



## U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Briefing

### **Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security: New Policy Guidance from the OSCE**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

#### **Gayle Manchin, USCIRF Vice Chair:**

Thank you very much, Chair Perkins. I would like to emphasize a couple significant points raised in the OSCE's policy guidance.

First, the report furthers the discussion on the synergies of women's rights and freedom of religion. In 2017, USCIRF facilitated an international conversation on how women's rights and religious freedom are complementary. Recognizing that there was an entrenched misperception that women's rights to equality and religious freedom are mutually exclusive, USCIRF looked more deeply into the complexities between the rights of women and girls and religious freedom to help dispel that misperception.

The policy guidance emphasizes the importance of ensuring gender-sensitive approaches and highlights that women's rights and religious freedom are complementary, even within the framework of security. While recognizing the different ways in which men and women exercise the freedom of religion or belief, the guidance notes religious freedom and the equality of men and women "belong to the same indivisible human rights framework."

Second, the policy guidance emphasizes that, particularly when addressing security concerns, it is important to acknowledge the diversity of religions and beliefs and ensure protection of varied religious and belief communities. The policy guidance recommends that states ensure violence is

not identified or associated with religion or belief in general or with one specific religion or belief, which is extremely important when grounding these laws and policies in human rights.

In grappling with the interrelationship between FoRB and security, there are alarming examples of the dangers of labeling one religion as a security threat. In Uzbekistan, the government notoriously pursued and imprisoned thousands of mainly observant Muslims on overly broad charges of “religious extremism.” Thousands of these religious prisoners remain incarcerated today. In Russia, the government exploits security and terrorism concerns to persecute certain religious groups, including through the broad application of the label of “extremism” to many religious groups with no links to violence or revolution. In 2017, Jehovah’s Witnesses became the first religion to be banned outright across Russia, based on the accusation that the church is a terrorist organization. As a result of this ban, as of May 2019, Russian authorities have brought 74 criminal cases against Jehovah’s Witnesses across Russia, including USCIRF’s Religious Prisoner of Conscience Dennis Christensen who is currently serving a 6-year sentence after being arrested in 2017 following during a raid of a prayer service in which he was participating.

I look forward to further exploring these important themes today and discussing how governments can better implement policies that ensure security alongside religious freedom.

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