



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

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

**Tuesday, April 19th, 2016**

**2:00 PM - 4:00 PM**

**1334 Longworth House Office Building**

#### **Opening Statement**

Ladies and gentlemen, panelists and distinguished guests, I now call this hearing to order. This hearing is entitled “Confronting the Genocide of Religious Minorities: A Way Forward.” It will be comprised of three panels.

Recognizing myself for an opening statement –

In recent years, the globe has witnessed a dramatic rise in the ability of non-state-actors to fill power vacuums, govern territory and execute some of the world’s most egregious and systemic violations of human rights. Recognizing this emerging threat, this Commission held its first hearing of my tenure, just over one year ago, on the human rights abuses of the Islamic State.

At that hearing, this Commission laid out the broad range of abuses and atrocities committed by Islamic State fighters against its opponents in Iraq and Syria – whether armed or unarmed. This Commission heard accounts of the specific targeting by the Islamic State of Christians, Yazidis, Shiites, Alawites, and Sunnis opposed to Islamic State Rule. Women of all sects and ethnicities also

faced severe targeting and faced unique hardships imposed by this radical terrorist group, including sexual assault and forced marriage.

Given the Islamic State's core motivations and extreme religious ideology, the targeting of religious minority groups for destruction comes as no surprise. Near the very beginning of ISIL's blitz through Iraq, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights stated in September of 2014 that "the targeting of ethnic and religious communities by the Islamic State appears to be part of a deliberate and systematic policy that aims to suppress, permanently cleanse or expel, or in some instances destroy those communities within areas of its control." In March of 2015, the High Commissioner further iterated that it had "gathered reliable information about acts of violence perpetrated against civilians (by the Islamic State) because of their affiliation or perceived affiliation to an ethnic or religious group."

The specific abuses committed by the Islamic State documented by NGO's and governments alike include forced conversions, kidnapping, assault, sexual assault, the displacement, detention, and expulsion of individuals, the destruction or seizure of their property, and the execution of minorities.

One dynamic characteristic of these abuses is the level of exposure they've had on the world stage, either via foreign media outlets or the sick advertisement of them by the perpetrators themselves. Whether it was witnessing a Yazidi girl being auctioned as a sex slave, or a Christian being beheaded for his faith, or a Shia mosque blown apart in an effort to cleanse its followers from the land, humanity has experienced an unprecedented amount of admittance of these atrocities and – dare I say – a new level of liability along with it.

The depth and breadth of atrocities proliferated by the Islamic State has been met with a far reaching and substantial response – the determination that these atrocities constitute genocide.

The European Parliament recognized it in February of this year, followed by the United States Congress last month, followed days later by the Obama Administration. I'd like to commend Secretary Kerry and the Administration for making the accurate, right and just decision to designate these atrocities as genocide, and for the scope of their designation.

However, this determination may prove to ring hollow if our government does not bring about a response and actions reciprocal of this designation. The United Nations **Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide** requires our government and other parties to the agreement to prevent and punish acts of genocide.

With that, I was proud to serve as an original cosponsor of a resolution that the House also passed promoting the establishment of a war crimes tribunal for the parties in Syria that have committed crimes against humanity. I believe a transnational accountability mechanism like this is sorely needed. Furthermore, the United States can call upon competent international bodies to suppress the actions of genocide.

Aside from legal actions, there are many numerous operable actions that can be taken to suppress these atrocities, help bring about accountability and bring relief to the victims. I look forward to exploring our government's obligations, responses to these violations and paths forward with our distinguished panelists.

I thank them for their participation here today, and I commit to working within this body to promote, defend and advocate for the human rights of the victims the Islamic State and all those that have experienced acts of genocide.