

**United States House of Representatives
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Testimony of Bassam Ishak, President
Syriac National Council of Syria**

Wednesday, March 18, 2015, 2:00 PM

Human Rights Violations Committed by the Islamic State

Chairman Pitts, Chairman McGovern, and Members of the Commission, thank you for inviting me to testify about the human rights violations committed by the Islamic State (IS) against Assyrian Syriac Christians and other religious minorities.

I speak on behalf of millions of Assyrian Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities as President of the Syriac National Council of Syria (SNCS)—a coalition of thirteen Syriac political and civil society organizations and independent Syriac politicians who represent their interests in Syria and abroad.

My remarks today will focus on the imminent threat of mass atrocities and destruction to these civilian populations and their brave defenders as IS attempts to invade the heart of the al-Hasakeh province in northeastern Syria—also known by its new name al Jazeera (or “the island”) under the region’s pluralistic self-governance contract. We urgently seek immediate international military intervention and humanitarian assistance to prevent IS from overrunning the province. Without it, the ancient communities in this region and their people will perish or be driven out. The current inclusive, pluralistic, and democratic self-governance contract accepted by all religious and ethnic communities, which provides equal civil, political and human rights for all, will be replaced by tyrannical IS rule.

IS has already inflicted well documented atrocities on Assyrian Christians, Yazidis, Kurds, and other minorities during its brutal military campaigns in Syria and Iraq. These are well documented following the 2013 seizure of Raqqa and the 2014 seizure of the cities of Mosul and Tikrit and minority communities in the Nineveh Plain. Men, women, and children, old and young, have been murdered, beheaded, buried alive, or forced to serve as IS fighters. Parents have watched their children be beheaded and cut in two before their eyes. Crucifixions and beheadings are daily occurrences in IS held territories as are torture and summary executions of persons who belong to a disfavored minority or who refuse to bow to IS demands. Women sold as sex slaves seek to kill themselves. The trauma, physical violence, and deaths are unprecedented in modern history.

Christians in particular are given a choice between death, converting to IS-style Islam, or accepting IS domination and accepting “dhimmi” status—paying special taxes (in

pure gold) and accepting humiliating conditions of life and very limited civil rights. Christians have been forced to remove all evidence of their faith from homes and places of worship. IS has seized homes, businesses, and land from Christians and other minorities.

The worst abuses were reserved for the Yazidi community—viewed as pagans by IS and deserving only enslavement (usually for sexual purposes) or death. However, in the last three weeks, IS has extended this horrific treatment to captured Assyrians as well in al-Hasakeh.

IS's rampage includes destruction or desecration of Christian churches and other ancient Assyrian historical treasures, which are irreplaceable and part of the history of all of mankind. All Christian churches in Mosul have been destroyed, and all Christians have fled or been killed or driven out. Most have left Raqqa, which is the self-declared IS capital of its Syrian "caliphate." Its largest church was converted into IS headquarters—vividly conveying IS's intention to extinguish all evidence of that faith in territories it controls. IS regards all expressions of the Christian faith—crosses, bibles, icons, and other religious objects—as items that must be destroyed or cynically sold to finance its activities. IS allows no freedom of conscience, religion, or belief in areas it controls, and it has no respect for human rights as we understand them—or for human life and dignity.

My focus at this hearing is the catastrophic humanitarian and military disaster unfolding, as I speak, for Syriac Christians in the al-Hasakeh province of Syria. IS forces with overpowering military advantage have seized almost thirty Assyrian villages along the Khabour River in the last three weeks. Without immediate foreign assistance, IS will overrun the entire area, capturing large cities, including the regional capital, the City of al-Hasakeh. This will put millions of civilians and defenders at grave risk of the same treatment IS has already inflicted across Syria and Iraq—massive civilian deaths, injuries, and atrocities and expulsion of Christians from this area where their ancestors have lived for over 5,000 years.

Continued IS attacks and an influx of minority refugees from other parts of Syria and from Iraq has already created a humanitarian nightmare in al-Hasakeh province. Turkey has sealed its border and will not allow civilian refugees from al-Hasakeh to cross its border for sanctuary or humanitarian and other forms of assistance to cross into al-Hasakeh. Hundreds of thousands lack basic necessities such as food, water, shelter, and medical care. Humanitarian and military assistance are urgently needed to stop the IS advance and support those affected by it.

The province of al-Hasakeh is landlocked in northeastern Syria due to IS advances and political barriers. Bordered on two sides by Iraq and Turkey, it is unable to use those borders to supply its needs or to allow way of escape for civilian populations. It is cut off from the rest of Syria by IS armies, which have seized the neighboring provinces of al Raqqa and Dayr az Zawī.

Al-Hasakeh's population includes Syrians of diverse ethnic and religious identities: Arab and Kurdish Muslims, Syriac Christians, Armenians, Yazidis, Chaldeans and other ethnic and religious groups. Like all Christian communities in Syria, Syriacs in al-Hasakeh were divided in 2010 between supporters and opposition to the Assad regime. Many Syriac Christians participated in the early anti-Assad demonstrations due to the regime's human rights abuses. The Assad regime released many Syrian Islamists from state jails in hopes of disrupting activities of peaceful civil society activists. Those who were from al-Hasakeh came back to their home city. Islamists joined in the anti-government demonstrations, but soon dominated them and pushed out Christian Syriac participants.

Shortly after this, a gang of local tribal Arabs began a series of kidnapping and extortion episodes that targeted wealthy members of the Syriac community and of all identity backgrounds. These included businessmen and medical doctors from the Syriac Assyrian community. Certain Arab Muslim villages have affiliated themselves with radical Islamic groups while others are seeking to co-exist peacefully with their neighbors.

In a matter of months, two hundred Syriac Assyrian medical doctors had to flee the city of al-Hasakeh, and three of the major hospitals in town were closed. Moreover, wealthy and middle class Syriacs of all professions in all parts of the province felt their security and that of their families was jeopardized and felt pressured to leave. Their homes, lands, businesses, and possessions were seized and appropriated by radical Islamists. Many died in the hands of kidnappers. Young Syriac men who faced draft by the Assad military also fled the country. Since 2011, hundreds of thousands of Syriacs have fled the region. They were extremely important to the economic and social fabric of the region, but they will not return until they can be assured that they can live in peace.

The Assad regime decided to focus on defending areas in the western provinces of Syria, and it left al-Hasakeh province residents to fend for themselves against IS. The Syriacs who stayed in the province had to organize a self-defense police force, which they called "Sutoro" (security in Aramaic). More recently, the SNCS formed self-defense military units called the Syriac Military Council. Many want to fight to defend their communities, but self-defense military units have few weapons (primarily rifles) and little ammunition. These are wholly inadequate against IS's well-equipped and more numerous forces armed with tanks, armored vehicles, mortars, and other heavy weaponry pillaged from the Syrian and Iraqi military.

In 2013, feeling ignored, abandoned, and marginalized by the Assad regime and by ineffective political opposition groups, a social contract (constitution) for democratic and pluralistic self-administration of the province was negotiated by Syriac political forces with local Kurdish political groups led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and local Arab figures. The social contract recognizes the identity and language of the Syriac people (known as the Aramaic or Assyrian language) as one of the official

languages of the al-Hasakeh province. It provides that all religious and ethnic groups, mentioned by name, have equal rights in an inclusive, democratic governmental structure that provides for full civil and political rights, regardless of religion or ethnicity or gender. It has a Bill of Rights similar to the US model. It even creates a quota for female participation in government (40% of all positions are to be held by women). The social contract refers to the al-Hasakeh province as the al-Jazeera province.

This area became a target of IS soon after it was established—in part because its governance structure is the exact opposite of IS's goals of dominance and Islamist uniformity. Attacking from the provinces of Raqqa to the west and Dayr az Zawr to the south, IS initially extended its occupation of Dayr az Zawr to neighboring Arab villages in al-Hasakeh.

In October 2014, during the ongoing siege of Kobani, IS began a series of military attempts to enter the city of al-Hasakeh. However, the Peoples Protection Unit of the self-administration district, made up of Kurdish, Arab, and Syriac Assyrian military units, managed to hold them off. After IS units withdrew from Kobani recently, they turned their sights back to al-Hasakeh province in hopes of gaining control over it—attacking from the north, west, and south. As IS retreats from parts of Iraq, they are troops and equipment toward al-Hasakeh as well. Their immediate goal is to overrun the entire territory, which is both the Syriac and Kurdish enclave in Syria. Their longer term goal is to secure the entire al-Khabour River valley and adjacent roads, from Turkey to Dayr az Zawr province and be able to attack northern Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan from the West.

Syriacs, Kurds, and others have seen this coming and have been begging the international community to help supply and train its military units so they could fend off IS attacks for many years. They have also been begging for humanitarian aid, funds, and other supplies needed to support civilian populations and the hundreds of thousands of minority refugees that have fled to al Hasakeh from other parts of Syria and Iraq.

On February 22, 2015, IS engaged in a sudden and large-scale attack on the Assyrian villages along the southern bank of al-Khabour River. Using tanks and other heavy equipment, they immediately captured ten lightly defended Assyrian Christian villages. They took close to 265 civilians and fifteen Assyrian fighters as hostages. The IS fighters looted the houses in the captured villages and destroyed churches. IS has released approximately 21 elderly hostages. They executed the fifteen Assyrian fighters. They took 30 young Assyrian girls to the town of Shadadeh to be used as sex slaves. The fate and condition of the other captives is unknown, but we believe they have also been taken to Shadadeh, IS's capital in the area, for use as human shields or funds.

Upon securing control of the village of Tel Hormizd, IS fighters summoned elders of the community and informed them that crosses must be removed from the church of Beth'yon and all churches in nearby villages. The radical group also bombed the ancient Assyrian church of Qabr Shamiya in the countryside of Tel Tamr causing the death of four Syriac Christian fighters who were defending the Church. In fighting for control of Tel Tamr, they seized the Saint Circis Church and burned its bibles and broke its cross. Two Assyrian Christians from the al E'ghaibish village were accused by IS of cooperation with the Kurds, and they were executed. More than 1,000 Assyrian families fled IS and sought refuge in the cities and districts of the province such as the cities of al-Hasakeh, al Qamishli, and the Malkia district.

Heavy US led coalition airstrikes from February 23 to 27 had a major impact in stopping IS from crossing the Khabour to seize villages on the north bank. However, there was only one attack from February 28 to March 13. This emboldened IS. Last week, IS advanced on the villages backed by a large influx of additional heavy weapons and fighters, IS managed to build a ford and cross to the north bank of the Khabour River and capture five more villages.

IS has encircled the strategic river town of Tel Tamr, which sits on a major east-west highway linking to a major north-south highway. IS is also attacking the border town of Ras al-Ayn and other parts of al-Hasakeh. We believe that IS plans to capture Tel Tamr and then move its heavy weapons across the Khabour so that it can take Ras al-Ayn, which sits on the Turkish border, and the city of al-Hasakeh, resulting in control of a strategic highway and allowing it to eventually bifurcate and capture the self-administration district.

In the Khabour conflict zone, People's Protection Unit forces along with the Syriac Military Council, the Khabour River brigades, and Sutoro Police armed with rifles are facing heavily armed IS forces that are daily increasing in numbers. They are running out of ammunition, and many are trapped and under IS siege in Tel Tamr. They need immediate and prolonged air strikes, as well as military supplies and logistical and military support to halt the IS advance and allow them to attempt to reclaim the lost Assyrian villages.

Renewed air strikes on March 13 and 14 raised the morale of the Assyrian Syriac fighters and their allies and have comforted terrified civilian populations. However, all on the ground realize that without much greater help, they are doomed. The situation is similar to the Kobani and the Nineveh Plain attacks (overpowering ISIS force against vastly inferior defense forces). However, the dispersed nature of civilian populations and villages and the barriers to retreat and flight means that IS may attack from many directions. There is no single place where civilians can take refuge and self-defense forces can take a stand as there was in Kobani.

Airstrikes can never alone stop IS. There is an immediate need for ammunition, anti-tank weapons, and military strategic advice for the defending minority forces.

Without military help for these forces in the Hasakeh province, a population of close to a million Kurds and Syriac Assyrians are in grave danger. Moreover, IS will seek to move from Hasakeh back into northern Iraq where millions of refugees from prior IS attacks have taken refuge in Kurdish or Syriac controlled areas.

Unlike the Arab Muslim defenders and civilians of towns and villages in the Raqqa and Dayr az Zawr provinces, Christians, Kurds, and other minorities stand to receive severe persecution at best if IS prevails militarily in the embattled al-Hasakeh province. IS has been particularly brutal with communities that have sought to fend off its attacks. Its treatment of captured Christians, Kurds, Yazidis and others in Iraq, who could not resist militarily, was atrocious. IS can be expected to inflict equal or greater outrages in al-Hasakeh if it is able to conquer the region.

IS took 278 hostages from the ten Assyrian villages it captured and turned 30 Assyrian girls into sex slaves. How many more similar human rights abuses will take place if IS takes hundreds of Kurdish and Syriac Assyrian villages housing millions of citizens in the beleaguered province. The Assyrian people are the oldest inhabitants of this area and have lived there for over 5,000 years. But they could be completely removed, by death, conquest, or flight within weeks if the international community does not take steps to stop IS.

IS has made plain that its goal is utter eradication of all ethnic/religious groups in Syria that do not adopt its worldview and tenets of behavior and belief. This is clearly genocide as defined by international law, which authorizes international action. The existence of a genocide and threats to commit more in al-Hasakeh is openly documented by IS itself, removing any excuses for international inaction.

For the al-Hasakeh province, the Assad regime has made clear that it is either unable or unwilling to defend this particular section of the Syrian nation. Accordingly, we believe that this emergency situation clearly is one in which the defense and intervention responsibility must be borne by the broader community of states—particularly the US led coalition. There will be no violation of Syrian sovereignty if intervention occurs. Further, we seek US pressure to be applied through the UN, NATO, and US allies in the region to allow al-Hasakeh civilians and their defenders to receive overland and airdrops of needed military supplies and humanitarian assistance. The international community should also take steps to ensure that civilian populations have the means and capability to flee to sanctuary in Turkey or Iraq—if Iraq can provide safe havens.

Our goal, as part of the self-administration district, is to rebuild our province and our nation on a foundation of the principles set out in the self-administration contract. We want to create a pluralistic, inclusive democratic state for all the people of Syria. As minorities, we have a great motivation to live in an inclusive society that is not dominated by any one group. To achieve this, Assyrians and other minorities must

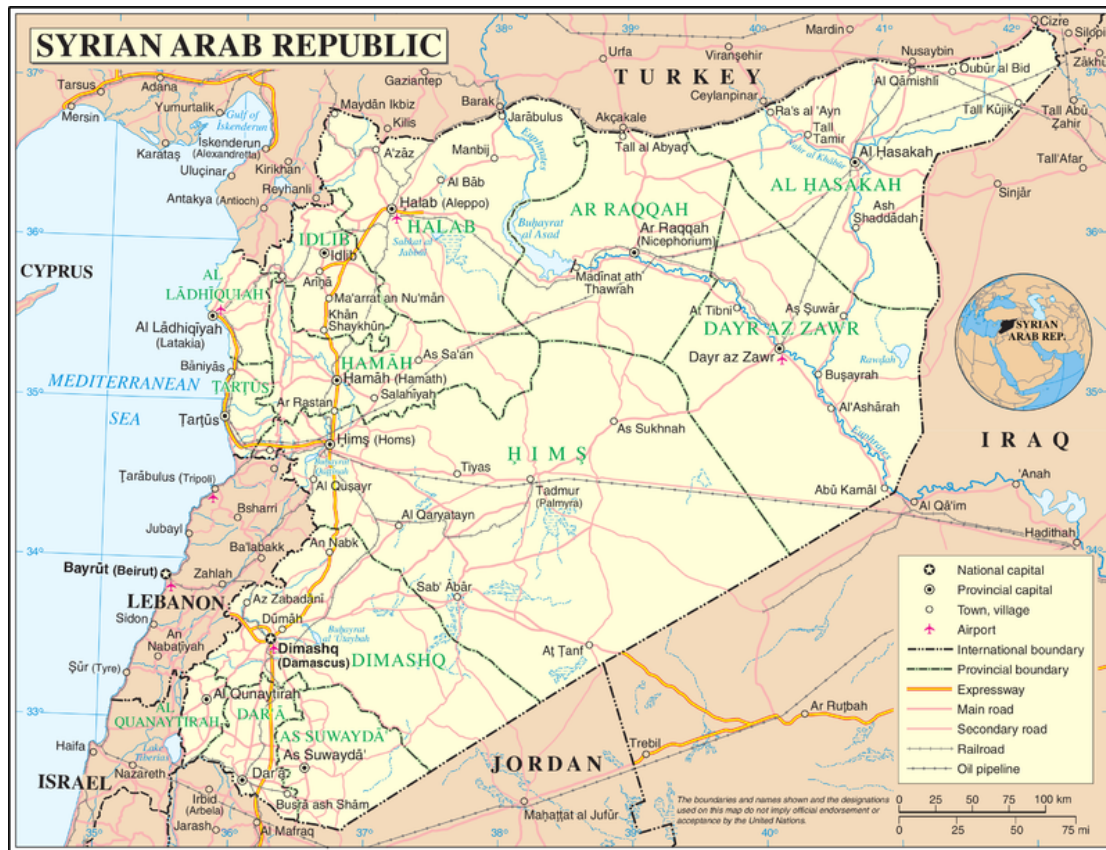
survive and must be able to live in the country without fearing for their lives, property and future.

In closing, on behalf of the people of the al-Hasakeh province, men and women of all nationalities and religions, I thank the United States and its coalition partners for what they have done to date to slow down IS attacks on the province, and I request that the members of this Commission and the United States Congress do all within their power to keep IS from taking more of this territory and to help afflicted civilian populations by providing military and humanitarian assistance as quickly as is possible to stop what will otherwise be a disaster for all who live in the region.

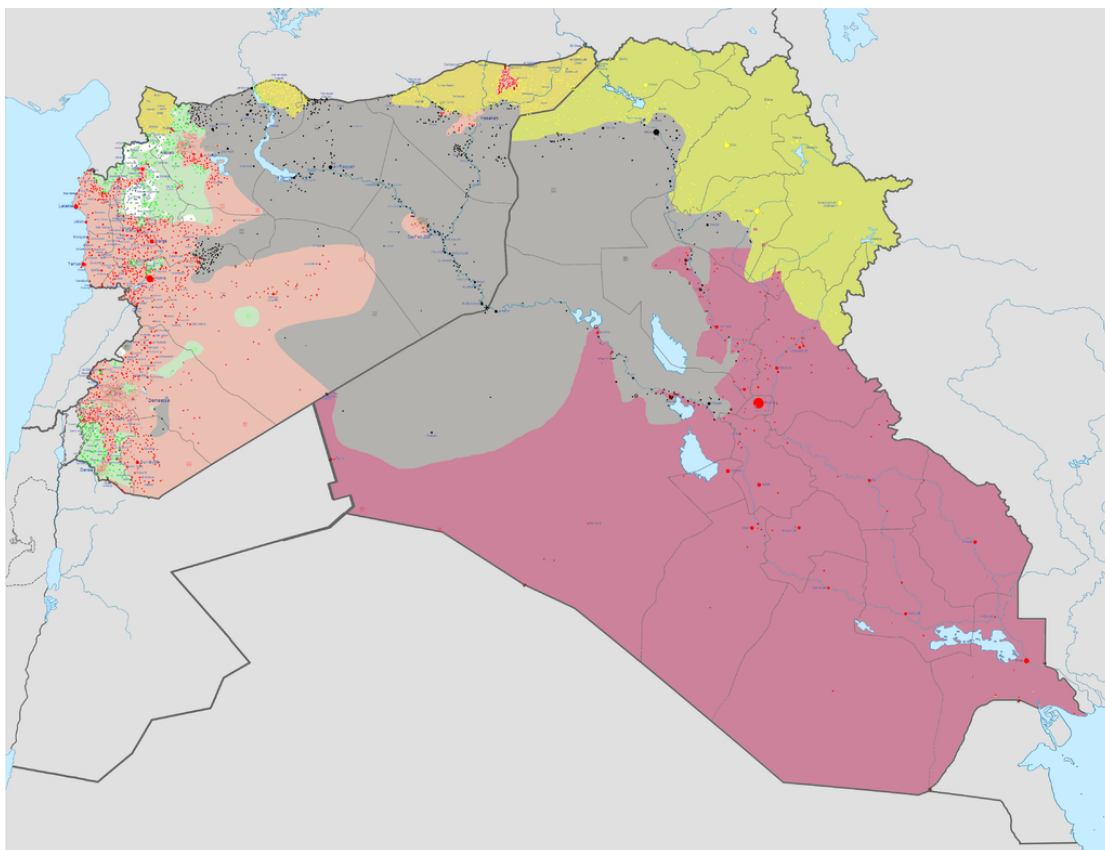
I will be happy to answer questions or provide any needed information to the Commission.

Attachments: Maps of Conflict Zone; Press Releases of SNCS

POLITICAL MAP OF SYRIA



MAP OF AL-HASAKEH CONFLICT ZONE AS OF MARCH 5, 2015 (Wikipedia)



MAP OF ATTACKED ASSYRIAN KHABOUR RIVER VALLEY VILLAGES

