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**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing- Religious Freedom for**  
**Shia Populations**  
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Co-chairmen and members of the Commission, thank you for inviting me to speak before you today to speak about this relevant topic of great significance to the future of the Middle East. It is particularly important to draw to the U.S. **government's attention the complicated and changing religious and ethnic relations in Arab societies.**

I am speaking to you today from Baghdad, where I have come based upon the sponsorship of the Arabia Foundation, to **explore Shi'a** -Sunni dynamics after the national election held here on May 12. Part of my research includes an assessment of the role Iran is playing in its determination to influence and control **Iraq's future** government.

Sectarianism in the Arab world **between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims** remains an inescapable presence that escalates when there are major upheavals, such as the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the US invasion of Iraq, and, of course, the Arab uprisings. The Arab uprisings have given prominence to ethnic and religious identities and raised questions about citizenship. With the weakening or utter collapse of some Arab states, citizenship is being re-defined. As my latest book, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi-a-Sunni Divide* documents, **Arabs today are asking themselves are they Shi'a, Sunni or Alawites or are they Syrians? Are they Kurds, Yazidis, Shi'a, Sunni or Iraqis?**

Over the last few decades, two broad factors have caused the Shia-Sunni differences to escalate: geopolitics in the Middle East, primarily between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the tactics through which governments have used this rivalry to manipulate their populations for their own political purposes. We see this in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, and, historically in Saudi Arabia. However today, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman is taking a radically different approach and has censored those more radical religious figures who preach anti-**Shi'a discourse**.

In Bahrain, where the **Sunni-led government rules over a majority Shi'a population, there is widespread discrimination against the Shia'**. Since the uprising began in 2011, society has only become more polarized. An uprising that began as somewhat of a united protest movement, **when Shi'a and Sunni called for democratic reforms, has deteriorated into deeper repression against Shi'a leaders, their clerics and their organizations.**

I know the Commission recently heard detailed testimony on the Bahraini situation; therefore, I will not go into further detail. However, there is an important lesson **here: In the beginning of the uprising, the many strands of the Shi'a opposition**

were not involved with Iran, and Iran did not appear to back the unrest. But as the repression continued and as the government advanced a false narrative of Iranian involvement, it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Youth groups after some time radicalized and began receiving funding from Iran either indirectly or directly, according to many sources, including US intelligence.

The geopolitical struggles feed the conflict on the ground. **Iran's expansionism** – both politically and militarily – has certainly contributed to Sunni views of the Arab Shia, who are often mistakenly assumed to be Iranian loyalists. Debates over contemporary interpretations of Islam have led to the propagation of violence and extremism. Sunni non-state actors, particularly Salafists, believe Iran and the **Shi'a by extension**, are trying to take over Sunni-dominated countries. **Iran's expansionism** over many years, but particularly since the Arab uprisings began, is unprecedented.

**In Iraq, after decades of discrimination against the Shi'a under Saddam Hussein**, the Sunnis now feel they are the ones being targeted. In the aftermath of the recent election, where there was widespread fraud across the country, it is difficult to say even if the election is legitimate. In addition, Iranian forces are hard at work here in Baghdad to make sure their loyalists form the new government.

In conclusion, it is important to understand that unless the tribal and autocratic forms of governance in the Arab world change, ethnic and religious discrimination will continue. Who is the target of this discrimination depends upon who is in power.

Thank you