

**Testimony of**

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**Before the**

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**On Confronting the Genocide of Religious Minorities: A Way  
Forward**

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I want to thank the Co-Chairs and Members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for holding this hearing on “Confronting the Genocide of Religious Minorities: A Way Forward” and inviting me to testify on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Among other issues, my testimony will focus on the genocidal actions of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). USCIRF in 2015 called on the U.S. government to declare that ISIL was committing genocide against the Christian, Yazidi, Shi’a, Turkmen, and Shabak communities in the areas it controls in Iraq and Syria. At that time, USCIRF also called on American and world leaders to condemn ISIL’s actions against these groups and other ethnic and religious groups, including the brutal persecution and crimes against humanity against Sunni Muslims who refuse to embrace its extremist ideology.

USCIRF welcomed Secretary of State John Kerry’s declaration on March 17, 2016 that, in his judgment, ISIL “is responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control, including Yezidis, Christians, and Shi’a Muslims [and] for crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing directed at these same groups and in some cases also against Sunni Muslims, Kurds, and other minorities.” He also correctly observed that: “Daesh is responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control,” is “genocidal by self-proclamation, by ideology, and by actions,” and that it “kills Christians because they are Christians; Yezidis because they are Yezidis; Shia because they are Shia.”

The Secretary’s statement shined an essential light on ISIL’s horrific actions and its extremist ideology, and correctly calls ISIL what it is: genocidal. We must all stand against ISIL, which seeks to destroy minority religious communities and members of the majority community who do not subscribe to its barbaric interpretation of Islam.

I would be remiss if I also did not include in my testimony the al-Assad regime’s brutal persecution and crimes against humanity in Syria that target mainly Sunni Muslims, but also others, and helped create the conditions for ISIL’s rise in that nation. USCIRF also encourages continued and robust efforts by the United States and international community to bear witness to these crimes and make additional designations of genocide and crimes against humanity, whether committed by ISIL, the Assad regime, or others, as appropriate.

By describing the all too tragic human consequences for religious minorities and dissenting Muslims of the actions of ISIL and the Assad regime, I hope to set the stage for a discussion of policy options for the United States and the international community, especially in light of the Administration’s genocide declaration. The recommendations in my testimony reflect the situation on the ground, including the forced dislocation of millions and the consequences within and beyond the region of ISIL and the Assad regime’s actions. I will begin my testimony by focusing on Iraq and then turn to Syria, including the displacement crisis, and end with recommendations for the U.S. government.

### **Iraq’s Religious Minorities and ISIL**

Iraq’s sectarian tensions underscore the country’s very poor human rights and religious freedom climate. Under Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi government used intimidation and terror to maintain relative order, while favoring the 35 percent of the country’s population who are Sunni Muslim.

Following Hussein's fall in 2003, Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's Prime Minister between 2003 and 2014, did not fully implement an agreement to share government power between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, targeted Sunni areas and politicians, and marginalized Sunni Muslims in the government and the military. Since his resignation, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has made some overtures to integrate Sunni Muslims into the government and recruit them into the military but he has not eased sectarian tensions. The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), recognized by Prime Minister al-Abadi in September 2015 as officially part of the Iraqi state, have continued to commit systematic attacks against Sunni Muslim civilians, exacerbating sectarian tensions.

These factors facilitated the rise of ISIL which controls significant areas of northern and central Iraq. Moreover, those Sunni Muslims who abhor ISIL fear that the Iraqi government will not protect them. Religious minority communities, especially the Yazidi population, doubt the Iraqi government's willingness and/or ability to protect them from ISIL. This degree of mistrust among Iraq's religious and ethnic communities and their lack of confidence in the Iraqi government exacerbate sectarian tensions and further undermine the country's stability.

### Religious Freedom Conditions

**Violations by ISIL:** Even before ISIL's rise, the country's smallest religious communities – which include Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Protestants, Yazidis, and Sabeen Mandeans – had been significantly diminished. Before 2003, non-Muslim Iraqis constituted about three percent of the Iraqi population. By 2013, the Christian population had been reduced to 500,000, half of its reported size in 2003: some Christian leaders report that the figure may be as low as 250,000 to 300,000. The Yazidi community reported in 2013 that since 2005 their population had decreased by nearly 200,000 to about 500,000, and the Mandeans report that almost 90 percent of their community had left the country or been killed, with only a few thousand remaining in Iraq.

ISIL threatens these minority religious communities, Iraq's stability, and the region. Especially since 2014, when ISIL advanced in northern Iraq, their size further has declined. ISIL's violent religious and political ideology allows no religious diversity or freedom of thought or expression. Since January 2014, the group has spurred the displacement of at least 3.4 million Iraqis, including many minority community members. The group has forced others to convert to ISIL's version of Islam; raped and enslaved women and children; and tortured and killed community members, including by stoning, electrocution, and beheading. ISIL's targeting of Iraq's smallest and ancient religious minority communities could well mark their end in Northern Iraq.

ISIL's horrific crimes include those against the Yazidi community, a small religious group it regards as "devil worshippers" who are not "People of the Book" (the Abrahamic faiths). According to survivor accounts, ISIL gave Yazidis two options: convert or face death. Yazidi women and girls are subject to mass rape, sexual slavery, assault, and forced marriage to ISIL fighters. The U.S. Holocaust Museum Memorial documents at least 1,562 Yazidis killed in the summer of 2014, including those who died on Mount Sinjar from starvation and dehydration. According to the United Nations, at least 16 mass graves have been uncovered around Sinjar, with the remains likely being Yazidi victims. In January 2016, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

(OHCHR) reported that ISIL had abducted 5,838 people since August 2014: 3,192 women and 2,646 men.

ISIL also has targeted Christian communities. In August 2015, Iraqi Defense Minister, Khaled al-Obeidi reported that ISIL had killed 2,000 Iraqis in the largely Christian Nineveh Plains area between January and August 2015, and that more than 125,000 Christians fled to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for protection. In Kirkuk, ISIL has used churches as bases, stormed cemeteries, and desecrated several graveyards; it also destroyed Assyrian monasteries. In late January 2016, reports were received that ISIL in 2014 had destroyed St. Elijah's Monastery in Erbil, the oldest Christian monastery in Iraq which has been a place of worship for more than 1,400 years.

ISIL also victimizes both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, having taken responsibility for many bombings and killings throughout the country that target both communities. ISIL kills and injures Shi'a Muslims indiscriminately through bombings and other mass killing methods, whereas it targets Sunni communities – and community leaders – that pose threats to its authority or are engaged in resistance activities. For example, in July 2015, 115 Shi'a Muslims were killed in Khan Bani Saad, north of Baghdad and in August, 67 Shi'a Muslims were killed in the Jamila Market near Sadr City. In July, 22 members of the Sunni Jubur tribe were executed north of Mosul and in October, ISIL executed 70 members of Sunni Abu Nimer tribe Anbar Province.

***Violations by the Shi'a Militias:*** At the 2015 United Nations General Assembly, Prime Minister al-Abadi announced that the PMF would be part of the official Iraqi state, accountable to the Ministry of Interior. While one likely reason for this action was to increase government control of the PMF, one of Iraq's strongest military umbrella forces, the group still operates with significant autonomy. Religious leaders, such as Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani – Iraq's top Shi'a cleric, publicly have called on the Iraqi government and the Prime Minister to exert more robust control over the group's actions. In spite of this plea, al-Abadi has allocated at least \$1 billion to the PMF from Iraq's state budget and regularly mentions the group when speaking about the Iraqi government's battles against ISIL.

Although the PMF is an effective military force in the fight against ISIL, it and Shi'a militia groups under its umbrella (such as the Badr Brigades, League of the Righteous, Hezbollah Battalions, and the Imam Ali Battalions) also have been accused of carrying out systematic and egregious sectarian violence and other human rights abuses against Sunni Muslims. After the recapture of Tikrit in March 2015, Shi'a militias reportedly destroyed hundreds of buildings in the Sunni villages of al-Dur, al-Bu' Ajil, and al-Alam neighborhoods. Two hundred Sunni men also were abducted. In mid-January 2016 in Muqadiyah, Shi'a militias burned and destroyed six Sunni mosques and a Sunni marketplace. Sunni neighbors and two journalists for Iraq's al-Sharqiya TV, a channel sympathetic to Iraqi Sunnis, also were executed. At the end of December 2015, PMF groups reportedly harassed Christian women who did not wear the Islamic headscarf. Christians in Baghdad said that the PMF hung posters on churches and monasteries in Christian neighborhoods urging women to cover their hair and that some Christians received threats that they should not celebrate Christmas or New Year's or disrespect PMF martyrs who died fighting ISIL. Human rights groups have urged the government to hold the PMF and other government-sanctioned actors

accountable, by prosecuting them for their perpetration of extortions, torture, extrajudicial killings, kidnappings, and abductions of non-Shi'a, especially Sunni, individuals.

### **Syria and Religious Minorities**

Since 2011, Syria has been a hostile place for all ethno-sectarian groups, including Christians, Druze, Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, Alawites, and Turkmen. With over 13.5 million people in Syria now in need of humanitarian assistance, the protection of human rights and religious freedom is especially challenging. Syria's religious communities have been denied religious freedom due to the actions of President Bashar al-Assad's regime, elements of the armed opposition, and U.S.-designated terrorist groups, in particular ISIL and the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, among others.

The Syrian crisis has become a largely sectarian conflict. The al-Assad regime continues to target Sunni Arab civilians and other individuals or groups that oppose it, including through indiscriminate bombings, sieges, starvation, and the use of chemical weapons. ISIL targets the regime and its supporters, religious minorities, and any Sunni Muslims opposing its violent version of Islamist ideology. Syrian and international groups alike have documented attacks on places of worship, kidnappings and killings of religious leaders, and public beheadings and mass murders of anyone who does not submit to ISIL's control and authority.

The al-Assad family's brutal authoritarian rule for over 40 years created the political conditions for the current conflict by allowing no political opposition and permitting Syrian security forces to perpetrate egregious human rights abuses against anyone critical of the government. Adherents of the minority Alawite community, Hafez and Bashar al-Assad placed loyal Alawites in key positions in the government, army, and security forces, and oppressed political opposition from the majority Sunni Arab population to maintain control over all aspects of Syrian society

The current Syrian conflict began in March 2011 with peaceful protestors initially calling for democratic reforms, a repeal of the abusive emergency law, and space for political parties to compete with the ruling Ba'athist party. President al-Assad ordered a brutal crackdown of the protests which were being held around the country and which the international media widely covered. As a result, violence quickly escalated across the country. By mid-to-late 2012, the strife between the government and protesters had turned into a full-blown military confrontation. In mid-2011, the government released numerous prisoners previously designated as "Islamic fundamentalists," including prominent Sunnis who became leaders in Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIL, and other factions, and facilitated the "Islamization" of the armed opposition. Simultaneously, al-Assad began to use religiously divisive rhetoric to convince minority groups, such as the Druze, Alawites, and Christians, to remain loyal to him.

The involvement of international actors in many cases has contributed to increased ethno-sectarian tensions throughout the country. The Iranian-backed, U.S.-designated terrorist group, Hezbollah, has provided military support for the Syrian Arab Army. Human rights groups have documented Hezbollah's sectarian rhetoric against Sunni Muslims. Additionally, ceasefire and negotiations overseen, and at times orchestrated, by Iran and Hezbollah have facilitated the forced relocation of Sunni Muslims to northern Syria and Shi'a Muslims to Damascus.

Islamist factions, who are leading the armed opposition, have received support from countries including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. Many of these groups have established Shari'ah courts and imposed Islamic regulations, such as prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcohol. The political and military opposition have not succeeded in attracting ethno-sectarian minorities to join their ranks, leaving communities such as the Kurds, Druze, and Christians feeling disenfranchised and sidelined in the political process, even if they are not supportive of the al-Assad regime. While minority groups have not been driven out of opposition-controlled areas, they have maintained a low profile, sometimes adopting Muslim attire and avoiding going to their religious institutions so as not to attract attention.

ISIL has attacked pro-Assad and anti-Assad groups alike, and while it seized significant territory in 2014, it lost an estimated 10 to 20 percent of its territory in Syria in 2015, including oil wells, refineries, and military bases. Despite military setbacks inflicted by the U.S.-led anti-ISIL coalition and the armed opposition, ISIL continues to govern brutally. Reports have emerged from all groups, including Muslims, Christians, Ismailis, and others, of gross human rights violations, including beheading, rape, murder, torture of civilians and religious figures, and the destruction of mosques and churches.

More than five years of conflict has created a devastating humanitarian crisis, with an estimated death toll of as high as 470,000. As of January 2016, more than 4.7 million Syrians were registered with UNHCR as refugees in neighboring countries, more than 6.5 million were internally displaced, and over 140,000 children had been born stateless. Such large numbers of refugees are straining resources and exacerbating sectarian tensions in neighboring countries.

### Religious Freedom Conditions

Prior to the onset of the conflict in 2011, Syria was home to a multitude of religious groups. Based on official Syrian government figures, the country's religious demography before the conflict was estimated as: 87 percent Muslim (74 percent Sunni and 13 percent Alawi, Ismaili, and Shi'a), 10 percent Christian, three percent Druze, and a very small number of Jews in Damascus and Aleppo. Another 2010 estimated breakdown is as follows: 92.8 Muslim, 5.2 percent Christian, two percent unaffiliated, and all other groups less than 0.1 percent.

***Violations by the al-Assad Regime and Affiliated Groups:*** According to human rights groups, the regime and its allies, Russia and Iranian-backed Hezbollah, indiscriminately have targeted primarily Arab Sunni Muslim residential neighborhoods, market places, schools, and hospitals. The al-Assad regime and its military have used rape, extrajudicial killings, starvation, sniper attacks, and torture to maintain power. Paramilitary units, previously known as the *shabiha* but now known as the National Defense Forces and comprised mostly of local Shi'a and Alawite fighters (including females), have been accused of extortion, blackmail, kidnapping, and extrajudicial killing.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), the Syrian regime in 2015 killed more than 12,000 civilians and used chemical weapons at least 64 times. Russian forces killed 832 civilians. More than 6,909 individuals were arrested, including 452 children, and 1,546 individuals died under torture. In 2015, the regime targeted at least 166 places of worship: according to various

sources, government forces since 2011 targeted between 50 to 63 percent of Christian places of worship. Members of the Christian community also have been victims of the Syrian government. Since 2011, at least 50 Christians reportedly have been killed and at least 450 remain detained, although the numbers cannot be confirmed. Offices of Christian pro-democracy and charity groups have been raided and prominent Christian civil rights activists, humanitarian workers, and religious leaders have been among the detained and killed.

***Violations by ISIL:*** ISIL makes little distinction between sects and ethnicities in its efforts to seize and maintain control of territory. It has established brutal governing structures that apply strict Shari'ah law to everyone. According to SNHR, of the more than 5,800 individuals ISIL killed in Syria since 2014, at least 97 percent were Muslims. ISIL reportedly has killed at least 100 individuals from religious minority communities, including 50 Christians. Additionally, since 2014, ISIL has kidnapped about 450 Christians; it has periodically released some of them in small groups through negotiations between ISIL and Sunni Arab tribes, but about 150 remain in captivity. ISIL also has kidnapped well-known Christian leaders, including the Italian Jesuit Priest, Paolo Dall'Oglio. The group has attacked and closed down all churches and non-Sunni mosques in areas it controls, often destroying the buildings or converting them to ISIL administrative buildings or military bases. ISIL and other extremist groups reportedly have seized and sold on the black market Christian relics and artifacts.

***Armed Opposition Groups:*** There reportedly are at least 228 armed opposition groups: they range from Jabhat al-Nusra and its allies to independent, U.S.-backed, moderate opposition groups. Religious freedom conditions vary by locality given that not all groups violate freedom of religion to the same degree. For example, in Idleb and Aleppo, where al-Nusra is strongest, minority religious groups often hide their identity, although they have not been forced from their homes. Some armed groups have characterized clashes on the basis of religious identity as “individual actions” not supported by a group’s leadership.

## **Displacement**

The combined actions of ISIL, other non-state actors, and in some cases state actors, have created and/or contributed to a humanitarian crisis not seen since World War II. Millions from Iraq and Syria now are displaced, including Yazidis, Christians, Shi'a Muslims, and Sunni Muslims who do not subscribe to ISIL's barbaric interpretation of Islam. In Iraq, about 3.4 million have been displaced internally due to ISIL's offensive, and in Syria, nearly 7.5 million are internally displaced and more than 4.8 million are registered as refugees in neighboring states (with almost 3 million in Turkey and more than 1 million in Lebanon). A record number of refugees are attempting the dangerous Mediterranean crossing to apply for asylum in Europe, with many from Syria and Iraq.

Since 2014, the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region and its government (KRG) have provided a safe haven for religious minority communities fleeing ISIL's advancements and attacks. With a population of about 5.2 million people, since ISIL's advent and the beginning of the Syrian conflict, an additional 1.8 million Syrian refugees and Iraqi IDPs from other parts of Iraq have flooded the KRG, straining its ability to provide sufficient humanitarian aid and services. The

pressure on the KRG to provide for communities that have sought safety there has further strained relations between the KRG and Baghdad.

## **Recommendations**

Before suggesting some recommendations for the U.S. government it is important to note recent U.S. government aid to Iraq and Syria

Aid to Iraq: In 2015, the United States provided Iraq with over \$623 million in humanitarian aid, including to care for internally displaced persons in the KRG. The funding supported the activities of the U.S. State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Organization for Migration (IOM), UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), UN Population Fund (UNFPA), UN World Health Organization (WHO), UN Development Program (UNDP), and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), among others. Supported activities include camp coordination, health and medical support, education projects, food assistance, psychosocial support, shelter rehabilitation, and livelihood development. The United States also continues to resettle Iraqi refugees to the United States. According to State Department statistics, 12,676 Iraqis were resettled to the United States in FY2015, second only to the number of refugees resettled from Burma.

The United States in 2015 also spent over \$52.49 million in Iraq on good governance, rule of law and human rights, political competition and consensus building, and civil society programs, and continues to fund projects dealing with minority issues such as The Support for Minorities in Iraq (SMI) program. SMI collaborates with centers in Iraq to train and provide assistance to the country's minority groups so they can better represent themselves in civil society, address common challenges, and economically empower women.

Aid to Syria: Since 2011, the U.S. government has provided over \$4.5 billion in humanitarian aid to Syrians and neighboring countries dealing with the Syrian crisis; \$1.6 billion was provided in 2015 alone. The funding has supported activities of the U.S. State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Organization for Migration (IOM), UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), UN Population Fund (UNFPA), UN World Health Organization (WHO), UN Development Program (UNDP), and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), among others. The efforts supported by the United States include civil society trainings, local council capacity building, health and medical support, education projects, food assistance, psychosocial support, shelter rehabilitation, and livelihood development.

In addition to recommending increased humanitarian aid to internally displaced persons and refugee, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Designate Syria and Iraq both as "Countries of Particular Concern" (CPCs) for their "systematic, ongoing and egregious violations" of religious freedom;



- Call for or support a referral by the UN Security Council to the International Criminal Court to investigate ISIL violations in Iraq and Syria against religious and ethnic minorities, following the models used in Sudan and Libya, or encourage the Iraqi government to accept ICC jurisdiction to investigate ISIL violations in Iraq after June 2014;
- Encourage the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, in its ongoing international meetings, to work to develop measures to protect and assist the region's most vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities, including by increasing immediate humanitarian aid, prioritizing the resettlement to third countries of the most vulnerable, and providing longer-term support in host countries for those who hope to return to their homes post-conflict;
- Initiate an effort among relevant UN agencies, NGOs, and like-minded partners among the Global Coalition to Combat ISIL to fund and develop programs that bolster intra- and inter-religious tolerance, alleviate sectarian tensions, and promote respect for religious freedom and related rights, both in neighboring countries hosting refugees (especially Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey), and in preparing for a post-conflict Syria; and
- The U.S. Congress should include in the Fiscal Year 2017 Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Bill, or in another appropriate vehicle, a provision that would permit the U.S. government to appropriate or allocate funds for in-kind assistance to genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes cases at the ICC on a case-by-case basis and when in the national interest to provide such assistance.

For Iraq: The U.S. government should:

- Develop a government-wide plan of action to protect religious minorities in Iraq and help establish the conditions for them to return to their homes; charge the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom with engaging with the Inter-Governmental Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief to coordinate similar efforts by other governments;
- Include in all military or security assistance to the Iraqi and Iraqi Kurdistan governments a requirement that security forces are integrated to reflect the country's religious and ethnic diversity, and provide training for recipient units on universal human rights standards and how to treat civilians, particularly religious minorities;
- Urge the Iraqi government to continue to prosecute and hold to account the Popular Mobilization Forces for abuses of non-combatant Sunni Muslims or other religious minorities, and investigate and prosecute perpetrators when violations occur;
- Urge the parties to include the protection of rights for all Iraqis and ending discrimination as part of negotiations between the KRG and the Iraqi government on disputed territories, and press the KRG to address alleged abuses against minorities by Kurdish officials in these areas;
- Continue to task Embassy officials with engaging religious minority communities, and work with Iraq's government and these communities and their political and civic

representatives to help them reach agreement on what measures are needed to ensure their rights and security in the country; and

- Focus U.S. programming in Iraq on promoting religious freedom and tolerance and ensure that marginalized communities benefit from U.S. and international development assistance.

For Syria, the U.S. government should seek an end to the Syrian conflict, and should:

- Condemn the al-Assad regime's brutal persecution of, and crimes of humanity against, Sunni Muslims and others, and urge other nations to do the same;
- Urge the UN Security Council and its member states to rigorously implement and comply with ratified resolutions, including UN Security Council resolutions 2118 (elimination of Syrian chemical weapons), 2139 (calling for humanitarian access into besieged areas and an end to barrel bombs), 2165 (approving humanitarian access across conflict lines), 2209 (calling for an end to the use of chlorine bombs), and 2254 (ceasefire and road map for peace in Syria);
- Continue to call for an International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation into crimes committed by the al-Assad regime, following the models used in Sudan and Libya;
- Ensure that religious freedom and diversity are given a high priority in the Vienna Process by encouraging both the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and any negotiating teams developed by the ISSG to be inclusive of all religious and ethnic groups; the ISSG should also provide training to negotiating teams on international human rights standards;
- Ensure that U.S. government planning for a post-conflict Syria is a "whole-of-government" effort and includes consideration of issues concerning religious freedom and related human rights, and that USCIRF and other U.S. government experts on those issues are consulted as appropriate;
- Commit to a goal of resettling 100,000 Syrian refugees to the United States, subject to proper vetting and a prioritization based on vulnerability, in order to aid those Syrians in the greatest peril, demonstrate U.S. leadership in efforts to address this extraordinary humanitarian crisis, and show support for governments in the Middle East and Europe that are hosting millions of Syrian refugees;
- Allocate sufficient resources to the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies that conduct the rigorous individualized vetting of refugees being considered for resettlement to allow them to expeditiously process applications and thoroughly conduct background checks, in order to facilitate resettlement without compromising U.S. national security; and
- Consider issuing an exemption to U.S. immigration law's "material support bar" provision for Syrian refugees who supported specific U.S.-backed rebel groups or provided "support"

by force or under duress to terrorist organizations, and properly apply existing exemptions, so that Syrians who pose no threat to the United States and are fleeing the al-Assad regime or terrorist groups are not erroneously barred from the U.S. refugee program.