

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

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Testimony

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

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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.