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Syria at a Crossroads: U.S. Policy Challenges Post-Assad

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Good morning, Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Meeks, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the important challenges facing U.S. policy in post-Assad Syria. It is a privilege to be with you.

I had the honor of serving two terms as a Trump appointee on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), serving my last year as chair. Since then, I have continued this work as Co-Chair of the International Religious Freedom Roundtable, Chair of the Institute for Global Engagement, and Senior Advisor to the Shai Fund. I also previously served as a Global Fellow at The Wilson Center.

Raising the Alarm

Former Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback recently warned, “A genocide will happen in Syria within the next four years if the U.S. doesn't have the right policy. Syria's government must protect its religious minorities and be held accountable if it doesn't. We can't allow what happened in Iraq to happen again.”

To some, that may sound alarmist. But history shows that warnings before mass atrocities are often discounted—until, after the fact, we recognize the warning signs were apparent and the outcomes were preventable.

As the Committee considers U.S. policy in Syria, it is urgent that we weigh its impact on religious freedom and on vulnerable communities—including Christians, Yazidis, Druze, Alawites, Kurds, and others.

Why Religious Freedom Matters for Stability

Congress anticipated this challenge when it passed the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in 1998 to ensure that religious freedom is not treated as an afterthought and to recognize that how a government treats minorities—with some preferring to be called “components”—is one of the clearest indicators of whether it will be stable and a reliable partner.

There is a point of common ground: we all want Syria to succeed. After more than five decades under brutal Assad family rule and fourteen years of civil war, Syrians deserve the chance to rebuild, recover economically, and live with real safety and stability. But that success cannot be built on quick, short-term deals that ignore Syria's religious and ethnic diversity—including some of the world's oldest Christian communities, and some of the newest and most vulnerable, including Christian converts. During my travels, I also heard from many Sunni Muslims who want the same outcome: a Syria that belongs to all Syrians—where equal citizenship is real, and no community is treated as a second-class citizen.

While we counter Iran, we can continue to counter ISIS without sacrificing religious freedom or the safety of minority communities. In fact, without social cohesion among Syria's religious and ethnic communities, there will be no durable peace or stability. The chaos that follows creates the opening for ISIS and other extremist movements to grow—early signs we are already observing.

Religious freedom is not a separate issue from security or prosperity. It is a foundation for both. When people are protected and treated as equals in law and practice, they invest in their communities. They stay. They rebuild. When they are threatened, excluded, or targeted, they flee—and instability follows. A state that aggressively persecutes its own citizens and denies them basic rights is unlikely

to establish a stable environment that can foster the economic recovery that Syrians so desperately need.

Northeast Syria: a Model Worth Protecting

I have visited Syria more than a dozen times over the past six years—most often in the northeast. I was also in Damascus twice this past year, including to help bring a multi-faith conference that drew a CODEL led by Senator Jeanne Shaheen, with Representative Joe Wilson and Ambassador Tom Barrack.

I first visited in 2019, and I saw what USCIRF had documented even before my appointment: remarkably strong conditions for religious freedom in the northeast—among the best in the Middle East. I met Christians, Yazidis, and other minorities serving as local officials. The diversity was visible in everyday life, including public signage in three official languages—Kurdish, Arabic, and Syriac (Aramaic), the language of Jesus.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are rightly recognized for losing over 11,000 lives in defeating the ISIS caliphate as partners of the U.S.-led Coalition to Defeat ISIS. But they should also be recognized for what they built afterward: governance that helped create social cohesion among religious and ethnic communities, in ways rarely seen elsewhere in Syria.

As Kurdish-led forces and their local partners began liberating areas from ISIS in early 2015, they empowered local communities to establish self-governance—deliberately including all religious and ethnic communities, with women holding roughly half of leadership roles. This governance structure would eventually become the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES). Elements of this model had already begun to take shape earlier, starting in 2012, as Kurdish-led forces—alongside Christians and Yazidis—took control of Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira while the Assad regime was focused on fighting in Syria’s major cities.

While in Damascus in August, I described how this model relied on constant dialogue and local problem-solving. Syrians teared up. Many could not imagine speaking so openly, having political opposition, or living with equal citizenship regardless of religion, ethnicity, or gender. Like any system, it was imperfect. But in the context of Syria, what it achieved was astonishing.

Military Operation against the Northeast

On January 10, President Trump publicly called for peace in Syria and signaled that violence by the Syrian government against civilians and security personnel in Kurdish-majority neighborhoods in Aleppo should stop—neighborhoods that are also home to Christians and Yazidis. The offensive did not stop. The Syrian government continued its push, seizing the two Kurdish-majority neighborhoods in Aleppo and advancing toward Tabqa and Raqqa, until it reached other Kurdish-majority areas.

During this operation, Syrian security forces themselves recorded and circulated evidence of horrific crimes, including the beheading of Kurdish fighters—including women—and the execution of Kurdish families. In one video from Aleppo, a deceased Kurdish female fighter is thrown from a building, reportedly by a foreign fighter. In another video circulating from the same period, a young man appears to be tortured, including the gouging out of his eyes. Disturbing reports and additional evidence continue to emerge.

The northeast did not need to be integrated by force at this horrific cost in human life. That is not a path to peace or stability—and it appears to already violate some of the conditions in the legislation repealing Caesar sanctions, potentially triggering new sanctions. I am grateful to the many Members of Congress here and across Capitol Hill who spoke up or contacted President Trump to press the Syrian government to halt its advance into Kurdish-majority areas—home not only to Kurds, but also to Yazidis, Syriac-Assyrian Christians, Armenian Christians, evangelicals, Zoroastrians, and others.

I have also seen dangerous hate speech directed at Kurds and other minorities—language that dehumanizes communities and signals impunity. No government can “manage” hatred once it is unleashed; it spreads faster than institutions can contain, and it becomes a precursor to further atrocities.

Northeast Syria Integration Agreement: What Must Be Monitored

On January 30, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Syrian government announced a comprehensive agreement to gradually integrate military and civilian institutions into the state. Key provisions include maintaining the DAANES inclusive governing institutions and limiting the presence of Syrian security government forces: reporting indicates the Interior Ministry’s internal security would enter the city centers of Hasakah and Qamishli and secure specific civil institutions, including passport services, civil registry, and the airport, while government forces are not to enter Kurdish villages. Local community members will continue to provide their own security.

But agreements are only as strong as their enforcement. The United States has an important role to play in ensuring the terms are implemented as written—by pressing for transparency, monitoring conditions on the ground, and making clear that violations will carry consequences. For Congress, the central test is whether the agreement preserves local governance and locally accountable security in practice—not only on paper—because those safeguards are necessary to preserve religious freedom conditions and protect vulnerable communities.

Atrocities and Impunity in Syrian Security Forces

This past year, Syria has experienced a horrific wave of violence against religious and ethnic minority communities, whose perpetrators included Islamist members of the Syrian security forces. These forces include members of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), foreign fighters, and Turkish-backed elements of the Syrian National Army (SNA), some seen in photos and videos wearing ISIS patches on their uniforms. These forces also include individuals who have been sanctioned by the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union for serious human rights abuses.

The Turkish-backed SNA factions operating in northern Syria have a well-documented record of abuses against religious and ethnic minorities. USCIRF’s 2025 annual report on Syria warned that some SNA factions have “terrorized Kurds and religious minorities with extortion, detention, and torture.” They have driven most Yazidis from Afrin, with shrines destroyed and villages looted.

Worse, some sanctioned SNA leaders have been elevated into senior posts within Syria’s security structure. That includes Abu Hatem Shaqra, appointed commander of the 86th Division with authority over parts of northeast Syria, including Hasakah. He was sanctioned by the United States for serious abuses tied to Ahrar al-Sharqiya, including the killing of Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf, alongside sex trafficking of Yazidi women and girls and the incorporation of former ISIS members. It also includes Abu Amsha, appointed head of the 62nd Division in Hama, who is sanctioned by the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union.

Compounding these concerns are reports that Syrian security forces have released ISIS fighters from detention facilities and facilitated the movement of ISIS-linked families out of al-Hol—effectively sending hardened ISIS members and networks back into Syria. This does not reduce the ISIS threat; it amplifies it.

On December 13 in Palmyra, two U.S. soldiers and a U.S. civilian interpreter were killed by a member of the Syrian security forces. The Syrian government later acknowledged that he had been under review for possible “extremist ideas.” National Counterterrorism Center Director Joe Kent described the shooting as “an insider terrorist attack.” This appears to be the first publicly reported insider attack against U.S. forces in Syria—and it stands in sharp contrast to more than a decade of U.S. operations alongside the SDF, during which no comparable insider attack occurred.

Targeted Violence Against Alawites

In March 2025, the Syrian government announced it was mobilizing forces against pro-Assad insurgents in coastal areas. But what followed was not a targeted security campaign. It devolved into large-scale massacres across entire neighborhoods and villages, with men, women, and children killed. A Reuters investigation concluded that the “chain of command led to Damascus.”

Reported death tolls vary widely. Reuters documented nearly 1,500 people killed during the violence in March, while other accounts place the number far higher. Given restricted access, fear of reporting, and ongoing disappearances, the full toll is likely higher than currently documented. Women and children were abducted and remain missing, and violence against this community has continued.

On December 26, an explosion at the Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib Mosque in a predominantly Alawite neighborhood of Homs killed at least eight people and wounded 18 during prayers. Live ammunition was then used against protesters, killing four. Killings have continued into the new year, including the recent shooting deaths of four Alawites in Homs. And in a number of incidents, the involvement of Syrian security forces has been documented by the perpetrators themselves and posted on social media—evidence that underscores both the scale of abuse and the depth of impunity.

After the March 2025 coastal massacres, the government’s fact-finding committee identified 298 suspects tied to crimes against Alawites and reported 31 arrests. Syria has opened its first public trial related to that violence with 14 defendants. As of the latest public reporting on those proceedings, no verdicts have been announced. Given Syria’s long record of impunity and the Reuters findings on chain of command, Congress should watch closely whether these proceedings lead to genuine accountability.

Violence Against Druze in Suwayda

United Nations human rights reports—under the United Nations Human Rights Office Special Procedures—have warned that armed attacks in and around Suwayda Governorate since July 13, 2025, amount to a targeted campaign against the Druze minority, citing reports of killings, enforced disappearances, abductions, widespread property destruction, and sexual and gender-based violence and abduction against women and girls. They reported that the violence killed 1,000 people, including at least 539 identified Druze civilians, and that at least 105 Druze women and girls were abducted (with 80 still missing at the time of the statement). They also reported that in at least three cases, Druze women were allegedly raped before being executed.

Other credible reporting underscores both the scale and the brutality. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights separately reported 1,653 deaths during the mid-July violence and alleged 429 field executions by members of the Defense and Interior Ministries. Amnesty International documented executions in a public square, homes, a school, and a hospital—evidence it attributes to government and government-affiliated forces. The number killed may be much higher, with approximately 700 missing and 34 villages still occupied, displacing more than 120,000 people. Suwayda continues under siege, with civilians facing severe shortages and constrained access to food, humanitarian supplies, and fuel.

Threats and Conditions for Christians

On June 22, a suicide attacker struck Mar Elias Greek Orthodox Church in Damascus during worship, killing at least 25 parishioners and wounding more than 60—a stark reminder that extremist violence and sectarian intimidation remain real threats. Syrian authorities blamed ISIS and announced swift arrests of suspects linked to the attack. Christians also describe a steady pattern of intimidation and threats, including the vandalism of churches and Christian symbols—and, in some cases, targeted killings. Arbitrary detention and kidnapping have continued, including the case of Suleiman Khalil, who has been held by Syrian authorities for a year, incommunicado and without charges.

Those fears intensified again during the mid-July violence in Suwayda. Church and media reporting indicate that evangelical pastor Khalid Mezher and at least 11–12 members of his extended family were killed in that same wave of violence. Other evangelical Christians—including churches with converts—are at particular risk from Islamist forces and the climate of impunity they have helped create.

In my meetings with Christians across Syria, their requests have mirrored what I hear from other religious communities: they want more than protection. They want equal citizenship. The government has pledged inclusion, but representation remains thin—Syria’s transitional cabinet has included only one Christian minister. And the interim Constitutional Declaration has compounded fears rather than easing them: it retains the name “Syrian Arab Republic,” requires that the president be Muslim, and makes Islamic jurisprudence the principal source of legislation. Any serious effort to stabilize Syria—and keep Christians in Syria—will require credible changes that move from promises to enforceable equal citizenship.

Conditions for Yazidis

While Yazidis have been safe and treated as equal citizens in northeast Syria—with many serving in local government roles—they continue to suffer under Syrian National Army (SNA) factions and in areas under Syrian government control. Dr. Amy Austin Holmes testified at a USCIRF hearing in 2020 that after the Turkish invasion of Afrin—where SNA factions now integrated into Syria’s security structure gained control—Yazidis, along with Christians, “have been killed, disappeared, kidnapped, raped, detained, subjected to forced religious conversion, and held for ransom until families pay exorbitant sums to secure their release. Their places of worship have been destroyed, defaced, and looted. Even cemeteries have been demolished and vandalized.” After relocating to the safe Kurdish-majority neighborhoods of Aleppo, many of the 1,200 families have now been displaced again—forced either back to Afrin or displaced in the Northeast.

The Syrian government continues the Assad-era practice of classifying Yazidis as Muslims on identity cards, rather than allowing them to identify as Yazidis. This past August, I met a family whose cousin was seeking to marry a Yazidi man who had emigrated to Europe. Because his ID

identified him as Yazidi and hers identified her as Muslim, they could not obtain a marriage license unless he converted to Islam. These are straightforward administrative changes the Syrian government can make to allow Yazidis to live openly and follow their faith.

In 2014, ISIS committed genocide against Yezidis in Sinjar, which borders Syria. The beleaguered Yezidi community in both countries is alarmed by the rise of extremist elements in the Syrian security forces and the release of thousands of ISIS detainees formerly held by the SDF.

Other Communities

My testimony does not attempt to be comprehensive in addressing every religious or ethnic community in Syria—and that is intentional. Some smaller or less visible communities have asked that their circumstances not be highlighted publicly, particularly given the risks they face. Others, by contrast, are urging public recognition and protection.

Recommendations to the U.S. Government

While President al-Sharaa is often described as a pragmatist, even his own advisors have acknowledged that sustained pressure is needed to counter the Islamist base pressing this young government. The United States does him—or Syria—no favors by offering blanket, unconditional support when specific reforms are necessary for stability and for his long-term legitimacy.

A. What the United States should do

1. **Designate Syria a Country of Particular Concern (CPC)** for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom unless immediate, verifiable changes are made. Monitor religious freedom and the safety of minority communities—and condition U.S. engagement and support accordingly.
2. **Create a mechanism to monitor the January 30 Northeast Syria integration agreement—ideally with partners such as the U.K., France, and Germany, who have indicated willingness.**
Ensure (1) local civil officials and employees are not replaced, (2) ethnic, religious, and gender diversity is maintained, (3) Syrian security forces do not enter Kurdish-majority areas outside the agreement, and (4) the siege of Kobani ends, all major roads open, and humanitarian supplies enter without obstruction.
3. **Clarify that the SDF remain U.S. partners during the integration transition.**
Syrian security forces should not be treated as security partners until they have undergone appropriate vetting, including Leahy vetting.
4. **Pass the Save the Kurds Act quickly.**
This would create real consequences for any additional violence against Kurdish areas.
5. **Monitor public and online incitement as an early-warning indicator.**
Track hate speech and direct calls for violence—especially targeting Kurds and other religious and ethnic minorities—and condition engagement on concrete steps to curb incitement and hold perpetrators accountable.
6. **Transition from a narrow counterterrorism posture to sustained regional military engagement, with troops remaining in northeast Syria.**
Shift U.S. posture from counterterrorism toward steady regional engagement—similar to U.S. military partnerships in Jordan, Kuwait, and Bahrain—to deter external actors, support stability, and maintain pressure on ISIS networks.

7. Use Congress’s oversight role to scrutinize the President’s upcoming Caesar repeal certification—and act on documented violations.

Review the President’s required reporting on whether the Syrian government is meeting the conditions tied to Caesar Act repeal and be prepared to respond to violations—through hearings, targeted restrictions, or the reimposition of sanctions where warranted.

8. Undertake Congressional fact-finding to verify conditions firsthand, including in northeast Syria and Suwayda.

Authorize a bipartisan delegation to meet local leaders, civil society, and affected communities, and to assess implementation of the January 30 agreement, minority protection, humanitarian access, and accountability efforts.

9. Invest in programs that strengthen social cohesion.

Support locally led initiatives that build trust across religious and ethnic communities and reduce the risk of sectarian retaliation and extremist recruitment.

B. What the United States should press the Syrian government to do

1. Prioritize the safety of all Syrians, including religious and ethnic minorities.

This includes immediately ending the siege in both Kobani and Suwayda.

2. Deliver an inclusive national government.

Follow through on the pledge to build an inclusive government that reflects all of Syria’s religious and ethnic communities.

3. Revise the interim constitution to guarantee equal citizenship.

Make reforms essential to equal citizenship, including (1) removing “Arab” from the state name, (2) removing the requirement that the president be Muslim, (3) ensuring the legal framework is not subordinated to Islamic jurisprudence—consistent with states that protect robust religious pluralism, (4) explicitly recognizing Kurdish rights.

4. Include residents in their own local governance and security.

Rather than continue to replace local administrators and security personnel with figures from Idlib linked to HTS—replicating the Assad-era authoritarian model—instead appoint residents, including religious and ethnic minorities, to local governance roles and locally accountable security positions.

5. Correct the legal designation of the Yazidi community.

Allow Yazidis to identify as Yazidis on identity documents and in civil-status procedures, including marriage licensing—ending coercive requirements that effectively force religious conversion.

6. Remove foreign fighters and sanctioned actors from the security forces.

Remove foreign fighters, U.S.-sanctioned figures, and anyone signaling alignment with ISIS ideology—including through insignia—from any official security structure.

7. Counter incitement and enforce accountability.

Publicly condemn incitement, investigate and prosecute direct calls for violence, and remove officials or commanders who promote sectarian hate.

Conclusion

The United States can help steer Syria away from authoritarian retrenchment toward inclusive governance and equal citizenship. Only with religious freedom will Christians, Alawites, Druze, Yazidis, and other religious and ethnic minorities be able to remain, and only then can all Syrians be able to live with long-term peace and stability.