UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING ON STRATEGIES FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN FRAGILE STATES

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10:30 a.m.

Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Nadine Maenza, Chair
Nury Turkel, Vice Chair

Anurima Bhargava
James W. Carr
Frederick A. Davie
Khizr Khan
Sharon Kleinbaum

C O N T E N T S

P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR MAENZA: Good morning and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing today on Strategies for Religious Freedom in Fragile States. I'd also like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA.

The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

Today, USCIRF is exercising its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

USCIRF works to monitor and protect religious freedom in a diverse array of countries and contexts. This diversity calls for a variety

of tools and approaches as different contexts present different landscapes for the success and failure of religious freedom efforts.

For today's hearing, we will be focusing on strategies for promoting religious freedom in fragile states.

A fragile state is a country characterized by weak state capacity or weak state legitimacy, leaving citizens vulnerable to a range of shocks. From our vantage point, protection of freedom of religion or belief is under constant threat in fragile states. Often governments in fragile states are incapable of holding perpetrators of religious freedom violations accountable because they lack the capacity and the territorial control to enforce legal and social protections for religious freedom.

In some instances, fragile governments may be complicit in these violations as they ally with or tolerate nefarious actors to strengthen or expand their tenuous control and legitimacy.

For example, in Syria, armed actors have laid siege to towns and villages with sizeable religious minority populations, defacing and destroying Yazidi and Christian shrines, and detained, prosecuted, and even tortured Yazidis, Christians, and other religious minority communities for their religious beliefs.

In Afghanistan, political instability has exacerbated the risk of violence for those who hold minority or alternative religious beliefs from the Taliban.

Furthermore, with security now in the hands of the Taliban's assigned, quote, "special forces" and the reestablishment of the Ministry of the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice policing the streets, communities that hold opposing beliefs fear reprisal.

In Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen, Jews and Baha'is continue to be harassed and arrested for their beliefs amidst a six-year armed conflict.

In the face of state weakness in Lebanon,

the government empowers religious elites with a monopoly on spiritual matters that can restrict alternative religious beliefs and exacerbate sectarian violence.

In Somalia, parishioners risk suicide bombs and targeted attacks against houses of worship as the fledgling government struggles to wrest control of key parts of the country from the violent terrorist group Al-Shabaab.

These are just some of the many examples we see of the overlap between fragility and religious violence.

I will now turn it over to Vice Chair Turkel to discuss U.S. government efforts to date and some of the challenges that our government faces in responding to religious freedom violations in fragile states.

VICE CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Chair Maenza.

I would like to join in welcoming you all to today's hearing. As Chair Maenza has

highlighted, many living in fragile states face significant barriers to worshipping safely and accessing their rights to freedom of religion or belief.

In recent years, policy- and lawmakers have increasingly recognized the threat that fragility and instability around the world pose to U.S. values and interests. In the 2018 Stabilization Assistance Review, then Secretaries of State and Defense and the Administrator for the U.S. Agency for International Development highlighted that persistent and protected conflicts and instability they create "directly affect the security interests of the United States and our allies."

With the introduction of the 2019 Global Fragility Act, Congress has identified that "violence and violent conflict underpin many of the United States government's key national security challenges."

The consensus is clear: fragility and

violent conflict undermines U.S. interests abroad and at home.

All too many fragile countries have poor religious freedom conditions. In addition to Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Lebanon, and Somalia, as mentioned by Chair Maenza, we can see the overlap in Central African Republic, the Sahel, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Burma. The list goes on.

While the link between fragility and violations of right to freedom of religion or belief are clear, the avenues for successful policy interventions are often less so.

In these difficult and complex contexts, policy tools like sanctions, raising awareness, and diplomacy often prove ineffective in addressing or changing conditions for vulnerable communities on the ground. Providing programmatic funding and capacity building support yields limited protection as insecurity limits how far these efforts can reach outside the capital.

In fact, in some cases, sanctions or other

punitive policies may weaken an already fragile government, exacerbating insecurity while delivering few-to-no results to vulnerable populations facing religious restrictions.

This is why it is so important as we think creatively and innovatively about how to construct and implement strategies that will improve religious freedom conditions in these fragile states and help cement religious freedom norms and protections as an important part of broader stabilization efforts.

We look forward to hearing the testimonies of our witnesses on these issues along with the recommendations the United States government can implement to better protect and promote religious freedom in fragile states.

Now I will turn the floor back to Chair Maenza to introduce our witnesses.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much, Vice Chair Turkel.

First, we will have Dr. Elie Al Hindy,

Executive Director of Adyan Foundation, a Lebanon-based foundation for diversity, solidarity and human dignity. He's also an associate professor at Notre Dame University in Lebanon.

Corinne Graff is a senior advisor at the U.S. Institute of Peace where her work focuses on long-term strategies and policies to prevent the outbreak or escalation of conflict in fragile states.

James Patton is the CEO and President of the International Center for Religions and Diplomacy where he serves as a member of a number of collaborative efforts to combat--to advance--sorry--the field of peacemaking.

Then Ebrahim Moosa, Ph.D., is a Mirza Family Professor of Islamic Thought and Muslim Societies at Notre Dame's Keough School of Global Affairs and Department of History.

You can read their entire bios on our website. We're also going to share that link with those of you joining us via Zoom.

So, first, we'll start with you, Dr. Hindy.

DR. AL HINDY: Thank you.

Honorable Madam Chair, dear members of the Commission, it's a great pleasure to be with you this evening--this morning in the U.S., I assume.

Let me start by saying that I am speaking to you from a fragile Lebanon, unfortunately where basic livelihood needs are no longer guaranteed, and thus what I will share with you is based as much on intellectual or scholarship work as it is on real-life experience and my work in Lebanese and Arab civil society for the past 20 years.

And I ask you to bear with me in case there will be some cuts in my Internet stream or in electricity.

The challenge of FORB and conflicts based on identity are actually increasing rather than decreasing with time. To understand this, we need to start by reflecting on why are humans becoming more aggressive, more attached to their identity,

less willing to compromise, less willing to find common grounds, and to accept the other.

Religions of the world have been a major part of this or, to be clearer, it is how we deal with religions that is the problem.

Events of the past two decades prove that the world have dismissed religion and identity politics probably too early. We thought that extreme and sometimes even forced secularism would be the best antidote of religious extremism. We thought that globalization is the best way to unite people around the world.

In fact, western style secularism that is aggressively excluding or at least neglecting religions and other identities seems to me doomed to implode and cause reactions.

A globalized world does not solve identity-caused conflicts; on the contrary, it makes these conflicts and the fragile states resulting from them an international concern that needs to be addressed collectively. Thus, I

applaud the efforts of your committee to advise global strategy, global U.S. strategy, and encourage the U.S. to lead global efforts to uphold FORB the way only it can, and I present to you the following observations.

Number one, promoting inclusive citizenship. The promotion of one-size-fits-all style of secular democracy has to be dropped in favor of the promotion of complex and unique democratic systems that are adapted to the reality of each country.

Equal citizenship, equality before the law, and equal dignity and rights of all human beings are definitely and must continue to be the essence and the basis of every potential solution. Yet, maybe these are not sufficient.

Any solution that aims at successfully bringing sustainable peace and proper state building needs to take into consideration and maybe even be based to a certain extent on the respect of religious and other identities and on transforming

these from a reason of conflict to a partner/a tool for the solution.

People's attachment to their faith and religious identities must not be neglected or put down because if it is, it has a high probability of radicalizing and turning into extremism. And as we have seen, every extremism encourages the rise of counter extremism, leading to the vicious cycle of feeding on the existence and strength of each other, feeding on xenophobia, on victimization. Inclusive citizenship is the best way to address the issue of religious identities within the norms of democracy and strong statehood.

Number two, promoting alternative religious narratives. Violations of FORB requires an aggressive religious discourse that dehumanizes the other, promotes hate speech and discrimination, and thus prepares the ground to legitimize violence against people.

While we have witnessed in the past years huge efforts and steps forward in presenting

alternative religious discourse and interpretations that promote tolerance, acceptance of the other, and the role of interfaith dialogue in promoting mutual acceptance and respect, yet we are far from reaching a time when these moderate alternative religious discourses are mainstreamed.

We must promote the existing narratives, encourage the new ones, connect moderate religious leaders together, introduce alternative narratives in religious schools and protect/support champions of this frontier battlefront from all religious backgrounds.

A U.S. strategy must empower and build on the faith-based activism that strives for peace, mutual respect, and inclusive citizenship.

Number three, promoting religious social responsibility. Serious efforts must be invested in re-humanizing religion and promoting the social responsibility of religions, religious institutions, and religious leaders.

Worshipping God in almost all religions

goes hand-in-hand with good relations with his children. In addition to the theological dialogues that are increasingly happening, a more urgent dialogue is needed--an interfaith dialogue for life and for reconciliation. A dialogue that happens in refugee camps, in the poor suburbs of cities, behind the scenes of battlefronts, and on peace negotiation tables, in soup kitchens feeding the poor, in efforts of religious leaders from different religions working together to address the social, economic and ethical challenges of their communities.

A U.S. strategy must support the efforts to re-humanize religion, to promote interfaith initiatives, and to support faith-based actors for peace and reconciliation.

Fourth and finally, promoting state building. Most importantly, and beyond all of the above, a U.S. strategy for FORB must continue to have an ultimate aim of preventing fragile states from falling into and becoming failed states. The

first victims of the failure of the state are moderate voices and peace builders. Thus, proper state building balances between rule of law and equal citizenry, on one hand, and the respect of the different religious traditions and values on the other. This should be our ultimate goal.

Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much, Dr. Hindy.

Now we will move to Corinne Graff. Thank you.

DR. GRAFF: Thank you, Chair Maenza and Vice Chair Turkel, and the other members of this Commission, for the opportunity to speak at this important and timely hearing today.

As armed conflicts in fragile states have increased in number, duration, and intensity since the 1990s, and we've seen the spillovers from conflict zones rise exponentially, particularly the spread of violent extremism and rise of the Islamic State, as well as one of the largest displacement

crises in human history. One percent of the world's entire population, or one in 97 people, have been forcibly displaced from their homes.

According to the U.N., 250 million people lack any access to justice whatsoever because they've either been forcibly displaced or they live in ungoverned spaces in conflict zones.

Conflict-related humanitarian emergencies have multiplied, stretching the capacity of the multilateral system to deliver emergency relief. A global hunger crisis is growing, and while this is certainly being exacerbated by the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the first instance, it's being fueled by persistent conflicts that have simmered in countries around the world for years or even decades, in the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, the Middle East and Central Asia. And we know that the impacts of global climate change will only exacerbate these trends.

It's in response to these trends that the international community has coalesced in recent

years around the need for new approaches to reduce conflicts underlying drivers in fragile states.

Fragile states are defined as countries where state-society relations and the social compact between citizens and their government are frayed and where governments substantially lack legitimacy and citizen trust in public institutions is very limited or nonexistent.

The rationale for improving peacebuilding and stabilization policy in these places is clear. In addition to reducing human suffering, the U.N. estimates that the international community stands to save $20 in costly military and humanitarian crisis response for every one dollar invested in conflict prevention.

This new consensus on fragile states is reflected in policy documents ranging from the U.N.-World Bank Pathways for Peace Report to the UK's Elite Bargains and Political Deals research, and here in the United States, the Global Fragility Act.

There are differences across these frameworks, to be sure, but they all share a number of common strategies and policy instruments that have withstood the test of time and proved effective over the past two decades. Several of these intersect squarely with the promotion of religious freedom agenda.

It's important to note that the relationship between freedom of religion and fragility and conflict is complex. My colleagues in USIP's Religion and Inclusive Societies Program have argued that religious discrimination and other forms of state repression can lead communities to take up arms, although that's less likely to happen in situations of extremely high state repression, for example, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The converse is also true since conflict can lead to religious discrimination and greater regulation. We've seen this, of course, in Myanmar where violence between Buddhists and Rohingya communities has resulted in an uptick in

discrimination there.

Ultimately, it will be very important to conduct more analysis so we have a better understanding of freedom of religion's impacts on peace and vice versa.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on this landscape are still coming into view. The virus continues to spread unabated in many developing countries, and so we don't yet know the full extent of its impacts. Yet, we do know that the pandemic is further fraying the social contract and deepening fragility in countries around the world.

We're seeing rising numbers of anti-government protests and we see very low trust in public institutions in public opinion polls. It will therefore be crucial that the global recovery efforts in the wake of COVID integrate conflict prevention and the promotion of democracy and human rights into the global pandemic response.

The substantial amount of assistance

that's being delivered to address COVID-19's impacts must heed the lessons we've learned about engaging effectively in fragile states.

So, in the time I have left, I'd like to turn to several strategies we've learned about engaging effectively in these contexts.

First is to recognize that all development programs in these settings have a deeply political dimension. Addressing the root causes of conflict and violence is an inherently political enterprise, a lesson reflected across many of the reports of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

Diplomatic and development activities in conflict-affected states should therefore be viewed not only as tools for policymakers to communicate with country representatives or to promote economic development. A central goal must be to encourage and support local peacebuilders and political reformers inside and outside government in these countries.

To promote more politically aware approaches, we need professional incentives and rewards for U.S. Foreign Service officers who support and incentivize national and local reforms.

Second, inclusive approaches are critical in fractured societies where state relations are weak. Representatives from local governments, civil society grassroots organizations, including faith-based leaders and communities, as well as women and youth, should be involved as much as possible in the strategy formulation and implementation phases of policy and programs.

Failing to do so can reinforce the very conflict dynamics that the U.S. is seeking to address, creating a perception that only elite actors are being engaged and that they are accountable to external rather than domestic constituencies.

Third, fostering local leadership at the national and local level in supporting the reform agendas of local leaders is key. Over two decades

of international engagement in fragile states demonstrates a hard-learned lesson: externally imposed solutions and timelines don't lead to sustainable progress.

External actors are most likely to be successful when they support the efforts of national and local leaders. The more ownership and agency for these leaders, the more contextual and sustainable the solutions.

To facilitate international support for country-led solutions include tools; include country-led assessments of the risks of violence and conflict; inclusively developed plans that form the basis for partnership between the United States and international and local actors; and compact-based agreements between donors and fragile states themselves that set out the terms of the partnership.

Fourth, the management of development programs must be adaptive. Adaptive program management involves gathering regular information

about whether policy interventions are achieving their goals and adapting them as needed to better fit the changing context.

USAID and other agencies must establish relationships, feedback mechanisms, and trust with the local and national stakeholders most affected by the program. Congress also has an important role to play in incentivizing more adaptive approaches in fragile states, for example, by requiring that agencies outline their annual strategic learning processes in these countries rather than their programmatic plans.

And, fifth, there must be better alignment between development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding programming in these countries.

This principle is particularly relevant in complex emergencies where peace processes may be underway in the context of humanitarian emergencies. Policy innovations that can help build bridges across these sectors include: undertaking joint assessments of fragility and

structural drivers of conflict; mainstreaming do-no-harm principles across humanitarian and development programs; and establishing donor coordination structures that regularly bring together international development agencies and our partners in fragile states on the ground.

Finally, let me just say that the Global Fragility Act offers an important opportunity to improve the effectiveness of stabilization and peacebuilding.

The State Department, USAID, the Department of Defense, and other agencies have released a robust U.S. government strategy as required under the law. It's significant because in the past we've seen humanitarian development and security assistance too often work at cross-purposes, delivered in the absence of overarching policy frameworks.

In addition to releasing a new strategy, no decision will be more consequential to the new approach's success than the identification of focus

countries and regions where the U.S. will test this new approach.

This process of selecting countries has been underway for nearly a year and is now significantly delayed. It will be critical to ensure the countries selected provide us with a window of opportunity to partner with reformers. The U.S. government should exclude from consideration states where the prospects for such partnerships are extremely limited, including countries on the USCIRF Countries of Particular Concern or Special Watch List.

Let me stop there and again thank the chair and vice chair and the commissioners for holding this hearing, and I would be pleased to answer any questions in the Q&A.

CHAIR MAENZA: Okay. Thank you so much.

And now James Patton, we'll go to you. Thank you.

MR. PATTON: Wonderful. Thank you very much. I'd like to thank USCIRF, particularly you,

Chair Maenza, Vice Chair Turkel, other commissioners, colleagues of the Commission, and the guests that have joined us.

I am grateful to join my illustrious fellow panelists in this hearing, and I have submitted longer written remarks that I encourage people if they're interested to read. But I just want to highlight a few points from those.

The explicit acknowledgement in USG stabilization strategies of the need for community-driven practices, I think, points directly to a growing recognition in recent years of the importance of religious actors with respect to conflict and stability operations.

There is some debate, however, about a direct causal link between restrictions on freedom of religion and belief, which I will shorthand as FORB going forward, and social instability.

The Stimson Center asserted in 2021 that "more research is needed to determine whether and how FORB restrictions correlate with the outbreak

of violent conflicts worldwide."

But I would suggest some anecdotal and intuitive reasons that restrictions on FORB are a significant contributor to conditions for possible conflict.

One, there is a tendency towards identity conflict in contexts of group inequality.

Two, social and political exclusion is commonly cited as a grievance that drives conflict and radicalization.

Three, most traditions, religious traditions, are grounded in some assertion that they hold a form of absolute truth, which by definition is exclusive of other truths.

And, four, the transcendent nature of faith exponentially amplifies internal justifications for intergroup prejudices by giving them divine sanction.

Therefore, if social and governance structures support restrictions on FORB, pitting protected religious groups against excluded ones,

they contribute directly to a powerful driver of identity conflict.

Now, while religious identity groups themselves can be the most serious perpetrators of religious intolerance, religion's role as a driver of intolerance and instability can be especially grievous when it aligns with political interests that are served by targeting religious outgroups. Political restrictions on FORB are rampant globally.

The Stimson Center report from 2021 states that "state attempts to eliminate the presence of at least one religious group from the country have been recorded in Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, China, Comoros, Egypt, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan," and on and on. We get the picture.

It is critical that the United States pressures its allies to prioritize FORB protections in domestic and international policies. We must collaborate to commit--in action, and not just in

rhetoric--to promote pluralist societies with legal, social and educational policies that protect the minority religious rights.

Allies must refrain from agitating conflict between religious identity groups in order to increase regional and geopolitical influence.

We have seen firsthand evidence of the ripple effect of religious oppression beyond borders. Religious persecution in one place will amplify prejudice, punitive legislation, vengeance violence, and the like in other contexts, resulting in a self-reinforcing cycle.

One program being conducted by the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy has shown how unrest and persecution in Myanmar's Rakhine State, Sri Lanka's Easter bombings in 2019, and recent developments in Afghanistan are tied directly to documented increases in religious-based intolerance, discrimination against minorities and indigenous peoples, intercommunal violence, and the securitization of FORB under the rubric of fighting

terrorism in other contexts.

Now FORB has been a popular theme in recent years, often employed by religious groups and allies to protect their own adherents. But one critical aspect of FORB is that it cannot be selective. Protections must be universal for it to be meaningful. Not only is this an issue of equal rights, it's a practical issue.

Where the state is weak or absent, universalizing a commitment by faith communities to FORB may actually be itself a simple way to reduce identity conflict because while faith tenets portray other traditions as representing perhaps an incorrect understanding of divine truth, if they find common cause in efforts to elevate FORB protections and they understand these protections as mutually reinforcing, this common cause can develop understanding and empathy, which are key elements in programs that are successful in reducing identity conflict.

So inter-religious cooperation in

promoting a narrative that the United States should continue to advance that broad protections of belief and worship protect all religious faithful is very key.

This is very salient when it comes to beliefs that we don't understand or share. In some cases, those beliefs may not easily integrate into a western liberal democratic framework, but FORB should still be rigorously applied without prejudice.

One example of a program done by us at ICRD is that we've engaged with nonviolent conservative self-described Salafi communities in Tunisia, which had seen a significant number of recruits sent to foreign terrorist organizations, and whereas more moderate voices might not reach or persuade members of their communities, conservative Imams had the kind of influence and access to at-risk community members to reorient them away from violent extremism.

Now, the teachings within those

communities might not have been fully aligned with values embraced by the United States in government or civilian society, including questions of gender equality, for example, but the commitment to religiously based admonitions to reject violent extremism was shared. Importantly, one of the primary grievances found among the community related to a broad sense of exclusion and prejudice against the Salafi community by civil society, the media and the government.

This sense of isolation was expressed as a direct driver of radicalization within the community.

The potential tension, however, between liberal democratic values raises a very important question that I think we in the FORB community must grapple with. Religion and belief do not expire at the walls of a house of worship. Personal faith, sacred doctrine and religious teachings all compel religious adherents to act in society, and there are times in which the behaviors that religious

faithful engage in come into direct conflict with civil law frameworks and norms.

I'm not just talking about external religious practices here. I'm also talking about domestic identity groups. Simply put, FORB protections cannot include FORB-justified inter-group prejudice that manifests as structural or physical violence.

Tensions arise between civil and religious law when the latter is understood by faith adherents to supersede the former as derived from a divine source believed to hold authority above that of the state. We have heard FORB arguments used by governments and religious identity groups to justify restricting the freedoms and rights of others. Protection of FORB must have boundaries where a faith community is engaged in or inciting a violation of the rights of others or a religious exemption represents a violation of equal protection or the responsibility to the common good.

So I would just encourage that a clear articulation of the boundaries of religious freedom, not in worship or belief, but in inter-group behaviors in a pluralist society would likely have the end result of protecting the myriad faith adherents around the world.

So thank you for your time.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much.

And, lastly, but not least, we go to Dr. Ebrahim Moosa.

DR. MOOSA: Thank you so much, Chairperson Maenza, and thank you to the commissioners at this hearing for your time.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak on religious freedom to this distinguished panel of USCIRF.

So religious freedom is not a concept uniformly accepted around the world. I think most of us hopefully can keep that in mind and most of us are familiar with that. In many fragile states and regions, say, for instance, that I know best,

with Muslim majorities or minorities, for example, the concept of freedom is contested and varied, and in certain circumstances, it is subordinate to religious claims.

What is needed, in our view, in my view, and based on my work, that we need deep knowledge of local ecologies is necessary for U.S. government actors to effectively support minority religious groups' dignity and inclusion.

And to do so, in the most enduring way, and that is by empowering endogenous pro-pluralism modes of thinking and practice.

The Madrasa Discourses program that began five years under my leadership at the University of Notre Dame seeks to revitalize Islamic theological education in different settings in South Asia with recent graduates of madrasas, both men and women. Our experiences offer insightful lessons as to how long-term engagement focused on supporting local efforts rooted in tradition can lay the groundwork for tolerance and to further embed values of

coexistence into local communities.

Our approach was elicitive. In other words, beginning from values in which communities find common and shared interests. A major difference is our realization that there are more pervasive processes of social integration outside the state and elections.

Social recognition refers to the social, psychological, ethical and political practices through which actors evaluate, acknowledge, and engage with their fellows in society.

So we based on our experience propose that in matters of religious freedom that we take seriously so-called social recognition as well as an elicitive approach as some of the most effective ways of gaining trust and advancing the best interests of multiple communities.

In diametric opposition to say lightning interventions that cherry-pick scripture verses to educate religious leaders on the values of tolerance, pluralism, and countering violence,

Madrasa Discourses instead educates future and current Madrasa educators with an ecological approach. What does that mean? By investing in the rich resources of the Muslim tradition and empowering them to deploy these values in their communities.

These efforts do multiple things. They first of all equip religious leaders to construct narratives for themselves, not from outside, that uplift human dignity and allow participants to constructively respond to modern concerns.

Emerging from the stated needs of scholars in the Indian and Pakistani ulama communities and relying on authentic traditional knowledge, the programs graduated participants who are comfortable with diversity and now view the world as a complex place, as a complex place, not in black and white terms.

When you make people comfortable with understanding diverse knowledge frames, they are amenable to diversity and complexity.

There are, of course, porous boundaries and complex interplays between what we mark as religion and the range of fields of practice such as knowledge acquisition, the role of tradition, questions of belonging, identity, and governance.

While these are indexed as distinctions, they resist strict separation and dichotomies. I would say that, you know, people do take their identity seriously. Identity is not necessarily the enemy.

Religious freedom is not a goal to be achieved. It is part of an upshot of social and moral goods that flourishing societies generate. It requires the broader public and social goods to be met as a precondition. Otherwise, religious freedom often becomes an instrument to reach political ends without overall social and moral accomplishments.

There's an interesting story of participants in our cohort of over 150 people over five years who have two years of intensive

education under our watch. Some of them, for instance, have never met or talked to persons belonging to a rival denomination, such as Jobadine [ph] never talked to a Barali [ph], or a Sunni never meeting a Shia or talking to them, leave alone talking to a faculty member who is Jewish or Christian, of a Christian background.

We have a story, for instance, of one person whose father was killed in violence between Sunni and Shias. And this person took a vow that he would always hate Shias. After coming into our program, talking to people with different, you know, approaches to life and different backgrounds, he changed his views and he's now the biggest advocate for toleration.

The Madrasa Discourses program makes no explicit reference to buzzwords such as "religious freedom," "countering violent extremism," or "defending religious minorities."

These themes and topics emerge organically out of structured conversations on broader

investigations and mutual study on theology, history and questions of justice.

Yet, Madrasa Discourses graduated religious leaders who are now issuing the religious rulings, fatwas, and teaching future Islamic studies students whose renewed knowledge of tradition shifted their world views.

Across fragile contexts, religious actors are already leading the kind of intra-traditional work that can lead to lasting positive changes in how communities perceive "the other."

U.S. policy actors and NGO partners can sensitively support and expand such programming, which can also pair seamlessly with interfaith exchange opportunities.

Religion is an ambivalent force when it comes to peace and conflict. Some institutional capacity already exists within the U.S. government to map the role of religion and religious groups in situations of fragility, such as the Religious Landscape Mapping in Conflict-Affected States

Initiative at the U.S. Institute of Peace or the Inter-Agency Conflict Assessment Framework developed by the State Department.

Yet, much more deep and nuanced understanding of fragile contexts and their religious dynamics is needed. Afghanistan is a glaring example where the U.S. avoided a cross-section of actors and only focused on urban elites.

Most universities, NGOs and diaspora communities can help build this capacity provided they can identify with a range of local actors and not selected ones.

In territories where the state is weak or captured by extremist or exclusive ideologies, such as narco-states or those where government services are offered to communities based on patronage and identity, faith-based actors often fill the gap.

The U.S. government can work through these faith-based actors to provide critical services from humanitarian aid to education but must do so in a conflict-sensitive way that clearly maps an

intervention's impact on the religious power dynamics in an area.

A successful program could equitably serve residents and displaced persons, for example, and integrate practices that undergird tolerance between groups, such as social cohesion.

An intervention that doesn't pay attention to power dynamics, meanwhile, can end up supporting only one religious identity group and deepening patterns of animosity that exacerbate intolerance.

So my concluding recommendations are:

One, deepen U.S. policy actors' cultural and religious literacies--and I've heard this from my fellow colleagues so I'm happy about that, that there's a broader understanding, there's a broader kind of consensus about this--to deepen U.S. policy actors' cultural and religious literacies by reaching out to non-typical actors outside the literacy of liberal western frameworks of aid and NGO intervention.

For instance, intensive and meaningful

exchanges with the ulama or priests and religious leaders in addition to other sectors is a valuable component, but it's not a one-off meeting or a visit to the U.S. It requires deep and long-enduring work.

Second point, ensure conflict-sensitive work with faith-based organizations in fragile contexts.

Thirdly, empower endogenous intra- and inter-religious efforts that lay the building blocks for enduring plural social recognition.

Local and contextual understandings of religious freedoms are varied, and, furthermore, the notions of minority and majority religious groups is a complex one. Just look at Syria where the minority Alawites control the government, or the long, decades-long, Sunni control of Iraq under Saddam Hussein. A nuanced and conflict-sensitive approach that partners with long-term stakeholder-led efforts to build pluralism is, in my view, the path forward.

Thank you for your time.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much.

I know we are asking the toughest of questions, which is in the most difficult parts of the world with the least-amount of legitimacy in government, how do we, you know, protect and promote religious freedom and how do we advise the U.S. government to do that better?

I mean these are really the toughest of all questions so you've all addressed them in just such an expert way, and you all bring such diverse and really in-depth experience that we really appreciate you spending time with us this morning.

I think we probably all have so many questions, but I think for us as, you know, you mentioned, I know, Dr. Moosa, Afghanistan is a good example of the elites were engaged but not a lot of broader section of society, and you see places, like in Afghanistan, where there didn't seem to be a legitimacy of the government, but then you have a place like Northeast Syria where there's legitimacy

of the government and there's some protection of human rights, and there's just inconsistency with how the U.S. can deal with that.

How can we as USCIRF better recommend for the U.S. government in these areas to be able to allow some indigenous people of each community to play a bigger role in finding a way forward? Because all of you were consistent in talking about how important those local voices, those local narratives, the cultural and nuances that we can't just walk into a country and understand, and bringing those people in.

It's very complex. Every country is different, but I'd love to understand how you think we could better recommend a way forward in these fragile states in these kind of situations?

DR. MOOSA: Nadine, thank you.

I'll give it a shot. I don't think I have all the answers, but what is the other country that you mentioned after Afghanistan?

CHAIR MAENZA: I just mentioned Northeast

Syria as a contrast as a place that has legitimacy.

DR. MOOSA: Okay.

CHAIR MAENZA: It's kind of unique-like place, but obviously--

DR. MOOSA: I got it. Yes.

CHAIR MAENZA: --it's still a difficult country.

DR. MOOSA: My experience is that, you know, we only talk to people who can speak a little bit of English or are English-speaking, understand our patterns. And I think we need to be brave, and I think what USCIRF might want to do is to say we need to work with non-typical, non-typical actors. That's the key thing. You know, rural people, you know, women who have a different understanding of who they think of themselves and how they think the world works.

We need to talk to religious groups that are not only religious groups that say to us what we want to hear, but also what we don't want to hear. So I think once we make our input complex

and deeper and on the lines that we are challenged, we will come out, we'll come up with better recommendations and possibilities of working together, but not necessarily always on our agenda.

So our experience has been let the process grow organically rather than being prescriptive, and I think prescription so you have the idea of religious freedom, but, you know, religious freedom--because people are suspicious what do you mean by religious freedom? You want the Ahmadis in Pakistan to flourish? Okay. Or you want, you know, the Shias or the Sunnis to flourish in this context?

That's the first thought. One has to first both trust and make them understand that what are your cultural values, and then help them in a certain kind of way of understanding the nuances of their cultural and religious values, and here the United States, I always say to people, when it comes to the world of Islam, the United States has some of the best resources, libraries, expertise.

The one place this complex knowledge of religion and Islam doesn't get into is into government. We go to war on the say-so of one or two experts, not a complex input. So I would say that we need to make this more complex and we need to make use of the resources we have and the multiple voices we have on this continent.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much.

If we're done with that one, we can go to Vice Chair Turkel and let you ask a question.

VICE CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you. Thank you.

I have a question for Ms. Graff. You described how poor religious freedom conditions intersect with fragility. Could you explain more about the relationship between strong respect for religious freedom and stability? And how does religious freedom contribute to stability?

And the additional question follows that is how does stability contribute to religious freedom?

DR. GRAFF: Yes, thank you, Vice Chair.

I mean as I said, I do think that more research is needed on that question, and I think there's agreement in the community that we need to do more research on this.

I didn't speak about this. I think some of my fellow panelists did. But religious leaders, religious leader-led dialogues, of course, play a key role in conflict resolution.

So I know I didn't touch on this, and I should have. But clearly having access to religious leaders who are empowered in their countries and who, of course, for any variety of reasons can understand the local context and have, of course, very strong influence in their countries and in their communities, working with those actors is key to conflict resolution. There's no question.

And I think your second question was about the reverse side of that equation, and when, what the intersection between discrimination and conflict is, and I think, I think there--and I'm

not an expert on religious freedom the way some of my fellow panelists are, but the key issue for me is the fact that fragility is at the core of these conflicts.

And what we understand by fragility is a deeply political concept that has to do with the respect of fundamental rights, being responsive to citizens, and I think that religious freedom is one aspect of what we want to see in resilient states that are more open and responsive. And so I would think that religious discrimination and regulation of religion is probably a sign of fragility and contexts that are likely to be more unstable and prone to violence.

But I welcome thoughts from my other panelists who focused on this from probably other perspectives.

VICE CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you. Thank you.

As we have seen, there are a number of countries of these views achieving stability as an excuse for religious persecution.

Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Great. Thank you.

I'd love to open it to my other fellow commissioners to ask questions. And Commissioner Carr.

COMMISSIONER CARR: Thank you, Madam Chair.

First of all, thanks to our commentators for the excellence of their presentation. I have a question for Professor Al Hindy. In your view, is religious tolerance always compatible with religious freedom? In some instances, wouldn't freedom of religion mean freedom to hold views appearing to be intolerant?

Of course, I'm assuming the holder does not inflict or incite violence. How can we square the circle and promote religious tolerance while at the same time protecting freedom of belief?

DR. AL HINDY: Thank you, Commissioner Carr. Very important question.

I think that, first of all, I

intentionally tried to--the term "tolerance," and in our connotation or the way we use it, at least in the Arab context, let me say, tolerance is a kind of, it's given some kind of a condescending approach, meaning that I have the truth, and thus I will allow you to exist within my norms or within my control.

So, in that sense, we push more towards mutual respect, towards mutual understanding, towards peaceful coexistence and living together, in that sense, just as a term of using the terms in that general context.

And now definitely we do have religious interpretations that do contradict with human rights, basic human rights, or with the concept of accepting "the other" and respecting "the other." Thus, that's why I insisted in my intervention to give it the two-level approach.

We must definitely work on advancing alternative interpretations or alternative discourse with the leaders of religions and with

scholars and with theologians of each of the religions, and thus this approach must not be neglected. It must be pushed forward.

And we have seen very significant steps, whether with the visit of the Pope to Dubai, the context with Al-Azhar, the visit to Sistani in Iraq, and in other very significant contributions.

This is the top down, but it also must be complemented with the bottom level, with the grassroots, with the common living together on common issues and common values, and here we speak about values or public life values, the things that we simply can share, even if we have completely different theologic or religious perspectives.

So I can still strongly and deeply believe that in my belief, you are kafir or you are heretic. Yet, you are a citizen, an equal citizen, of the same state. What can we do together? How can we live together in that sense on the very basis of, you know, we have a common interest of doing business together? We have a [?] and so on.

So this is the grassroot level that must connect and complement the bottom-down perspective, and these two consequently will make us avoid this existing, yet I hope diminishing, gap with, between tolerance and between FORB, as you presented it.

Let's be also conscious about what Commissioner Turkel mentioned or asked, that most of the times definitely religion is not the reason of the conflict. It is simply the fuel. It is simply the tool to promote conflict and to use and mobilize people based on their fear, based on their grievances, to make them fuel for this, for this conflict.

So we must address and deal with these grievances as a start, as an open way to make people be able to talk to each other on a human level, beyond the religious or theological differences.

Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Wonderful. Thank you so much.

I know, Commissioner Bhargava, you have a question.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thank you, Chair Maenza. And thank you, everyone, for the extraordinary remarks and reflections.

There's a couple of through lines that I just wanted to pick up on from all of your remarks. One is really the importance of reaching out to grassroots community, local entities outside of the, in some ways, the normal pathways of USAID and government engagement.

And I wanted, so, Dr. Moosa, you mentioned trying to reach out to sort of atypical actors, and so I wanted to ask all of you if you had some thoughts on--and this is building in part on Chair Maenza's original question--do you have some thoughts on how to reach those kinds of atypical actors who are maybe outside of these traditional pathways?

And then my other question, which is really just to add more challenges to the very

deeply complex conversation that we're already having, is how do we think about, you know, what is happening in so many fragile areas and states around the world, which is the migrations, and how do we think about, you know, what does it mean to engage in some of the, you know--James, you spoke about prevention?

Like how do we do that in the context of where we have populations that are local that are moving? And engage in that way? So I just wanted to put both of those out there and realize I'm making it even more complicated than it already is in some ways.

MR. PATTON: I heard my name mentioned. Do you mind if I jump in on this?

I think there are a couple of principles when it comes to identity conflict that we have to consider. One is--and this is true particularly in migration spaces, where people move into areas of limited resources. What are people afraid of when they look at a different identity?

There are usually two fundamental aspects here. One is practical and one is philosophical. And the practical is usually around tension between an "in" and an "out" group over sort of a zero sum thinking about resources and power dynamics; right?

So if you put a migrant group that has little resources into an urban periphery that has poor infrastructure, little resources, and bad governance, then it's very easy for those two groups to develop a sense of identity tension across their differences.

The other is philosophical or talking about religion theological, which is this idea of, you know, "transcendent truths or identities becoming corrupted," quote-unquote, by the other, by the other teaching and what not. So it's hard in a space that has a universality of truth ascribed to it to then absorb a different truth with respect, tolerance, and even collaboration.

But I think in those spaces, it's maybe as simple as saying where identity is causing divides,

particularly divine identity, religious identity, it's what is human that will unite; right?

And so one of the great strategies I think in resolving identity conflicts is to find common needs that are practical and can be mutually advanced. When people work together--I know it sounds simple and intuitive, but sometimes in practice it is not. But when people work together on things that they both need and they become dependent on one another to move forward and overcome challenges, then they naturally develop respect, affinity and cooperation in a way that starts to diminish those more abstract ideas of fear around the other.

Now one of the things that I think is really important in these spaces of collaboration that we have to tackle, and it's in my written comments, but I didn't make it in my spoken comments, is what I'm seeing more and more frequently, which I'm calling a religious schizophrenia. I think in religious communities,

there is one side of a religious community within the faith tradition that believes in caring for others, caring for all of what, you know, the Abraham traditions might call creation, which includes other identity groups and other people.

And then there is one side that firmly believes that there's a divine kind of compulsion to exclude and even punish those who do not have the same identity.

And I think when it comes to working on freedom of religion issues and working on religious engagement issues, this is a very serious challenge that we have to start to reflect on.

And these are within faiths. We look a lot at the conflict between faith traditions, but what about the conflict in the same house of worship between a person who feels compelled to care for the other as a manifestation of the divine and the one who feels compelled to persecute the other as a manifestation of the same divine.

And oftentimes I think we shy away from

struggling with that challenge, but if any community should be struggling with that challenge, it's probably this community.

DR. GRAFF: I'm happy to jump in as well.

DR. AL HINDY: Okay.

DR. GRAFF: Sorry about that. I'm happy to jump in as well on Commissioner Bhargava's first question about how to engage with local actors and what can be done.

I think a really important key to that is the localization agenda, at USAID, in particular, but the AID localization agenda. So to allow donor agencies to engage more with local actors and support local actors so the USAID Forward Initiative, the New Partnerships Initiative at USAID, the local works, I know, Ambassador Power has put a lot of emphasis on this at USAID currently.

But the barriers to entry for small local organizations to partner with AID are just too substantial, and so we're partnering with these

large actors that don't necessarily have any relationships in these countries and in these contexts.

And so allowing our AID agencies to engage directly with these local actors I think would be--would make a huge difference, both for engagement with religious leaders and actors as well as for development.

DR. MOOSA: I think, Professor Graff hit the nail right there about how difficult it is and how we need to shift our approach to get to the small actors.

I think there is a couple of things I'm going to say. Just one is that our concept of religion, to Commissioner Bhargava's question. So some of us come to the idea of religion, religion is private, and we have this kind of narrow idea of religion, but then other communities, religion is webbed into cultural and a range of practices so we can hardly distinguish what is religious and what we would call cultural.

I think it is intermeshed. It is part of a complex reality. So we have to be aware of that. Now, even in that complex understanding of religion and where religion is pervasive or its effects are pervasive, we sometimes as policymakers expect religion to do too much.

We think that religion is a silver bullet for all of these things. Whereas, other things need to be addressed, so, for instance, I mean when we go in with our program, we provide every participant with a $70 monthly stipend and so on, and a computer, and a high-speed Internet link--okay--suddenly you relieve that individual's existential crisis.

This person can now relieve him or herself for study, for education, for discussion, things that otherwise the state or other kinds of institutions ought to have done to provide the person with certain kind of comforts, provide the person with a certain kind of exposure.

So what is the greatest exposure? We take

students from India and Pakistan. We take them to Nepal where they meet for two weeks, and they talk to each other, and they discover that that boundary is a political boundary, not a human boundary. We take them to Doha, where they talk to each other. They see another country. They've never had--so exposure. Let them speak to Christian theologians, Jewish colleagues, Hindu interlocutors, and so on, and suddenly they realize, oh, my gosh. So exposure is the other thing.

But I also think that the question about what religion needs to do is obviously we sometimes expect religion to do too much where other things also need to be in place like in fragile states we are now very desperate that we want religion to make some breakthrough because everything else has failed, and the religion is enduring. So we then need to go into, when we deal with the religious actors with questions of freedom of religion and so on, we need to deal with it sensitively, but also with a long-term agenda, not fly in and

helicoptering in and out.

Lastly, I would say your question, Commissioner Bhargava, was on the question of how do we get to atypical actors? I think we underestimate the resources on this continent, and, you know, we have, for instance, you know, diaspora communities a variety of places. They have native knowledge of those places. They can take you there. A university professor who had never been to Syria or Myanmar, and so on, might be scared and hesitant to go into those places. And when you go into those places, you reach those places that are safe.

We don't want to take people to unsafe places, but we need to take them to atypical places, and therefore there you need conduits. You need people who can take you to those, you know, individuals and places where you would have a different kind of conversation.

So I think it can be done. We need to make available grants and those kind of things that

don't ask for these kind of formalities, you know, how many, what is the reach of such and such organization, how many people do they have, do they keep a, you know, a balance sheet, and so on and so forth? That is going to block up from getting to the people that we need to talk to.

And in that talking-to process, my experience would be even though I'm a graduate of the madrasas from India 40 years ago, I do realize that I've learned a lot more and with my team that we have, you know, the worlds in India and Pakistan have changed 40 years later. And there's a lot to learn.

So even for someone who considers himself kind of native to that literacy, there's a lot to learn.

DR. AL HINDY: May I add just in one minute without taking long? Just to say that I fully agree with what all the three panelists said. I love it, and I actually agree with it. Just to add one more component. For me, I think it has

been tangible thing that identity or religious identity is simply one of the so many identities that each one of us holds within.

If this part of the identity is threatened in a way, it will jump and it will take over. It will start to address the others based on these cases that we put them and classify them. So the more we respect identity without threatening it, and the more we focus on all the other common identities of people, the common shared values, this is I think the best way to deal with migrants and refugees and all other pluralistic challenges that some countries face, and thus we speak about inclusive citizenship that fully respects the identities and even allows them to express themselves in the public sphere, not only in the private sphere.

Yet, it bases itself strongly and strictly on equal citizenship and our common values that we all share as human beings.

CHAIR MAENZA: Great. Thank you so much.

I know that we have a question from Commissioner Davie, and then also I know, Commissioner Kleinbaum, we'll go directly to you afterwards, and, then, Commissioner Khan, we'll go to you if you'd have a question after that to make sure that all the commissioners have an opportunity to speak.

I am really enjoying this conversation. I wish we had a couple more hours, but I know fortunately we have a little bit more time so I'm glad that we can continue for this discussion.

Commissioner Davie.

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: Thank you, Chair Maenza.

I think my question is for Dr. Moosa, but obviously we'd invite any of the other panelists to address it as well should they want to.

I'm curious about how you bring to scale in fragile countries the kind of leadership development that you addressed in your remarks?

How do you take these small gatherings of

leaders--I'm assuming they're small--where one is taught tolerance, understanding of another's tradition, such that they are then going out and being leaders in communities themselves?

So how do you bring that to scale? And what can an organization like USCIRF do to assist with that, particularly, again, in fragile countries?

And then, and then in the interim, how do we continue to protect the rights of minority or--minority groups, sort of the fundamental human rights of all individuals, whether it's women and non-religious people, or members of the LGBT community, while we're developing leadership that will lead to more tolerance in these fragile states? How does an organization like USCIRF help in these two alleys? If that's a fair question or questions.

DR. MOOSA: It's a very unfair question, Commissioner Davie. It's a difficult question, and I'll try my best.

You know, right now we are thinking about this question that this experiment that we had in India and Pakistan--you were right--with a small group. And we are so delighted by the success, but how do we scale it up?

And I have two minds on this. One is that so we do have local partners, credible local partners, who do the--so the experiment in Pakistan is in this way, that the International Islamic University has now picked up our agenda, and they are running, and they've got government funding, and they're doing the kind of work we have done.

So in that way, our job is done in that local actors pick it up and take it seriously. And they can scale it up in ways that outsiders cannot because there are all kinds of challenges for outside money, you know. John Templeton Foundation funded the Notre Dame, Catholic University. What are they trying to talk about madrasas. Right? That's all right. I have to put my face in there and say no, it's me, all right. And then, and then

you build trust.

So I think the way to scale that would be for USCIRF and other institutions, you know, to contact, be in touch with those kinds of institutions where this work has been ceded, but people are prepared to now scale it up in-country and own it. That's the best way to form the partnerships where there's still funding or resource sharing and a whole variety of ways that could be done.

The other thing is to continue the small-scale conversation too. So it doesn't have to be the franchise of Notre Dame alone. It can be a range of actors that do different kinds of work in the way that our experiments showed to be successful. And I think it can do so.

In the interim, what do we do to protect the human rights of these various sectors that you just mentioned? You know, pressurizing governments is one thing and talking to them is one thing. But how can we talk to, in the interim, how could we

make, you know, institutions of civil society become the voices?

And especially in fragile states where obviously government does not necessarily listen to civil society, but civil society is effective because that is the face where people are interacting, people are coming to workplaces, people are coming to, you know, churches and recreational places and so on where discrimination can take place, and that's where the intervention is required.

So I do believe that there's possibilities there that working through institutions or civil society can be the place to do so, but I think governments are--they're just going to say yes, especially in fragile states, because they got other objectives, therefore they are fragile, and obviously they've been waiting for, they're waiting for funding, and you're not entirely sure that the funding will go to the right places.

So I think one has to be especially

careful, and obviously they're going to try and block you for getting the funding to the target groups that you want to, you want to provide to or communicate to those target groups. It requires a much more delicate balance, but I think here, this is where--and I'm going to stop, Commissioner Davie--this is where native knowledge, this is where our resources in this country should be properly honest. Our resources in the country is--resources are phenomenal.

We, and my saddest realization is, being a U.S. citizen for the past 20 odd years, is that our government does not take our resources that we have and utilize it effectively in a complex way. We cannot just listen to four experts. You might want to speak to 40 more experts to get a much more complex idea. Then you'll be able to see, okay, what is going to work.

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: I know, Corinne, you wanted to add to that?

DR. GRAFF: Yes, please, just very quickly, if I may, on Dr. Moosa's point in response to Commissioner Davie's question about scaling.

If we accept that we need to engage more directly with local actors as a government through our agencies, an additional task that we can give our agencies is one of the functions they can have instead of directly implementing programs is to identify those local partners and cede work at the local level, and then they can help connect those local partners with others in the international community or even at the national level in the country in which they're working.

So we have programs like that. We've seen them in Sierra Leone and in other places, but focusing on that role of providing support to the local level and everything that we can do as an international actor to help with that is really important.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much.

Commissioner Kleinbaum.

COMMISSIONER KLEINBAUM: Thank you so much, Chair Maenza. Thank you to the panel. It's really fascinating. I agree with you, Chair Maenza. This could really go on for many, many hours.

I know that in Holocaust studies, there's been a lot of discussion, particularly by Professor Tim Snyder at Yale, as the, as the world has opened up for Holocaust studies, that it's less about ideology than about the complete destruction of civil society that makes the possibility of violent actions moving from the ideology of discrimination to the actual, in some cases, genocide.

And so, I, hearing all of you speak in this framework is very powerful for me, and of course we're talking about some very long-term, complex state-building kinds of things which are so difficult to wrap our minds around.

I'm wondering if you can offer any success stories or tell us are there, of all of these fragile states, and they're very different and they

have many different complex issues, do you see any in which there is some movement towards improvement and where USCIRF or the United States has played a positive role that we can build on or imagine, understanding, using the phrase "fragile state," of course, as all of you have pointed out, they are all so very, very different with very different issues?

So that's one question. Do you see anywhere where that's happening, where states that have been in such chaos or disarray are able to, or the long-term issues are getting any better because we know that's ultimately going to be important?

And the other is kind of the opposite end of that. When do we start advocating and thinking about changing policies about asylum, refugees, building on the ability to help more people get out?

And I know that's not USCIRF's, our role here necessarily in terms of American policy about refugees, but how do we do both of those at the

same time, and do we see any examples of where, of things we can build on where we have seen some successes, and maybe not, but you're the experts so I'd love to hear that?

DR. AL HINDY: Yeah, I assume James wants to start. Go ahead, James.

MR. PATTON: I don't know if there's a protocol to who should call on whom, but--

CHAIR MAENZA: Jump in.

MR. PATTON: Yeah. Thanks. Thank you, Commissioner Kleinbaum.

Yeah, the short answer to your question is yes, of course I think there are successes otherwise many of us would probably have despaired by now. But, and those are successes that we try to elevate and try to use as models going forward.

One of the things I think that's very important about conflict stability operations, and this is something I tell people coming into the field, is it's not a linear kind of a work. You don't get from broken to unbroken. If you're

fortunate, you get from broken to less broken, but it's also a cyclical issue.

It's a generational issue. There are a lot of pressures that are brought to bear to sustain identity conflicts over generations and from community to community that just require a constancy of awareness and intervention.

And if I can really, really second and third and onward this discussion about local ownership, and this is where my success stories will come in, we've been talking about local ownership for decades though. This is not a new idea. We've been talking about the industry and the institutions getting closer to the ground, and yet what I see in the processes of proposal drafting--and we do lots of it--is that it gets harder and harder for a small local organization, even a small Washington, D.C.-based organization, in my case, to keep up with some of the requirements for these proposals and to get through some of the pay walls, if you want to call them

that.

And so what we do is we invariably tie ourselves into local communities and partners in ways that allow for local ownership, and one of the key things, and I really want to emphasize this, is that what we need to have, and oftentimes I witness the failings on, is what I call methodological humility, right. I mean this idea that expertise is in the halls of power in Washington, D.C., yes, we have certain expertise, but knowledge of the lived faith traditions, knowledge of the lived conflicts, knowledge of what is in the way and what will help things get out of the way, is all held within the communities.

And so our expertise needs to be one of facilitation, where we bring in structures and frameworks that allow for that knowledge to then manifest in sustainable relationships and programs.

And I'll give an example. I used to joke, you know, we're a conflict resolution organization that works with religious actors, and I used to

always say we don't build wells. It's really easy to count success if you build wells. It's hard for monitoring and evaluation when you're dealing with the transcendent and you're dealing with conflict.

But ironically we did a build a well at one point. We were in a community in Yemen, and the local community members were lamenting over several different drivers of conflict, including recruitment by al-Qaeda and ISY, and what they came to the conclusion on is when the government left it, it left in place one water system that was not serving surrounding communities, and there was some conflict around that.

So we actually funded the implementation of a water project, but the water project drew on the youth who had already been recruited or were at risk of being recruited into the extremist organizations.

And what that did, and, you know, this is, we can explain this at greater depth at another time, but basically there was a whole web of

dynamics that was happening--conditions that were leading to conflict that included questions of belonging, questions of economic opportunity, questions of lack of infrastructure, and the sense of disempowerment.

But when the youth got involved in this project and were able to give back to the community--and I've seen the same thing with gangs in Latin America, et cetera--they developed a sense of not only deep ownership of the program because they had determined what was necessary, but a sense of belonging and responsibility that then caused them to reject the idea that these extremist organizations that were coming in not on ideological grounds but on practical grounds saying they could offer services were no longer necessary.

But they had a sense of empowerment themselves. Then we had built the relationships where they were able to go out and find funding themselves to extend this program to other communities around in the area. So there was a

training-of-trainers type element to it.

There was a capacity-building element to it. There was a networking-building element, and honestly when we backed out, you know, hopefully, when you leave, they don't even notice because you've left so much behind that is theirs already, it's just empowered, that you're no longer necessary.

And so these are the kinds of things that I would just encourage, and there are myriad, myriad examples of successes at the local level that I think should inspire us all to be hopeful. Yeah.

CHAIR MAENZA: Yes, Doctor, can you please add to that?

DR. AL HINDY: Thank you.

Just to maybe continue with the concept of how strong civil society can actually help build that. For us, the example in Lebanon and in Iraq, it has been this exactly. It has been where people, not necessarily--maybe people of faith, put

it in that sense, have met in civil society for common objectives, for common projects, for development projects, for peacebuilding negotiations, and so on. These people would have done the process that maybe Dr. Moosa explained, which is going across the fear and then meeting the other and then being changed by that other and by that meeting and by that daily interaction.

So for us, in the two contexts that we have strongly been invested in Lebanon and Iraq, we have seen that people who have been in such an experience would be the best leaders of hope and would be the best leaders of peacebuilding in that sense because themselves have been changed by the process, and thus we always say that a Christian in Lebanon is completely different, to a large extent, very different than a Christian from the United States or otherwise, even in the way he reads and he lives his faith.

Same for a Muslim who is in a pluralistic society or otherwise. So for us the stronger the

civil society is, and the stronger these common work that have been done over the years and years in the common space, which is the public space, the stronger it would be or the more difficult it would be to create conflict and to use religion for one against the other.

CHAIR MAENZA: Great. I know that, Corinne, I think you had your hand up, and then Dr. Moosa, if I remember correctly.

DR. GRAFF: Yes, thank you.

I just want to come back quickly to the question from Commissioner Kleinbaum because I think it's very important not to leave the impression that there are no successes or that we don't know whether we can achieve success.

And I agree with everything my colleagues have said. I think one example of a country where we've achieved success is Kenya through its elections, and we've worked very hard as a government to ensure peaceful elections in Kenya after what happened in the late 2000s.

And I think, and I don't want to, I don't want us to take credit for that. We had to work with a lot of partners, but I do believe those are models that we should look at in terms of success, and I think one of the keys, as you're suggesting, Commissioner Kleinbaum, is that Kenya has a really healthy civil society, and we're working with those actors, and we work with those actors to prevent violence, and we're engaging with moderate Muslim organizations in Kenya, and they're key to the success that we've seen there.

So I think that's really important. I think there are other places where we've seen success--Colombia, Indonesia, and others. But I do think it's really important, not for us to think that or to suggest that there are no successes or that, you know, we haven't been able to achieve that.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much.

Dr. Moosa.

DR. MOOSA: I want to agree with my

colleagues and all the nuances and the success. So we shouldn't give up. And I think success also comes in kind of small stories.

And I'm just going to, you know, telegraph four things. In our program, one of the kind of successes was to start on time, just starting on time. I mean first day people came late, and they saw, I mean they came in, you know, class has already started. I mean this has never happened before in their own experience.

Secondly, faculty listened to what participants have to say, and they feel free, and they are not lectured to, but it's a conversation. That's the second success.

And the third is, in civil society, is how do we, people discover very qualified, very knowledgeable, very talented individuals find their voice. These voices would never make it out in the public were it not for some kind of tuition, some kind of help, some kind of enabling them, enabling them to give their voice.

So sometimes the success is maybe not in large terms, and I think we have great successes, too, as our colleagues have shared. But these small successes that transform an individual, a group's life, to be on time, to listen to one another, and to develop a voice.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much.

Commissioner Khan, I believe, you have a question. You're on mute. Great.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: Thank you.

I know there is very little time left, but as a student of U.S. scholarship, Dr. Al Hindy, Professor Graff, Dr. Patton, and Dr. Moosa, thank you. I shall read your testimony on daily basis to be heartened. Thank you.

I ask the question as American doctrine of foreign policy shifts towards relentless diplomacy, do you--I know you have answered in your statements. I've been listening to it very carefully. Do you feel that institutions like USCIRF reflects, and I want to reflect myself on

our past approach to international religious freedom, and in their reflection, is there room for a regard for faith and culture of the people with whom we engage or within the framework of USCIRF we make sure that within our framework, the work that we do of recommendations, we reflect a regard for faith and culture of the societies that we engage?

I would like, to hearten myself, I would like to hear your brief comments on it. We can start with Dr. Al Hindy.

DR. AL HINDY: Thank you so much, sir.

I do think that, to a large extent, we cannot and we should not deal with politics and international relations outside the scope of ethics.

For me, the more you are able, the more you have the responsibility to do so, and thus it is my priority for me an essential moral duty of the U.S. to actually promote these values in every aspect of its foreign policy and every aspect of its aid and development policy in that sense.

So I do think that at times we have, we have been reluctant or the U.S. has been reluctant, yes. At other times, they have paid the price for their interventions, but I think the more we focus that intervention on promoting values and on working with the local actors, the more we can avoid missteps and the more we can get better results in that sense.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: Professor Graff.

DR. GRAFF: Yes, thank you, Commissioner.

I agree entirely with Dr. Al Hindy. I think the one concern I would have is that as we've discussed over the past hour, is that what we're promoting are values and faith and not just our values because there are different ways of interpreting them, and, of course, not anything goes. I don't want to suggest that. There are universal values, of course.

But where we have faltered in the past is going in and assuming that we know what a community's values are or what their, what their

needs are, and that's led us into trouble.

And so hopefully we will have that sensitivity going forward to acknowledge that we need to support the reformers in those countries. I'll stop there.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: Dr. Patton.

MR. PATTON: Yeah. I think the only thing I would add is, you know, if we can launch our engagement with others from a foundation of human development and human dignity, where we think in terms of maybe, you know, you know, development is not just economics, it's really about being able to make choices about your life and your future.

And those choices then will be things that people will dictate themselves. Again, I think that despite our best efforts and our best intentions, oftentimes we come in with a very, very clear idea of what people need from us, what we bring to them, rather than what they can create or generate themselves if they are given the chance and the opportunity and the assistance to do that.

So that would just be my encouragement.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: Dr. Moosa.

DR. MOOSA: Thank you.

My colleagues have already covered most of what I was going to say except that I would say that one of the things, add that we need to think about ways in which people-to-people conversations can happen. I think people-to-people diplomacy where just makes breakthroughs that this issue or this image of the U.S. government and America just dissipates because that has a certain kind of impression around the world.

You know, America's impression in Europe is very different from what it is in sub-Saharan Africa or in South Asia. And I think--so that's the one thing.

What my colleagues have already said, that let's not be too prescriptive because prescription comes with suspicion. Advance the cultural and religious literacy in our own midst and in our own policy circles. The more we deepen that, the more

complex we have that amongst ourselves, we'll understand the world better.

No one can disagree with ethics, as Professor Al Hindy had talked about the need for ethics. But it's the application and the approach to the ethical that is going to be so crucial, and so I think we come with great ethical values, but the way in which these ethical values are applied, and through policy and others, and, you know, we live in a world that is now a global village.

People know what we are doing in different places of the world. We can no longer hide, and therefore it's a very transparent world, and therefore we need to have our best behavior at all times.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: I think that was everyone. I want to make sure. I want to say thank you to our really so impressive panelists and, of course, my colleagues for such insightful questions.

I do want to mention that USCIRF creates a

hearing summary from this event today, and I think that's going to be an important document that hopefully we can pass along to government officials, especially those that work in fragile states, especially the young up and coming diplomats, to have this kind of wisdom and to be able to know who you are, be able to go back and read some further testimonies that we'll also post on our website because I do believe that the information you have shared--and I know it was just a tiny bit of your expertise--is really what we, policymakers in Washington, that connection between what's happening on the ground in the local and that wisdom that you're all sharing, those nuances, has been really impressive just to see that thread between all four of you.

And we really, again, appreciate your time, and we're so pleased that the USCIRF team, our professional staff, has done such a great job putting this together for us, and I know the hearing summary will be a wonderful tool for us to

further share the important information you have all presented this morning.

So thank you again for joining us, and of course to all our participants, we appreciate you joining us, and please look for our summary. It will be forthcoming.

Thanks so much.

DR. MOOSA: Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 12:03 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]