

TLHRC Hearing: Human Rights Violations of the Islamic State

March 18, 2015

Opening Statement

Ladies and gentlemen, panelist and distinguished guests, I know call this hearing to order. This hearing is entitled “The Human Rights Violations of the Islamic State” and we will have two panels of witnesses here today.

Early in 2014, what was then a little-known group of transnational Sunni Islamist insurgents and terrorists burst onto the world stage. A remnant of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, this group activity thrived in disaffected Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria since the U.S. military withdrawal in 2011. The group rapidly advanced through Iraq last year and dramatically expanded its territory in Syria since the beginning of last year. As it advanced, the group massacred adversaries, civilians and surrendering combatants.

Observers have reported a broad range of abuses and atrocities committed by IS members. Non-Muslim minority groups like Christians and Yazidis, Iraqi Shiite and Syrian Alawite civilians, women of all sects and ethnicities, captured Iraqi and Syrian combatants and even Sunni Arabs that opposed Islamic State rule have all become targets of the Islamic State.

The group has openly signaled out minority religious groups for targeting and has implemented brutal practices against women and children. It waged an open genocide against one minority religious group – the Yazidis – and threatened many others with the same prospect.

After taking control of Mosul, IS demanded that Christians and other minorities convert to Islam or vacate the city. The destruction of the Christian community there followed. The group has bombed Shiite gathering places in Baghdad and other majority Shiite cities in order to depose the Shiite-led government in Iraq.

Women have faced broad ranging and a particularly severe set of abuses. Yazidi women that were captured have been subject to systematic sexual violence and enslavement. The human trafficking of women is rampant amongst the group.

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 battle, the Islamic State has demonstrated no respect for international norms in its treatment of combatants and opposition forces. It has executed hundreds of Iraqi and Syrian military personnel captured during operations, frequently beheading their corpses and displaying the bodies and heads in town squares.

IS has brutally opposed fellow Sunnis reject their rule, executing hundreds or even thousands of Sunni tribes that have opposed the Islamic State's rule.

Lastly, the group has executed three Americans and declared war on America and our allies.

The amount of human rights abuses committed by the Islamic State is ever accumulating.

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

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

Furthermore, we must learn from history. Sectarianism in Iraq and Syria was rampant long before IS was established and took control of territory. A respect for International Religious Freedom must play a central role in guiding the region out of the current crisis.

There has been a lot of debate recently regarding the nature of the Islamic State – whether it is indeed has Islamic beliefs or if it is motivated by other factors. This group has a top-down leadership. It has an ideology. It has a theology and a worldview that is uncompromising and demonstrates relentless ambition.

I believe our government must correctly identify the motivations of this group and its threat to defeat it and put a stop to its unending human rights violations. The Commission would like to explore this today, along with policy tools that can mitigate human rights violations and bring about accountability, justice and redress.

I look forward to discussing these issues with our distinguished panelists, and thank them and the other Members for their attendance here today.