

Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
“Ancient Communities Under Attack: ISIS’s War on Religious Minorities”

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Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, DC
May 13, 2015

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and Members of the Committee – I would like to thank you for inviting me here to discuss the status of religious minorities under ISIS. I am truly honored by your invitation and grateful for the concern that this committee continues to show for all of the Syrian people.

I am a Syrian Christian from Damascus. I raised my children there. My husband still lives there, in our home in the old city - on a street called Straight, which is mentioned in the Bible dozens of times. My children grew up playing with their Muslim and Christian friends. They learned that Syria was a place of harmony for people of different religions to live peacefully; to coexist; and to set an example for communities worldwide.

ISIS’S ASSAULT ON SYRIA

The threat of ISIS has endangered Muslims and Christians alike, all of whom have been victim to its brutal treatment of those who do not follow its cruel and deeply flawed interpretation of Islam. Religious minority communities have been particularly threatened and abused; such violence is, as Chairman Royce described it, truly sickening. In addition to its broad targeting and killing of Christians, minorities, and Muslims who do not fit their extremist codes, ISIS has in particular destroyed the lives of countless women and girls in a display of enslavement, rape, and horror that has no precedent for us in Syria. Women and girls are thus subject to horror from all sides.

Beyond its barbaric human rights violations, ISIS has further sought to destroy these communities by erasing their cultural and religious heritage – attacking churches, mosques, shrines, and ancient sites. By targeting Assyrian archaeology, ISIS goes beyond ethnic and religious cleansing to further wipe out any historical trace of the people it has displaced. Because these sites harken back to a flourishing and pluralistic past that legitimizes the histories of religious minorities, such sites are seen as a threat to ISIS and are summarily destroyed. The group believes that it cannot control the future until it controls the past.

The outcome of ISIS’s campaign to cleanse Iraq and Syria of these indigenous minority communities has been widespread success in the areas where they have most forcefully concentrated their efforts. In

cities where ISIS is now firmly in control, such as Raqqa, religious minorities have been largely driven out, with the exception of some still in hiding in small pockets of these areas. The areas where the fate of religious minorities has yet to be decided are those locations where ISIS has not yet gained a decisive victory. A two-pronged approach is needed in these cities: to continue to aggressively combat and counter ISIS while simultaneously protecting the citizens they seek to conquer, focusing specifically on the most vulnerable among them.

CREATING SAFE HAVENS FOR SYRIANS

Nowhere in Syria is safe – especially not for religious minorities. Creating safe havens where Syrians fleeing ISIS-controlled and -contested cities can seek refuge inside the country is of utmost importance as a way to manage the conflict in the short term. The first step in doing so is to liberate the cities around the safe haven to create a buffer zone between the location of the haven and the reach of ISIS. The ideal would be to build havens where those escaping from ISIS can be independent, safe, and in charge of their own defense, and to establish fair laws for everyone. As part of their protection, these safe havens must without question be no-fly zones that are also secured by a strong, moderate army on the ground.

Women are the most effective guarantors of peace in any society. By providing safe havens for families, we can ensure that women from across the spectrum of minorities will help each other and their communities. In my work with the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution, I have managed and been witness to numerous joint operations of training between minority and majority women who protect each other from the violence that threatens them from all sides. The best way to build these safe havens is to build them in cooperation with established networks of women and men – minorities and majorities – who have a track record of working together and protecting each other. Such alliances are the best guarantees of safety, security, and general welfare and serve as avenues from immediate crisis management to near-term solutions.

LOCATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF SAFE HAVENS

There are certain regions of the country, such as Hasake, a city in the province of Jazira in northeastern Syria, that will be particularly helpful places to set up a safe haven. The area from Tell Abiad to Aleppo would function as a buffer zone for the Jazira safe haven: since it is protected by the Turkish border in the north and moderate groups in Aleppo, the only points of compromise for this zone are the south and the east. ISIS controls Manbij, which is part of the proposed zone and would need to be liberated in order for the zone to be effective. Raqqa is far south enough that the ISIS forces there are unlikely to attempt to penetrate the buffer zone as long as it is adequately protected by the moderate opposition. Because there are many minorities, including Christians, Kurds, and Assyrians, in Hasake and Qamishli, this far corner of northeastern Syria is an ideal location to establish the first large-scale safe haven for all people that can then serve as a model and testing ground for other areas.

Key to the maintenance and success of safe havens is the policy of inclusion. Our goal should be to guarantee the best safety possible for the greatest number of Syrians possible, bringing together men and women from all ethnic and religious groups who can easily and quickly gain access to the safe haven area. Singling out a specific ethnic or religious group to protect more earnestly than others would be damaging to Syria's security in the long term and preclude a return to the coexistence that has been a hallmark of Syria's long history. Thus Hasake and Qamishli offer us the best site for a safe haven not only because of their geographic location but also because they are home to Christians, Muslims, and all other communities that we should seek to protect: all Syrians.

LOCAL COUNCILS IN SAFE HAVENS AS THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Another essential element of the creation of safe havens is the need to maintain them through the provision of social services and the guarantee of good governance. Local councils supported by the moderate opposition have for years acted as the sole governing bodies in some areas. Such councils are democratically elected and have a demonstrated commitment to minorities and the safeguarding of women's and human rights. I have personally attended some of their meetings in several liberated areas and was welcomed as a Christian and a woman who trained them in capacity building and conflict resolution skills. One council worked closely with our organization to release a priest from Idlib who had been taken captive; after Idlib was liberated, that same council guaranteed that they would protect the safety of the Christians there.

NECESSITY OF SOCIAL SERVICES AND TRAUMA SUPPORT

Support for these local councils is the best hope for maintaining regions of Syria that will be safe for Christians to return to. However, these groups are significantly underfunded in comparison to ISIS and the al-Nusra Front, both of which have extremely well-funded social programs that fill the void of social services that have not existed in these areas since the start of the revolution. Providing significant funding and support to these civilian-run councils will pave the way for a smoother transition to democracy and ensure that Syrians committed to a pluralistic Syria where everyone is respected are empowered for the future.

In order to compete with the social services that other groups provide, local councils in safe havens, buffer zones, and all liberated areas of Syria must be equipped to implement development projects that give their citizens a stake in their community's future and a means of self-sufficiency. Such work should include the building and maintenance of hospitals and schools and significant opportunities for agricultural and other development work. Many of these regions have lacked electricity and clean water for much of the last few years, while ISIS is able to provide these services for people in the areas it controls. Local councils need funding and capacity building to secure these resources and to rebuild municipal buildings that have been destroyed in the war. Centers to support community and family life and trauma healing are without question essential to communities in every corner of Syria. The men, women, and children of my country have been traumatized by the attacks they have experienced and the immense losses that they have sustained. If we wait until the war is over to begin addressing such

widespread and systematic trauma, we will have lost an entire generation of Syrians who are now growing up amidst horror and war with no outlets for trauma healing or PTSD support. By guaranteeing social services beyond the mere basics of medical care and clean water, we not only position the local councils to surpass ISIS in terms of capability but also proactively work for the long-term good of the Syrian people to ensure that the atrocities of the last four years do not color the future of this country.

PROVIDING FOR SYRIA'S FUTURE THROUGH A PROVEN INCLUSIVE APPROACH

ISIS, of course, is not the only warring faction in Syria that has targeted religious minorities. The regime of Bashar Al Assad has damaged and destroyed churches – Catholic, Orthodox, and Armenian – all over the country by directly targeting them, with no regard for the collateral damage. Only last year, government forces attacked the Lady of Peace Roman Catholic Church in Homs for the sixth time by planting a landmine inside the church, which exploded and killed the Christian man inside.

Just as minorities in Syria cannot be protected without also addressing the safety of the majority, ISIS cannot be controlled and defeated without addressing the terrorism of Bashar Al Assad and his government. Safe havens are a short-term solution to protect minorities, women, and other Syrian civilians from brutal death at the hands of ISIS; but without a long-term political solution to end the war and stop the violence, these same citizens will face death at the hands of the regime regardless.

I have worked with Dr. Marc Gopin at the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution since 2004. Together we have trained hundreds of Syrians – Christians, Alawites, Muslims, and secular groups – in negotiation, civil society building, and conflict resolution skills. Before the revolution, we worked inside Syria; since the conflict began, we have continued to train Syrians from all parts of the country and those seeking refuge in Turkey and Jordan. In training and supporting these groups, we have found countless examples of Christians, Muslims, and all other minorities working together to protect their communities in the face of ISIS and the regime. Civil society organizations and women's groups bring together majority and minority communities: in Aleppo, for example, many churches have welcomed Muslims in need of medical attention, and Muslims are protecting and providing for the Christian nursing home there. These groups and individuals are not choosing sectarian divisions; instead, they choose the humanitarian side, as their faith and mine compels us to do.

The sustainability of protection for religious minorities can only be guaranteed by involving the majority and all other groups in securing these safe havens, providing administrative and governmental support in the form of local councils, and protecting the safe havens and their buffer zones. The safe havens themselves must be open to *all* citizens who would seek refuge there; if the West appears to favor minority groups – even though they are those most cruelly targeted by ISIS – such an approach would isolate and alienate my Christian community and sow seeds of future discord and resentment. Relationships and alliances among the different Syrian communities have survived four years of war and destruction and continue to work for the good of the Syrian people despite the enormous adversity they face. I ask you to take advantage of these incredible networks; to build them up and support them;

and to use them to protect all communities in the short term while working to ensure that a long-term political solution is brought about through principled and sustained diplomacy and negotiation.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR WORLD RELIGIONS, DIPLOMACY, AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The Center for World Religions, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution (CRDC) is the flagship center for international conflict resolution practice at the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University. CRDC seeks to engage emerging indigenous and global conflict resolvers, partner with them in innovative entrepreneurial growth, mobilize support for them, and create linkages between peacebuilders, citizen diplomats, students, business people and policy makers.

CRDC was founded in 2003 through a major gift commitment from the Catalyst Fund, which endowed the James H. Laue Chair in World Religions, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution and created CRDC to be directed by the Chair. In the twelve years since, CRDC has pioneered work in Syria and Afghanistan focusing on local peacebuilding, citizen diplomacy, and interfaith approaches to conflict resolution under the direction of Dr. Marc Gopin.

CRDC's goal is to inspire and generate successful incremental steps of positive change in intractable conflict situations that can become the basis for new approaches to diplomacy and foreign policy. Paths to positive change include civil society development through education in conflict resolution; peer mediation; innovative religious, spiritual, and cultural forms of conflict resolution; culturally effective methods of cooperation on development projects of benefit to all parties; and an integrated relationship between the world of such work and the world of policymakers and diplomats.