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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.