

FULL TRANSCRIPT

AN STPC WEBINAR

Syria's Minorities in Crisis: Will Christians, Yezidis and Kurds Survive?

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BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

Dede Laugesen: [00:00:13] Hello, everyone. Thanks for joining us today. I'm Dede Laugesen, executive director for Save the Persecuted Christians. Today's webinar is part of our ongoing webinar series, generally on the third Thursday of each month focused on extreme discrimination, harassment and violence experienced by a record 365 million followers of Christ worldwide and other threats to religious freedom, prosperity and peace for people of all beliefs. A video of this webinar will be posted to save the Persecuted Christians. Org. Within a day or two of the end of our program, videos of our other webinars are also there. Please share these with your elected officials, friends, Colleagues and other networks. [00:01:00] Our president and CEO, Frank Gaffney, is traveling today, so I will serve as the moderator. Nonetheless, we will begin with opening remarks from Mr. Gaffney and his Secure Freedom Minute commentary taped yesterday, as it will set the tone for our program. Oleg, let's go to Frank's video now.

Frank Gaffney: [00:01:20] The prime mover behind the toppling of Syrian dictator Bashar Assad was another de facto dictator, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He is poised to become its principal beneficiary as well. During the Cold War, Turkey was ruled by governments that while Muslim aligned their country with the West, securing NATO's southern flank against Soviet aggression. Unfortunately, that alliance has no mechanism for expelling a nation now [00:02:00] ruled by a Sharia supremacist like Erdogan, allied with today's existential threat to freedom, Communist China, and set on its own aggressive agenda aimed at establishing a neo Ottoman Empire and

destroying Israel. Turkish enabled surrogates like the Muslim Brotherhood, h t s Al Qaeda and ISIS are consolidating power in Syria, and Turkey's own forces there are poised to ethnically cleanse Kurds, Yazidis and Christians in the way of Erdogan's next target, Jordan. Paging president elect Donald Trump. The ability you demonstrated in your first term to wrangle wretched Erdogan is needed now before he creates facts on the ground that will be a [00:03:00] festering sore for your next one, and for the entire Middle East. Those are some of my thoughts. You can find more by following me at Frank Gaffney on X and of course at Securingamerica.substack.com.

Dede Laugesen: [00:03:16] Thank you, Frank, for the start of our webinar. Today. We're bringing in Nadine Maenza. She is the president of the IRF Secretariat, which hosts the IRF summit each year, a gathering of thousand activists and human rights advocates from around the world focused on freedom of religion or belief issues and really working to bring together around the world groups within countries to advocate for international religious freedom, for the freedom of all people to believe or not to believe. She is also the former chair of the US Commission on International [00:04:00] Religious Freedom. And Nadine, were so happy to have you here today to talk about what happened in Syria and what does it mean for Christians and other religious ethnic minorities.

Nadine Maenza: [00:04:11] Thanks so much for having me. It's such an honor and a privilege to join all of you. This is an opportunity of a generation in Syria with the fall of this brutal regime of Bashar al Assad. This effort to overthrow the Assad regime was led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS. Its leader, Abu Mohammad Al-Julani, now going by his birth name of Ahmed Al-shara while capturing Aleppo and HTS representative, assured me that Christians, Kurds and others would not be targeted during this campaign and they were not afterwards. HTS continued on to depose Assad with the help of the Syrian opposition Operation Room Coalition from the south and other militias, but Turkey's Syrian National Army instead headed north, attacked the Shaba region, part of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East [00:05:00] Syria. We'll call it Danes for short, protected by the Syrian Democratic Forces or the SDF. This has caused over 100,000 people to flee to the cities of Raqqa and Tabqa, causing a humanitarian crisis. During this attack, they targeted Kurds, Christians and Yazidis with atrocities including killings, beheadings, kidnappings with many still missing. When Turkey and its NSA took Manbij a few days later, we saw the same type

of war crimes in that city, and now Turkey is amassing troops on the border of Kobani with their announced goal to destroy the multi-ethnic, multi-religious democracy and our allies in the fight against ISIS. Outside of the northeast, Syrians throughout the country are taking to the streets today to demand a civic and secular state.

Nadine Maenza: [00:05:44] In response to his talk of constitutional changes, including indications that women would not be appointed to senior positions. They want freedom to organize in political parties, as civil society and even as opposition. But will they be allowed to? Most worried [00:06:00] are the Christians, Yazidis, Kurds, Alawites, Druze and other religious and ethnic minorities. While we are thankful, they were not targeted by us during this campaign to overthrow Assad. They want more than just not to be targeted with violence and to attend worship services. They want to be equal citizens in this new Syria, and that is what religious freedom looks like. Syria has a long history of religious pluralism. The name Syria is derived from the Syriac Assyrian people, reportedly once 80% of the population, before Islam arrived in the seventh century. Of course, Christianity is not a foreign religion for Syria. This is where Christianity began. Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, and when I crossed into the Tigris River to enter Syria, I'm always aware of the remarkable history. I'm going to give a quick history of the autonomous administration, as well as the Syrian opposition, to give you some context for how things are playing out right now. In March of 2004, riots erupted in the city of Qamishli in the northeast after a soccer match between Kurdish and Arab teams. [00:07:00] The next day, the Syrian regime fired on civilians attending a funeral procession, killing 30, injuring hundreds, arresting thousands.

Nadine Maenza: [00:07:08] This led to a mass demonstrations in the northeast and throughout the country. While things return to normal throughout most of Syria, it would begin the beginning of planning for autonomy in northeast Syria. In March 2011, inspired by the Arab Spring, schoolboys in Syria spray painted, quote the people want to topple the regime on walls and grain silos. Their brutal treatment by the secret police ignited nationwide protests, and this really was the beginning of the Civil War. Many in the northeast joined the newly formed People Protection Unit called the YPG, now the Syrian Democratic Forces, or the SDF, to defend against potential regime attacks. Now, during this time, the Syrian opposition is swiftly put together at this time to fight the brutal crackdowns from the Assad regime. A group of defecting [00:08:00] army officers known as the, started the Free Syrian Army in June of 2011. A few months later,

political opponents began organizing in Turkey, with key involvement from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood that had been banned from Syria for decades. They formed the Syrian National Council, and by 2012 it had 100 countries recognizing them as the legitimate representation of the Syrian people. They would merge with other opposition groups and eventually just be called the Syrian opposition. And they captured Aleppo and other key places. And so most people aren't aware of that, but it's public information. Now, the US spent over \$1 billion covertly trying to train up a moderate Muslim army called the Free Syrian Army.

Nadine Maenza: [00:08:40] Yet all but four deserted and joined. Those all joined Islamist movements. You almost can't make up the impact the US had in a negative way on some of the things that were happening here. And so of course, imagine being a Christian on the ground trying to figure out what to do in this complicated situation. You know, part of the problem with the Syrian opposition was it became the only US [00:09:00] sanctioned place for anyone opposed to Assad. So while many distinguished and brave representatives have been leaders of the opposition in the US, UN, in Geneva and globally, but mostly they've been Islamist on the ground in Syria. So this dichotomy has always been troubling. As the war deepened, the regime and the Syrian opposition became dependent on international players. So Assad on Russia and Iran and opposition on Turkey and the US. During the 13 years of civil war, at least a half a million Syrians have been killed, over 12 million displaced internally or fleeing as refugees. It's estimated that at least 1.5 million Christians fled. Missing from almost all timelines on Syria is the fact that in 2012, a coalition led by the Kurds, but with Syriac Assyrians, Arabs and other religious and ethnic minorities peacefully filled government buildings in northeast Syria in a bloodless coup. The Syrian regime then pulled out of the northeast and chose instead on fighting the rebels in the major cities, and this autonomy would eventually become [00:10:00] the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, or Danes.

Nadine Maenza: [00:10:04] The US and the international community had nothing to do with building this autonomy. They did it all on their own and that is why it works. And one of the key parts of this, of course, is their support of religious freedom. The chaos and the violence caused by the Assad regime created the perfect conditions for Islamists to rise. So in January 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra, or the Nusra Front announced it was the front for al-Qaeda's franchise in Syria. Of course, they will become less a group

breaks from al Qaeda in Iraq, even more brutal, calling themselves the Islamic State. And so in March 2013, the Syrian opposition takes Raqqa. But in a space where the Free Syrian Army and the Nusra Front now, and ISIS were all operating, ISIS would end up taking control of the city and declare a caliphate from Aleppo to Iraq, committing genocide against Yazidis, Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities. In September of 2014, ISIS launches [00:11:00] the Siege of Kobani to take the city that was considered the stronghold for this Kurdish movement. This is when the US partnered with the YPG. They had to because there was no one else left. They tried to put together another army, and obviously they all ended up joining all these Islamist movements. So the US provided the airstrikes as the YPG that would become the SDF. Did the fighting on the ground with a lot of religious minorities a part of those, those militias.

Nadine Maenza: [00:11:26] And in January 2015, they won the Battle of Kobani. And then they'd eventually move on into Manbij, Tabqa, the Khabur Valley, and then Raqqa. And the reason I'm telling this story is because most people know that part of it. But what they don't know is why they were liberating places from the ISIS caliphate. They were empowering the local community to set up self-governance like they had already done in the majority Kurdish areas. Now, I want you to know, while they're building this, this remarkable self-governance in the northeast, at the same time, that same year, the Nusra Front took over Idlib, committing severe human rights violations. And [00:12:00] then they changed their name to HTS. Idlib became one of the most dangerous places for Christians and minorities, with widespread reports of torture, rape and killings. The Christian population wants 10,000 strong dwindled to near extinction. I think the New York Times had an article about the last Christian left in Idlib last year. So in June of 2017, Raqqa was liberated from ISIS by the SDF and the US led coalition to defeat ISIS. But the caliphate was not eliminated until February 2019. So Deniz is no longer a Kurdish project. It is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious. In fact, it is majority Arab. Even the SDF is majority Arab with Syriac Assyrian Syrian militias. They have adopted three official languages Kurdish, Arabic and Syriac. So it's important to understand this is not some hastily thrown together government, but a carefully planned democracy that fills the governance and security voids that normally occur when bad actors are eliminated.

Nadine Maenza: [00:12:53] They have shown that governance is the way to make permanent the gains won during military action. This [00:13:00] is how to stop a forever

war. Isis had almost been eliminated before Turkey invaded in 2018, capturing a frame and again in 2019, capturing the area between Rosaleen and Tell Abyad, committing horrific crimes against religious minorities, including killings, rape, kidnappings, torture, disappearances and destructions of religious sites. And just this week, Turkey indicated its strategic goal to eliminate Kurdish forces and this democracy in northeast Syria. Diplomacy alone won't push Turkey back. We saw Secretary Blinken go and meet with Erdogan and the foreign minister and actually a few hours after that meeting, they announced their goal of eliminating the project in northeast Syria. So it's important that senators like Lindsey Graham, Chris Van Hollen and John Kennedy have stood up calling for sanctions against Turkey. It's only going to be real consequences that are going to stop this action. So the US and the international community needs to stand up with our allies in the northeast and demand that Turkey step back from [00:14:00] attacking. And in addition, it's important that the international community also demand that the government in Damascus includes all the religious communities to be equal citizens. So we'll be watching this closely and be standing for all of Syria to be able to experience religious freedom.

Dede Laugesen: [00:14:19] Thank you. Nadine. You know, it just seems impossible that the Biden administration isn't supporting this area with everything that they've got since they're such big defenders of democracy. Next up, we have Charmaine Hedding, president and founder of the Shai Fund. Charmaine and the Shai Fund are on the ground in Syria, with their local partners providing aid to the people most in need. Charmaine also was instrumental with helping get religious minorities out of Afghanistan when Afghanistan fell. Moving Americans to [00:15:00] back to the United States when we saw the October 7th attacks. And now here she is again in Syria. Charmaine, it's so good to have you here today. You're going to talk with us about the conflict of interest, Israel and other regional actors, response to regime change in Syria. Charmaine, welcome.

Charmaine Hedding: [00:15:21] Thank you, Frank and Dede, for having me on today. I have a slideshow that we can quickly talk through so that we can see some of the issues of what's happening on the 26th of November. It was a shock to everyone when Israel declared a ceasefire, and then at the same time, we started hearing in Israel that there were problems with troop movement coming out of the Idlib area and down through the various parts of Syria, and it was in Idlib that triggered the Israelis to start

talking out about the Dallas [00:16:00] area and starting to say things that were very unusual, you know, stop attacking the Kurds. We have to protect on the next slide, we have to protect the religious minorities. And everyone was wondering what was happening. And then, of course, we realized that basically the ceasefire with Lebanon between Israel and Lebanon had realized that Hezbollah was now so weakened that they would not be able to put up any defense for the Assad regime. When these two campaigns from HTS, which is mostly, as Nadine said, al Qaeda and other affiliates, and then the Syrian National Army, which is a very unusual name, because actually it's a Turkey proxy militia that's mostly has ISIS veterans in their ranks. And so they moved across Syria, and they were surprised [00:17:00] themselves at exactly how easy it was in order to topple the different areas. And if you have a look at the next slide, we started to see the problems between these two what Israel was saying.

Charmaine Hedding: [00:17:17] And also, they started to emerge as that conflict with Turkey. And so if we look at what the next slide says it talks about, for example Israel's fears at the time was comments like this from Turkey. So, for example, Turkey says I do not view Hamas as a terrorist organization, or Turkey starting to say things like what is Turkey doing in Libya, Syria or Somalia? Well, if you don't understand this, you fail to comprehend their mission. And if you look at the next slide with what Turkey is saying, they stay in comments about Jerusalem being theirs and regretting [00:18:00] that after the end of First World War that they had they lost Jerusalem and that they're coming back for Jerusalem. And so Turkey has this expansionist wish in order to take over an imperialistic wish to take over parts of the area in Syria. And the shocking thing is that 20% of Syria is now controlled by Turkey, and they're looking to liquidate the 30% that's controlled by Dennis and the northeast Syria, parts of Syria. And when you look at these two groups of HTS and SNA, who are both somehow under the Turkish security umbrella, we know that they are funded by Qatar. We see an alliance between Turkey HTS, SNA, Qatar starting [00:19:00] to emerge, and even their support of Hamas, which is an American foreign policy. Sometimes we hear this strange dichotomy that because Turkey and these groups are Sunni, that somehow, they can't form an alliance like they did with Iran in order to support Hamas, but they did that.

Charmaine Hedding: [00:19:21] And so what we see here is that Turkey is trying to take over more and more areas like they've done in with Azerbaijan, in Nagorno-Karabakh. And if we look at the next slide, we can see that Turkey's had goals for a very

long time to take over portions of northeast Syria and has indeed taken over some of these areas. Now, the remarkable thing about this, and here he's saying that he wants just a buffer zone, but through SNA and through HTS, especially through the SNA proxy militias, he's been able to now get more control over [00:20:00] the whole region of Syria while he's trying to dismantle the last Democratic enclave, which is northeast Syria, in order to take over the whole area for what he sees as an Islamist, neo-ottoman Turkish styled caliphate with him as the Sultan. And if you go to this, the slide, the next slide that he's got holding up. You can see that this area that he's starting to say he wants to control is a buffer zone is has got these blue squares in it. And these blue squares are very important because this whole area is a minority area of Kurds, Christians, Yazidis and Druze. But in particular all of those blue squares are Christian villages. And how did they get there? If you go to the next slide, it's a picture that I took at the in Yerevan in of [00:21:00] the 1915 Ottoman Turkish genocide against the Armenian Christians, where they put the Christians on a death march.

Charmaine Hedding: [00:21:10] Where into Syria? Where did they put them into Aleppo and into this area of northeast Syria. So this is a slow burn genocide by the Turks, continuing what they began in order to take over this area and to complete what they see as an Ottoman Turkish area that should become theirs and Turkey's imperialistic gains throughout the area. And if you look at the next slide, you will see that these are the people that Turkey is supporting. In order to do this noticeably is that they've got ISIS patches and ISIS flags. So on one hand, they are supporting the Syrian National Army who split with [00:22:00] HTS at Aleppo. They are the ones that Turkey is using to attack the northeast Syria. And then if you go to the next slide, you will see some of the HDS. And here this is a picture of them when they entered the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. And they said that their goal is to come to Jerusalem. And when you look at their history on the following slide, you can see that you've got Giovanni, who is the leader of this terrorist group, and then you've also got this, the SNA. And together they are forming a group with the backing of Turkey that Israel is very concerned about. So SNA with ISIS affiliations, HTS with Al Qaeda, Turkey supporting both Hamas HTS and SNA, we know that they can form alliances with Iran. [00:23:00] We know that the weapons have come mostly from Iran. That's why Israel has got involved and started attacking all of the weapons depot.

Charmaine Hedding: [00:23:09] And the fear that Israel has is that this alliance with Iran, Turkey agents and the like with Hamas will join up to destroy Israel. And so when you look at the next slide and you understand some of the background of this, you can see that, for example Giuliani isn't, as Nadine said, his first name. His name, if you have a look on this next slide is actually Al Qaida. When did he change his name? He changed his name to Giuliani in during the second Intifada. And it was in, first of all, allegiance to the Palestinian cause. And secondly, Giuliani means [00:24:00] Golan in Arabic. And so in 2015, it's no surprise that he says the Golan Heights are Syria's historical lands and Israel is the occupier. And so in addition to this, now that he's trying to reform himself. He's got a PR campaign where he says, you know, you look at how he's dressed, for example, in the ranks of ISIS all the way now to HDZ and then to different interviews that he's given in a Western suit. He's acting as if he's trying to reform himself. But in the meantime, we heard today that he doesn't think Syria is ready for elections. And many of the officials that he's putting into the interim government in Damascus are actually from Idlib, this enclave that was an incubator of Turkey that kept him alive, trained them, [00:25:00] and where he started to move from on this whole campaign to take over Syria.

Charmaine Hedding: [00:25:06] And so when you consider all of these, the Israelis, the Druze, the northeast Syria are saying, wait a minute, we're not sure we want to join this. And the Druze have put out a statement saying that they are advocating for a decentralized system. In fact, some of the closest Druze villages to the Israeli border have said, we want to rather be annexed with Israel. We're not prepared to take the risk. And so if you look at that, the next slide on the Druze, you can see some of the Druze having a meeting and together discussing this. And then we have the situation with Jordan. So if you go to the slide with Jordan. And we can see some of the problems that are [00:26:00] associated with the issue of Jordan, because Jordan has a border with Iraq and with Syria, and it's become an entry point to destabilize Jordan. Jordan is very worried that these Islamists are going to be empowered and empower the Muslim Brotherhood groups and the Palestinian groups within their country, and that that will result in an uprising to overthrow the Jordanian Hashemite Kingdom. In fact, the Jordanians also believe that this is a problem. Israel has done a risk assessment on this, and they have concerns whether Jordan will survive. The Hashemite Kingdom will survive after 2025 because of two reasons Iran flooding money into these radical groups, and also these radical groups. Having taken over 31 seats in the 138 [00:27:00]

seat parliament. So Israel is busy drawing up plans to support the Hashemites, and at the same time is now moving into Parts of Syria onto the Golan Heights.

Charmaine Hedding: [00:27:14] And if you go to the second to last slide, you can see the area of the Golan Heights that Israel is moving into. And the reason that they are doing that is to protect our population and also the Druze and other religious minorities along this area in case these radical jihadist forces come against Israel. And so this is the main concern in, in the area. And, of course, the religious minorities spread throughout Syria, but especially in the north. And the Druze and the South are very concerned about what will happen if the HTS continues in the fashion that it has, and Israel has basically warned them that [00:28:00] they have until December 2025, the HTS to solidify the agreement that Israel has with the previous Baathist regime that was done in 1974. Otherwise, Israel's not leaving anything to question. And indeed, the Prime Minister of Israel this week has stood on the Golan border and stated very clearly what Israel's position is, and that we will not withdraw until Israel has security. So we are responding to the humanitarian crisis in multiple ways, because many people have fled to different areas. And of course, there's been issues inside Syria with lack of ATMs and lack of supply. And we've been giving in as much humanitarian aid as we can. And across the areas controlled by TSNA and also into northeast [00:29:00] Syria. Thank you. Dede.

Dede Laugesen: [00:29:05] It seems like there's this vacuum In Syria right now, and the whole world is holding its breath to see how it will all play out. We've been watching since October 7th. The Biden administration betray our ally Israel time and time again, and we're in the transition period now between the Biden administration and a new Trump presidency. In the previous Trump presidency, we saw his actions in Syria. We saw his willingness to sanction Turkey. And we're looking forward to our report from our next presenter, Doctor David Wurmser, who is a director of the Mideast Program at the center for Security Policy and a former naval intelligence officer with the rank of lieutenant commander. Now, he's a former Mideast expert, advisor to an [00:30:00] undersecretary of state, national security advisor, and vice president of the United States. So we're pleased to have you here. David, can a new Trump presidency bring peace and stability to Israel and the Middle East? Your thoughts, sir?

David Wurmser: [00:30:15] Yeah, the potential is there, but I think we still have a long time. I know it doesn't sound like very long. It's already almost Christmas. And you already, if you go downtown in Washington, you already see the scaffolding up for the inauguration. But we are talking about another month. And the damage that the administration currently and can do is still is significant, in part because many of the players on the ground who are nefarious understand that there's a stopwatch and they're moving as fast as they can to set their position up. And the two previous speakers, Charlene and Nadine, wonderful presentations that more or less outlined a lot of the strategic moves underway [00:31:00] and some of the concerns I'm going to sort of pick up from there and first start with this administration. Not exactly with this administration, but what this administration will be dealing with. That is the previous the Biden administration before even the Trump administration comes in. Well, first of all, this administration will view Syria through the lens of Qatar and Turkey. Why? Because that's what it's done until now. Qatar seems to be one of the most important voices that this administration, the Biden administration, listens to. And Qatar has a number of things on its mind. Number one, it is an Islamist government that is pursuing an Islamist agenda. For example, Hamas, we all are hearing all these things about Hamas being destroyed and Iran being put on the defensive. All very true. But Hamas is also a Qatari creation. [00:32:00] Qatar itself stands between sort of the Turkish world and their Islamist agenda under Erdogan and the Iranian world.

David Wurmser: [00:32:11] They always play both sides. But Islamism is what they constantly pursue. So they're right now coaching Giuliani and the Turks to behave in a very slick way. We see we've seen Qatar do this consistently with Turkey, with Islamists over the last half decade. That's what the is the backstory behind the Khashoggi affair, where Adnan Khashoggi, who was a Washington Post commentator very close to the current one of the current commentators, Shadi Hamid, who's a major figure right now, and the Washington Post crowd, they were trying to portray these Islamist movements under Erdogan and Qatar's control as really liberals, Jeffersonian liberals. [00:33:00] And it was a very slick public affairs campaign. The Saudis, though, understood Khashoggi as the danger he was. And they snuffed him out. Now, obviously, the way they did it and what they did and even snuffing them out rather than challenging him and putting money to show the people who they are, probably would have been a better route. They did an awful thing of killing him in the embassy and in Ankara, and then trying to dissolve his body in acid. So the Saudis are really fumbled it, but their sense of

the threat of Khashoggi was correct, that this was an Islamist movement under the auspices, almost, of the Washington Post, whitewashing itself as a liberal movement that appeals to the American liberal sentiments. And that's essentially what you're seeing now is round two with Hess and Giuliani. We know who Giuliani [00:34:00] is.

David Wurmser: [00:34:00] He's got decades of this. You don't stop believing when, when, when you're somebody like Giuliani, you may moderate a little bit in some of your tactics, but your essence is the same. So he is a product of al Qaeda, Iraq, al Qaeda, Iraq. By the way, we were talking about North Jordan. One thing I would add to that is al Qaeda. Iraq was run by al Zarqawi. Zarqawi literally means the guy from Zarqawi, which is northern Jordan. So the real following of, of our Zarqawi, of, of al Qaeda, Iraq is north Jordan, which is, of course, the organization from which Al Giuliani's Nusra and then HTS eventually emerged. So North Jordan is very much in his sights and very much in his orbit and very much in the orbit of his followers. So that's point number one. Point number two is we look at transitions. And this is why I'm saying about the issue with [00:35:00] with BTS being portrayed as moderate, let's assume for a second that The Washington Post is correct and he's had a Jeffersonian conversion. Revolutions like that are two step processes. In shorthand, we call them the February revolutions. October revolutions? Why? Because we talk about the Russian Revolution in 1917, when you had a moderate liberal government, a genuinely liberal minded government under Kerensky emerge. But underneath that, the real forces that were gathering were the communist forces, the Bolsheviks under Lenin. And so the original revolution was in February. And then in October, the Bolsheviks made their move, took over the government, and that's the government we lived with until 1991.

David Wurmser: [00:35:55] And you say, well, okay, that's Russia. But when you look at [00:36:00] the French Revolution, you look at the Iranian Revolution. So three very different civilizations Russian civilization, French civilization, Iranian civilization, exactly the same process. You had the Girondists were replaced by Robespierre. In Iran, you had Shapour Bakhtiar, who was maybe, possibly genuinely a liberal in his mind, was replaced by Khomeini. It's basically they used this grand coalition to overthrow the system, consolidate their control, and then they make the move through the system as the real power behind it. And I would be shocked if that's not the process that we will see with HTS in Syria, if they even consolidate all their power and all the signs are there, that that is exactly what will happen. Now another point that I would focus on is

the Turkish s differences. Differences are something [00:37:00] we would seize on, usually to try to divide them. In this case, I'd be very careful. There are differences. The key one is what Erdogan is after. And the SNA is really nothing more than Erdogan's militia. It's dressed in Islamist garb. HTS is also aligned with Turkey, and Turkey's trying to flood via HTS. All these Turkic peoples, all these Turkic Islamists into Syria. We see Uyghurs, we see Turkmen, we see others coming in. So certainly there's that going on. And I don't want to say that there's one is not Erdogan's ally. HTS is Erdogan's ally. But in the end, when an Islamist takes over Damascus, there's a mythical a mythical symbolism to that, that the Umayyads were, were [00:38:00] the first Sunni caliphate.

David Wurmser: [00:38:03] They took over for from Ali, the fourth caliph of Islam, in the mid to late seventh century, very early 50 years, 40 years after Muhammad himself. And their epicenter was Damascus. It wasn't even Mecca. It was. It was really Damascus. And their first acts were Jerusalem building the dome of the Rock, the golden dome, we see, and then adorning that with anti-Christian graffiti or calligraphy. That basically was a an attack on the Trinity and an attack on the Immaculate Conception. But second of all, they put it on top of where the Jewish temple was. The whole point was the Umayyads were about asserting their supremacy over Christendom and over Judaism, and their presence in Damascus [00:39:00] had already established them over the cradle of Christianity. The dome of the Rock was the polemic, but the real cradle of Christianity at that time already was moving toward Syria, what is today Syria. So the Ummah, regardless of what Jilani thinks, regardless of what he thinks, the symbolism for these Salafis, which are people who believe that Islam ever since its first generations has been corrupted. And where was the corruption? The corruption was when the Sunni Umayyad Caliphate, about 100 years later, or less than 100 years later, it was overthrown by the Abbasids in in Baghdad, the Abbasids in Baghdad. They say we're Persian. They're not Persian. They were Arab. It's wrong. It's mythology. But nonetheless, there's this idea that ever since the Abbasids took over, Islam is corrupt, corrupted, and Islam as a result has declined.

David Wurmser: [00:39:59] So [00:40:00] the whole idea of taking Damascus instantly evokes the idea of a neo Umayyad caliphate and the return for Salafis to the purity of early Islam, supplanting Christianity and overpowering and supplanting the remnants of Judaism. I don't think you can get around the symbolic pool of that. Even if Giuliani wanted to be a liberal, I don't think he can overcome that, and certainly he will be unable

to overcome that among his followers. So I think the idea that he can essentially maintain a liberal path, even giving him credit, I think, is unrealistic at this point, which leads us to where we really should be thinking, and what we should be thinking is to look at Turkey and see what they're saying. But by the way, this neo Umayyad caliphate can [00:41:00] come into conflict with this Sultan of Istanbul, the neo Ottoman Empire. There you can only have one caliph, and that that might be a problem. But in the meantime, they will probably align to outbid each other in being more purely Islamic. So as a result, I don't see any hope in the short term of splitting them. I think they're operating in tandem and almost bouncing off of each other precisely because they're kind of in competition. So I think that there's no hope there right now to say, well, let's play them off eventually, yes, but only once they've been contained and pushed back on themselves.

David Wurmser: [00:41:40] So where does this put us? Well, Erdogan, there was one statement by Erdogan just recently where he said the borders of Turkey are defined by Turkey's ending World War one, and it didn't have to end that way. This is exactly the sort of stuff we heard from Germany in the 30s [00:42:00] about World War one, that it wasn't a defeat of Germany that led to the Germans having to have a cease fire and end World War One. It was a choice by the Germans to end it in a bad choice that that allowed the Germans to say, well, it started again. I mean, we ended it. We didn't have to lose. We chose to. So they betrayed us. This this government in Germany at the time betrayed us. So let's reverse the verdict. And that is what you're hearing from Erdogan. Rather than understanding Ataturk saved Turkey from utter destruction. He pulled back, ended the empire, and saved Turkey as best he could. And that created the borders of Turkey that was imposed on them because they were catastrophically defeated and catastrophically collapsing. So Erdogan can reopen the end of World War One, but he's trying to end it, reopen it in a way that the Germans did, which [00:43:00] is no, no, no, we were winning. We just chose to lose. And so therefore, if we reopen it, we win. So this is a very dangerous idea he's raised. But what it's done is it's eliminated the legitimacy of all the borders. He's basically saying that what defined the post-World War One era was the borders that were imposed on Turkey, and all the borders that we see in the Middle East.

David Wurmser: [00:43:26] And he's saying there are no longer valid. And he's creating the instability now in Syria that makes those borders no longer viable by

pushing HTS and ISIS SNA, etc. He's making it unlivable for the minorities to stay within the parameters of the Syrian state. So while I would hope that there would be an inclusive and liberal government emerging in Damascus, I think realistically our goal at this point ought to be more [00:44:00] toward ensuring greater autonomy and, if necessary, independence of various structures in Syria that already organically had emerged or are emerging like Danes, or are emerging like with the Druze, and potentially a redrawing of borders, for example, the Christian communities that abut Lebanon and so forth. It's a matter of protection. The attempt to keep a unified Syria together under an Islamist government can only result in an massacres and slaughter and so it would make sense to redraw the administrative lines, if not outright borders at this point. The administration, though, is determined to define HFSS more and more as moderate and create a unified government under it, and then more or less ignore the fact that a unified government is [00:45:00] really an excuse now emerging for Sunni and Turkic supremacism, which is really death to too many minorities. So any rate, I'll leave it at that. I tried to throw out a bit and we can go on to discussions from there.

Dede Laugesen: [00:45:15] Thank you so much, David. You know, I've heard of the Neo-ottoman caliphate, but I hadn't heard of the neo Umayyad Caliphate. And I can see the tension and the conflicts that could arise from that as well. So I really appreciate you bringing that up today on this webinar. Next up we have Lauren Homer, who is an international religious freedom lawyer. She is the founder and president of Law and Liberty Trust, and a longtime advocate with Save the Persecuted Christians. And in her own way, truly the women on this webinar. Nadine, Charmaine and Lauren have been hard at work at this now for decades [00:46:00] and have a historical knowledge of the battle for religious freedom around the world that is just exemplary, and we're grateful for their inputs. Lauren was not able to join us today as her grandchild's Christmas concert is happening right now. So she has recorded a video for us and we'll talk about do American policymakers have the political will to secure democracy and an end of terrorism in Syria and the Middle East?

Lauren Homer: [00:46:31] Good afternoon. My name is Lauren Homer, and I'm speaking to you today in my capacity as co-chair of the Middle East Working Group of the International Religious Freedom Roundtable. I know that you have already heard from several experts who, I hope, have given you a good overview of who the players are at the moment in Syria and what we're concerned about. But basically, in the last

[00:47:00] two weeks, Syria has gone from being a country controlled by the violent Assad regime with the assistance of Russia and Iran through Hezbollah, to having all three of those actors vanish from the scene. And a not very large group called HTS arise and sweep into Damascus and take over the capital and start acting as if it is. The interim government. The Middle East Working Group and other friends have put together a letter to President Biden, Secretary of State Blinken, and it's also addressed to president elect Donald Trump and Secretary of State designate Marco Rubio, and hopes that they will read it and even be able to take some action [00:48:00] on their own prior to Inauguration Day, because this is such a critical issue at the moment, our allies in fighting ISIS, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and the civilian populations that they represent and defend are in the crosshairs of the Turkish military and its jihadi proxies, the Syrian National Army. The Syrian National Army is actually a paid unit of the Turkish military. It's not independent, although it's presented as such, and it has already taken two large, well, three now large pieces of territory from the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria Danes, and has introduced strict Islamist practices and chaos.

Lauren Homer: [00:48:56] There are constant reports of kidnaping, rape, looting, [00:49:00] stealing, abductions and murders of innocent people in these regions. There's nothing peaceful about it. Erdogan wants to use this moment when the Assad regime, Russia and Hezbollah aren't around to stop it, to go in and grab much, if not all, of northeast Syria. Danes is now a sanctuary for Christians and other religious minorities. It's a sanctuary for Kurds, and it's actually very evenly distributed population wise between Kurds, Arab Muslims, Arab ethnic Muslims and Christians, Yazidis and other religious minorities. They have instituted a system that started back in 2014 and has lasted through ten years of war, when they were simultaneously [00:50:00] fighting ISIS efforts to impose an Islamic state over all of Syria, and they give equal rights to women. There's everything good about it. They based it on the United States founding documents, writings by our founding fathers, and it's incredibly impressive. It's homemade. It was not imposed by the United States or any other government. So Turkey hates this and wants to destroy it. And they invaded in 2018 2019 and took large swaths of land. They signed an agreement with the United States promising not to invade further and to respect civilian populations. That promise has been continuously broken since 2019, and they have even made agreements with the United States in the

last few days where they promised a cease fire in exchange, for example, for the SDF withdrawing [00:51:00] from an area called Manbij.

Lauren Homer: [00:51:02] And instead of stopping fighting there, they've just continued. They were they were doing more yesterday, even though they promised a cease fire until Friday, while they had further talks. So this is this is the m.o. of Turkey. And we need to act firmly and quickly. Our letter has two main asks. We are asking the United States government to use all available mechanisms to stop Turkey's continued attacks on northeast Syria and on Danes. Second, we're asking our government and its allies to do everything they can to achieve nonsectarian, non-religious constitutional order in Syria, where religious freedom and equal rights are given to all, [00:52:00] including women, as an action point, we suggest that the same executive order that was written under then President Trump's time in office. Executive order 13 894. The well, it's already it's still in effect. President Biden reauthorized it every year, including this year, and under it, designations can be made as they were in 2019 against President Erdogan and his Minister of Defense, his Minister of Interior, and other officials who are responsible for starting this war against their neighbor Danes. And it would freeze their assets and impose a lot of different sanctions on them personally prohibit them from coming to the United States and other things. [00:53:00] And in 2019, this was very effective. Within a couple of days, they were willing to make a deal with the United States. Whether that will be enough now is anyone's guess. We also have bipartisan legislation that will probably be introduced any day now by Senator Chris Van Hollen and Lindsey Graham respectively, a Democrat and a Republican who have been very vocal about this, as have others.

Lauren Homer: [00:53:30] And they would impose additional sanctions on Turkey if they don't stop the invasion. So we welcome that, and we hope there will be more bills, as there were in 2019. There were four separate pieces of legislation. Secondly, we think that talks on the future of Syria should begin immediately. He is taking the position. It's too soon to have peace talks. They need to get control of the country. [00:54:00] Well, they don't have the right to have control of the country. They control only a small fraction of Syrian territory. The Syrian Democratic Forces actually control a larger piece of Syrian territory, and they would have more if parts of the territory that they administered very peacefully had not been Often stolen from them by Turkey. Now, as I'm sure you've been told, the SDF is the only army in the world with us. Help that we're

able to stand against ISIS and brought about its defeat. That's a huge thing. There were times in the last ten years when people were very afraid that ISIS would take over the whole Middle East and take over the whole world, but that's not happening, and that's because of the Syrian Democratic Forces. And in my opinion, our government and our people owe it to them to protect them right now. [00:55:00] Erdogan has made clear that his goal is not just to eliminate the Syrian Democratic Forces and the people who now live in northeast Syria, which is his goal number one.

Lauren Homer: [00:55:13] His goal is to continue to recreate what he sees as Turkey's right to recreate the Ottoman Empire. And what does that mean? He is promising. And speeches, as are his allies inside Turkey, to go quickly to the gates of Jerusalem. That means they want to overthrow the government of Israel and occupy Israel the way the Ottoman Empire did in its heyday. They also want to go to the gates of Mecca and take over Mecca. Well, that means they would need to defeat the Saudi Arabian army. And they're also working hard to destabilize the countries in between Iraq, Jordan, [00:56:00] Egypt, Lebanon and so on. Two weeks ago, we were more worried about Iran being the one that wanted to take over the Middle East. Now Turkey is stepping up into that role and it's not something new. They've been threatening to do this for years. Turkey's ambitions threaten all three major Abrahamic religions. They threaten the Jews, they threaten the Christians, and they threaten Islam. And it, insomuch as Islam is quite capable of being a moderate faith that doesn't demand that every other person in the world adopt it. This whole radical Islamic movement is relatively recent in world history, at least in recent world history. All of these faiths are at risk. All of the smaller minority groups that have existed in Syria [00:57:00] for millennia, such as the Yazidis, the Zoroastrians, the Druze, the Islamists and the Alawites and many other groups are threatened in the areas currently governed by HTS and in XNA, there are virtually no Christians, no Kurds, no Yazidis, no minority groups, and they have put the Alawites and the Druze through some very terrible times while they've been in power.

Lauren Homer: [00:57:34] And by the way, has really only had a foothold in Syria for five years. And again, up until a couple of weeks ago, it occupied only a tiny area. So there is no reason that he should be regarded as the legitimate government of Syria, as some are suggesting. So we would like to see [00:58:00] an all Syria set of meetings in which all Syrian stakeholders participate. I'm not talking about foreign governments. I'm talking about all parts of Syria, all ethnic groups, all religious groups, all regions should

be represented. And that is what the Syrian people want. That's what they fought for. And fighting to overthrow Assad and take control of their country. They do not want a totalitarian government run by Bashar Assad to be replaced by a totalitarian government run by Hess as the proxy force for Turkey, because it's quite clear from some leaked documents that we've just seen in the last few days that Turkey has a very specific plan to govern Syria, to Turkify it, as it has in the areas that it seized in 2018 and [00:59:00] 2019. They have Turkish governors. They use they use the Turkish language in schools. They get people to be nationalistic about being Turkish and their post office.

Lauren Homer: [00:59:14] Their communication systems. Those are all run by Turkey. That's what they want to do to Syria. And it poses a real and present danger to Israel. Which is why if you've been following this, you've read about Israel launching lots of bombardments inside Syria, where it's trying to destroy the weapons stockpiles and the aircraft that belong to the Assad regime so that they can't get their hands on it. And I think one of the primary democracies in the region, Israel, is quite well equipped to be on top of this and to know that HTS is its enemy. It's not suddenly a [01:00:00] more moderate group. And I'm quite concerned that if HTS and Turkey have their way, we're really going to see Taliban 2.0, or when we see groups that try to pretend they're moderate that they're going to be understanding to all other faith groups and all ethnic groups, and they will reimpose strict Islamist law the way that ISIS wanted to. I should also note in, just in closing, that one of the results of the war against ISIS is that there are at least 10,000 ISIS fighters and maybe 40,000 ISIS family members and children still in camps inside Syria, inside Danes that are guarded and overseen by Danes and the Syrian Democratic Forces. Turkey is now suggesting that they should be in charge of it, of these camps. Well, they've already said that their plan [01:01:00] is to release these fighters and send them home. So what does that mean? That means that ISIS fighters who've been in these camps since 2019 would suddenly be sent to Europe or neighboring countries.

Lauren Homer: [01:01:14] That cannot happen. They need to be brought to justice. And the reason why they haven't had been there hasn't been an international mechanism to try them. And that is way overdue. That should happen. There should also be tribunals for the Assad regime, people who did horrible things to their own people. But that will only happen with international pressure, with international facilitation. But we cannot have an ISIS caliphate in Syria under a different name. That's

the bottom line. So we're asking the viewers you to read the information [01:02:00] that's being provided by Save the Persecuted Christians, which will give you ways to contact your senators and your congressmen. Tell them about what your thoughts are and ask them to bring pressure upon the current administration and the administration to be to stop Turkey from completing its military takeover of northeast Syria, and also to ensure that there is an inclusive process of setting up a democratic government in Syria with equal rights to all. I would just say in closing that today, on the 19th of December, there are demonstrations going on all over Syria by different groups asking for these very things. And this is not asking the US to impose something on a country that doesn't want it. It's asking us to get behind the people who want what we want, which is [01:03:00] freedom. Equal rights, freedom of religion. So thank you for listening, and I appreciate the time.

Dede Laugesen: [01:03:07] Thank you so much, Lauren. Lauren was referring to a letter that she and Nadine have put together for the International Religious Freedom Roundtable, which is a group that gathers on a weekly basis, generally a weekly bi weekly basis depending in Washington, DC, and engages with U.S. government agencies. Sometimes we have government agencies that come on and give us a report from USAID or from the International Religious Freedom Office at the State Department and others, but it is a civil society led group that has been gathering together for over a decade. And Save the Persecuted Christians is glad to be a part of that. What we are going to do is create an opportunity [01:04:00] for the public, just ordinary citizens, to be able to email their representatives in Congress, both in the House and in the Senate, to advocate for some of these policies that have been mentioned here on the webinar today. That Align Act will be up Friday or Saturday, and it will allow you, as a member of the public, to act directly on behalf of the religious minorities and ethnic minorities so vulnerable right now in Syria, and to advocate for policies that could help bring stability to the Middle East and ensure that our ally Israel, is safe in the region as well. Nadine, I'd like to broaden the scope a little bit with you, if I may. We haven't talked about Europe's response to the Syrian crisis. We've seen during ISIS, mass immigration into Europe [01:05:00] of all kinds of diverse people, but most of those immigrants that came in are adherents to Islam. And we saw also that England and others were not prioritizing the communities that were most vulnerable under a Trump administration. Vice President Pence put forth a policy through US aid to give direct support to those most affected communities in Iraq, and the Biden administration pulled that back. So I know

that a number of countries in Europe put immediate stays on immigration from Syria into their countries. What can you tell us about that situation and what we're seeing in Europe?

Nadine Maenza: [01:05:48] Sure. So we definitely are seeing some countries in Europe put stays on asylum claims from those from Syria, including Germany, UK, Italy, Austria. And so [01:06:00] and I know others will be coming. And so what we want to emphasize is that there are some that have been targeted by these jihadist groups in Syria and that that actually are at risk, and to make sure that they assess those rather than just deny everyone that is potentially from Syria wanting them to, to return. But other countries, we've been I've been surprised at how many European countries have actually come out and cautioned about Turkey's threat on the northeast. France for one. But what surprised me the most was Germany, because their friends, really good friends with Turkey and have a real strong alliance. So for their foreign minister to caution Turkey from invading. And I do think part of it is the, you know, if they invade this area of, what, 4 million and Kurds, Christians, Yazidis and, you know, white although majority Kurd but diverse religious area, all the religious minorities are going to have to flee. [01:07:00] They're going to have to go somewhere. And I think Europe understands that. Of course, they're not going to go to the areas that are currently under HDZ or the SNA. So of course they're going to try to find a way into Europe, and it makes a lot of sense for them to stop Turkey's incursion invasion because it will lead to dangerous conditions for these. There's really no place for them to flee legally. So they'll flee illegally. And but of course, just being careful about those that have legitimate asylum claims to be able to stay.

Dede Laugesen: [01:07:32] Thank you so much. And, David, I wanted to come back to you. We haven't talked about Saudi Arabia and where they're at in the Middle East at this point. We know that Saudi Arabia has made moves recently to allow women to drive and some other things that are positives on the front, but how are they responding and what is their interplay between Iran, Iraq and Turkey in this moment.

David Wurmser: [01:07:59] Up until [01:08:00] a few months ago, the world to Saudi Arabia was, you know, mildly complex, but overall simple. A mildly complex is they knew that there was a sort of a threat from Turkey. They see it on their border with Qatar and the relationship between Qatar and Turkey. They also already in 2014, 2015,

if I remember correctly, started seeing how dangerous sending their ulama, their religious leadership, as well as some regular fighters to Syria and the Syrian Civil war, they saw how radical they were and radicalizing and how dangerous that was to Saudi Arabia. So they saw Turkey and they saw this exactly the nature of the threat we're now seeing. But it ultimately was a containable threat because there was Jordan in between. [01:09:00] And more importantly, there was the Shiite Crescent, which really threatened them, but also but also was a wall to, to their threat to of the Sunni Islamist threat to Saudi Arabia, because the Iranians essentially built that wall and then threatened Saudi Arabia with that wall. Now that wall is gone. And Iran, I mean, we're not going to talk about Iran, but I don't believe they're all that long for this world as a regime anymore. So and certainly they're weak and they're no longer in Syria and in Iraq. You're seeing the Iraqi Shiite militias and others beginning to hedge. And the Houthis are only beginning to feel what ultimately awaits them.

David Wurmser: [01:09:49] So at the end of the day, the Saudis now are more focused on Turkey. And for that, they're terrified. They're terrified. First of all, of Qatar. Qatar [01:10:00] is ideological also problem because they're Wahhabis, a sect like the Saudis, but also, they behave like an enemy. But second of all, Qatar is really the funder and strategically aligned with Turkey. Why would they be worried about that? Well, first of all, it's the Umayyad thing that we talked about. I mentioned how Jerusalem is a main target for the Umayyads, but at the end of the day, the Umayyads, they know Mecca is the is the religious center of Islam. And who controls Mecca is important. I mean, just like the early Umayyads, they took over Damascus. They did not have full control over the over the Islamic world. There was a revolt, the Ibn Zubayr revolt, and they didn't have control of Mecca, Medina and areas around there. So it took a civil war and a great crushing of that. And in the end, they took it. So they definitely will want to recreate [01:11:00] that and take Mecca, Medina and the Saudis. And so that that's their objective. Even if Damascus remains their epicenter, their symbolic heart. So just because they're looking at Damascus doesn't mean they're not going to go after Mecca. And they've said so.

David Wurmser: [01:11:18] The second thing that I think is problematic is North Jordan. If northern Jordan falls to this crowd, then you have the front lines. Are the Hejazi tribes, the tribes that are south of Amman and Jordan right now? Those are Hejazi tribes. Those are the same tribes you have in Saudi Arabia in the eastern, in the

western provinces and so forth, down to Mecca. So the integrity of Saudi Arabia instantly deteriorates the moment that you have a Jordanian collapse. And then, moreover, the tribes in southern Israel and the Sinai are of that same crowd. So if there's a threat to them, [01:12:00] you've really begun to threaten the entire northern half of the Arabian and Arabian Peninsula and so forth. The second thing the Saudis are worried about is where's Egypt going to go? Egypt is teetering. Egypt was Erdogan's premier enemy. Looked at him as a nemesis. But what we've seen in the last five years is that Egypt has felt betrayed by the West, undermined by the West and the Soviets or the not the excuse me, the Russians were the only thing they could turn to. So they started turning to the Russians. But over the last 3 or 4 years, we've seen them also play a much more sophisticated game. Also with the Turks, they suddenly didn't look at Hamas as much of an enemy and began to cut their deals with Hamas.

David Wurmser: [01:12:49] Just two weeks ago, they released 800 of the top Muslim Brotherhood leaders in Egypt. That's not a gesture. That is a strategic, strategic statement. [01:13:00] So Egypt worries Saudi Arabia as well, because that can also affect them strategically. And then the other side of Saudi Arabia is Somalia and Yemen. And of course, the Houthis are aligned with Iran, but Yemen. But Somalia is another area the Turks have really put their efforts into. And again, Qatar is there with Turkey. So, again, the Saudis see threats from every direction beginning to emerge from the Turks. Fortunately for them, they share the same enemy that Israel has. So they once again are finding themselves drifting toward the Israelis for sort of a mutual alliance, if even quietly or not formally concluded. And then, of course, the other thing that everybody is looking at is, is Iran. If there's a post Ayatollah, Iran, what emerges there? The hope is [01:14:00] it's either introverted to clean itself up because its damage is great or alternatively, to harness it. But at this point, the Saudis wouldn't really side with the they're not looking at a post ayatollah Iran as a potential ally. The Israelis are but the Saudis are not. At the end of the day right now, they're scared. America's out to lunch. They're hopeful the Israelis are going to follow through strategically, but they're scared.

Dede Laugesen: [01:14:30] And, Charmaine, did you want to respond to either of those questions?

Charmaine Hedding: [01:14:34] I agree, I think we're hearing a lot of, you know, noise about the Saudis and the Israelis and possibly something happening very quickly there. And, of course, it is because of what's happening with Turkey. But I'll never forget. You can hear I'm South African and when in the mosques in Durban, when Yasser Arafat came to visit, he said something very interesting, [01:15:00] which I think sums up Turkey's goal here. Yasser Arafat said piece by piece, for peace or in the name of peace. And when you look at what's gone on here with Turkey and how it's trying to gobble up the different areas, and it's doing it piece by piece and very intelligently. And so is Jilani. There's a lot of reporting on him and a lot of us who were involved with Afghanistan, you know, we saw that it succeeded for the Afghans to act as if they were moderates in the beginning. And then three years down the road, we saw who they were, really were. And I'll never forget, you know, the students demonstrating outside Kabul and everyone saying, oh, look, it's the Taliban 2.0, and are we falling into this trap again? And are we falling into an old trap of these groups? Piece by piece, in the name of peace. But really, it's an agenda to take [01:16:00] over vast areas for radical Islam.

Dede Laugesen: [01:16:04] Thank you. Charmaine. And before we close out, this has been a very rich program. And I'm so grateful to all of you for your participation. But, Charmaine, since you really are providing aid on the ground with your local partners in Syria right now in northeast Syria, what are the needs in northeast Syria? How are the church leaders themselves responding and with regards to women and Muslim background, believers and others, how can we both pray for them but also and take action with the Align act will provide, but how else can we support you in what you're doing now?

Charmaine Hedding: [01:16:48] So it's interesting you should raise that, Dede. Because as I'm sitting here, I've just got a message about Muslim background believers that have fled one area to another area [01:17:00] and can we get support in and that's what we've been doing. We've already helped some of these Muslim background believer congregations who we know, some of them who fled Kobani in 2018 and 19 and have gone to different areas because of these Turkish Islamist backed militias attacking these areas, or even in Afrin, where we had Muslim background believers. And I remember how the Turkish Islamist militias would come in. They saw who the Christians were and the Yazidis. They had pictures of them and they went door to door hunting them down. And so we've been able to get thousands of dollars' worth of aid in.

And we're helping practically on the ground through local Yazidi and Christian partners that we have across all of the areas and some of the very difficult areas to get into, both BTS and SNA. And [01:18:00] of course, in northeast Syria, we have strong partners on the ground, and the model of governance is easy for us to work with in order to get more aid in.

Charmaine Hedding: [01:18:10] And so we've been looking at bringing in food items because there's a lack of food, of course, with over 200,000 people that fled into northeast Syria, we've been looking at how to support them with blankets because it's very cold, with warm winter clothing, with non-food items and food items. And so I think it's critical at this moment that we put and get as many. Put pressure on the international community to understand the massive humanitarian crisis that we're looking at here. If HDZ and SNA are allowed, with the backing of Turkey, to continue, with no one halting this agenda of Turkey and these groups, and we have [01:19:00] to get in there to help practically, and I believe I always say this, we need to be prayerful and practical, prayerful that we'll get the right strategy on how to be practical but practical, so that we can really help the people on the ground through the local communities so that we empower them at all times.

Dede Laugesen: [01:19:21] Thank you so much. Is there anything that any one of you would like to say? Did you leave anything out? Have anything more you wanted to mention?

Nadine Maenza: [01:19:30] I think when we talk about northeast Syria, one of the things that makes them so special is that they built this on their own. They don't need nation building. We're not talking about, you know, going in there and teaching them how to govern, you know, building up their institutions. They've done it themselves. And that's what's so remarkable. There's so much we can learn from how they did that. I was able to be, you know, with Arab women in Raqqa who used to not be able to leave their house without a guardian. And now our government officials, but yet they still have they're still very religious [01:20:00] and their communities are intact. And there's a way to build this governance that supports that, that religious freedom, which is really accepting the human dignity of each other regardless of ethnicity or religion. And because they built this, this inclusive environment. When I was there in October, almost every person I asked, I said, what happens if you see meet somebody that's like

extreme or if you hear about extremism somewhere? And they all were saying to me, I really don't hear that anymore, even in places like Raqqa because they really have had extremism lowering because of this extreme. It's really an extreme inclusivity that they have where they pass a microphone around. Everyone is able to be a part of their own governance when they have government meetings. Everyone is included, and there's so much we can learn about how governing to include everybody actually is the best way to defeat radical Islam.

Nadine Maenza: [01:20:51] So when we're talking about, you know, we can't fight this ideology with weapons, I think we've seen that before. Of course, it's important to keep ISIS at bay, but [01:21:00] the real way to do it is to build governance that is inclusive, that holds the ground and keeps out these extremist elements from growing inside their own community, which is what they've done in northeast Syria. So to me, that's what one of the most impressive things we can learn about them, and which is the reason why ISIS isn't growing inside of their community. Of course, it's on the outside trying to come back in, but not in their own. That's not their own children. It's not the people in their community. And so to me, that's one of the things, I think, that our community hasn't learned so much about them and why I personally think the new administration would grasp this as being an example of people should be governing themselves and taking care of their own communities, and that we just need to hold back people like Turkey from invading and taking their land, which I think is pretty standard for all of the countries around the world. We obviously believe in borders and people should the sovereignty of countries. So I think this is consistent with our values to stand with a northeast Syria as they redo and figure out how Syria is going to look like, I think it's important that we continue to stand with them in this project [01:22:00] they've built.

Dede Laugesen: [01:22:00] Thank you. David, anything from you?

David Wurmser: [01:22:04] I pretty much agree with what everybody is saying. I really hope that these, these various minorities don't get caught up. It's the last stand of in many ways, what we're seeing in Lebanon and Syria is really the last stand of Christianity in the region. So the way they go really determines the future of any, any Christianity in its cradle. So the success here for the West, I think, is absolutely essential that we cannot allow it to become extinct.

Charmaine Hedding: [01:22:33] People I'll never forget when the caliphate was established and ISIS came down to the border with Jordan and the pickup trucks, and I remember seeing the signs and it was first the Saturday people, then the Sunday people, first the Jews and then the Christians. And we look at the situation in Iraq and Syria. There are no more Jews left. And so we have to ask ourselves [01:23:00] the question on our watch, are we going to let the rest of the religious minorities fall in this region? And that's the question and the call today.

Dede Laugesen: [01:23:12] Thank you. And something we didn't mention much in this panel, but we see that Turkey is also moving to their eastern border again with Azerbaijan against Christian Armenia. And Armenia was the first Christian nation in the world established in 301 A.D. so Turkey's ambitions for this neo Ottoman Empire are not just affecting what we know of the Middle East, but also into the Caucasus as well. It's a vast expanse, and it is filled with all kinds of heritage sites that are very important to Christians and to Jews and to people of other faiths as well. We see the [01:24:00] destruction of these ancient sites, and it really just rips at our souls. So I am so grateful to all of you for being here today to discuss this truly slow burn genocide that has been going on since the early 1900s at Turkey's you know, behest and just creating massive instability in this area, in this region. But we know that it is always darkest before the dawn. There are indications there are areas where, especially in Deir ez-Zor, that has set the example, that give us hope that something different truly could arise in the Middle East, and that this Christmas and into the New Year, we hope and pray for a world at peace.

Dede Laugesen: [01:24:57] Thank you so much for joining us today. [01:25:00] We'll be back again next month with another Save the Persecuted Christians webinar on topics important to this. A video of this webinar will be posted to SaveThePersecutedChristians.org within a day or two of the end of our program, and we ask you to share it with your colleagues and other networks. We invite you to join us, as we said, next month, and help support this and other programs of Save the Persecuted Christians, a US registered educational nonprofit. Please prayerfully consider making a monthly contribution to the work of our coalition and partner organizations by becoming a paid subscriber to our Substack at PersecutedChristians.Substack.com. \$5 a month from many of you makes all the difference in the world. For us to be able to continue the work that we do and follow us

on X @PersecutedSave. Thanks for being here today. Thank you. Nadine Maenza, Charmaine [01:26:00] Hedding, Dr David Wurmser, and Lauren Homer for your excellent contribution today. Goodbye.