



One Hundred and Fourteenth Congress

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing

Human Rights Violations Committed by the Islamic State

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2:00 – 4:00 PM

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Remarks by Co-Chairman James P. McGovern

Good afternoon.

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

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

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

The rise of ISIS has deepened a human rights and humanitarian crisis that has been unfolding for years as sectarian conflict has spread throughout the region. Before the ISIS invasion, the Iraqi government was unable to provide such basic services as clean water, electricity and health care, or to protect vulnerable groups including children, women and minorities. The last two years under the government of Prime

Minister Maliki were a nightmare for religious and ethnic minorities, the internally displaced, the 20 percent of the population who are Sunni Arabs, and civil society at large.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Chairman, today we are focusing on atrocities committed by the Islamic State. But there are many armed actors in Syria and Iraq who carry out terrible abuses and human rights crimes against the civilian population. Human Rights Watch has

documented gross abuses by Iraqi government forces and its allied Shi'ite militias against Sunnis and Sunni villages in the fight to turn back ISIS.

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

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

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

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.