq.) [*Foreign Assistance Act*].

¹³ *Ibid.* at § 116(c)(3).

3. Refugee Support

Despite all other efforts, Syrian civilians including religious minorities may have no other option but to flee their homes to secure their safety. Refugee protection is an essential means of protecting vulnerable people where all other efforts have failed. At the same time, evacuating religious minorities from Syria will only be a victory for the extremists. The United States must continuously work toward preventing the need for Syrian minorities to leave their homes and toward creating the conditions in which those who have left or still must leave will be safe to return to Syria both in the short and long term. However, to the extent that the violence continues to dislocate people from their homes, the United States together with its allies must not only take all steps necessary to accept as many refugees as possible, but they must also coordinate their refugee admission processes so that the minorities whose circumstances render them especially vulnerable are provided for.

To the extent possible Muslim Syrians can and ought to be encouraged to seek refuge in surrounding countries. Refugees in any circumstances are vulnerable in the countries where they seek help. They are foreigners and must learn to fit in, but they are also often seen as a burden on the host country that must supply them with physical and material support and, in prolonged situations, the means for a livelihood. However, to the extent that neighbouring countries are capable of absorbing them, the local solution will provide the easiest transition for Muslims for whom the language, culture, and religion of the neighbouring countries will be familiar.

For other minorities, particularly Syrian Christians, fleeing to the neighbouring countries would be an untenable situation. Despite the cultural and linguistic familiarity of the region, they will be equally, if not more, vulnerable in the surrounding countries as they will be at home. Not only will they be foreigners and refugees who will be seen as burdening the receiving countries, but they will also be religious minorities in countries where the local religious minorities are already vulnerable should the ever-present threat of religious extremism raise its ugly head. A striking example of what can happen is the example of Iraqi Christian refugees who fled to Syria and are now forced to flee the extremists back to Iraq where extremists continue to use every opportunity to pursue their eradication. While Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon are currently in a rather different position, conditions in those countries could change rapidly and without warning for the worse as they have in many other countries in the region over the past two-and-a-half years. As a result, those Syrian minorities for whom seeking refuge in the surrounding Muslim countries is not a viable option must be prioritized by the United States and western countries where their religious beliefs will not cause them to be further victimized.

4. Supporting Minorities and Preparing for the Post-Conflict Era

While a solution to the general conflict is an urgent priority, it is equally critical to find a way to stop the specific violence that is targeting Syrian minorities and to prepare the groundwork for a future Syria where the religious minorities are treated with respect and have their equal place among their Muslim neighbours.

The closure of the United States embassy in Damascus makes it more difficult to engage in direct diplomacy with the parties. However, it was an important response to the regime's actions. The

Assad regime still has its supporters, domestically and on the international scene, but it is fairly clear that any lasting solution to the situation in Syria cannot involve a continuation of the Assad regime. Replacing it with a truly democratic option cannot be done overnight or in a few months of popular uprising. As a result, it is critical that the United States prioritize building relationships with moderate and liberal democratic elements among the rebels and Syrian opposition and use all diplomatic means to strengthen their position. Together with its European and other western allies, it must make it clear that nothing less than full equality and respect for human rights, including religious freedom, and peaceful coexistence with Israel will be acceptable for the future of Syria. At the same time, the United States must work together with its allies in order to isolate and eliminate the extremist and terrorist elements among the rebels, many of which are either of foreign origin or supported by foreign interests.

In order to ensure the success of its efforts in Syria, the United States must be honest and clear about the realities on the ground. It must not turn a blind eye to the role of extremists among the rebels and it must not play down that role in its desire to promote opposition to Assad's regime. It must not overlook the impact of the conflict on religious minorities by minimizing or ignoring the targeted nature of attacks, including those by rebel forces. Clearly the Assad regime must go, but not at any cost – if the price of its removal is the blood of religious minorities and the conscience of the American people, it is too high.

V. Conclusion

Every member of the international community has undertaken a sacred trust to uphold fundamental human rights. There is no right more fundamental to human dignity and to truly free and inclusive societies than freedom of religion. In light of the horrific abuses of this basic right occurring throughout the world today, no country, the United States included, can say that it has fulfilled its duty to protect religious freedom and the vulnerable minorities to whom this freedom is denied.

Syria's minorities have historically enjoyed the ability to observe their religious beliefs and live in relative harmony and equality with their Muslim neighbours, a rare status in the Middle East. Christians have existed in this area since the very early days of Christianity and their presence is even recognized in the New Testament story of the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus. Today, however, Christians are being pushed out of Syria by the conflict, caught between a regime indiscriminately attacking rebels and civilians, on the one hand, and a growing cadre of religious extremists and terrorists among the rebels who are directly and intentionally targeting Christians and other minorities, both for their religion and for their (presumed) politics. The outcome for Syrian Christians at this crucial juncture will have far-reaching consequences on the presence and status of religious minorities generally in the region. Moreover, how this conflict is resolved could also have devastating consequences beyond the region and its minorities, for global stability and, therefore, the security of the United States itself.

Syrian minorities need the world to listen and to find an effective way to resolve the situation in their homeland. Removing the Assad regime at any cost is not the answer. The United States and its allies must be willing to engage in the long, tedious work of developing a real, democratic

alternative to the Assad regime rather than just applying a bandaid measure that will in all likelihood backfire on Syria's minorities and moderate Muslims. The oft-heard saying that, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend" is not always true and is certainly not true in the case of the future of Syria. The United States must support religious minorities in Syria and moderate, liberal forces that will promote a strong, liberal democracy in Syria and ensure that they do not support religious extremists and terrorists prepared to hijack the aspirations of the Syrian people with their dreams of a Shariah-based Islamist haven. Today, will the United States choose to be part of the problem or the heart of the solution?

RECOMMENDATIONS

– SUMMARY –

Today Syria is at a cross-roads. Almost 100,000 Syrians have been killed in the current conflict. Religious minorities, particularly Christians, are caught between a fierce regime fighting for its survival and religious extremists who are rapidly gaining control of the rebel movement and pursuing a Shariah-based religious state. The United States must do all it can to address the ongoing human-rights violations of religious minorities and to ensure their long-term safety and protection. It must not pursue the removal of the Assad regime at the cost of the blood of Syrian minorities and the conscience of the American people.

1. Military Support for the Rebels

- Extremists and terrorist-linked groups are taking control of the disorganized and undisciplined rebel groups
- The U.S. must not supply weapons to the rebels as they will find their way into extremist and/or terrorist hands and be used against civilians, minorities, and U.S. regional interests and allies such as Israel
- If the U.S. nonetheless goes ahead with military aid, it must demand accountability from the rebels, including the return of weapons after the conflict, and deny any further aid if weapons or ammunition are used against minorities, civilians, or American allies such as Israel

2. Humanitarian Aid

- The U.S. must continue to provide humanitarian aid as long as there is a need
- U.S. aid must not be implemented in a way that would support or grant legitimacy to any parties in Syria that refuse to respect the rights of religious minorities
- The U.S. must create an explicit link between eligibility for American aid and respect for the human rights of Syrian minorities

3. Refugee Support

- The U.S. must work toward preventing the need for Syrian minorities to leave their homes, but must ensure the safety of those who may not ultimately have a choice
- The U.S. and its allies must prepare to accept as many refugees as possible, prioritizing those whose religious beliefs may cause them to be further victimized in surrounding countries

4. Supporting Minorities and Preparing for the Post-Conflict Era

- The U.S. must make it a priority to build relationships with, and strengthen, moderate and liberal democratic elements among the rebels and Syrian opposition
- The U.S. must work with its allies to isolate and eliminate extremist and terrorist elements among the rebels, many of which are either of foreign origin or supported by foreign interests
- Policy-makers must be honest and clear about the realities on the ground, including the extent of extremist and terrorist involvement among the rebel forces and must ensure they do not work to replace one form of tyranny with another
- True democracy does not happen overnight; it must be built and nurtured from the ground up

Appendix A

BIOGRAPHY OF REV. MAJED EL SHAFIE FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT ONE FREE WORLD INTERNATIONAL

Rev. Majed El Shafie is a human rights advocate and founder of One Free World International (OFWI). His human rights journey started in his native Egypt that he was later forced to flee after he was severely tortured and sentenced to death for his conversion to Christianity and bringing awareness to human rights violations related to religious persecution. Belonging to a very prominent legal and political family in Egypt, Rev. El Shafie had tried to work within the Egyptian system to reform the country's human rights regime. Between the challenges he faced in these efforts, his firsthand experience as a survivor of religious persecution, the work he has engaged in since advocating for religious freedom, confronting governments that violate this fundamental right, and conducting fact-finding missions and humanitarian/rescue operations, he has obtained significant knowledge and insight into the dynamics of persecution of religious minorities by religious extremists and totalitarian governments alike.

Rev. El Shafie has established two effective human rights organizations including One Free World International (OFWI) which is one of the leading organizations advocating for religious minorities globally and has 28 branches around the world. He has organized and led delegations of parliamentarians and religious leaders to address minority rights and humanitarian issues with government leaders, including several cabinet ministers and other high-level officials, opposition leaders, and religious leaders among others in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Cuba, and India. Rev. El Shafie has developed excellent relationships with members of the Canadian House of Commons, Senate, and Cabinet, and has built bridges with the US Congress in order to educate decision-makers about violations of religious freedom around the world. He has had the opportunity to testify four times before the Subcommittee for International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, twice before United States Congressional subcommittees and commissions, and before the Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism in Canada. He has advocated on behalf of Christians, Falun Gong, Jews, Bahá'í's, Ahmadiyya Muslims, and China's Uyghur Muslims, among others. Leading North American and international news media have featured his work which has also been the subject of an award-winning feature-length documentary entitled "Freedom Fighter" and its companion book, also titled "Freedom Fighter".

HONOURS AND AWARDS

2012 Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal

HUMAN RIGHTS EXPERTISE AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Provided expert testimony of conditions facing religious minorities.
- Relied on in numerous cases in the Refugee Protection Division (Ontario) and Immigration Board (Florida).

- Created an underground human rights organization to pursue equal rights for Egyptian minorities and built organization to 24,000 members in just two years.
- Created and developed one of North America's most effective international human rights organizations focused on the rights of religious minorities around the world.
- Conducted fact-finding missions, rescue operations, and humanitarian interventions in countries where religious minorities are being persecuted and intervene directly through in-person meetings with high-level politicians and government officials regarding human rights concerns.
- Organized conferences and human rights events that attract thousands of participants every year to educate the public about religious persecution and human rights issues.

PARLIAMENTARY AND CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

Testified by invitation before parliamentary committees in Canada and congressional committees in the United States on issues related to minority rights, including:

- 21/3/2012 *The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, United States Congress*
Religious Freedom in Afghanistan and Pakistan
- 22/11/2011 *The Sub-Committee on International Human Rights (SDIR, previously SDEV) of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Parliament of Canada*
Religious Freedom in Egypt and Iraq
- 17/11/2011 *The Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights of the United States House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs*
Religious Freedom in Egypt and Iraq
- 30/11/2010 *SDIR, Parliament of Canada*
Recommendations with Respect to Certain Issues Pertaining to the Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan
- 30/11/2009 *Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism in Canada, Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Antisemitism*
- 16/6/2008 *SDIR, Parliament of Canada*
Canadian Policy Regarding Religious Minorities with a Focus on Iraq, Egypt, and Pakistan
- 2/12/2004 *SDEV, Parliament of Canada*
The Persecution of People of Faith

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA COVERAGE

Television: Whistleblower (CTV National News), W5, Canada AM, The Arena, The Source, and others
Radio: CBC Radio and others
Print: National Post, Ottawa Citizen, Toronto Star, Toronto Sun, and others
International: Israel (Haaretz, Jerusalem Post, Maariv, Yediot Aharonot), Denmark, Germany, France

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K. Tomlinson, “Christian fears persecution if sent back to Egypt”, on *CTV National News: Whistleblower*, March 16, 2006, Toronto: CTV.

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M. Coren, “Par for the Course” on *The Arena*, July 25, 2012, online: SunNews <<http://www.sunnewsnetwork.ca/video/search/all-par-for-the-course/1754368754001>>, accessed July 29, 2012.

E. Levant, “Beyond a Youtube Video” on *The Source*, September 13, 2012, online: The Source <<http://www.sunnewsnetwork.ca/video/featured/prime-time/867432237001/beyond-a-youtube-video/1839021026001/page/2>>, accessed September 15, 2012.

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Dr. John Eibner
CEO, Christian Solidarity International (CSI-USA)
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
June 25, 2013



Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle

Thank you, Chairman Smith, Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, and ranking members Bass and Deutch, for holding this important and timely hearing on the endangered Religious Minorities in Syria. Under your leadership, your subcommittees have given hope, over many years, to many people throughout the world whose fundamental human rights are denied, especially victims who cannot count on winning favor with our government or the human rights institutions of the United Nations system.

I have drafted this written statement in Syria. Last week, I traveled on a CSI human rights fact-finding and humanitarian aid mission from the Mediterranean city of Tartus to Homs, stopping on the way at various predominantly Christian villages in the so-called “Valley of the Christians.” My gratitude runs deep for the opportunity to share with the Committee the insights I gained from many observations and encounters with wonderfully resilient and courageous Syrians, mainly displaced Christians and church workers.

This hearing, Mr. Chairman, is indeed important and timely. The very existence of the religious minorities of the Middle East is under threat. In every state in the region, the Christian population is in relative decline, or cannot decline further because their existence is forbidden by law, as is the case with one of our country’s principal allies in the region, Saudi Arabia.

The world has been warned about the threat. On the eve of the so-called “Arab Spring,” campaigns of violence against Christians in Iraq and Egypt prompted public protests from former Lebanese President Amine Gemayel. “Massacres are taking place,” Gemayel declared, “for no reason and without any justification against Christians... What is happening to Christians is a genocide.”

Within days, the then President of France, Nicholas Sarkozy used similarly strong language, stating: “We cannot accept and thereby facilitate what looks more and more like a particularly perverse program of cleansing in the Middle East - religious cleansing.”

Pope Benedict the XVI also frequently drew attention of the grim plight of the Middle East’s Christians. CSI responded to the crisis by issuing its own Genocide Alert for the region.

As the “Arab Spring” of 2011 turned dark, cold and forbidding, the existential crisis of the Christians and other religious minorities deepened – nowhere more dramatically than in Syria. Ambassador Peter Galbraith, was among the first to highlight the threat when he forecast at the Holocaust Museum in Washington that the world’s next genocide would occur in Syria, with the minority Alawite community as the principal victim.

The future of Syria’s endangered religious minorities is not a peripheral issue, but is central to

the resolution of the current crisis. Roughly 30% of the population belongs to a religious minority community. By far the largest of these minority communities are the Alawites (12%) and the Christians (10%). There are also small groups of Shiites, Druze, and Ismailis. Sunni Muslims make up the majority. In the Middle East, identity is still determined primarily by the religious community into which one has been born.

The outcome of the increasingly sectarian and internationalized war that now ravages much of the land could lead either to the eradication of religious minorities or to greater guarantees for their long-term security. Syria has reached a historic fork in the road. One path continues along the route of religious pluralism, based on a rough parity between historic religions and equal citizenship. The other way leads to the erosion of religious minorities through a reversion to Sunni supremacism based on discriminatory Shariah principles, including obligatory jihad in both its violent and non-violent manifestations.

My research, which includes not only last week's fact-finding trip to Syria, but also recent visits to neighboring Lebanon and Iraq, have led to the following findings:

The late Hafez al-Assad who established Syria's ruling dynasty with a military coup in 1970 was from the minority Alawite community. The Alawites were regarded for centuries by the dominant Sunni religious establishment as non-believing infidels – indeed apostates from Islam - who were entirely outside the law and merited death. The Alawite Assads therefore strove to animate Syria with a secular political culture – a culture that provided considerable space in society for all historic religious communities.

For over four decades, the Syrian state has been unsurpassed in the Arab/Muslim Middle East as a protector of the basic religious freedom of the Sunni majority and of the non-Sunni minority religious communities. The historic Christian churches have long experienced not only freedom of worship, but also broad freedom to meet social needs outside the bounds of the Christian community and to demonstrate their faith publicly.

Syria's delicate religious balance was disturbed in 1982 when the Sunni supremacist Muslim Brotherhood made a bid for political power. This Islamist uprising was ruthlessly crushed by the Syrian state. A similar Islamist uprising took place in the spring of 2011. The opportunity arose when the "Arab Spring" pro-democracy movement reared its head in Syrian towns and cities. The peaceful pro-democracy movement was brutally suppressed by the Syrian government. But at the same time, a parallel non-democratic, Sunni supremacist movement, with strong ideological and lethal support from Saudi Arabia and other Islamist forces, soon made itself felt throughout the country.

I have received testimony from Christians from Homs, Qusair, and Latakia who witnessed during the "Arab Spring" mobs emerging from Sunni mosques following what were presumably incendiary sermons, to make unruly public demonstrations in favor of the overthrow of the "infidel" Syrian government, and its replacement with a state with Islamic legitimacy. Among the genocidal slogans heard during such demonstration were "Alawites to the tomb, Christians to Beirut," and "We will drink the blood of the Alawites." These mobs were not pro-democracy freedom fighters.

By the summer of 2011, violence became the dominant characteristic of the Sunni supremacist movement, as it came under the domination of Syrian and foreign jihadists.

Alawites and Christians were targeted as the armed jihadist and their followers began to put their genocidal slogans into practice.

Victims recounted to me details of the religious cleansing of Christian neighborhoods in Homs and Qasair by armed jihadis who threatened them with death and the destruction of their property if they did not leave their homes. A Christian woman told me that before she fled Homs at the beginning of 2012, she had seen the beheading in broad daylight of an Alawite girl who was pulled off a public minibus by armed jihadis. Churches in Homs and Qusair have not only damaged as a result of the exchange of mortars by the Syrian army and rebel forces, but have also been desecrated after falling under the control of the armed opposition.

From credible media reports and interviews with Syrians on the frontline of the conflict, we see that the targeted kidnapping of non-Sunnis is now a regular feature of the Syrian tragedy. I spoke with a Christian who reported that the four cousins of a close Alawite friend were kidnapped and beheaded. A nun told me that she knows a Christian girl who was kidnapped by armed insurgents and is now mentally deranged from the abuse. The victims of kidnapping include priests and prelates. The kidnapping of Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim and Greek Orthodox Archbishop Boutros Yazigi while attempting to negotiate the release of two abducted priests is widely interpreted within the Syrian Christian community as a message from the Muslim supremacist opposition to leave the country.

The Syrian war has so far resulted in the deaths of over 100,000 people, the internal displacement of 4 million, and the displacement abroad of 1.5 million. This human rights calamity has affected members of all of Syria's religious communities. Numerically, most of the victims belong to the majority Sunni community. For the Sunnis the conflict has become a war between Sunni supremacists and Sunnis who prefer the Syrian state's enforcement of tolerance and a pluralism based on enlightenment ideas of religious equality. But for the religious minorities the current conflict has become one of survival. The Syrian conflict shares many characteristics with the violent sectarian strife in Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. The consequence of the Islamist reign of terror in post-Saddam Iraq was the flight abroad of half of Iraq's Christians and the internal displacement of most of those who stayed inside the country.

The outcome for religious minorities in Syria could turn out to be worse than in Iraq. But all hope is not lost. Massive violence, some of it targeted, did indeed drive many Christians and Alawites from their homes in places like Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Qusair and al-Raqqah when the armed Islamist opposition gained local footholds and went to battle against the Syrian government. I have seen for myself extensive destruction in Homs. But I also found government-controlled Tartus Province on the Mediterranean coast to be a generally tranquil place where people go about their private business and practice their religious faith without oppressive interference from the side of the state. The bustling seaside city of Tartus exudes a spirit of defiant optimism. Over 400,000 displaced Syrians have sought refuge there. They include Christians and Alawites, but the overwhelming majority of the displaced are Sunnis.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Tartus Province has largely, though not entirely escaped the horrors of the civil war. This is mainly because the armed Islamist insurgency has been unable to gain a foothold there. (An effort by radical Islamists to do just that in May 2013 in the mainly Sunni village of Baniyas, met with rapid suppression by the governing

authorities, accompanied by a revenge massacre of Sunni civilians by government-linked militiamen.)

The burning question is: Do American policy-makers place high priority on securing the fundamental rights of all the peoples of Syria, and guaranteeing the existence of the endangered religious minorities in Syria? If so, the United States' *de facto* war against the Syrian state - a state which has for decades been a prime protector of religious minorities - would end forthwith. Our government would use its leverage with its principle Sunni Islamist allies in the "coalition of the willing" for affecting regime change - namely Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar - to end their support for armed Muslim supremacist forces in Syria, and encourage them to turn their attention to providing Syrian-standard respect for religious freedom to their own citizens.

The green light given to our Sunni regional allies to militarily destabilize Syria does not lend credibility to the human rights rhetoric that surrounds the United States' regime change policy. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey may be beloved by America's military and economic interests, but all have grave democracy deficits and cannot serve as models for religious pluralism and freedom religious. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are Sunni absolute monarchies. All religious minorities are banned in the former. Nearly one hundred years ago the Christian minorities were virtually eradicated in Turkey by means of genocide. Successive Turkish governments, including the current government of Prime Minister Recep Erdogan, have taken patriotic pride in genocide denial.

If, on the other hand, the ultimate goal of Washington's Syria policy is to deny Shiite Iran - an aspiring nuclear power - a regional ally, and to replace the secular-minded government in Damascus with a majoritarian Sunni Islamist regime, as we saw to be the case in Egypt and Tunisia, then our President has an obligation to explain to the American and Syrian people how the United States intends to guarantee the survival and freedom of Syria's religious minorities.

If Washington is prepared to act in good faith, an early sign will be the United States' readiness to abandon archaic cold-war politics and to cooperate with Russia in encouraging an end to Syria's sectarian civil war. We have already seen in Boston the tragic consequence of failure to cooperate adequately with Russia in combating the security threats posed by radical Sunni Islamism.

If the United States had Syria's religious minorities and secularly-oriented Sunnis on its side, it is likely that regime change would have happened already in 2011. But without the presentation of a credible plan from our President, the Christians, Alawites, and other Syrian religious minorities have good reason to fear that their existence will be sacrificed on the altar of higher geopolitical interests.

May our President, like the great persecutor of the first generation of Christians, Saul of Tarsus, have a profound Damascus Road experience - one that produces an end to policies the effect of which is to promote the persecution of the religious minorities in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Thank you, Chairman Smith and Chairman Ros-Lehtinen.

JOINT SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International
Organizations**

Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

**TESTIMONY OF NINA SHEA, DIRECTOR
HUDSON INSTITUTE'S CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

June 25, 2013

Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle

I commend the two Subcommittees for holding this critically important and timely hearing today. The question of the treatment of religious minorities concerns America's core values as a nation, but, in recent foreign policy, it is one that the United States has too often failed to address, with tragic results. It represents a grave human rights crisis and undermines our national security interests.

I am honored to have been invited to testify for the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom. In my testimony, I will focus on the situation of the various Christian groups in Syria, and the threat they face to their continued existence in their ancient homeland. This threat, which undoubtedly applies equally to Syria's other defenseless and even smaller minorities – such as the Yizidis (80,000) and Jews (under 100) -- about whom there is scant information, is not recognized or understood in US foreign policy. We are grateful to the Subcommittees two chairs, Rep. Christopher H. Smith and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, for giving attention to this issue.

In the Middle and Targeted with Ethno-Religious Cleansing

In Syria's conflict, now characterized as overtly sectarian, every religious and ethnic group* has experienced catastrophic loss and pain. Reportedly over the past two years of war, 93,000 combatants and civilians, of diverse religious identities, have been killed, 1.5 million have become refugees, and 4.5 million more have been internally displaced.

Though no religious community has been spared suffering, Syria's ancient Christian minority has cause to believe that they confront an "existential threat," according to a finding of the UN Human Right Council's Commission of Inquiry on Syria, last December. And this group, in contrast to Syria's Alawites, Shiites and Sunnis, has no defender.

Syria's Christians are primarily ethnically Assyrian but some are also Armenian and Arab, who together number between 2-2.5 million or 10 percent of the population, and follow some ten different faith traditions.** They face a distinct peril so dire that their ability to survive in Syria is being seriously doubted by church leaders and independent secular observers, alike. While in some neighborhoods they struggle to maintain defense committees, they lack militias of their own. Nor do they have protective tribal structures, or support from any outside power. Referencing Syria, Archbishop Elias Chacour, head of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church in Israel, remarked a few weeks ago that, while many people are facing hardship and dying in the Arab Spring, no group is suffering more than Christians.

Living largely in the Syrian governorates of Hassake, Homs, Damascus, and Aleppo, the Christians are extremely vulnerable. They are indeed stranded in the middle of a brutal war, where each side – regime and rebel -- fires rockets into civilian areas and carry out indiscriminate bloody attacks daily. The Christian churches, which were registered and permitted by the Assad regime, have not formally allied themselves with either side in the conflict and in fact Christians have largely avoided taking sides despite intense pressure to do so by both the government and the opposition.

For example, Christians have been reportedly displaced by the regime in Tal Nasri, Um Sharshoh, and the old city of Homs. They have been reportedly displaced by the Free Syrian Army in Mesmye, Daraa, Ghassaniy, Idlib, Quseir and Rable in Homs. And clashes between the two sides caused displacements that disproportionately impacted the Christian residents, though Muslims were also affected, in Ras al-Ayn, Deir el-Zor.

The Christians, however, are not simply caught in the middle, as collateral damage. They are the targets of a more focused shadow war, one that is taking place alongside the larger conflict between the Shiite-backed Baathist Assad regime and the largely Sunni rebel militias. Christians are the targets of an ethno-religious cleansing by Islamist militants and courts. In addition, they have lost the protection of the Assad government, making them easy prey for criminals and fighters, whose affiliations are not always clear.

Wherever they appear, Islamist militias have made life impossible for the Christians. Metropolitan Archbishop Jean Clement Jeanbart, of Aleppo's Melkite Greek Catholic Church, told the Rome-based Catholic outlet, *AsiaNews*, "Christians are terrified by these militias and fear that in the event of their victory they would no longer be able to practice their religion and that they would be forced to leave the country." He explained:

"As soon as they reached the city [of Aleppo], Islamist guerrillas, almost all of them from abroad, took over the mosques. Every Friday, an imam launches their messages of hate, calling on the population to kill anyone who does not practice the religion of the Prophet Muhammad. They use the courts to level charges of blasphemy. Who is contrary to their way of thinking pays with his life."

Unprotected, the Christians are also prime victims of kidnappers and thieves. In one example last February, a Syrian Orthodox dentist in Aleppo told the American Christian

Morningstar News that he finally fled into exile when the constant fear of sniper-fire and kidnapping of Christians made life too dangerous. “Some people would come to my dental office and threaten me with kidnapping,” he says. The outlet reported that “[i]n the city of Hassaké, 50 Christians were kidnapped last month [January]. Most recently, a Christian pharmacist was kidnapped earlier this month and held for a ransom of approximately 11,000 euros.”

Such threats and assaults are driving out the Christians en masse, from various parts of the country. This 2,000-year-old community -- some members of which still pray in Jesus’ Aramaic tongue and trace their churches to St. Paul, who had experienced his conversion to the faith on the road to Damascus -- is now facing extinction.

Archdeacon Emanuel Youkhana of the Assyrian Church of the East, who has been desperately working to cope with the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon and Iraq, wrote to me in February:

“We are witnessing another Arab country losing its Christian Assyrian minority. When it happened in Iraq nobody believed Syria’s turn would come. Christian Assyrians are fleeing massively from threats, kidnappings, rapes and murders. Behind the daily reporting about bombs there is an ethno-religious cleansing taking place, and soon Syria can be emptied of its Christians.”

Targeted Attacks

Syriac League President Habib Afram states that Christians are “systematically targeted” with kidnappings, which are used to collect ransom or to terrorize them into leaving. The highest profile attack was the kidnapping by gunmen in April of two church leaders, Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi and Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim, as they drove back to Aleppo from a trip to the Turkish border where they worked for the release of two kidnapped priests. They have not reappeared. The authors of the attack on these two hierarchs are unknown but it sent an unmistakable signal to all Christians: none is protected.

Other clergy have been kidnapped and disappeared as well. In a report confirmed by the Vatican news agency *Fides*, on February 9, 2013, 27-year-old Father Michael Kayal of the Armenian Catholic Church in Aleppo was abducted by Islamic extremist rebels as he was travelling on a bus on his way to Rome. He was pulled off when Islamist gangs spotted his clerical garb. He has not been seen since. A similar fate befell the Greek Orthodox Maher Mahfouz around the same time.

The American Christian news service *Compass Direct News* reported in December 2012 of the torture and subsequent murder of a Syrian Orthodox parish priest Father Fadi Haddad. He left his church in the town of Qatana to negotiate the release of one of his kidnapped parishioners, but the priest never returned. A week later, Fr. Haddad’s mutilated corpse was found by the roadside, with his eyes gouged out. His murderers are unknown.

Ordinary individuals, too, have been summarily killed after being identified as Christian.

For example, *Fides* reported that a man named Yohannes was killed by an Islamist gunman who stopped the bus he was taking on the way to Aleppo and checked the background of each passenger. When the gunman noticed Yohannes' last name was Armenian, they singled him out for a search. After finding a cross around his neck, "One of the terrorists shot point blank at the cross tearing open the man's chest."

Such reports are not uncommon. A woman from Hassake recounted in December to Swedish journalist Nuri Kino how her husband and son were shot in the head by Islamists. "Our only crime is being Christians," she answers when asked if there had been a dispute.

On February 13, 2013, the *New York Times* reported on Syrian refugee interviews it collected in Turkey:

"One mother told of the abduction of a neighbor's child, held for ransom by rebel fighters in her hometown of Al-Hasakah, which prompted her family to seek safety for their three young sons across the border in Turkey. A young man demonstrated how he was hung by his arms, robbed and beaten by rebels, 'just for being a Christian.'"

Muslims are subject to kidnapping too but the *Wall Street Journal* reported on June 11, 2013, often "their outcome is different" because they have armed defenders. It told the story of a 25-year-old cabdriver Hafez al Mohammed who said he was kidnapped and tortured for seven hours by Sunni rebels in Al Waer in late May. He was released after Alawites threatened to retaliate by kidnapping Sunni women.

Swedish Assyrian journalist Nuri Kino, who travels to the region to interview Christian refugees from Syria recounts the story of Gabriel Staifo Malke, an 18-year-old who fled with his family from Hassake after his father was shot on July 17, 2012, for having a crucifix hanging from his car's rear view mirror: The son told him:

"In Hassake, terrorists had warned Christians that they would be killed if they didn't leave town; there was no room left for us. Most of the others hid their religion, didn't show openly that they were non-Muslims. But not Dad. After the funeral the threats against our family and other Christians increased. The terrorists called us and said that it was time to disappear; we had that choice, or we would be killed."

Many pointed to criminal assaults and a government that fails to protect them. A refugee detailed to Kino: "Two men from a strong Arabic tribe decided one day to occupy our farmland, just like that. When I went to the police to report, I was told there was nothing they could do. The police chief was very clear that they would not act, as they didn't want the tribe to turn against the regime."

A father told Kino: "We're not poor, we didn't run from poverty. We ran from fear. I have to think about my twelve-year-old daughter. She's easy prey for kidnappers. Three children of our friends were kidnapped. In two cases they paid enormous ransoms to get the children back, and in one case they paid but got the child back dead."

Chaldean Catholic Bishop Antoine Audo, the Jesuit head of Syria's Caritas charity, according to a March 21, 2013, AFP interview, said between 20,000-30,000 out of 160,000 Christians had fled the city of Aleppo, and two priests were abducted and held each for a ransom of 15 million Syrian pounds (\$150,000).

In an English-language video, Fr. Fadi al-Hamzi relates that his uncle was recently murdered: "They killed him because he is Christian, they refuse to have any Christians in Syria. . . ." When asked if he was worried if Christians would be massacred if jihadists overthrew the government, the priest said, "Yes, yes, this will be... they don't want us here."

Sharia Courts

Christians, as well as others, also have been targeted with summary executions, forcible conversions to Islam and expulsions from their homes as a result of actions taken by the courts of the "Caliphate of Iraq and the Levant", the name the al Nusra Brigade and other Islamist rebels use in reference to the Syrian territory under their control. The Christians find it impossible to survive under such rule.

According to *AsiaNews*, currently some 30 recognizable militias with some 100,000 fighters operate in Syria, and of these, only a handful belong to the Free Syrian Army, the main interlocutor of the international community. The others are linked to Al-Qaeda or belong to other Islamist or political movements.

Sources told *AsiaNews*, "the purpose of these groups is not only the liberation of Syria from Assad, but also the spread by force of radical Islam throughout the Middle East and the conquest of Jerusalem." Based on interviews with local church leaders, this Catholic press reported that many fighters do not speak Arabic, come from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Indonesia, and, according to some villagers near Aleppo, several, particularly younger, fighters were recruited by being told that they were going to "liberate Jerusalem." These extremists have wasted no time in establishing sharia courts.

Half of Aleppo, which has been under rebel control since last July, in the towns of al-Bab and Idlib and other villages under the control of Islamist groups, sharia has been enforced for the past year. Islamic justice is administered by well-organized courts, the Hayaa al-Sharia, or the Sharia Authority. Controlled by such militias as al Nusra, the Tawhid Brigade, and the home-grown Ahrar al-Sham, these courts, according to a *Washington Post* report, pass sentences "daily and indiscriminately" against Christians and anyone else who fails to conform to Wahhabi Islam. All women are required to cover up with the *abaya*, a black full length gown.

It was in Aleppo, that al Nusra executed a 14-year-old Muslim boy for insulting the Muslim prophet. A coffee street vendor, the boy, Mohammed Qatta, was asked to give a cup free to a customer and he reportedly refused, saying, "Even if [Prophet] Mohammed comes back to life, I won't." Rebels driving by overheard the exchange and apprehended the boy.

What happened next was reported by the *Washington Post*, on June 10, 2013:

"The rebels, according to ABC News' reconstruction of the Syrian groups' reports, appear to have whipped Qatta. When they brought him back to where they'd taken him, his head was wrapped by a shirt.

"The rebels waited for a crowd to gather; Qatta's parents were among them. Speaking in classical Arabic, they announced that Qatta had committed blasphemy and that anyone else who dared insult the Prophet Mohammed would share his fate. Then, the shirt still wrapped around the boy's head, the rebels shot him in the mouth and neck."

Sharia justice, as much as anything, has terrorized Syria's Christians, among others. In April, al Nusra's pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda reinforced their fears of a coming Talibanization of Syria.

After a recent prayer walk in Jordan for the two kidnapped bishops, Syrian Christian refugees told Dutch blogger Martin Janssen that their village of 30 Christian families had a first hand taste of the rebels' new sharia courts. One of Janssen's accounts, as translated by renowned Australian linguist, writer and Anglican priest, the Rev. Mark Durie, follows:

"Jamil [an elderly man] lived in a village near Idlib where 30 Christian families had always lived peacefully alongside some 200 Sunni families. That changed dramatically in the summer of 2012. One Friday trucks appeared in the village with heavily armed and bearded strangers who did not know anyone in the village. They began to drive through the village with a loud speaker broadcasting the message that their village was now part of an Islamic emirate and Muslim women were henceforth to dress in accordance with the provisions of the Islamic Shariah. Christians were given four choices. They could convert to Islam and renounce their 'idolatry.' If they refused they were allowed to remain on condition that they pay the jizya. This is a special tax that non-Muslims under Islamic law must pay for 'protection.' For Christians who refused there remained two choices: they could leave behind all their property or they would be slain. The word that was used for the latter in Arabic (dhabaha) refers to the ritual slaughter of sacrificial animals."

The man told Janssen that his and a number of other families began to pay the jizya but, after the amount demanded kept increasing over several months, the Christians decided to flee, leaving behind their farms and property. Some who could not pay or escape were forced to convert to Islam.

An Orthodox cleric, independently corroborating such accounts, described conditions in the towns taken by rebel forces in the Christian valley outside Homs: “They are ruled by newly-appeared emirs, and those Christians who were not able to flee these places are obligated to pay jizya—a special tax that allows them to remain Christians, and Christian women must hide their faces like Moslem women. If they don’t pay the jizya they are simply killed.”

Christian Refugees

Official information and media reports about the Christians’ fate has been sparse, and Christian refugees have been all but invisible since they are fearful of and avoid Muslim-dominated refugee camps. A report earlier this year by journalist Nuri Kino sheds valuable light on the atrocities visited upon the Christians inside Syria, and their ordeals in attempting to escape, relying as they must on exploitative human-trafficking networks that have sprung up. Entitled “Between the Barbed Wire,” the report resulted from a trip sponsored by a Swedish charity, the Syriac Orthodox Youth Organization, to assess the needs of refugees. It is based on over a hundred interviews this past Christmas with Christian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon.

The refugees and the Lebanese bishops whom Kino and his team interviewed relate that Christians are leaving in a torrent. Once they cross into Lebanon, guided by Middle Eastern versions of “coyotes” through a harrowing series of checkpoints guarded by various sides in the conflict, they mostly seek out the local Christian communities for help. A clearly overwhelmed Archbishop George Saliba, on Mount Lebanon, commented: “I want to help as many as I can, but it is not sustainable. We have hundreds of Syrian refugees who arrive every week. I don’t know what to do.”

Elsewhere in Lebanon, St. Gabriel’s monastery opened its 75 unheated rooms last winter to over a hundred refugees. In another Lebanese Christian town, the Syrian Catholic patriarch Ignatius Ephrem Josef III converted a school building into a shelter for the hundreds of refugees there then and the others constantly arriving. The patriarch described the situation as the “great exodus taking place in silence.” He also said he houses Christians who fled several years ago from Iraq. All of the Christian towns visited for the report were scrambling to keep up with the influx of Syrian Christians. Church leaders were grateful for the beds, washing machines, heaters, and medicine brought by the Swedish visitors.

Some of the Syrians told Kino they plan to stay in Lebanon until Syria “calms down” and they can return to their homes. Many others said going back is “unthinkable” and were making plans to try to get to Europe either on valid visas or by paying smugglers the going rate of \$20,000. They are largely small-business owners and skilled professionals — an engineer and his family, a jeweler and his, a hairdresser, a medical student, etc. Many hoped to be smuggled to Sweden and Germany, where they can receive some state subsidies until they find work. The town of Sodertalje seems to be a popular destination, with 35 new Christian families arriving from Syria each week. Kino, himself a citizen of

Sodertalje, relates that there are already many Syrian Christians living there, and Arabic is becoming as common as Swedish.

Some refugees were young men who deserted from the Syrian military. Others of the refugees were panic-stricken, pointing to some horrifying triggering event that forced them out — a kidnapping of a relative, a murder, or a robbery. They feel targeted for being Christian, which means that militants and criminals can assault them with impunity.

There is no complete data on the number of refugees. Most of the Christians, like the other groups, resettle internally when they leave their homes. How many Christians have fled to other countries is not known and escapees continue to come across the border each day. Only a fraction of the Christians in exile registers as refugees. They bypass the refugee camps where rebels press young men into their militias and many fear being victimized again as vulnerable minorities. Most of the Christians seek help from local churches and monasteries in Turkey and Lebanon.

It is, nonetheless apparent that hundreds of thousands of Christians have already fled. Entire neighborhoods and villages around the Wadi al-Nasara—the Valley of Christians, an enclave of some 30 villages west of the city of Homs, are emptying out. *Fides* reported in March 2012: “The Christian areas of Homs ... are at the center of the crossfire between army and rebels. In Homs there are about 1,000 Christians. A year ago, before the start of the fighting, there were in town, on the whole, 160,000 faithful and four Bishops of various denominations.”

On June 17, 2013, a *Fox News* blog cited a local priest’s report stating that two Christian villages near Homs with a combined population of nearly 1,000, now lie abandoned after everybody fled. Regarding a third Christian village abandoned a year ago, he stated that people recently returned to find their homes either destroyed or taken over by others. “The situation is disastrous,” he wrote.

When the jihadist rebel units take control of a town, like Ras al-Ayn, in Hassake province, it loses its Christian population over night, church sources further report. Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan Eustathius Matta Roham, of Jazirah and Euphrates, confirms that churches and all Christian symbols have been destroyed in Ras al-Ayn. [*Photographs of some of Syria’s destroyed that are provided to us by the European Syriac Union are submitted separately for the record.*]

Most information about these massacres and about the violence perpetrated by the regime comes from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), an organization set up by the Syrian opposition in London. Virtually all international news accounts republish the Observatory’s reporting. According to *AsiaNews*: “For nearly two years, SOHR has reported only acts of violence by the regime against the rebels. Mainstream international media like the BBC, al Jazeera and al Arabiya, have relied on it as their sole source of news.” I note, SOHR is now reporting on some jihadist rebel atrocities.

Some in the opposition openly deny that Christians are victimized for their faith. George Sabra, the Socialist Party leader who is president of the National Syrian Coalition, who comes from a Christian background and is often pointed to by Western supporters as evidence that Christians are represented in the Coalition, insisted to Kino on May 21, 2013 that there is no evidence Syrian Christians are under pressure because of their religion. Sabra was reported to have stated:

"Maybe there are some small events here and there," he said, "but we have not the right to exaggerate with these events to tell it as a fact, as a truth, of the life in Syria. Really it is not true."

Sabra's views are contradicted by the church leaders inside Syria and Christian refugees pouring out of it. We are only beginning to understand the perils Syria's Christians face.

The *New York Times* reported: "Hannibal, a 36-year-old pathologist who fled Syria when his life was threatened by rebels, was not smiling as he talked: 'As Christians in the Middle East, we live in misery and suffer many difficulties. We want nothing more than to emigrate to other places.'"

An Orthodox cleric concludes: "It would not be good if all Christians were to leave Syria, because then the Church would disappear here. But those who stay risk their lives and the lives of their children. Therefore the Church finds itself in a very complicated position. Prayer is our only support. After all, everything is in God's hands."

Regional Religious Cleansing

The devastation of Iraq's Christian community over the past ten years is foremost on the mind of those who analyze the situation of Syria's churches now. In 2003 in Iraq, Christians were some four percent of the population; they are now thought to be 1.5 percent, numbering no more than half a million.

After Saddam Hussein's secular Baathist dictatorship in Iraq was overthrown, up to two-thirds of that country's Christians was driven out in less than a decade. The Iraqi Christians, also with ancient roots in the area, have fled intense violence specifically targeting them by Islamist extremists and common criminals, both of whom operate with impunity. Authorities in Baghdad have been slow to protect Christians, and have watched passively as local authorities have deprived Christians of essential services – including those provided through American reconstruction efforts. In Iraq, too, kidnappers have found the unprotected Christians easy prey.

Like in Syria, no Iraqi group, Muslim or non-Muslim, has been spared massive and appalling religiously motivated violence. However, as the US Commission on International Religious Freedom found, the one-two punch of extremism, combined with deep governmental discrimination and indifference, now threatens the "very existence" of Iraq's ancient Christian churches.

The refugee branches of both the UN and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, after extensive research, separately concluded that these minorities are being “obliterated” (the bishops’ term) because of specifically targeted violence. Wijdan Michael, Iraq’s human rights minister and herself a Christian, concluded it is an attempt “to empty Iraq of Christians.”

Egypt’s ancient Coptic community, about 8-10 million, is the largest Christian and the largest non-Muslim religious minority in the Middle East, and it too is now under threat. They now suffer ruthless attacks by Salafi Muslims, as well as by the military troops, who have gone unpunished for abusing or using excessive force against Christians. Since the Arab Spring ushered in a Muslim Brotherhood government, anti-Christian persecution has increased.

Just a few weeks ago, another attack occurred when an angry mob laid siege to Cairo’s cathedral during the funeral of four Copts who were themselves indiscriminately murdered by another angry mob aroused by a rumor of blasphemy. Repeatedly Pres. Morsi has failed to protect them against violent Salafis. Tens, maybe hundreds, of thousands of Copts have fled the country since the beginning of 2011. Egyptian political scholar, who is my colleague at Hudson’s Center for Religious Freedom, Samuel Tadros, writes: “The Copts can only wonder today whether, after 2,000 years, the time has come for them to pack their belongings and leave, as Egypt looks less hospitable to them than ever.”

Syria’s Christian community constitutes the largest church in the Middle East after Egypt’s Copts. Only one other country in the region has over a million Christians: Lebanon, with about 1.5 million. The other countries of the region count the numbers of Christian populations in the thousands. Except for Saudi Arabia, which has no indigenous church at all left within its borders. Much more is at stake in the fate of Syria’s Christians than the future of the Church itself.

The driving out of Christians from the region, after a two millennia presence there, should be a concern not only to Christians. Lebanese Christian scholar Habib Malik makes the point that Christian minorities have traditionally served as “moderators” and “mediators” in the Middle East. They have often stressed Western-style education, individual freedoms, and women’s rights. A case in point is his own father, Charles Malik, a major drafter of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Malik insists:

”The existence of settled, stable, prosperous, and reasonably free and secure native Christian communities in the Middle East has served in many instances as a factor encouraging Islamic openness and moderation, creating an environment of pluralism that fosters acknowledgment of the different other.”

Without Christians, the Middle East, a cultural cross-roads historically, will become even more radicalized and more estranged from the West. This will be a political problem for the West. As a Chaldean Catholic bishop lamented about his own country, “This is very

sad and very dangerous for the church, for Iraq and even for Muslim people, because it means the end of an old experience of living together.”

American Policy

As my co-authors Paul Marshall and Lela Gilbert and I found in our recent book *Persecuted*, unfortunately, our policy officials often miss or misunderstand the perilous circumstances of Christians and other religious minorities as they make foreign policy.

For example, while there were 90,000 American and NATO troops on the ground in Afghanistan, that country’s last remaining church, in Kabul, was razed in 2010 after its 99-year lease was cancelled. The U.S. State Department knew of this, and even reported on it in September 2011, but no U.S. official took any measure to stop or reverse it. The destruction of Afghanistan’s last church did not draw the international protest that accompanied the Taliban’s destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhist statues in 2001, but it is equally emblematic and even more consequential, depriving a religious community of its only house of worship. While the American people supported President Karzai’s government, financially and militarily, Afghanistan joined the infamous company of hardline Saudi Arabia as a country that will not tolerate any churches. America’s own diplomats and contract workers in Afghanistan must now hide their worship services.

Other examples occurred in Iraq in 2005–08, under the noses of the US occupying power and over 100,000 American troops. During those years, Christians, Mandaean, and Yezidis experienced horrific persecution that ultimately led to a nationwide “religious cleansing” campaign against non-Muslims.

American foreign policy officials appeared to believe that it would be “special pleading” to do anything to help when 20,000 Christians were being violently driven from Baghdad’s Dora neighborhood by Islamist death squads in 2006. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told me that the administration could not protect them from being murdered and kidnapped because it did not want American policy to be seen as “sectarian.” But the U.S. was already deeply vested in sectarian considerations, though not for Christians. At the same time, the U.S. was engaged in a military surge against Islamic Sunni extremists. The U.S. was engaged in intensive efforts to ensure that non-violent Sunnis gained positions in the Iraqi government, which, thanks to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, was run largely by Shias, whom the administration had helped politically strengthen and unify. The problem is that U.S. Iraq policy had many sectarian considerations – except when it came to Christians and other non-Muslims, whom, because they were peaceful, it consistently overlooked.

These attacks on religious freedom in Afghanistan and Iraq took place under two different administrations, one Democratic and one Republican. They happened without a significant policy response from the United States.

Recommendations

The Center for Religious Freedom concludes that Syrian Christians are both trapped in a vise between the two sides of a brutal conflict, and specifically targeted in an ethno-religious cleansing campaign. The US administration is failing to address, or even notice, the particular situation of Syria's Christians. Without delay, it should adopt the following policies:

First, it is critical for the US to officially take notice that, while every group in Syria is suffering, the Christian minorities are currently particularly persecuted; as well as being caught in the middle of a terrible war, they are also the objects of a concerted religious cleansing campaign. The State Department's *Religious Freedom Report* on Syria, issued last month, notes blandly that: "Reports of harassment of Christians, mostly in the context of ongoing political unrest, increased during the year." Also that: "Some Christians reported societal tolerance for Christians was dwindling and this was a major factor for the surge of emigration of Syrian Christians." Few actual cases were cited by the State Department and there's not the slightest hint in this gross understatement that the threat they face is an existential one.

The situation of Christians and other minorities should be accurately reflected in a special report, one that Congress could mandate, and/or in official speeches, from the bully pulpits of our highest level officials. The fact that this cleansing is being missed is reason for the Congress to pass the resolution of Reps. Frank Wolf and Anna Eshoo mandating a special envoy for religious minorities in the Middle East.

Second, US humanitarian aid must also be directed to the institutions that are caring for the Christian refugees. Generous American humanitarian aid – over \$800 million -- for Syrian refugees typically bypasses Christians since they are generally afraid to go to the camps, where they risk further persecution and attack. Churches and monasteries in Lebanon and Turkey are being overwhelmed with Christians escaping violence in Syria and these and similar such facilities need to be identified and provided assistance.

Furthermore, humanitarian aid – and, in the future, reconstruction and development aid – is desperately needed inside Syria. The majority of Syrian Christians, and others, who have been driven from their homes are displaced within Syria and are in urgent need of assistance. The US should provide such aid and must ensure that –unlike in Iraq -- such aid actually reaches the Christians and other smaller minority communities and is not distributed solely through Assad government agencies, or existing opposition groups; aid to them should be distributed through Syrian Christian organizations, including, but not limited to, the churches.

Third, while many Christians wish to continue living in Syria and we hope that the Christian community will remain in their homeland, the US must begin to accept large numbers of the Christian refugees who are not be able or willing to return to Syria and who cannot securely stay in the region. Because as a group, the Christian minority has not been linked to terror by either side, they do not require extensive background checks

and their cases can be expedited. The *LA Times* recently reported that the Obama administration is considering resettling refugees who have fled Syria as part of an international effort that could bring thousands of the 1.5 million or more Syrian refugees currently in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East to the United States. According to a State Department official cited in the *Times*, the Department is "ready to consider the idea," upon the receipt of a formal request from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees. Washington usually accepts about half the refugees that the U.N. agency proposes for resettlement, the paper reports. However, because many Christians avoid registering and entering UN camps for fear of being victimized, they are not likely to appear in the High Commissioner's request. Hence, the administration should ensure that unregistered Christian refugees are included in any resettlement plan, and that their cases are not delayed by unnecessary terrorist background checks.

Fourth, as the administration distributes support, weapons and other aid, lethal and non-lethal, to the members of the Free Syrian Army, it must ensure that none goes, directly or indirectly, to those responsible for religious persecution and cleansing against any group.

In addition, the US should ensure that policing assistance needed for the defense of Christian neighborhoods and villages is provided.

Fifth, the US should make a peaceful settlement in Syria among its highest foreign policy priorities. It should do so in consultations that include appropriate and fair representation of Christian and other small minorities, including through their civic leaders. Charges must be taken seriously by the Syriac National Council of Syria, a coalition of Syrian Christians groups and leaders, that the Syrian National Coalition, with which the West regularly consults, is dominated by Islamist groups and does not include authentic Christian voices. (I have submitted the statement of the Syriac National Council's of Syria's statement separately for the record.)

Any settlement must ensure religious pluralism and freedom through a democratic constitution guaranteeing religious freedom, freedom of expression, personal security, and full recognition of the rights of all minorities, as well as other political and civil rights, including the right to equality under the law for women. Guarantees must be provided against Syria's Talibanization through the forcible imposition of sharia by sharia courts, Islamist security forces, or religious police.

In conclusion, I wish to draw attention to the appeal of Aleppo's Metropolitan Archbishop Jean-Clément Jeanbart, of the Melkite Greek-Catholic Church:

"One suffers for lack of goods, fuel, electricity, sometimes for food. But what makes us suffer most is to see that the future gets darker and darker. The future for us Christians and for all Syrians can only be based on full citizenship, freedom, dignity and respect for others. Otherwise what will happen to us? "

* According to a U.S. government source, the population of Syria is approximately 22.5 million. Sunni Muslims constitute 74 percent of the population and includes Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Chechens, and some Turkomans. Other Muslim groups, including Alawis, Ismailis, and Shia, together, constitute 13 percent. Druze account for 3 percent of the population. Various Christian groups constitute 10 percent. There is also a tiny Jewish population, numbering between 20-100 people. Yezidis number about 80,000.

** Most Christians belong to the Orthodox churches, the Uniate churches (which recognize Roman Catholic papal authority), the independent Nestorian Church and several Protestant churches.

**RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN SYRIA:
CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE**

JOINT HEARING
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH,
GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS, AND
INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS
AND THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN SYRIA: CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

TUESDAY, JUNE 25, 2013

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH,
GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS, AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittees met, pursuant to notice, at 3:04 p.m., in room 2172, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Christopher H. Smith (chairman of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations) presiding.

Mr. SMITH. The subcommittees will come to order.

And good afternoon. And welcome to today's joint hearing of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations and the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa as we turn our attention to an overlooked aspect of the crisis in Syria: The religious minorities caught in the middle of the conflict and apparently targeted by government forces as well as rebel groups.

More than 93,000 Syrians have been killed in this horrendous and seemingly endless civil war. More than 4.25 million people are displaced within Syria, and millions more are fleeing to safety in the surrounding countries of Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq.

It is disturbing to note that 1 in 5 of the refugees is Christian, although Christians in Syria make up 1 in 10 of the pre-war population of 22 million people. This would seem to indicate that Christians are even more fearful for their lives and safety than other segments of the Syrian population.

Before the war, Syria was a fairly pluralistic society, with Alawites, Shias, Ismailis, Yazidis, Druze, Christians, Jews, and Sunnis living in relative peace side-by-side. The situation was far from perfect, as President Bashar al-Assad's regime had a vast security apparatus in place with members inside each of the religious communities to monitor their activities. The Assad government was guilty of serious human rights violations, including the summary imprisonment and execution of political prisoners, but relations between various religious groups was generally not violent.

That civil coexistence has ended with the war. In February of this year, the U.N. Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic reported that "the conflict has become increasingly sectarian, with the conduct of the parties be-

coming significantly more radicalized and militarized.” This followed on an earlier Commission report stating that “entire communities are at risk of being forced out of the country or being killed inside the country, with communities believing, and not without cause, that they face an existential threat.”

We know that early in the civil war Assad came to view the Christian minority with suspicion, accusing churches of laundering money and goods for opposition forces and forbidding banks from conducting transactions for certain churches. There is also evidence that the Assad regime encouraged sectarian tensions in order to maintain power, perhaps believing that if people were afraid of Islamists commandeering a nominally secular state, the people would be more likely to support Assad over the opposition.

In December 2012, Time magazine reported allegations that the Assad regime was paying individuals to pose as opposition supporters and chant slogans at protests, including, “The Christians to Beirut, and the Alawites to the grave.”

Our own Government has voiced concern about the particular threat posed to Christians in Syria. According to the State Department’s International Religious Freedom Report for 2012,

“The regime continued to frame opposition actions as targeting the Christian population. At the same time, it increased its own targeting of Christians and Alawi anti-regime activists in order to eliminate minority voices that might counter its narrative of Sunni-sponsored violence.”

Religious minorities seem to fear the opposition forces. Some prominent opposition groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, have a religious basis which has been seen as threatening to Syria’s Alawite and Christian minorities. Smaller opposition factions, such as the al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist al-Nusra Front, take explicitly sectarian positions. There are reports of incidents in which rebel forces engaged in sectarian violence, such as burning Shiite mosques.

Christians are perceived by many in the opposition to be Assad loyalists, possibly due to Assad’s aggressive recruitment of Christians into the regime militias at the start of the civil war. Other reports indicate that Christians attempted to remain neutral, either out of passivism or concern about their rights under opposition forces.

Christian neutrality was perceived by some opposition groups as loyalty to the regime. In December 2012, a rebel force believed to be associated with the Muslim Brotherhood released a video on YouTube entitled, “Warning Mainly Christian Cities in the Province of Hama,” and promising attacks if they continue to support and house pro-Assad forces.

Christian leaders have been targeted, such as the April 2013 kidnappings of two Syriac Orthodox Church bishops. Both men have still not been returned. The Druze community reports being targeted, as well. In March 2013, a Druze leader reported to Christian Solidarity International, who will testify today,

“Our people get stopped at checkpoints and are asked which sect they belong to. Once the militias hear that they are

Swaida, a province where 90 percent of the population is Druze, our men disappear.”

Al-Nusra Front, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, has been blamed for much of the sectarian rhetoric and violence, but dozens of the opposition groups ascribe to Islamic jihadist ideologies and mingle with the Free Syrian Army, which the U.S. may now be supporting.

Over the last 3 years, the United States has committed to providing \$250 million to various opposition groups in Syria, at least \$117 million of which has already been funded, largely to the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. With the chemical-weapon red line crossed, the administration has also agreed to provide ammunitions and small arms, as well. It is not clear whether any of this new lethal assistance will go to the Free Syrian Army and its worrisome opposition groups.

The administration also committed to send an additional \$300 million in humanitarian aid to “vulnerable groups in and around Syria.” It is not clear whether distribution of this aid will be informed by the plight of religious minorities.

I am very concerned that the administration may not be taking seriously enough the targeting of religious minorities, which is why we have called this hearing. Too often we have heard from the administration that they have bigger issues to deal with than the vulnerability of religious minorities.

In the last two appropriations cycles, we have directed the administration to condition aid, for example, to Egypt, some \$1.3 billion, on the certification that Egypt is acting to protect the religious freedom of its minorities. The administration, both Secretary Clinton and Secretary Kerry, refused to do so and waived it.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Government of Egypt continues to allow attacks on Coptic Christians with impunity. I have actually chaired three hearings on the targeting of Coptic Christians, and I do believe much more needs to be done, and robustly done, to protect this minority in Egypt.

Money does talk. The United States should be using assistance to ensure recipient countries and entities have a plan that is implemented to protect vulnerable religious minorities.

And, with that, I look forward to hearing the testimony of our distinguished witness from the administration. But I would like to ask Mr. Schneider if he has any comments and then go to Randy.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you for calling this very important hearing.

As you rightly indicated, the sectarian violence in Syria is an overlooked aspect of what we are seeing as events unfold, with over 93,000 people already believed to be killed, the number possibly being even much higher.

It is critical, as we look forward to moving Syria in a different direction, that we take into consideration how we create a future for Syria that does not lead to further sectarian violence and oppression of minorities. So I look forward to hearing from our witnesses and increasing our understanding on this crucial issue.

Thank you very much.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you so very much.

The distinguished vice chairman of the subcommittee?

Mr. WEBER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Genocide is defined as the deliberate killing of a large group of people, especially those of a particular ethnicity or religion. Today, more than at any other time in modern history, religious minorities are regularly persecuted, kidnapped, tortured, and murdered in Syria, and throughout the Middle East for that matter. They are experiencing the true definition of “genocide.”

The Pew Research Center indicates that Christians are targeted for governmental and societal persecution more than any other religious group. Sadly, an estimated 100,000 Christians are killed for their faith every single year, according to a recent United Nations report.

And yet the media is complicit in this genocide by failing to shine a light on the plight of those being annihilated. Their failure to inform the public prevents accountability and action. Ignorant or not, as policymakers, we are all just as at fault for our failure to step in and help protect the helpless.

After World War II, a war in which my father fought—and he is one of the last of the living greatest generation, by the way—we made a promise to the world never to forget. We echoed that promise after 9/11: We would never forget. A promise to the world that, after World War II, that we would ensure that it never happened again.

But we have failed over and over again: In Cambodia, in the Congo, in the Darfur, in Iraq, in Rwanda, and in places, quite frankly, too numerous to mention. Countless millions have died in genocides which occurred following our promise that we would never let it happen again.

At what point do we say, enough is enough? Our word has to mean something. Thousands are crying out to us to pay attention and for us to act, and it is our moral obligation as the world’s leading superpower to do so, because it is who we are as a Nation and a people.

To quote Reverend Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who actively spoke out against the Nazi regime in Germany, “Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.” He also said, and I quote him here, “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of the victims beneath the wheels of injustice. We are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.” Realizing that the magnitude of the numbers can be overwhelming and awfully paralyzing, perhaps we need to narrow our vision down to the One who motivates action.

As those with knowledge of actual events on the ground, I look to our witnesses today to give us not only some of these individual accounts of what is happening within Syria but also ways that we might engage and hold us accountable, by the way, that we would be held accountable for the promises that we made even as a previous generation. I would much rather be on the side of those speaking and acting than those who stayed at home.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Mr. Weber.

Mr. Kennedy?

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much.

I just wanted to thank you for calling an important hearing, and look forward to what our witnesses have to say on the issue.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Mr. Kennedy.

Mr. Yoho?

Mr. YOHO. Mr. Chairman, not right now.

Mr. SMITH. Okay.

Mr. Collins?

Mr. COLLINS. No, thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you.

I would like to now introduce our distinguished panelist from the administration, Thomas Melia, who is the Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. He is responsible for its work in Europe, including Russia, and the countries of the Middle East and North Africa region.

He came to DRL in 2010 from Freedom House, where he was deputy executive director for 5 years. Earlier, Mr. Melia worked at the National Democratic Institute, the AFL-CIO, and on Capitol Hill. In addition, he taught democracy and human rights courses at Georgetown University and the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and did that for more than 10 years.

The floor is yours.

STATEMENT OF MR. THOMAS O. MELIA, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Mr. MELIA. Chairman Smith and members of the subcommittees, thank you for inviting me here to discuss the situation for religious and other minorities in Syria today.

I request that the full prepared testimony be included in the record, and I will just give you a summary.

Mr. SMITH. Without objection, so ordered.

Mr. MELIA. Syria looks disturbingly different today than it did at the start of the revolution. What started 2 years ago as a peaceful demand for human rights in Daraa has turned into a devastating nationwide conflict with a growing human toll. The Assad regime continues to commit gross and systematic violations of human rights.

Mr. Chairman, you recited the numbers, I don't need to repeat them here, but the last several months have been particularly concerning. We have seen increasing sectarian undertones in the horrific massacres at Bayda, Baniyas, and Qusayr. Indeed, the U.N. Commission of Inquiry's June 4 report underscores that crimes against humanity have become a daily reality for the people of Syria.

For centuries, Syria has been a rich tapestry of religious and ethnic groups, including the Sunnis, the Alawis, Ismailis, Shia, Druze, and different Christian communities. The regime has provoked and attempted to divide Syria's population by driving a wedge between these minorities and the Sunni majority.

The regime continues to target faith groups it deems a threat, including members of the country's Sunni majority and numerous religious minorities. Such targeting includes killing, detention, and harassment. Regime attacks have also destroyed religious sites, including more than 1,000 mosques and an undetermined number of other houses of worship, including churches.

The attacks in Qusayr marked a dangerous new precedent of direct sectarian threats by Hezbollah's forces fighting at the behest of the regime. Over 200 civilians were killed and many more wounded, who now desperately need humanitarian assistance.

We have also seen al-Qaeda-linked groups and other violent extremist groups engaged in gross human rights abuses. We have seen several reports of violent extremists conducting massacres of Shia civilians as well as destroying a Shia mosque.

Many Christians, moreover, have reported receiving threats on their lives if they do not join the opposition efforts against the regime and have been driven from their homes and killed en masse as presumed supporters of the regime. Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim and Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi were kidnapped on April 22 by persons unknown and remain missing to this day.

The Nusra Front has claimed responsibility for bombings across the country. A 15-year-old boy was executed for blasphemy this month by extremists in Aleppo, who, reports tell us, have come from outside the country to fight the regime.

These extremist groups do not support the aspirations nor do they reflect the mindset of the vast majority of the Syrian people or even the vast majority of the active Syrian opposition. The atrocities committed by these extremist elements should not be conflated with the efforts by the moderate opposition, including the Supreme Military Council, to seek an end to the Assad regime and to facilitate an orderly political transition.

In fact, the list of targets that these extreme groups have developed is increasingly long and includes Sunnis and virtually all the minorities. In a recent interview with *The Economist* magazine, one Nusra Front fighter stated that even Sunnis who want democracy are to be considered unbelievers who deserve to be punished.

Sectarian-based retribution plays directly into the regime's and violent extremists' hands. It does not move the country closer to the inclusive post-Assad future that Syrians have been struggling to achieve.

In our conversations with opposition military leaders, we have consistently urged opposition groups to respect international law and human rights, and we have applauded those groups that signed on to the code of conduct issued by the Free Syrian Army in the fall of 2012.

We continue to try to help bring an end to the violent conflict by strengthening the moderate opposition, blocking the Assad regime's access to cash and weapons, facilitating a political transition to end Assad's rule, and providing substantial humanitarian assistance, as well as laying the groundwork for an inclusive democratic transition, including accountability for egregious violations committed. We are also working closely with our allies to stem the flow of money and resources to violent extremist groups.

We believe that a political transition is the best solution for the crisis in Syria. We support the letter and intent of the June 2012 Geneva Communiqué—June 30, almost exactly a year ago—which calls for a transitional governing body with full executive powers and formed on the basis of national consent.

We have been clear that there is no role for Assad in a transitional government. He has lost all credibility and must be held accountable for his crimes.

Our efforts to strengthen the moderate opposition and change the balance on the ground include diplomatic outreach to improve the representativeness and connectedness of the opposition bodies themselves. We have repeatedly encouraged the political opposition to include grassroots activists from inside Syria, religious and ethnic minorities, and women from all these communities in their leadership.

We hope that the upcoming meetings will produce more diverse and inclusive membership and leaders who reflect the diversity of Syrian society. We regularly track the violations and abuses committed in Syria by all parties and regularly reiterate our call for all parties to the conflict to protect and to respect the rights of civilians regardless of ethnicity, religion, or gender.

The international community must continue to support documentation and other efforts to lay the groundwork for justice and accountability processes and to support Syrian efforts as they identify how best to bring to justice those who have committed so many heinous acts.

As we expand our engagement with the Syrian opposition now, efforts by the United States and the international community focused on justice, accountability, and conflict resolution will be critical to ensuring the protection of human rights during Syria's transition. By helping Syrians to accelerate their efforts to lay the groundwork for eventual criminal trials, we aim to deter current and potential perpetrators of these crimes as well as sectarian vigilante justice or collective reprisals.

In addition to our other bureaus and agencies in the U.S. Government engaged in coordinated programs to assist Syrians over the past year or more, the State Department's Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor is supporting Syrian civil society so they can more effectively coordinate to advocate for human rights and democracy concerns.

We are also bolstering efforts to lay the groundwork for future transitional justice initiatives by supporting the documentation of violations and abuses committed by all sides of the conflict and education about locally owned accountability and transitional justice mechanisms.

We are also promoting conflict mitigation and reconciliation efforts by supporting positive cross-sectarian engagement, coalition building and targeted humanitarian assistance, and conflict-prevention training at the local level, working through respected NGOs and community leaders.

We support these activities by partnering with large interfaith and ecumenical nongovernmental international organizations and universities with experience in Syria. A broad range of Syrian ethnic and religious minority groups are included in these efforts.

We have also honored the work of human rights activists such as Syrian Alawite activist Ms. Hanadi Zahlout, who recently was selected for the 2013 Department of State Human Rights Defender Award. She has been active on human rights issues in Syria since before the revolution and was a founding member of the local co-

ordination committees, which are an integral part of the opposition infrastructure. She is providing education and messaging on anti-sectarianism as well as raising awareness about threats to the security of minority communities.

Finally, to ensure that our assistance reaches its intended targets and does not end up in the hands of extremists, we will continue to vet recipients using the formal processes that have been established across various agencies.

The United States stood with the Syrian people at the outset of this conflict, beginning with U.S. support for activists and civil society during the early protest movement. We stand with the Syrian people today, with ongoing and increasing efforts to strengthen the opposition and civil society. And we will continue to stand with them going forward until the day that we can, together, welcome a new Syria, one where the Syrian people can enjoy a free, stable, and democratic country without Bashar al-Assad. We look forward to continuing to work with Congress toward this goal.

Thank you again for this invitation to testify before your committees. I am happy to take any questions you may have.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Melia, thank you very much for your testimony and for the work of your office.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Melia follows:]

Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

Deputy Assistant Secretary Thomas O. Melia

Testimony

HFAC hearing “Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle”

June 25, 2013, 3pm

Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations

Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa

Chairman Smith, Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to discuss the situation for minorities in Syria.

Syria is comprised of a rich myriad of religious and ethnic groups. Syria’s population is approximately 22.5 million, although emigration has increased due to ongoing violence, unrest, and economic hardship. According to the State Department’s International Religious Freedom report for 2012, Sunni Muslims constitute 74 percent of the population, and include: Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Chechens, and Turkomans. The Alawis, Ismailis, and Shia constitute 13 percent. The Druze account for 3 percent. Christian groups, who have an ancient presence in Syria, constitute the remaining 10 percent, although the Christian population may be closer to 8 percent due to recent emigration due to the conflict.

Syria looks disturbingly different today than it did at the start of the revolution. What started as a peaceful demand for human rights in Deraa has turned into a devastating conflict nationwide with a growing human toll. The Assad regime continues to commit gross and systematic violations of human rights. According to the U.N., more than 93,000 Syrians have died since the beginning of the conflict and the number is rising. More than 1.6 million people have left their homes in Syria to seek refuge in another country – a number that could more than double by the end of 2013. And nearly 4.5 million Syrians are internally displaced, all out of a total population of only 20 million. The last several months have been particularly concerning. We have seen increasing sectarian undertones in the horrific massacres of Bayda, Baniyas, and Qusayr. Indeed, the UN Commission of Inquiry’s June 4 report underscores that crimes against humanity have become a daily reality for the people of Syria. The regime has provoked and attempted to divide Syria’s population by driving a wedge between the minorities and Sunni majority. The regime continues to target faith groups it deems a threat, including members of the country’s Sunni majority and religious minorities. Such targeting included killing, detention, and harassment. Regime attacks have also destroyed religious sites, including more than 1,000 mosques.

The attacks on Qusayr marked a dangerous new precedent of direct sectarian threats by Hizballah’s forces that are fighting at the behest of the regime. During the June session of the UN Human Rights Council session, we co-sponsored an urgent debate and resolution on the regime and Hizballah’s attack on Qusayr. Unfortunately the regime did not halt its attacks. Over 200 civilians were killed and many more wounded who now desperately need humanitarian assistance.

There are reports the regime is now moving north to Aleppo as well as calling on Shia civilians to fight against the Sunni population.

We have also seen al-Qaida-linked groups and other violent extremist groups engaged in gross human rights abuses. We have seen several reports of violent extremists conducting massacres of Shia civilians as well as destroying a Shia mosque. Many Christians have reported receiving threats on their lives if they do not join the opposition efforts against the regime, have been driven from their homes and killed in mass as presumed supporters of the regime. We have also seen increasing lawlessness in the northern areas and increasing threats to civilian security, including kidnapping, rape, and looting. Syrian Orthodox archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim and Greek Orthodox archbishop Paul Yazigi were kidnapped April 22 by persons unknown, and remain missing. The Nusra Front has claimed responsibility for bombings across the country. A 15-year-old boy was executed for blasphemy this month by extremists in Aleppo who, reports suggest, have come from outside the country to fight the regime. As you know, the Obama administration designated the Nusra Front in December 2012 as an alias of al-Qaida in Iraq, and supported a similar designation by the UN Security Council as well. We did that to warn others in the Syrian opposition of the risks that they take by working with the Nusra Front.

These groups do not support the aspirations, nor do they reflect the mindset, of the vast majority of the Syrian people, or even the vast majority of the active Syrian opposition. The atrocities committed by these extremist elements should not be conflated with the efforts by the moderate opposition, including the Supreme Military Council, to seek an end to the Asad regime and to facilitate a political transition. In fact, the list of acceptable targets for these extremist groups is increasingly long, and includes Sunnis. In a recent interview with the *Economist* magazine, one Nusra Front fighter stated that even Sunnis who want democracy are “unbelievers” who deserve to be punished.

Sectarian based retribution plays directly into the regime’s and violent extremists’ hands. It does not move the country closer to the inclusive, post-Asad future that Syrians have been struggling to achieve. We have been very clear that all sides in this conflict must abide by international humanitarian law and we continue to urge all Syrians to speak out against the perpetration of unlawful killings against any group, regardless of faith or ethnicity. In our conversations with opposition military leaders, we have consistently urged opposition groups to respect international law and human rights, and applauded those groups that signed on to the code of conduct issued by the Free Syrian Army in the fall of 2012. We are encouraged by the actions of our political and military opposition partners to work towards and speak out in favor of these shared goals, and are working to use our assistance to improve the capacity of these proven actors.

We continue to try to help bring an end to the violent conflict in Syria by strengthening the moderate opposition, blocking the Asad regime’s access to cash and weapons, facilitating a political transition to end Asad’s rule, providing humanitarian assistance, and laying the groundwork for an inclusive democratic transition, including accountability for the egregious violations committed. We are also working closely with our allies to stem the flow of money and resources to violent extremist groups.

We believe that a political transition is the best solution for the crisis in Syria. We support the letter and intent of the June 2012 Geneva Communiqué, which calls for a transitional governing body with full executive powers and formed on the basis of mutual consent. We have been clear that there is no role for Asad in a transitional government; he has lost his credibility and must be held accountable.

Our and our partners' efforts to strengthen the moderate opposition and change the balance on the ground include diplomatic outreach to improve the representativeness and connectedness of the opposition bodies themselves. We have repeatedly encouraged the political opposition to include grass roots activists from inside Syria, minorities, and women from all communities in their leadership. We hope that their upcoming meetings will produce more diverse and inclusive membership and leaders who reflect the diversity of Syria's opposition.

We regularly track violations and abuses committed in Syria by all parties, and regularly reiterate our call for all parties to the conflict in Syria to protect and to respect the rights of all civilians, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or gender. We have been absolutely clear that those responsible for serious violations of international human rights law and humanitarian law must be held accountable. As we have noted at the UN, the international community must continue to support documentation and other efforts to lay the groundwork for justice and accountability processes, and to support Syrian efforts as they identify how best to bring to justice those who have committed these heinous acts. As we look toward expanding our engagement with the Syrian opposition, efforts by the United States and the international community focused on justice, accountability, and conflict resolution will be critical to ensuring the protection of human rights during Syria's transition. By helping Syrians to accelerate their efforts to lay the groundwork for eventual criminal trials, we aim to deter current and potential perpetrators of these crimes, as well as sectarian vigilante justice or collective reprisals.

The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) at the State Department is supporting Syrian civil society so they can more effectively coordinate to advocate for human rights and democracy concerns. We are also bolstering efforts to lay the groundwork for future transitional justice initiatives, by supporting the documentation of violations and abuses committed by all sides of the conflict, and education about locally-owned accountability and transitional justice mechanisms. We are also promoting conflict mitigation and reconciliation by supporting positive cross-sectarian engagement, coalition building, and targeted humanitarian assistance and conflict prevention training at the local level. We support these activities by partnering with large inter-faith and ecumenical non-governmental international organizations and universities with experience working in Syria. A broad range of Syrian ethnic and religious minority groups are included throughout our efforts.

We are also honoring the work of human rights activists, such as female Syrian Alawite activist Hanadi Zahlout, who recently was selected for the 2013 Department of State Human Rights Defender Award. It is critical for Syrians and the international community to understand that Syria's minorities hold a range of political views and associations, despite the Asad regime's efforts to act as their sole representative and protector against the Sunni majority. Not all Alawites support the regime or the abuses committed by pro-regime militias, just as not all Sunnis support the opposition. Ms. Zahlout has been active on human rights issues in Syria since before the revolution, and was a founding member of the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) which are

an integral part of the opposition infrastructure. She is providing education and messaging on anti-sectarianism, as well as raising awareness about current threats to the security of minority communities and concerns about their role in a future transition.

Other U.S. backed transition assistance programs are helping to provide vital services such as food, water and electricity to local community groups, which help establish credible alternatives to new extremist elements among opposition groups. We supplied over 6,000 major pieces of equipment, including communications gear, to enable activists to coordinate their efforts. We boosted radio signals, extending the reach of broadcast on FM stations, and funded media outlets. We then used those media platforms to address sectarian violence and issue public service messages on chemical weapons exposure.

We also have trained and equipped thousands of local leaders and activists – including women and minorities – from over 100 Syrian opposition provincial councils. These graduates are empowering local committees and councils from Damascus to Dayr az Zawr to Idlib to better provide for the needs of all members of their communities. And we are looking to improve civilian security through training and some non-lethal equipment to opposition police and judges. This is critical to addressing the security vacuum in liberated areas easily exploited by extremists.

Finally, to ensure that our assistance reaches its intended targets and does not end up in the hands of extremists, we will continue to vet recipients using the formal processes that have been established across various government agencies.

The United States stood with the Syrian people at the outset of this conflict, beginning with U.S. support for activists and civil society during the early protest movement. We stand with the Syrian people today, with ongoing and increasing efforts to strengthen the opposition and civil society. And we will continue to stand with them going forward, until the day that we can together welcome a new Syria, one where the Syrian people can enjoy a free, stable, and democratic country without Assad.

We look forward to working with Congress toward this goal. Thank you again for the invitation to testify before your committee today. I am happy to take any questions you might have.

Mr. SMITH. I do have a few questions I would like to pose, beginning first with, do you have any sense as to how many Christians, how many people of minority faiths have been killed, wounded, and put to flight either as IDPs or as refugees?

Mr. MELIA. We don't have hard numbers on that because a lot of the people that are gathering information about deaths, displacement, refugees, et cetera, don't always sort the numbers by religious affiliation. But we know the numbers are appalling and they are growing in all communities, including in the Christian minority.

Mr. SMITH. In your testimony, is that something that if you can look into it even further, get back to us with some number just so we know the order of magnitude, how many people have been killed or wounded?

Mr. MELIA. We can certainly explore that. I will see what we can find out about that for you.

Mr. SMITH. That would be important to have.

In her testimony, Nina Shea points out that, and I quote her in the pertinent part, "the Christians are not simply caught in the middle as collateral damage. They are the targets of a more focused shadow war, one that is taking place alongside the larger conflict between the Shiite-backed Baathist Assad regime and the largely Sunni rebel militias. Christians are the targets of an ethno-religious cleansing by Islamist militants and courts."

Do you agree with that?

Mr. MELIA. Well, I am quite familiar with Ms. Shea's work over the years. I was a colleague of hers at Freedom House for a number of years, and I know she is one of the most astute students of this subject.

I think she is right that the regime and other elements that have come into the country in the course of this conflict are targeting a number of the communities, including specifically Christian communities. So it is clear that the efforts to divide and conquer are affecting not only the Christians but including the Christians, most definitely.

Mr. SMITH. I will never forget back in the early 1980s a visit that I had to El Salvador when Napoleon Duarte was the President of El Salvador. And there was a big, raging controversy in the United States about whether or not human rights conditionality should be affixed to military aid. And in a meeting with Ambassador Corr and myself, he said, "While some in this government may say no, put those human rights safeguards on all of our aid," because it helps him even with some of those people who might have been part of the right-wing death squad apparatus that he abhorred himself.

My question is that we now have taken a side, a clear side, with the Free Syrian Army and with other elements of the opposition. And I wonder if you could tell us how we can ensure that our support, both in the area of weaponry and humanitarian support and logistical support, that we can ensure that the people to whom we are providing that are not part of the problem, are not committing atrocities and human rights abuses in Syria.

Mr. MELIA. Well, you are pointing to one of the most difficult challenges that we have faced over these last many months of this

conflict in figuring out how best to intervene in a constructive way, because there are so many different militias and armed groups in various degrees of coordination with one another in the battle against the Assad regime. So that explains in significant part the hesitation to provide more to the opposition, to make sure that we don't provide more to the extremist elements that would work against our human rights values and against the longer-term interests of a free and stable Syria that we aspire to.

In the assistance we have been providing—and this will certainly be enhanced as other kinds of assistance are provided—we will do our utmost to vet the recipients of that through the kinds of established mechanisms that we use to enforce other kinds of human rights provisions in our security and economic assistance.

So we are engaged right now. It is very difficult when you don't have your established U.S. mechanisms in a country. We don't have an established order of battle in the opposition forces that we can study. The leadership doesn't control all of the armed elements on the ground.

So what I can assure you is that this is very much at the center of our deliberations. We are working very hard to figure out the best way to provide the kind of vetting and end-use monitoring that would ensure that the assistance we provide goes to the people who are working toward a free, stable, and democratic and rights-respecting Syria.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Chairman? Over here, Mr. Chairman. Sorry.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Connolly?

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Chairman—and I completely support your line of questioning. I just—are we on the 5-minute rule in terms of—

Mr. SMITH. No, no. We are not.

Mr. CONNOLLY. May I—

Mr. SMITH. You will have as much time as you want to.

Mr. CONNOLLY. As much time as we want?

Mr. SMITH. Yes.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SMITH. Within some reason. And that goes for me, as well. Let me just ask a couple of other questions, and then I will yield to my colleagues.

When we are talking about promises and getting promises not to do harm, how do we follow up with that? How do we actually ensure that, once out in the field with weapons provided by the United States of America, that Christians and others are not being slaughtered? How do we do that?

Mr. MELIA. Well, the many months of engagement and negotiation and political assistance that have been provided to the Syrian opposition by my colleagues who are on the front lines in that engagement. Now, you have met with Ambassador Ford on many occasions. Others in our Government are engaged on a constant basis with the Syrian political and military opposition, and this is exactly the kind of conversations we are having with them. They are endeavoring to persuade us that they have the command and control necessary to oversee the disposition of the equipment and the assistance we provide.

There is a trust building. There is a certain confidence building. We are going to have to also rely on the reports that we get from others, not only the people directly to whom we are assisting but also the work of NGOs and journalists and others who are gathering all kinds of information. So we will be doing our utmost to gather as much realtime information as we can from as many sources as we can about what is happening on the ground in Syria. That all feeds into the database that we use to do further vetting.

I wish I could promise you that there won't be any—I wish I could promise you that we would be 100 percent successful in only sending assistance to the most high-minded. But we will certainly do our best to work with trusted people that we think share our values and our goals.

Mr. SMITH. Does the Free Syrian Army understand that if they commit atrocities, if they rape and kill and execute Christians, or anyone else for that matter, that U.S. funding ceases?

Mr. MELIA. Again, this has been very much a part of our conversation, that—and they have made statements, and we know that they have told their people in the field to adhere to the international standards of humanitarian law and the laws of war and conflict.

It is not a highly organized military organization, but it is one that, as we engage with all Syrian organizations, this is very much a part of our discourse with them. They know, they know why we are there. We are there to support a transition to a democratic, rights-respecting regime in Syria. And any of the kind of behavior you are describing moves it in the opposite direction, and we can't support that.

Mr. SMITH. One final question. With regard to chain of command, are our military advisers and the administration sufficiently—have they been sufficiently assured that the chain of command, what the general says follows through to the colonels, to the lieutenants, right on down to the private? Or does that kind of structure simply not exist, making, again, any kind of discipline when it comes to human rights that much harder to adhere to?

Mr. MELIA. I am going to defer to my colleagues at the Pentagon and elsewhere who are more directly in that lane of responsibility for the details on how that happens. But all I can say is that this is very much a part of our policy. And I can assure you that in our near-daily interagency meetings on this, this is not ever out of the discussion.

Mr. SMITH. I do have a final question. If you had the opposition versus the Assad military, how would the breakdown in human rights violations be? I mean, is it 60–40? 80–20? Who are committing the lion's share of these atrocities?

Mr. MELIA. The regime of Bashar al-Assad is by far responsible for the most crimes against humanity, the most murders, the most dislocation of people in Syria. That is an easy one.

Mr. SMITH. Okay.

Mr. MELIA. It is a painful one, but it is easy to say.

And we have been mindful and the leadership, the responsible leadership in the Syrian opposition, has been mindful of the arrival of extremists who have come in and say that they are fighting the same battle but have different agendas. And trying to separate

them out is part of their job and part of our job, to make sure that the extremist elements do not benefit from our assistance.

Mr. SMITH. Had we done this months ago, would it have made a difference? I mean, Secretary Kerry himself said we are late. Are we late?

Mr. MELIA. I will leave it at what Secretary Kerry said. The question is, what do we do tomorrow?

Mr. SMITH. Okay.

With regards to the chain of command, I do hope you would take that back. You know, I have chaired hearings and I have been around the world many times. Even looking at U.N. peacekeepers, who have a very rigid chain of command, and yet in places like D.R. Congo it was the peacekeepers who were raping 13-year-olds, which became, as you know, a horrific scandal. And here we have people that aren't even part of an organized military, so it raises very serious questions.

Mr. Schneider?

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you.

And thank you for your testimony.

I want to touch a little bit—we were talking about the militias and the effectiveness of vetting. Do you have a sense of how many militias are currently active in Syria?

Mr. MELIA. I think different parts of our Government have studied this and come up with numbers that grow over time.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. But ballpark, is it—

Mr. MELIA. Scores.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Scores. So more than 40, approaching 60?

Mr. MELIA. Scores.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Of those militias, any sense of how many of them are affiliated with specific sects or religious groups versus how many are coming in from the outside or coming in with a different agenda?

Mr. MELIA. I don't know the answer to that. I do know that, as the violence goes on, we see increasingly the different communities, geographic communities, religious and ethnic communities, are feeling increasingly obliged to organize themselves and defend their communities. And that leads to the proliferation of militias and different centers of military activity, defensive and then conflictive.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Well, let me come back to that in a second. As far as looking at these scores of militias, how are we planning to evaluate who is moderate and who is not?

Mr. MELIA. That is the vetting process that I referred to that the State Department and other agencies will go into. But I would rather leave that for another venue to talk in more detail about that.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. What are examples of maybe some definitions of what makes one group moderate versus a different group?

Mr. MELIA. I guess it depends on what they say their goals are and then also how they behave. Stated goals and behavior I think would tell you what different groups' orientations are. And so that is—I guess I would leave it at that.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. One of the concerns I have—and I had a chance to meet a woman—actually had a naturalization ceremony on Friday, a brand-new American—from Syria, from the western part of

Syria. And she was relating a story of how her brother lost vision in one eye, he is now in Turkey getting medical treatment, but expressing her concern.

There was someone else who was talking about the challenges—I guess there is a significant Armenian community in Syria, and what they see and what they see as post-Assad. And you have different opinions on different sides of the outcome.

This split—and I will go to the percentage split within the population. What percent of people within the minority groups are fearful that, if the Assad regime falls, they would be targets of retaliation?

Mr. MELIA. I don't have a number answer for you, Congressman, but I can say that anticipating that there would be an instinct for some kind of vengeance against minority communities has been part of our political/diplomatic assistance engagement from the start, to warn against, urge against any kind of vengeance and retributive violence.

So, again, as I say, this has been very much a part of our conversation inside the government here and with our Syrian partners from day one, because that is a downward cycle that can only make things worse. So we have been—you are describing exactly the challenge we face.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. So one of my fears as we look at it is—and you used the word “retribution,” or “retributive justice.” I will call it, for lack of a better term, an antiquated perspective on justice. We are looking for people who have a more enlightened vision of justice, that can look at the past but focus on the future.

Do you have a sense that there are enough people within Syria, across the spectrum of different sects, that we can work with and actually try to achieve an enlightened system of justice in a new Syria?

Mr. MELIA. We know there are people who are working toward that and would like to see a system of rights-based respect for the rule of law in Syria. Some of them, interestingly, are judges in other parts of the judicial system that have defected from the Assad regime and would like to be judges and prosecutors in a better Syria.

We know that there are people who have been in opposition in human rights groups and elsewhere for a long time who also see a vision for a rights-respecting system in Syria based on international standards and norms. So we know the people are there. And those are the people that we are trying to support through our assistance efforts and our technical advisory assistance efforts.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Okay.

As we engage, as we look forward, find groups that will share our values and vision, best-case scenario, how likely do you think our prospects for success are?

Mr. MELIA. I think the success of the Syrian transition will depend mainly on the people of Syria and how they organize themselves and where they push their leaders and where their leaders take them. You know, we are playing, along with a number of other international partners, an important supporting role, but I think it is important always to keep in mind that this is not so much about us as it is about Syrians. And if we can support people to move it

in the right direction, we can do that. And that is what we are engaged in trying to do now.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. And my last questions, or line of questions. You touched on it a little bit. In the cities, in Aleppo and Damascus, where you have large, cosmopolitan areas where you have different religious groups living together and, for a long time, as you said in your opening remarks, living in peace, that is one situation. But in the villages, where, as you mentioned, now entire villages which would tend to be more of one faith or another, organizing and unifying. I had a chance to observe a battle from just across the border between Druze in a Druze village surrounded by Sunnis. And it is a real concern.

Are the villages going to be able to engage in a future Syria, or are they going to carry these grudges and we are going to see an intense or intensifying sectarian warfare after the fall of the Assad regime?

Mr. MELIA. Well, our efforts in engaging with the political opposition have been to encourage and cajole and persuade them to make their political apparatuses as inclusive and representative of Syrian diversity as possible. That will continue to be our effort. We will continue to try to push them in that direction.

And, you know, as we have seen in war-torn societies around the world, that is one of the most difficult things afterwards when conflicts have broken down along ethnic, sectarian, religious, linguistic lines, to try to patch back together diverse communities. That will be a long row to hoe for Syria.

And we will endeavor to work with them to find peace-building mechanisms, cross-community efforts at reconciliation. And right now we are focusing on trying to strengthen the political opposition that will provide a better model for a way forward for Syria, to get them to the negotiating table and to help them articulate a vision for an inclusive, democratic, rights-respecting Syria.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. If the road diverges and we end up in a failed state in Syria, what geographies do you see? Do you see it fracturing into multiple sectarian districts, or is it a complete failed state?

Mr. MELIA. Well, now you are getting into speculating about what is the worst thing that could possibly happen. So I am going to not take the bait—

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Fair enough.

Mr. MELIA [continuing]. And decline to go that way.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. I understand. Thank you for your responses.

I yield back.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Weber?

Mr. WEBER. Mr. Melia, you are the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy and Human Rights and Labor; is that right?

Mr. MELIA. That is right, sir.

Mr. WEBER. How long have you been doing that?

Mr. MELIA. 3 years.

Mr. WEBER. 3 years. Are you enjoying that job? I hate to put you on the spot, but I am going to put you on the spot.

Mr. MELIA. It is a terrific opportunity to serve my country in an important role in the government. I get to work with colleagues

across Europe and the Middle East to try to integrate human rights considerations into our broader foreign policy. It is a terrific opportunity for a guy like me.

Mr. WEBER. Well, you sound like a politician. We will watch your career and see what you run for next.

So you were there on August the 21, 2012. Your 3 years would have predated that, according to the Associated Press release, when President Obama said that if chemical weapons were used in Syria, that was a red line that would be crossed and the United States would take action. Do you recollect that?

Mr. MELIA. I do. I do.

Mr. WEBER. Okay.

Mr. MELIA. We have been reminded of that a number of times since.

Mr. WEBER. I would imagine. According to the AP article, some 20,000 people at that point, after 1½ years of struggle, had lost their lives. Does that strike you as correct, a reasonable estimate back then?

Mr. MELIA. Yeah, I can't challenge that. I don't remember the dates—

Mr. WEBER. Okay.

Mr. MELIA [continuing]. Or the numbers, but—

Mr. WEBER. Well, I will tell what you my wife tells me: I wasn't looking for a challenge, okay?

Now, to date, what is that number to date? What are we estimating, how many people have lost their lives?

Mr. MELIA. In Syria? The United Nations has reported it is above 93,000, and others say it is over 100,000.

Mr. WEBER. Would you calculate the time from August 21, 2012, to date for me, please? How long has that been, August—

Mr. MELIA. That is 11 months.

Mr. WEBER. 11 months.

Mr. MELIA. Close to 11 months.

Mr. WEBER. A little less than 11 months.

You made the comment that you wish you could promise we would be 100 percent successful in only sending weapons to the "most high-minded" in earlier testimony here today. How do you decide who is the most high-minded?

Mr. MELIA. I am going to leave the discussion for whatever expanded assistance is being provided to the Syrian opposition for others at a higher pay grade. I am trying to describe for you, Congressman, the efforts that we are making to ensure that whatever assistance we provide is accompanied by a strong emphasis on respect for the international humanitarian law and the rules of war and democratic standards for addressing human rights violations.

Mr. WEBER. So it was 20,000 people on August the 21, 2012, that had lost their lives. And now it is, what did you say, almost 90,000?

Mr. MELIA. [Nonverbal response.]

Mr. WEBER. So we are going to leave that to other people to make a decision. How is that working for those 70,000 people that have since lost their lives? It is not working, is it? We have got to have activity, action, on our part, wouldn't you say?

Mr. MELIA. Congressman, the President of the United States, two Secretaries of State, and two Secretaries of Defense have been focused on this on a daily basis. We are working to support the Syrian people to move to a post-Assad situation. This is one of the highest priorities of this government. We are doing it mindful of all of the complexities that Congressman Smith, Congressman Schneider described for us earlier.

And we have—as you noted, the President’s spokesman said a couple weeks ago that a red line on chemical-weapons use has been crossed and that we are broadening the nature of our assistance to the Syrian opposition. So we are moving in that direction.

Mr. WEBER. You said in earlier testimony here today that the regime of Assad had by far committed the most crimes against humanity. Would you give us a percentage of that? Are they committing 60 percent, 70 percent of what you are seeing on the ground, 90 percent? Would you attribute a number to that for us?

Mr. MELIA. I have seen different estimates from different agencies—humanitarian, journalists, et cetera. It is by far—it is in the 80, 90 percent or more are responsible.

Mr. WEBER. So of the 90,000 people killed who have lost their lives in this, you would say that some 80,000 are attributable to the Assad regime?

Mr. MELIA. [Nonverbal response.]

Mr. WEBER. And I realize that is a guess. Okay.

Do you think the lack of action on our part—you know, let me just—let me say it this way. You know—and you work at the State Department; that is why I was curious about your title and how long you have been there.

You know, Mark Twain said that a committee is a group of individuals who by themselves can do nothing, but collectively they can decide that nothing can be done.

And my fear is that we have a situation where we go over there—and I am not attacking you personally—but we look at what is going on and we make all these grandiose observations and these declarations that that would be a red line crossed, and then we decide that nothing can be done, and we sit back and we wait, and more and more people lose their lives.

Is that what is going on in the State Department?

Mr. MELIA. I think that is an incorrect description, to say that nothing has been done since then or nothing is being done today.

We are providing close to \$1 billion worth of assistance to Syrians, displaced persons and refugees in neighboring countries. We are providing a range of assistance—I described just some of it—in terms of political advisory assistance to the political opposition at a national level and to local councils around the country in the liberated areas. We are providing support for their efforts to rebuild and sustain the infrastructure of Syria in the liberated areas.

To say that nothing is being done I think is just not accurate.

Mr. WEBER. Well, then, it is your contention here today that, based on your earlier comments, you want to vet 100 percent—well, you can’t guarantee 100 percent, but you want to vet people who are the highest-minded. You want to get involved and you want to help, but yet, how you do that, how do you decide who is the highest-minded is above your pay grade. Whose pay grade is that?

Mr. MELIA. Well, we have a number of professionals in the government—we do this all the time on different kinds of assistance programs. And maybe I will rephrase the “high-mindedness” to say what we are looking to do is exclude violators of human rights. We are looking to make sure that our assistance, and consistent with the comments and questions from your colleagues, don’t inadvertently go to people that are going to commit human rights violations with our assistance. We are there to strengthen those people that are committed to building a democratic, rights-respecting Syria.

Mr. WEBER. Do we have a good track record in doing that?

Mr. MELIA. I think if you look around the world, I think we have often been able to help people do the right thing and strengthen institutions—

Mr. WEBER. For example, Libya? Iraq? Afghanistan?

Let me change gears a little bit on you. When the President makes a statement that the use of chemical weapons is a red line that is crossed, will be a game-changer—in fact, he said—let me quote from the article here: “The President noted that he hadn’t ordered”—I am sorry. ““That is an issue that doesn’t just concern Syria. It concerns our close allies in the region, including Israel. It concerns us,” Obama said, underscoring that the U.S. wouldn’t accept the threat of weapons of mass destruction from Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s government, rebels fighting the government, or militant groups aiding either side.” The AP quoted him, “We cannot have a situation where chemical or biological weapons are falling into the hands of the wrong people.”

The article went on to say that “the President noted that he hadn’t ordered any armed U.S. intervention yet but said, ‘We have communicated in no uncertain terms with every player in the region that that is a red line for us and there would be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons. That would change my calculations significantly,’ he said,” August 21, 2012.

And yet 70,000 more people have died. Are we losing credibility in the world?

Mr. MELIA. No. In fact, this administration has reestablished American credibility in quite a remarkable way. So I think that to say that—

Mr. WEBER. That is why Russia and China have sent back what’s-his-face? That is why they have extradited him to our country?

Mr. MELIA. How many subjects do you want to go over, Mr. Congressman?

Mr. WEBER. Well, I am simply saying that, as a supervisor in the State Department, at what point do you say to those who are that higher pay grade, we are not getting the job done and we need to change? At what point do you—how many more people have to lose their lives before that message gets communicated up the line?

Mr. MELIA. You have quoted the President. The President’s spokesman followed up on that, Ben Rhodes, in the statement he made 2 weeks ago on Thursday. When the evidence came in that the red line had been crossed, decisions had been taken, and we are moving forward.

Mr. WEBER. Well, then, Mr. Chairman, I am going to yield back, but I have a suggestion for a future hearing. Maybe we get people with a higher pay grade in here to testify and answer those questions as to what it takes to get to that process.

I yield back.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you.

Mr. Connolly?

Mr. CONNOLLY. Mr. Chairman, thank you.

And I would love to have a hearing where Members of Congress actually have to explain themselves in terms of what it is they want the United States to do. Are you willing to go to war again? Are you willing to put troops on the ground if it doesn't work out? Do you have omniscience? Do you know who is good and who is bad in Syria?

Because unless you do, I don't think you are in the position to lecture this administration about the options it has and the options it has exercised. This country is sick of war and does not want to be sucked into another one.

Mr. Melia—

Mr. MELIA. Congressman.

Mr. CONNOLLY [continuing]. Help me understand how we are supposed to—the title of this hearing is “Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle.” Do you think that is a fair description of religious minorities in Syria?

Mr. MELIA. I think that is not an unreasonable description. The religious minorities, of course, are disparate, not all of like mind or like situation. But they are in a very difficult place, not least because for the last several decades they have lived in a very repressive country where the government has squelched the ability of people to interact normally between communities, within their communities.

This country is emerging in fits and starts from decades of repressive, totalitarian rule. That means that it is hard for people to build trust and confidence across communities. It is hard for them to think about how to build a better future. But it is beginning to happen now. There are Syrians that are coming out and building these bridges, and we are trying to support that.

Mr. CONNOLLY. A little bit of history. When Hafez Assad came to power, he championed the cause and was himself a member of a particular sect not fully accepted as even Islamic by some, the Alawite sect; is that correct?

Mr. MELIA. That is right.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And in championing their cause, did he also champion the cause of other minorities in Syria at the time, or purport to?

Mr. MELIA. I will defer to the knowledgeable Congressman on the strategies and policies of Hafez al-Assad.

Mr. CONNOLLY. But you are looking at human rights; you knew what the title of this hearing was. So I am just trying to explore with you a little bit of history to put things in context.

Mr. MELIA. Right.

Mr. CONNOLLY. If you were a Christian Syrian and a minority Alawite government comes to power, initially, do you feel better or

worse about the protection of your rights as a minority within Syria at the time?

Mr. MELIA. Well, one might think that minorities would be better treated if the government was led by a person from a minority community.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Could there be rational reason to be concerned if you were a minority at that time about, in a sense, the tyranny of the majority?

Mr. MELIA. Absolutely.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Are there historical reasons, not only in Syria but in the region, to find that concern not entirely irrational?

Mr. MELIA. Absolutely. It is a common dilemma across the region and indeed worldwide that minorities feel sometimes at the mercy of majority communities that they may be alienated from, yes.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So, I like the title of this hearing, Mr. Chairman, because I think it actually accurately captures the ambiguity, the mixed feelings one might have if one were a member of a religious minority in terms of the current situation in Syria. If we had an insurgency that explicitly embraced, and within reason, it could be confirmed, diversity, protection of minority rights and the composition of which was itself very diverse and explicitly reassuring the minorities in Syria their rights would be better protected than they had been in the current brutal regime, I assume, Mr. Melia, that would make your job a little easier.

Mr. MELIA. Well, it would, and that has been our quest is to encourage the opposition, the civilian opposition to Assad to work in precisely that direction, to articulate, and they have in some significant ways, a vision that is inclusive of diversity, of religious and ethnic diversity in Syria.

The challenge is going to be to help them make that real. You know, we have encouraged them to include in the leadership of the Syrian opposition a diverse set of individuals representing the many different communities, including women. They haven't always taken our advice, but that remains part of our encouragement to them.

So we are trying to encourage them to work in precisely the direction you describe, Congressman.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Is it your impression that we have made headway in that regard so that the leadership of the opposition, the armed opposition is better sensitized and itself more diverse than it was at the time of the uprising?

Mr. MELIA. We have made some headway but not enough.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Is there evidence within Syria that minorities are responding to the call of the armed opposition and abandoning the Assad regime?

Mr. MELIA. Well, let me also emphasize that there are—there is the political opposition, which is affiliated to the armed opposition but which is distinct, and our efforts on working with Syrians to build out their vision for a political future for their country are concentrated mainly with civilian leaders, but that is the group that Ambassador Ford and Assistant Secretary Jones and Under Secretary Sherman have been engaged with over many weeks to try to encourage them to come together and create a coherent political organization that, among other things, could go to a conference in

Geneva and negotiate the future of Syria and to provide more—the beginnings of governance in Syria.

At the same time, there are these local councils that have emerged in various parts of liberated Syria with their own elections, their own dynamics. There is a different group of leaders that are emerging there. And then there is the broad swath of independent civil society, men and women and their families who are not literally part of the opposition, per se, not even—not part of the military opposition, maybe not part of the political opposition but who would like to live in a better the Syria, and that civil society is also another object of our attention, to try to help them build out, if you will, nonpartisan institutional-oriented projects for building toward a democratic Syria.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Well, I was in Egypt before the revolution and after the revolution, and many of the same arguments could have been used about Egypt during the revolution. And it is a similar dynamic where, because there was no political space allowed for a long period of time, only that which was organized underground and organized well is going to benefit from the vacuum created by the revolution. And so, there were lots of secular advocates for a civil society, for a pluralistic society, respect for minority rights who showed up at Tahrir Square and elsewhere, and they were essentially brushed aside when the political process got under way by the only organized opposition group in the country, the Muslim Brotherhood, and it is a work in progress, and the jury is out, but there are a lot of alarming signs that it is not a desirable outcome.

And we did get early behind the ouster of Mubarak. We didn't get involved militarily, but we certainly put our chips on the line very early in Egypt. And one could argue that that is an outcome that certainly is a source of concern at this moment.

This committee had a hearing just last week about the judgment with respect to NGO employees, and we have expressed concern about democratization and so forth. So, I guess my concern is that the choices here are not easy, though some would have us believe they are, and that those who want us to intervene aggressively as if it is a black and white situation—the good guys all wear white hats and the bad guys all wear black ones—will have to explain when and if, God forbid, the outcomes are not to our liking.

I do not believe that the choices in Syria are all that clear. I wish they were. I do agree, of course, that the administration regime of Bashar Assad must go, but we are going have to work very carefully to make sure that that which replaces it is a government that respects the rights of minorities, including religious minorities.

I am very grateful you had this hearing, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Mr. Connolly.

Mr. Kinzinger.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I will start with a real quick quote from Winston Churchill. He says, "You have enemies, good. That means you have stood up for something some time in your life."

I believe that in what I have seen lately in this administration, to be honest with you, we are out to make friends with everybody. I think it was mentioned earlier what is going on with the man

who stole—the 29-year-old who basically decided he was going to take it upon himself to determine U.S. foreign policy and is now being held by, I guess, the Russians, and there is this kind of carnival going on, and some people call him a hero. I tend to think he is a traitor, but that said.

We don't really know, I think, where the administration stands on a lot of issues. The administration came in, they said they wanted a great reset with Russia. Unfortunately, I don't think Russia got that information. We disarmed our ability to defend ourselves against attacks, to the chagrin of our allies, and the Russians responded by increasing their nuclear arsenal.

The gentleman that spoke before me said something about yelling—in terms of we don't know where we want to go, do we know who the enemy is? Do we know what exactly goals we need to achieve in Syria? And the answer is, no, we don't. And the reason is because for the last 2 years, I have not heard this administration sell those goals to the American people.

The leader of the free world is not the United States Congress. The leader of the free world is the President of the United States. Everywhere from 2009, where there was uprising in Iran, utter silence, crickets on the side of the administration. To the situation in Syria, where we saw Bashar al-Assad initially being challenged by people who wanted freedom from a dictatorship, we got crickets from this administration. And now we have created ourselves, we have put ourselves in a situation where the opposition does have al-Qaeda influence and the opposition does have extremist influence, and the opposition now is much more muddled because there has been not been American leadership.

And, sir—and I say this respectfully because I understand you are here as kind of the face of the administration. You are not the one necessarily making these decisions. That was made clear. But a big question I have is where has the administration been in terms of selling this to the American people? And if we have been as active as you say, then how come we, on this committee, have talked to allies that have told us they are begging for United States leadership to bring these groups together? I won't necessarily out who is saying that, but I will say allies have talked to us and said, we need American leadership in this.

So, if you care to elaborate on exactly what we are doing in bringing allies together and taking a prime role in solving this situation, I will give you a short opportunity to do that.

Mr. MELIA. Well, let me just—I am not sure I can respond to all the points you raised, Congressman.

Mr. KINZINGER. I don't expect you to, no worries.

Mr. MELIA. Let me simply say that we are engaged constantly. Secretary Kerry is on the phone and in the room with our allies in Europe and—

Mr. KINZINGER. Well, and I understand he wants to bring the Russians together and the Russians have made very clear that they have a very different interest, and if they come together and talk to us, it is probably to buy some time. It is not going to be because we are going to enlighten them with our philosophy, and they will want to have freedom in Syria. Go ahead.

Mr. MELIA. So, the United States currently in the person of Secretary Kerry is on a daily basis engaged with our friends and allies in Europe and across the Middle East on bringing them together around Syria and utilizing everybody's points of access to try to bring people to the table as well as to organize effective humanitarian and other support to Syrian opposition.

So, I don't know who you have heard from among our allies that says we are not leading this, but they certainly come to the meetings we convene, and there is a coordinated effort under way, and I think we are leading it.

Mr. KINZINGER. That is the point, and Congress—I have been in Congress for 2½ years now, and I have learned something, and that is, there are plenty of meetings but little action, and so bringing people to meetings—and again, I say this understanding you are not the one leading this, so this isn't a personal attack, but you are the face of the administration today. I think leading meetings isn't necessarily going to solve a situation, we have 90,000 people, vast majority of them innocent, that have lost their lives.

It was also said earlier, "America is sick and tired of war." I get it. America is tired. We are. As a military pilot and somebody that has been to a bunch of theaters in that capacity and still in the military, I can tell you, we would love all this war to go away, but we live in a moment in time right now where history in 50 or 100 years is going to judge what we did in this epic shift in what America and the world looks like. This is not the time to be fatigued. This is not the time for America to say, well, yeah, we get it, Iraq didn't go exactly as we had planned; Afghanistan has been a lot longer than we had planned. I feel like the administration is in a hurry to get out of Afghanistan on an artificial timeline, but that is a separate subject.

This is not the moment where America can say, we don't have the luxury to say we are a little fatigued, it is time to just move on, because in 50 or 100 years, the history books that our kids and grandkids read is going to say, what did America do during this time when there was a monumental shift? And it will either be a monumental shift toward a, I don't know, Russian, Chinese-centric world, monumental shift toward extremism, a monumental shift toward chaos, or it could be a monumental shift where America seized an opportunity and led the charge of freedom around the globe.

One of the verses of the Star Spangled Banner actually has a great line that unfortunately doesn't get said very much. It is, "Oh, conquer we must when our cause is just," and that is something that I think we ought not to forget.

One other thing I want to chat with you about. You mentioned that this administration has re-established credibility around the globe, re-established credibility around the globe. I would like to—I will give you an opportunity to elaborate on that, sir.

Mr. MELIA. I am tempted to try to cover the waterfront as you have, Congressman. There is obviously a rich discussion to be had.

Mr. KINZINGER. Yeah. Unfortunately, I control the time, though, so just if you could—if you could go on with re-establishing credibility, that is what I am curious about.

Mr. MELIA. Well, I will just give you one example, which is that this administration made the decision to become much more active in the international arenas of the United Nations, U.N. Human Rights Council, the OSCE, where we have come to play a leadership role, galvanizing these international mechanisms to articulate and enhance the norms that reflect our values, freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of religion, and there is a number of ways in which we have led the international community in these venues to step up and agree with our propositions that these fundamental international human rights are the international system's standards.

So, that happens through patient diplomacy, engaging with a wide range of countries, and we have the credibility to do that. We lead these discussions, and we often get them to a good result, not 100 percent of the time, but often, when we engage, we succeed.

Mr. KINZINGER. Unfortunately, though, sometimes if you don't back that with strength, and you know, say, as was mentioned earlier by Mr. Weber, talking about a red line, I have said before, if you are in a crowded theater and the only way to empty that crowded theater is if you yell the world "red line," don't do it because it has a very powerful meaning if you are President of the United States.

So, with that, I will yield back. I want to say I do respect your work for the country, and I appreciate you being here. Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Mr. Kinzinger.

Just a few follow-up questions, and if Mr. Connolly or any other member of the committee has any additional questions, I hope they will fire away.

Let me just ask you, if I could, Dr. Jasser will testify later today that the Assyrian International News Agency recently reported that armed rebels affiliated with the Free Syrian Army raided the Christian populated al-Duvair village and massacred all of its civilian residents, including women and children.

Are you aware of this report? Was it investigated by the State Department? And did it show the Free Syrian Army responsible? And how are those battalions? How are those troops being held to account?

Mr. MELIA. I confess that I—I don't know the details on that specific incident. I will be glad to take the question, if that is all right, and come back to you.

Mr. SMITH. I appreciate that, and get back to us as soon as you can.

Mr. MELIA. Okay.

Mr. SMITH. Dr. Eibner, who will also testify, has just returned from Syria, and he says the very existence of religious minorities in the Middle East are under threat. What is happening to Christians is genocide, and as a matter of fact, earlier they had put out a genocide alert, and I am wondering if you agree that this is a genocide.

Mr. MELIA. Our Government has not come to the use of the word "genocide" at this point. We just talk about crimes against humanity, and there is certainly some—many, many gross human rights violations. The word "genocide" is fraught with legal and moral and political meaning. I wouldn't toss it around casually. I know it is

an important part of this discussion. I just would say that we are not there yet, but I think it is certainly a worthy discussion to have.

Mr. SMITH. Well, as you know, the very Genocide Convention talks about in whole or in part. It would seem with the evaporating, as Dr. Eibner says, the very existence of religious organizations in the Middle East are under threat, this is the ultimate game changer. People are not only being slaughtered; they are leaving, and so I would hope you would take that back. And I would agree that it is—it does carry with it implications in law, but I think it is a good thing.

I remember the fight we had with Sudan in trying to get Sudan in the horrific killings in Darfur designated as a genocide, and the reluctance was appalling on the part of so many, including our friends in the European community, so—and you were there as well, so I—please take that back because I do think, you know, we need to call it for what it is, the systematic elimination of people because of their beliefs in whole or in part. If that is not happening in Syria, I don't know what is.

You mentioned also about the importance of documenting the atrocities, and I couldn't agree more. I do hope, though, that the documentation is thorough, that people on every side of the divide who are committing atrocities are held to account, but I would also say I think it is—it is—it is thoughtful, but I don't think it is—it comports with the reality that some somehow Assad or others on the Free Syrian Army side really take the idea that they will be held to account some day all that seriously. Milosevic never did. Charles Taylor did not. Karadzic and all the others who systematically slaughtered people after the fact, after the war is over, then they realized that they were in a heap of trouble, but it is important that we document. But I am wondering, how much resources do we spend on that, and are we going just for the higher ups? Because we saw with the Yugoslav court, the Sierra Leone court, the Rwandan court, very often, the very people who were the ones who pulled the trigger and mowed people down and raped with—horribly were not the ones held to account, so I am wondering how far down the line of responsibility we will be going.

Mr. MELIA. Well, there are different efforts under way through nongovernmental organizations to collect and organize the information. Our bureau is supporting one major effort in that regard, but there are others, Syrians in exile working with Syrians in the country. I don't know that I can—the documentation is inclusive and far-reaching. It is not looking at people at a certain grade or rank. It is looking at incidents and then trying to connect the dots about who might be responsible.

Mr. SMITH. But in the past, as you know, and I know you know this so well, having a background that is very rich in human rights work, the colonels and the other people who commit these atrocities are often—are often not held to account. It is the very top, and for that matter, very few at the very top.

Mr. MELIA. Well, the documentation efforts are as comprehensive as they can be. Decisions will be made later by Syrians in the first instance and then perhaps by other bodies about what the accountability might be and for who and in what—

Mr. SMITH. And would this be something that would be brought at the ICC, or is something that a special court that might be established? What is the venue?

Mr. MELIA. We haven't gotten there yet. We just got in information for whatever venue might make use of it later on.

Mr. SMITH. Several years back, I held the only and one of the most contentious hearings I have ever held on the Armenian genocide, and we had both sides, the Turks and the Armenians on both side of the divide there at the table, at the witness table, but now, fast forward to now and the fact that some 100,000 Armenians have fled, are there any special efforts being made to reach out to that community as well as others to help them with their refugee status?

Mr. MELIA. You know, that is a good question, Congressman. I don't have a concrete answer for you, but I will be glad to look into what our engagement has been with the Armenian community. I know we have met with leaders of the Armenian church and some of the members of the ethnic community, so I know it is part of our engagement. I just don't have a specific answer for you on whether we have done something in particular for that community, per se.

Mr. SMITH. Very shortly, we will be marking up a piece of legislation introduced by Congressman Frank Wolf that focuses on—it would establish a special envoy for Middle East religions. Obviously, he began to think—and I am a cosponsor of it and proud to be so—how important it is that someone walk point on these Christians who are being, as Dr. Eibner said, their very existence is under threat. Very existence.

Does the administration support the Wolf bill?

Mr. MELIA. We do not. We think that the Ambassador At Large for International Religious Freedom and staff of the International Religious Freedom office is able to address these issues, and we don't need an additional envoy at this point.

Mr. SMITH. With all due respect, I hope you will convey to your superiors how disappointing that is because it seems to me that there are religious persecutions occurring all over the world. China is probably worst among the worst. The Ambassador-at-Large, which was Wolf's bill as well, went through my committee—we did all the heavy lifting on it in this committee—is one person—it is an office, of course, but it seems to me that a special envoy with a singular focus would have, at least with the ear of the President, would have additional clout to really convey, including to the Free Syrian Army how serious we are about hands off those people who are at risk, including the Christians, so I would hope you would take that back. We had the same fight, as you know, with a Special Envoy for Sudan. And it took a long time, but we finally got it, but I hope you will take that back that we are disappointed.

Mr. Connolly.

Mr. MELIA. I will bring it back to my superiors.

Mr. SMITH. Oh, I see.

Please, Mr. Yoho.

Mr. YOHO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I will be brief. It seems like, when I was here, you answered pretty much everything that was asked over and over again, and I don't want to sound like a broken record, but what I see in the

Middle East, it seems like a broken record with the policies that we have had and the same conflicts that come up. And I read, too, that article you read about or referenced about the 15-year-old boy that was assassinated in front of his parents, and my concern is like everybody else, to give military assistance to these groups, even if we vet them, you know, there is no guarantee that somebody else will come in and take those arms away. And from your experience, what other non-intervention techniques, strategies can we come up with and how can we include more Arab nations involved in this? Because, as we all know, if Westerners intervene in an Islamic state, it tends to unify against the Westerners, so what else could we do, instead of military assistance, to help stop this?

Can we employ and engage the U.N. more, since that was one of their main missions is to help resolve world conflicts, and it doesn't seem like we are doing very well there either. And from your experience in the years you have had in foreign affairs around the world, what other strategy could we come up with? I mean, there has got to be a better way instead of sending arms over there, because we tried that in—I mean, even our own administration sending them to Mexico, we couldn't keep track of them. And I don't know how we can keep track of them in a foreign nation. So, if you could elaborate real briefly.

Mr. MELIA. What we have been engaged, since long before this uprising and conflict began, in isolating the Syrian regime through financial sanctions and political sanctions, and that has been escalated over these last 2 years through a series of measures that we have implemented so that the financial and economic assistance to the Syrian regime has been reduced to dramatically, thanks to American leadership in mobilizing the international community on this sanctions regime.

The conference that Secretary Kerry has proposed, along with Foreign Minister Lavrov to bring together the different sides in Syria is to be convened, in fact, by the United Nations—I mean, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, who would convene that conference. So although the initiative has come from U.S. and Russian foreign ministers, it is intended and is envisioned to be managed by the United Nations. So we have been mobilizing the international community in a variety of ways to provide—to try to cut off the assistance to the regime and also to facilitate a discussion.

As you well know, the Russian and Chinese Governments have not cooperated in our efforts to bring greater Security Council weight to these decisions on Syria, and we know that several countries are continuing to supply weapons to the government.

Mr. YOHO. Okay.

Mr. MELIA. And that is—that is feeding the problem. That is fuelling the problem.

Mr. YOHO. It is, and I agree, and that is the broken record I see over and over again. What other Arab countries are we bringing to the table that have a vested interest? I know Jordan is right there, and you know, we have got Turkey to the north. I mean, how else can we engage them and make a stronger presence to where the influence is coming from them to say let's calm this down, let's, you know, let's develop our economies and not worry about this other stuff and help that situation in that forum instead of, here is your

guns, here is your military aid, and it just—it just doesn't seem like that works. Who else is coming to the table?

Mr. MELIA. Well, the Arab League, which is the 22-member organization in which Syria had been a member for many years, initially was divided over this. They expelled the Syrian regime, and most of the Arab governments of the Arab League are on increasingly visibly on the side of the opposition in various ways, and so they have seen this as a problem that they would like to see resolved sooner rather than later, and they are very much a part of this multilateral engagement that Secretary Kerry is in—he was in Saudi Arabia today. He was in Bahrain recently. I mean, he is constantly engaging with our Arab friends on this question as well as with the Europeans.

Mr. YOHO. All right.

Mr. Chairman, I am going to yield back. Thank you, sir.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Connolly.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Just a few brief items. One, I think you made a statement, you have been asked about twice about the restoration of U.S. prestige and engagement around the world. I want to presume by you saying that that there was something to be restored. There was prestige to be restored. Was that your point?

Mr. MELIA. I think I am going to resist the temptation to get into an analysis of the previous administration's foreign policy. I just don't think it would be productive for today's hearing, with all due respect to the Congressman.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Fine. I will not show such restraint. I mean, it is very clear that the United States' prestige and engagement around the world were badly damaged by 8 years of the previous administration. We can hold in abeyance whether what they decided to do was good, bad, or indifferent, but what is beyond dispute is it was controversial, unwelcome in the international community and did us damage with allies and neutral nations alike and enormous repair work had to be done. That's one of the reasons why the former Secretary, Hillary Clinton, spent so much time traveling. She wanted to repair, face to face, damaged relationships in every continent on the planet. So, the idea that somehow our prestige is on the line because we haven't invaded Syria or made a clearcut decision about who to support in Syria, I find ironic, at best, so I will say it for you.

I thought the chairman made a very important point about atrocities and war crimes, and if I took what you were getting at, Mr. Smith, by documenting them now, by making sure that those perpetrating those crimes are fully aware of the fact we are doing that and that sooner or later they will be brought to justice, it seems to me, could help on lots of levels, not least of which is perhaps helping to deter some of the atrocities, though as Mr. Weber points out, 90,000. 93,000 is a horrific number for a country the size of Syria.

What are we doing to track atrocities and to advertise broadly that we are doing so, and we are naming names?

Mr. MELIA. Well, the efforts that we are supporting currently are not broadcasting names now, but I think it is increasingly well known in Syria because there are researchers and data collectors

working online and through collecting interviews from refugees and survivors of different incidents, there is a lot of—it is clear there is a lot of information being gathered. And while we don't want to endanger the ongoing effort to collect the information, the purpose of the work is precisely as you say, Congressman, to let people know that there will be some accountability and that we hope that at some point, some individuals, some others will choose the better path knowing that there will be some accountability down the road, so that is the purpose of this.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Well, you know, they say sunshine is the best disinfectant, and I think I concur with the chairman's, I think where you were taking us, which is bringing some sunshine onto this may go a long way, but at the very least, everyone needs to be on notice. We will pursue it, as will the international community.

Finally, the word "genocide," you reacted to the word "genocide," and would you say, given your responsibilities, that it would be a fair characterization to say that religious minorities, including especially the Christian community but not limited to the Christian community, in the Middle East and certainly in Syria have reason to be concerned?

Mr. MELIA. Absolutely. I think that it's very clear that religious tensions and violence have risen across the region. I think that is indisputable. Very clearly seems to be concerned.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Do—would it be fair to say that policies explicit or implicit that have been adopted in the region, especially in the post-Arab Spring governments, are encouraging religious minorities, especially Christians, to perhaps find a different home, to go somewhere else, to not be integrated into this new community, this new political community; is that a fair statement?

Mr. MELIA. You are describing the ongoing political social challenges of these countries in which new political actors, new governments are changing some of the dynamics, some of the protections that may have previously existed for minority communities. You are describing the challenges we face in the region, but more importantly, that the people of the region face, and so this is an important issue and worthy of greater discussion and examination.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I share the chairman's concern about the fate of so many minority communities in the region. I can tell you when I go—Mr. Schneider was talking about going to a naturalization ceremony. I go to as many as I can in my district, and some of them are very substantial, 700, 800 new citizens. What has struck me in the last year or so was the upsurge in the number of Christian Egyptians and Christian Syrians who are coming to the United States for citizenship because of their palatable fear of remaining back home. Now, that may be anecdotal. It may be just those families, but the numbers certainly grab one, and I just think it is really important.

I don't know that genocide is going on, though we are going to have a witness who will assert otherwise, but certainly some kind of cleansing seems to be going on in certain corners of the region, and it is very troubling, and it seems to me that the United States must speak out about that to—and without doing something ham-handed, try to offer its protection to those minority communities.

A delicate job, but it seems to me that is something incumbent upon us as we move forward, a value you would share, Mr. Melia?

Mr. MELIA. I agree with you, Congressman.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Finally, Mr. Chairman, I just want to thank Mr. Melia for being here. He and I go back way back. We worked on the Hill together in the United States Senate. He worked as a foreign policy legislative—he was my foreign policy legislative assistant to the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. I was on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff, and Tom did a great job then and is doing a great job for his country now.

Thank you, Mr. Melia, for being here.

Mr. MELIA. Thank you, Congressman.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you. Mr. Weber.

Mr. WEBER. I am okay.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. Melia, and I do—you know, there are a number of questions that you did say you would get back on, and I hope you will do it very quickly.

Mr. MELIA. We will come back to you, Congressman, as soon as we can.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you.

Mr. MELIA. Thanks.

Mr. SMITH. I would like to now welcome our second panelists. And thank you for your testimony today.

We will begin with Dr. Zuhdi Jasser, who is a member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and he is also founder and president of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy and is the author of “A Battle for the Soul of Islam: An American Muslim Patriot’s Fight to Save his Faith.” Dr. Jasser is a first-generation American Muslim whose parents fled the oppressive Baath regime in Syria. He earned his medical degree on a U.S. Navy scholarship and served 11 years in the United States Navy. Dr. Jasser has testified before the House and Senate and briefed Members of the House and Senate on many occasions in the past.

We will then hear from Nina Shea, who is currently a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, where she directs the Center for Religious Freedom. She has been an international human rights lawyer for 30 years. During that time she has worked at Freedom House and served as a member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Ms. Shea has also been appointed as a U.S. delegate to the United Nations main body for human rights by both Republican and Democratic administrations. She regularly presents testimony before Congress, travels extensively and writes on religious freedom issues in many well known news outlets.

We will then hear from Dr. John Eibner, who is the chief executive officer of Christian Solidarity International in the United States, and travels around the world to frontline situations to document gross human rights abuses. Dr. Eibner has directed human rights campaigns for CSI on behalf of persecuted Christian communities in the former Soviet Union, Egypt, Iraq, and Sudan. He has recently returned from a trip Syria. We are grateful for his insights into the conditions there. Dr. Eibner also served as CSI’s main representative at the United Nations in Geneva and has written extensively on human rights issues for a range of well-known publications.

I note parenthetically, one of my first trips to the Eastern Bloc was to Romania back in the early 1980s with CSI. We met with a number of dissidents, combatted the atrocities of the Ceausescu regime, and as a direct result of that, introduced legislation to take away MFN from Romania because of its egregious human rights abuse. CSI played a pivotal role in my and Frank Wolf's work on Romania.

We will then hear from the Reverend Majed El Shafie, who is a human rights advocate who has established two successful human rights organizations and is currently the president of One Free World International, an organization that focuses on the rights of religious minorities around the world. Reverend El Shafie advocates globally for Christians, Chinese Uyghur Muslims Baha'i, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Jews, Falun Gong, and so many others. He is frequently called upon to provide expert testimony in refugee and protection proceedings in both Canada and United States. His work has been covered in a wide range of television, radio and print media and has taken the gospel and the human rights advocacy implicit about the gospel faithfully all over the world.

Dr. Jasser, the floor is yours.

**STATEMENT OF ZUHDI JASSER, M.D., COMMISSIONER, U.S.
COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

Dr. JASSER. Thank you, Chairman Smith and subcommittee members for holding this very important hearing. I request that my written statement be submitted into the record along with a special report that our commission, USCIRF, put together called, "Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria."

Mr. SMITH. Without objection, so ordered, and all of your full statements and any additional information you would like to have affixed to it will be made a part of the record.

Dr. JASSER. Thank you. Well into its third year, the Syrian civil war has widespread implications both for religious freedom or belief in the stability of the region and beyond. The Syrian people have experienced indescribable horrors with almost 93,000 dead, 4.2 million internally displaced and 1.6 million refugees. Stories refugees related to USCIRF, our commission, remained vivid in my mind. Our staff visited there earlier this month, visited Egypt and Jordan.

A regime soldier tortured by his colleagues because he refused to shoot civilians, Sunni women and children. A mother relaying how the regime questions children about the opposition. The wrong answer can mean death to the child of the family. A high school and university student despairing about their own futures.

The war hits especially close to home for me and my family, the son of Syrian immigrants. We daily sit on edge waiting to hear from family members, as so many American Syrians do, my own in Aleppo and Damascus, wondering who is next to be tortured, disappeared or forced to choose between the regime or death.

What is the nature of this conflict? The Assad regime has created a humanitarian crisis on a scale not recently seen in the region, and it will certainly get worse, and it is on its way to heading exponentially as the vacuum, which has been Damascus, may be on the way to what the rest of Syria has experienced.

By the end of 2013, more than half of Syria's population, over 10 million people likely will need urgent humanitarian assistance. The Assad regime turned what was peaceful political protests that began in Daraa with no religious or sectarian undertones into a sectarian conflict, most of that in the last year. Despite wide defections and a paralyzed economy, remaining regime-associated individuals are supported by a foreign military aid, training, and fighters who belong to U.S. designated terrorist groups. Foreign countries the U.S. considers to be allies sponsor the opposition, many of which have very different visions of moderation and religious freedom. The regime and foreign fighters particularly fuel sectarian fires which target people of faith.

There have been 2,000 mosques and churches that have been targeted and many of which have been destroyed. The Assad family's brutal authoritarian rule—make no mistake, this started 42 years ago, created the political conditions and sectarian divisions that the regime is cashing in on today, fueling today's conflict. With political opposition banned and security forces perpetrating egregious human rights abuses, dozens of domestic and foreign opposition groups have emerged, as we have heard in testimony. Some espouse democratic reform, others religiously motivated violence, such as the U.S. designated terrorist group, Jabhat al-Nusra Front, and they are often way too disparate to work together, complicating the situation for religious freedom in the region.

The Assads selectively permitted religious freedom for the smallest religious minority groups as long as they did not politically oppose the regime. While religious minorities will certainly be more vulnerable in a post-Assad Syria should extremist groups take power, the Assad regime has targeted Sunni Muslims, as we have heard with Mr. Weber's questions about the numbers, committing against them the most egregious human rights and religious freedom violations. But certainly the religious minorities are caught in the middle. The estimated pre-conflict population in Syria was 22 million, 75 percent are Sunni Muslim, 12 percent Alawi, 10 percent Christian, 4 percent Druze, and the Yezidis, Shi'a Muslims, Ismailis and Jews are less than 1 percent each.

These religious minorities increasingly are being forced to take sides in this vacuum. The Assad regime used sectarian rhetoric to discourage Christians and other religious minorities from supporting the opposition, whom the regime refers to, along with all Sunni Muslims, as extremists and terrorists who will turn Syria into an Islamic state inhospitable to religious minorities. And in fact, the Assad regime has fomented an environment in which the radicalization of not only bringing in al-Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra caused the radicalization of many of those who started out peacefully.

The regime frightens Christians by predicting a fate like the Egyptian Coptic Christians and Iraqi Christians should the opposition succeed and thus frightening them into taking sides. Al-Qaeda-affiliated foreign terrorists and the wide deployment of Shabiha, which are the regime terror squads, makes credible this argument. The Alawite community from which the Assad's Baathist party arises, however, is not monolithic, with some elites abandoning the

regime for the opposition and denouncing the violence perpetrated against civilians.

And if we accept the regime's narrative that this is a sectarian battle, which it has turned into, then we buy into their rhetoric. Foreign Assad supporters also are entering Syrian and stoking sectarianism, including Hezbollah, Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards, and Shiite fighters from Iraq.

Alarming, Syria's sectarian conflict now appears to be spreading beyond its borders, including into Lebanon and Iraq. We now are seeing levels of sectarian violence in these surrounding countries that we hadn't seen before.

Despite being in the middle, religious minorities are not fleeing Syria in the numbers anticipated. Most of the 1.6 million refugees are Sunni Muslims. At the end of April, UNHCR reported that less than 1 percent of each minority community has registered and had been registered in Egypt and Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. While about 300,000 Christians reportedly are internally displaced, data for others, though, are difficult to find and unavailable. Christians and Alawites, who constitute less than 1 percent of registered refugees, largely on moving back to their homes or regime-held areas that they are beginning to feel now are safer from regime bombing.

I will highlight, lastly, a few of our recommendations.

The U.S. should assist the Syrian opposition coalition in any future post-Assad government to protect likely targets of sectarian or religious motivated violence, including religious minorities. Next, to offset the influence of extremist groups who establish Sharia courts in liberated areas, the U.S. Government should provide technical training and support to local councils, courts, lawyers, and judges on domestic laws and on international standards relating to human rights and religious freedom.

As nations like Saudi Arabia and Qatar vie for influence, the U.S. Government should form a coalition with partners among the Friends of Syria in support of efforts from all intra- and inter-religious tolerance and respect for religious freedom and related rights. The U.S. Government should establish a Syrian refugee resettlement program for those fleeing religious persecution.

So, in essence, Chairman Smith, sectarian violence has been both imported into Syria and ignited within by the Assad regime as a final justification to maintain its tyranny. We must seek these and other remedies now and post-Assad to address the plight of religious minorities and for all free people in Syria for whom the United States may well be their last best hope.

Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Dr. Jasser.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Jasser follows:]

Testimony

Before the

**Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and
International Organizations**

and the

Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

on

Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle.

By

Dr. M. Zuhdi Jasser

Commissioner

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

June 25, 2013

I am Dr. M. Zuhdi Jasser, a Commissioner at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Thank you for the opportunity to testify today before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations and the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa on *Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle*. This important hearing highlights the increasingly sectarian nature of the Syrian civil war, which is well into its third year, and the widespread implications both for religious freedom or belief and the regional stability. I will mention up front that the war in Syria hits especially close to home for me not only as a USCIRF commissioner but as the son of Syrian immigrants. Many of our immediate and extended family still call Syria home and remain in the crosshairs of this civil war and humanitarian disaster.

USCIRF has been monitoring closely the crisis in Syria and in April issued a special report, *Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria*. The report, USCIRF's first ever on Syria, highlighted that the Syrian people have experienced egregious violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. The international community, including the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and numerous non-governmental organizations, all agree that the Assad regime has committed gross abuses of human rights and violated its obligations under the 1949 Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I. Extrajudicial killings, rape, and torture have all been well-documented. And most recently, President Obama has confirmed that the regime has utilized chemical weapons. Some groups associated with the opposition also have committed crimes against humanity.

If the crisis continues and current conditions persist and intensify, the Syrian people will experience indescribable horrors perpetrated against them, and an entire generation of young Syrians will be lost. The international community must come together to deal with the crisis both within Syria and in neighboring countries. If it does not, the crisis will spread beyond Syria and into the region and beyond.

In my testimony, I will focus on the increasing sectarian nature of the Syrian crisis, the effects on religious minority communities and the impact on the region. I also will report on some findings based on a June 1-11, 2013 UNHCR delegation trip in which USCIRF participated that included speaking with refugees. I will conclude with some recommendations for your consideration.

The Nature of the Conflict

Since the conflict began, all religious communities in Syria have experienced religiously-motivated violence against their persons, places of worship, homes, businesses, and villages, towns and cities. For example, the London-based Syrian Network for Human Rights reported in September 2012 that the regime had already destroyed more than 500,000 buildings, including churches and mosques. The same NGO reports that 1451 mosques were targeted by the regime and that at least 348 mosques have been destroyed completely. The opposition reportedly has attacked four mosques, in each case because the Syrian army used the minaret as a sniper position.

While religious minority communities will be more vulnerable in a post-Assad Syria should extremist groups take power, it is important to note that the Assad regime overwhelmingly has targeted Sunni Muslims and committed the most egregious human rights violations against them. Additionally, women and children have been adversely affected: nearly three-quarters of all refugees who have fled to Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and beyond are women and children under the age of 17.

The regime's actions have created a humanitarian crisis that the world has not seen in recent memory. The United Nations reports that at least 93,000 individuals have died, that there are more than 1.6 million refugees, and 4.2 million Syrians have been internally displaced. It is estimated that by the end of 2013 more than half of Syria's population, or over 10 million people, will need urgent humanitarian assistance from the international community.

The Assad regime has turned a peaceful political protest with no religious or sectarian undertones into an overtly sectarian conflict. Regime-associated individuals (and to a lesser extent the opposition) that were born and bred in Syria now are supported by foreign military aid and training, and with inflows of foreign fighters by groups the United States has designated as terrorist organizations. Additionally, countries that the U.S. considers allies are supporting the warring parties. The regime and foreign fighters in particular fuel the sectarian fires of this conflict. As the sectarian nature of this conflict widens, individuals will be targeted not only because of their perceived or true allegiance to a particular political side, but simply because they follow a particular faith.

Additionally, the massive numbers of refugees fleeing Syria are destabilizing an already unstable region. Economically and politically unstable countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon have been put under severe economic pressure by hosting hundreds of thousands of Syrians.

Background

Syria's pre-conflict population of 22 million had broken down as follows: Sunni Muslims constituted Syria's largest religious community, making up roughly 75% of the population. Alawites, adherents to an offshoot of Shi'a Islam, made up about 12% of the population and various Christian denominations about 10%. Other religious communities in the country include Druze (4%); Yezidis (1%) -- whom the government categorizes as Muslims; and a very small Jewish community found in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo.

These figures reflect that Syria historically has been a religiously diverse country where its people have traditionally lived together without religious or sectarian animosities. However, some argue that sectarian divides existed under the surface due to the Assad regime favoring religious communities loyal to his government.

Prior to the conflict, the Assad family's government selectively permitted freedom of religion or belief based on its political calculations. The Assad government tolerated the country's smallest religious minority groups, including Christians, permitting them to worship freely, as long as they did not politically oppose his regime. With regard to Sunni Muslims, the Assad regime limited their religious freedom by controlling how their imams were selected, as well as

imposing other restrictions. Also limited under Hafez and Bashar Assad was the Sunni Muslim majority's ability to participate in the government and have political parties.

The Assad family's brutal authoritarian rule for over 40 years created the political conditions for the current conflict. Under both Hafez and Bashar, no political opposition was allowed and Syrian security forces perpetrated egregious human rights abuses to oppress anyone critical of the government. Due to these conditions, dozens of groups -- domestic and foreign -- have emerged in opposition to the regime. They vary widely in composition, from where they are drawn from, and their goals. Some of these groups, including the internationally-recognized Syrian Opposition Council, espouse democratic reform. Others, however, are motivated by religious ideologies espousing violence, such as the U.S.-designated terrorist organization al-Nusra Front. The varied nature of these groups affects their ability to find consensus and work together, further complicating the current and future situation for human rights and religious freedom in Syria.

Religious Minorities Caught in the Middle

By and large, religious minority communities, including Christians, Druze, Ismailis and other non-Alawite minorities, have attempted to disassociate themselves from the conflict and stay above the fray. However, circumstances increasingly are forcing them to take a position either in favor of the regime or the opposition.

From the beginning of the conflict, the Assad regime used sectarian rhetoric and military strategy as tactics to discourage Christians and other religious minorities from supporting and joining the opposition. The regime refers to the opposition and all Sunni Muslims as both extremists and terrorists who seek to turn Syria into an Islamic state which would be unwelcoming to religious minority communities. Assad and government officials stoked fears among Christians, citing the plight of Egyptian Coptic Christians and Iraqi Christians to depict what would happen to Syrian Christians should the opposition be successful. The presence of foreign terrorists affiliated with al-Qaeda and the wide deployment of Shabiha (regime terror squads) gives credibility to this argument.

The Assad regime and its most loyal supporters, predominately Alawites associated with the Ba'athist political party, appear to view opposition forces, predominately Sunni Muslims, as a threat to, not only to their ability to remain in power, but also the very existence of their religious community in Syria. However, the Alawite community is not monolithic. Some Alawite elites have abandoned the al-Assad regime for the opposition and denounced the violence perpetrated against civilians. In March 2013, a group of Alawites opposed to al-Assad and supporting a democratic alternative met in Cairo to discuss a declaration supporting a united Syria and preventing sectarian revenge attacks.

In February 2012, regime forces raided the historic Syriac Orthodox Um-al-Zennar Church in Homs. Additionally, the regime has bombed and desecrated a number of other Christian churches in Syria. Anti-regime activists have reported that the regime plants individuals within refugee camps and in key localities both within and outside Syria to stoke sectarian fears. In late December 2012, *Time Magazine* reported allegations that the regime and local government

officials provided up to \$500 per month to individuals to pose as opposition supporters and graffiti buildings or chant slogans at protests including “The Christians to Beirut...”

The opposition also has targeted religious minorities. Just a few weeks ago the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA) reported that armed rebels affiliated with the Free Syrian Army raided the Christian-populated al-Duvair village and massacred all its civilian residents, including women and children.

Also, after more than two months we still do not know who kidnapped two Orthodox Bishops, Yohanna Ibrahim and Boulos Yaziji, or why. This kidnapping reportedly occurred near the town of Kafr Dael, near Aleppo in northern Syria. Most individuals allege that they were kidnapped by opposition fighters, while some opposition groups claim regime affiliates kidnapped the Bishops to further inflame sectarian fears.

These are not the only incidents against Christians during the war. In January 2013, the NGO Human Rights Watch reported that opposition forces destroyed and looted minority religious sites in northern Syria. Human Rights Watch also reported that two churches were stormed and ransacked in the villages of Ghasaniyeh and Jdeideh, in the region of Latakia, in November and December 2012. Various reports indicate that the Christian population of the city of Homs—approximately 160,000—has almost entirely fled for safety, with reports suggesting that only 1,000 Christians remain. In late 2012, opposition forces reportedly attacked churches and occupied as safe houses an evangelical school and a home for the elderly in Homs.

A Sunni-Alawite War?

Assad’s tactic of dividing the Syrian people along Sunni-Alawite sectarian lines appears to be succeeding. To ensure continued Alawite support for the regime, the government capitalized on Alawite fears of Sunni rule by spreading rumors of Sunni atrocities against Alawites and depicting the conflict as a fight to prevent Alawite extermination. For example, in late December 2012, *Time Magazine* reported allegations that the regime and local government officials also paid individuals to pose as opposition supporters and graffiti buildings or chant slogans at protests including “...Alawites to the grave.”

In response to their growing fears, civilian Alawites formed the pro-Assad and government-supported domestic militia such as Jaysh al-Sha’bi and Shabiha. The U.S. government has designated both as terrorist organizations that have committed gross human rights violations in Sunni communities.

The government’s language and violence, including indiscriminate bombings, extrajudicial killing, and torture of the largely Sunni opposition and non-combative Sunni Muslim communities, has led Sunnis increasingly to view the conflict not as a regime’s attempts to stay in power, but rather an Alawite-led attack against Sunni Muslims.

The al-Assad regime, including its army, security forces and related militias, has targeted Sunni Muslims. In May 2013 the regime killed more than 200 civilians, including women and children in al-Bayda, a massacre described by many as the worst sectarian attack against Sunni Muslims during this conflict. On May 25, 2012, in what has become known as the Houla massacre, 108

Sunni Muslims, including 49 children, were killed in two opposition-controlled villages in the Houla region of Syria just north of Homs. In the aftermath, the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) determined that most of the victims had been “summarily executed” and “entire families were shot in their houses,” and that regime-supported *Shabiha* were the most likely perpetrators. Reportedly some victims had pro Shi’a or regime slogans carved into their foreheads. In July 2012, more than 200 Syrians, mostly Sunni Muslim civilians were killed in a village in the opposition-held Hama region. The Syrian army attacked the village with helicopters and tanks, followed by militia forces reportedly killing civilians including women and children “execution style.”

USCIRF staff members Tiffany Lynch and Sahar Chaudhry, who recently travelled to the Middle East to speak with Syrian refugees about religious freedom conditions in Syria, were told of some of the tactics the regime uses to increase sectarian divides between Sunnis and Alawites. One tactic used by the regime is to force Sunnis to proclaim that Assad is their god and they are loyal only to him - if they are unwilling to do so, torture and death are likely. A former Syrian officer told USCIRF staff that regime forces only killed Sunnis and that his senior officer continuously reiterated that they were fighting Sunni terrorists. When this officer refused to kill women and children the Army accused of being Sunni terrorists, he was arrested and tortured for months until he was released and was able to defect and travel to Jordan.

Some Syrian refugees in Jordan and Egypt expressed to USCIRF staff strong anti-Alawite sentiments, including referring to Alawites as “dogs.” They made these comments largely in the context of their perceiving Alawites as being pro-Assad and anti-Sunni Muslim, rather than their making a derogatory statement against the Alawite faith.

There have been reports of groups attacking Alawites and Shi’a Muslims. For example, a December 2012 video released by Saudi-sponsored Takfiri Wahhabi, a Sunni opposition group, shows a Shi’i mosque that was burned down and dozens of individuals congratulating each other. Also in December 2012, a suicide bomber detonated explosives in a Damascus suburb wounding 14 people and damaging one of Shi’i Islam’s holiest shrines, a mausoleum of the Prophet’s Muhammad’s granddaughter.

Outside Actors Stoking Sectarianism

A number of outside actors are entering Syria and stoking the sectarian nature of the Syrian civil war, including Hezbollah, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards, and Shi’ite fighters from Iraq – all in support of Assad.

Additionally, over the last two-plus-years the dozens of groups which constitute the opposition include a number of foreign groups motivated by religious ideologies espousing violence, such as the U.S.-designated terrorist organization al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate. Like the regime, some of the more extremist groups utilize sectarian rhetoric and iconography to perpetuate fear and sectarianism. While al-Nusra, al-Qaeda and other extremists groups and fighters undoubtedly are becoming more influential, the numbers of their fighters in Syria are in dispute. Still, the majority of fighters in Syria are Syrians.

In conversations USCIRF had with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Egypt, the refugees – all of whom were Sunni Muslims -- by and large expressed disagreement with the religiously-motivated ideologies of the extremist groups. However, they supported the end goal, removing Assad from power.

Religious Minorities in the Refugee Crisis

Despite being caught in the middle of this conflict and in a precarious situation, religious minorities in Syria are not fleeing the country in the numbers anticipated. Of the more than 1.6 million Syrian refugees in the Middle East and North Africa, the overwhelming majority are Sunni Muslims. UNHCR reports that at the end of April less than one percent of each minority community -- Christians, Alawite, Ismaili, Mandaean and Yezidi -- are registered in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon.

There are reports that upwards of 300,000 Christians are internally displaced. Unfortunately reports for other communities are not available.

The small number of minorities in the refugee population reflects two displacement trends among these communities, especially among Christians and Alawites. The first is that Christians and Alawites are moving to their home areas or to regime-held areas because these areas tend to be safe from regime bombing. This suggests that as the conflict drags on longer than some had anticipated some Christians and Alawites are joining their-co-religionists, and perhaps buying into the government's rhetoric that they are safer with the government than with the opposition. . Second, evidence suggests that if Christians and Alawites do flee the country to Lebanon or Jordan, for instance, they are not registering with the UN refugee agency.

As USCIRF staff was told while meeting with refugees, Christians and Alawites fear identifying themselves as refugees for two reasons that highlight their precarious situation trying to exist between the two warring parties. One, they do not want other refugees to perceive them as supporting the Syrian government simply because of their religious affiliation. And second, if they should go home and the Assad government remains in power, they do not want government officials to view them as disloyal to the regime by having sought safety in another country.

It is believed that a small percentage of minority refugees are trying to pass as Sunni Muslims by, among other measures, wearing the hijab, to protect them from possible backlash.

Effects on the Region

As mentioned, more than 1.6 million Syrians have fled the country, thereby creating a massive humanitarian crisis and an emerging destabilizing threat to the region. Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey now each host more than half a million Syrians. Although Egypt currently is hosting 80,000 refugees, it is expecting at least an additional 120,000 Syrian refugees by the end of the year.

These refugees are putting enormous economic and political strains on already weak governments in the region. In Jordan, 80 percent of all refugees live outside of camps and no Syrian refugee camps exist in either Lebanon or Egypt. Instead, refugees live in cities and towns, competing with Egyptians, Jordanians, and Lebanese for housing, jobs, and access to services such as health clinics and schools.

For Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt, all countries that already have pre-existing economic and political challenges, hosting and providing for the large number of refugees is creating further destabilizing conditions. Further destabilization of countries in this already troubled region will have negative implications for the region, as well as beyond, including for U.S. national security.

Alarming, Syria's sectarian conflict now appears to be spreading beyond its borders, including to Lebanon and Iraq. In the last month, Lebanon has experienced fighting between Alawite and Salafist groups. In addition, it is widely argued that the spike in sectarian violence in Iraq that has left about 1,000 people killed is a direct spillover effect from the Syrian crisis. This is the largest death toll Iraq has experienced since 2006-2007

Additionally, scarce resources and jobs in all host countries are further exacerbating local tensions, potentially causing further economic and political destabilization. The international community will disregard these tensions at its peril.

Some analysts have suggested that a significant number of Syrians and current refugees will seek entry into Europe and that European nations need to both focus on aiding refugees in current host countries and start planning for inflows to Europe.

Recommendations

In late April, USCIRF released the special report, *Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria*, in which the Commission provided recommendations grouped in four categories: 1) Promoting Protection for Religious Freedom in Syria; 2) Prioritizing Human Rights in U.S. relations with the Friends of Syria Group; 3) Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief through U.S. Programs; and 4) Addressing the Situation of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees.

While USCIRF offered 20 recommendations in the report, below are seven key recommendations:

- The U.S. should, where appropriate, assist the Syrian Opposition Coalition and any future post-Assad government to provide security to protect likely targets of sectarian or religious-motivated violence, including areas where religious or minority communities live or congregate, as neighborhoods, religious sites and places of worship;
- To offset the influence of extremist groups who are establishing Shariah courts in liberated areas, the U.S. government should provide technical training and support to local councils, courts, lawyers and judges on domestic laws and international standards relating to human rights and religious freedom;

- As other nations such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar are vying for influence to shape Syria towards their goals, the U.S. government should form a special coalition with like-minded partners among the Friends of Syria to fund and develop efforts to promote intra- and inter-religious tolerance and respect for religious freedom and related rights to ensure that a future Syria respects these fundamental freedoms;
- The U.S. government should ensure that all international cooperation with the SOC emphasizes the importance of ensuring the rights to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of opinion and expression, as well as protection of minority religious communities;
- The U.S. government should direct U.S. officials and recipients of U.S. grants to prioritize projects that promote multi-religious and multi-ethnic efforts to encourage religious tolerance and understanding, foster knowledge of and respect for universal human rights standards, and develop the political ability of religious minorities to organize themselves and convey their concerns effectively;
- The U.S. government should establish a refugee resettlement program for Syrian refugees fleeing targeted religious persecution from Syrian government forces, affiliated militias, or non-state actors opposed to the al-Assad regime; and
- In anticipation of any mass exodus of religious minorities who could be targeted for sectarian reprisal attacks in refugee camps, encourage UNHCR to make preparations for increased refugee flows of religious minorities, to develop a protection program to ensure their safety in refugee camps, and to sponsor interfaith dialogues among the various refugee communities.

Mr. SMITH. Ms. Shea.

**STATEMENT OF MS. NINA SHEA, DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, HUDSON INSTITUTE**

Ms. SHEA. Thank you, Chairman Smith.

Thank you, Chairman Smith, and I commend you and the two subcommittees for holding this critically important hearing. The persecution of religious minorities concerns America's core values but is one the United States has failed to address in Iraq to the devastation of the Christian Mandaean and Yezidi communities there, and the U.S. must not fail to recognize a similar threat that has already developed in Syria.

I will focus today, in my testimony, on Syria's Christians and the threat that they face to their continued existence in their ancient homeland. This threat applies equally to Syria's other defenseless and even small minorities, for example, the Yezidis, and I would like to enter into the record a statement of the Yezidi Human Rights Organization as well as the assessment statement of the Syriac National Council.

Though no religious community has been spared egregious suffering, Syria's ancient Christian minority has cause to believe that it confronts an existential threat. This was said by the U.N. Human Rights Council's Commission of Inquiry on Syria, and this group, in contrast to Syria's larger groups, has no defender. Primarily, ethnically Assyrian but also Armenian and Arab and numbering about 2 million, the Christians face a distinct peril so dire that their ability to survive in Syria is being seriously doubted by the church and by secular observers as well.

While in some neighborhoods they struggle to maintain defense committees, they lack militias of their own, nor do they have protective tribal structures or support from any outside power. The Christians are indeed stranded in the middle of a brutal war, where each side, regime and rebel, fires rockets into civilian areas and carry out indiscriminate attacks. The Christian churches, which were registered and permitted by the Assad regime, have not formally allied themselves with either side in the conflict, though they have been under intense pressure to do so.

However, they are not simply caught in the middle as collateral damage. They have been targets of a more focused shadow war. Christians are the targets of an ethno-religious cleansing by Islamist militants and their Sharia courts. In addition, they have lost the protection of the Assad government, making them easy prey for criminals and fighters whose affiliations are not always clear.

As Archbishop Jeanbart of Aleppo's Melkite Greek Catholic Church states, Christians are terrified by the Islamist militias and fear that in the event of their victory, they would no longer be able to practice their religion and that they would be forced to leave the country. He went on to explain, "as soon as they reach the city of Aleppo, Islamist guerrillas, almost all of them from abroad, took over the mosque. Every Friday, an imam launches their messages of hate, calling on the population to kill anyone who does not practice the religion of the Prophet Muhammad. They use the courts to

level charges of blasphemy, who is contrary to their way of thinking pays with his life.”

Unprotected, the Christians are also prime victims of kidnapers and thieves. Such threats and assaults are driving out the 2,000-year-old Christian en masse from various parts of the country. Archdeacon Youkhana of the Assyrian Church of the East, who works with Syrian refugees, wrote to me recently,

“We are witnessing another Arab country losing its Christian Assyrian minority. When it happened in Iraq, nobody believed Syria’s turn would come. Christian Assyrians are fleeing massively from threats, kidnappings, rapes and murders. Behind the daily reporting about bombs, there is an ethno-religious cleansing taking place and soon Syria can be emptied of its Christians.”

Syriac League President Habib Afram states that Christians are “systematically targeted” with kidnappings, which are used either to collect ransom or to terrorize them into leaving. The highest profile attack, of course, was the kidnapping by gunmen in April of the Greek Orthodox Archbishop Yazigi and Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Ibrahim. This sent an unmistakable signal to all Christians: None is protected.

Other clergy have been kidnapped and disappeared as well. In February, 27-year-old Father Michael Kayal of the Armenian Catholic Church in Aleppo was abducted while riding on a bus. An Islamist spotted his clerical garb. He has not been seen since. A similar fate befell a Greek Orthodox priest, Maher Mahfouz, around the same time.

Last December, Syrian Orthodox parish priest Father Fadi Haddad was kidnapped after he left his church in the town of Qatana to negotiate the release of one of his kidnapped parishioners. A week later, his mutilated corpse was found by the roadside with his eyes gouged out, his murderers unknown.

And reports are just in today that St. Anthony’s Monastery in Idlib was stormed last Sunday and killed—the Islamist rebels killed Father Francois Mourad who was defending the nuns there.

Ordinary individuals, too, have been summarily killed after being identified as Christian. An Islamic gunman stopped the bus to Aleppo and checked the background of each passenger. When the gunman noticed Yohannes’ last name was Armenian, they singled him out for a search. After finding a cross around his neck, “One of the terrorists shot point blank at a crossing—at the cross, tearing open the man’s chest.”

A woman from Hassake recounted in December to Swedish journalist Nuri Kino how her husband and son were shot in the head by Islamists, “Our only crime is being Christians,” she answers when asked if there had been a dispute.

Gabriel, an 18-year-old, fled with his family from Hassake after his father was shot for having a crucifix hanging from his car’s rearview mirror. The son told Kino, “After the funeral, the threats against our family and other Christians increased. The terrorists called us and said it was time to disappear; we had that choice, or we would be killed.”

The New York Times reported that a young Syrian refugee demonstrated how he was hung by his arms, robbed and beaten by rebels “just for being a Christian.”

Muslims, of course, are subjected to kidnapping, too, but the Wall Street Journal reported on June 11th, often, “their outcome is different” because they have armed defenders. They told the story of a 25-year-old cab driver, Hafez al-Mohammed, who said he was kidnapped and tortured for 7 hours by Sunni rebels in al-Waer in late May. He was released after Alawites threatened to retaliate by kidnapping Sunni women.

Many also pointed to criminal assaults and the government—and a government that fails to protect them. A refugee detailed to journalists: “Two men from a strong Arabic tribe decided one day to occupy our farmland just like that. When I went to the police to report, I was told there was nothing they could. The police chief was very clear that they would not act as they didn’t want the tribe to turn against the regime.”

Christians also fear the Talibanization through Sharia courts where they are given four choices, either to pay a Jizyah tax; to convert to Islam; flee; or be killed. Half of Aleppo and other places are already under these courts. And by the way, the villagers from the areas where these courts have taken over have reported to the Catholic Press that the fighters were foreign and were recruited, some told of having been recruited by being told that they were going to liberate Jerusalem.

There are reports that Christians are leaving Syria in droves. Though the details have been sparse, and this is partially due to the fact that these Christians are fearful of and avoid the refugee camps, so they are therefore not registered with the U.N. as refugees.

An Orthodox cleric concludes, it would not be good if all Christians were to leave Syria because then the church would disappear here, but those who stay risk their lives and the lives of their children.

And Mr. Chairman, my time is almost up, so I just want to say that I have a number of recommendations. I am not going to say them all here now, but I would like to point out that the situation the Christians and the other minorities should be—defenseless minorities should be accurately reflected in a special report, one that Congress could mandate or in official speeches from the bully pulpits of our highest level officials. That, so far, has not happened.

The State Department Religious Freedom Report on Syria, which was released last month, notes rather blandly that there are “Reports of harassment of Christians . . .” and that “. . . societal tolerance for Christians was dwindling. . . .” There were a few actual cases were cited by the State Department, and there is not really single—the slightest hint in this gross understatement that the threat they face is an existential one. And there have been no statements issued by the White House’s Atrocity Prevention Task Force either on this issue.

And therefore, I would support the bill that was introduced by Congressman Frank Wolf and Anna Eshoo and that you are co-sponsoring for a special envoy for religious minorities.

And I just want to conclude by saying that the refugee—there is a real danger that refugee relief is not reaching these smallest minorities because, again, they are not in the U.N. camps, and they are not being registered by the U.N. and that they are rather seeking shelter in churches and monasteries in Lebanon and Turkey and that the United States should make an effort to identify those places and to count those refugees and to give them aid and to ensure that any humanitarian aid, which is desperately needed inside Syria, also reaches their villages and neighborhoods. Thank you very much.

Mr. SMITH. Ms. Shea, thank you very much.
[The prepared statement of Ms. Shea follows.]

JOINT SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International
Organizations**

Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

**TESTIMONY OF NINA SHEA, DIRECTOR
HUDSON INSTITUTE'S CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

June 25, 2013

Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle

I commend the two Subcommittees for holding this critically important and timely hearing today. The question of the treatment of religious minorities concerns America's core values as a nation, but, in recent foreign policy, it is one that the United States has too often failed to address, with tragic results. It represents a grave human rights crisis and undermines our national security interests.

I am honored to have been invited to testify for the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom. In my testimony, I will focus on the situation of the various Christian groups in Syria, and the threat they face to their continued existence in their ancient homeland. This threat, which undoubtedly applies equally to Syria's other defenseless and even smaller minorities – such as the Yizidis (80,000) and Jews (under 100) -- about whom there is scant information, is not recognized or understood in US foreign policy. We are grateful to the Subcommittees two chairs, Rep. Christopher H. Smith and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, for giving attention to this issue.

In the Middle and Targeted with Ethno-Religious Cleansing

In Syria's conflict, now characterized as overtly sectarian, every religious and ethnic group* has experienced catastrophic loss and pain. Reportedly over the past two years of war, 93,000 combatants and civilians, of diverse religious identities, have been killed, 1.5 million have become refugees, and 4.5 million more have been internally displaced.

Though no religious community has been spared suffering, Syria's ancient Christian minority has cause to believe that they confront an "existential threat," according to a finding of the UN Human Right Council's Commission of Inquiry on Syria, last December. And this group, in contrast to Syria's Alawites, Shiites and Sunnis, has no defender.

Syria's Christians are primarily ethnically Assyrian but some are also Armenian and Arab, who together number between 2-2.5 million or 10 percent of the population, and follow some ten different faith traditions.** They face a distinct peril so dire that their ability to survive in Syria is being seriously doubted by church leaders and independent secular observers, alike. While in some neighborhoods they struggle to maintain defense committees, they lack militias of their own. Nor do they have protective tribal structures, or support from any outside power. Referencing Syria, Archbishop Elias Chacour, head of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church in Israel, remarked a few weeks ago that, while many people are facing hardship and dying in the Arab Spring, no group is suffering more than Christians.

Living largely in the Syrian governorates of Hassake, Homs, Damascus, and Aleppo, the Christians are extremely vulnerable. They are indeed stranded in the middle of a brutal war, where each side – regime and rebel -- fires rockets into civilian areas and carry out indiscriminate bloody attacks daily. The Christian churches, which were registered and permitted by the Assad regime, have not formally allied themselves with either side in the conflict and in fact Christians have largely avoided taking sides despite intense pressure to do so by both the government and the opposition.

For example, Christians have been reportedly displaced by the regime in Tal Nasri, Um Sharshoh, and the old city of Homs. They have been reportedly displaced by the Free Syrian Army in Mesmye, Daraa, Ghassaniy, Idlib, Quseir and Rable in Homs. And clashes between the two sides caused displacements that disproportionately impacted the Christian residents, though Muslims were also affected, in Ras al-Ayn, Deir el-Zor.

The Christians, however, are not simply caught in the middle, as collateral damage. They are the targets of a more focused shadow war, one that is taking place alongside the larger conflict between the Shiite-backed Baathist Assad regime and the largely Sunni rebel militias. Christians are the targets of an ethno-religious cleansing by Islamist militants and courts. In addition, they have lost the protection of the Assad government, making them easy prey for criminals and fighters, whose affiliations are not always clear.

Wherever they appear, Islamist militias have made life impossible for the Christians. Metropolitan Archbishop Jean Clement Jeanbart, of Aleppo's Melkite Greek Catholic Church, told the Rome-based Catholic outlet, *AsiaNews*, "Christians are terrified by these militias and fear that in the event of their victory they would no longer be able to practice their religion and that they would be forced to leave the country." He explained:

"As soon as they reached the city [of Aleppo], Islamist guerrillas, almost all of them from abroad, took over the mosques. Every Friday, an imam launches their messages of hate, calling on the population to kill anyone who does not practice the religion of the Prophet Muhammad. They use the courts to level charges of blasphemy. Who is contrary to their way of thinking pays with his life."

Unprotected, the Christians are also prime victims of kidnappers and thieves. In one example last February, a Syrian Orthodox dentist in Aleppo told the American Christian

Morningstar News that he finally fled into exile when the constant fear of sniper-fire and kidnapping of Christians made life too dangerous. “Some people would come to my dental office and threaten me with kidnapping,” he says. The outlet reported that “[i]n the city of Hassaké, 50 Christians were kidnapped last month [January]. Most recently, a Christian pharmacist was kidnapped earlier this month and held for a ransom of approximately 11,000 euros.”

Such threats and assaults are driving out the Christians en masse, from various parts of the country. This 2,000-year-old community -- some members of which still pray in Jesus’ Aramaic tongue and trace their churches to St. Paul, who had experienced his conversion to the faith on the road to Damascus -- is now facing extinction.

Archdeacon Emanuel Youkhana of the Assyrian Church of the East, who has been desperately working to cope with the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon and Iraq, wrote to me in February:

“We are witnessing another Arab country losing its Christian Assyrian minority. When it happened in Iraq nobody believed Syria’s turn would come. Christian Assyrians are fleeing massively from threats, kidnappings, rapes and murders. Behind the daily reporting about bombs there is an ethno-religious cleansing taking place, and soon Syria can be emptied of its Christians.”

Targeted Attacks

Syriac League President Habib Afram states that Christians are “systematically targeted” with kidnappings, which are used to collect ransom or to terrorize them into leaving. The highest profile attack was the kidnapping by gunmen in April of two church leaders, Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi and Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim, as they drove back to Aleppo from a trip to the Turkish border where they worked for the release of two kidnapped priests. They have not reappeared. The authors of the attack on these two hierarchs are unknown but it sent an unmistakable signal to all Christians: none is protected.

Other clergy have been kidnapped and disappeared as well. In a report confirmed by the Vatican news agency *Fides*, on February 9, 2013, 27-year-old Father Michael Kayal of the Armenian Catholic Church in Aleppo was abducted by Islamic extremist rebels as he was travelling on a bus on his way to Rome. He was pulled off when Islamist gangs spotted his clerical garb. He has not been seen since. A similar fate befell the Greek Orthodox Maher Mahfouz around the same time.

The American Christian news service *Compass Direct News* reported in December 2012 of the torture and subsequent murder of a Syrian Orthodox parish priest Father Fadi Haddad. He left his church in the town of Qatana to negotiate the release of one of his kidnapped parishioners, but the priest never returned. A week later, Fr. Haddad’s mutilated corpse was found by the roadside, with his eyes gouged out. His murderers are unknown.

Ordinary individuals, too, have been summarily killed after being identified as Christian.

For example, *Fides* reported that a man named Yohannes was killed by an Islamist gunman who stopped the bus he was taking on the way to Aleppo and checked the background of each passenger. When the gunman noticed Yohannes' last name was Armenian, they singled him out for a search. After finding a cross around his neck, "One of the terrorists shot point blank at the cross tearing open the man's chest."

Such reports are not uncommon. A woman from Hassake recounted in December to Swedish journalist Nuri Kino how her husband and son were shot in the head by Islamists. "Our only crime is being Christians," she answers when asked if there had been a dispute.

On February 13, 2013, the *New York Times* reported on Syrian refugee interviews it collected in Turkey:

"One mother told of the abduction of a neighbor's child, held for ransom by rebel fighters in her hometown of Al-Hasakah, which prompted her family to seek safety for their three young sons across the border in Turkey. A young man demonstrated how he was hung by his arms, robbed and beaten by rebels, 'just for being a Christian.'"

Muslims are subject to kidnapping too but the *Wall Street Journal* reported on June 11, 2013, often "their outcome is different" because they have armed defenders. It told the story of a 25-year-old cabdriver Hafez al Mohammed who said he was kidnapped and tortured for seven hours by Sunni rebels in Al Waer in late May. He was released after Alawites threatened to retaliate by kidnapping Sunni women.

Swedish Assyrian journalist Nuri Kino, who travels to the region to interview Christian refugees from Syria recounts the story of Gabriel Staifo Malke, an 18-year-old who fled with his family from Hassake after his father was shot on July 17, 2012, for having a crucifix hanging from his car's rear view mirror: The son told him:

"In Hassake, terrorists had warned Christians that they would be killed if they didn't leave town; there was no room left for us. Most of the others hid their religion, didn't show openly that they were non-Muslims. But not Dad. After the funeral the threats against our family and other Christians increased. The terrorists called us and said that it was time to disappear; we had that choice, or we would be killed."

Many pointed to criminal assaults and a government that fails to protect them. A refugee detailed to Kino: "Two men from a strong Arabic tribe decided one day to occupy our farmland, just like that. When I went to the police to report, I was told there was nothing they could do. The police chief was very clear that they would not act, as they didn't want the tribe to turn against the regime."

A father told Kino: "We're not poor, we didn't run from poverty. We ran from fear. I have to think about my twelve-year-old daughter. She's easy prey for kidnapers. Three children of our friends were kidnapped. In two cases they paid enormous ransoms to get the children back, and in one case they paid but got the child back dead."

Chaldean Catholic Bishop Antoine Audo, the Jesuit head of Syria's Caritas charity, according to a March 21, 2013, AFP interview, said between 20,000-30,000 out of 160,000 Christians had fled the city of Aleppo, and two priests were abducted and held each for a ransom of 15 million Syrian pounds (\$150,000).

In an English-language video, Fr. Fadi al-Hamzi relates that his uncle was recently murdered: "They killed him because he is Christian, they refuse to have any Christians in Syria. . . ." When asked if he was worried if Christians would be massacred if jihadists overthrew the government, the priest said, "Yes, yes, this will be . . . they don't want us here."

Sharia Courts

Christians, as well as others, also have been targeted with summary executions, forcible conversions to Islam and expulsions from their homes as a result of actions taken by the courts of the "Caliphate of Iraq and the Levant", the name the al Nusra Brigade and other Islamist rebels use in reference to the Syrian territory under their control. The Christians find it impossible to survive under such rule.

According to *AsiaNews*, currently some 30 recognizable militias with some 100,000 fighters operate in Syria, and of these, only a handful belong to the Free Syrian Army, the main interlocutor of the international community. The others are linked to Al-Qaeda or belong to other Islamist or political movements.

Sources told *AsiaNews*, "the purpose of these groups is not only the liberation of Syria from Assad, but also the spread by force of radical Islam throughout the Middle East and the conquest of Jerusalem." Based on interviews with local church leaders, this Catholic press reported that many fighters do not speak Arabic, come from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Indonesia, and, according to some villagers near Aleppo, several, particularly younger, fighters were recruited by being told that they were going to "liberate Jerusalem." These extremists have wasted no time in establishing sharia courts.

Half of Aleppo, which has been under rebel control since last July, in the towns of al-Bab and Idlib and other villages under the control of Islamist groups, sharia has been enforced for the past year. Islamic justice is administered by well-organized courts, the Hayaa al-Sharia, or the Sharia Authority. Controlled by such militias as al Nusra, the Tawhid Brigade, and the home-grown Ahrar al-Sham, these courts, according to a *Washington Post* report, pass sentences "daily and indiscriminately" against Christians and anyone else who fails to conform to Wahhabi Islam. All women are required to cover up with the *abaya*, a black full length gown.

It was in Aleppo, that al Nusra executed a 14-year-old Muslim boy for insulting the Muslim prophet. A coffee street vendor, the boy, Mohammed Qatta, was asked to give a cup free to a customer and he reportedly refused, saying, "Even if [Prophet] Mohammed comes back to life, I won't." Rebels driving by overheard the exchange and apprehended the boy.

What happened next was reported by the *Washington Post*, on June 10, 2013:

"The rebels, according to ABC News' reconstruction of the Syrian groups' reports, appear to have whipped Qatta. When they brought him back to where they'd taken him, his head was wrapped by a shirt.

"The rebels waited for a crowd to gather; Qatta's parents were among them. Speaking in classical Arabic, they announced that Qatta had committed blasphemy and that anyone else who dared insult the Prophet Mohammed would share his fate. Then, the shirt still wrapped around the boy's head, the rebels shot him in the mouth and neck."

Sharia justice, as much as anything, has terrorized Syria's Christians, among others. In April, al Nusra's pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda reinforced their fears of a coming Talibanization of Syria.

After a recent prayer walk in Jordan for the two kidnapped bishops, Syrian Christian refugees told Dutch blogger Martin Janssen that their village of 30 Christian families had a first hand taste of the rebels' new sharia courts. One of Janssen's accounts, as translated by renowned Australian linguist, writer and Anglican priest, the Rev. Mark Durie, follows:

"Jamil [an elderly man] lived in a village near Idlib where 30 Christian families had always lived peacefully alongside some 200 Sunni families. That changed dramatically in the summer of 2012. One Friday trucks appeared in the village with heavily armed and bearded strangers who did not know anyone in the village. They began to drive through the village with a loud speaker broadcasting the message that their village was now part of an Islamic emirate and Muslim women were henceforth to dress in accordance with the provisions of the Islamic Shariah. Christians were given four choices. They could convert to Islam and renounce their 'idolatry.' If they refused they were allowed to remain on condition that they pay the jizya. This is a special tax that non-Muslims under Islamic law must pay for 'protection.' For Christians who refused there remained two choices: they could leave behind all their property or they would be slain. The word that was used for the latter in Arabic (dhabaha) refers to the ritual slaughter of sacrificial animals."

The man told Janssen that his and a number of other families began to pay the jizya but, after the amount demanded kept increasing over several months, the Christians decided to flee, leaving behind their farms and property. Some who could not pay or escape were forced to convert to Islam.

An Orthodox cleric, independently corroborating such accounts, described conditions in the towns taken by rebel forces in the Christian valley outside Homs: “They are ruled by newly-appeared emirs, and those Christians who were not able to flee these places are obligated to pay jizya—a special tax that allows them to remain Christians, and Christian women must hide their faces like Moslem women. If they don’t pay the jizya they are simply killed.”

Christian Refugees

Official information and media reports about the Christians’ fate has been sparse, and Christian refugees have been all but invisible since they are fearful of and avoid Muslim-dominated refugee camps. A report earlier this year by journalist Nuri Kino sheds valuable light on the atrocities visited upon the Christians inside Syria, and their ordeals in attempting to escape, relying as they must on exploitative human-trafficking networks that have sprung up. Entitled “Between the Barbed Wire,” the report resulted from a trip sponsored by a Swedish charity, the Syriac Orthodox Youth Organization, to assess the needs of refugees. It is based on over a hundred interviews this past Christmas with Christian refugees in Turkey and Lebanon.

The refugees and the Lebanese bishops whom Kino and his team interviewed relate that Christians are leaving in a torrent. Once they cross into Lebanon, guided by Middle Eastern versions of “coyotes” through a harrowing series of checkpoints guarded by various sides in the conflict, they mostly seek out the local Christian communities for help. A clearly overwhelmed Archbishop George Saliba, on Mount Lebanon, commented: “I want to help as many as I can, but it is not sustainable. We have hundreds of Syrian refugees who arrive every week. I don’t know what to do.”

Elsewhere in Lebanon, St. Gabriel’s monastery opened its 75 unheated rooms last winter to over a hundred refugees. In another Lebanese Christian town, the Syrian Catholic patriarch Ignatius Ephrem Josef III converted a school building into a shelter for the hundreds of refugees there then and the others constantly arriving. The patriarch described the situation as the “great exodus taking place in silence.” He also said he houses Christians who fled several years ago from Iraq. All of the Christian towns visited for the report were scrambling to keep up with the influx of Syrian Christians. Church leaders were grateful for the beds, washing machines, heaters, and medicine brought by the Swedish visitors.

Some of the Syrians told Kino they plan to stay in Lebanon until Syria “calms down” and they can return to their homes. Many others said going back is “unthinkable” and were making plans to try to get to Europe either on valid visas or by paying smugglers the going rate of \$20,000. They are largely small-business owners and skilled professionals — an engineer and his family, a jeweler and his, a hairdresser, a medical student, etc. Many hoped to be smuggled to Sweden and Germany, where they can receive some state subsidies until they find work. The town of Sodertalje seems to be a popular destination, with 35 new Christian families arriving from Syria each week. Kino, himself a citizen of

Sodertalje, relates that there are already many Syrian Christians living there, and Arabic is becoming as common as Swedish.

Some refugees were young men who deserted from the Syrian military. Others of the refugees were panic-stricken, pointing to some horrifying triggering event that forced them out — a kidnapping of a relative, a murder, or a robbery. They feel targeted for being Christian, which means that militants and criminals can assault them with impunity.

There is no complete data on the number of refugees. Most of the Christians, like the other groups, resettle internally when they leave their homes. How many Christians have fled to other countries is not known and escapees continue to come across the border each day. Only a fraction of the Christians in exile registers as refugees. They bypass the refugee camps where rebels press young men into their militias and many fear being victimized again as vulnerable minorities. Most of the Christians seek help from local churches and monasteries in Turkey and Lebanon.

It is, nonetheless apparent that hundreds of thousands of Christians have already fled. Entire neighborhoods and villages around the Wadi al-Nasara—the Valley of Christians, an enclave of some 30 villages west of the city of Homs, are emptying out. *Fides* reported in March 2012: “The Christian areas of Homs ... are at the center of the crossfire between army and rebels. In Homs there are about 1,000 Christians. A year ago, before the start of the fighting, there were in town, on the whole, 160,000 faithful and four Bishops of various denominations.”

On June 17, 2013, a *Fox News* blog cited a local priest’s report stating that two Christian villages near Homs with a combined population of nearly 1,000, now lie abandoned after everybody fled. Regarding a third Christian village abandoned a year ago, he stated that people recently returned to find their homes either destroyed or taken over by others. “The situation is disastrous,” he wrote.

When the jihadist rebel units take control of a town, like Ras al-Ayn, in Hassake province, it loses its Christian population over night, church sources further report. Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan Eustathius Matta Roham, of Jazirah and Euphrates, confirms that churches and all Christian symbols have been destroyed in Ras al-Ayn. [*Photographs of some of Syria’s destroyed that are provided to us by the European Syriac Union are submitted separately for the record.*]

Most information about these massacres and about the violence perpetrated by the regime comes from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), an organization set up by the Syrian opposition in London. Virtually all international news accounts republish the Observatory’s reporting. According to *AsiaNews*: “For nearly two years, SOHR has reported only acts of violence by the regime against the rebels. Mainstream international media like the BBC, al Jazeera and al Arabiya, have relied on it as their sole source of news.” I note, SOHR is now reporting on some jihadist rebel atrocities.

Some in the opposition openly deny that Christians are victimized for their faith. George Sabra, the Socialist Party leader who is president of the National Syrian Coalition, who comes from a Christian background and is often pointed to by Western supporters as evidence that Christians are represented in the Coalition, insisted to Kino on May 21, 2013 that there is no evidence Syrian Christians are under pressure because of their religion. Sabra was reported to have stated:

"Maybe there are some small events here and there," he said, "but we have not the right to exaggerate with these events to tell it as a fact, as a truth, of the life in Syria. Really it is not true."

Sabra's views are contradicted by the church leaders inside Syria and Christian refugees pouring out of it. We are only beginning to understand the perils Syria's Christians face.

The *New York Times* reported: "Hannibal, a 36-year-old pathologist who fled Syria when his life was threatened by rebels, was not smiling as he talked: 'As Christians in the Middle East, we live in misery and suffer many difficulties. We want nothing more than to emigrate to other places.'"

An Orthodox cleric concludes: "It would not be good if all Christians were to leave Syria, because then the Church would disappear here. But those who stay risk their lives and the lives of their children. Therefore the Church finds itself in a very complicated position. Prayer is our only support. After all, everything is in God's hands."

Regional Religious Cleansing

The devastation of Iraq's Christian community over the past ten years is foremost on the mind of those who analyze the situation of Syria's churches now. In 2003 in Iraq, Christians were some four percent of the population; they are now thought to be 1.5 percent, numbering no more than half a million.

After Saddam Hussein's secular Baathist dictatorship in Iraq was overthrown, up to two-thirds of that country's Christians was driven out in less than a decade. The Iraqi Christians, also with ancient roots in the area, have fled intense violence specifically targeting them by Islamist extremists and common criminals, both of whom operate with impunity. Authorities in Baghdad have been slow to protect Christians, and have watched passively as local authorities have deprived Christian of essential services – including those provided through American reconstruction efforts. In Iraq, too, kidnapers have found the unprotected Christians easy prey.

Like in Syria, no Iraqi group, Muslim or non-Muslim, has been spared massive and appalling religiously motivated violence. However, as the US Commission on International Religious Freedom found, the one-two punch of extremism, combined with deep governmental discrimination and indifference, now threatens the "very existence" of Iraq's ancient Christian churches.

The refugee branches of both the UN and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, after extensive research, separately concluded that these minorities are being “obliterated” (the bishops’ term) because of specifically targeted violence. Wijdan Michael, Iraq’s human rights minister and herself a Christian, concluded it is an attempt “to empty Iraq of Christians.”

Egypt’s ancient Coptic community, about 8-10 million, is the largest Christian and the largest non-Muslim religious minority in the Middle East, and it too is now under threat. They now suffer ruthless attacks by Salafi Muslims, as well as by the military troops, who have gone unpunished for abusing or using excessive force against Christians. Since the Arab Spring ushered in a Muslim Brotherhood government, anti-Christian persecution has increased.

Just a few weeks ago, another attack occurred when an angry mob laid siege to Cairo’s cathedral during the funeral of four Copts who were themselves indiscriminately murdered by another angry mob aroused by a rumor of blasphemy. Repeatedly Pres. Morsi has failed to protect them against violent Salafis. Tens, maybe hundreds, of thousands of Copts have fled the country since the beginning of 2011. Egyptian political scholar, who is my colleague at Hudson’s Center for Religious Freedom, Samuel Tadros, writes: “The Copts can only wonder today whether, after 2,000 years, the time has come for them to pack their belongings and leave, as Egypt looks less hospitable to them than ever.”

Syria’s Christian community constitutes the largest church in the Middle East after Egypt’s Copts. Only one other country in the region has over a million Christians: Lebanon, with about 1.5 million. The other countries of the region count the numbers of Christian populations in the thousands. Except for Saudi Arabia, which has no indigenous church at all left within its borders. Much more is at stake in the fate of Syria’s Christians than the future of the Church itself.

The driving out of Christians from the region, after a two millennia presence there, should be a concern not only to Christians. Lebanese Christian scholar Habib Malik makes the point that Christian minorities have traditionally served as “moderators” and “mediators” in the Middle East. They have often stressed Western-style education, individual freedoms, and women’s rights. A case in point is his own father, Charles Malik, a major drafter of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Malik insists:

”The existence of settled, stable, prosperous, and reasonably free and secure native Christian communities in the Middle East has served in many instances as a factor encouraging Islamic openness and moderation, creating an environment of pluralism that fosters acknowledgment of the different other.”

Without Christians, the Middle East, a cultural cross-roads historically, will become even more radicalized and more estranged from the West. This will be a political problem for the West. As a Chaldean Catholic bishop lamented about his own country, “This is very

sad and very dangerous for the church, for Iraq and even for Muslim people, because it means the end of an old experience of living together.”

American Policy

As my co-authors Paul Marshall and Lela Gilbert and I found in our recent book *Persecuted*, unfortunately, our policy officials often miss or misunderstand the perilous circumstances of Christians and other religious minorities as they make foreign policy.

For example, while there were 90,000 American and NATO troops on the ground in Afghanistan, that country’s last remaining church, in Kabul, was razed in 2010 after its 99-year lease was cancelled. The U.S. State Department knew of this, and even reported on it in September 2011, but no U.S. official took any measure to stop or reverse it. The destruction of Afghanistan’s last church did not draw the international protest that accompanied the Taliban’s destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhist statues in 2001, but it is equally emblematic and even more consequential, depriving a religious community of its only house of worship. While the American people supported President Karzai’s government, financially and militarily, Afghanistan joined the infamous company of hardline Saudi Arabia as a country that will not tolerate any churches. America’s own diplomats and contract workers in Afghanistan must now hide their worship services.

Other examples occurred in Iraq in 2005–08, under the noses of the US occupying power and over 100,000 American troops. During those years, Christians, Mandaean, and Yezidis experienced horrific persecution that ultimately led to a nationwide “religious cleansing” campaign against non-Muslims.

American foreign policy officials appeared to believe that it would be “special pleading” to do anything to help when 20,000 Christians were being violently driven from Baghdad’s Dora neighborhood by Islamist death squads in 2006. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told me that the administration could not protect them from being murdered and kidnapped because it did not want American policy to be seen as “sectarian.” But the U.S. was already deeply vested in sectarian considerations, though not for Christians. At the same time, the U.S. was engaged in a military surge against Islamic Sunni extremists. The U.S. was engaged in intensive efforts to ensure that non-violent Sunnis gained positions in the Iraqi government, which, thanks to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, was run largely by Shias, whom the administration had helped politically strengthen and unify. The problem is that U.S. Iraq policy had many sectarian considerations – except when it came to Christians and other non-Muslims, whom, because they were peaceful, it consistently overlooked.

These attacks on religious freedom in Afghanistan and Iraq took place under two different administrations, one Democratic and one Republican. They happened without a significant policy response from the United States.

Recommendations

The Center for Religious Freedom concludes that Syrian Christians are both trapped in a vise between the two sides of a brutal conflict, and specifically targeted in an ethno-religious cleansing campaign. The US administration is failing to address, or even notice, the particular situation of Syria's Christians. Without delay, it should adopt the following policies:

First, it is critical for the US to officially take notice that, while every group in Syria is suffering, the Christian minorities are currently particularly persecuted; as well as being caught in the middle of a terrible war, they are also the objects of a concerted religious cleansing campaign. The State Department's *Religious Freedom Report* on Syria, issued last month, notes blandly that: "Reports of harassment of Christians, mostly in the context of ongoing political unrest, increased during the year." Also that: "Some Christians reported societal tolerance for Christians was dwindling and this was a major factor for the surge of emigration of Syrian Christians." Few actual cases were cited by the State Department and there's not the slightest hint in this gross understatement that the threat they face is an existential one.

The situation of Christians and other minorities should be accurately reflected in a special report, one that Congress could mandate, and/or in official speeches, from the bully pulpits of our highest level officials. The fact that this cleansing is being missed is reason for the Congress to pass the resolution of Reps. Frank Wolf and Anna Eshoo mandating a special envoy for religious minorities in the Middle East.

Second, US humanitarian aid must also be directed to the institutions that are caring for the Christian refugees. Generous American humanitarian aid – over \$800 million -- for Syrian refugees typically bypasses Christians since they are generally afraid to go to the camps, where they risk further persecution and attack. Churches and monasteries in Lebanon and Turkey are being overwhelmed with Christians escaping violence in Syria and these and similar such facilities need to be identified and provided assistance.

Furthermore, humanitarian aid – and, in the future, reconstruction and development aid – is desperately needed inside Syria. The majority of Syrian Christians, and others, who have been driven from their homes are displaced within Syria and are in urgent need of assistance. The US should provide such aid and must ensure that –unlike in Iraq -- such aid actually reaches the Christians and other smaller minority communities and is not distributed solely through Assad government agencies, or existing opposition groups; aid to them should be distributed through Syrian Christian organizations, including, but not limited to, the churches.

Third, while many Christians wish to continue living in Syria and we hope that the Christian community will remain in their homeland, the US must begin to accept large numbers of the Christian refugees who are not be able or willing to return to Syria and who cannot securely stay in the region. Because as a group, the Christian minority has not been linked to terror by either side, they do not require extensive background checks

and their cases can be expedited. The *LA Times* recently reported that the Obama administration is considering resettling refugees who have fled Syria as part of an international effort that could bring thousands of the 1.5 million or more Syrian refugees currently in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East to the United States. According to a State Department official cited in the *Times*, the Department is "ready to consider the idea," upon the receipt of a formal request from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees. Washington usually accepts about half the refugees that the U.N. agency proposes for resettlement, the paper reports. However, because many Christians avoid registering and entering UN camps for fear of being victimized, they are not likely to appear in the High Commissioner's request. Hence, the administration should ensure that unregistered Christian refugees are included in any resettlement plan, and that their cases are not delayed by unnecessary terrorist background checks.

Fourth, as the administration distributes support, weapons and other aid, lethal and non-lethal, to the members of the Free Syrian Army, it must ensure that none goes, directly or indirectly, to those responsible for religious persecution and cleansing against any group.

In addition, the US should ensure that policing assistance needed for the defense of Christian neighborhoods and villages is provided.

Fifth, the US should make a peaceful settlement in Syria among its highest foreign policy priorities. It should do so in consultations that include appropriate and fair representation of Christian and other small minorities, including through their civic leaders. Charges must be taken seriously by the Syriac National Council of Syria, a coalition of Syrian Christians groups and leaders, that the Syrian National Coalition, with which the West regularly consults, is dominated by Islamist groups and does not include authentic Christian voices. (I have submitted the statement of the Syriac National Council's of Syria's statement separately for the record.)

Any settlement must ensure religious pluralism and freedom through a democratic constitution guaranteeing religious freedom, freedom of expression, personal security, and full recognition of the rights of all minorities, as well as other political and civil rights, including the right to equality under the law for women. Guarantees must be provided against Syria's Talibanization through the forcible imposition of sharia by sharia courts, Islamist security forces, or religious police.

In conclusion, I wish to draw attention to the appeal of Aleppo's Metropolitan Archbishop Jean-Clément Jeanbart, of the Melkite Greek-Catholic Church:

"One suffers for lack of goods, fuel, electricity, sometimes for food. But what makes us suffer most is to see that the future gets darker and darker. The future for us Christians and for all Syrians can only be based on full citizenship, freedom, dignity and respect for others. Otherwise what will happen to us? "

* According to a U.S. government source, the population of Syria is approximately 22.5 million. Sunni Muslims constitute 74 percent of the population and includes Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Chechens, and some Turkomans. Other Muslim groups, including Alawis, Ismailis, and Shia, together, constitute 13 percent. Druze account for 3 percent of the population. Various Christian groups constitute 10 percent. There is also a tiny Jewish population, numbering between 20-100 people. Yezidis number about 80,000.

** Most Christians belong to the Orthodox churches, the Uniate churches (which recognize Roman Catholic papal authority), the independent Nestorian Church and several Protestant churches.

Mr. SMITH. Dr. Eibner.

STATEMENT OF JOHN EIBNER, PH.D., CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY INTERNATIONAL, USA

Mr. EIBNER. Thank you, Chairman Smith, for your determined leadership in the defense of human rights over many years, as you mentioned, going way back to the 1980s when you travelled with CSI as a young Member.

And I would like to thank members here for their constructive questioning and contribution to the debate.

I would also ask, Mr. Chairman, for my written submission to be—and appendants to be placed in the record.

I returned only last night from Syria, and while there, I traveled with local church workers from the tranquil Mediterranean town of Tartus through the Valley of Christians to war torn homes, stopping at cloisters and villages along the way.

Today's hearing, Mr. Chairman, is indeed timely and important. The war in Syria has been catastrophic for all the people of Syria and carries within it the seeds of genocide. This ever-expanding war, a war that the vast Sunni Muslim world increasingly views as a jihad, threatens to set the entire Middle East ablaze.

For 2 years, our Government has pursued a revolutionary policy of violent regime change and has done so in the name of the Syrian people. I would like to use this opportunity to fill in some of the gaps in Washington's regime change narrative.

Syria is a multi-religious country. Religious minorities, mainly Alawites and Christians, constitute roughly 30 percent of the population, with Sunni Muslims in the majority. All communities have suffered greatly, but the war's seeds of genocide have the greatest potential to cleanse the country of its religious minorities.

For over four decades, the secular-minded al-Assad dictatorship has provided a kind of protection for the religious minorities in a country where they have long experienced severe persecution under Sunni rule. The Assad regime has provided more space for non-Sunni minorities than can be found in any other Arab Sunni majority state in the region.

Those who would overthrow this dictatorship have a responsibility to provide a credible alternative system of protection, one in which the vulnerable minority communities have confidence. Whenever I went in Syria, I heard from Christians about the considerable religious freedom that is guaranteed by their government, freedom to worship, freedom to provide Christian education, freedom to engage with broader society through social services, freedom to proclaim their faith through public processions on religious holidays, some of which are public holidays, and freedom from the obligation to conform to discriminatory Sharia norms.

I was repeatedly asked by displaced Christians, why is America at war against us? Why is the United States destroying infrastructure of our country? Why is Washington handing us over to Islamic extremists? They also wanted me to know that the genuine pro-democracy movement of the so-called Arab Spring had been tragically overtaken long ago by a parallel Sunni supremacist movement, one that is dominated by jihadis, many with links to al-Qaeda.

Dismay was also expressed about Washington's outsourcing of much of its Syria policy to regional Sunni allies, in particular, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, all of which have grave democratic deficits and deny religious freedom and minority rights to their own citizens.

It seems that America's intervention in the war is aimed primarily at detaching Syria from Shiite Iran and transforming it into a Sunni Islamic state. The goal appears to be to construct an anti-Iranian-Sunni access, stretching from Turkey in the north to the Gulf states in the south.

During my visit I spoke with Christians who were personally terrorized during the Arab Spring days of 2011 by mobs pouring out of Sunni mosques, shouting, "Alawites to the tomb," "Christians to Beirut," and other genocidal slogans. Witnesses provided accounts of murder, including ritual beheadings and religious cleansing of their neighborhoods, and the desecration of churches.

Kidnappings, as we have heard, are on the increase, with Alawites and Christians as the principal victims. One Christian church worker told me that four Alawite cousins of a friend were kidnapped and beheaded; a nun told me that she personally knows a Christian girl who was abducted by the terrorists and is now mentally disturbed on account of the abuse. The most widely known kidnapping case is that of the Syriac and Greek Orthodox archbishops of Aleppo.

Such acts of terror are not senseless; they send a clear message to the religious minorities: Leave the country now. The conflict in Syria today, Mr. Chairman, cannot be portrayed simply in simple terms as one of the evil Assad's dictatorship, a war against a peaceful, democracy-loving people of Syria. The war has indeed taken on an ugly sectarian character. Nowadays the religious minorities and secular-minded Sunnis that could constitute possibly a majority of the Syrian people tend to look to the Assad regime for protection, while those striving to reinstate Sunni superiority or supremacy within an Islamic state are the driving force of the anti-Assad insurrection on the ground.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, if our foreign policy establishment is determined to bring an end to the Syrian war and to strengthen guarantees for the religious rights of minorities, the United States will desist from financing and arming forces of Sunni supremacism. Our Government will rein in its Sunni Islamist allies and will cooperate with Russia, as President Reagan did to end the cold war, to create conditions for successful peace talks. We need to hear from our President and from all American statesmen, irrespective of party, who wish to escalate the war effort about their ultimate war goals and their plan for preventing genocide and guaranteeing minority rights for the Syrian people.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you. Thank you very much for your testimony. [The prepared statement of Mr. Eibner follows:]

Dr. John Eibner
CEO, Christian Solidarity International (CSI-USA)
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
June 25, 2013



Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle

Thank you, Chairman Smith, Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, and ranking members Bass and Deutch, for holding this important and timely hearing on the endangered Religious Minorities in Syria. Under your leadership, your subcommittees have given hope, over many years, to many people throughout the world whose fundamental human rights are denied, especially victims who cannot count on winning favor with our government or the human rights institutions of the United Nations system.

I have drafted this written statement in Syria. Last week, I traveled on a CSI human rights fact-finding and humanitarian aid mission from the Mediterranean city of Tartus to Homs, stopping on the way at various predominantly Christian villages in the so-called “Valley of the Christians.” My gratitude runs deep for the opportunity to share with the Committee the insights I gained from many observations and encounters with wonderfully resilient and courageous Syrians, mainly displaced Christians and church workers.

This hearing, Mr. Chairman, is indeed important and timely. The very existence of the religious minorities of the Middle East is under threat. In every state in the region, the Christian population is in relative decline, or cannot decline further because their existence is forbidden by law, as is the case with one of our country’s principal allies in the region, Saudi Arabia.

The world has been warned about the threat. On the eve of the so-called “Arab Spring,” campaigns of violence against Christians in Iraq and Egypt prompted public protests from former Lebanese President Amine Gemayel. “Massacres are taking place,” Gemayel declared, “for no reason and without any justification against Christians... What is happening to Christians is a genocide.”

Within days, the then President of France, Nicholas Sarkozy used similarly strong language, stating: “We cannot accept and thereby facilitate what looks more and more like a particularly perverse program of cleansing in the Middle East - religious cleansing.”

Pope Benedict the XVI also frequently drew attention of the grim plight of the Middle East’s Christians. CSI responded to the crisis by issuing its own Genocide Alert for the region.

As the “Arab Spring” of 2011 turned dark, cold and forbidding, the existential crisis of the Christians and other religious minorities deepened – nowhere more dramatically than in Syria. Ambassador Peter Galbraith, was among the first to highlight the threat when he forecast at the Holocaust Museum in Washington that the world’s next genocide would occur in Syria, with the minority Alawite community as the principal victim.

The future of Syria’s endangered religious minorities is not a peripheral issue, but is central to

the resolution of the current crisis. Roughly 30% of the population belongs to a religious minority community. By far the largest of these minority communities are the Alawites (12%) and the Christians (10%). There are also small groups of Shiites, Druze, and Ismailis. Sunni Muslims make up the majority. In the Middle East, identity is still determined primarily by the religious community into which one has been born.

The outcome of the increasingly sectarian and internationalized war that now ravages much of the land could lead either to the eradication of religious minorities or to greater guarantees for their long-term security. Syria has reached a historic fork in the road. One path continues along the route of religious pluralism, based on a rough parity between historic religions and equal citizenship. The other way leads to the erosion of religious minorities through a reversion to Sunni supremacism based on discriminatory Shariah principles, including obligatory jihad in both its violent and non-violent manifestations.

My research, which includes not only last week's fact-finding trip to Syria, but also recent visits to neighboring Lebanon and Iraq, have led to the following findings:

The late Hafez al-Assad who established Syria's ruling dynasty with a military coup in 1970 was from the minority Alawite community. The Alawites were regarded for centuries by the dominant Sunni religious establishment as non-believing infidels – indeed apostates from Islam - who were entirely outside the law and merited death. The Alawite Assads therefore strove to animate Syria with a secular political culture – a culture that provided considerable space in society for all historic religious communities.

For over four decades, the Syrian state has been unsurpassed in the Arab/Muslim Middle East as a protector of the basic religious freedom of the Sunni majority and of the non-Sunni minority religious communities. The historic Christian churches have long experienced not only freedom of worship, but also broad freedom to meet social needs outside the bounds of the Christian community and to demonstrate their faith publicly.

Syria's delicate religious balance was disturbed in 1982 when the Sunni supremacist Muslim Brotherhood made a bid for political power. This Islamist uprising was ruthlessly crushed by the Syrian state. A similar Islamist uprising took place in the spring of 2011. The opportunity arose when the "Arab Spring" pro-democracy movement reared its head in Syrian towns and cities. The peaceful pro-democracy movement was brutally suppressed by the Syrian government. But at the same time, a parallel non-democratic, Sunni supremacist movement, with strong ideological and lethal support from Saudi Arabia and other Islamist forces, soon made itself felt throughout the country.

I have received testimony from Christians from Homs, Qusair, and Latakia who witnessed during the "Arab Spring" mobs emerging from Sunni mosques following what were presumably incendiary sermons, to make unruly public demonstrations in favor of the overthrow of the "infidel" Syrian government, and its replacement with a state with Islamic legitimacy. Among the genocidal slogans heard during such demonstration were "Alawites to the tomb, Christians to Beirut," and "We will drink the blood of the Alawites." These mobs were not pro-democracy freedom fighters.

By the summer of 2011, violence became the dominant characteristic of the Sunni supremacist movement, as it came under the domination of Syrian and foreign jihadists.

Alawites and Christians were targeted as the armed jihadist and their followers began to put their genocidal slogans into practice.

Victims recounted to me details of the religious cleansing of Christian neighborhoods in Homs and Qasair by armed jihadis who threatened them with death and the destruction of their property if they did not leave their homes. A Christian woman told me that before she fled Homs at the beginning of 2012, she had seen the beheading in broad daylight of an Alawite girl who was pulled off a public minibus by armed jihadis. Churches in Homs and Qusair have not only damaged as a result of the exchange of mortars by the Syrian army and rebel forces, but have also been desecrated after falling under the control of the armed opposition.

From credible media reports and interviews with Syrians on the frontline of the conflict, we see that the targeted kidnapping of non-Sunnis is now a regular feature of the Syrian tragedy. I spoke with a Christian who reported that the four cousins of a close Alawite friend were kidnapped and beheaded. A nun told me that she knows a Christian girl who was kidnapped by armed insurgents and is now mentally deranged from the abuse. The victims of kidnapping include priests and prelates. The kidnapping of Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim and Greek Orthodox Archbishop Boutros Yazigi while attempting to negotiate the release of two abducted priests is widely interpreted within the Syrian Christian community as a message from the Muslim supremacist opposition to leave the country.

The Syrian war has so far resulted in the deaths of over 100,000 people, the internal displacement of 4 million, and the displacement abroad of 1.5 million. This human rights calamity has affected members of all of Syria's religious communities. Numerically, most of the victims belong to the majority Sunni community. For the Sunnis the conflict has become a war between Sunni supremacists and Sunnis who prefer the Syrian state's enforcement of tolerance and a pluralism based on enlightenment ideas of religious equality. But for the religious minorities the current conflict has become one of survival. The Syrian conflict shares many characteristics with the violent sectarian strife in Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. The consequence of the Islamist reign of terror in post-Saddam Iraq was the flight abroad of half of Iraq's Christians and the internal displacement of most of those who stayed inside the country.

The outcome for religious minorities in Syria could turn out to be worse than in Iraq. But all hope is not lost. Massive violence, some of it targeted, did indeed drive many Christians and Alawites from their homes in places like Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Qusair and al-Raqqa when the armed Islamist opposition gained local footholds and went to battle against the Syrian government. I have seen for myself extensive destruction in Homs. But I also found government-controlled Tartus Province on the Mediterranean coast to be a generally tranquil place where people go about their private business and practice their religious faith without oppressive interference from the side of the state. The bustling seaside city of Tartus exudes a spirit of defiant optimism. Over 400,000 displaced Syrians have sought refuge there. They include Christians and Alawites, but the overwhelming majority of the displaced are Sunnis.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Tartus Province has largely, though not entirely escaped the horrors of the civil war. This is mainly because the armed Islamist insurgency has been unable to gain a foothold there. (An effort by radical Islamists to do just that in May 2013 in the mainly Sunni village of Baniyas, met with rapid suppression by the governing

authorities, accompanied by a revenge massacre of Sunni civilians by government-linked militiamen.)

The burning question is: Do American policy-makers place high priority on securing the fundamental rights of all the peoples of Syria, and guaranteeing the existence of the endangered religious minorities in Syria? If so, the United States' *de facto* war against the Syrian state - a state which has for decades been a prime protector of religious minorities - would end forthwith. Our government would use its leverage with its principle Sunni Islamist allies in the "coalition of the willing" for affecting regime change - namely Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar - to end their support for armed Muslim supremacist forces in Syria, and encourage them to turn their attention to providing Syrian-standard respect for religious freedom to their own citizens.

The green light given to our Sunni regional allies to militarily destabilize Syria does not lend credibility to the human rights rhetoric that surrounds the United States' regime change policy. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey may be beloved by America's military and economic interests, but all have grave democracy deficits and cannot serve as models for religious pluralism and freedom religious. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are Sunni absolute monarchies. All religious minorities are banned in the former. Nearly one hundred years ago the Christian minorities were virtually eradicated in Turkey by means of genocide. Successive Turkish governments, including the current government of Prime Minister Recep Erdogan, have taken patriotic pride in genocide denial.

If, on the other hand, the ultimate goal of Washington's Syria policy is to deny Shiite Iran - an aspiring nuclear power - a regional ally, and to replace the secular-minded government in Damascus with a majoritarian Sunni Islamist regime, as we saw to be the case in Egypt and Tunisia, then our President has an obligation to explain to the American and Syrian people how the United States intends to guarantee the survival and freedom of Syria's religious minorities.

If Washington is prepared to act in good faith, an early sign will be the United States' readiness to abandon archaic cold-war politics and to cooperate with Russia in encouraging an end to Syria's sectarian civil war. We have already seen in Boston the tragic consequence of failure to cooperate adequately with Russia in combating the security threats posed by radical Sunni Islamism.

If the United States had Syria's religious minorities and secularly-oriented Sunnis on its side, it is likely that regime change would have happened already in 2011. But without the presentation of a credible plan from our President, the Christians, Alawites, and other Syrian religious minorities have good reason to fear that their existence will be sacrificed on the altar of higher geopolitical interests.

May our President, like the great persecutor of the first generation of Christians, Saul of Tarsus, have a profound Damascus Road experience - one that produces an end to policies the effect of which is to promote the persecution of the religious minorities in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Thank you, Chairman Smith and Chairman Ros-Lehtinen.

Mr. SMITH. Reverend El Shafie.

STATEMENT OF REV. MAJED EL SHAFIE, FOUNDER, ONE FREE WORLD INTERNATIONAL

Rev. EL SHAFIE. Thank you, Mr. Chair, for having me. It is a pleasure and honor to be here with all of you. And thank you, members of the committee and all the staffers; I know that the staffers as well work so hard.

My name Reverend Majed El Shafie. I am founder and president of One Free World, an international human rights organization based in Toronto, Canada. I am not just the head of my organization, and I am not just a man wearing a suit behind my desk. I used to be a prisoner back home in Egypt, and I was tortured by the Egyptian regime. And until now I have my scars on my body, which I consider it a badge of honor.

The war in Syria and what we are seeing right now in Syria is started by March 2011, and I believe it started as a genuine uprising. I believe that the people was tired from the regime. I believe that they want end of the corruption, the emergency law, and reform of the Constitution. Sadly, as we are seeing today—and we hear this expression many times, the “Arab Spring”—what we see today that the Arab Spring been hijacked to become an Arab deadly winter on the minority.

We all are against a dictatorship, make no mistake. We are all against a dictatorship, from Mubarak to Assad, to Ghadafi, to Ali Abdullah Saleh; whoever they are, we are all against a dictatorship. The problem when you take a dictatorship out, you create a political vacuum. Who is using this political vacuum is the extremist. And, sadly, the worst thing that you can have a democracy and freedom between day and night in the Middle East, this is will not happen.

The truth and the reality there is no—there will not be a democracy in the Middle East or true freedom without two major elements. Number one is the separation between the religion and the state. Number two is the freedom of religion of the individuals, the freedom to believe or not to believe.

We see here that the attacks that this Arab Spring or what so-called Arab Spring led to attacks on the Christian minorities in Syria; not just the Christians, you can found as well attacks on the Druze and the Shias. These attacks been led in areas like the Roman Catholic Church, our Lady of Salvation in July 5, 2012; the deadly bomb blast in August 28, 2012, in Druze and Christian areas; the arrest of many of the Christians and other minorities and torturing them on the hand of the rebels; and, of course, we know about the kidnap of the Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi and the Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim, which we don't know until now where they are and what has happened to them.

Not only that, because when the extremist comes, they don't only—they are not only danger on the minority, they are also danger on the moderate Muslims. And we see right now even incidents such as the 14-years-old Mohammad Qatta in the city of Aleppo, which was in a coffee shop. And he made a statement about the Prophet Muhammed. The rebels kidnapped him, they tortured him,

and they killed him in public. He was a Muslim boy; he was not a Christian boy.

We see as well the attacks on the Shias, like in June—in the early June, dozen of Shiite Muslims in the town of Hatlah, where massacre been reported, that the rebels have looted and destroyed religious sites after taking control of the—of this areas or this region.

The worst dilemma that facing Islam today as a faith is not rising of the extremist, but is the silence of the moderate Muslims. The worst dilemma that facing Islam as a faith today is not the rising of the extremists, but the silence of the moderate Muslims.

We see here that United States decided that they will provide weapon to the opposition, the rebels. It seems to me that United States will not learn from its mistakes yet. We provided weapon to Osama bin Laden during the mujahideen war in Afghanistan, and it turned against us. We provide weapon to Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war, and turn against us. We provide weapons to Libya, to the rebels in Libya, and 2 months later they killed our American Ambassador.

Providing a weapon to the rebels in Syria will be a mistake that the innocent people will pay the price for it, especially the minorities. Nevertheless, if the United States none-less goes ahead with the military aid, it must demand accountability from the rebels, include the return of the weapons after the conflict, and deny any further aid if weapons or ammunitions are used against minorities, civilians, or American allies, such as Israel.

Let us make it clear: United States in—pledged \$500 million in humanitarian aid. If the rebels refuse to respect the minority rights, woman rights, stop child abuse, we have to stop or at least to connect our humanitarian aid with improvement of human rights in these countries. I believe that the American people is tired of using their tax money to support terrorist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere.

In the end, and my closing remark, I believe that our world today is unfair place, is unjust place not because the people is doing evil, but because the people who remain silent about it. History will not remember the words of our enemy, but will remember the silence of our friends. The persecuted Christians and the minorities is dying, but they still smile. They are in very deep, dark night, but they still have the candle of hope. Believe me when I tell you, they can kill the dreamer, but no one can kill the dream.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. God bless.

[The prepared statement of Rev. El Shafie follows:]



One Free World International
El Shafie Ministries

**RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN SYRIA:
CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE**

A STATEMENT BY

REV. MAJED EL SHAFIE
PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER OF
ONE FREE WORLD INTERNATIONAL

BEFORE THE JOINT SUBCOMMITTEE OF

THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH, AND HUMAN RIGHTS
CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH (R-NJ), CHAIRMAN

AND

THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA
ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN (R-FL), CHAIRMAN

OF THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

JUNE 25, 2013

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I. Introduction

My name is Reverend Majed El Shafie, and I am the President and Founder of One Free World International (OFWI), an international human rights organization based out of Toronto, Canada. I would like to thank the members of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights for the opportunity to present our comments and recommendations on this most urgent issue of the plight facing religious minorities in Syria.

For those who are not familiar with my background, I was born in Egypt to a prominent Muslim family of judges and lawyers. After I converted to Christianity and began advocating equal rights for Egyptian Christians, I was detained and severely tortured by Egyptian authorities. Sentenced to death, I fled Egypt by way of Israel and settled in Canada in 2002, establishing OFWI to share a message of freedom, hope, and tolerance for religious differences and to promote human rights in this area through advocacy and public education.

Our mission and calling at OFWI is to stand up for religious minorities and individuals around the world who are being persecuted because of their personal beliefs. We advocate on behalf of all those who are persecuted for their beliefs, regardless of religion or creed. Among other things, our work involves direct interventions with foreign governments on behalf of minorities in general or on individual cases, educating our own politicians and citizens about religious freedom and abuses of human rights in this area, humanitarian aid, and rescue missions. Our goal in putting forward the present recommendations is to encourage the United States to live up to its responsibility as a world leader and take a principled stand for justice and freedom for religious minorities in Syria who are voiceless, vulnerable, and desperate.

Today Syria is at a cross-roads. Tens of thousands of Syrians have been killed in the conflict and the United States is in a position to help determine whether this country goes down the path of freedom and respect for human rights or a path of extremism, oppression, and continued violence. To its credit, the United States has repeatedly and publicly reiterated its commitment to promote and defend freedom of religion in this region and around the world. While such public endorsements of religious freedom are an important first step, the U.S. must back its words up with action in protecting Syrian Christians and other minorities both now, while the conflict rages, and in preparing its strategy for a post-conflict Syria.

II. Religious Freedom

1. Freedom of Religion as a Human Right and in International Law

Freedom of religion is a fundamental, universal right that speaks to the very core of what it means to be human. The basic freedom to believe in (or not believe in) and to practice the religion of one's choice (or equally to refrain from any religious practice) forms the very basis of human dignity and is a pre-requisite for true equality under the law. After all, our ability to observe such beliefs about who we are in this universe is unique to humans among the living

beings on this planet. As a result, the right to religious freedom is recognized both by U.S. and international law as foundational and intrinsic to any truly free society, and without freedom of religion, experience has shown there can be no democracy, peace, or security.

Recognition of the rights of individuals and nations, minorities and majorities, is basic. Ultimately everyone is in some respect or at some time or place a member of a minority and one need only consider one's own position but for a moment in order to see the importance of respecting the rights of others and the universal nature of this principle, known in the Christian tradition as the Golden Rule, or "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you".

Human beings have learned this painful lesson the hard way over thousands of years of violations of this foundational principle. In fact, the United States of America was built to a large extent on the hopes of those who fled Europe centuries ago in order to be able to worship freely, and much of the unique character of the American culture, way of life, and legal institutions is based on this very foundation. Over the last century, communities and humanity as a whole have joined together to seek ways to promote respect for these painful lessons by enshrining this principle in constitutions and international documents such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR).

The UDHR, while not in itself binding, is considered by international law experts to reflect customary international law which in turn is binding on states. The UDHR states in Article 18 that,

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.¹

However, it is not necessary to rely on general principles of morality or international law or even less on mere declarations of principle or aspiration in order to establish the rights of religious minorities. A large part of the world community has expressly agreed to submit to binding international law in this matter by signing or acceding to the ICCPR, including Syria which acceded to this covenant on April 21, 1969. Article 18 states that,

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. ...²

¹ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, GA Res. 217(III), UN GAOR, 3d Sess., Supp. No. 13, UN Doc. A/810 (1948).

² *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 19 December 1966, 999 UNTS 171, online: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights <<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/ccpr.htm>> accessed 12 November 2011.

2. Religious Freedom and Syria

a. The al-Assad Regime

Syria is a predominately Muslim country, but unlike most other Muslim countries reports of persecution of religious minorities have been relatively rare in the past. The country's totalitarian secular, socialist regime under President Bashar al-Assad has been concerned primarily with safeguarding its own status through preventing social discord by emphasizing the secular nature of the state. In this the regime has been ruthless and torture has been a common and routine technique to suppress dissent. Moreover, despite its own secular posture, it has been the primary supporter of such extremist Islamist factions as Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran and its hostile position against Israel has been a continuously destabilizing factor in the region.

Nevertheless, under President Bashar al-Assad's secular Ba'athist party, Syrian minorities shared a relatively equal existence with their Muslim compatriots. Despite the regime's many other failings – and these have been great – its minorities experienced a measure of prosperity in business, education, and society. In fact, the country shares many similarities, both in terms of its history and the implications for religious minorities of current events, with that of its former ideological partner, Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

The constitution gives Islam a certain prominence, for example by requiring that the president be a Muslim and recognizing Islamic jurisprudence as a principal source of legislation. In practice President Assad's Alawite sect of Shi'a Islam has enjoyed some minor benefits as compared to other groups including the Sunni Muslim majority (at 74% of the population) and other Shi'a Muslims. Otherwise, however, the regime has been concerned with religious activity primarily to the limited extent that it affects public order and the status quo. On a certain level, this makes the regime an "equal opportunity oppressor".

The Syrian constitution also includes a provision affirming freedom of religion. A historic Christian community, whose presence in Syria stretches back to the earliest years and even months of Christianity and pre-dates the existence of Islam by hundreds of years, accounts for less than 10% of the population today. Christians belong primarily to various Orthodox and Catholic confessions but also include Armenians, Protestants, and others. Syria has been the home to some of the oldest Christian communities in the world without interruption since the birth of Christianity very close to 2,000 years ago. Other minorities represented are the Alawites and other Shi'a Muslims, Druze, Yezidis, and others, including a few isolated and elderly Jews. Under Assad's Ba'athist regime, these traditional communities have been able to worship within tight restrictions and, while Alawites form the core of support for the Assad regime, Christians, Sunnis and others could be found in prominent positions in government and business life.

On the other hand, any religious activity that was deemed to be subversive or threaten the regime or its secular nature or to threaten public order, including relations between religious communities, has long been of concern to authorities and pursued without mercy. As a result, the government has strictly monitored and controlled all religious activity. For example, in September 2010 it shut down eight house-churches in the north of the country in what at the time

was believed to be the beginning of a crackdown on unauthorized Christian activity. The brunt of the regime's brutality, however, has been focused on those belonging to groups determined to be extreme Islamist groups. It has walked a fine line to keep religious extremism from threatening its position by tightly controlling Muslim religious activities while simultaneously appeasing Muslim extremists in ways that often impacted on minorities.

Proselytizing was not technically illegal, but was actively discouraged and effectively forbidden as it was treated by the regime as a threat to relations among religious groups. Religion was kept strictly out of public life nor were one's religious beliefs safe to discuss with friends or neighbours for fear of being charged with proselytizing and seeing a lengthy sentence in the harsh Syrian prisons.

Christians were not actively pursued by the regime for their religious beliefs or activities apart from claims of proselytizing. However, despite its claims to protect the Christian minority the government did not necessarily come to the aid of Christians when they were in danger. On the other hand, when any excuse could be found to implicate Christians, the government would not spare any measures in pursuing them. For example, in October of 2004 two Christians were brutally murdered by a Muslim gang and a police officer after one of them requested that a rowdy group of Muslims leave his café when the Muslims' card-game turned violent. When the authorities refused to act on these crimes, some of the dead men's friends took matters into their own hands destroying some property belonging to some of those responsible. While the authorities took no action on the murders, this property damage resulted in the rapid arrest of 42 Christians, most of whom were unrelated to the events. As a result of such attitudes and treatment whereby victims and other innocents are pursued as criminals, an ancient Christian community has long lived with the constant knowledge that they must tread very carefully for their own protection and that of their loved ones and community.

Converts, on the other hand, have faced a much different situation. As in other Muslim countries, while conversion to Islam is recognized, conversion from Islam to any other religion is illegal under Shariah law. While religious identity was effectively kept out of public life, laws governing personal status are determined by a person's religious identity. This left converts vulnerable because conversion is not recognized by the Syrian government and so they continued to be dealt with under Islamic laws concerning personal status. From a practical perspective, conversions were not directly punished by the government but by the local community or the convert's family who would find ways to implement the Shariah death penalty against the apostate while the government turned a blind eye. The government itself, however, also readily used pretexts or excuses to penalize converts on other manufactured grounds. In the meantime, Syrian society is very close-knit, as in other Muslim and Middle Eastern countries, and converts were not able to relocate and typically had no choice but to leave the country.

b. The Current Status of Syrian Minorities

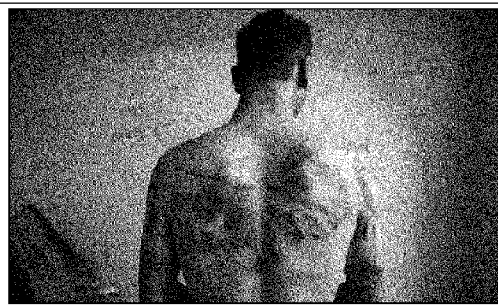
The current conflict in Syria has altered the situation for religious minorities in that country radically. They are no longer accepted, even if begrudgingly, as an established part of a secular regime. Religious minorities – and particularly the historic Christian community – are now caught between a desperate regime, vicious at the best of times, which is fighting for its life

against rebels riding a wave of successful popular uprisings against dictatorial regimes elsewhere in the Middle East that were largely driven by Muslim extremists.

While the situation in Syria is different in some ways from the regime changes that have taken place in the region, there are many similarities. The circumstances facing Syrian minorities are eerily familiar and yet somehow more tragic as extremists have strengthened and consolidated their positions in the region cutting off options for minorities. The Syrian conflict began with peaceful protests against the regime's authoritarian rule. The Syrian uprising began mostly as a genuine popular uprising driven primarily by moderate and liberal Syrians fed up with the Assad regime's tactics and encouraged by the apparent success of the other uprisings in the region. However, as the regime responded to peaceful protests with heavy-handed measures, extremist groups saw an opportunity and rapidly became more and more involved and the conflict rapidly escalated.

The Assad regime is trying to maintain its hold on power against disparate rebel forces that are openly and violently, and in many places successfully, defying the regime. As a result, it has no available capacity to protect its minorities. There have also been reports that the regime itself has intentionally attacked minorities, although it is difficult to determine whether these attacks were actually perpetrated by the regime or by rebels. Moreover, where minorities have been caught in attacks committed by the regime, this has generally been as a result of the regime's broader crackdown against the uprising and not because of any specific targeting of minorities. In either case, however, attacks by the regime against any of its unarmed civilians are despicable crimes and we do not condone any such action; but if we are to find a lasting and equitable solution for the minorities, we must begin by being honest and accurate in characterizing the threats facing them.

In the meantime, we tend to refer to "the rebels" in shorthand, as if they were a cohesive group with compatible motivations, goals, and methods. However, nothing can be further from the truth. Rather than a somewhat homogeneous rebel force, the rebels in Syria are composed of several groups with radically different and often competing agendas, particularly with regard to



A Syrian man shows marks of torture inflicted after rebels took control of a Christian area of Aleppo. (Photo: James Lawler Duggan/AFP/Getty Images)

their future plans for Syrian society, including its minorities. The moderate, liberal factions are simply tired of Assad's authoritarian methods and wish to implement a liberal, secular democracy. The Muslim extremist and terrorist elements, on the other hand, have very specific goals for turning Syria into an Islamist haven governed by Shariah law which will provide a base from which to attack western interests in the region and beyond.

These Islamist factions, which include Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist, and al-Qaeda-linked groups and are rapidly overtaking the undisciplined and poorly organized rebels as they have in other countries, operate on the assumption that minorities, particularly Alawites and Christians, support the regime. As a result, minorities are targeted both for their politics and as minorities who must either convert or be killed. Many towns captured by rebels have been cleared of their Christian populations either with the Christians fleeing the on-coming Islamists or being forced out by threats that they must convert, flee, or be killed. Demands for the payment of *jizya*, a form of protection money imposed on non-Muslims, have been seen as well.

Reports about rebel activities in towns they come to control are conflicting and it is very difficult to confirm what actually happened in individual incidents such as the captures in the spring of 2012 of Qusayr and sections of Homs, as well as multiple Christian towns and villages. Some reports indicate that rebels have made ultimatums to Christians and other minorities, in some cases to convert to Islam and in others to join the fight against the regime, or be killed, causing minorities to flee. Reports from rebel groups, on the other hand, deny any ultimatums and claim that the minorities fled voluntarily. What is clear is that Christians are fleeing the approaching rebels amid reports of Shariah courts, threats, kidnappings, rapes, and extortion.

Numerous car-bomb attacks have been placed as if with a strategic plan in place to specifically target minorities. These include bombs in minority neighbourhoods, like the mostly Christian and Druze neighbourhood of Jaramana, or placed close to churches or Christian charities. Some have caused only property damage while others have apparently been carefully and fatally timed to coincide with worshippers going to services or mourners participating in a funeral procession.

In April 2013 two bishops representing the Greek Orthodox and Syriac Orthodox churches were kidnapped by rebel forces in Aleppo. Their condition and whereabouts are still unknown, but the targeting of priests and other religious leaders is a familiar tactic of Islamist groups that sends a chilling message to minorities: if their religious leaders are not safe, no one is safe. Many who might have stayed are persuaded to flee, leaving the diminished minority even more vulnerable.

In early June 2013, a 14-year-old young Muslim boy named Mohammad Qatta serving coffee at a coffee shop in Aleppo was killed in an impromptu public execution by rebel gunmen for an off-handed comment referencing the Muslim prophet Mohammed. While details of the event are unclear and this is not strictly speaking an attack on minorities, it is a graphic example of the priorities of large segments of the rebel forces and an indication of the direction the country is headed if extremist forces succeed in consolidating their control of those forces. Incidents such as this add to the fears of minorities and increase their motivation to leave for safer areas controlled by the regime or to flee the country entirely.

Also in early June 2013, dozens of Shiite Muslims in the town of Hatlah were massacred by rebels claiming to be targeting pro-government militia members. Increasingly throughout the conflict there have been reports that rebels have looted and destroyed religious sites after taking control of minority areas, including a Shia place of worship and two churches in Idlib and Latakia governorates respectively as documented by Human Rights Watch.³

³ "Syria: Attacks on Religious Sites Raise Tensions", 23 January 2013, online: Human Rights Watch <<http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/01/23/syria-attacks-religious-sites-raise-tensions>>, accessed 21 June 2013.

c. What Does the Future Hold?

As already mentioned, the situation in Syria bears many similarities to Iraq, with the exception that the recent regime change in that country was brought about by outside forces led by the American military invasion and occupation. Nevertheless, the experience of religious minorities in Iraq is instructive of what can be expected to take place in Syria. In the violence that followed the fall of Hussein's regime, Iraqi Christians were targeted by both Sunni and Shi'a militias. Christians fled as refugees in numbers vastly disproportionate to their share of the population, leaving their ancient community reduced to about half of its pre-invasion size in a period of less than ten years. While some have returned, they face an uncertain future in a country where their own government has no ability or interest to protect them or other minorities from Shi'a and Sunni groups engaged in on-going sectarian violence and religious extremists. But whether they have returned, found a new home in another country, or are still waiting for a resolution to their situation, the human toll of the experiences Iraqi minorities have endured is incalculable.

The irony in this tragedy is that many Iraqi Christians who have returned have only done so because they simply had no other option. Syria, where they had sought refuge from the Iraqi crisis, is no longer safe for them and now they are being forced to flee yet again. If Syria, which was a safe haven for Christians in the region, is no longer safe, where will Syrian Christians flee? Yet in some areas they are afraid to leave their homes to go to work or buy food.

We, along with others, have argued that the situation in Iraq had all the hallmarks of the beginnings of genocide. Even though we no longer hear of daily attacks, the violence has not ended and, while it may take a little longer, the goal of the extremists remains to rid Iraq of its minorities. Our concern is that Syria will turn into another Iraq and worse – that Muslim extremists will take advantage of this opportunity to cleanse Syria of the “infidels” – Christians and other minorities – and establish an Islamist state. In fact, this process has already begun. Christianity, which has been in Syria since the months and years following its establishment, is in danger of being eradicated if this crisis is managed poorly or half-heartedly.

III. Religious Freedom in U.S. Foreign Policy

Religious freedom cannot be separated from the more ‘traditional’ focuses of diplomacy and international relations – such as peace, security, and, more recently, fostering democracy. Such an approach is not only morally untenable, but also fundamentally flawed, especially in a highly religious area such as the Middle East. Despite the best efforts and predictions of western secular humanist academics and prognosticators, religion holds an enduring and even increasing relevance in our 21st-century world. In these circumstances, the absence of religious freedom has far-reaching implications beyond individual abuses that must be taken into account in the formulation of foreign policy. This statement is not intended to diminish the importance of individual cases – even if one solitary individual in a remote part of the world was denied his or her right to their beliefs and practices, we ought to treat it as an assault on the humanity of each and every one of us. However, the lack of religious freedom takes on a different dimension when entire communities and societies are affected.

Even a cursory review of history shows that societies that restrict religious freedom are far more likely to experience profound social upheaval that jeopardizes the long-term survival of democracy. The importance of religious freedom as a fundamental pre-requisite, not only for the existence of stable, rights-based democracies, but also for international peace and security and the freedom of every human being, was recognized by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when she stated that,

...it is [the United States'] core conviction that religious tolerance is one of the essential elements not only of a sustainable democracy but of a peaceful society that respects the rights and dignity of each individual. People who have a voice in how they are governed—no matter what their identity or ethnicity or religion—are more likely to have a stake in both their government's and their society's success. That is good for stability, for American national security, and for global security.⁴

(emphasis added)

Moreover, the foundational role played by religious freedom in the United States is eloquently expressed in the preamble of the *International Religious Freedom Act* of 1998 (IRFA), where Congress stated that:

The right to freedom of religion undergirds the very origin and existence of the United States. Many of our Nation's founders fled religious persecution abroad, cherishing in their hearts and minds the ideal of religious freedom. They established in law, as a fundamental right and as a pillar of our Nation, the right to freedom of religion. From its birth to this day, the United States has prized this legacy of religious freedom and honored this heritage by standing for religious freedom and offering refuge to those suffering religious persecution.⁵

(emphasis added)

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the United States has had the unenviable position of being the world's lone super-power. This position certainly has its challenges; while many look to the United States to guarantee their security, at the same time they resent their dependency and therefore seek to reject American influence and values, especially in areas where they feel their culture and identity may be vulnerable, religious identity being one of the most obvious. However, promoting religious freedom is one area where the United States must not give in to the challenges of its role. Rather it must vigorously, but tactfully, pursue the establishment of conditions in which every member of the human community can pursue their religious beliefs and identity with only their conscience as their guide and not the dictates of the state or oppressive religious leaders. This is a critical determinant not only for peace and security in far-flung countries around the world, but ultimately for the peace and security of American citizens in their homes across the United States.

At the same time, freedom of religion in Syria must not be viewed as merely a 'means to an end,' as this will inevitably lead to the compromising of the 'means' (religious freedom) for the sake

⁴ Remarks by Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks at the Release of the 13th Annual Report on International Freedom", 13 September 2011, online: State Department < <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/09/172254.htm> > accessed 12 November 2011.

⁵ U.S., Bill H.R. 2431, *International Religious Freedom Act of 1998*, 105th Cong., 1998, § 2(a)(1) (enacted).

of the 'ends' (national security). Religious freedom is an end in itself. Any diplomatic initiatives on behalf of religious freedom must be premised on a commitment to its intrinsic value as an inalienable right vested in individuals on the basis of their humanity alone.

Section 2 of IRFA clearly states that

(b) It shall be the policy of the United States ...:

...

(3) To be vigorous and flexible, reflecting both the unwavering commitment of the United States to religious freedom and the desire of the United States for the most effective and principled response, in light of the range of violations of religious freedom by a variety of persecuting regimes, and the status of the relations of the United States with different nations.

...

(5) Standing for liberty and standing with the persecuted, to use and implement appropriate tools in the United States foreign policy apparatus, including diplomatic, political, commercial, charitable, educational, and cultural channels, to promote respect for religious freedom by all governments and peoples.⁶

(emphasis added)

In order for the United States to live up to its responsibility as the 'leader of the free world,' it is not enough that the American government respect the rights and freedoms of its citizens within U.S. borders. The United States must ensure that its foreign policy is consistent with the fundamental values that form the basis of American society and identity. There is no question that freedom of religion is one of these fundamental values.

Freedom of religion is absolutely intrinsic to the broader system of rights and freedoms that underpin the United States as a society and a nation. As President Obama acknowledged as much in his 2009 Cairo speech when he stated, "[f]reedom in America is indivisible from the freedom to practice one's religion."⁷ Ever since the birth of the United States, American leaders have recognized that no society can be truly free if it denies an individual's inviolable right to believe and practice his or her religion of choice. For U.S. foreign policy on Syria to be truly 'American' it must be reflective of and consistent with core American values, including the centrality of freedom of religion. Overlooking violations of religious freedom is to legitimize those actions and undermine the very principles that underlie American identity and society.

For all these reasons, the United States is obligated, morally, legally, and out of its own national security and self-interest, to take every measure within its power to ensure that religious minorities in Syria are able to exercise their full rights as human beings and citizens and, in particular, able to hold to and observe their religious beliefs and practices without fear.

⁶ IRFA, *supra* note 5 at §2.

⁷ "Remarks by the President on a New Beginning at Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt", 4 June 2009, online: The White House, Office of the Press Secretary <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>> accessed 12 November 2011 ["A New Beginning"] (emphasis added).

IV. Recommendations for U.S. Foreign Policy in Syria

In June 2009 President Obama declared in Cairo that, “[f]reedom of religion is central to the ability of peoples to live together.”⁸ Any U.S. foreign policy efforts aimed at promoting democracy, social stability, peace, and security in Syria without taking into account the issue of religious freedom and the security of religious minorities will effectively ignore one of the fundamental sources of the problems and is destined to fail. It will not only be highly ineffective, but will also risk exacerbating tensions and insecurity in the region. Estimates are that over 5 million people have been displaced from their homes due to the current conflict. That is just under one in four of Syria’s 22 million citizens. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, about 1.6 million of those are refugees in surrounding countries, including one million who have fled in the first five months of 2013 alone.⁹

These refugees have fled primarily to the countries that share land borders with Syria although there are also a significant number in Egypt. All of these countries, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey, face significant internal challenges of their own even without adding to their policy agenda the enormous burden of assisting hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees. Lebanon has continuous challenges with a population identified along religious lines and the political challenge of containing Hezbollah, but has so far managed to avoid the impact of the so-called “Arab Spring”. Jordan, on the other hand, has seen demonstrations related to the Arab Spring, and while they have not spread or taken root as a full-fledged uprising in that country, the Jordanian government is certainly not in any position to take its authority for granted. In Turkey, in the meantime, tensions have been rising over the past weeks over political protests and the government’s handling of those protests, while Iraq still has not achieved any lasting stability after the invasion and subsequent withdrawal of American and allied troops. Under these conditions the potential destabilizing force of millions of Syrian refugees in the region that is the Middle Eastern powder-keg is all too real.

In light of the frightening prospects for religious minorities in Syria, the United States must use all foreign policy tools at its disposal both to address the on-going violations, examples of which are described above, and to ensure long-term protection of the rights of religious minorities. As history has shown, diplomatic engagement and political dialogue – however sustained and constructive – is often insufficient. In order for U.S. policy in Syria to be effective, diplomatic efforts must be backed by a demonstrable commitment to take substantive policy measures and stand behind the diplomatic measures.

For some time the United States has expressed its disapproval of the Assad regime’s activities by maintaining sanctions against the regime. While by no means condoning the actions of the Assad regime, it has nevertheless sought to remain on the sidelines of this conflict and to express its support for the aspirations of the Syrian people through humanitarian aid and diplomatic support and statements.

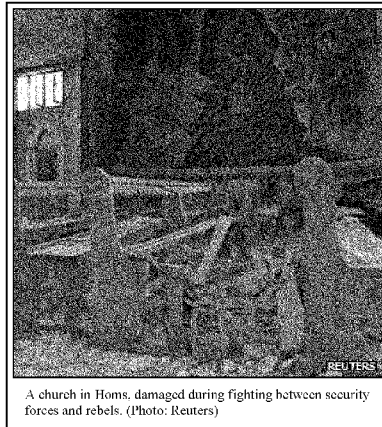
⁸ “A New Beginning”, *supra* note 6.

⁹ “Stories from Syrian Refugees: Discovering the Human Faces of a Tragedy”, online: UNHCR information portal <<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/syria.php>>, accessed 16 June, 2013.

1. Military Support for the Rebels

Over recent weeks the United States has committed to providing small-scale military support to the Syrian rebel groups on the grounds that evidence which has surfaced about the regime's use of chemical weapons shows that the regime has crossed a "red line" demanding action. While we do not in any way condone the use of chemical weapons in any circumstance, we have serious and grave concerns about the United States' new policy direction and what it will mean for religious minorities and a speedy and just resolution to the violence afflicting the Syrian people.

Providing any kind of military support for the rebels is an extremely dangerous move and a no-win policy that will have disastrous consequences for Syrian minorities and American security interests. Unfortunately, the United States has gone down this road before. In the 1980s it supported Afghan rebel forces fighting against the Soviet Union's invading troops; the result was the Taliban, a safe-haven for terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda, and a dozen-year military engagement by American troops that remains on-going. Also in the 1980s, the United States supported Iraq in its war with Iran; the result was the regime of Saddam Hussein, two wars, an invasion and full-fledged occupation, and thousands of American lives lost. As recently as the last two years, the United States supported rebels in Libya; the result was an attack on the American diplomatic mission resulting in the killing of the ambassador and three other embassy personnel and wounding of many more. Our question to American policy-makers is simple: how will Syria be any different?



A church in Homs, damaged during fighting between security forces and rebels. (Photo: Reuters)

We firmly believe that the United States has the settled intention to do everything within its power to ensure that these arms supplies do not find their way into the control of religious extremists or terrorists. These people have no scruples about using American-supplied weapons against religious minorities, whether as proxies for the Assad regime or quite simply in their capacity as religious minorities. Unfortunately, despite the best of intentions there is absolutely no way to guarantee that this will not happen. In fact, even if the moderate groups can be trusted to use these arms for their intended purpose of defending against the regime, the extremists are rapidly consolidating their position and influence over the rebels and establishing Shariah law in areas where they are in control. Under these circumstances the only thing we can truly be certain of is that, whether they are small arms or something more substantial, some or all of any weapons provided to the rebels will wind up in the hands of extremists. At that point these American weapons will be used against Syrian civilians and particularly against religious minorities, as well as against Israel, America's most important ally in the region. This is simply a matter of time.

If, however, the United States decides to go ahead with its military aid despite the obvious signs, it must demand accountability from the rebels for any aid it provides. This means that any weapons supplied must be returned to the United States once the conflict is resolved. Furthermore, if there is any evidence that weapons or ammunition provided by the United States or other western countries have been used against minorities or other civilians or against the state of Israel, all further military aid or support, as well as development and humanitarian aid must be stopped immediately with no exceptions.

2. Humanitarian Aid

To date the United States has committed more than \$500 million in humanitarian aid to ease the suffering of Syrian civilians. This is a critical and compassionate measure that must be maintained as long as there is a need. However, American aid must not be implemented in any way that would support or grant legitimacy to any parties in Syria that refuse to respect the rights of Syrian minorities. In order to ensure that this does not happen, the United States must create an explicit link between eligibility for American aid and respect for human rights. It must ensure that aid is given only through groups that are responsible and accountable for those funds and for their treatment of religious minorities and that such support does not function directly or indirectly to support extremist elements.

The legislative authority for such an explicit link between aid and religious freedom already exists within IRFA and the *Foreign Assistance Act* of 1961. Section 2(b) of IRFA clearly states that it “shall be the policy of the United States ... to seek to channel United States security and development assistance to governments other than those found to be engaged in gross violations of freedom of religion.”¹⁰ Moreover, section 405(a) of IRFA¹¹ empowers the President to authorize the “withdrawal, limitation, or suspension of” both “development assistance” (paragraph 9) and “security assistance” (paragraph 11) in accordance with the *Foreign Assistance Act*. Section 116(a) of the *Foreign Assistance Act* further states that “no assistance may be provided under this part to the government of any country which engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of international human rights,”¹² including “particularly severe violations of religious freedom.”¹³

If this authority applies to government recipients of American aid then it goes without saying that the same principle must apply equally to non-governmental or opposition groups. If the United States is serious about its commitment to religious freedom, it must take action based on this authority given to it by Congress to compel the parties in Syria to respect the rights of minorities.

¹⁰ IRFA, *supra* note 5 at § 2(b).

¹¹ *Ibid.* at § 405(a).

¹² *The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as Amended*, Pub.L. No. 87-195, § 116(a), 75 Stat 424 (enacted September 4, 1961, 22 U.S.C. § 2151 et seq.) [*Foreign Assistance Act*].

¹³ *Ibid.* at § 116(c)(3).

3. Refugee Support

Despite all other efforts, Syrian civilians including religious minorities may have no other option but to flee their homes to secure their safety. Refugee protection is an essential means of protecting vulnerable people where all other efforts have failed. At the same time, evacuating religious minorities from Syria will only be a victory for the extremists. The United States must continuously work toward preventing the need for Syrian minorities to leave their homes and toward creating the conditions in which those who have left or still must leave will be safe to return to Syria both in the short and long term. However, to the extent that the violence continues to dislocate people from their homes, the United States together with its allies must not only take all steps necessary to accept as many refugees as possible, but they must also coordinate their refugee admission processes so that the minorities whose circumstances render them especially vulnerable are provided for.

To the extent possible Muslim Syrians can and ought to be encouraged to seek refuge in surrounding countries. Refugees in any circumstances are vulnerable in the countries where they seek help. They are foreigners and must learn to fit in, but they are also often seen as a burden on the host country that must supply them with physical and material support and, in prolonged situations, the means for a livelihood. However, to the extent that neighbouring countries are capable of absorbing them, the local solution will provide the easiest transition for Muslims for whom the language, culture, and religion of the neighbouring countries will be familiar.

For other minorities, particularly Syrian Christians, fleeing to the neighbouring countries would be an untenable situation. Despite the cultural and linguistic familiarity of the region, they will be equally, if not more, vulnerable in the surrounding countries as they will be at home. Not only will they be foreigners and refugees who will be seen as burdening the receiving countries, but they will also be religious minorities in countries where the local religious minorities are already vulnerable should the ever-present threat of religious extremism raise its ugly head. A striking example of what can happen is the example of Iraqi Christian refugees who fled to Syria and are now forced to flee the extremists back to Iraq where extremists continue to use every opportunity to pursue their eradication. While Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon are currently in a rather different position, conditions in those countries could change rapidly and without warning for the worse as they have in many other countries in the region over the past two-and-a-half years. As a result, those Syrian minorities for whom seeking refuge in the surrounding Muslim countries is not a viable option must be prioritized by the United States and western countries where their religious beliefs will not cause them to be further victimized.

4. Supporting Minorities and Preparing for the Post-Conflict Era

While a solution to the general conflict is an urgent priority, it is equally critical to find a way to stop the specific violence that is targeting Syrian minorities and to prepare the groundwork for a future Syria where the religious minorities are treated with respect and have their equal place among their Muslim neighbours.

The closure of the United States embassy in Damascus makes it more difficult to engage in direct diplomacy with the parties. However, it was an important response to the regime's actions. The

Assad regime still has its supporters, domestically and on the international scene, but it is fairly clear that any lasting solution to the situation in Syria cannot involve a continuation of the Assad regime. Replacing it with a truly democratic option cannot be done overnight or in a few months of popular uprising. As a result, it is critical that the United States prioritize building relationships with moderate and liberal democratic elements among the rebels and Syrian opposition and use all diplomatic means to strengthen their position. Together with its European and other western allies, it must make it clear that nothing less than full equality and respect for human rights, including religious freedom, and peaceful coexistence with Israel will be acceptable for the future of Syria. At the same time, the United States must work together with its allies in order to isolate and eliminate the extremist and terrorist elements among the rebels, many of which are either of foreign origin or supported by foreign interests.

In order to ensure the success of its efforts in Syria, the United States must be honest and clear about the realities on the ground. It must not turn a blind eye to the role of extremists among the rebels and it must not play down that role in its desire to promote opposition to Assad's regime. It must not overlook the impact of the conflict on religious minorities by minimizing or ignoring the targeted nature of attacks, including those by rebel forces. Clearly the Assad regime must go, but not at any cost – if the price of its removal is the blood of religious minorities and the conscience of the American people, it is too high.

V. Conclusion

Every member of the international community has undertaken a sacred trust to uphold fundamental human rights. There is no right more fundamental to human dignity and to truly free and inclusive societies than freedom of religion. In light of the horrific abuses of this basic right occurring throughout the world today, no country, the United States included, can say that it has fulfilled its duty to protect religious freedom and the vulnerable minorities to whom this freedom is denied.

Syria's minorities have historically enjoyed the ability to observe their religious beliefs and live in relative harmony and equality with their Muslim neighbours, a rare status in the Middle East. Christians have existed in this area since the very early days of Christianity and their presence is even recognized in the New Testament story of the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus. Today, however, Christians are being pushed out of Syria by the conflict, caught between a regime indiscriminately attacking rebels and civilians, on the one hand, and a growing cadre of religious extremists and terrorists among the rebels who are directly and intentionally targeting Christians and other minorities, both for their religion and for their (presumed) politics. The outcome for Syrian Christians at this crucial juncture will have far-reaching consequences on the presence and status of religious minorities generally in the region. Moreover, how this conflict is resolved could also have devastating consequences beyond the region and its minorities, for global stability and, therefore, the security of the United States itself.

Syrian minorities need the world to listen and to find an effective way to resolve the situation in their homeland. Removing the Assad regime at any cost is not the answer. The United States and its allies must be willing to engage in the long, tedious work of developing a real, democratic

alternative to the Assad regime rather than just applying a bandaid measure that will in all likelihood backfire on Syria's minorities and moderate Muslims. The oft-heard saying that, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend" is not always true and is certainly not true in the case of the future of Syria. The United States must support religious minorities in Syria and moderate, liberal forces that will promote a strong, liberal democracy in Syria and ensure that they do not support religious extremists and terrorists prepared to hijack the aspirations of the Syrian people with their dreams of a Shariah-based Islamist haven. Today, will the United States choose to be part of the problem or the heart of the solution?

RECOMMENDATIONS
– SUMMARY –

Today Syria is at a cross-roads. Almost 100,000 Syrians have been killed in the current conflict. Religious minorities, particularly Christians, are caught between a fierce regime fighting for its survival and religious extremists who are rapidly gaining control of the rebel movement and pursuing a Shariah-based religious state. The United States must do all it can to address the ongoing human-rights violations of religious minorities and to ensure their long-term safety and protection. It must not pursue the removal of the Assad regime at the cost of the blood of Syrian minorities and the conscience of the American people.

1. Military Support for the Rebels

- Extremists and terrorist-linked groups are taking control of the disorganized and undisciplined rebel groups
- The U.S. must not supply weapons to the rebels as they will find their way into extremist and/or terrorist hands and be used against civilians, minorities, and U.S. regional interests and allies such as Israel
- If the U.S. nonetheless goes ahead with military aid, it must demand accountability from the rebels, including the return of weapons after the conflict, and deny any further aid if weapons or ammunition are used against minorities, civilians, or American allies such as Israel

2. Humanitarian Aid

- The U.S. must continue to provide humanitarian aid as long as there is a need
- U.S. aid must not be implemented in a way that would support or grant legitimacy to any parties in Syria that refuse to respect the rights of religious minorities
- The U.S. must create an explicit link between eligibility for American aid and respect for the human rights of Syrian minorities

3. Refugee Support

- The U.S. must work toward preventing the need for Syrian minorities to leave their homes, but must ensure the safety of those who may not ultimately have a choice
- The U.S. and its allies must prepare to accept as many refugees as possible, prioritizing those whose religious beliefs may cause them to be further victimized in surrounding countries

4. Supporting Minorities and Preparing for the Post-Conflict Era

- The U.S. must make it a priority to build relationships with, and strengthen, moderate and liberal democratic elements among the rebels and Syrian opposition
- The U.S. must work with its allies to isolate and eliminate extremist and terrorist elements among the rebels, many of which are either of foreign origin or supported by foreign interests
- Policy-makers must be honest and clear about the realities on the ground, including the extent of extremist and terrorist involvement among the rebel forces and must ensure they do not work to replace one form of tyranny with another
- True democracy does not happen overnight; it must be built and nurtured from the ground up

Appendix A

BIOGRAPHY OF REV. MAJED EL SHAFIE FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT ONE FREE WORLD INTERNATIONAL

Rev. Majed El Shafie is a human rights advocate and founder of One Free World International (OFWI). His human rights journey started in his native Egypt that he was later forced to flee after he was severely tortured and sentenced to death for his conversion to Christianity and bringing awareness to human rights violations related to religious persecution. Belonging to a very prominent legal and political family in Egypt, Rev. El Shafie had tried to work within the Egyptian system to reform the country's human rights regime. Between the challenges he faced in these efforts, his firsthand experience as a survivor of religious persecution, the work he has engaged in since advocating for religious freedom, confronting governments that violate this fundamental right, and conducting fact-finding missions and humanitarian/rescue operations, he has obtained significant knowledge and insight into the dynamics of persecution of religious minorities by religious extremists and totalitarian governments alike.

Rev. El Shafie has established two effective human rights organizations including One Free World International (OFWI) which is one of the leading organizations advocating for religious minorities globally and has 28 branches around the world. He has organized and led delegations of parliamentarians and religious leaders to address minority rights and humanitarian issues with government leaders, including several cabinet ministers and other high-level officials, opposition leaders, and religious leaders among others in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Cuba, and India. Rev. El Shafie has developed excellent relationships with members of the Canadian House of Commons, Senate, and Cabinet, and has built bridges with the US Congress in order to educate decision-makers about violations of religious freedom around the world. He has had the opportunity to testify four times before the Subcommittee for International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, twice before United States Congressional subcommittees and commissions, and before the Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism in Canada. He has advocated on behalf of Christians, Falun Gong, Jews, Bahá'ís, Ahmadiyya Muslims, and China's Uyghur Muslims, among others. Leading North American and international news media have featured his work which has also been the subject of an award-winning feature-length documentary entitled "Freedom Fighter" and its companion book, also titled "Freedom Fighter".

HONOURS AND AWARDS

2012 Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal

HUMAN RIGHTS EXPERTISE AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Provided expert testimony of conditions facing religious minorities.
- Relied on in numerous cases in the Refugee Protection Division (Ontario) and Immigration Board (Florida).

- Created an underground human rights organization to pursue equal rights for Egyptian minorities and built organization to 24,000 members in just two years.
- Created and developed one of North America's most effective international human rights organizations focused on the rights of religious minorities around the world.
- Conducted fact-finding missions, rescue operations, and humanitarian interventions in countries where religious minorities are being persecuted and intervene directly through in-person meetings with high-level politicians and government officials regarding human rights concerns.
- Organized conferences and human rights events that attract thousands of participants every year to educate the public about religious persecution and human rights issues.

PARLIAMENTARY AND CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

Testified by invitation before parliamentary committees in Canada and congressional committees in the United States on issues related to minority rights, including:

- 21/3/2012 *The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, United States Congress*
Religious Freedom in Afghanistan and Pakistan
- 22/11/2011 *The Sub-Committee on International Human Rights (SDIR, previously SDEV) of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Parliament of Canada*
Religious Freedom in Egypt and Iraq
- 17/11/2011 *The Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights of the United States House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs*
Religious Freedom in Egypt and Iraq
- 30/11/2010 *SDIR, Parliament of Canada*
Recommendations with Respect to Certain Issues Pertaining to the Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan
- 30/11/2009 *Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism in Canada, Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Antisemitism*
- 16/6/2008 *SDIR, Parliament of Canada*
Canadian Policy Regarding Religious Minorities with a Focus on Iraq, Egypt, and Pakistan
- 2/12/2004 *SDEV, Parliament of Canada*
The Persecution of People of Faith

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA COVERAGE

Television: Whistleblower (CTV National News), W5, Canada AM, The Arena, The Source, and others
 Radio: CBC Radio and others
 Print: National Post, Ottawa Citizen, Toronto Star, Toronto Sun, and others
 International: Israel (Haaretz, Jerusalem Post, Maariv, Yediot Aharonot), Denmark, Germany, France

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E. Levant, "Beyond a Youtube Video" on *The Source*, September 13, 2012, online: The Source <<http://www.sunnewsnetwork.ca/video/featured/prime-time/867432237001/beyond-a-youtube-video/1839021026001/page/2>>, accessed September 15, 2012.

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M. Maslanik, "Torture spurs man to fight for religious freedom" in *Finger Lakes Times*, October, 2006, online: Living Testimony <<http://living-testimony.blogspot.ca/2006/10/rev-majed-el-shafie-egyptian-ex-muslim.html>>, accessed July 21, 2012.

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“One Free World International Founder Majed El Shafie Leads First Canadian Delegation to Iraq Since the War Began” on *Yahoo! News*, September 20, 2011, online: Yahoo! News <<http://news.yahoo.com/one-free-world-international-founder-majed-el-shafie-073313821.html>>, accessed July 22, 2012.

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Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Reverend El Shafie, for not only presenting testimony, but as a man who has literally been tortured for his faith, thank you for being here and forgiving us the insights of your thoughts and where we should go.

Rev. EL SHAFIE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SMITH. Let me ask the entire panel a couple of questions. And I will just lay it out, and if could you respond.

I asked earlier the Deputy Assistant Secretary as to whether or not he, and especially the administration, construed what is going on against the Christians to be genocide. I would point out that Syria acceded to the Genocide Convention in 1955, and Article 1 it makes it very clear that genocide means—and this is right from the convention—any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy in whole or in part a national ethnic—ethnic, racial, or religious group, such as killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group. And then Article 3 talks about the acts that are punishable: Genocide, conspiracy to commit genocide—you don't even have to do it; the mere conspiracy is an actionable offense—direct and public incitement to commit genocide, attempt to commit genocide, complicity in genocide. And yet, like we saw with Sudan—and I remember, Ms. Shea, you were very active and outspoken during previous administrations when we utterly refused, as did the Europeans, as did the U.N. Human Rights Council, to call what was going on in Darfur a genocide. I am wondering, you know, if each of you could say whether or not you believe what is happening to the Christians rise to the level of genocide.

Secondly, I had asked earlier about the conditionality. And, Reverend, you talked about the importance of conditionality with human rights. And I noted that even Napoleon Duarte, the former President of El Salvador, told me directly how important conditionality was when it come to human rights, even within his own government. And I am wondering, we heard a lot about vetting. I am not sure how vetting is done in an efficacious way to ensure that the bad guys don't get the guns. But the conditionality issue, I am not sure there are conditions; if you know of any, please say.

Let me ask Dr. Jasser if you could add—you mentioned—and I read your recommendations, the 20 recommendations that were made by the Commission. Has the administration embraced all, some, or any of those recommendations that were made by the International Religious Freedom Commission? And I have a few other questions, then I will yield to my colleagues.

Mr. JASSER. Thank you, Chairman Smith.

I will address the last one first, in my role as a Commissioner. We have begun having conversations at a staff level regarding our recommendations, and our report is a little over 1½ months, 2 months old. So we are in the process of hoping that they adopt some of those recommendations because of the plight of religious minorities. But I can't speak officially for—and, obviously, we are not part of the administration to be able to speak on their behalf on what they feel about those recommendations. We do hope as a result of the testimony that they do look at them and embrace them as a method in which we should employ the way to protect religious minorities.

To speak to your other questions, again, our report and my testimony do lay out the egregious and horrific plight of the Syrian people across various faith groups and the sectarian divides. However, as you mentioned, and many have mentioned, labeling it as a genocide involves certain legal and other ramifications that I can't respond to as a Commissioner.

But let me just speak on my own behalf personally. I do think that, obviously, as somebody who speaks to Syrians frequently, and trying to keep in contact with them; they just do not know if they will be around tomorrow. For example, what's happened to Sunni Muslims, the millions now, a population in Syria of 22 million with 1 to 2 million displaced refugees, 90-plus percent of which are Sunni Muslims, I would be hard pressed as an American citizen who cares about humanitarian rights not to say that there is a genocide against Sunni Muslims in Syria.

But what happens in all conflicts, and what is the last card that Assad has pulled, is fomenting sectarian divisions. So what is going to happen, given Assad allowing al-Qaeda into his country, has been to basically allow them to have competing genocides so that he can legitimize, the regime can legitimize, its continued existence.

Because I will tell you, as much as I agree—and in my testimony I talked about atrocities committed by some of the rebels. Now, is there a command-and-control center for the FSA? There isn't. And there are obviously many, many groups. But God help the minorities, such as the Christians, who may disagree politically with the Ba'athists or with their political ends, because at the end they may have the religious freedom to practice, but there is no certainty for those who are politically against the regime's authoritarian means.

And I think lastly, as far as vetting, I think it's important, and I will tell you that the trajectory of the conflict—we have tried now for 28 months-plus the “do nothing and let the Friends of Syria sort of guide it,” and it has gotten us to this point of talking about competing genocides and almost 100,000 dead. And I think at the minimum the choices that we have thus far for protecting religious minorities is to begin to play a role to help push it—as Mr. Kinzinger said earlier, to help push history toward at least giving those that would like a democratic, moderate Syria a chance at promoting those values and helping those who would be our real allies on the ground to have the ability to see a future Syria that is not run by either extreme, and I think at least us playing some type of a role there, and in the recommendations we give, as far as helping those who promote our principles within the Friends of Syria, and also of building infrastructure there that can help provide safe haven within the opposition.

Ms. SHEA. Yeah. I think every one of us who was really monitoring the situation with the minorities, the smallest, defenseless minorities in Syria, has very much Iraq on its—the precedent of Iraq on our minds. And in Iraq over the last 10 years, two-thirds of the Christian population there has been eliminated. They have been driven out by violence. Many of them have been killed, but most are just—been sent it into exile. Ninety percent of the Mandeans, the followers of John the Baptist, have also been eliminated from Iraq under the same conditions; the Yizidis, over half.

These are the smallest defenseless minorities. They have essentially been ethnically—or religiously, I should say, cleansed from Iraq.

That is very much on our minds now in Syria, as we—hearing these anecdotes and hearing the church leaders attest to what is happening to the Christian people. And I also received a letter this week from the Yizidi representative saying the same thing, villages, Yizidi villages, emptying out. So that is why—because when the dust settles, there may not be any small, defenseless minorities left in Iraq. There will be Sunnis, there will be Shiites, as horrific as the violence has been against those groups and the allies. Those groups will—do have champions outside of Iraq, Syria, and have militias and militaries at their disposal. These smallest defenseless minorities do not.

And in my first recommendation, I—I said that there should be a report trying to establish exactly what is happening, and that is why I support the special envoy, because we hear the anecdotes, we don't have the dimensions of this—this problem. But, of course, we fear a genocidal situation. And this problem will not end when this war ends, because there are so many militants who are so intolerant.

And I am very concerned by Secretary Kerry's statements today in Saudi Arabia where he said, meeting with the Saudi Foreign Minister, Saud al Faisal, saying that he expressed his appreciation for Saudi Arabia's leadership within the region, and saying that we believe that every minority can be respected. So, "I express our appreciation for Saudi Arabia's leadership within the region. We believe that the best solution is a political solution. And we believe that every minority can be respected. There can be diversity and pluralism." I don't know who the "we" is there; if that is the United States, then fair enough. But if he is talking about our partner, our closest partner in the region, as he starts out his speech by referring to Saudi Arabia, then he is sadly mistaken. There is not a single church or other house of worship other than the Wahhabi mosque and some Shiite mosques in Saudi Arabia. So Saudi Arabia does not believe in diversity and pluralism and does not respect minorities.

So I am very concerned. I think there should be a special envoy to take—to understand more clearly what is happening to these minorities, especially since they do not register. When they go into exile, they do not register with the U.N. They are afraid of being minorities again in the U.N. camps and being victims again outside of Syria, in Turkey or other places. So that has to be taken into account as well. We do not know how many Christian refugees there are. There have been some guesses of hundreds of thousands, but we really have no idea, and this has to be assessed.

Mr. EIBNER. The CSI issued a genocide alert for the whole Middle East region because we were concerned that conditions for genocide exist. It doesn't mean to say that there is full-blown genocide, but there is very good cause for concern, as we heard from the representative from the State Department.

The situation in Syria is more acute than anywhere else in the region because of the conflict there and the vulnerability of the minorities. What we see are acts of genocide or genocidal massacres

which have affected every minority community in Syria, including Sunni Muslims, if you think of them as a minority in places where there is perhaps an Alawite majority, certain provinces and regions where the Sunni Muslims are very vulnerable. And we see a situation developing in Syria that is out of control, and it will look very much like the Balkans, like Bosnia, where every side in the conflict was involved in massacres and acts of genocide, crimes against humanity.

So we are, you know, deeply concerned about this. We are deeply concerned that—just over a year ago, if I am not mistaken, there was an Atrocities Prevention Board that was announced with much fanfare at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, and we have not heard anything about, you know, what their findings are. They concerned about the possibility of genocides; not even genocide, but atrocities. What do they see as going on, and what are their recommendations? I would have thought that members of the public would want to know what the Atrocities Board is doing and what their take on the situation in Syria is.

Another cause for, you know, great concern, I am a historian by background, and one cannot help but look back to the days of the Ottoman Empire when in 1908 there was a great revolution, you might call it the Ottoman Spring, where members of all religious communities, ethnic communities were dancing in the streets to celebrate freedom. And within a decade there is genocide, and Anatolia is completely, you know, cleared of its religious minorities.

It can happen. It can happen today, it can happen this year, it can happen within the next—we, the United States, have an international obligation to try to prevent genocide. There are international undertakings that we have signed on. I would like to see the United States Government take these seriously and act on their responsibilities.

And just another observation about the movements of people. I think that one can learn a lot about a situation by seeing how people vote with their feet. They are not able to vote with the ballot in Syria, but there is something that can be picked up by movement, how people move around the country. And what I have observed is that when people are forced to flee their homes—and in most cases it is not because of targeted violence against them or their religious community, but there is shelling, there is bombing, there is a war going on, and they want to get out of there—they tend to go either abroad, or they tend to go to areas controlled by the government, such as Tartus Province, which is relatively tranquil.

And I saw myself that there are many Sunni refugees or displaced people who are living there, trying to stay out of harm's way, and, of course, like all Syrians they are denied their political freedoms, but I did not detect any sign of special harassment or that they were targeted by the government. And after all, we must bear in mind, too, that while the Assad regime is a dictatorship that did not respect basic human rights and does not provide democracy, it does not have an ideology that targets religious minorities. Unfortunately, we see increasingly an opposition that is dominated by the forces that have an ideology that say Christians are not equal citizens, Alawites are not equal citizens, and they should

either leave, or, if they stay, they have to have a second-class role in society.

Thank you.

Rev. EL SHAFIE. Mr. Chair, I believe that my colleagues here answered your question in details. I don't want to repeat their words. There are some people here already tired. So I—I think I would—I don't have anything to add on that.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Connolly.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I wish our colleague from Texas was still here, because I find this discussion quite fascinating.

If I am understanding you correctly, Mr. Jasser, you think that the United States ought to take a risk and arm the rebels because the Assad regime is so brutal that the alternative can't be worse, and that is where we ought to sort of put our chips. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but I thought I heard you kind of say that.

Mr. JASSER. Well, our Commission's recommendations do not get into those types of details. We get into the fact that there are things we need to do on the ground in a humanitarian way to help move to the protection of religious minorities.

I did make a comment personally, not as a Commissioner, that I do believe the last 28 months of not helping the opposition at all has proven that the Darwinian solution of sort of letting it play itself out has brought the worst actors in the region into Syria, has caused the biggest devastation. And the sense that there is a binary choice in Syria now, which is between al-Qaeda and the Assad regime, I think is a false choice. I think the opposition's numbers clearly show that the majority of them are the millions of Syrians that have been devastated in this—

Mr. CONNOLLY. So, all right. Not wearing your Commission hat, you personally still think we ought to bet down and invest in the opposition even with some queasiness.

Mr. JASSER. Absolutely. Because the lack—the choice of doing nothing—is going to bring the worst pathway. And the pathway toward repairing a country that has been devastated by 50 years of dictatorship will involve some growing pains. It may involve, you know, arming some of the wrong people, but we can correct those with involvement versus letting Qatar and Saudi Arabia decide the future of—

Mr. CONNOLLY. Got it. Perfectly legitimate point of view. But let me ask you two questions. One is in making that recommendation to the United States Government, if you had a magic wand and you were the chief recommender, that would be your recommendation. Are you also willing when you make such a recommendation to take responsibility for the possibility that the outcome isn't at all what you hoped for, and that, as a matter of fact, you are wrong; that what we have done by intervening and providing military assistance is to actually strengthen the hands of those we do not wish to strengthen, and we produce an outcome we do not wish, a jihadist, theocratic-oriented, intolerant of minorities regime that actually respects diversity even less than the Ba'athist regime it replaces?

I mean, I know that is not what you wish, but when you ask the United States, a power, superpower, to intervene in this kind of situation in that way, somebody has to take responsibility for the risk, the probability, slim, moderate, remote or high, that the outcome is going to be worse than the regime it is replacing.

Mr. JASSER. Sir, speaking on my own behalf, I would tell you that if we exerted real leadership as leaders of the free world in that region, and we actually stood behind those decisions not just for 6 months, but for years, and laid out, educated the American public about what is at stake not only for Syria, but the entire region, for our allies, Israel and the empowerment of Iran, and play that out over not 1 or 2 years, but over the next 10, 15 years, and saying that we will have a policy that will be pushed forth to protect minorities, to protect those who believe in the values of freedom and liberty within that region, and say that there are no clear answers, but doing nothing is going to allow a Darwinian solution that will allow the last 2½ years that has demonstrated the death and devastation and actually the loss of American interests, and our allies in the West have lost significant influence in Syria with what—with the devastation that we have seen. So, you know, choices will evolve, but I do believe that currently we have seen the failure of the current policy. And while I can completely understand your concerns, I believe helping the opposition is a better choice than doing nothing.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Now, you are on a panel with three others who are concerned about protecting the rights of minorities, especially religious minorities. And I think I heard every one of the—your three colleagues on this panel actually differ with you. They are very concerned about arming the rebels because they actually cited the lack of respect for religious diversity within the armed insurgency in Syria.

Mr. JASSER. Well, sir, I am also concerned about arming the rebels, but I do believe that the solutions so far have created a vacuum. There have been no solutions. If you look at our recommendations that come from USCIRF, it involves a much more active role in protecting those minorities and ensuring that the current Syrian coalition and others are accountable to international standards of human rights to which we have not held them accountable because we are taking such a back seat in what is happening there, that we need to take a front seat rather than allow other countries, as Ms. Shea mentioned, like Saudi Arabia, that really have no respect for religious freedom, to play a role in a future Syria, where you have both sides. One is Iranian standards of religious freedom and Saudi standards of religious freedom, both of whom are on the worst lists as far as advocacy for religious freedom. And I believe America will play a role—

Mr. CONNOLLY. Dr. Jasser, I just said to you I certainly respect your point of view. I wish the world were that black and white. I wish our choices were that simple. They are not. And I—I am not sure—in fact, I know I don't accept your characterization that we have somehow taken a back seat for 28 months.

I am not quite sure what you would have us do. And I would say that when the United States intervenes in that region, very overtly, it can lead with the best of intentions to results that are unde-

sirable. I am not sure the intervention in Lebanon under the Ronald Reagan administration was such a wise policy in retrospect. It led to terrible deaths for the United States, and I am not sure it led to an improved outcome in Lebanon; history will have to judge.

You know, the President got a lot of criticism for leading from behind in Libya, and yet I will say to you, and I was in both Egypt and Libya last year, I was more hopeful about the outcomes in Libya in terms of pluralism and respect for minority rights—albeit it is a much smaller country—than I was for Egypt. And I have been to Egypt many times.

So I wish, you know, our options were really clear cut, and we could find the guys with the white hats, because I would support them, too. But I am not so sure that it is clear. Nor was it as clear 28 months ago that the insurgency was only composed of elements of people wearing white hats.

Now, Ms. Shea, let me ask you, you gave a very interesting analogy. Iraq. The interesting thing that both Iraq and Syria shared, of course, when Saddam Hussein was still in power was they both had Ba'athist regimes. And Dr. Eibner actually cited the Ba'athist philosophy or political governance not in an admiring way, but he reminded us that the one thing, though, that was true was you weren't having a whole bunch of Christians and other minorities fleeing because they were worried about the oppression and brutality of a regime on their rights. They weren't being singled out as such in a way that unfortunately they seem to be at least with some elements of the—of the insurgency in Syria. Is that your view as well?

That—terrible, though, the brutality of Saddam Hussein was, no one is praising that regime. There was a difference between the Ba'athist philosophy that governed both in Iraq and Syria with respect to minority rights or with respect to minorities, including religious minorities. That is quite different than an explicit avowed “they are not us” kind of philosophy that seems to come out of at least some of the more extreme elements of the insurgency in Syria today. And, for that matter, in the post-Saddam Hussein world of Iraq, whatever respect there was for minority rights seems to have dissipated and worsened in the current situation in Iraq. Are those views you would share?

Ms. SHEA. Well, I think both regimes, in a way, they were mirror images of each other. They were both Ba'athists and secular, but they were both the minorities themselves. Saddam Hussein was, of course, a Sunni minority in the Shi'ite Iraq. And Assad is a—

Mr. CONNOLLY. Alawite. Right.

Ms. SHEA [continuing]. Minority aligned with the Shi'ites in a majority-Sunni Syria. So that there was an emphasis on building a secular society from those regimes, and, therefore, there was more space for other minorities like the Christians and the Yizidis, et cetera.

I don't think there is any going back to that, though, in Syria. I think what we are seeing now is the Assad regime making deals with tribes and others at the expense of these minorities. They are letting gangs of criminals prey on these minorities with impunity, just as actually is happening now in Iraq, continues to happen in

Iraq, with the impunity situation that USCIRF has—they have identified.

But the—there is the jihadist element in the rebels that is extremely worrisome, and these are being supported, it is no secret, from the Gulf region.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I was struck by your testimony and that of the other two panelists to the other side of you not because it—not because you were saying that we should go back, or we should shore up the Assad regime because, given the alternative, it is leaser of two evils, but to show that our choices in Syria are not so clear, and that the outcomes are at high risk. That isn't an argument to do nothing, but it is an argument to take care and caution and make sure we know what we are doing before we just rush in and support one side or the other.

Ms. SHEA. I oppose military aid, for what it is worth, from my opinion, to Syria at this point. And I conclude that we should have—make every—make the peaceful settlement in Syria among our highest foreign policy priorities, and that the President should use his prestige that you have identified to make that happen, and to be fully engaged in it.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you.

Dr. Eibner, I just want to make sure I characterized your views correctly. I did?

Mr. EIBNER. Yes. There was no misrepresentation that I picked up.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you.

And Reverend El Shafie?

Rev. EL SHAFIE. Yes.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I thought I heard you actually say explicitly, don't arm the rebels.

Rev. EL SHAFIE. That is correct.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And you said that why? Remind us again why you think, unlike Dr. Jasser, the United States should not go down that road.

Rev. EL SHAFIE. Let's look at the—first of all, allow me to explain that there is no win-win scenario about Syria. If Bashar al-Assad stayed, Iran, Hezbollah have the stronger arms in the region. If defeated, we ended with extremist Sunnis that only God knows what they will do. So there is no win-win scenario when it comes to Syria.

But let us take a look at the opposition, the Syrian opposition, the rebels. Let us look at their component at their cells. You found like the Free Syrian Army, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution, the opposition's forces or the Syrian Opposition Coalition, that is led by al-Khatib, Moaz al-Khatib. He in exile in Cairo. You have the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, or the SMB. This is a guy by the name Mohammed Riad. He is in exile in London.

When I am look—and I am not saying they are the only ones that leading the opposition, but I am talking about the big names, the main player. All of the names that I am telling you right now, they are very extremist and very violent. And my fear, when we arm the rebels, even if we are arming the people that we feel that they are less extremist, that they will not have a full control on where is this weapon going, and this weapon in the end will go to

kill civilians or minority, or will attack Israel, which is alliance, or will kill our Ambassador in Damascus later on. That is my fear.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you.

Mr. Chair, you have been most indulgent. I really appreciate it. I do think this panel has given us a lot of food for thought and highlights the complexity of the choices we face in Syria. Thank you so much.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Mr. Connolly.

Mr. Yoho.

Mr. YOHO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Connolly, great questions. I appreciate it.

And your testimony, I guess, is—it is almost a nightmare. And we know it is going on over there, and that is my concern.

And, Dr. Jasser, I want to commend you and your parents for having the good sight and you the good fortune of landing on the shores of America to where you and hopefully your parents have experienced and lived, and it sounds like it, the American dream. And I think that is a basis underlying tenet for all humans, that yearning to be free. And I would love for everybody in the world to have that and experience that, but reality is we are not there yet.

Reverend El Shafie, you are from Egypt, right?

Rev. EL SHAFIE. That is correct, sir.

Mr. YOHO. When you said you were tortured, was it President Mubarak at the time?

Rev. EL SHAFIE. It was the regime, the Egyptian regime. That is correct, Mubarak at the time.

Mr. YOHO. And you know, the—I guess back in the old days, we will say it, things were more predictable; they weren't good, but they were predictable, because if you propped up a regime, you could kind of determine how they were going to respond—

Rev. EL SHAFIE. That is correct.

Mr. YOHO [continuing]. And how they would react.

We have got a whole new ballgame now. We have got a new group of people in there that have arisen from the Arab Spring, and like you said, it is turning into the Arab Winter. Their ideologies are different. They are stronger. There are stronger beliefs in—I don't want to say extreme Islam, but, I mean, we are seeing that played out with Sharia law and all that. And so it is a whole different game, and we don't know how people are going to respond, and we don't know how to—I don't want to say manipulate, but how to work with them to get the results we want.

And what I have heard from three of you is the way I feel. You know, arming them is a bad thing to do. I mean, we have tried that. We have seen it in Iran in the 1970s. We have done it with Iraq. We have done it with Afghanistan. Libya is yet to play out. And that is one of my questions is I would like to hear your response and what you think is turning out in Libya, if we are on the right track with what we do with the flyovers and the minimum intervention that we had, so that we can look at Syria and which way to go.

Because what I have heard from all of you is the promotion of liberty, the promotion of freedoms, human rights promotion, religious freedoms. And, again, I don't have to remind you, but those

are more Westernized ideologies; not freedom. But to promote and to try to force human rights on an Islamic country when they don't believe the way we do, I don't see how you can do that without taking complete control over a country, and that is something that is just not acceptable.

What are your thoughts on that? If you would, start with Libya on how you think that is turning out right now.

Rev. EL SHAFIE. Do you want me to start, or do you want to start with Dr. Jasser?

Ms. SHEA. You start.

Rev. EL SHAFIE. The separation between the religion and a state, any religion, any state, is necessary to ensure true democracy and freedom in any country. Any religion, any state. The problem that you are seeing right now is lack of education.

One of the major issues that we see in Egypt, for example, is lack of education. Even if you reform the Constitution, you have 30–40 percent of the Egyptians is illiterate; they don't know how to read or write their own name. Even if you reform the Constitution, they don't know what they are voting on. So here comes the religious guy, comes in the name of God, and they will follow him because they don't know any better.

So education have to come before democracy. Without education, democracy dies. Education is the oxygen of democracy.

In Libya—back to your question, in Libya, how we can see the future in Libya—you got to remember there was a time that came that they said there was somebody, American pastor, I believe in Florida, was burning the Koran, something like that.

Mr. YOHO. Right. From my hometown.

Rev. EL SHAFIE. Blaming you, by the way, I'm sure.

And everybody went attacking American Embassies, burning Bibles and so on and so forth.

Do you remember what happened in Libya, sir, in that time? They went to cemeteries. There were cemeteries where the old British soldiers that fought the Second World War was. There was a cross in their cemeteries, and they went to destroy the crosses. This is after a very short period of time that we supported them, that we send our troops to help them, and to finish Ghadafi like—the war won in Libya because the NATO troops interfered and because the American troops build no-fly zone, make no mistake.

Mr. YOHO. Right.

Rev. EL SHAFIE. But this is how was the respond.

When we are not helping, I think one of the major thing that we are missing in our policies is accountability. There is nothing wrong with accountability. When I am giving you—I went to Iraq not that long time ago. I took Canadian Members of Parliament and Canadian Senators—I live in Canada; I am a Canadian—and I want to Iraq. It was the first Canadian delegation to go to Iraq after the war. Canada gave to Iraq \$300 million. When I met with the Vice President, and when I met with the Deputy Prime Minister, I told them, "What did you do with this money?" And they said, "We don't know."

I want to inform you and to ensure you that 90 percent of the aid that goes from the American Government, if it is not more, and

goes to the Libyan Government or to the Iraqi Government or to Syrian Government at some point is—will be misused.

Mr. YOHO. I agree. And that is—you know, as we give foreign aid, I think we need to change our whole policy in that here is our aid; these are the conditions you take it under. You know, we believe in these things: We believe in human rights, we believe in freedom of expression—or religious freedoms and all that. I am not going to tell you you have to do it, but if you want our money, this is what you do.

Rev. EL SHAFIE. That is it.

Mr. YOHO. And so—but you see Libya playing out in a favorable way, or do you think it is still rocky and it can go either way?

Rev. EL SHAFIE. No, is still rocky. I think Libya—

Mr. YOHO. I think so, too.

Rev. EL SHAFIE [continuing]. Is the cancer under the skin.

Mr. YOHO. I agree.

Rev. EL SHAFIE. This will come at some point.

Mr. YOHO. Dr. Eibner?

Mr. EIBNER. Yes, sir.

I think Libya is very rocky indeed. And we have heard about some of the events in the Libya since the revolution. One which is not mentioned by Reverend El Shafie was the arrest of scores of Coptic Christians from Egypt in Libya, and they were tortured and abused very badly simply for allegedly sharing the Gospel. So there is great cause to be concerned about the consequences of our policy in Libya.

I would agree with Reverend El Shafie that there are really two fundamental conditions for democracy. One is a separation of religion and state, and the other is the freedom to choose one's religion.

Mr. YOHO. I wrote that down when you said that. How do you instill that on another country when that is not their belief?

Mr. EIBNER. That is exactly what I am leading up to is that these two conditions, which I think we would all agree are fundamental conditions for democracy, are generally thought of throughout the Islamic world as un-Islamic.

Mr. YOHO. Right.

Mr. EIBNER. And that to promote those conditions or those values is to act against Islam. That is the huge problem that we face.

Mr. YOHO. Exactly right.

Mr. EIBNER. In order to really fundamentally change—of course, the United States can use its influence here, and there and tinker with systems, and make it a little bit better or a little bit worse, but to fundamentally change the situation so that one has—so that these conditions are met, it would mean nothing short than going back to old-fashioned imperialism, where the United States moves in like the French or the British in old times: Here we are, we are here to stay, we run the show, and we take responsibility for governance. That is something that we in the United States do not do with our role as a superpower. It is another way of saying, actually, neoimperial power.

Mr. YOHO. Right.

Mr. EIBNER. We want to have our—guarantee our resources, our strategic interests, but not take real responsibility. And we repeat-

edly take half measures like, you know, calling for the overthrow of the Assad regime, but without having a real strategy and resources to make it happen and to make it work in a desirable—in a desirable way.

Mr. YOHO. And that is what I see is, I mean, we are doing the same thing over and over again, but we are not getting the results we want. And I don't know how you get to that, because, like you said, you can't separate religion from politics in Islam, because it is one and the same; they work together in that—in that mindset. And we are trying to say, well, we want to separate religion from the politics; we want the religious freedom.

Mr. EIBNER. Well, I say that I don't believe that these are our real goals as a Nation. Our strategic goals are not to achieve that, and as I mentioned in my statement, I am convinced that our major strategic goal in the region is to create this Sunni axis from Turkey to the Gulf states as a barrier to Shiite in Iran, and these human rights issues and religious liberty issues are sadly sacrificed on the altar of these greater geopolitical interests that our Nation has.

Mr. YOHO. Okay. Thank you for your testimony.

Ms. Shea?

Ms. SHEA. Yeah. I want to second what my copanelists have said about Libya, but I think that it is very important to focus on Egypt and to think about Egypt as you are. We do provide billions of support for the government even now. And maybe putting Egypt soon on life support as it threatens to teeter over the cliff of failed statehood—June 30 is the date to watch; they are planning big demonstrations against the regime and counterdemonstrations against the protesters.

And Egypt is the country in the Middle East with the largest—in the Muslim Middle East with the largest Christian population, by far; maybe 8–10 million Christians. Only two, three others rise to anywhere near 1 million, and that is Syria, with perhaps 1 million or so Christians; Lebanon; and Iraq, which has been devastated, the Christian population there.

If the Copts are attacked—continue to be attacked, it is going to be a very, very difficult situation, and it will be—signal further radicalization of that whole area, because once the great cultural crossroads in history, this Middle Eastern region, it will be totally Islamicized for the first time and can be expected to radicalize.

Mr. YOHO. And that is my concern. That is where I see we are heading with the policies we have. And, you know, I have read all your stuff in here, and what I look forward to is redirecting our foreign policy in a way that it is not interventionism, it is more on trade, technological advice, and help along those lines. And that is what I look forward to doing.

Ms. SHEA. We don't have any red line at all in our aid to Egypt to protect the Christian minority there, and we should.

Mr. YOHO. Okay. Doc.

Mr. JASSER. Thank you. And I am just sort of—there are some issues I just think we really need to address. And as far as promoting religious freedom abroad, you know, the mechanism is, the narrative—I think many of us agree on the symptoms, that there are religious minorities being attacked, that their plight is as grim

as it has ever been. But then as you make that assessment, you can't get away from the fact that you cannot defeat al-Qaeda and radical Islam in Syria or in Egypt or in Saudi without changing the dictatorships.

Assad produced, allowed al-Qaeda in because it is a mechanism for sectarian control his population. So if the narrative becomes a binary choice, I can tell you, as you mentioned, my family, you know, they saw, as they were in and out—my grandfather was in and out of prison in the 1950s. As dictatorship after dictatorship happened in Syria, and then it solidified into this Ba'athist regime, they looked upon the West as the leader of the free world and a place to come to build these ideas. Not as a Commissioner, but my NGO is based on the separation of mosque and state, is based on advocating Islamic ideas against groups like the Brotherhood. But Egypt, for example, will finally be able to treat the condition of theocracy that comes from the Brotherhood through the freedom that it got after the departure of Mubarak.

So to think that it is going to be clean and not a mess is not what I am trying to say, but to say somehow that Arabs or Muslims are any different than Americans were at their revolution is just, I don't believe, the human narrative that is part of the International Religious Freedom Act that every human being wants to be free when left to their own devices.

And the United States, I believe—and I think to say that sitting on our hands doesn't have—you know, sort of keeps us clean of what is happening and with no moral obligation, and somehow we can then during any political cycle say that we had nothing to do with the changes there I don't think is a fair assessment in that there are choices. And if Syria continues to go south and radicalize, that that will be a choice we have allowed to happen, and that we could have steered it in a different direction.

Certainly some interests will try to blame people that decide to help the opposition with some untoward effects that may happen, but I still believe that the last 28 months demonstrate that anything against Assad, you defeat him first, and then later—and many of the Free Syrian Army say this: Defeat Assad first, then we defeat al-Qaeda.

Mr. YOHO. Well, you know, I want America to be the magnet in the world that people look to and aspire to to look at a country that says, that is what freedom does; you can become and do whatever you want to in a country that honors those basic rights, and we have that Constitution we have been blessed with.

But yet I guess what I am looking for is a way to have the people uprising, because it has got to come from the ground up. We can't instill it from the top down. It is not going to work. I mean, when you have 1 billion Muslims in the world that don't quite believe the way we do, to put our beliefs there, it has got to be an uprising from the ground up. And I look forward to, you know, sending questions to you guys and hearing more from you.

One of the things that has been promoted is Radio Free America, you know, and the Freedom Network to get that message out. And there are other things like that I know we can do on a small scale, but to promote that, that ideology of freedom, that it is there for everybody, and help them achieve that.

I appreciate your time. Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much.

Mr. —

Rev. EL SHAFIE. Can I add something, please, just something extremely small?

Mr. YOHO. Is that okay, Mr. Chairman?

Mr. SMITH. Absolutely.

Rev. EL SHAFIE. One of the things about education, like what I was talking about education, the accountability of the American aid. First of all, I—I disagree with Dr. Jasser, if we defeated Assad today will defeat al-Qaeda tomorrow. Never happened before in history and will not happen now. It just will not happen. Experience wise it did happen.

But, example, just a quick example about education, because if you really want to build this true democracy, you have to start from the young generation. This is a book from the Egyptian—from the Egyptian schools during the time of Mubarak. Was supported, funded by American aid, the 1.9- that we gave to the Egyptians after Camp David.

This book, it was supposed to be—it is in every school until now. When you open the book, you found on page number 24, speaking about jihad, for example, violent jihad. When you are looking at page number 11, you found that there is no Israel on the map, does not exist completely. And so on and so forth, big examples.

I think this will be much better for all of us, if we are giving aid for a school, for example, to raise a new generation, let us go to the school ourselves or the Embassy that—in this region, like if we have the American Embassy in Cairo, for example; why don't make a surprise visit to the school and grab one of the books that you paid for?

Mr. YOHO. I think that is a great idea, and that goes back to your idea of accountability. I mean, we all talk about transparency and accountability, but we don't see it, and we don't follow through. And we can't afford to do that anymore for the sake of Syria, Egypt, all these other countries. And it is—if we are going to spend the American taxpayers' money, when we are borrowing at the point we are and the debt we are in, we need to change the game and the rules of the game, I will say.

Rev. EL SHAFIE. Yes, sir.

Mr. YOHO. And again, thank you all. Appreciate it.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Yoho, thank you very much.

On that very point, as you and I and, I think, everyone in this room knows, in Rodgers and Hammerstein's famous South Pacific, there is a song in it where you have to be taught, taught about racism, taught about hate, how it is passed on from generation to generation. And I and our subcommittee for years has raised the textbooks issue, particularly in the camps, but as well, as the Reverend said, the books that were very much utilized during the Mubarak regime.

The problem is we have gone from bad on worse. And I think that is what we are trying to say with this hearing, that the Christians have been targeted. As Ms. Shea has so eloquently pointed out, it is not collateral damage; they are being targeted. And I don't think that understanding has—has been accepted by some people

within the administration, or within Congress, or in the European community.

And, Dr. Jasser, as you know, during the worst days of the Bosnia conflict, you know, not only did I make frequent trips there, but I had the hearing where we heard from the translator who was there when Milosevic and the Dutch peacekeepers were lifting up glasses of wine or champagne as 8,000 Muslim men were loaded onto buses and were destroyed in an act of genocide in Srebrenica, a so-called U.N. safe haven.

Hopefully, we learned from those lessons. Part of the reason for this hearing is to say that Christians are being targeted, as Ms. Shea pointed out, and the response has been at best inadequate.

I do believe there is good faith on the part of the administration. The problem is that we haven't had that line to say, our Deputy Assistant Secretary talked about generically talking about human rights with the opposition, the Free Syrian Army. There needs to be a very carefully delineated list of things that need to be avoided, including the targeting of Christians simply because they are Christians. So hopefully that message will be taken back.

Your testimonies have been of enormous, enormous help to us. I have other questions, but it is late, and you have been very patient with your time. I will submit them for the record.

But I want to thank you, and thank you for your bold and very effective leadership over the course of many, many years for each of our four distinguished panelists.

Mr. Yoho, thank you for your participation. Thank you to my friends on the other side of the aisle.

The hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 5:58 p.m., the subcommittees were adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X



MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE HEARING RECORD

JOINT SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations
Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ), Chairman

Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), Chairman

June 24, 2013

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held jointly by the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations and the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at www.foreignaffairs.house.gov):

DATE: Tuesday, June 25, 2013

TIME: 3:00 p.m.

SUBJECT: Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle

WITNESSES:

Panel I

Mr. Thomas O. Melia
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
U.S. Department of State

Panel II

Zuhdi Jasser, M.D.
Commissioner
U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

Rev. Majed El Shafie
Founder
One Free World International

John Eibner, Ph.D.
Chief Executive Officer
Christian Solidarity International, USA

Ms. Nina Shea
Director
Center for Religious Freedom
Hudson Institute

By Direction of the Chairman

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations
Re: Middle East and North Africa HEARINGDay Tuesday Date June 25, 2013 Room 2172 Rayburn HOBStarting Time 3:04 p.m. Ending Time 5:58 p.m.Recesses 0 (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____)

Presiding Member(s)

Rep. Chris Smith

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session Electronically Recorded (taped) Executive (closed) Session Stenographic Record Televised

TITLE OF HEARING:

Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

*Rep. Schneider, Rep. Weber, Rep. Yoho, Rep. D. Collins, Rep. Kennedy, Rep. Connolly, Rep. Kinzinger*NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: *(Mark with an * if they are not members of full committee.)*HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes No *(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)*STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: *(List any statements submitted for the record.)**Prepared statement from Rep. Connolly**Prepared statement from Rep. Eshoo and Rep. Wolf**Questions for the record from Rep. C. Smith for DAS Melia with Responses**Excerpt of USCIRF Report: Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria**Material submitted for the record by Dr. Eibner**Material submitted for the record by Ms. Shea*

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

OR

TIME ADJOURNED 5:58 p.m.*Gregory B. Simpson*
Subcommittee Staff Director

The Honorable Gerald E. Connolly (VA-11)

Religious Minorities in Syria: Caught in the Middle
Tuesday, 6/18/13
3pm

There has been much talk of late about the President's decision to provide arms to the opposition forces in Syria. The trigger for this decision was the finding by multiple U.S. outlets that Bashar al Assad used chemical weapons. Before this decision, President Obama was criticized by several lawmakers—most notably Senators McCain and Graham—for not acting quickly enough or “leading from behind.” It is disappointing that our President was criticized for deliberating over the intelligence before deciding on a course of action. Our recent history has shown us that when the United States intervenes too quickly without considering all possibilities, we risk losing untold amounts of blood and treasure. Being skeptical about what is going on during a ground war ought to be praised, not criticized.

In my view, the President has shown great caution with regard to intervening in Syria. He has made clear that his goal is to get the United States out of its wars, not to start new ones. Slipping and sliding into a third engagement would not serve the United States well. Moreover, there is understandably a war fatigue among Americans.

That said, the United States has not been standing idly by. In fact, the United States heretofore has been providing humanitarian aid to Syrians. It is in our and our allies' national security interests for a stable Syria to exist—one that respects democratic institutions and the rights of minorities. An unstable, jihadist Syria would not complement U.S. interests. Time will tell how arming the rebels by the United States will alter circumstances on the ground. There are already multiple actors on the ground in Syria, including Hezbollah fighters coming into Syria from Lebanon. This, in and of itself, threatens the stability of Lebanon, a country which is all too familiar with the high price of sectarian bloodshed.

Last, there is the issue of which rebels we are discussing. Sorting through the different groups, along with their allegiances and ideologies, is no small feat. In an ideal world, and obviously as Americans, our sympathies naturally go to the group that is fighting for freedom and shared human values. The real question is—which opposition groups share these values? Just a few days ago media outlets reported that arms from Libya have ended up in Syria. The situation on the ground seems to be a hodgepodge of groups. As the United States attempts to pick sides, it would behoove us to remember the consequences of past operations in which we supplied weapons to rebels. The provision of weapons to various armed group is a gamble, to say the least.

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MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD BY THE HONORABLE CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH,
A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF NEW JERSEY, AND CHAIRMAN,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS, AND INTER-
NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Testimony of the Honorable Anna G. Eshoo and the Honorable Frank Wolf

Joint Hearing: Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International
Organizations and the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
Religious Minorities in Syrian: Stuck in the Middle
2172 Rayburn House Office Building
June 25, 2013

We want to begin by thanking the House Foreign Affairs Committee for holding this very important hearing today on the plight of religious minorities in Syria. Thank you specifically to Chairs Smith and Ros-Lehtinen and Ranking Members Bass and Deutch for your leadership in this regard. As Co-Chairs of the Religious Minorities in the Middle East Caucus, we take the issue of oppression against religious minorities very seriously and have worked long and hard, in a bipartisan way, to develop solutions to ease their suffering.

As the deadly conflict in Syria unfolds, it's unfortunately unsurprising that religious minorities are the ones 'stuck in the middle.' Notably Syria's ancient Christian population, which makes up 10% of the country, has been forced to flee their ancestral homeland, nearly clearing out completely from Homs, a city which until recently had 160,000 Christians.

The Christians of Syria, as well as Iraq, Iran, Israel, and Egypt, are the oldest in the world. Christianity was, from the beginning, a Middle Eastern religion. The Assyrian Christians, the Chaldeans, actually celebrate Mass in Aramaic, which is the language Jesus spoke. For more than two thousand years, Christians have been a key part of the Middle Eastern community.

In April, two Christian bishops were kidnapped while carrying out humanitarian work around Aleppo. Bishop Youhanna Ibrahim, head of the Syriac Orthodox church in Aleppo, and Bishop Boulos Yazigi, of the Greek Orthodox church in the city, were abducted by gunmen Syrian state media called "terrorists." Later the kidnappers were described as "Chechen mercenaries" fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra, an extreme Islamist group that has links with al-Qaida.

Most of Syria's Christians have been forced to either support a regime that strictly restricted political freedoms but allowed for religious worship, or choose to flee the land their people have occupied since ancient times—we read in the Bible about Paul on the road to Damascus. Many Christians fear that if President Assad is overthrown, in the ensuing power vacuum they'll be further targeted and their communities destroyed, just as many were in Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. They see the rising power of Islamist parties in post-revolutionary Egypt and Tunisia and it becomes clear that they are increasingly vulnerable.

It's because of conflicts like this in Syria, as well as the challenges faced by religious minorities in Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, that together we introduced legislation to create a high-level special envoy charged with advocating on behalf of religious minorities in the Middle East and South Central Asia.

At the time of introduction, the International Religious Freedom Ambassador post at the State Department had been vacant for two years, sending a clear message globally that this issue

simply was not a priority. In the last Congress, our legislation overwhelmingly passed the House only to stall in the Senate. Then Senators Webb and Kerry blocked it from moving forward largely at the request of the State Department. We've reintroduced the legislation this year and we urge this Committee to once again consider the legislation and send it to the floor for a vote before the full House.

We know that a special envoy will not single-handedly solve the problems faced by religious minorities, but it certainly can't hurt to have a high-level person within the State Department bureaucracy who is exclusively focused on the protection and preservation of these ancient communities. It will send an important message to both our own foreign policy establishment and to suffering communities in the Middle East and elsewhere that religious freedom is a priority — that America will be a voice for the voiceless.

We look forward to hearing the testimony of the witnesses here today and hope to continue a robust dialogue about supporting the religious minority communities in Syria and the entire Middle East.



Questions posed during the hearing with responses from USAID

June 25, 2013
Thomas O. Melia

Mr. Smith. Mr. Melia, thank you very much for your testimony and for the work of your -- your office. I -- I do have a few questions I'd like to pose, beginning first with do we have any sense as to how many Christians, how many people of minority faiths have been killed, wounded and put to flight either as IDPs or as refugees? In your testimony -- is that something that if you can look into it even further and get back to us with some number just so we know the order of magnitude, how many people have been killed or wounded?

Mr. Melia. The Asad regime continues to commit gross and systematic violations of human rights as well as violations of international humanitarian law. Syria's civilians are also under attack by al-Qaida-linked groups and other extremist rebels. The targeting of protected civilians is completely unacceptable, and we condemn it in the strongest possible terms. We have been absolutely clear that those responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian law and of serious human rights violations and abuses must be held accountable.

According to the United Nations, 93,000 Syrians have died since the beginning of the conflict (the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports more than 100,000) and the number is rising. More than 1.6 million people have left their homes in Syria to seek refuge in another country -- a number that could more than double by the end of 2013. In addition, nearly 4.5 million Syrians are internally displaced, out of a total population of 20 million.

We have seen estimates that over 400,000 Syrian Christians are among the refugee population. However we do not have an accurate count as many aid organizations do not record the sect or religion of the refugees, some refugees are reluctant to volunteer such information given the current sectarian tensions, and there are many Syrians in the region, including Christians, who have not registered as refugees or sought services from aid agencies.

The Syrian Revolution against Asad's tyranny and brutality is a struggle for dignity and freedom. We call on all Syrians to protect and respect the rights of all civilians, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or religion. The Syrian people have a long history of tolerance and co-existence, and those who would murder civilians and prisoners as a means to win popular support or undermine the support of other groups are not credible voices for a future pluralistic and democratic Syria.

Mr. Smith. Dr. Jasser will testify later today that the Syrian International News Agency recently reported that armed rebels affiliated with the Free Syrian Army raided the Christian-populated al-Dub (ph) Village and massacred all of its civilian residents, including women and children. Are you aware of this report? Was it investigated by the State Department? And did it show the -- the Free Syrian Army responsible? And how are those battalions, how are those troops being held to account?

Mr. Melia. We regularly track violations and abuses committed in Syria by all parties, and will continue to reiterate our call for all parties to the conflict in Syria to protect civilians in accordance with international humanitarian law and to respect the rights of all civilians, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or gender. We have looked into the reports of the alleged Free Syrian Army raid in al-Duvair Village in May as reported by the Assyrian International News Agency. We have discussed the alleged incident with multiple Syrian documentation groups, religious organizations, and with the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and have concluded that the report is inaccurate. The report cited by Dr. Jasser was based on a report by the Iranian government-linked FARS News agency, which has a history of questionable reporting. The Syrian Network for Human Rights, a well-regarded Syrian led documentation group, has confirmed that Syrian regime forces targeted the village resulting in the death of four civilians in May 2012. Following that attack a clash between opposition forces and regime forces took place on the outskirts of the al-Duvair village which left two more dead. However, they found no evidence that the Free Syrian Army or other opposition forces targeted the Christian minority in the village. The Syrian Network for Human Rights also reported that the village church was destroyed due to regime shelling.

We have been absolutely clear that anyone responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian law and violations and abuses of human rights law must be held accountable. Through partnerships with groups like the Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC), we are supporting documentation and other efforts to lay the groundwork for justice and accountability processes and to support Syrian efforts as they identify how best to bring to justice those who have committed these heinous acts.

Adherence to international humanitarian law and respect for human rights is central to our engagement with the Free Syrian Army, and we work closely with those groups that signed on to the code of conduct issued by the Free Syrian Army in the fall of 2012. Major General Salim Idriss, Chief of Staff for the Syrian Military Council, has condemned violations committed by opposition forces and called for trials, including the Independent Omar al-Farouq brigade who committed a well-documented mutilation of a regime soldier in April 2013 in Homs. We are encouraged by the actions of our political and military opposition partners to work towards and speak out in favor of these shared goals, and are working to use our assistance to improve the capacity of these proven actors.

We also work closely with our allies to strengthen the moderate opposition by blocking access to cash and weapons by the Assad regime and violent extremist groups, and laying the groundwork for an inclusive democratic transition.



SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD BY ZUHDI JASSER, M.D., COMMISSIONER, U.S.
COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria

April 2013

THE U.S.
COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL
RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM

was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress.

SYRIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Due to the intensifying conflict between government forces and affiliates supporting Bashar al-Assad's regime and anti-government elements seeking his overthrow, the Syrian people have experienced egregious violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. Government forces and affiliated militias have perpetrated religiously-motivated attacks against Sunni Muslim civilians and members of religious minority communities, and have increased sectarian divides through rhetoric and religiously-motivated violence. In this context, USCIRF has become increasingly concerned about religious freedom conditions in Syria, both during the current crisis and in its aftermath. This report provides USCIRF's preliminary findings and recommendations. Over the coming months, USCIRF will continue to monitor the situation, and expects to issue additional reports and recommendations.

The escalating violence and humanitarian crisis impacts members of all religious communities, including their religious freedom. Syria has historically been a religiously diverse country with a pre-conflict estimated population of 22 million, who traditionally lived together without religious or sectarian animosities. The largest religious community is Sunni Muslims, who constitute roughly 75% of the population. Alawites, who follow an offshoot of Shi'i Islam, are approximately 12%, and various Christian denominations are 10%. Other religious communities in the country include Druze (4%); Yezidis (1%), who the government categorizes as Muslims; and a very small Jewish community found in Damascus, Al Qamishli, and Aleppo.

The Syrian conflict, which began in March 2011, was declared by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on July 15, 2012 as a "non-international armed conflict," the legal term for "civil war." The fighting has caused a humanitarian disaster, with over 70,000 people dead (February 2013 estimate), at least 3.6 million internally displaced, and approximately 1.3 million as refugees in neighboring countries. The international community, including the ICRC, the UN Human Rights Council's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, and numerous NGOs, agree that the al-Assad regime has violated its obligations under the 1949 Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I, including committing crimes against humanity, such as extrajudicial killings, rape and torture. They have also found that groups seeking the overthrow of the al-Assad regime have committed similar acts, but on a lesser scale. The increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict has created a climate where the human rights of all Syrians, including religious freedom, have been violated. The conflict also threatens Syria's religious diversity, as members of the smallest minority communities are either fleeing the country or face an uncertain future in a post al-Assad Syria.

Syria's transition from armed conflict to a representative democracy under rule of law will be difficult, arduous, and remains uncertain. U.S. leadership is vital, both to press the al-Assad government to cease its severe human rights violations and to ensure that any future government protects human rights and religious freedoms for all Syrians. The United States should, along with its other efforts during the conflict, highlight the importance of respecting religious freedom and the rights of minority religious communities. The United States and other donor nations should target assistance to civil society actors, opposition members, and religious groups that espouse the rule of law, human rights, including religious freedom, and a pluralistic Syria. Additionally, the United States and other donor countries should prioritize programs that promote minority rights, interfaith cooperation, peace-building, and legal and human rights education and

training, as well as a robust and transparent program that documents human right violations. If the United States concludes that particularly severe violations of religious freedom are engaged in or tolerated by the Syrian government, the Secretary of State should consider designating Syria a CPC and modify existing targeted sanctions to reference religious freedom violations. The United States should increase efforts to assist Syrians who are internally displaced or have sought refuge in neighboring countries. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy toward Syria can be found at the end of this report.

BACKGROUND

The al-Assad family's brutal authoritarian rule for over 40 years created the political conditions for the current conflict. Under both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, no political opposition was allowed and Syrian security forces were permitted to perpetrate egregious human rights abuses to oppress anyone critical of the government. An adherent of the minority Alawite community, which is affiliated with Shi'i Islam, Hafez al-Assad named himself president in 1970. To maintain control over all aspects of Syrian society, he placed Alawites loyal to him in key positions of his government, army, and security forces and oppressed political opposition from the majority Sunni Muslim population.

Following Hafez's June 2000 death, he was succeeded by his son, Bashar. While there were hopes that Bashar al-Assad would usher in a new political openness, he maintained his father's status quo of strict political restrictions to oppress any opposition.

Prior to the current war, Syria offered a modicum of freedom of religion, including worship, particularly for Syria's smallest religious minority communities, including Christians. However, the government controlled the selection of Sunni Muslim imams and limited their religious freedoms. According to the 2012 constitution, while there is no official religion, Article 3 requires that the president be a Muslim and declares that "Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation." Article 3 also states "the State shall respect all religions, and ensure the freedom to perform all the rituals that do not prejudice public order; The personal status of religious communities shall be protected and respected." Article 33 states that Syrian citizens shall not be discriminated against based on religion or creed, among other grounds.

ESCALATING SECTARIANISM

The initial peaceful protests in March 2011 by disenfranchised, largely Sunni Muslim opponents of the al-Assad regime had no religious or sectarian undertones. Protestors called for the repeal of the abusive emergency law, space for political parties, and the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad. As the protests grew, President al-Assad ordered an increasingly violent crackdown and he and his regime played on sectarian fears, repeatedly stating it was fighting "extreme Islamist factions" that were acting to increase sectarian tensions. The use of sectarian and religiously-oriented language by al-Assad and his supporters has continued throughout the conflict. Most recently in March 2013, the government backed Supreme Iftaa Council issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) calling for "jihad" to defend al-Assad's government.

The regime's 40-plus years of repressing the Sunni majority and its policy to exacerbate sectarian tensions before and during the current conflict has deepened the hostilities among all of

Syria's diverse religious and ethnic communities. The government's language and violence have caused protesters and opposition forces to increasingly view the violence as an Alawite-led attack on Sunni Muslims. Many minority religious communities have tried to stay neutral in the conflict, but opposition forces increasingly see their non-alignment, or perceived non-alignment, as support for the al-Assad regime. Minority religious communities thus have been forced by circumstances to take a position either in favor of the al-Assad regime, which historically provided them some religious freedom protections, or in favor of the uncertainties of the opposition. As these sectarian fissures deepen, it is increasingly likely that religious communities will be targeted not for their political allegiances, but solely for their religious affiliation.

The December 2012 report of the UN Human Rights Council's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic noted the increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict. It found that "[a]s battles between Government forces and anti-Government armed groups approach the end of their second year, the conflict has become overtly sectarian in nature." The Commission of Inquiry also found that regime forces and their militias have attacked civilians because they were Sunnis. One interviewee stated a pro-regime militia told her that "they would kill all Sunnis in the region and that the area belonged to them." The Commission of Inquiry also received "credible reports of anti-Government armed groups attacking Alawites and other pro-Government minority communities."

The Commission of Inquiry concluded that "[e]ntire [religious] communities are at risk of being forced out of the country or of being killed inside the country," adding that these communities believe "not without cause, that they face an existential threat." Because of this fear, minority communities are increasingly becoming parties to the conflict, forced to choose sides, which leads to armed clashes and exacerbates sectarian divisions. The Commission of Inquiry also noted that "[s]ome minority communities, notably the Alawites and Christians, have formed armed self-defense groups to protect their neighborhoods from anti-Government fighters."

Regime Supporters

The Syrian government has a large army and sophisticated security apparatus, although its size and strength has considerably decreased from deaths and defections. In addition, Syrian government forces are supported by various pro-regime militias, most of which are directly funded and armed by the regime or its foreign government allies, and have a sectarian character. In part because of the actions of these militias, minority communities increasingly believe they are targeted for their religious or ethnic affiliation.

The most notable domestic militias are the U.S. designated terrorist organizations, *Jaysh al-Sha'bi* and *Shabiha*. The *Jaysh al-Sha'bi* is a militia of Syrian civilian volunteers, the vast majority of whom are Alawite or Shi'a. While the group operates under the Syrian regime, it is also supported by Iran and Hezbollah. *Shabiha*, which loosely translates to "thugs," are smaller, regime-funded groups, with less organization and training. The *Shabiha* are primarily drawn from the Alawite and Shi'i communities, but Sunni Muslims loyal to the regime are also believed to participate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

USCIRF is deeply concerned about the increasing sectarian nature of the conflict and mounting violations of freedom of religion or belief. While it is difficult to ascertain if individuals or groups are targeted for their religious affiliation or because of their allegiance or perceived allegiance to one side of the conflict, it is clear that religious freedom for all Syrians is threatened and will be in jeopardy in a post al-Assad Syria. The indiscriminate use of military force and sectarian tactics of the al-Assad regime, government proxies, and some non-state actors seeking the regime's overthrow are creating deep sectarian fissures among Syria's diverse religious communities. These cleavages will not be easily overcome, and the threat of religiously-motivated reprisal attacks in a post al-Assad Syria is real. The humanitarian disaster, including the vast number of IDPs and refugees, and the scarce resources available to Syrians will further exacerbate sectarian divides.

U.S. leadership is essential to ensuring the full transition to representative democratic rule, ending human rights violations, and advancing religious freedom and the rule of law in Syria. U.S. government efforts in coordinating diplomatic actions of regional allies—particularly Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar—will be critical to provide Syrian leaders with incentives to ensure that political reforms protect human rights and religious freedoms for all. The escalating conflict provides openings for terrorists to operate in Syria, and anti-government elements may splinter along religious and secular lines after al-Assad steps down or is removed. The United States should take steps to ensure that the post-al-Assad Syrian government does not harbor violent religious extremists, and supports religious freedoms and international human rights standards. To ensure an orderly transition of power, all perpetrators of human rights violations should be held accountable, whether Syrian forces, non-state actors affiliated with the regime, or anti-government elements.

I. Promoting Protection of Religious Freedom in Syria

The U.S. government should:

- prioritize human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, in any required dealings with the al-Assad regime, and increase U.S. government advocacy on the need for the regime to protect civilians affected by the armed conflict; and
- consider designating Syria a CPC, if the United States concludes that the Syrian government is engaged in or tolerating particularly severe violations of religious freedom, and modify existing targeted sanctions to reference religious freedom violations.

The U.S. government should urge, and where appropriate assist, the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) and future post-al-Assad government to:

- provide security to protect likely targets of sectarian or religiously-motivated violence, including areas where religious or minority communities live or congregate, such as neighborhoods, religious sites, and places of worship;

- provide technical training and support to local councils, courts, lawyers and judges on domestic laws and international standards relating to human rights and religious freedom;
- undertake prompt, transparent, and effective investigations of all incidents of sectarian or religiously-motivated violence and bring the perpetrators to justice consistent with due process of law, regardless of whether they are former regime agents or members of the opposition;
- ensure that they neither directly nor indirectly support any militia, non-state actor, or other organization credibly charged with involvement in sectarian or religiously-motivated violence;
- work to see a future constitution that respects freedom of religion or belief in full, not just freedom of worship, as well as minority rights, women's rights, and freedom of expression;
- include religious minorities in key leadership positions and work to see religious minorities represented in parliament, either through their prominent inclusion on party lists and/or by establishing reserved seats in their parliament; and
- work with Syria's diverse religious communities, including the smallest minority communities and their political and civic representatives, to help them reach agreement on what measures are needed to ensure religious freedom and security for all communities in the country.

II. Prioritizing Human Rights, including Freedom of Religion or Belief, in U.S. Relations with the "Friends of Syria" Group

The U.S. government should:

- work with like-minded partners among the Friends of Syria to fund and develop efforts to promote intra- and inter-religious tolerance and respect for religious freedom and related rights, and ensure that all international cooperation with the SOC emphasizes the importance of ensuring the rights to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of opinion and expression, as well as protection of minority religious communities;
- create a working group among the Friends of Syria to focus on protecting religious and ethnic minorities in a post-Assad Syria and constructing a new constitution and legal system that protects freedom of religion or belief and associated human rights for all Syrians;
- engage regional partners, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, on their vision for a post-al-Assad Syria to reach and implement a mutually-agreed plan on how the international community will influence the direction of a new government and its system of law; and
- urge regional partners, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, not to support armed groups or proxies promoting a religious ideology and/or a form of government that would violate religious freedom and other internationally-guaranteed human rights.

III. Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief through U.S. Programs

The U.S. government should:

- direct U.S. officials and recipients of U.S. grants to prioritize projects that promote multi-religious and multi-ethnic efforts to encourage religious tolerance and understanding, foster knowledge of and respect for universal human rights standards, and develop the political ability of religious minorities to organize themselves and convey their concerns effectively; and
- ensure that U.S. development assistance prioritizes areas where Syria's smallest religious minority communities are concentrated, and that the use of such funding is determined in consultation with these communities' political and civic leaders.

IV. Addressing the Situation of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees

The U.S. government should:

- establish a refugee resettlement program for Syrian refugees fleeing targeted religious persecution from Syrian government forces, affiliated militias, or non-state actors opposed to the al-Assad regime;
- continue to provide significant funding to the UN, humanitarian organizations, host nations, and host communities to provide essential humanitarian aid to vulnerable Syrian internally displaced persons and refugees, and encourage other countries to do likewise;
- encourage UNHCR to make preparations for increased refugee flows of religious minorities, to develop a protection program to ensure their safety in refugee camps from reprisal attacks along sectarian lines, and to sponsor interfaith dialogues among the various refugee communities;
- increase its efforts to process Iraqi refugees deferred for resettlement to the United States, including by moving applicants to neighboring countries or interviewing applicants by videoconference in locations where in-person interviews cannot be conducted for security reasons; and
- ensure that Iraqi and Syrian refugees scheduled to be resettled to the United States are not delayed unnecessarily by providing adequate personnel to conduct background screening and enforcing proper application of the existing waiver of the material support bar to individuals forced to provide support to terrorists under duress.

DISSENTING STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONERS AZIZAH AL-HIBRI, MARY ANN GLENDON AND WILLIAM SHAW:

We have strong and deep feelings for the sufferings currently being endured by the people of Syria. We dissent from the report, however, because the facts about and the relation between issues of religious freedom and the political dynamics of the armed struggle there are not sufficiently clear to enable us to draw conclusions or make recommendations regarding matters that lie outside USCIRF's mandate to monitor violations of religious freedom.

A broadening of the informational and interpretive bases regarding events in the country may help provide grounds for clearer and more accurate analysis and hence judgments.

Continued monitoring of Syria should be done. Report findings should stand on the strength of the facts uncovered and not be influenced by descriptive words/ phrases which can be interpreted as prejudicial.

The complete version of this report can be access here:

[http://www.uscifr.gov/images/Syria Report April 2013\(1\).pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/images/Syria%20Report%20April%202013(1).pdf)

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD BY JOHN EIBNER, PH.D., CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY INTERNATIONAL, USA



GENOCIDE ALERT: THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY INTERNATIONAL

MAY 2013

Christian Solidarity International has issued a Genocide Alert for religious minorities in the Syrian Arab Republic, specifically Alawites, Shia Muslims, Druze, Christians, Yezidis and Jews. Conditions currently exist for a genocide of these groups by armed non-state actors fighting against the Bashar al-Assad regime, particularly Jubhat al-Nusra and other Islamist groups fighting under a wide and ever-shifting collection of names.

Syria is currently in the third year of a conflict that began with peaceful anti-government protests in March 2011, protests which were immediately and repeatedly met with deadly violence from the Syrian state. Because the Syrian state is dominated by members of the Alawi sect, including President Bashar al-Assad, and because the Assad regime has historically protected and even favored members of religious minority groups in a region that is traditionally hostile to religious minorities, the uprising remained largely restricted to Syria's Sunni Arab majority (approximately 65% of the population.)

The militarization of the revolution, triggered by the Assad regime's unremitting violence against Syria's civilian population and large defections from the Syrian Armed Forces, which then organized into the "Free Syrian Army," did not change this sectarian dynamic. Weapons and funding for the rebels from Islamist-dominated states like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, the superior organization of Syrian Islamist groups, and the preexisting sectarianism of the movement contributed to increasing Islamist dominance, until, according to one analyst, "By November 2012, the ideological spectrum of Syria's armed movement had narrowed to one ranging from apolitical Sunni conservatism or rural sufism, across the Muslim Brotherhood's ikhwani Islamism, to the rigid ultra-orthodoxy of salafism. There was little or no room for secular ideologies." Another analyst concluded in December 2012 about Syria's armed rebels, "The overwhelming majority, if not all, espouse an Islamist, jihadist, Salafist outlook."

The Islamicization of the Syrian revolution has been accompanied by increased attacks on Syrian religious minorities from armed anti-government groups, including acts of religious cleansing, targeted killings, massacres, attacks on places of worship, and abductions. The anti-minority violence prompted the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria to warn in December 2012 that, "Entire [minority] communities are at risk of being forced out of the country or of being killed inside the country," a prospect that amounts to genocide under the definition of the Genocide Convention. In March 2013, Ambassador Frederic C. Hof, a former special adviser on Syria to the Obama administration, echoed this warning: "Left on its current trajectory, Syria is on the path to state failure and sustained sectarian violence, featuring mass atrocities and cleansing that could amount to genocide in some areas."

Anti-government rebels have cleansed several locales in Syria of their religious minority populations, most notably Homs, Syria's third-largest city, where nearly the entire Christian population of 80,000 was forcibly expelled, but also Qusayr, al-Burj al-Qastal, and some rural areas in Idlib and Latakia province. At least 14 minority places of worship across Syria, including Christian churches, Shia Muslim mosques and shrines and a Jewish Synagogue, have been deliberately attacked or destroyed. Car bomb attacks targeting Christian and Alawite neighborhoods of Damascus have killed scores of civilians and prompted many to flee.

According to one particularly disturbing report from February 2013, rebels in Aleppo shot and killed an Armenian Christian man after checking the identity papers of all the passengers on board a bus and noting that his surname sounded Armenian. Two Christian priests traveling on a bus in Aleppo province were similarly singled out and abducted by rebels in the same month. Sources inside CSI have reported that several Christians in Raqqa City were murdered by Jubhat al-Nusra after the group seized the city from regime forces in March 2013. The UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria reported in December 2012 that, "upon capturing Government forces," one FSA battalion in Latakia province imprisoned its Sunni captives, "while Alawites were immediately executed."

Abductions by rebel groups, gangs or common criminals, are a ubiquitous phenomenon in Syria and disproportionately affect religious minorities. In January 2013, some 50 people were abducted from Hasake province in northeast Syria, half of them Christians. A CSI source in Aleppo reports that abductions occur almost daily, "mainly of Christians, as they are thought to be the group that can pay the most for ransom." A Druze leader reported in March 2013, "Our people get stopped at checkpoints and are asked which sect they belong to. Once the militias hear that they are from Swaida [a province where 90% of the population is Druze], our men disappear." A Sunni anti-regime activist explained the targeting of Swaida's Druze, despite their considerable support for Sunnis under government assault in neighboring Daraa province, this way: "Jubhat al-Nusra sees the Druze as infidels, therefore they see attacking and kidnapping them as justified."

Religious minorities in Syria have also been victimized by regime violence. Many Syrian Christian refugees in Lebanon were forced to flee by the regime's indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas. Regime forces murdered Basel Shahade, a young Christian political activist, in Homs in May 2012. Bishop Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syrian Orthodox Church was kidnapped in April 2013 after criticizing the regime in public; the regime and the opposition traded blame for the abduction of the bishop, who remains in captivity. The Syrian opposition has also blamed the car bomb massacres in the Christian-Druze Damascus suburb of Jaramana on regime intelligence services. The regime has contributed significantly to the sectarian nature of the conflict by aggressively recruiting Christians, Alawites and Shiites into pro-government militias. The Assad regime has historically tried to suppress non-Arab Christian identities, such as that of the Assyrian Christian population.

Between 200,000 and 300,000 Christians have fled Syria since the beginning of the war, accounting for nearly one-fifth of the total Syrian refugee population, though Christians constituted only one-tenth of Syria's prewar population. Christian refugees in Turkey report that they are unable to stay in refugee camps set up by the Turkish government, as Jubhat al-Nusra and other rebel groups often impress young men from the camps into fighting against the regime.

There is precedent for elimination of minority religious groups in Syria's modern history: following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, Syria's small Jewish population was subjected to repeated pogroms and systematic persecution by the state, leading to the slow exodus of nearly the entire community from the country.

Calls for genocide against religious minorities from rebel leaders in Syria are numerous and frequent. The chant "Alawites to the grave, Christians to Beirut!" has been reported at anti-government demonstrations since the earliest days of the revolution. In early 2013, a YouTube video surfaced of a young Sunni Syrian boy singing to a cheering crowd, "We will slaughter the Shiites in the towns of Kfariya and Fua" (two isolated Shia towns in Idlib province, which would later become the site of a mass abduction of Shia civilians). In July 2012, a Sunni rebel commander posted a video on YouTube threatening to kill any Sunni who traded with Shia Muslims, "even if it is a single grain of wheat." Many Free Syrian Army battalions have named themselves after Ibn Taymiyya, a 14th century Sunni Muslim scholar who called for the extermination of Alawites. Following the religious cleansing of Alawites from the village of Jamaliyya in December 2012, a Jubhat al-Nusra fighter said, "We are defending our religion. This is what our revolution is about." In July 2012, a Sunni rebel fighter declared, "All Alawites must be slaughtered."

Christian Solidarity International calls on the international community to act now to prevent the genocide of Syria's religious minorities.

MIDDLE EAST

Islamic extremists threaten Syria's Christians

Obama must not ignore sacrifice of religious minorities

By John Eibner

More than a year has elapsed since the United States aligned itself with Syria's Sunni-dominated opposition and the Middle East's Sunni powers to overthrow the regime of Bashar Assad. While the United States pursues this goal in the name of the Syrian people, it is clear that its ultimate strategic objective is to render Syria, Shiite Iran's most important regional ally, useless in its struggle for mastery of the Middle East.

To achieve its goal, the United States is employing economic sanctions, political backing for the Syrian opposition and lethal military support to the Free Syrian Army and other Sunni-dominated armed groups, channeled through Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey — all American allies with considerable democratic deficits, especially in the realm of religious and ethnic minority rights.

As the Syrian state has degraded, the people of Syria have experienced an upsurge of death, displacement and destruction. The United States' active support for regime change in Syria has signaled an anarchic scramble for power and influence, as neighboring states and terrorist groups such as al Qaeda vie for a share of the collapsing state. The Syrian civil war has become, in the words of Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta, "a situation that is rapidly spinning out of control."

During Syria's slow-motion descent into chaos, the State Department has vigorously publicized and condemned atrocities committed by forces loyal to President Assad. But

Syrian opposition forces increasingly match the Assad regime's disdain for the lives and liberty of the Syrian people, especially Christians and other non-Sunnis, who constitute about 25 percent of Syria's population.

Human rights monitors and church officials have reported cases of the armed opposition kidnapping, torturing, displacing, murdering and using civilians as human shields. Such crimes often are accompanied by cries of "Allahu Akbar," "Death to unbelievers" and other expressions of Islamic jihad.

Before the outbreak of anti-government violence in the spring of 2011, the strain of Sunni supremacism within the opposition was evident. "Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the coffin," became a refrain at public protests. (The Alawites belong to an offshoot sect of Islam and are seen as heretics by most Sunnis. The Assad family and most of its top lieutenants are Alawite.) Within a year, Islamist rebels had religiously cleansed 90 percent of the Christians from Homs, and they reportedly are holding 200 as hostages. This month, the Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo expressed fear that the same fate awaits the Christian community in his besieged see and in Damascus.

A July 31 article in The Washington Times told the story of a Syrian Alawite man who attempted to join a rebel group in Latakia, only to be rebuffed by rebels who said, "We don't need Alawi pigs with us!"

The United Nations secretary-general's special advisers on the prevention of genocide and on the responsibility to protect warned last month that with "deepening sectarian tensions (in Syria), the risk of further mass atrocity crimes is high."

In January 2011, former President Amine Gemayel of Lebanon broke a taboo of the international community when he declared that Islamic extremists were committing "genocide" against the Christians of the Middle East. President Nicolas Sarkozy of France soon followed suit by describing this genocide process as

"religious cleansing." Syria has surpassed Iraq as the epicenter of this regional catastrophe.

In President Obama's May 2011 address on the Arab uprisings, he pledged to defend "universal rights" in the Middle East — including religious freedom — with "all of the diplomatic, economic and strategic tools at our disposal." The United States must lose no more time translating those fine words into a concrete, implementable policy.

Mr. Obama should call on the Syrian opposition and its foreign supporters — especially Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey — to declare support for minority rights, religious liberty and religiously neutral government and to condemn all forms of religious supremacism. He furthermore should unveil without delay a policy response to the UN secretary-general's special advisers' appeal for "immediate, decisive action" to "protect populations at risk of further atrocity crimes in Syria."

Washington must not sacrifice the religious minorities of Syria in its efforts to build a Sunni Islamist bloc against the regional ambitions of Shiite Iran. Failure of the United States and its allies to guarantee the human rights of religious minorities will only cause these communities to cling tighter to the Assad regime for protection and thereby deepen and prolong the civil war.

John Eibner is CEO of Christian Solidarity International.





December 24, 2012

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President,

"Israel must be wiped off the map!" – proclaims the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This threat of genocide, combined with the development of Iran's nuclear capacity, is rightly taken seriously by the United States. Throughout your presidency you have made it clear that the United States is committed to preventing the eradication of the people of Israel.

There is, however, another threat of genocide in the Middle East – one which neither you, nor Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, have publicly acknowledged. It is the religious cleansing of Christians and other religious minorities from the Sunni-dominated Middle East.

Already, last year, former Lebanese President Amine Gemayel and French President Nicholas Sarkozy drew the attention of the international community respectively to acts of "genocide", and "a perverse program of religious cleansing" directed at Middle Eastern Christian communities.

Today, the crisis of religious cleansing is particularly acute in Syria. The general chaos and confusion of civil war harms all Syrians irrespective of religion. But members of religious minorities - roughly 25% of the population - are targeted for murder, abduction, displacement and humiliation with increasing frequency and ferocity. Religious cleansing proceeds apace under the publicly proclaimed slogan, "Alawites to the grave, and Christians to Beirut!" – a proclamation, like President Ahmadinejad's, of genocidal intent.

Some of the inciters and perpetrators of religious cleansing in Syria are driven by fanatical adherence to a genocidal ideology of jihad. Others find inspiration in a widespread and deep-seated culture of Sunni Muslim supremacism. They represent the most powerful elements within the Sunni-dominated rebel forces, extending far beyond the recently sanctioned al-Nusra Front militia. These Islamist militias, with the non-lethal backing of the United States and the lethal support of our country's closest regional Sunni allies – in particular Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey - strive to overthrow the secular dictatorship of Bashar al Assad and replace it with a Sunni Islamic state to serve as a barrier to Shiite Iran.

It is a tragic irony that Syrian religious minorities feel compelled to cling to the brutal Assad dictatorship - not out of love for the regime, but for survival in the face of religious cleansing from the side of American-supported Islamists. The failure of the Syrian armed opposition and its patrons in the "Friends of Syria" international contact group to gain the confidence of minorities has prolonged the life of the Assad regime and has inflicted more death and destruction on the Syrian people.

In a letter dated August 1, 2012, I urged you to act decisively to forestall genocide in Syria. Since then, the religious cleansing of Christians and other religious minorities in Syria has gained momentum.

In the meantime, others have issued their own genocide warnings regarding Syria. Speaking recently at

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the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, former Ambassador Peter W. Galbraith – the bearer of impressive anti-genocide credentials – declared: “The next genocide in the world will likely be against the Alawites in Syria”.

Simon Adams, Executive Director of the Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, elaborated on Ambassador Galbraith’s observation, stating on the 15th of November 2012 in a *New York Times* article entitled “The World’s Next Genocide”:

“Growing numbers of foreign Sunni extremist fighters are battling not just to rid Syria of Mr. Assad, but to religiously cleanse it. As a result, many Syrian Christians now fear that their fate will mirror that of Iraqi Christians, who were largely forced out of Iraq by war and sectarian terrorism. The city of Homs was once home to 80,000 Christians; there are now reportedly fewer than 400.

Mr. Adams’ reference to the near destruction of the Iraqi Christian community during the US-led Operation Iraqi Freedom is a sobering reminder of the grisly fate that awaits the non-Sunni religious minorities of Syria as the institutions and infrastructure of the state are degraded and Sunni supremacist armies expand their control of territory.

Only this week, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic issued an alarming report, confirming that the revolution in Syria “has become overtly sectarian.” The Commission concludes:

“Entire communities are at risk of being forced out of the country or of being killed inside the country. With communities believing – not without cause – that they face an existential threat, the need for a negotiated settlement is more urgent than ever.”

The prospect foreseen by the UN Commission corresponds to the definition of genocide as found in the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, to which the United States is a signatory.

What power, Mr. President, is going to undertake responsibility for the prevention of genocide and the restoration of security for the terrorized people of Syria as the war there becomes more brutal and sectarian?

While the current crisis of religious cleansing is most acute in Syria, we now see in Egypt – ruled by a new US-backed Islamist dictatorship – an upsurge in anti-Christian hate speech, pogroms against Christians, and the religious cleansing of the pyramid village of Dahshour. Conditions for anti-Christian acts of genocide currently exist in Egypt.

Employing the refrain “Never again!,” you pledged on the 23rd of April at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to use the many instruments at your disposal to prevent genocide. You furthermore announced the establishment of a new instrument – the interagency Atrocities Prevention Board, headed by Samantha Power – and revealed the imposition of tough U.S. sanctions against the Syrian and Iranian regimes.

In your Holocaust Museum speech you also declared:

“I will always be there for Israel... When faced with a regime that threatens global security and denies the Holocaust and threatens to destroy Israel, the United States will do everything in our power to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons.”

But there was no such undertaking then, or subsequently, to “always be there” for the existentially threatened religious minorities of the Islamic Middle East. Nor was there a commitment to “do everything in

our power to prevent” potential perpetrators of genocide from having the means to eradicate them. Meanwhile, the death and displacement toll mounts.

CSI urges you act to prevent genocide in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East before it is too late. You can do so by commissioning Samantha Power and the new Atrocities Prevention Board to prepare a genocide prevention policy based on:

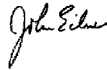
1. Crisis management in cooperation with Russia and other Permanent Members of the UN Security Council.
2. Constructive participation at the Swiss-proposed international conference in Geneva in early 2013 with a view to reaching agreement on the employment of all international instruments for the prevention of genocide and the protection of endangered peoples in Syria, as called for on June 14 by the UN Secretary-General’s Special Advisors on the Prevention of Genocide and on the Responsibility to Protect.
3. The extension of the United States’ punitive anti-Assad sanctions to all Syrian opposition armed forces – and their financiers and weapons suppliers – who incite and/or wage a religiously supremacist jihad.
4. Vigorous and open encouragement of the “Friends of Syria” and the armed Syrian opposition to provide genuine guarantees for the survival and freedom of Syria’s religious minority communities, and to work to achieve a negotiated settlement that encompasses all the Syrian people.
5. Reduction of military aid to Egypt’s Islamist regime until such time as a constitutional consensus is reached for the defense of personal freedom and minority rights.
6. An international campaign to combat the genocidal ideology of jihad and the region’s culture of religious supremacism.

Announcing this policy next month in your State of the Union address would send a powerful message to those who are now threatening the survival of the Middle East’s oldest religious communities.

At the Holocaust Museum, Mr. President, you repeated a truth of which American policy-makers must never lose sight: “Preventing mass atrocities and genocide is a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility of the United State of America.”

This Christmas Eve, CSI urges you to serve the United States’ interests and fulfill her moral responsibilities by making a firm commitment to prevent the religious cleansing of Christians and other religious minorities from the Middle East.

Respectfully,



Dr. John Libner
CEO

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD BY MS. NINA SHEA, DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, HUDSON INSTITUTE

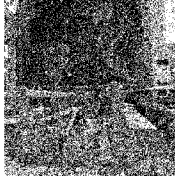
Pictures of Destroyed Syrian Churches

Photographs Provided by: European Syriac Union

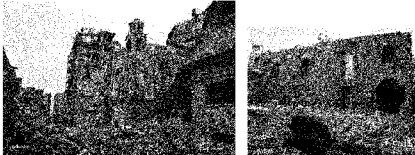
A Church in Homs December 2012



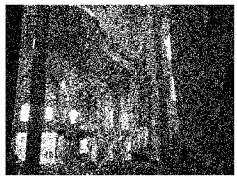
Church Called Peace in Homs



St Mary's Church and Al Wahda School in Dair el zur



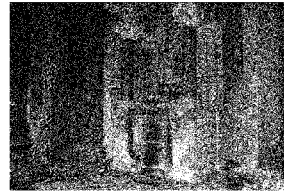
St Mary's Church, Dver el Zor



Church of the Holy Belt in Homs



Armenian Church in Aleppo



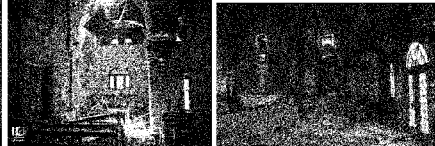
A Church in Latakia Region



Bustan al Diwan Homs Old Town



Syriac Church in Aleppo



Syriac Church in Aleppo (cont.)



Ras al-Ayn Church



The suffering of the Yezidis in Syria is going from bad to worse, which is very tragic when there are very limited choices: Convert to Islam/Kurdish culture, Die or Leave!

As the Yezidis and minority- they (Yezidis) are subjected to fierce attack by Islamic forces (Infidel Terrorist). Where those forces have entered many of the Yezidi villages; the killing of hundreds of Yezidis, looting of their properties and other possessions; raping of the Yezidi women, forced to convert to Islam or leave the country.

Those forces, which identify themselves as “Free Syrian Army attacked the Azaz village in Qamishly region, which the Yezidis lost more than 20 members, their possessions were looted and the remaining villagers had no choice but to leave their village and flee with their children in and out of Syria. And thousands of the Yezidis in Ras al-Ayin region in the province of Hassakeh already left their agricultural lands, farms, possessions and other businesses and fled to Turkey for their lives safety. And same thing is happening in most of the Yezidis villages and towns in the Aleppo province. That's how the lives of the Yezidis been in all cases for the past two years. And on the other hand the Kurds are doing the same thing by imposing Kurdish culture on the Yezidis and to obscure the Yezidi Nation's identity and their geographical regions. This does not have the option to either waive his/her religion or nationality his properties or lands. Those forces (Extremists, Radicals and terrorist groups do not accept anything but emigrate the Yezidis to abroad, this is what happening and what we see today. Many of the asylum Yezidis to migrate to European countries in strayed risk their lives and serpents of children and women in travelling thousands of miles, crossing rivers; mountains, bear hunger, thirst, bear the shadow of fear and darkness at the hands of smugglers and the Mafia, which displays the men killed and women subjected to rape in order to reach saluting liberty and maintain their privacy and religious nationalism.

Since what matters the Yezidi people. An ambitious one and completed all the affairs of our lives; the privacy gap of the Yezidi people in nationality, religion, race and social habit and tradition. In privacy away from the pressures of the violations and abuses of Islam and Muslims against the non-Muslim religious and ethnic minorities in Middle East countries such as the Iraq, Syria, Egypt, etc.

We are hoping that the International Communities do make the same mistake as they did in Iraq and Egypt, where the minorities' “Rights and Freedom” almost have been destroyed. And we are also asking the International communities to take an immediate action to guarantee the minorities rights in Middle East before it is too late.

Best Regards,

Mirza Ismail

Chairman

Yezidi Human Rights Organization-International



**REPORT ON THE SITUATION OF
SYRIAC CHRISTIANS IN SYRIA**

2013

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SYRIAC CHRISTIANS IN SYRIA

The Mesopotamian Civilization has been marked with the significant and vital developments of Syriac people created during the centuries. Syria has witnessed to these changes from the first. Even the name of Syria derived from the Syriac origin, which means homeland of Syriacs. Greeks used the name also before Christ during Assyrian Empire. The name of Syria was used as a geographic by Persians, Roma, Arabs and Ottomans and arrived until today. Syria has been the homeland of Syriac people and thus they lived there during the history and they developed civilizations. Consequently, Syriac people are the oldest and indigenous people of Syria.

During the First World War, Syria and Lebanon entered under the French sovereignty. In 1920 with the international treaty Syria became a mandate of France. Lebanon has significant Syriac population which belong to Antioch East Maronites Church. Lebanon had been separated from Syria on 01 September 1920. Because of this separation, a new split occurred between Syriacs of Syria and those of Lebanon. In the Syria, followers of Antioch Greek Orthodox Church, Antioch Greek Catholic Church and Antioch Syriac Orthodox Church are the dominant.

During the 1915 Genocide and later great migration waves took place to Syria and Lebanon from Turabdin, Diyarbakır and Urfa regions. Under the French mandate, Syriac people took their places at the improvement of Syria at economic, educational, cultural, military and in political domains without any privileged status. At the aftermath of 1933 Simele Massacres in Iraq, tens of thousands of Assyrian-Syriac people had been transferred around Habur region under the French authority. By the objective to create an ally at the region from Syriac-Assyrian people, French authorities set up military units under the name of "Assyrian-Chaldean battalions". The Antioch Syriac Orthodox Patriarch, which had been exiled from Turkey, had been installed at the Homs city by French authorities.

After the departure of French and English hegemony on 1946 from Syria and Lebanon, Syriac people played their roles at the development and at the administration of these countries. The Arab Baath Party, established on 07 April 1947, marked the history and policy of Syria after 1950s.

Syriac people are deprived from any constitutional, ethnic and cultural rights. The cause is that the dominant ideology and policy nourish from Arab nationalism. Consequently the dominance of Arab nationalism is characteristic at the all spheres of the life. The churches of Syriac people are accepted and viewed as the churches of Christians of Syria. Syriac people can open private schools, but at these schools the lessons and programmes are organised and prepared by the state. At the primary schools the religion lesson is instructed with Syriac language. In Syria, Syriac language is accepted as the language of a church rather than being accepted as the language of a people. At the field of culture Syriacs has important works. During history Syriac people individually had played important role at the development and at the construction of the Syria. Despite this true fact, Syriac people remained deprived from their most fundamental rights within Syria.

PRESENT SITUATION OF SYRIAC CHRISTIANS IN SYRIA

In order to represent Syriac people in all platforms and demand their fundamental rights “**The Syriac National Council of Syria**”⁶⁷ had been established on September 08, 2012 and working for a democratic, civil, pluralistic and multi-ethnic Syria, that is a country based on citizenship, where all citizen, regardless of their ethnic, religion or sectarian background have equal rights and equal responsibilities.

As the opposition groups are now being right to discussion about a possible post Assad regime, the Syriacs and other minority groups are not being included in a discussion. There is no authentic representation of the Syriacs and other minorities in the Syrian National Coalition. There is known an effort in discussions and dialogue of expanding the Syrian National Coalition; we are not being consulted, although we have gone and met many times with the leadership of the SOC and presented our case. They have admitted to the fact that they need to represent the Syriacs but they have failed to do this. And it seems that they continue to ignore us.

The Islamist-Radicals have been taken an increasing share the power. There is over-representation of Islamist-radical groups. The Islamist-Radicals dominate the Syrian National Coalition and there is actually a competition between different elements of Islam and a total ignorance of other minorities. Syria does not want to go the route of Afghanistan, Iraq and Egypt with a new constitution based on Sharia.

Syrian Christians have played the key role in expanding democratic culture in Syria; they have played the key role in basic documents of Damascus Spring and many Syrian Christians are well-know Opposition figures long before the revolution started. Members of the Syriac community were fighting for human rights, for democratic reforms and a pluralistic Syria. Syriac Christians have been almost caught in the fights between the Assad forces and the Islamist-Radicals. Each one wants to claim, that he is the protector of the Christians.

The Syriacs long have realized that their aspirations to live in peace and dignity can be best achieved through a democratic, civil, pluralistic Syria. This is why the Syriacs have aligned themselves with other Syrian minorities in a very diverse country to seek a Syria that is based on citizenship and that guarantees equal rights to all Syrians.

Syriac people seek a future in Syria, which is based on citizenship, democracy and respect of religious freedom.

GENERAL DEMANDS

1. Drafting of a democratic constitution.
2. Creating new decentralised system of legislation and enforcing local administration.
3. Drafting new political parties' legislation and passing to multi-party system.
4. Giving back all political, cultural, economic, educational, religious and national rights.
5. Taking away all obstacles before the expression of thought and media tools.
6. Re-organisation of all institutions with the democratic principles.
7. Issuing a general amnesty.
8. Providing humanitarian aid to Syrian people.
9. Re-organisation of Syrian administration, which represent all groups.
10. Maintaining all necessary measures for the damages and compensate the victims.

***Independent opposition figures of Syriac National Council of Syria:**

- Bassam Ishak
- Rimon Majoun
- Aydin Said

***Member organizations and institutions of Syriac National Council of Syria:**

- Syriac Union Party of Syria
- Syriac Cultural Association in Syria
- Civil Society in Syria
- Syriac Movement
- European Syriac Union
- Suryoyo (Syriac) American Association
- Bethnahrin Women Union

