

# HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS COMMITTED BY THE ISLAMIC STATE

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## HEARING BEFORE THE TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED AND FOURTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

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MARCH 18, 2015

TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

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1 **HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS COMMITTED BY THE ISLAMIC STATE**  
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5 **WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18, 2015**  
6

7 HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,

8 TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION,

9 *Washington, D.C.*  
10

11  
12 The commission met, pursuant to call, at 2:00 p.m., in Room 2255 Rayburn House Office  
13 Building, Hon. James P. McGovern and Hon. Joseph R. Pitts [co-chairmen of the  
14 commission] presiding.  
15

16 MR.PITTS. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience. We were on the floor  
17 voting, and I am sorry for the delay but welcome to all of our distinguished guests, panelists.  
18

19 Ladies and gentlemen, I call this hearing to order. This hearing is entitled "The  
20 Human Rights Violations of the Islamic State," and we will have two panels of witnesses  
21 here today.  
22

23 Early in 2014, what was then a little-known group of transnational Sunni Islamic insurgents  
24 and terrorists burst onto the world's stage. A remnant of al-Qaeda and Iraq, this group  
25 activity thrived in disaffected Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria since the U.S. military  
26 withdrawal in 2011.  
27

28 The group rapidly advanced through Iraq last year and dramatically expanded its  
29 territory in Syria since the beginning of last year. As it advanced, the group massacred  
30 adversaries, civilians and surrounding combatants.  
31

32 Observers have reported a broad range of abuses and atrocities committed by ISIS  
33 members. Non-Muslim minority groups like Christians and Yazidis, Iraqi Shi'ite and Syrian  
34 Alawite civilians, women of all sects and ethnicities, captured Iraqi and Syrian combatants  
35 and even Sunni Arabs that opposed Islamic State rule have all become targets of the Islamic  
36 State.  
37

38 The group has openly singled out minority religious groups for targeting and has  
39 implemented brutal practices against women and children. It waged an open genocide  
40 against one minority religious group, the Yazidis, and threatened many others with the same  
41 prospect.  
42

43 After taking control of Mosul, ISIS demanded that Christians and other minorities  
44 convert to Islam or vacate the city. The destruction of the Christian community there  
45 followed.  
46

47 The group has bombed Shi'ite gathering places in Baghdad and other majority Shi'ite  
48 cities in order to depose the Shi'ite-led government in Iraq.  
49 Women have faced a broad-ranging and particularly severe set of abuses. Yazidi women  
50 that were captured have been subject to systematic sexual violence and enslavement. The  
51 human trafficking of women is rampant amongst the group.  
52

53 Children, too, face specific and severe targeting. The Islamic state has conscripted  
boys and executed those perceived of retaining allegiances to rival groups. On the field of

1 battle, the Islamic State has demonstrated no respect for international norms in its treatment  
2 of combatants and opposition forces.  
3

4 It has executed hundreds of Iraqi and Syrian military personnel captured during  
5 operations, frequently beheading their corpses and displaying the bodies and heads in town  
6 squares.  
7

8 ISIS has brutally opposed fellow Sunnis who reject their rule, executing hundreds or  
9 even thousands of Sunni tribes -- tribe people that have opposed the Islamic State rule.  
10

11 Lastly, the group has executed three Americans and declared war on America and  
12 our allies. The amount of human rights abuses committed by the Islamic State is ever  
13 accumulating.  
14

15 Congress is in the middle of a debate over a request by the president to authorize the  
16 use of military force against the terrorist group. As we consider this authorization and other  
17 policies, we must display leadership and comprehensively address the abuses and grievance  
18 of its victims.  
19

20 Our government must implement concrete steps to help address this situation with  
21 specific considerations for how women, children and minorities have experienced the  
22 conflict and its ensuing human rights violations.  
23

24 Furthermore, we must learn from history. Sectarianism in Iraq and Syria was  
25 rampant long before ISIS was established and took control of the territory.  
26

27 A respect for international religious freedom must play a central role in guiding the  
28 region out of the current crisis. There has been a lot of debate recently regarding the nature  
29 of the Islamic State, whether it is indeed -- has Islamic beliefs or if it is motivated by other  
30 factors.  
31

32 This group has a top-down leadership. It has an ideology. It has a theology and a  
33 world view that is uncompromising and demonstrates relentless ambition.  
34 I believe our government must correctly identify the motivations of this group and its threat  
35 to defeat it and put a stop to its unending human rights violation.  
36

37 The commission would like to explore this today along with policy tools that can  
38 mitigate human rights violations and bring about accountability, justice and redress. And so  
39 I look forward to discussing these issues with our distinguished panelists.  
40

41 I want to thank all of them, the other members, for their attendance here today, and  
42 at this point I yield to my co-chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, Jim  
43 McGovern, for his opening statement.  
44  
45  
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1 MR.MCGOVERN. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I want to welcome all of you to the  
2 Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on human rights violations committed by  
3 the Islamic State and I want to thank all the witnesses for being here.  
4

5 I apologize for the delay, as I am sure Mr. Pitts did. But votes happen. So I want to  
6 also thank the staff for their role in organizing this hearing.  
7

8 What is the so-called Islamic State? What do we know about it? We know that Abu  
9 Bakr al Baghdadi has been its leader since mid-2010 -- that last summer he assumed the  
10 mantle of Caliph and declared the existence of a new Islamic Caliphate, and during the last  
11 year ISIS has expanded its control over large parts of Iraq and Syria and now controls an  
12 area larger than the United Kingdom.  
13

14 It has gained territory. It is committed to brutal, systematic and widespread attacks  
15 against Iraqi and Syrian civilians including mass executions, sexual slavery of women and  
16 girls, forced recruitment of children and the destruction of cultural heritage.  
17

18 Often, these atrocities have been carried out against ethnic or religious minority  
19 communities. The rise of ISIS has deepened a human rights and humanitarian crisis that has  
20 been unfolding for years as sectarian conflict has spread throughout the region.  
21

22 Before the ISIS invasion, the Iraqi government was unable to provide basic services  
23 or to protect vulnerable groups including children, women and minorities. The last two  
24 years under the government of Prime Minister Maliki were a nightmare for religious and  
25 ethnic minorities and civil society at large.  
26

27 In Syria, we are marking the fourth anniversary of peaceful protests that were  
28 brutally repressed, initiating a devastating internal armed conflict. Major cities have been  
29 destroyed, 250,000 people live under siege, millions have been living -- are living as  
30 refugees and the Assad regime has committed war crimes.  
31

32 These realities contributed to a vacuum that ISIS forces, sadly, exploited. At the  
33 core of my work on human rights is the fundamental belief that governments and nations are  
34 stronger and more stable if they respect the basic human rights of all their citizens and their  
35 diversity.  
36

37 It is especially necessary to protect the rights of minority populations and to redress  
38 discrimination. It should make no difference which minorities we are talking about.  
39 Governments that are pluralistic and inclusive offer the only alternative to permanent  
40 sectarian conflict. How do we get there? We need clear guidance and concrete steps that  
41 we can take to turn back ISIS and respond effectively.  
42

43 We need -- we need to establish mechanisms and institutions that genuinely embrace  
44 pluralism. In December, the commission held a hearing on human rights and the  
45 humanitarian crisis in Iraq that generated some recommendations.  
46

47 To date, the U.S. has significantly scaled up the provision of humanitarian assistance  
48 and protection and has undertaken a separate active military role in Iraq to counter the  
49 Islamic State.  
50

1 At today's hearing I look forward to getting additional recommendations on what the  
2 United States can do and the international community can do to alleviate these continuing  
3 human rights abuses.  
4

5 And, finally, Mr. Chairman, we are focusing on atrocities committed by the Islamic  
6 State today, but there are many armed actors in Syria and Iraq who carry out terrible abuses  
7 and human rights crimes against the civilian population.  
8 Human Rights Watch has documented gross abuses by Iraqi government forces with its  
9 allied Shi'a militias against Sunnis and Sunni villages in the fight to turn back ISIS. And I  
10 want to say how deeply concerned I am about this -- about this morning's story in the  
11 Washington Post regarding reports that the Syrian government of Bashir al-Assad allegedly  
12 dropped barrel bombs filled with some chemical agent, most likely chlorine, on the city of  
13 Sarmeen in northwest Syria.  
14

15 According to medical workers in that town, at least six people died and over 70  
16 others were so severely affected by this chemical agent that they required medical treatment.  
17 On March 6th, the United Nations Security Council condemned in the strongest terms any  
18 use of chlorine as a weapon in Syria. We need to make sure that the Syrian government  
19 stops using toxic chemicals as weapons and it is up to the international community including  
20 the United States to ensure that this form of violence is no longer used against Syria's  
21 defenseless population.  
22

23 Toxic chemicals including chlorine are indiscriminate weapons. They do not  
24 distinguish between combatants and civilians, between soldiers and women, children or the  
25 elderly.  
26

27 This is why their use is banned and condemned and we cannot stand silently by and  
28 fail to take action against their use, and with that I yield back my time.  
29

30 [The statement of Mr. McGovern follows:]  
31

32 **Prepared Statement of Rep. James P. McGovern:**  
33

34 Good afternoon.  
35

36 I join my colleague and Co-Chair, Congressman Joe Pitts, in welcoming all of you to the Tom Lantos  
37 Human Rights Commission's hearing on "Human Rights Violations Committed by the Islamic State." I thank  
38 all of our witnesses for their presence today, and I also want to thank the staff of the Commission, especially  
39 Carson Middleton, for organizing this important and timely hearing.  
40

41 What is the so-called Islamic State? What do we know about it?  
42

43 We know that Abu Bakr (BAH-Ker) al-Baghdadi has been its leader since mid-2010; that last summer  
44 he assumed the mantle of caliph and declared the existence of a new Islamic caliphate, something that has not  
45 functioned except in name for a thousand years; and that a caliphate implies actually governing territory. We  
46 know that during the last year ISIS has expanded its control over large parts of Iraq and Syria, and now  
47 controls an area larger than the United Kingdom. We know that as it has gained territory, ISIS has committed  
48 brutal, systematic and widespread attacks against Iraqi and Syrian civilians, including mass executions, sexual  
49 slavery of women and girls, forced recruitment of children and the destruction of cultural heritage. Often these  
50 atrocities have been carried out against ethnic or religious minority communities that have lived in the region  
51 for hundreds, even thousands, of years -- which reminds us once again that it was not that long ago that Iraq  
52 and Syria were pluralistic countries.  
53

54 The rise of ISIS has deepened a human rights and humanitarian crisis that has been unfolding for  
55 years as sectarian conflict has spread throughout the region. Before the ISIS invasion, the Iraqi government  
56 was unable to provide such basic services as clean water, electricity and health care, or to protect vulnerable



1 groups including children, women and minorities. The last two years under the government of Prime Minister  
2 Maliki were a nightmare for religious and ethnic minorities, the internally displaced, the 20 percent of the  
3 population who are Sunni Arabs, and civil society at large.  
4

5 In Syria, we are marking the 4<sup>th</sup> anniversary of peaceful protests that were brutally repressed,  
6 initiating a devastating internal armed conflict. Major cities have been destroyed; 250,000 people live under  
7 siege; 4,000,000 people are living as refugees; and the Assad regime has systematically destroyed medical  
8 facilities and killed doctors, nurses and first responders, a war crime.  
9

10 These realities have contributed to generating and sustaining a vacuum that ISIS forces exploit. And  
11 as ISIS has swept in, the situation has deteriorated even further into horror.  
12

13 At the core of my work on human rights is the fundamental belief that governments and nations are  
14 stronger and more stable if they respect the basic human rights of all their citizens, in all their diversity. It is  
15 especially necessary to protect the rights of minority populations and to redress discrimination. It should make  
16 no difference whether we are talking about minority Muslims in Burma; Buddhists, Christians and Muslims in  
17 China; Christians and Muslims in India; Muslims, Jews and Christians in different parts of the Middle East; or  
18 the threats against all minorities in Iraq and Syria. Governments that are pluralistic and inclusive offer the  
19 only alternative to permanent sectarian conflict.  
20

21 How to get there? We need clear guidance and concrete steps we can take to turn back ISIS; respond  
22 effectively, flexibly and in a non-discriminatory way to the humanitarian “mega crisis” in the region; protect  
23 religious and ethnic minorities; and establish mechanisms and institutions that genuinely embrace pluralism.  
24

25 In December the Commission held a hearing on the human rights and humanitarian crisis in Iraq that  
26 generated some recommendations. To date the U.S. has significantly scaled up the provision of humanitarian  
27 assistance and protection, and has undertaken a separate, active military role in Iraq to counter the Islamic  
28 State. At today’s hearing I look forward to getting additional recommendations on what the United States and  
29 the international community can do to alleviate continuing gross human rights abuses and human suffering in  
30 the region, while reducing and preventing sectarian tensions.  
31

32 Personally, I’m not sure that any of us can say how Iraq and Syria will recover, or what the future  
33 holds. The ground work for today’s violence was laid years ago, and the problems will not be resolved quickly  
34 or with only a military response. But I do believe that all of us of good faith – in the region and in the  
35 international community – have not just the ability but the obligation to offer protection and provide assistance  
36 to those who are suffering, and to bring to justice the perpetrators of violence and abuse.  
37

38 Mr. Chairman, today we are focusing on atrocities committed by the Islamic State. But there are  
39 many armed actors in Syria and Iraq who carry out terrible abuses and human rights crimes against the civilian  
40 population. Human Rights Watch has documented gross abuses by Iraqi government forces and its allied  
41 Shi’ite militias against Sunnis and Sunni villages in the fight to turn back ISIS.  
42

43 I want to say how deeply concerned I am about this morning’s story in the Washington Post regarding  
44 reports that the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad allegedly dropped barrel bombs filled with some  
45 chemical agent, most likely chlorine, on the city of Sarmin in northwest Syria. According to medical workers  
46 in that town, at least six people died and over 70 others were so severely affected by this chemical agent that  
47 they required medical treatment.  
48

49 On March 6<sup>th</sup>, the United Nations Security Council condemned in the strongest terms any use of  
50 chlorine as a weapon in Syria. We need to make sure that the Syrian government stops using toxic chemicals  
51 as weapons – and it is up to the international community, including the United States, to ensure that this form  
52 of violence is no longer used against Syria’s defenseless civilian population.  
53

54 Toxic chemicals, including chlorine, are indiscriminate weapons. They do not distinguish between  
55 combatants and civilians, between soldiers and women, children or the elderly. This is why their use is banned  
56 and condemned. We cannot stand silently by and fail to take action against their use.  
57

58 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.  
59  
60

1 MR.PITTS. The chair thanks the gentleman and I now recognize another distinguished  
2 member of the commission, Trent Franks, for his opening statement.

3  
4 [Begin: Trent Franks, distinguished member of the TLHR commission, opening statement]

5  
6 MR.FRANKS. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman.  
7 I have to be very candid with you. We are in the middle of a markup in another committee  
8 and I have to go soon. So my comments will be sort of extemporaneous and very brief.

9  
10 But I want you to know that I am grateful to both chairmen for drawing attention to  
11 this critical issue and would suggest to you that there is nothing that I or any of us should  
12 fear more in terms of public policy than allowing ourselves or our leaders to grow numb to  
13 evil and the horrific and barbaric atrocities perpetrated against our fellow Americans and our  
14 fellow human beings across the world.

15  
16 And I would suggest to you that ISIS represents probably one of the most evil groups  
17 that we have faced in modern day and sometimes we realize that history doesn't exactly  
18 repeat itself but it does rhyme.

19  
20 And seven decades ago another evil ideology arose in the world and some deemed  
21 them second string or whatever you might want to add as an adjective and they were sort of  
22 ignored.

23  
24 They wore brown shirts and drove bicycles across France and nobody paid much  
25 attention to them. But they had an evil ideology that had no respect for human rights and for  
26 innocent individuals, and that ideology began to take hold in the intelligentsia of Germany  
27 and it lit the fires of World War II's hell on earth and even Holocaust, and before it was over  
28 atomic bombs fell on cities and 15 million people were dead.

29  
30 We ignore this kind of evil, lack of compassion for innocent human beings, at the  
31 peril of all of us. When we don't intervene and stand between the innocent and the  
32 malevolent, we invite that evil to our own shores and that hand to knock on our own door.

33  
34 And so I want to encourage all of you for what you are doing. The fundamental  
35 truth is if we don't have the courage to reach out and protect the innocent, in the final  
36 analysis it weakens our commitment to liberty for anyone on Earth.

37  
38 And I truly believe that if we are about protecting the innocent in our own society  
39 and the world -- that we can overcome almost everything else if we have the moral impulse  
40 toward one another to try to protect the innocent -- somehow we can overcome the rest.

41  
42 But when we turn a blind eye to those that are suffering and tortured and crucified  
43 and beheaded and burned alive, when we turn a blind eye to that, not only does it threaten  
44 our society -- it calls into question whether it is worth saving anyway.

45  
46 So I thank all of you for what you are doing. I especially thank the chairmen here. I  
47 want you to know that many of us are involved not only in efforts like this but in the greater  
48 effort to respond to this evil as it should be responded to.

49  
50 So God bless you all. Thank you both chairmen and let us hope and pray for a day  
51 when, like the Nazis, ISIS will be no more.

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MR.PITTS. The chair thanks the gentleman for his eloquent statement.

In the audience we have a distinguished guest. I would like to take this time to welcome His Grace, Bishop Angelos. His Grace is general bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom.

He was born in Cairo. He spent his childhood and early life in Australia. Following the murders of Coptic Christians at the hands of ISIS last month, His Grace launched the "When Left Behind" appeal.

The appeal, which will support the families of the victims, has received support from His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, and His Grace, the Archbishop of Canterbury, among others. So thank you for your presence here today, Your Grace. And I would like to call the first panel to the witness stand and I would like to -- just take your seat and I will introduce you as you come. Our only witness on our first panel here is David Saperstein.

He is the ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom. He was confirmed by the Senate in December of 2014. He was sworn in and assumed his duties on January 6th, 2015.

The ambassador-at-large is by law a principal advisor to the president and the secretary of state and serves as the United States' chief diplomat on issues of religious freedom worldwide.

Ambassador Saperstein previously served for 40 years as the director of the Religious Action Center of Reformed Judaism, overseeing the national social justice programming for the largest segment of American Jewry.

A rabbi and an attorney for 35 years, Ambassador Saperstein taught seminars in First Amendment church-state law and in the Jewish law at Georgetown University Law Center. Ambassador Saperstein recently visited Iraq and has been outspoken about the urgency of dealing with unfolding violations of religious freedom around the world, particularly in Iraq and Syria.

So, Mr. Ambassador, thank you for joining us here today. We look forward to hearing a report of your trip and your testimony. At this time, you are recognized.

1 STATEMENT OF DAVID N. SAPERSTEIN, AMBASSADOR-AT-LARGE FOR  
2 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
3

4 STATEMENT OF AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN  
5

6 AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN. Thank you, Chairman Pitts and Chairman  
7 McGovern, members of the commission who are not here.

8 I hope I have the opportunity to meet and talk with them about this urgent issue and I thank  
9 you for holding this hearing to condemn ISIL's increasingly flagrant and egregious human  
10 rights abuses.

11  
12 Amongst the millions forcibly displaced in Iraq and Syria, religious and ethnic  
13 minorities feel especially threatened by the actions of violent extremist groups such as ISIL.  
14 ISIL is pursuing its own violent destructive interpretation of prophecies in which it plays the  
15 starring role, engaging in targeted and systematic efforts to displace entire communities  
16 from their historic homelands in Iraq and Syria.

17  
18 Those not ascribing to the extremist brand of Sunni Muslim ideology, including  
19 Shi'a Muslims, other Sunni Muslims, Alawites, Christians, Ismailis, Druze and others have  
20 faced mass killings, forced conversion at gunpoint, kidnappings and other atrocities.

21  
22 As the ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, I am especially  
23 concerned with ISIS' promotion of a world view fundamentally and diametrically opposed  
24 to freedom of religion -- a world view it uses to justify its violent actions.

25  
26 In addition, ISIL's rise and the threat it presents clearly demonstrate the strong and  
27 complex link between religious freedom and our national security. The list of ISIL's  
28 atrocities is too long to enumerate fully during this testimony. You have named many of  
29 them -- the mass killings, the beheadings, crucifixion, stoning, abduction, forced  
30 conversions, torture, rape, sexual assault, enslavement, mass eviction, forced migration,  
31 burning and burning people alive, using women and children as human shields.

32  
33 People have been pushed off buildings and beheaded because of their sexual  
34 orientation. Women have been murdered merely for being community organizers and  
35 journalists.

36  
37 We were all horrified when American, Japanese and other journalists and aid  
38 workers were beheaded and when the Jordanian pilot, Captain Moaz al Kassarbeh, was  
39 burned alive in a cage, and these horrendous acts have shocked the conscience of the world  
40 and made a mockery of the righteous image with which ISIL attempted to portray itself.

41  
42 Its targeting of people on the basis of religious identity cuts across more sectors of  
43 society than we often hear about in the media. When ISIL entered Mosul last June, it clearly  
44 announced on social media it would never target civilians except for those who were Shi'a.  
45 On the same day, ISIL took control of Camp Speicher in Tikrit and summarily executed  
46 over 1,000 unarmed Shi'a male air force cadets that it detained.

47  
48 Despite their claim of not targeting civilians, it wasn't long after before ISIL began  
49 systematically targeting minorities in Mosul -- for example, by imposing an ultimatum on  
50 Christians to convert, be killed, pay the jizya tax. If they didn't they simply had to flee to  
51 save their lives, and those who were unable to flee were often forced to convert at gunpoint.

1 ISIL's offensives continued against other parts of the Nineveh Plain. We saw the siege of  
2 tens of thousands of Yazidis on Mount Sinjar in early August, justified by ISIL because of  
3 how it characterized their religious beliefs.  
4

5 This prompted the president to order air strikes, to help forces in Iraq to break the  
6 siege, explaining, "We can act carefully and responsibly to prevent a potential act of  
7 genocide. That is what we are doing on that mountain."  
8

9 Well, we have helped save tens of thousands of lives but hundreds of innocents were  
10 lost and thousands of women and children have been taken into an unimaginable life of  
11 suffering, raped, enslaved, sold or given as compensation to ISIL fighters. Talking about  
12 ISIL's abuses in Iraq would address only a fraction of what horrors they have brought. So  
13 let me turn to Syria.  
14

15 The situation in Syria is especially heartbreaking because in Syria, as you alluded,  
16 ISIL is just one of many flagrant and systematic abusers of human rights. Its abuses and  
17 those by extremist groups such as the al-Nusra Front, the Assad regime, arbitrarily detains  
18 tens of thousands of people each year, torturing many to their deaths.  
19

20 It has devastated cities such as Aleppo in a brutal, mostly barrel bombing, campaign  
21 and starved towns into submission. Shi'a militia, working a coordination with the Assad  
22 regime, regularly targets Sunni civilians for arbitrary killings, sometimes en masse, and al-  
23 Nusra does the same to Shi'a and other non-Sunnis as well as conducting kidnappings,  
24 forced recruitment including of children and other atrocities and now the world's attention  
25 and ours and everyone in this room is focused on the most recent threat.  
26

27 On the morning of February, 23 ISIL launched an offensive against a string of  
28 predominantly Syrian Christian villages along on one side of the Khabur River northwest of  
29 Hasakeh City. An estimated 4,000 to 5,000 people were displaced. Between 260 and 350  
30 were taken captive.  
31

32 Assyrian Kurdish fighters have repelled the attackers from crossing the river to  
33 attack other villages and it is still trying to hold the line there. A week after the initial  
34 attacks, 23 captives were released but we remain gravely concerned about those who are still  
35 in captivity.  
36

37 And, again, we have stepped up our bombings aimed at stopping ISIL and it has  
38 helped. My team at the international Religious Freedom Office had been working hard  
39 gathering and ensuring a great deal of detailed threat information much of which comes  
40 from the rich network of diaspora and advocacy groups, many represented in this room, with  
41 relevant U.S. departments and agencies that can take action to help.  
42

43 In recent days, the coalition has, as I indicated, stepped up strikes in the vicinity of  
44 Hasakeh in order to degrade ISIL's presence there and during my confirmation hearing I  
45 made clear that the fate and well-being of vulnerable religious communities including the  
46 Christian communities in the Near East would be among my most urgent priorities.  
47

48 Accordingly, my first trip as ambassador-at-large took me to Iraq to see first-hand  
49 the impact ISIL had on the people of that country, meeting with representatives from nearly  
50 every religious group in the country to hear the terrible toll borne by these communities and  
51 what they needed, including many who were displaced yet poignantly wish to return home  
52 to rebuild their lives.

1 My office has direct links with our coalition's counter ISIL effort which includes  
2 both a military and non-military component to ensure that the security conditions of  
3 vulnerable populations are understood in our broader counter-ISIL effort and we are  
4 facilitating access here in D.C. for a wide range of targeted communities as we did for  
5 Yazidi communities, most recently for key Christian leaders with churches in Syria.  
6 And this allows senior officials to hear first-hand from those most affected about the  
7 situation afflicting members of these communities. Now, all the representatives of religious  
8 communities with whom we meet highlight the importance of defeating ISIL.  
9

10 We can't proceed without the work of the coalition of 60 countries aimed at  
11 degrading its capacity through coordinated air strikes, military assistance to the groups  
12 fighting ISIL, diplomatic engagement, messaging coordination to defeat, degrade and  
13 delegitimize it.  
14

15 We have spent scores of millions of dollars trying to sustain and to give support to  
16 those displaced populations. If they don't have health care and schools to send their kids, if  
17 they don't have shelter over their heads, they are not going to stay, even those who want to  
18 stay.  
19

20 And we have to be sure they have what it takes to hold in place until we have the  
21 opportunity of pushing ISIL out, to reconstruct life and allow them to return, those who wish  
22 to, to their historic homes.  
23

24 In Iraq, the restoration and security of all the people we meet identified it as crucially  
25 important and as well the restoration of trust between the different segments of society and  
26 between the people and the government.  
27

28 Many people there felt betrayed when government forces and Kurdish forces fled  
29 when ISIL attacked. This will require stabilizing the areas. It will involve justice for those  
30 who have had their homes and their businesses taken over by others.  
31

32 These complicated steps of security, reconciliation, reconstruction, transitional  
33 justice are the things we talked about with Iraqi officials at the highest levels. They  
34 continue to be a central part of our work in Washington to develop strategies to deal with  
35 each one of those.  
36

37 At the same time, there have been disturbing and serious allegations of Shi'a militias,  
38 some peshmerga forces, Yazidi fighters and others committing revenge attacks against  
39 Sunnis when ISIL is pushed out of territory.  
40

41 We have called for transparent thorough timely investigations and have been  
42 encouraged that Prime Minister al-Abadi has since stated that he has a zero tolerance policy  
43 for human rights abuses.  
44

45 For Syria, we have been clear that our overarching goal is to help the Syrian people  
46 reach a solution that fulfils Syrian aspirations for freedom and dignity.  
47

48 We remain -- are firm but we maintain our firm belief that Assad has lost all  
49 legitimacy and must go. Syria -- it will be necessary to ensure all perpetrators of atrocities  
50 are brought to action.

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To sum up, we are resolved to see an end to ISIL's violent crimes. We are committed to the important work of defending vulnerable religious communities in the region, helping survivors of ISIL's brutality.

Let me pledge my commitment to work closely with this commission, with the relevant committees in this Congress. I know how many people on both sides of the aisle are dedicated to the principle of religious freedom and to prevent extremists from undermining the hopes for democracy and freedom for all the peoples in the regions where they exist.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

1 MR.PITTS. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador, for your opening statement. I will begin the  
2 questioning at this point.  
3

4 Religious minority groups in the region have at times been criticized for what  
5 detractors describe as overly close ties to the United States and Europe.  
6 How can the United States best advocate for the rights of religious minorities in Iraq and  
7 Syria without undermining the standing of these groups within their broader communities?  
8

9 AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN. Mr. Chairman, I really appreciate that question and may  
10 want to suggest that at some point you might want to devote an entire hearing to this  
11 because this challenge applies not just to the situation.  
12

13 Very often our efforts to embrace those who represent values, whatever their  
14 theology -- I don't care how fundamental it is, how liberal their theology is -- if they eschew  
15 the use of force to impose their views on others and are willing to abide by the rule of law,  
16 they should be part of the broad coalition that is aimed at defeating the violent extremists.  
17 But very often our embrace of them is used in a narrative battle for the hearts and minds of  
18 the people we hope that they will affect to delegitimize them as not being authentic but  
19 representing foreign interests.  
20

21 We have to be much more sophisticated in the way we go about our efforts in these  
22 building intergroup and international coalitions involving Muslim countries and countries  
23 from the Southern Hemisphere who are part of these coalitions and can add legitimacy that  
24 sometimes it is difficult for us to do and have longstanding relations often with a number of  
25 these religious communities because they may exist in their own countries in which they  
26 have successfully worked together to curtail or contain extremist efforts in their own  
27 countries.  
28

29 There are ways that we can empower them in the communications battle for the hearts  
30 and minds of particularly younger people within their religious communities, and it is not  
31 just Muslim extremists.  
32

33 We have extremists groups -- violent Buddhists, militant Buddhists who are  
34 affecting Rohingya Muslims in Burma. In Sri Lanka, you have the situation of extremist  
35 Hindu groups in India.  
36

37 These are challenges across the globe and we have to be -- meet those people where  
38 they are, find out what they need from us and be more sophisticated in the way we approach  
39 our efforts to help them.  
40

41 So I am glad that you put this on the table I do hope we think about it more broadly  
42 and with deeper insight into this challenge.  
43

44 MR.PITTS. Even before ISIS or ISIL's rise, the smallest religious communities, which  
45 include Catholics, Christian Orthodox, Protestant, Yazidis, Sabian Mandaeans were mere  
46 shadows of their former presence.  
47

48 They have long faced official and societal discrimination and their small size, their  
49 lack of militia or tribal structures, have made it difficult for them to defend themselves  
50 against violence or protect their rights through the Iraqi political system.  
51 ISIL's August 2014 attack on the largely Yazidi town of Sinjar located in the Nineveh  
52 Province of Northern Iraq led to the massacre of Yazidis and Assyrian Christians, Shi'a and



1 others, and the destruction of religious sites that date back for centuries along with other  
2 attacks, which together threaten the very existence of these religious communities.  
3 ISIL has also killed Sunni Muslims who disagree with their extremist ideology as well as  
4 Sunni clerics that rejected their extremist ideologies or attempted to assist or protect  
5 religious minorities.

6  
7 My question is what policy tools does the United States have to promote religious  
8 freedom and prevent human rights abuses by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq against  
9 these minorities?

10  
11 AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN. First, we have to act on the military level to degrade,  
12 weaken and support those ground forces that will drive ISIL out of these areas.

13  
14 Secondly, there need to be the ability of those communities to participate in their  
15 own security with local security forces integrated into the broader security structure of Iraq,  
16 and the same would be true in Syria.

17  
18 These are -- none of those groups can develop militias, can develop security forces  
19 that are going to be able to protect them alone. They have to be integrated, these local  
20 security forces, and they have to be coordinated with the peshmerga and with the Iraqi  
21 forces as well.

22  
23 So that has to be another part of it. As I indicated, sustaining people who are  
24 displaced in living conditions that give them a sense of hope here for the most vulnerable,  
25 who don't have -- the elderly, orphaned children, others who may not have a path to go  
26 home in any realistic kind of way, improving the visa process in the international  
27 community to try and ensure they are protected in other locations if that is necessary can be  
28 part of that.

29  
30 As I said, the transitional justice -- there were people who took their homes and their  
31 businesses. We have to find a way to resolve now their needs, the reconstruction  
32 economically of those areas.

33 We know the pieces of what it will take. It will require that same coalition of 60  
34 countries and some of the surrounding nations as well working together to map that out. We  
35 can start right now.

36  
37 We are not waiting or shouldn't wait until ISIL is driven out to begin those  
38 conversations. There has to be planning. And on the ground when we were there we  
39 pushed very hard with our meeting with the peshmerga military forces and the Kurdistan  
40 regional government and with the Iraqi military, with the chief justice of the Supreme Court  
41 and the interior ministers both of the nation and deputy interior minister of Iraq and the  
42 interior minister of Kurdistan regional government.

43  
44 We worked in terms of trying to see how the coordination is happening, encourage  
45 them to really develop these plans right now, as well as we know where a number of the  
46 captives are -- what are we going to do to prevent them from being taken out, the ones who  
47 are in Iraq?

48  
49 And it should be part of the military planning as well here. All of these are pieces of  
50 what is happening and it is what we spent our time on dealing with when we were there.

51  
52 MR.PITTS. Thank you. Very, very important and informative.

1 The chair recognizes the co-chair, Mr. McGovern, for five minutes.

2  
3 MR.MCGOVERN. Thank you very much and thank you, Mr. Ambassador. It is great to  
4 see you and appreciate your lifetime work on these issues -- not only for religious freedom  
5 but on human rights in general.

6  
7 You know, I just -- this is so overwhelmingly horrible and we read about it in the  
8 news every day and we have human rights organizations explaining to us in vivid detail the  
9 horrors that continue to be committed by ISIS against civilian populations, against religious  
10 and ethnic minorities and it is -- I mean, it is beyond comprehension.

11  
12 And it is a short -- there is a short term strategy but then there is the longer term  
13 strategy and I guess what we hear a lot about up here is, you know, the short-term strategy.  
14 I mean, we are bombing every day and yet ISIS continues to get recruits. We -- people are  
15 now talking about, you know, deploying U.S. forces, you know, as a way to deal with this. I  
16 mean, but you hear a lot about kind of the military options and the military solutions.

17  
18 But I think the long-term strategy needs to be aimed more at a political solution  
19 because some of these governments including the government of Iraq before ISIS came in  
20 and, you know, and began to be a presence there, the government that we left in Iraq was not  
21 a particularly inclusive government.

22  
23 And, you know, and there were reports that ISIS came in, you know, and there was a  
24 vacuum and it exploited some of the excesses that the Iraqi government committed against  
25 Sunnis and others and they were able to find people to, you know, at least -- if not join to be  
26 at least tolerant of their presence.

27  
28 And I worry about this not just with regard to Iraq and certainly Syria but with a lot  
29 of countries in the region. You know, that we need a greater effort to try to encourage these  
30 governments to respect all the people, especially ethnic religious minorities that live in their  
31 countries and, you know, and I -- you know, and I am trying to figure out, you know, I am  
32 trying to -- I am just trying to figure out how we, first of all, try to convince people to turn  
33 away from ISIS.

34  
35 But also what are we doing to prevent ISIS from going to other places and exploiting  
36 populations and taking advantage of, quite frankly, bad governance by people who are  
37 oftentimes our allies?

38  
39 AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN. Would it be appropriate for a diplomat to say amen?

40  
41 MR.MCGOVERN. Absolutely. Yes.

42  
43 AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN. The -- I am really glad you put that on the table. What  
44 happened under the Maliki government testifies to the point I made in the testimony when I  
45 said there is a direct connection between our national security, the national security of other  
46 nations and religious freedom.

47  
48 If large segments of the community can be systematically discriminated against, shut  
49 out of the governing structure, believe that they have no hope to fulfil their destiny through  
50 the normative structures of that society -- even worse, forced underground with their -- for  
51 their religious beliefs, where they -- as I said, creates a fertile field that extremists can often  
52 cultivate and seed and cultivate to recruit people to them.

1  
2 This is the classic affirmation of that failure and therefore what we are hearing from  
3 Prime Minister Abadi a very different style. It is a more inclusive government, a  
4 commitment to maintaining the minorities communities, a commitment to protect those  
5 communities, his willingness to call Shi'a militias to task that have been fortunately the  
6 exception but way too frequent excesses aimed at other -- either the Sunni community or  
7 other communities.

8  
9 This is a different tone and we need to do everything we can to support him. He has  
10 enormous pressures on all sides. This is not an easy path for him to go and the international  
11 community, in particular including our friends in the surrounding countries, need to stand  
12 behind him and provide him with the kind of support he needs in order to be able -- to create  
13 a very different kind of model.

14  
15 The other part of it is what I indicated by our -- you know, think about and you can  
16 take, like, Hezbollah and Hamas and groups like that -- how did they begin their move  
17 towards influence?

18  
19 In limited or failed state situations they started providing core social services to  
20 people. Well, you don't need to have failed states to learn a lesson from that. Very often  
21 across the globe in countries even like the United States it is the religious communities that  
22 are providing core services.

23  
24 We can empower a coalition -- an interfaith coalition of groups to work together on  
25 behalf of all the citizens and create a different model of tolerance. There have to be, and  
26 that is a long-term strategy and there have to be long-term strategies aimed at empowering  
27 those willing to work together, those committed to a tolerant society.  
28 In the end, that is the way to delegitimize the extremists and not leave room for them to  
29 really cultivate followers and that long-term strategy has to begin now. Not later once  
30 things are militarily stabilized but right now.

31  
32 MR.MCGOVERN. Because when I look at the region, sometimes I am reminded of that Dr.  
33 Seuss book "Cat in the Hat," you know, we clean up one mess and we create a bigger mess.  
34 We clean up that mess, it gets bigger and, you know, it just goes on and on and on and on.  
35 And when I am -- you know, I have been around here now for -- since 1996 and I feel that  
36 sometimes some of the best intentions are things that we have engaged in in that part of the  
37 world have not resulted in the goal that was promised.

38  
39 And so I do think that, you know, we need to be thinking, you know, again, there is a  
40 short-term and then there is the long-term and if we don't get the long-term right we are  
41 going to -- we are just going to create a -- clean up one mess and create a bigger mess.

42  
43 I think that is what happened in Iraq. I mean, no one liked Saddam Hussein but we  
44 ended up with a government that was not a good government. In Afghanistan, we -- you  
45 know, we have invested all this time and money and the sacrifice of young men and women  
46 and we -- and we have a government that is pretty corrupt.

47  
48 It is like if we get involved in these places we -- I think we need to be assured that,  
49 you know, things are going to be better off for people when we, you know, when it is done  
50 than not, and I just -- I don't -- and again, I -- this is -- I am just -- one, is I think your -- I  
51 agree with everything you are saying here but, you know, we have spent millions on  
52 humanitarian assistance.

1  
2           You know, is it enough? Is it flexible enough? You mentioned transitional justice.  
3 You know, is this prosecutions or is it alternative justice or women victims? You know,  
4 what are we doing? What do they need?  
5

6           You know, Saddam must go but do we need him to fight ISIS and now we are  
7 involved with, you know, a nuclear deal with Iran and they are fighting ISIS and it is all  
8 very confusing. But at the end of the day, I worry about that a lot of the people that we need  
9 to care for, you know, are kind of afterthoughts.  
10

11        AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN. Well, I appreciate that. You are going to hear from a  
12 very strong panel of people who have given a lot of thought to some of these issues as well.  
13 But in terms of the justice part of it, there has to be immediate justice, criminal justice for  
14 those who directly engaged in the atrocities that were involved and that means within Iraq  
15 and in some cases within the international community as well.  
16

17           But for those communities that have to, because of their passivity to allow this, that  
18 have been standing idly by, have left deep scars from people who have long been their  
19 neighbors.  
20

21           There we need a different kind of justice that will be, as you said, alternative, aimed  
22 at reconciliation but in fairness in terms of allowing people to have restoration of what they  
23 lost because they were forced to flee in this area but done in a way that promotes  
24 reconciliation.  
25

26           These are both short-term and long-term goals that we -- that we are challenged with.  
27

28        MR.MCGOVERN. Just one final quick question because, again, we are now very much  
29 engaged in all of this and yet you read reports that ISIS in growing in recruits.  
30

31           I guess the question is, you know ,what can we do -- what should we and the  
32 international community be doing better to mitigate the appeal of the group?  
33

34        AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN. First, there is some indication that their recruiting actually  
35 has flattened out or decreasing at this time and the international community's efforts to  
36 respond to this is having an impact.  
37

38           At the State Department, there is a very high-level task force of some of the most  
39 skilled and thoughtful analysts and communications experts aimed at dealing just with these  
40 questions -- what are the messages, what are -- what are the messages that can help undercut  
41 the legitimacy of the group -- what are the needs of the people they are appealing to that we,  
42 through international cooperation, can address in ways that may be far more effective than  
43 anything that ISIL can offer them.  
44

45           There is a lot of thought going on with this. It is true not just here but across the  
46 globe. The recent emergency summit called by the president to combat violent extremism  
47 was filled with creative ideas that are going on all across the globe from local communities  
48 across the globe aimed at trying to answer the question that you have put on the table.  
49

50           And from the best practices that came out of that are a rich repository of new ideas  
51 that are being forged and plans made as to how to implement those kinds of strategies. So  
52 there are some encouraging signs in this area.

1  
2 But in the end, and that is why I said the question of how you support here the  
3 broader coalition committed to the rule of law and eschewing the use of force to impose  
4 their views on each other, how you empower them and allow them to stand up themselves in  
5 their own terms -- not our Western terms necessarily -- their own terms to effectively  
6 respond to these extremists is one of the central challenges we face in American foreign  
7 policy.  
8

9 We are making progress on it here. It will continue to be a significant challenge in  
10 the years to come that we must respond to.

11  
12 MR.MCGOVERN. Thank you, and I am glad you are where you are. So thank you.

13  
14 AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN. Well, good, because I can't think of two people who stand  
15 more for the values of human rights and religious freedom than the two of you and I am  
16 deeply honored to have been with you.  
17

18 MR.PITTS. And, again, thank you, Mr. Ambassador, for your concern, for your efforts in  
19 this regard, for your trip to the region. We look forward to working with you. If we have  
20 any follow-up questions can we send them to you in writing?  
21

22 AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN. Of course you can. That will be -- is fine.  
23

24 MR.PITTS. Some of the other members who are late probably will have some. Thank you  
25 very much, Mr. Ambassador.  
26

27 At this time, I will ask the second panel to take the witness stand and ask the staff to  
28 put out their placards. This is a very diverse panel. Some of them have travelled many  
29 miles to be here present today and I will introduce them in the order that they will present  
30 testimony.  
31

32 First, Mr. Sunjeev Bery is the advocacy director for the Middle East and North  
33 Africa at Amnesty international USA. His commentaries on U.S. foreign policy and human  
34 rights have appeared in a range of U.S. newspapers and publications.  
35

36 Sunjeev holds a BA from UC Berkeley and an MBA from Harvard Kennedy School  
37 where he was a Harvard Public Service Fellow. He is a recipient of the 2007 Asian Law  
38 Alliance Community Impact Award and has received commendations from the California  
39 State Senate and Assembly for his human rights advocacy. So, Mr. Bery, if you can take  
40 your seat.  
41

42 Next to him please come to the witness stand. Mr. Evers -- Mr. Erin Evers is an  
43 Iraqi researcher -- I mean, Ms. Evers is an Iraqi researcher with Human Rights Watch. Ms.  
44 Evers received her JD from Yale Law School where she was editor of the Yale Human  
45 Rights and Development Law Journal in 2011.  
46

47 From 2006 to 2011, Ms. Evers was an advocate with the Mallard K. Lowenstein  
48 International Human Rights Law Clinic at Yale Law School. She is also a recipient of the  
49 post-graduate Robert Bernstein Fellowship for International Human Rights. Welcome, Ms.  
50 Evers.  
51

1                   Finally, or thirdly, Rami Abdelrahman is director of the Syrian Observatory for  
2 Human Rights based in London. His group cooperates with human rights organizations  
3 throughout Syria and the region to document human rights abuses.  
4

5                   His organization's efforts have been reported by media outlets throughout the world,  
6 have been recognized by many organizations including such bodies as the United Nations.  
7

8                   And finally, Bassam Ishak is president of the Syriac National Council of Syria. He  
9 has been a longtime political reform and human rights activist in Syria before and after the  
10 civil conflict.  
11

12                   He is an orthodox Syrian Christian and ran for parliament in Syria twice but was not  
13 granted the right to serve. When in Syria he was director of the Syrian Human Rights  
14 Organization.  
15

16                   Welcome to all of you. Thank you very much for your patience today and taking the  
17 time to come here.  
18

19                   Mr. Bery, you are recognized for your opening statement  
20

1 STATEMENTS OF SUNJEEV BERY, ADVOCACY DIRECTOR, MIDDLE EAST  
2 NORTH AFRICA, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL USA; ERIN EVERS, IRAQ  
3 RESEARCHER, MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA DIVISION, HUMAN RIGHTS  
4 WATCH; RAMI ABDELRAHMAN, DIRECTOR, THE SYRIAN OBSERVATORY FOR  
5 HUMAN RIGHTS; BASSAM ISHAK, PRESIDENT, SYRIAC NATIONAL COUNCIL  
6 OF SYRIA  
7

8 STATEMENT OF MR. BERY  
9

10 MR. BERY. Thank you, Chairman Pitts. Thank you, Chairman McGovern, both of you, for  
11 your leadership on human rights issues.  
12

13 Amnesty International USA has long considered it a privilege to work with both of  
14 you and our membership across the U.S. deeply appreciates the work that you have done on  
15 quite a wide range of human rights issues that we are all concerned about including the ones  
16 today.  
17

18 The rise of the armed group calling itself Islamic State as well as the broader human  
19 rights crises in Iraq and Syria represent a tangled mop of geopolitics and extraordinary  
20 human suffering that evades a simple answer.  
21

22 Today I join my esteemed colleagues on this panel in helping to define the problem  
23 and highlight key components of the solution. Amnesty International has documented first  
24 hand the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Islamic State and many  
25 of the parties to this conflict.  
26

27 These include the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Syrian  
28 government, abuses committed by some of the 1,500 armed groups in Syria, violations by  
29 the Iraqi government, abductions and killings by Shi'a militias and even abuses including  
30 revenge attacks by Kurdish peshmerga soldiers.  
31

32 March 15th marked the fourth year of Syria's crisis. It is worth remembering that  
33 before the armed group Islamic State arrived on the scene there were many long months in  
34 which civilians suffered crimes against humanity committed by the Syrian government and  
35 extensive war crimes and gross human rights abuses by government forces and some armed  
36 groups.  
37

38 It wasn't until late 2012 that the Islamist armed groups with their radical  
39 interpretations of Sharia began establishing areas of military dominance. In 2014, Islamic  
40 State swept across northern Iraq.  
41

42 Over the ensuing months, IS carried out a campaign of ethnic cleansing in which  
43 countless Iraqi religious minorities were given the choice of leaving, converting or being  
44 enslaved or killed. Because of IS and other violence more than 2 million Iraqis were  
45 displaced during 2014. Nearly half of them, some 950,000, are now in the Kurdistan region  
46 of Iraq.  
47

48 Hundreds and possibly thousands of Yazidi women and girls have been forcibly  
49 married, sold, or given as "gifts" to IS fighters or their supporters. Through private  
50 negotiations, some Yazidi women and girls were able to return to their families.  
51

1 But many remain trapped in horrifying circumstances of sexual violence and sexual  
2 slavery. In Syria, Amnesty International has documented IS prison camps where sentences  
3 are handed down by Islamic State judges following reports of torture and forced  
4 confessions.

5  
6 Meanwhile, the larger refugee crisis stemming from the armed conflict in Syria  
7 continues unabated. Seven million people are internally displaced in Syria and 4 million are  
8 refugees who have fled the country.

9  
10 Collectively, these challenges evade a simple solution but there are key steps that  
11 U.S. policy makers can take to reduce suffering and to begin to address the human rights  
12 crisis.

13  
14 In terms of recommendations, policies pursued by the U.S. must prioritize the  
15 present and future protection of civilians. This is in order to ensure that U.S. actions do not  
16 run the risk of either making the problem worse or of introducing new factors that could  
17 trigger future human rights crises.

18  
19 In my submitted written testimony, I address the following areas of concern -- U.S.  
20 military action, U.S. military assistance, refugees and internally displaced people, survivors  
21 of sexual and gender-based violence as well as the questions of investigation, prosecution  
22 and accountability.

23  
24 With the remainder of my time, I want to focus on the two questions of U.S. military  
25 action and U.S. military assistance.

26  
27 First, U.S. military action. Amnesty International's focus is on holding all parties in  
28 an armed conflict to their binding obligations under international law. We take no position  
29 on the question of military intervention per se.

30  
31 In situations of armed conflict, we focus on ensuring full respect for the rules of  
32 international humanitarian law, what are called the laws of war, and applicable human rights  
33 law.

34  
35 In terms of ongoing U.S. combat in military operations in Iraq and Syrian, the U.S.  
36 should take all reasonable precautions to prevent death or injury to civilians. Any air strikes  
37 authorized by the U.S. in either Syria or Iraq should be strictly limited to bona fide military  
38 targets.

39 Congress is presently engaged in a debate over a potential new authorization to use  
40 military force, or AUMF. Though such an AUMF might be proposed in the context of the  
41 U.S. armed conflict with Islamic State, Congress should be mindful of the following human  
42 rights concerns.

43  
44 Sweeping grants of war authority including for military actions against vaguely  
45 defined "associated persons" or "associated forces" could further entrench the U.S. in a  
46 permanent global war framework without identifiable geographic or temporal limits in  
47 which broad executive discretion and secrecy are the rule.

48  
49 Now to turn to the second question of U.S. military assistance. Without adequate  
50 safeguards, U.S. arms transfers and military assistance in Syria and Iraq could lead to  
51 additional human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law.



1 This is because key U.S. allies in the armed conflict with the Islamic State have highly  
2 problematic human rights records of their own.  
3

4 In the armed conflict with the Islamic State in 2014, the Iraqi central government  
5 used indiscriminate shelling in Fallujah including on hospitals and in residential areas.  
6 Meanwhile, Shi'a militias affiliated with the Iraqi government have waged bloody  
7 campaigns of kidnapping and murder targeting primarily Sunni communities.  
8

9 Given these realities, it is problematic that legislation recently passed by Congress  
10 and signed into law by the president enables the White House to waive important  
11 monitoring and human rights screening requirements for recipients of U.S. arms and  
12 military training in Iraq and Syria. Congress must closely monitor how the Obama  
13 administration provides military aid, assistance and training and to who.  
14

15 If U.S. weapons end up being used by others to commit war crimes and human right  
16 abuses, the U.S. risks perpetuating the underlying political problems that facilitated the rise  
17 of armed groups like Islamic State to begin with.

18 In summary, the terrible human rights record of the armed group Islamic State is best  
19 understood within the broader context of the long-term impunity that governance and armed  
20 groups alike have enjoyed for grave and widespread abuses in both Syria and Iraq.  
21

22 Any lasting solution to this human rights crisis must elevate the protection of  
23 civilians to a top priority. Any political solution must prioritize human rights principles in  
24 order to be a long-term success.  
25

26 Thank you.  
27

28 MR.PITTS. The chair thanks the gentleman.  
29  
30

1 STATEMENT OF MS. EVERS

2  
3 MS.EVERS. Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McGovern, members of the Lantos  
4 Commission, thank you for inviting me to testify this afternoon. It is a great pleasure to be  
5 here.

6  
7 Per your request, I would like to share some insights from my experience and  
8 research in Iraq. I will describe some of the abuses that I have documented as Human  
9 Rights Watch's Iraq researcher, specifically by the Islamic State, also whose name is ISIS.

10  
11 I will also discuss widespread violations of international human rights and  
12 humanitarian law that pro-government militias, Iraqi security forces and volunteer fighters  
13 are carrying out in Iraq without which a discussion about ISIS' atrocities would be glaringly  
14 incomplete.

15  
16 Finally, I offer some recommendations for U.S. foreign policy in Iraq going forward.  
17 I will start off with what we documented -- the abuses that ISIS has committed in the past  
18 couple of years in Iraq, focusing specifically on Iraq.

19  
20 Much of this has been discussed by the people in the room already but I will talk  
21 specifically about attacks on minorities and we documented ISIS' abduction of Shi'a  
22 Turkmen from areas near Mosul, ISIS killing and kidnapping religious and ethnic minorities  
23 in and around Mosul -- Shi'a Turkmen, Shabaks and Yazidis -- order Christians to convert to  
24 Islam and separating women and girls from their families and forcing some into marriage  
25 and, as my colleague, Mr. Bery, just said, being sold or given as gifts to ISIS fighters. We  
26 have documented multiple rapes and sexual slavery.

27  
28 Last summer, we documented the massacre at Camp Speicher in which ISIS took  
29 control of Tikrit on June 11th, claimed to have executed 1,700 Shi'a members of the army,  
30 posted videos of hundreds in civilian clothes who had claimed had surrender at the nearby  
31 Speicher military base.

32  
33 We located five of the execution sites and confirmed that at least between 560 and  
34 770 people were killed. The number is likely much higher.

35  
36 Finally, we documented how ISIS gunmen systematically executed some 600 male  
37 inmates outside Mosul's Badoush prison on June 10th when it took over Mosul. The vast  
38 majority of these prisoners were shot.

39  
40 Next, I am going to focus on security forces and militia abuses within which I think  
41 the problems are assessed -- has to be contextualized, as the ambassador and Mr. Bery have  
42 already noted.

43  
44 Without a discussion of the previous government's egregious abuses and the ongoing  
45 abuses by security forces and militia abuses we can't understand, you know, where ISIS is at  
46 today and why they have the kind of power that they have today.

47  
48 On March 11th, ABC documented atrocities by Iraqi security forces in addition to  
49 militias. These are official security forces that the U.S. created and trained. We at Human  
50 Rights Watch reviewed the entire compilation before the report was aired.

1 Basically, these images showed graphic evidence of Iraqi forces torturing and  
2 summarily executing civilians including children and beheading captives. These are all  
3 abuses that we have been documenting for the past several years under former Prime  
4 Minister Maliki's government and that we have continued to document since Abadi took  
5 over the premiership.

6  
7 Today, we release in a report on the abuses by Shi'a militias of Sunni civilians in and  
8 around Amerli after Iraqi security forces, militias with the aid of U.S. air strikes routed ISIS  
9 from Amerli.

10  
11 That operation was touted as a great victory, as a great success. But the story of  
12 what happened afterwards shows that it was in fact a human rights disaster.

13  
14 We interviewed, my colleague and I, dozens -- more than 30 people in Salah ad Din  
15 and Kirkuk Provinces, analyzed photo and satellite imagery showing militias, not ISIS,  
16 destroyed some villages in whole or in part, forced the displacement of thousands of  
17 residents and kidnapped civilians apparently to remove Sunni civilians from the area  
18 permanently.

19  
20 We are gravely concerned that circumstances around Amerli operations are  
21 emblematic of an effort underway elsewhere as Iraq scales up its counter terrorism  
22 campaign whereby Shi'a militias use the counter terrorism effort as an excuse to punish the  
23 Sunni population because of its sect.

24  
25 These militias are now fighting -- leading the fight in Tikrit. Back in August, a  
26 massacre took place at the Musab bin Omar mosque in Diyala, which 34 people were killed.  
27 We interviewed victims of this massacre who were in the mosque and watched as pro-  
28 government militias and security forces entered and opened fire.

29  
30 They watched as these militias and security forces killed their relatives. The Iraqi  
31 government has yet to make public any investigation results into the massacre at the mosque  
32 in Diyala and has failed to hold anybody accountable.

33  
34 We have documented where militias are kidnapping and killing Sunni civilians  
35 throughout Iraq's Baghdad, Diyala and Hillah Provinces throughout 2014.

36  
37 Finally, I offer some recommendations going forward. What can we do -- what can  
38 we do in terms of our foreign policy, our relationship with Iraq in order to address the  
39 entirety of the problem? Because as we see -- as we have seen so far, you know, ISIS has  
40 only been radicalized and strengthened by the abusive tactics of the Iraqi security forces and  
41 militias have undertaken.

42  
43 Human Rights Watch believes that U.S. arms are effectively aiding abusive militias  
44 and security forces and that until the Iraqi government can show it can control security  
45 forces and dismantle militias, there is simply no guarantee that U.S. aid is not helping to fuel  
46 abuses.

47  
48 Any ongoing U.S. military aid to Iraq should therefore be conditioned on immediate  
49 and concrete steps to end security forces' and pro-government militias' commission of  
50 widespread war crimes, documentation that political reform benchmarks have been met  
51 including the end of the use of anti-terrorism legislation to detain political opposition  
52 figures.

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Congress should press the administration to develop clear policy guidance on how diplomats and military officers can promote Iraqi accountability. And finally, both the Iraqi and U.S. governments urgently need to come up with a post-conflict policy for reconstruction including guarantees that people will be allowed to return home and to confront sectarian violence.

Thank you very much, again, for allowing me to testify today.

MR. PITTS. The chair thanks the gentle lady.

I will now recognize Mr. Ishak for your opening statement.

1 STATEMENT OF MR. ISHAK

2  
3 MR. ISHAK. Chairman Pitts, Chairman McGovern and members of the commission, thank  
4 you for inviting me to testify about the human rights violations committed by the Islamic  
5 State, ISIS, against Assyrian Syriac Christians and other religious minorities.  
6

7 I speak on behalf of millions of Assyrian Christians and other religious and ethnic  
8 minorities as president of the Syriac National Council for Syria, a coalition of 13 Syriac,  
9 political and civil society organizations and independent politicians who represent their  
10 interests in Syria and abroad.  
11

12 My remarks today will focus on the ISIS attacks on the Syrian Christians living in  
13 the 30 small villages along the Khabur River in the al-Hasakeh Province of Syria that began  
14 three weeks ago.  
15

16 I will describe the political and military situation in the area, the current emergency  
17 and our request to the U.S. government for military and humanitarian assistance so that the  
18 Syriac military self-defense forces can repel ISIS and Christians can remain in this area  
19 where their Assyrian ancestors have lived for over 5,000 years.  
20

21 The province of al-Hasakeh is landlocked in northeastern Syria due to ISIS advances  
22 and political barriers. Bordered on two sides by Iraq and Turkey, it is unable to use those  
23 borders to supply its needs or to allow a way to escape for civilian populations.  
24 It is cut off from the rest of Syria by ISIS armies which have seized the neighboring  
25 provinces of Raqqa and Dayr az-Zawr. The al-Hasakeh population of almost 1.5 million  
26 includes Syrians of diverse ethnic and religious identities -- Arabs and Kurdish Muslims,  
27 Syriac Christians, Armenians, Yazidis and other ethnic and religious groups.  
28

29 Syriacs in al-Hasakeh were divided in 2011 between supporters and opposition to the  
30 Assad regime. Many participated in the early anti-Assad demonstrations. Later, some of  
31 the Syrian Islamists who were released from the state jails by the Assad regime returned to  
32 their home province of al-Hasakeh.  
33

34 Those Islamists soon dominated the opposition, early peaceful demonstrations in al-  
35 Hasakeh and pushed out Christian Syriac participants. By mid-2012, an Arab tribal gang  
36 began a campaign of carnage, threats and kidnappings that targeted wealthier residents of  
37 the city of al-Hasakeh. As a result, thousands of Syriac families have fled the region,  
38 particularly wealthier families who could afford to do so.  
39

40 For example, in a matter of months, 200 Syriac Assyrian medical doctors fled from  
41 the city of al-Hasakeh and three major hospitals were closed. Moreover, young Syriac men  
42 who faced draft by the Assad military also fled the country.  
43

44 As a result, of the security void the remaining Syriacs in al-Hasakeh organized their  
45 own self-defense police. They called it sutoro and means in Aramaic security.  
46

47 And then the Syriac Military Council was also established as a military defense  
48 against ISIS. In addition, in 2013 Syriac political forces negotiated with local Kurdish  
49 political groups led by the Democratic Union Party, PYD, and local Arab figures a social  
50 contract.  
51

1 The new contract established a pluralistic and inclusive political structure for  
2 governing called the Democratic Self Administration. The new social contract also  
3 recognized the Syriac language as own of the official languages of the province. It also  
4 provided for equal rights for all regardless of religious, ethnicity or gender.  
5

6 Al-Hasakeh became a target of ISIS in 2014. Attacking from the provinces of Raqqa  
7 to the west and Dayr az-Zawr to the south, ISIS seized Arab villages near the regional  
8 capital city of al-Hasakeh and attacked the city before its well-known attack assault on  
9 Kobani.  
10

11 The people protection unit of the Democratic Self Administration district made up of  
12 Kurdish, Arab and Syriac Assyrian military units managed to hold them off at the time.  
13 On February 23rd, ISIS launched a surprise attack on lightly guarded villages along the  
14 Khabur with heavy weapons and many troops. It immediately kidnapped 278 women and  
15 children and turned 30 young women as sex slaves and executed all captured Assyrian  
16 fighters. There were about 15.  
17

18 There has been continuous fierce fighting for three weeks across the Khabur River to  
19 keep ISIS from capturing the strategically located town of Tel Tamr. The self-defense  
20 forces have minimal weapons and many have been killed. Nonetheless, they are  
21 courageously fighting against ISIS. ISIS inflicted upon the first ten Syrian villages it  
22 captured its known treatment of Christians.  
23

24 For example, in the village of Tel Hormiz, ISIS fighters summoned elders of the  
25 community and informed them that crosses must be removed from the Church of Beth'yon  
26 and all churches in nearby villages.  
27

28 The radical group also bombed the ancient Assyrian church of Qabr Shamiya in the  
29 countryside of Tel Tamr, causing the death of four Syriac Christian fighters who were  
30 defending the church. They basically died because they ran out of ammunition.  
31

32 In fighting for control of Tel Tamr, they seized the Saint Tarsus church and burned it  
33 -- burned its Bibles and broke its crosses. To Assyrian Christians from the E'ghaibish  
34 village were accused by ISIS of cooperation with the Kurds and they were executed.  
35

36 More than 1,000 Assyrian families fled ISIS and sought refuge in the cities and  
37 districts of the province such as the city of Hasakeh, Qamishli and Malikiyah district.  
38 Heavy U.S.-led coalition air strikes on February -- through February 23rd to 27 had a major  
39 impact in slowing ISIS advancement.  
40

41 But when air attacks briefly stopped from February 28th to March 13, ISIS managed  
42 to build a ford along the Khabur River and crossed to the northern bank and it captured four  
43 more villages, and ISIS has been attempting since to encircle and capture the strategic city  
44 of Tel Tamr.  
45

46 On the ground, Syriac, Kurdish and local self-defense military units are being  
47 severely pressured by these larger and better equipped ISIS forces attacking from many  
48 directions.  
49

50 Their ammunition is limited. They need immediate and prolonged air strikes as well  
51 as military supplies and logistical and military support to hold the ISIS advance and allow  
52 them to attempt to reclaim the lost Syrian villages. Renewed air strikes on March 13 and 14

1 raised the morales of the Assyrian Syriac fighters and their allies and have comforted  
2 terrified civilian populations.  
3

4 However, all on the ground realize that without a greater and continuing help they  
5 are doomed. If ISIS was to succeed in taking the rest of al-Hasakeh Province, Christians,  
6 Kurds and other minorities stand to receive severe persecution at best.  
7 We have specific needs and requests, which we have been presenting to the U.N. Permanent  
8 Security Council members and also to the European Union and European Parliament, and  
9 here during our visit to Washington, D.C.  
10

11 First, it is imperative that the U.S.-led coalition commit to ongoing air strikes and  
12 other types of military assistance to our self-defense military units. They urgently need  
13 heavier weapons, ammunition, communication equipment and coordination capabilities with  
14 the coalition as well as food, water and other necessities of life.  
15

16 We believe that this region warrant outside government conduct of military action to  
17 defend civilian populations because the Assad regime is unable or unwilling to protect them  
18 and they are under imminent threat of an ISIS genocide. Syria's sovereignty over the region  
19 has already been abandoned to ISIS.  
20

21 We urge the House of Representatives to use its appropriation power and its ability  
22 to issue a resolution to urge the U.S. government and the U.N. to take these actions. We  
23 have visited with missions of the most permanent members of the U.N. Security Council  
24 and asked for a resolution that establishes interim protected area in al-Hasakeh Province.  
25 Second, we urgently need humanitarian assistance because al-Hasakeh is cut off from food  
26 and other type of supplies by blockades on the Turkish and Iraqi sides.  
27

28 Receiving supplies through ISIS-held areas is out of the question. Large current  
29 refugee populations need food, water and shelter. If more have to flee from ISIS we need  
30 assistance so that they can cross borders and find safe havens.  
31

32 Third, our long-term goal as Syriacs is to be able to live in peace in our native land  
33 under a government similar to that created by the social contract for self-administration.  
34 As minorities, we have a great motivation to live in an inclusive society that is not  
35 dominated by any one group. To achieve this, Assyrians and other minorities must survive  
36 and must be able to live in the country without fearing for their lives, property and futures.  
37

38 We will need considerable help with rebuilding our communities, bringing about  
39 justice and the rule of law and creating more institution when this conflict finally ends.  
40

41 In closing, on behalf of the people of al-Hasakeh Province, men and women of all  
42 nationalities and religions, I thank the United States and its coalition partners for what they  
43 have done to date to slow down ISIS' attack on the province.

1                   And I humbly request that the members of this commission and the United States  
2 Congress do all within their power to keep ISIS from taking more of this territory and help  
3 afflicted civilian populations by providing crucially needed military and humanitarian  
4 assistance as quickly as possible to stop what will otherwise be a disaster for all who live in  
5 the region.

6  
7                   Thank you.

8  
9                   MR. PITTS. The chair thanks the gentleman and now recognizes Mr. Abdelrahman for his  
10 opening statement.

11



1 STATEMENT OF MR. ABDELAHMAN

2  
3 MR. ABDELRAHMAN.

4  
5 [The following testimony was delivered through an interpreter.]

6  
7 Thank you very much for the two co-chairs, Joseph Pitts as well as James  
8 McGovern. Thank you to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for holding this  
9 meeting, which comes at a very important time for my country, Syria.

10  
11 Four years before today's date, a peaceful protest started from the Omari mosque in  
12 Daraa Old City Center. It turned to carry out the death sentence against the civilians who  
13 demanded dignity and the cancellation of the state emergency, who also asked for the rule of  
14 law and the release of innocent children who were charged for writing anti-regime slogans  
15 on the wall of their school.

16  
17 At that time, there was only one killer -- the regime, the regime of Syria, and the  
18 victim was only one victim -- it was the Syrian people.  
19 Now, four years after that spontaneous revolution Syrians are not only killed with bullets.  
20 Rather, there are those who are targets in their identity, their heritage, their history and the  
21 bond that puts them together.

22  
23 Now, the Syrians are living between the regime's fire and what is called the Islamic  
24 State as the two most prominent parties in the Syrian equation and, of course, there are other  
25 actors who see and think that they have an uncontested right to do what they are doing in  
26 Syria.

27  
28 Ladies and gentlemen, do you know what the favorite game is for Syria's children  
29 today? It is the game of field execution where the children play and when they play this  
30 game they cover their eyes with a piece of cloth and they sit on the ground.

31  
32 At the same time, another of their -- of other kids would shoot at them with a  
33 wooden pistol on their heads and then they fall to the ground, pretending to be dead.  
34 It is the game that they have learned thanks to the media of the Islamic State. There are  
35 growing pieces of evidence that prove that ISIS its efforts on children in the areas that are  
36 under their control in order to train them for their future battles.

37  
38 What we see in Syria today is beyond merely using children in limited cases. When  
39 it comes to Islamic State, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has monitored that the  
40 organization sends a brigade made up of 140 members under the age -- who are children.  
41 They send them to the battlefield on the frontline in Kobani. We have also recently seen  
42 two videos that were probably filmed in Syria where two children, sons of immigrants,  
43 opened fire on the heads of three of the organization's detainees. But not only this, the  
44 organization usually conducts death penalties, slaughter, crucifixion, killing, throwing  
45 people from rooftops in front of a large crowd mostly made up of children.

46  
47 Honorable members of the commission, in addition to the children women are the  
48 biggest losers because of the behavior of the Islamic State and this is at many levels.  
49 Most notably is the case of captivity where Syrian women have become -- where Syria has  
50 become an arena for women's sale, especially Yazidi women who were taken captive after  
51 ISIS invasion of the areas around Jabal Sinjar.

1 But this is not only limited to the Yazidi women. Muslim Sunni women are part of  
2 it, too. We have documented at least six cases of captivity of at least seven women who  
3 were grabbed from military housing of the regime.  
4

5 Ladies and gentlemen, when it comes to minorities, this extremist organization, ISIS,  
6 has targeted different kinds of minorities starting from the Kurds who are engaged in a  
7 fierce war along the front stretch towards -- about 400 miles with Islamic State fighters.  
8

9 The ISIS has also shown on several occasions -- shows how minority -- the situation  
10 of minorities is going to be in case in controls their areas. They executed members of the  
11 Alawite sect and also from the Ismaili sect under the pretext that they are apostate.  
12

13 As for the Christians, their property in the area has been confiscated, their crosses  
14 were taken down, historical libraries were also stolen and that which was not taken was set  
15 on fire.  
16

17 Ladies and gentlemen, wrong is he who thinks that Islamic State is only targeting  
18 minorities and women. Most of the people who were killed by ISIS are Sunni Muslims and  
19 the massacre of the al-Sheitaat tribe, which is spread in the Azzor is proof of that.  
20 More than 900 people died and thousands were made to leave their homes. Ladies and  
21 gentlemen, the Islamic State prevents the transmission of students from areas under its  
22 control to areas controlled by the opposition or the regime.  
23

24 The fighters of ISIS also often confiscate or tear up students' cards. ISIS also uses  
25 another weapon so that the only option that is given to the people is for them to join its ranks  
26 and this weapon is starvation.  
27

28 The activists of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights documented -- have  
29 documented information that shows that ISIS pays excellent salaries to its fighters whereas  
30 the majority of Syrian citizens are denied their basic rights.  
31 Of course, we all recently followed what happened in terms of destruction of the historical  
32 sites in Mosul and there are reports and there is information that shows the destruction of the  
33 Prophet Younis mosque in Mosul and the destruction of Nimrod and other areas. But all of  
34 this has been nothing but the tip of the iceberg.  
35

36 But ISIS, the organization, has begun to remove everything that has to do with the  
37 memory of the Syrian people. What draws attention is the first step, which shows that the  
38 organization destroys shrines and mausoleums, which is the first goal of the fighters of ISIS.  
39 Ladies and gentlemen, this is very little of what the organization has done to the children of  
40 my country, Syria, counting the killing, displacing, executing, captivity, starving, destroying  
41 the culture and historical legacy, planting explosive devices against the children of my  
42 country, executions, crucifixion, to the point that the citizens of my country are no longer  
43 safe for their safety from this organization.  
44

45 When the Islamic State announced mid-year 2014 that it will remove the Sykes-Picot  
46 borders, the organization's members and its leaders did not mean fake lines painted on the  
47 map of geography books but the fact is this is very serious.  
48

49 It involves the destruction and removal of everything, starting from the character of  
50 the Syrian child as in by the past and the present and the future of the Syrians and historical  
51 relations between the components.

The Islamic State executed, crucified, slaughtered, stoned more than 1,300 civilians in Syria since the announcement of what they call the Caliphate State in the middle of last year. Add to that the hundreds of opponents opposed to it, including al-Nusra Front and regime forces.

These figures rejoiced and made the leader or the spokesperson of the organization, Muhammad al-Adnani, happy. So these actions that this gang has perpetrated is proof that who committed this is actually the Islamic State, which have been set up all over again.

Dear attendants, this is not the Syria we left. It is not the Syria we want to hand over to our children and grandchildren. We need your help more than ever before. So please do not leave them alone in the face of the killing machine.

Thank you.

Mr. MCGOVERN. Well, let me -- let me thank you all very much for your testimony. I have a few questions. I know you have been here for a long time but just -- and anybody can answer these or all of you can answer them, whoever feels comfortable.

But I think for a lot of us, not just in the Congress but all around the world who are horrified by what is going on, we are trying to figure out, like, what is the best way to combat ISIS and I guess I would be curious to hear your views on what do you assess the Islamic State's greatest vulnerabilities.

What more can the U.S. or coalition partners do to exploit the group's weaknesses and, you know, what factors motivates Syrians to join or support the Islamic State rather than other opposition groups?

I mean, you mentioned they pay better. But, I mean, I am just trying to get a sense and in Iraq I ask the same question. You know, we all -- we are all well aware of Mr. Maliki's issues.

The question is, you know, are there Shi'a militias under better control under the Abadi government? I mean, are we seeing the security forces being, you know, more restrained or better behaved and, you know, and what steps can we do here or others to mitigate the appeal of the group?

I have a few questions and whoever feels like they want to answer them can answer them, all right, rather than me pick on individuals one by one. If you have something to say I would appreciate it. But let me begin. I began this hearing by talking about these photographs that you see and that were on display in the Rayburn foyer. This is an exhibit on Congolese girls in a place like eastern Congo fraught by war.

What can we do to help girls like those we saw, achieve their potential? Because I think this is a big part of this. How can we do more to help them in the context of war and displacement?

MS. EVERS. I can take the question about Iraq.

I would say that -- you asked specifically whether or not Shi'a militias are under better control now that Abadi is in power.

Unfortunately, although I think -- I think that Prime Minister Abadi has the best of intentions and he is definitely making the right noises when it comes to human rights reforms, he is not -- the chain of command does not answer to him. He is not leading the military effort. The military effort is being led by the militias. The height of the interior ministry is a better militia commander. Same with the human rights ministry.

So, unfortunately, no. There is no accountability for Shi'a militia abuses and I don't that is within the -- within the, you know, within the power of Prime Minister Abadi or rein in the militias.

That being said, what, you know, we think is the best option for the U.S. is to support Abadi's political reforms and support humanitarian assistance, civilian protection as much as possible while ceasing the military assistance to Iraq until the government can show that it actually has control over the militias.

MR. ISHAK. Yes. I think, you know, one of the voids that help ISIS prosper in Syria is a political void because we -- ISIS came with a -- presented a vision. I mean, it is not a vision that we like or approve of if we are pro-democracy. But nevertheless, it is a vision and it filled the void where the opposition -- Syrian opposition -- did not present the Syrian people with a vision of what Syria would look like as a political system and as their life in general after Assad.

You know, so this is something that I think would be targeted diplomatically and the Syrian opposition could be encouraged to come together, unite, be more unified and present a vision for the Syrian people and such a vision will be also very important for the minorities because at this time the Syrian opposition has left the minorities for the regime to be pro-regime because the regime offers security and minorities' primary concern is their own security.

So I think this is one way to fight ISIS is to have a -- help the -- you know, have a vision for what Syria of the future looks like. But meanwhile --

Mr. MCGOVERN. But that is something the Syrians have to decide, right? I mean, that is not something that we can do. That is something that the Syrian people have to decide.

MR.MCGOVERN. Mr. Kant, it has been nearly one year since the gang rape of a young woman in Delhi, and sexual violence in India continues to make global headlines. Some reports indicate that cases of rape have even increased since that infamous case. Can you tell us how NGOs in India are helping to raise awareness about gender-based violence and creating change?

Mr. ISHAK. Yes, but you can encourage.

Mr. MCGOVERN. Right.

Mr. ISHAK. You know, that is what -- I mean, the Syrian opposition meet always and try to lobby foreign governments and Western governments and gets its legitimacy and recognition from Western governments. So you have a leverage over them and I think you will be able to use it in a positive way and it will help in our goal to overcome ISIS. The other thing is -- that help ISIS is a prolonged conflict.

The longer the conflict is, more people with economic needs might, you know, join ISIS to survive and many people, like, I know in my area in Hasakeh joined ISIS because there is a monthly salary. So that is another thing that, you know, can be focused on and there are many other ways.

MR. MCGOVERN. Thank you.

MR. ABDELRAHMAN. First, I think we should talk about the disease and then we should find a treatment. Well, first, the number one cause that led to the spread of ISIS is the brutality of the regime of Assad.

The second is the corrupt opposition that have provided cover for this criminal regime. And there is one case here I would like to talk about. On June 9, 2013, when the organization was called the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, this organization killed a 14-year-old child who was selling coffee in Halab City.

The only entity that spoke about this crime was the Assyrian Observatory of Human Rights, and the opposition attacked us, this opposition which is supported by the United States and also internationally attacked us because we spoke about this.

They killed this child because they accused him of infidelity and he was not an infidel, and also the opposition which is corrupt and which is supported by Arabs and the United States, and this benefitted ISIS. In the Azzor there are brigades of what is called the Free Army.

They pledged allegiance to ISIS. That is why the quick solutions are to immediately stop the murderous regime and to support an opposition that is supportive of democracy but more important than this is to take care of children in camps, in opposition areas.

Mr. Chairman, do you know that in the camps of ISIS, what is called the Caliphate, they practice what is called a brainwash against children and they also show movies of the regime's crimes against children.

In addition to this, of course, there is financial support. But through this way they recruit children. They denied them from a good education and they subjected them to extremist educational forces.

That means that any opposition that is to be supported has to be supportive of democracy and pluralism. Allied strikes were effective on Kobani and greatly contributed despite the fact that they were late to the point that the ISIS got inside Kobani.

MR. MCGOVERN. Thank you. Mr. Bery?

MR. BERY. Just one last quick point. You know, if we trace this back to the origin, it is the Russian and Chinese governments blocking U.N. Security Council action.

MR. MCGOVERN. Right.

MR. BERY. And that leads to a broader macro level issue that probably wouldn't move quickly enough for these crises but might be worth the U.S. Congress taking up, which is the question of whether or not a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council should be able to have an absolute veto or whether or not veto power should be removed in the context of grave crimes -- human rights violations and grave crimes and that is something that is obviously a vast challenge in terms of changing the U.N. Security.

But it could be raised over the medium to long term to begin that global conversation.

MR. MCGOVERN. Well, I appreciate that and look, I mean, and, you know, and I think, based on Mr. --

MR. ABDELRAHMAN. Abdelrahman.

MR. MCGOVERN. -- Abdelrahman's answer it points out how complicated the situation is and one of the things I think that is really important for us and the international community is to, you know, there is kind of impulse to do whatever you can to support anyone who is against ISIS, which we all don't -- we all think ISIS is horrible but there are some people that are exploiting this kind of moment who, quite frankly, don't deserve to be supported because they are not going to promise necessarily a better future for the people that are -- right now are in a very difficult situation.

And so it is -- you know, and I -- and I think that hearings like this are really important so people understand, you know, that this is not just -- there is not -- there is no simple answers to this.

And I think your issue about the United Nations, I think, is something that, you know, I have thought about as well. I mean, I think the international community needs to take a better and a more up front role in dealing with these kinds of situations around the world and it can't just be, you know, the United States. And quite frankly, we need to find ways to empower the United Nations to get them to be a more -- a better force on behalf of advocating for human rights and ending these conflicts.

And I will just end the way I began. You know, we have the short term issue of people who are, you know, caught in the middle of this terrible conflict. But the only long-term answer, you know, are inclusive governments -- governments that respect the rights of their people.

And, you know, and so -- and we have -- and I am going to say this. I think, you know, our history in this country has -- often has been, you know, we will support whoever is the enemy of our enemy and then we end up having the enemy of our enemy take over and it is not a good situation.

And so I think we need to -- we need to understand that as we move this and I -- you know, we all watch the Sunday talk shows and stuff and everybody has a quick answer to everything.

You know, ISIS was able to go into Syria and into Iraq the way it did because of some lousy governance. They were able to take advantage of a vacuum that existed and, you know, and actually find some support amongst people who we all wish would have known better.

But that is just the reality, and what I worry about is if we don't get serious about this issue of, you know, trying to support more inclusive governments in the region it is not going to just be Iraq and Syria.

You are going to have other countries that are going to have this same problem and we are going to end up, you know, having these discussions about these terrible human rights abuses and these terrible conflicts.

So, you know, we may have some additional questions that we would like to submit in writing to you, if that is okay.

But I appreciate all your testimony and all your patience here today and so I thank you very much for being here.

MR. HULTGREN. I also want to thank you so much. Thank you for your work. Thank you for being a part of this today. I have just got a few questions. First I will address it to Mr. Bery, if that is all right. How do human -- and we have heard quite a bit about how much of what had been happening in Syria really led to the position that we are in but how do human rights abuses by the Islamic State and Syria compare to those committed by the regime?

MR. BERY. You know, it is difficult to do a simple number count. But with the regime there is four years now of crimes against humanity with the government of Syria, the armed -- the armed forces of the government of Syria and it is against that backdrop that the Islamic State came into the region.

So the bulk of the human rights violations continue to be from the government of Syria and its actions though many people have also suffered and died in the context of Islamic State as well as the 1,500 armed groups.

You know, some 200,000 people have been killed in Syria over the last four years and so it began before Islamic State came onto the scene.

MR. HULTGREN. Okay. Thank you. Ms. Evers, you touched on this a little bit, but I wonder if you could maybe talk a little bit more just for my understanding. As was mentioned in the past you have written about sectarian rule of the Maliki government and



alienation of Sunni tribes. Many of the Sunni groups that led the Awakening Councils that defeated al-Qaeda are now backing Islamic State.

Can you help me understand a little bit more how the United States and our allies can turn these groups back against the Islamic State? What are some other thoughts that you might have of what else we could do there?

MS. EVERS. That is a really good question. I think, you know, the unfortunate reality is that a lot of the -- a lot of the tribes that participated in the Awakening are kind of permanently distrustful of both the United States and the Iraq governments because of what happened after the civil war, when Maliki, you know, did not -- did not make good on his promise to incorporate them and security forces to pay them regular salaries and instead started to arrest and execute them, and the U.S. essentially left them to their fates -- you know, turned a blind eye to that situation.

The one kind of thing that I think the U.S. has on its side in trying to re-enfranchise these tribes is their desperation, frankly, because, you know, we have seen a number of tribes now in Iraq -- Sunni tribes taking up the fight against ISIS by themselves without any military support from the Iraqi government or from -- or from the international community and the number -- I think the number of these tribes is spreading as, you know, as the fighting spreads.

What can the U.S. do to -- like, specifically to re-enfranchise these tribes? I think star -- you know, a lot of it has to do with language presentation. So long as the -- so long as the U.S. is seen as supporting sectarian Shi'ite militias and their military effort then Sunni tribes are going to continue to be alienated by the U.S.

I also think that we need to engage with the right people. To my knowledge, the - - for example, the committee of tribal leaders that came to the U.S. I think it was two months ago was really a committee of men -- tribal sheiks who are not at all representative in the community.

And so I think the -- I think that U.S. leaders need to get better counsel on who is actually representative in the Sunni community. To the extent that -- I mean, to be fair it is -- you know, Maliki and ISIS together have done an excellent job destroying that political and military representation of Sunnis.

But to the extent that there are still Sunni leaders on the ground with somewhat clean hands and with legitimacy, more importantly, we need to be engaging them and I don't think we are engaging the right people. I mean, we can talk a little bit, you know, through writing on who those people might be.

MR. HULTGREN. That would be great. How important do you think that is for a positive outcome there for us to engage with them? I mean, do you see them as a key part of hopeful success?

MS. EVERS. Absolutely, yes. Absolutely. I think that, you know, this idea about the National Guard law, which I don't know if you have heard about, that the idea is essentially initially, in order to bring Sunni tribes back into the fight so that -- so that Shi'a militias would not dominate the fight against ISIS.

Unfortunately, the militias who are, you know, now also political leaders essentially said well, you know, if we are -- if we are going to pass this law then we are going to be part of it too.

And so now what appeared to be a really positive development as something that would bring Sunnis back into the fold threatens to be just a legitimization and legalization of militias as fighters that represent the government.

So I think that we need to reconsider our support for the National Guard law. It is something that we -- I mean, it is an idea that the U.S. presented and one that the U.S. is strongly backing.

But I think that it is going to end up on the ground cementing a really, really bad status quo.

MR. HULTGREN. Thank you. A couple more questions, if I may. Mr. Abdelrahman, if I could briefly get your thoughts -- can you tell us about efforts to implement justice once a regime is taken -- region, I am sorry. Let me start over again.

Can you tell us about efforts to implement justice once a region is taken back from IS? Are there any efforts to establish truth commissions, prosecutions or reparations by any government or entity once IS has been pushed back?

MR. ABDELRAHMAN. Yes. First, I would like to thank you for shedding light on the Syrian case in general in this hearing.

Let us say that if we establish an area, a safe area, that is out of the control of ISIS where there is a democratic government then we must stop prosecutions against the criminals because the Security Council would say that the cases should be brought before the International Criminal Court.

But I would like to make a simple observation, and Mr. Bassam knows it, when the Kurdish units provided assistance to the coalition -- international coalition in the suburbs of al-Hasakeh, a leader in the coalition came out and said -- and promoted lies that the Kurdish units are perpetrating crimes against Arabs.

This created a sensitivity when it comes to the movement of units. That is why I am saying that these voices did not serve -- so all efforts are wasted. All the efforts that are deployed to get rid of the organization are just wasted.

MR. HULTGREN. Thank you. Let me ask one more question, if I can address it to Mr. Bassam Ishak. The Assad government has sought to portray itself as the sole protector of religious minorities in Syria, pointing to IS abuses as an indication that minorities would not be safe in a Syrian government by opposition groups.

Have moderate Syrian oppositionists taken sufficient steps to ensure the rights of religious and ethnic minorities in a post-Assad Syria?

MR. ISHAK. Actually, this has been part of my struggle with the Syrian opposition from early on when they started the Syrian National Council to make them more sensitive to the needs of the Syrian minority and to help them better appeal to Syrian minorities. But they have -- they ignore this topic.

There is sort of unfortunate, you know, feeling of superiority, you know, that is very unfortunate because I know that Muslim Sunnis they are good people of Syria. You know, I just want to help them to do a better job and be more sensitive to the minority, which will help serve all Syrians' goal of having more democratic Syria.

So the example that Mr. Abdelrahman spoke of where a spokesman of the coalition, which is recognized by the U.S. and by Western countries as their representative of the Syrian people, is, you know, making statements that is not truthful. So we need to have an example in the opposition of pluralism, of inclusion and so far it is not there.

MR. HULTGREN. I said this was going to be my last question. One more if I could and, really, just following up on what my friend, Congressman McGovern, had asked a little bit about but really getting back to Islamic State's greatest vulnerabilities or weaknesses, and what can we do -- the U.S. or coalition partners -- do to exploit those weaknesses ultimately for the benefit of the region?

MR. ISHAK. Well, I think we have to start working on this long-term solution from now. We have to fight this ideology, and I have had experiences where we did workshops for diverse groups from Hasakeh region, where we had Arabs and we had Kurdish participants, Syriac participants and talked about principles of pluralism, of inclusion, social justice, and it was very, very good, you know.

MR. HULTGREN. Well received?

MR. ISHAK. Yes. Well received and gave very good results and mended lots of differences and helped us actually draft a social contract, which eventually became a real social contract for Hasakeh.

So I think we need to work on that direction because ISIS abuses this void of a pluralistic democratic inclusive ideology.

MR. HULTGREN. Again, I want to thank the witnesses for testifying here today. I would also like to thank them for their contributions in the fields of human rights.

As we consider an organization like the Islamic State and its place when assessing human rights, our government must hold a proper perspective.

Terrorism is not simply an unfortunate plot on the continuum of human rights outcomes. Terrorism and the groups that commit terrorism and especially the Islamic State represent the apex of human rights violations.

We are witnessing a complete breakdown of the human rights climate when we see a group like the Islamic State gain territory, take control and expand its influence. Most especially, the Islamic State's theology precludes any notion of internationally respected human rights or universal recognized human rights norms. It cannot see, tolerate or respect anything outside its narrow world view. I do personally just agree with the Obama administration's claim that the group is not Islamic. It is a narrow, extreme and intolerant version of Islam. But it is Islamic nonetheless. We must come to terms with this.

However, I do agree with one assessment made by the president. The Islamic State is indeed a death cult. It worships death. Murder and the ensuing death that it causes represents the polar opposite of respect for the basic human rights of another individual.

Each act of violence perpetrated by the Islamic State actually constitutes the violation of many human rights and not a single violation.

With every murder of an innocent being, as we have heard about more today, that individual's right to assemble, the right to speak freely, the right to worship their creator, all of these rights are violated and not just their right to live freely.

I believe this is why the Islamic State turns to death as their final outcome. Then cannot respect the rights of those that do not adhere to its narrow way of life. Other ways of life are a threat to it.

I believe our government must support solutions that therefore bolster freedom. Any effort to degrade and destroy the Islamic State must also include ample efforts in building and bolstering respect for the rights of people.

I look forward to joining with my colleagues, here and others throughout Congress, to end -- working with this commission to make sure that happens.

Again, I want to thank you for your time. Thank you for your work and I look forward to working together to see some positive outcomes here. So again, thank you all. With that, the commission is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:38 p.m., the commission was adjourned.]

# **APPENDIX**

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MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE HEARING RECORD



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

### **Human Rights Violations Committed by the Islamic State**

**Wednesday, March 18th, 2015  
2:00 PM – 4:00 PM  
2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

Please join the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for a hearing on the ongoing human rights violations committed by the Islamic State (IS).

The Islamic State (IS, aka the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL/ISIS) has expanded its control over areas of parts of Iraq and Syria since 2013, threatening the wider region. Since then, IS forces have massacred Syrian and Iraqi adversaries, including some civilians, often from ethnic or religious minorities, and murdered hostages, including U.S. citizens. Islamic State offensives in Iraq's Anbar province and against Kurdish enclaves continue. The group's tactics have drawn international condemnation, and raised U.S. attention to Iraq's political problems and to the war in Syria.

The humanitarian situations in both Iraq and Syria have been described as a "mega crisis". Taken together, it is estimated that 17.4 million people living in either Iraq or Syria are affected by conflict and in need of humanitarian assistance. An estimated 3.6 million Iraqis reside in areas under the control of the IS and other armed groups. In the words of a UN Commission of Inquiry, IS has made "calculated use of public brutality and indoctrination to ensure the submission of communities under its control" and has become "synonymous with extreme violence directed against civilians and captured fighters."

As Congress is expected to debate an authorization for use of military force against the group, join us as experts discuss the ongoing conflict and human rights violations, including violence targeting religious and ethnic minorities and women. Panelists will also provide recommendations on what the United States Congress can do to alleviate human rights abuses and mitigate suffering caused by the crisis. Witnesses are:

#### **Panel I:**

- David N. Saperstein, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, U.S. Department of State

**Panel II:**

- Sunjeev Bery, Advocacy Director, Middle East North Africa, Amnesty International USA
- Erin Evers, Iraq Researcher, Middle East and North Africa Division, Human Rights Watch
- Rami Abdelrahman, Director, The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
- Bassam Ishak, President, Syriac National Council of Syria

*This hearing will be streaming live at <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/hclive21>*

For any questions, please contact Carson Middleton at [202-225-2411](tel:202-225-2411) or [carson.middleton@mail.house.gov](mailto:carson.middleton@mail.house.gov).

Sincerely,

James P. McGovern  
Co-Chair, TLHRC

Joseph R. Pitts  
Co-Chair, TLHRC