

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

THE FIRST 25 YEARS:
IRFA ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND NEXT STEPS

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Kennedy Caucus Room
325 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C.

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

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Abraham Cooper, Chair
Frederick A. Davie, Vice Chair
David Curry
Mohamed Magid
Stephen Schneck
Eric Ueland
Frank Wolf

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR COOPER: Good afternoon and welcome. My name is Abraham Cooper, and I am honored to serve as chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF.

Thank you for joining us to mark the 25th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA.

I would like to extend on behalf of the commissioners a special thank you to Senator Chris Coons and his staff for reserving this historic room for us.

In October 1998, Congress passed and then President Bill Clinton signed IRFA, making the promotion of freedom of religion or belief abroad a higher priority in U.S. foreign policy.

IRFA established USCIRF, and the State Department's Ambassador at Large, currently Ambassador Rashad Hussain, as well as the Office of International Religious Freedom.

The law required monitoring and annual reporting on conditions and delineated consequences

for the worst violators.

It also incorporated religious freedom concerns into U.S. diplomacy, programs, training, as well as refugee and asylum policies.

25 years later, religious freedom issues are more integrated than ever before into U.S. foreign relations.

We've seen the benefits of IRFA. Violations have been documented and exposed and violators often sanctioned.

Repressive governments have changed laws and policies, and they have released some prisoners.

Issues of international religious freedom, or IRF, now receive significant media and public attention, including today for which we are grateful.

Importantly, the United States no longer stands alone in recognizing the significance of freedom of religion or belief, or FoRB, and don't worry, we won't have a quiz on all of these abbreviations, or FoRB for everyone everywhere.

Various countries and the European Union have created FoRB ambassador or special envoy positions.

These and other countries have established an international contact group and alliance and have held regular IRF ministerial conferences. Networks of parliamentarians and of non-government organizations, focused on FoRB, have also developed.

USCIRF is proud to have been involved in the founding of both the international parliamentary network and the Washington, D.C. based NGO roundtable and continues to actively engage with both.

USCIRF remains a unique entity in this space. No other country has a similar commission. USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan advisory body that monitors conditions abroad based on international standards; evaluates U.S. policy and makes independent policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress.

USCIRF has nine commissioners. There are

three appointed by the President of the United States; three are appointed by the leadership of the Senate from each political party; and three are appointed by the leadership of the House from each political party.

USCIRF has an amazing, nonpartisan, young, dynamic professional staff of about 20.

Commissioners are private citizen volunteers. We come from different political parties, different faith and professional backgrounds, and different parts of our beloved United States.

Yet, we all agree on the importance of freedom of religion or belief for everyone everywhere.

We also agree on the need to shine a light on the severe abuses so many individuals of all faiths and of none who suffer simply for exercising their fundamental, God-given right to religious freedom.

We were among the first to call for recognizing China's horrific persecution of Uyghurs

as a genocide.

We continue to call out Russia for its antisemitic rhetoric and Holocaust distortion in an effort to justify Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.

And last week, we condemned the brutal terrorist onslaught by Hamas, whose antisemitic charter justifies violence and worse, against innocent Israelis.

And we reiterated that invoking any religion to justify taking innocent lives has no place in any society.

Today, we are going to discuss IRFA's importance, the accomplishment of its first quarter-century, and steps to take in the years to come.

Our first speakers are two of the key congressional sponsors of what became IRFA: Commissioner and former Representative Frank Wolf, otherwise known as our Commission's moral GPS; and former U.S. Senator Don Nickles.

Former Senator Joseph Lieberman had

planned to join us, but had a last minute change of schedule so we have prerecorded remarks from this great American as well.

After that, we'll have a panel discussion highlighting the importance of advocating for specific victims of religious freedom violations, and to conclude, commissioners and staff will share their thoughts on IRFA and USCIRF's impact and their suggestions for the future.

Before we start, I would like to thank the former USCIRF commissioners I see in our audience here today. I also want to thank Congress for its commitment to advancing international religious freedom and continued support of USCIRF.

We expect members of Congress to stop by to offer their comments throughout the event, as well as their support, we hope, in addition to written and video remarks provided to us.

Though I made mention of it before, before I give the floor to my esteemed colleague and friend, Fred Davie, I would be remiss not to mention again the butchering of the Iran-backed

Hamas terrorists, and the special challenge those criminal acts pose to people of faith everywhere.

Let me now give the floor to USCIRF Vice Chair Fred Davie, who will outline some key IRFA and USCIRF accomplishments, and then introduce the first panel.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Vice Chair Cooper. And thank all of you for joining us today.

I am Fred Davie, and I do serve as vice chair of—did I call you vice chair? Thank you, Chair Cooper.

And I am Fred Davie. I do serve as vice chair of this Commission.

Let me just say in response to Chair Cooper's remarks about the horrible situation in Israel, Gaza first. I am proud to be able to stand with him and with Imam Magid in the statement that we issued on behalf of USCIRF condemning the horrific attacks of Hamas, also calling for an end to religious incitement, and incitement of religious-based violence.

And then my own sort of commitment and

deep concern that I know we all share for the humanitarian situation in the region, particularly in Gaza.

So I stand with the rabbi. I stand with Imam Magid in this acknowledgement of the horror of that situation and hoping for a just and peaceful end to it soon.

Let me also say that it would be really important, we believe, if there were a national prayer service. USCIRF would—I think I can speak for my commissioners—we talked about it today—would be more than interested in helping to organize and participate in a national prayer service that called for an acknowledgement of the brutality and the horror and the depravity that has taken place in the region, calling for compassion for human life and innocent lives in the region, and calling for a just and peaceful resolution to the horrors that now exist there.

So, Rabbi Cooper, I want you to know I stand with you. Imam Magid, I'm really pleased that we can all join together, as commissioners of

USCIRF, and issue the statement that we've issued.

Let me now turn to the agenda of the day. Preparing for the event has given us an opportunity to reflect on IRFA's and USCIRF's impact both over time and in recent years.

We shared some highlights in a USCIRF fact sheet that is available in the room and hopefully that you all have.

Since we celebrated IRFA's 20th anniversary in 2018, we have seen robust use of newly available tools in the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act and the Global Magnitsky Act, including designations of "Special Watch Lists" and "Entities of Particular Concern," and the imposition of targeted sanctions against religious freedom abusers.

In addition, both President Joe Biden and President Donald Trump nominated their ambassadors at large for IRF, for International Religious Freedom, in record time. Six months into each new administration the ambassadors were nominated.

Then President Trump also appointed, for

the first time, a Director of International Religious Freedom on the National Security Council staff and issued an important Executive Order on the issue, which the Biden administration continues to implement.

The first five years also saw the founding of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, or IRFBA, and as our chair said, no one will hold you to a test for these acronyms that we will, that we will spout today.

And then the launch of regular International Religious Freedom, IRF, Ministerials.

We've also been gratified to see foreign governments make improvements on religious freedom issues in response to U.S. concerns.

To give two recent examples, both Sudan, during its period of civilian led transitional rule, and Uzbekistan engaged closely with USCIRF and the State Department in their efforts to amend restrictive laws and make other positive changes.

This led to progress sufficient for USCIRF to conclude that "country of particular concern" or

CPC, recommendations were no longer warranted for either country in 2020.

But with civilian government no longer in power in Sudan and recent backsliding in Uzbekistan, USCIRF continues to closely monitor both countries.

As we reflect today on the past 25 years' many accomplishments, we cannot be complacent. State and non-state actors around the globe continue to perpetrate or tolerate severe religious persecution.

In too many countries, individuals and communities are still targeted for their religious beliefs, activity or identity or for their religious freedom advocacy.

Those individuals and communities are why IRFA, or International Religious Freedom Act, was enacted. And they are why the global efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief for all remain essential today and for the future.

To start our discussion today, we are so pleased to hear from three of the key sponsors of

the legislative effort to promote international religious freedom, who will share their personal reflections on IRFA's creation and trajectory.

First, we will see video remarks from Senator Joseph Lieberman, who sends his regrets, as we have heard, that he is unable to join us today.

He served in the Senate from 1989 to 2013, representing the state of Connecticut. He is now Senior Counsel to the law firm Kazowitz Benson Torres in New York.

Our next speaker will be our own colleague, friend and, as Chair Cooper said, moral GPS, Commissioner and former Congressman Frank Wolf, who served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1981 to 2015 representing the 10th district of Virginia.

Commissioner Wolf was appointed to USCIRF by then House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy in 2020.

And, finally, we will hear from Senator Don Nickles, who represented Oklahoma in the Senate from 1981 to 2005.

He is currently chairman and CEO of the Nickles Group in Washington, D.C.

We will now play former Senator Lieberman's prerecorded remarks on the screens.

[Pause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: So we're going to have a slight change in schedule. I am told that Representative Gus Bilirakis, Bilirakis—how did I do—is here with us, and we'd love to hear from you, Congressman.

[Applause.]

MR. BILIRAKIS: Thank you so much. I appreciate it. Thanks very much.

I guess this is on. Can you hear me?

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Yes.

MR. BILIRAKIS: Okay. Very good. Thank you.

I'm glad to be here, again, commemorating the 25th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act.

I am a representative from the state of Florida, and I served with the great Frank Wolf for

many years, as did my father, Congressman Mike Bilirakis.

So we've been working on these issues, and he's been the leader, along with Chris Smith, in the House.

It's a testament to the incredible work, again, by three, again three true statesmen. We need them now. That's for sure. I wish they were in the House and the Senate.

But we thank them for all their work. I want to thank them directly. My former colleague, as I said, Frank Wolf, who is here, and I'm not sure, is former, is Don Nickles here?

Yes. Okay. And then, of course, Joe Lieberman, who is also a great hero and a true statesman.

Thank you for standing up for religious freedom and creating the tools to hold violators accountable for their actions.

I strive to continue this work as co-chair of the International Religious Freedom Caucus in the House and a member of the Executive Committee

for the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. What a giant he was, incredible. I served with him as well.

Fighting again for a range of persecuted religious minorities such as the Falun Gong, the Uyghurs, the Tibetans in China, the Copts, the Yazidis, and other Christians in the Middle East and Africa, and the Muslim minorities around the world, such as the Ahmadis in Pakistan.

And yet even as we celebrate this remarkable anniversary of the IRFA, we know that it is even more important now, given the dire situation we currently face around the world and even here in the United States unfortunately.

Most on mind is the current war between Israel and the radical Islamist forces of Hamas and Hezbollah.

At least 1,400 innocent Israelis were brutally and indiscriminately executed for simply existing by the terrorist organization Hamas.

By its own admission, it will not stop until it has wiped Israel off the map and has

exterminated all Jewish people.

That's pure evil, folks, and I know you agree. Plain and simple. I stand with Israel and the Jewish people and their right to defend themselves against the evil seeking their annihilation.

The effects of this war are already having global repercussions, as you know, specifically with the shocking and violent rise of antisemitic rhetoric and action, which is mindboggling to imagine given the fact that I've been talking about the rise of antisemitism, as have you, for years now.

Back in 2018, we held an International Religious Freedom briefing on the global increase of antisemitism.

Just two years ago, in my own community, in the Tampa Bay area, there was an antisemitic hate crime, and I condemned it where the Florida Holocaust Museum is in St. Petersburg, Florida.

It was desecrated with a swastika and a message that read "Jews are guilty."

Let me frankly state hate and hate groups have no place in our society, which is why I'm so alarmed by the recent displays of antisemitism on U.S. campuses.

We've seen student groups in organized demonstrations condoning, even celebrating, the October 7th terror attack against innocent Israelis.

Some have even adopted the imagery of a paraglider to advertise their rallies. Others have enthusiastically chanted the death toll from the terror attack.

This is utterly disgusting, in my opinion, and should be routinely and universally condemned by everyone.

I have joined my colleagues on numerous congressional efforts to push for accountability for this hate speech and pressure both Secretary of Education and Institutes of Higher Education to follow through with their legal obligation to provide all students, including Jewish students, a school environment free from discrimination, based

on race, color or national origin, including shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics.

It is important that we directly and unflinchingly address this scourge not only for the members of the international Jewish community but also for minority communities worldwide facing discrimination and hate.

History provides us with a clear reminder of what happens when people stand by while hate and intolerance grow.

The hesitation of the international community to act over 100 years ago following the end of the First World War created the conditions for the Holocaust where 17 million people, including six million Jews, were systematically killed.

While the world learned a grave lesson and swore "never forget," "never again," Holocaust denial and antisemitism are nevertheless on the rise, unfortunately, folks.

We can't tolerate that. We cannot forget. It is for this reason I'm proud that the "Never

Again Education Act," which I co-led, was signed into law last Congress.

This law expanded access to Holocaust and anti-hate education to teach children the important lessons of the Holocaust and the consequences of bigotry and hate.

While the House of Representatives was also able to pass the resolution condemning antisemitism and bigotry, as I said, last Congress, it is clear from some members' recent comments, very few, that the House must act again though in passing a resolution condemning antisemitism and in support of our ally, Israel.

The right to exist and the right to follow your beliefs should not be controversial, particularly in this country.

Thank you, again, for giving me the opportunity to speak and celebrate the historic achievement of the IRFA's 25th anniversary. Thank you and God bless.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Congressman.

And, Congressman, we want to note and thank you for your advocacy of two religious prisoners of conscience, one in China and one in Tajikistan.

So we want to thank you for your leadership in that regard as well. Thank you and thank you for joining us.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: And now we will have the video for former Senator Joseph Lieberman.

SENATOR LIEBERMAN: [Prerecorded video.] Well, congratulations on the 25th anniversary of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

I'm really grateful for the opportunity to join the celebration today, at least in this virtual way. I apologize. I've got a bit of a cold and sore throat this morning so I will not be singing happy anniversary, but I will be singing your praises.

I was thinking that there's a famous expression, certainly around Congress, that

sausages and laws should not be seen in the making. True enough.

But the corollary or follow-on to that is that, as a legislator, former legislator, I can tell you that when you're fortunate enough to make a law, you're really not sure how it's going to be implemented or whether it will work.

And as someone who was privileged to work with a lot of people inside Congress, particularly Senator Don Nickles, and people outside Congress, on the International Religious Freedom Act, 25 years ago this month, I really thank you for making this law work as well as you have.

All of us felt that the idea of having an International Religious Freedom Commission was so fundamental to what America is about that we didn't know why it had not already happened.

I mean think about it. When the Pilgrims arrived on the Mayflower and stepped onto the rock in Massachusetts, the spiritual leader, William Brewster, actually recited the words of Psalm 100.

So really from the beginning, this was a

faith-based country. Of course, it's right there in our Constitution and Declaration of Independence, particularly the catalytic sentence about the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that are the endowment of our creator.

And apropos of the Religious Freedom Commission, that declaration of the faith-based human rights is universal. It's obviously God didn't give those rights just to Americans, but to the whole world, every person on Earth, and it's why it's so critically important that human rights generally, but also religious freedom specifically, be at the center of our relations with the rest of the world.

And that's exactly why we adopted the Religious Freedom Act 25 years ago this month. Truthfully, we were—well, I'll read you some words that I spoke on the floor of the Senate in October of 1998.

Quote: "For me, this effort began with some pied pipers outside Congress who educated us

to the fact that the religious freedoms that we hold so dear in the United States are not real for millions of people around the world."

They were particularly not real for Christians, who were then subjected to discrimination and in many cases persecution, and I would add that is still true in many places in the world today.

I do want to say that in my case, one of the pied pipers, but really a better word is gadfly or advocate, was Michael Horowitz, who made really compelling appeals to me that we needed this kind of commission.

And the basic idea has just worked so well because of the work that Jim Cooper and the members of the Commission now and all your predecessors have done, which is to do this annual report of the state of religious freedom in every country of the world, reported to the State Department, the President, and thereby put the quest for religious freedom and our responsibility to support it around the world closer to the center of our American

foreign policy.

And it's really worked and had a big effect in protecting the religious rights of a lot of people around the world who would not otherwise have been protected.

The reality is that the work that you've done in the first 25 years, I think, will be even more important in the next 25.

Religion is like so much else in human history and our lives. It can either be used for good or bad, and most of the time, my understanding of history tells me that the power of religion to motivate people to behave well has been an extremely constructive force, certainly in American life.

But it can also be extremely divisive and lead groups either who are not religious to find religion in their countries as a threat to them or others who are religious to punish people who are not of their religion.

And at this time, which is so divided in the world, and which so many people are anxious and

angry, unfortunately, the threats to religious freedom may intensify.

So the work that you do, and have done so wonderfully for the last 25 years, will even be more important in the years ahead.

So what can I say but thank you; God bless you in your work. You have held America true to what America is all about, and helped us fulfill our responsibility to take the blessings of liberty that we enjoy here at home and try to spread them to people around the world.

Thank you very, very much, for making this law work, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to join you today.

All the best.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Many thanks again to Senator Lieberman.

And now to a man who personifies and exemplifies what we do here today. Commissioner Wolf, the floor is yours.

COMMISSIONER WOLF: Well, thank you very

much and thank you for being here.

I want to begin by saying I completely agree in the condemnation of the activity of Hamas and what's taking place to Jewish students on American college campuses, and we all should be speaking out against that publicly over and over.

I was asked to make some comments on what the environment was at the time, both in the House and the Senate, and also to talk a little bit about what I, and I'm speaking for myself, not for USCIRF, what I believe you might want to do and we should do to make a difference.

A Pew survey says that 80 percent of the world's population lives in a religiously repressive nation, an environment. We see it taking place in China—the Catholic Church, the Protestant church, genocide, cultural genocide against the Tibetan Buddhists.

I've been in Tibet, seen what every monastery has a public security police there.

Can you imagine in your own church or your own synagogue to have the secret police there when

you're going into worship.

Actual genocide, actual genocide against the Uyghur Muslims. The Falun Gong, we've seen 60,000 a year harvesting of their organs, and it's just so brutal. We see what's taking place.

So it's going on all over, over the world. When the legislation was introduced, there was a lot of opposition to it. You would have thought that it would have been welcomed. People would have said this is a great idea. There was a lot of opposition.

There was opposition by the Clinton administration. I'm going to read you something that Secretary Madeleine Albright, a speech that she gave at Catholic University.

Let the record show I love Madeleine Albright. Madeleine Albright lived in my congressional district. She had a farm up in Loudoun County. So this is not meant as a criticism of Madeleine Albright.

But the administration at that time was opposed and the State Department. And she said at

a speech, which interestingly was October 23, today, 1997, and here's what Secretary Albright said at a speech at Catholic University.

She said: It would establish a new and unneeded bureaucracy and deprive U.S. officials of the flexibility required to protect the overall foreign policy interests of the United States.

They were opposed to it. The State Department was opposed to it. I am very grateful, and I will say it publicly, I'm grateful that President Clinton signed it in spite of the opposition by some in the administration.

Secondly, the business community opposed it. I mean the Chamber of Commerce, some of the high-tech companies, they opposed it. They didn't want to say publicly too much. They worked this Hill over and over and through good offices.

Let me just say this has always been, particularly in the House, but also in the Senate, a bipartisan issue by Republicans and Democrats came together to kind of do something about it.

The circumstances, I think, that kind of

led to this was, one, I believe President Reagan said that the words in the Constitution and the words in the Declaration of Independence were a covenant, not a contract, but a covenant with the people not only in Philadelphia in 1776 and 1787, but with the entire world.

President Reagan and Pope John Paul, and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher kind of set, set the stage, if you will, when we saw the fall of the Soviet Union.

Sudan was a big issue in early '90s, and again bipartisan, Republican and Democrats. Many times I would go to Sudan, it was always, almost always a Democratic member there. There was a Democratic and Republican head of the Sudan Caucus.

It was, so Sudan, I remember a million Christians, mainly, some Muslims were killed by Bashir. You remember Bashir invited Osama bin Laden to live.

Osama bin Laden lived in Sudan, and so that kind of led the effort, and there were a lot of people, and God bless your colleague, Senator

John Danforth. When President Bush appointed Danforth to be the Special Envoy for Sudan, it made a tremendous difference.

But Sudan got everybody interested following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Next, China. When we'd go to China, I remember Chris Smith and I would go and talk to the underground and Catholic bishops, and they would tell us a story, and we watched what took place in Tiananmen, and we talked to Tiananmen Square people, family members and everybody, so China just kind of woke up the world as to what was taking place in China.

Thirdly, and I think this is very important. I don't see it today. I don't mean that as criticism, but I don't see it today, the faith community was really involved. I wrote down the names last night: Chuck Colson. Chuck was just, God bless him, he was on this thing.

Michael Horowitz, and I thank Senator Lieberman for—Michael Horowitz really worked this issue. He was with the Heritage Foundation and

everything, the Hudson Foundation during that time.

Nina, Nina Shea. Many of you know Nina. Nina wrote about this, was pushed by, pushed by this.

It was Cardinal Wuerl. I remember I had a meeting in my office about a religious freedom issue, and I had invited some people. Cardinal Wuerl walked into my office. He was so interested in this issue.

Then there were many, many others. Congressman Chris Smith, God bless. I think Chris Smith should be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Chris Smith has done more and been more and said more on this issue, but Chris was so dogged with regard to staying with this.

And Harry Wu and the church community. There was a little group down in Texas called the Midland Ministerial Group in a little town in Texas, Midland. They would come into town and they would work. So the faith community.

And lastly I want to give credit to the Jewish community. I was educated by many in my

congressional district who were Jewish who would come and tell me, and I really modeled, listened to Natan Sharansky, and Chris Smith and I went into Perm Camp 35.

The Jewish community really led the effort on this. If you recall, there was a large rally on the Mall. Ronald Reagan spoke. There were thousands there. I wish we could get that kind of a rally so the Jewish community really did an outstanding.

I also, I don't know if he's here, Rabbi Saperstein. Rabbi Saperstein, who I believe was the first or second president/head of USCIRF, was dogged and really involved and helped educate me on this history. It was stalled. We passed it in the House.

Now, this gentleman over here was the key. There were four key people. God bless him. Senator Arlen Specter. Arlen put the bill in. He was really good. He was from my home state of Pennsylvania where I was born, born and raised. Arlen Specter, very, very important.

Senator Lieberman, very, very important.
Senator Nickles, very, very important. The fact is that the two people that literally saved the bill, they saved the bill. Not many people realize, but it was the last day.

The people who saved the bill, Don Nickles, and a guy who was in, I was in a small fellowship with him, and you know him well, Dan Coats. God bless Dan Coats.

Dan couldn't be here, but if you know Dan Coats, tell him that Wolf said Coats is the best. Coats called about six o'clock at night. The House was still in session. Members told to go home, no more roll calls, just pro forma business.

And Coats said, Nickles, I got, we can get this over there. It's a little weakened now. It's watered down. Do you want it? Yes. He sent it over because of—because of Don Nickles and Dan Coats, there was a law passed that set up this Commission that has done all this, and if they had not done it, it would have never passed the next session because the opposition from the business

community was rolling.

So I said to Don Nickles, God bless Don. Don Nickles, who lived in my congressional district when he was—he must have read my mail sometimes, my newsletters, and Dan Coats. And I would ask you when you see Dan, would you tell him, if it hadn't been for the two of you, it would have never, never passed.

Where do we go from here? These are my own, my own views. One, I think you have to keep it bipartisan. I think the giants of Henry Hyde and Tom Lantos, you got to keep it bipartisan.

What made the success for Sudan was bipartisan. There were Republican, Democrat. You got to keep this thing bipartisan.

Secondly, the faith community has to get back involved. Members of Congress, I have always said that everything that takes place in government and politics is downstream from culture. But everything that takes place in culture is downstream from the church, from the synagogue, from the mosque, from the community.

We need the religious community to engage again and get back in this issue the way that they were before.

It would not have passed with regard to leaders of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim. All the groups came together then. They have to come together then.

Next, we need to motivate the young people. When I see the young people on college campuses, this has to be an issue that they really deeply care. They're good on that campus if we could educate them. I think the young people have to be involved.

Next, this would be very, the next thing is going to be very, very controversial. It's my position, nobody else's.

I think we have to ban lobbying for China. I don't believe we can have people lobbying, law firms in town lobbying for China when they're committing genocide against Uyghur Muslims and taking organs out from the Falun Gong and taking down crosses from Catholic churches and arresting

Protestant house church leaders, and doing that.

So I think one recommendation that Congress should take is ban lobbying for China, and then ban lobbying for any country that is a CPC designated country for four years straight.

The reason is that would be, the lobbyists would then help you because they could then go to the country and say, listen, you're going to be in the CPC. They're going to be banned. And so I think, but we have to ban lobbying for China because of what they're doing.

And also China is aiding Russia against Ukraine, and I support America's helping Ukraine, and yet China is aiding. And lastly, China is aiding Iran, which is behind, I believe, what's taking place today in Israel.

Lastly, I think Congress has to give USCIRF the necessary funding. USCIRF's funding has been cut. It's now at \$3.5 million when if you looked at the rate of inflation, it would be very, very high.

So Congress needs to give USCIRF at least

4.5 to \$5 million funding, and lastly, you have to get a permanent authorization or a three-to-five year authorization to USCIRF so they don't have to desperately wonder will they have a job or not have a job.

But there needs to be a permanent or long-term funding with that necessary authorization, and with that, I just think that this is such an important issue that, again, I end where I began, make it bipartisan, and one way to do that is to ask a Republican and a Democratic member to come together and travel to a country where this is taking place, whereby they become friends and experience together so they can come back and work on this, on this issue.

Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Congressman Wolf, and before we hear from Senator Nickles, we're going to hear from a couple of representatives who are here.

First, from New York, Senator, I'm sorry,

Representative Mike Lawler.

MR. LAWLER: Well, if I became a senator, Chuck Schumer might have a problem with that.

[Laughter.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: And since he appointed me, I don't want to get in any trouble with him.

[Laughter.]

MR. LAWLER: Well, it's great to be here with all of you, and I want to thank Commissioner Wolf for his work, you know, to really bring this together 25 years ago, and the work that USCIRF has done during that time has been monumental and important work.

And we see today with the terrorist attack in Israel, we still have a lot of work to do. And I think at the core of our society, at the core of our country, is our faith.

The United States and our Constitution is based on Judeo-Christian values, and the Abrahamic religions have played a pivotal role in society and in the world.

And I think when we look today at some of

the challenges that we're facing, I agree part of the problem that we're dealing with, frankly, is a lack of faith in the public sphere, a lack of faith in our discourse.

And we see society in some respects crumbling before us—the vitriol, the hatred, the bigotry, the anger, the fact that in our public debate, there's a lack of respect for diversity of opinion. We immediately ascribe adjectives to those we disagree with politically or on a policy, and it's destructive.

And I think we have to get back to the core of what unites us, what brings humanity together, and it is religion.

And I represent the 17th district of New York. This district is home to one of the largest Jewish communities in the country.

Now I'm Irish-Italian Catholic, but I have a very diverse district. 19 percent of my district is Latino. Most of them obviously Catholic. But a large Orthodox Jewish community.

I have a large Indian community, and you

see the different religions and the different cultures and the different communities. This is a district that in different iterations was represented by Ben Gilman and Eliot Engel, two chairs of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the House.

I'm proud to serve on the Foreign Affairs Committee and to get to deal with a lot of these issues, and earlier this year, I traveled with Speaker McCarthy to Israel for the 75th anniversary.

And we got to go see the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Western Wall and get a tour of the City of David under excavation and to see really what unites countries and societies throughout the world.

And I think when I see what is happening right now in the Middle East, when we see what is happening in Ukraine, these are real challenges that frankly make what's happening across the street pale in comparison.

We have a lot of work to do, and I know

Tracey and I want to get back to work and focused on dealing with these issues and really diving into the substance of it.

But I can tell you in closing what I would say, we have seen a rapid rise in antisemitism here in the United States, not just around the world, not just in the Middle East, but here in the United States, a lot of it starting on our college campuses.

And that needs to be rooted out and it needs to stop. The anti-Zionist movement is rooted in antisemitism. The BDS movement is antisemitism. We need to be able to define it.

We need to be able to call it out. And we need to address it. And we need to take on the bad actors around the world, whether it's China, Iran, North Korea, Russia, in this unholy alliance that they have teamed up in, and hold them accountable for the human rights violations, the war crimes, and the religious bigotry that they have engaged in.

So USCIRF plays a critical role, and I

look forward to continuing to partner with and work with to address these issues.

So thank you so much for being here and allowing me to speak to you.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: We will now—so thank you, Congressman, and we will now hear from Congressman Tracey Mann.

MR. MANN: Good afternoon. As mentioned, I'm Congressman Tracey Mann. I represent the big first district of Kansas. When you think about Kansas, my district is the western two-thirds of the state. Except for the Wichita area, we're the largest agriculture producing district in the country. So if you ate today, there's a good chance that some of those products came from our district.

We're also the geographic center of the country, and my district would not look anything like Mike Lawler's district though I would say that I agree with every word that he said wholeheartedly, and it's an honor to serve with

him.

It's good to be here near the upper chamber. Mike and I serve in the lower chamber. You know, we are running a very well-oiled efficient machine over there right now, as you all are well aware.

[Laughter.]

MR. MANN: But it's good to be over here for a just a little bit. Fantastic to see Congressman Wolf, a big fan of yours from afar. I chair, I'm the Republican chair of the Hunger Caucus as well. I know for years, you and Tony Hall did a lot of work in that space and good to see you, Senator Nickles.

I'm a big fan of yours as well. My wife is an Okie from Owasso, and my father-in-law played football for the Oklahoma Sooners. So we are all in Oklahoma as well.

And lastly, I heard, you mentioned Arlen Specter. So, yesterday, my wife and I and our four kids, we were coming back from my twin sister's wedding, long story, but we drove through Russell,

Kansas, which is in my district, population— Russell's population, 4,000, in the western plains of Kansas, home of Bob Dole, also the boyhood home of Arlen Specter, which a lot of people don't realize that Arlen Specter lived in Russell, Kansas, same town as Bob Dole, before he later was a member of Congress from Pennsylvania.

And Kansas, of course, is also a proud home of Sam Brownback as well, who has been very active in this space, been a friend and mentor of mine over the years.

So it's an honor to be with you all today and celebrate 25, the 25th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act. It was fun to hear about how that act actually came together and got passed.

Millions of people around the world today are suffering from religious persecution, which we know takes many forms. America does stand and should stand against religious persecution in all of its forms because religious freedom is a foundational value of this country.

It inspired our founding fathers to step out in faith and launch the American experiment 247 years ago, and it inspires us today in Congress as we govern to consider this law.

I think we should also acknowledge an attack on religious freedom for one person anywhere is an attack on religious freedom for all peoples everywhere.

25 years ago, the International Religious Freedom Act codified religious freedom into American foreign policy.

The legislation stated in no uncertain terms that the United States of America will not sit idly by while people are persecuted, tortured or killed for their religious beliefs.

If a foreign government or entity is persecuting people for their religious beliefs, the International Religious Freedom Act empowers America to step up and respond forcefully.

We will fight back on behalf of oppressed people. We will suspend aid, impose sanctions, and take steps to bring an end to all forms of

religious persecution.

Our country operates this way because we acknowledge God. We acknowledge that human rights themselves don't come from a king or from government. They come from God because he created us.

In 1814, Francis Scott Key wrote a poem called "The Star Spangled Banner." We sing the first stanza, of course, of that poem as our National Anthem, but here's the last stanza.

"Oh, thus be it ever when freemen shall stand between their beloved homes and the war's desolation. Blest with victory and peace, may the heaven rescued land praise the power that hath made and preserved us as a nation.

"Then conquer we must for our cause it is just, and this be our motto, 'In God is our trust.' And the star spangled banner in triumph shall wave over the land of the free and the home of the brave."

On the world stage, America is synonymous with religious freedom, and for 25 years, the

International Religious Freedom Act has strengthened our ability to stand up for what is right, condemn evil, stop religious persecution, and protect innocent lives.

Thank you, Senators Nickles and Lieberman, who originally authored this in the Senate, and to Congressman Wolf for all your work for getting this passed 25 years ago.

This is a perfect example of the kind of good work that we can do when we come together across the aisle and stand up for something we all know is right.

So thank you for having me. Really appreciate it.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Congressman. Thank you again.

We'll now hear from Representative McCormick. Representative Rich McCormick from Georgia.

MR. McCORMICK: Thank you. It's good to be here with you today.

For those of you who don't know me, I'm a Marine Corps pilot and a ER doc from the Navy. I've been in over 40 countries. I have one of the diverse districts in America. We probably have every religion and every race that's common to America.

In my travels, I've recently been to Ukraine. I've been to Israel. Been all over the Far East. Been to South America. Been all over Africa. And one thing is common, no matter what kind of religion your background is from, no matter what your race is, no matter what your gender is, most people are just trying to make it to the next generation.

When people are critical of the Afghanis, and when I was in Afghanistan, I'll tell you, people thought, well, why aren't they loyal to me? It's because they're literally just trying to pick a side that they can survive until the next generation.

It's a survival game for most people. Here in America, we think we have it hard. We

think we have racism and all kinds of discrimination.

Try spending a year in another country. One of the things that makes us strong, one of the things that makes us truly united when we think we aren't, is the fact that we have tolerance, that we have acceptance of many races, of many religions, of many backgrounds.

There aren't too many countries where you can go and you can actually decide who you want to protest against, and it's okay regardless of who you're protesting against.

That's what makes America strong. As a matter of fact, it's when you have freedom of religion, when you have tolerance, that you actually have peace.

When you have an homogenous society of one religion, usually it becomes very protectionist, and as soon as somebody steps outside of that, there's true violence, true persecution, and true disunity.

One of the things I appreciate about the

United States that you can only appreciate once you've spent time in foreign countries is the fact that we have some choices to make. And yes, there's going to be some violence.

Yes, there's going to be some discord. Yes, there's going to be some unconventional thoughts. And some things we disagree with wholeheartedly.

But we live in relative peace and tranquility when compared to the rest of the world, and it's because we accept our differences, and not because we focus on the things that only one group of people think.

So I encourage you to take a step back from all the things that distract us, all the things that divide us, all the things that we think are so important here in the United States and realize that it's truly a first-world problem.

You can go out here in the streets and be in the ultra-minority and yell at a congressman right here on the streets, and it's okay. Nobody is going to stop you. Nobody is going to kill you.

Nobody is going to put you in jail, at least not for a long period of time, when you disagree with me, because this is America, and that is our strength, and we should count our blessings.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Congressman.

And now we will have Representative Plaskett, who is here, to speak as well.

MS. PLASKETT: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for having me here. Thank you so much for this invitation.

I want to thank the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for the ability to come and speak with you all this afternoon.

I recognize my fellow members of Congress that have been here before and some that are coming after me to speak on our country's founding fundamental rights, our religious freedom.

That government shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion nor prohibit its free exercise is a uniquely American

protection at the founding of our nation.

It is a core principle that allows us to be a beacon of light to the world, even its most trying times.

Though we may champion this freedom on paper, the real work, we all know, is executing it in the lives of everyone. You all who are here this afternoon know this better than so many of us.

The commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 comes at a time where we are witnessing a resurgence of domestic antisemitism, Islamophobia.

The FBI is receiving reports of threats to churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, at striking levels.

Just outside Chicago, we have witnessed the killing, the brutal killing of a child, the death of individuals in worship, in their homes.

That a child would be lost because of it's that person or that parent's, right, religious belief, that his light is gone, Wadea's light is gone, the light of another American dream has been

snuffed out.

Hatred does not belong in America or anywhere in the world, not this hatred or any hatred. It's our duty as members of Congress, our duty as Americans, to work to stop this, to uphold the torch of freedom, to say to our people and to the world this light will protect you.

So I live in a very unique place in the Virgin Islands, in the Caribbean, which has its own unique religious tolerance there. The Danes—this was their one stronghold in the Caribbean for many years. The Kingdom of Denmark, where the official religion was Lutheranism, and there's a large number of Lutherans that are there on the island on which I live, but because they were interested in commerce and in growth, they were very smart to understand that we've got to have religious tolerance.

We've got to make a place where all religions can come and people can feel safe to worship, to work, to grow our economy as well.

And so they were very clear that the town

square would have no church. Unlike many places where you see a church in the town square, there is no church in our town squares because they didn't want prominence to any one given religion.

We also have, because of that, a unique position in the United States of having the second oldest continually running synagogue in the Western Hemisphere, which comes from Sephardic Jews, who leaving the Spanish Inquisition, came to the island of St. Thomas because there was religious tolerance and there was plenty of work.

The Danes recognized that these groups of people would be able to fortify their economy and become a really strong merchant class. Hence, Camille Passarro, one of the greatest founders of Impressionism, was born on the island of St. Thomas to a Sephardic Jewish family.

Again, in the 1940s, after the creation of Israel, we had the burgeoning of a Palestinian community on the island of St. Croix, who were also part of our merchant class there.

And we have all learned to live, to

coexist with one another, to respect each other's religions, and to work so that our children can live in harmony.

Listen, you can't be on a small island and have too much beef with one person or another. It's going to spill out if not in your homes, on the beach, in the grocery store, where everybody knows your name, and if you're like myself and your family have lived there for many generations, you're probably related to the person as well.

But it works. It works. So much so that at the beginning of the beginning understanding in World War II of the Holocaust, what was happening, the Jewish community on St. Thomas wrote a letter to then President Roosevelt and said that we have talked with our local government, and we can take thousands into our islands if you would accept them and allow them to come to us.

We have a place here, a haven for them, to be able to live. Unfortunately, the President did not take us up on that, and we lost many people because of that, because of lack of religious

tolerance and understanding that all of us getting along together helps us all to grow.

So much so that my youngest daughter—I have five children—my youngest is a girl, just started high school, and her high school teacher was just fascinated with the fact that this African American girl was taking Arabic as her language, and the professor asked me, well, why would she be taking Arabic?

I said, well, the next door neighbor speaks Arabic, and I guess, you know, I need somebody. I'm a politician. I need to know what they're thinking about me.

[Laughter.]

MS. PLASKETT: And so I need a mole around the neighborhood. Hence, my daughter is taking Arabic.

We have got to recognize humanity in each one of us. The humanity, and not just the humanity but the potential, and I think so much sometimes that the founding fathers were not thinking of religious tolerance as a means of being right, but

as a means of growing the United States, of a means of recognizing that our strength is our diversity.

American ingenuity can only come about if we continually bring new ideas, new creeds, new religions, and so knowing that 20 percent of the victims of registered hate crimes in the United States last year was targeted because of their religion, or the perpetrator's perception of their practice, is something that cannot continue in our country.

We must keep the practice of keeping our own house in order if we as Americans expect other nations to live up to the standards set by the International Religious Freedom Act.

Because of that law and the work of so many following up on its edict, we have seen violators sanctioned for their oppression of religious minorities and some repressive governments changed some laws, but there is still much work to do.

It's our duty to continue to protect religious freedoms here in the United States and

throughout the world.

Last year, we stood up and said no to the horrors of CCP's regime in Xinjiang working against and working through the Ways and Means Committee to pass the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act and other legislation to try to stop the greatest ongoing abuse of religious rights at a scale anywhere in the world.

So whether it's in Southern Levant in Africa or even in partner nations like India and Turkey, we know we must do more to create space and protections for the free association and practice of religion.

You know that you have my commitment to that. And I believe that you have so many Americans' commitment to make that happen.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you all and can't wait for the continued work to keep going. Thank you.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Congresswoman. We appreciate your being with us.

We'll now return to our panel and Senator Nickles. Senator Nickles.

SENATOR NICKLES: I'll try this one. That one works a little better.

Frank Wolf is a champion on behalf of religious freedom around the world, and one of the reasons why we passed it in the Senate was to get him off our back because he is persistent.

And I just want to say that I'm very pleased that I was the author of it. I mentioned, I'll say Joe Lieberman was a great co-chairman or co-sponsor of the legislation. I'm sorry he couldn't be here personally, but it was a pleasure to work with him.

I had the pleasure of traveling with him in various places around the country, and one of the things that we always did, and, Frank, I can tell that you did it, too, when you traveled, we would meet leaders of countries and then we would talk about things of interest, but we would always bring up religious freedom, particularly if they didn't have it or if it was being abused.

And we would do this, and it seemed like it was almost a sporadic effort. This congressman would be, you know, you were in Sudan, and I remember Nepal, I remember Somalia. I remember Egypt. I remember China. I remember Russia. And all of us in various ways would bring up, wait a minute, why, why in China are people relegated to home churches?

And what's the government doing with picking religious leaders in the Catholic Church or in other churches?

Or why are the Uyghurs being persecuted like they are? And, in Russia, why are the Jewish people being really discriminated against?

And we did it. It was a little haphazard. Jim Inhofe would go into Africa, and he would meet with all these different African leaders, and he would bring up some of these issues.

But it was a little haphazard. So what could we do that would be better? And Frank Wolf was one that championed and said let's have a commission that stays on top of it.

It's not just individual members. I mentioned Nepal. I remember I was a new member in the Senate, and one of my constituents was arrested because he was sharing gospels in Nepal. And I thought this is outlandish, and I remember talking to Dick Lugar, who was chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee in the Senate, what can I do?

And he said, well, call up the ambassador. I had the ambassador in my office. A couple weeks later this individual was out of prison. He was imprisoned because he was sharing.

And I remember in Somalia, we had an Oklahoma church group that wanted, and they had water shortages. Still is a big, big challenge in many countries in Africa. So they donated, we have a lot of drilling expertise in Oklahoma, so they donated rigs to drill water wells except for the Somalian government was going to tax them at an exorbitant rate so it would be impossible to send it in.

And again we talked to the ambassador. Eventually we got that taken care of, but again

these are kind of incremental, individual, and why was that? Well, it was coming from a Christian group.

It didn't make sense, and so the idea of having a commission that would expose religious intolerance, religious discrimination, religious punishment, religious death—I remember in Pakistan, and I'd just been in Pakistan, and there was a church bombing that killed over 100 people, and they were worshipping.

Wow. That's hard for us to even imagine in the United States because you can drive by in any town and there's unlimited number of churches and synagogues and mosques, and no one cares. It's taken for granted in the United States.

But it's not that way in frankly the majority of the world. The majority of the population of the world does not have religious freedom. And so what can we do about it in a constructive manner, and so that was the genesis of this, this legislation.

And I'm really proud of those people who

have implemented and worked on it. I want to mention John Hanford, who is also an ambassador, but he was a staff member for Dick Lugar, and he helped us in the legislation.

Eric Ueland helped us in the legislation. Doug Badger did. Jim Jatras. Several people worked on this. This is a labor of love and something very important to be done.

And I commend the Commission because you're staying on top of it, and to all the people who are working on this issue, I just want to say thank you for it. It's vitally important to continue exposing the abuse, maybe shaming those people who are abusing, and help bring about peace.

There is so much—Frank and I are both involved in the National Prayer Breakfast, and it was always interesting. When we'd have the international community, and we'd have prayers with the Muslim community. We'd have prayers with the Jewish community. We'd have prayers with Christian community. And we'd be praying together.

And it helps bring about understanding,

coalescing amongst peace, and it's really to be commended.

And so I just want to thank all of you for your outstanding efforts and say may God continue to bless you in your efforts. Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Thank you so much, Senator Nickles.

My name is Commissioner David Curry. Sadly, there are thousands of people around the world who are imprisoned and otherwise mistreated for their peaceful religious activities.

Many of these prisoners and other victims have and continue to endure things like torture, inhumane living conditions and enforced disappearance, deprivation of medical care, and no communication with their loved ones.

Advocacy on their behalf is crucial to calling out such injustices and providing hope for those that are behind bars and, of course, for their families.

Members of Congress can advocate for FoRB

prisoners of conscience through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedom Project, or DFP, which we'll refer to today.

We'd like to take this opportunity to thank the current co-chairs of the Lantos Human Rights Commission, Representatives Chris Smith and Jim McGovern, for their leadership and commitment to the DFP.

Also, I think it's worth noting that Katrina Lantos Swett is here. She is a leader on this subject, has picked up the mantle of her father, and I'd like to take a moment. She's going to be mad at me, but we're going to honor her.

Would you please give a hand to Katrina?
Thank you so much.

[Applause.]

COMMISSIONER CURRY: The Lantos Commission, in partnership with USCIRF and Amnesty International USA, developed and established the DFP in December of 2012. And since then nearly 60 congressional members, Republicans and Democrats, members of both House and Senate, have advocated

for more than a hundred prisoners of conscience from a wide variety of backgrounds through things like social media, press statements, letters, floor speeches, foreign delegation visits, and more.

USCIRF has long reported on the cases of individual prisoners and advocated for their release.

In 2016, Congress passed legislation requiring USCIRF to more formally compile such cases for the American public and the world.

The Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act mandated that USCIRF create a public Victims List database to document individuals who have been detained, imprisoned, placed under house arrest, forcibly disappeared, tortured, or forced to renounce their faith because of their religious belief or religious activity.

And since then, USCIRF has recorded more than 2,000 victims, a mere handful of the actual number that are imprisoned by nearly 30 countries and entities around the world.

Countries with the highest representation

in the Victims List include China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, India, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, and others like Nicaragua seeing a sharp increase this year alone.

It's a list of shame. Getting to this point has been a team effort, but I'd like to specifically acknowledge and thank USCIRF staffers Patrick Greenwalt and Dylan Schexnaydre—pardon me. That's on me. And former staffers Judy Golub and Zack Udin for their work in designing and implementing the database.

At this moment, we're going to begin to see on the screen a list of names, and I would like to ask for just a moment of silence in the honor of these prisoners.

[Moment of silence while list of names and faces is shown.]

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Thank you very much for that moment of silence.

As the names and faces of some of the victims of the USCIRF Victims List and in the Lantos Commission's DFP can be seen here on the

screens before you, the USCIRF advocates for prisoners by raising their cases with the U.S. Department of State, Congress, and foreign government officials, and we publicly speak out on prisoner cases throughout social media, interviews, reports and hearings, and during country visits.

USCIRF has visited prisoners in jail or met with their families, lawyers, and their representatives.

In some cases, these efforts have had direct positive impact, encouraging authorities to provide long overdue medical treatment to an ailing or elderly prisoner, or even granting an individual early release from prison.

At this time, we're going to have a panel to discuss these issues, and we have with us today Judy Golub, Director of Strategy and Planning for Religious News Foundation/Service and FoRB Women's Alliance co-founder; and Kim Stanton and Sasha LaPonsa from the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

As director of communications for USCIRF

and congressional relations between 2009 and 2016, Judy worked with Kim in coordination to bring about the DFP.

And Sasha is currently the primary Lantos Commission staffer working on the DFP.

So we're going to have a little discussion here. While I make my way over, would you please welcome these guests?

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: And as Commissioner Curry is making his way over, we're going to hear from another representative from Congress, Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz from Florida.

Congresswoman.

MS. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ: Thank you.

[Applause.]

MS. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ: Thank you very much. Thank you so much. I appreciate the opportunity to join you today.

I'm grateful to be able to join you in celebrating the Commission's quarter-century of

critical work to bring an end to religious persecution.

And I want to mention briefly that I had the privilege of serving with Frank Wolf, and there was no more devoted individual in our country to fighting for religious freedom, and to help make sure that we could put spotlights on those who were suffering from that persecution.

All of your work began with the International Religious Freedom Act, a simple recognition of a moral imperative that rings true for all Americans that freedom of religion does not belong to us alone, that universal rights be respected and that our nation ought to lead in lifting the marginalized.

Since the passage of this landmark legislation, USCIRF has played a central role in monitoring threats to freedom of religion and belief.

It also identifies U.S. policies to promote improvements and punish abusers and brings their expertise to the administration, the public,

and to Congress.

Religious freedom concerns are rightfully placed at the center of our human rights policy through the dedication of commissioners, professional staff, and ambassadors at large, including Ambassador Hussain, who has excelled in this role.

Throughout my time as a representative, I've seen immense progress in our government's efforts to hold repressive regimes accountable and provide justice for the downtrodden, especially under President Biden's leadership.

President Biden has taken forceful concrete actions to counter authoritarian regimes while also offering safe harbor to refugees who fear persecution on religious grounds.

This is a clear demonstration of our country's veracity and values. I've also observed the rapid evolution of this work in response to a dynamic threat environment.

This has included expanding their focus beyond state actors to account for the damaging

influence of ISIS, the Taliban, and Al-Shabaab.

This mission is especially personal for me, as an American Jew. My ancestors suffered from pogroms in Eastern Europe, and right now it cuts deeply as we see the horrific violence inflicted by Hamas that targeted and massacred Israeli civilians.

In this moment, it is particularly critical that we take notice of state sponsors of terrorism, like Iran, whose destabilizing actions are driven by religious intolerance and genocidal denial.

Clearly, bigotry does not abide by borders. Our increasing interconnection through the Internet created a viral network of disinformation, conspiracies and incitement that leaves us all unsafe.

It's especially dangerous when augmented by anti-democratic regimes, aided by profit-seeking algorithms, and abetted by ignorance and apathy.

As a co-founder and co-chair of the Inter-Parliamentary Task Force to Combat Online

Antisemitism, I fundamentally believe that social media platforms and democratic institutions must work hand-in-hand to combat the digital spread of hate.

The work is not finished, and as policymakers, we confront significant challenges in our mission to extend protection for religious minorities.

As we move forward, I will continue to lean on the guidance and expertise that USCIRF provides. So much depends on our nation's leadership on these issues across several agencies and departments.

And as a member of the House Appropriations Committee, I'll keep working on a bipartisan basis to ensure that this work has the resources it needs.

I hope that 25 years from today, there will be no reason for anyone to fear exile or exploitation due to their faith. Until that day arrives, I'll be proud to support the fight for international religious freedom.

Thank you so much.

[Applause.]

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you.

As chair, let me just thank my good friend Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz, who from the first day in Congress has always threatened to give politicians a good name.

[Laughter.]

CHAIR COOPER: And she's lived up to it every single day. Great public servant. Thank you.

MS. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ: Thank you.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: And we'll now hear from Representative Burgess Owens from Utah.

Congressman Owens.

[Applause.]

MR. OWENS: Thank you. Thank you.

Let me start off before I get into my notes here, my statement, how much we appreciate everything you do.

I was very, very fortunate to grow up in deep south Tallahassee, Florida in the '60s. What

brought us through that process was the fact that we had something in common, and the commonality was faith, a tradition of faith, family, the free market, education, an idea that as we become a more perfect union, that we find those things that have made us different brings us more and more together.

And as I look out over the last decades from my growing up in the segregated south to where we are today, where we really do a much better job of looking at each other from inside out versus outside in.

That's the promise of our nation. That's the promise of our country. And I want to thank you for what you have done because faith is the bottom line.

Faith, however we might worship, is what brings us together so we can start looking at each other in the way that we now have much better job of doing.

So I want to thank you again for having me here today to help commemorate the 25th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

Freedom of religion is not just a cherished American value. It's a fundamental right, human right, that knows no boundaries.

IRFA enacted a quarter of a century ago stands for a testament of our commitment to promoting and defending this universal right which we have to make sure we're always maintaining and fight for.

IRFA was born out of the understanding that religious freedom is not just a matter of personal belief. It's a cornerstone of democracy and human dignity.

It was created to make religious freedom a top priority in U.S. foreign policy, then to lend our support to those who face persecution because of their faith around the world.

Over the last, these 25 years, it's been a tangible impact. We've seen the tangible impact of IRFA. We've witnessed the courage and real resilience of those who in the face of adversity refuse to compromise their faith.

We have seen governments held accountable

for the violation of religious freedom, and we've seen the progress in a global struggle for that liberty.

We cannot rest. We must instead lean in with more passion, dedication, tenacity because the work is far from done.

As we reflect on the past successes, it should empower us to envision a much, much more has to be done. We must continue to advocate for those who still suffer.

We must adopt our policies to evolving challenges of religious freedom. Let us renew our commitment to the principles enshrined in IRFA. Let us work together to ensure that all people regardless of their faith or belief can live a life free of persecution and discrimination.

Let us honor the legacy of IRFA by working towards a world where universal rights to religious freedom is truly universal.

Again, we have in this nation a remarkable history, one that from the very beginning believed in becoming a more perfect union, one that believed

that we can be equal in the eyes of those around us, in our society, to dream the dreams we have knowing that because we can in a world of freedom make some good things happen.

So I want to thank you for giving us that foundation, the foundation of religious freedom, the foundation of having our faith, whatever it might be, to be accepted, to be embraced, and that together we can have a conversation that brings us to a more perfect union is what we're all about.

So thank you so much for that. Thank you for leaning in hard, and we have to make sure the next 25 years we can look back and say we have become even a much better place because of the freedom of religion that we have fought so hard for.

So thank you so much for that. Appreciate it.

[Applause.]

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Thank you, Congressman. So appreciate your comments, and also thank you to you three for sitting on this panel

with us.

I'm going to ask Judy and Kim if you could start us out here. We'll get you one that does work.

Let me ask the question first. Otherwise we won't know what your answer means.

But can you tell us a little bit about what led to the founding of the DFP and what your hopes were for the project? Maybe you could both kind of jump in on that.

MS. GOLUB: Thank you, Commissioner Curry.

So I was thinking a lot about that question, and I said there's five points I want to make, and what really led to it was the importance of personalizing injustice.

I think that's how someone talked to me about it a week or two ago. We're all numb by all the huge numbers of people who are persecuted, dislocated, they're refugees, there is horrible events that are happening in the world, and we just can't take it in.

At the same time, there's a lot of

division, and we're all numb. Individualizing and personalizing really cuts through the noise.

And we wanted to develop a tool that would do that, and if you look at all those pictures and the names of the people that are being shown, it really does cut through.

We can comprehend one person. We can't comprehend a million. That was number one.

My second point was certainly USCIRF's mandate to focus on religious freedom violations faced these same challenges: how do you cut through the noise? How do you break through and focus on individuals who are imprisoned for their religious belief or non-beliefs, their actions, their practices, and their advocacy?

How do you do it? What's a useful tool? Well, the Soviet Jewry Movement had a model for us. Synagogues, temples, campuses, Jewish campuses reached out to allies, and in every single place in communities there was a picture of a Soviet Jew.

People wore arm bands. They met with their members of Congress. They put things in the

op-eds. They had marches. They personalized the injustice, and they succeeded largely.

So with the support of the commissioners, and I want to thank Katrina Lantos Swett especially and Robby George at that time, this realization led to partnership with Representative Wolf, Representative McGovern, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, along with Amnesty International, in creating the Defending Freedoms Project.

It was a joy to collaborate with Kimberly, and it was a joy to work for Mr. McGovern and still does, and it was a joy to collaborate with Elyse Anderson, who worked for Representative Wolf on the project.

And I want to thank Erin Singshinsuk and the current commissioners and the current Commission staff for continuing to work on the project, which leads to my fourth point.

My hope that was that membership of Congress would work in support of individual prisoners of conscience using their bully pulpit

and their influence to try to work in support of not only the prisoners, which was always the goal, but the laws and practices that got those prisoners detained in the first place.

And many of them did, and it was great, but if you want me to talk about my hope for the future, I think more needs to be done, and we need to help members of Congress cut through the noise that they face every day.

And that can come from working at the grassroots, and that can come from civil society, working with their chapters at the grassroots level to do what the Soviet Jewry Movement did.

Bring up these members of Congress at home, make it important at home, and I think that will help to make it important in D.C.

So those are the five points I want to raise, and I want to thank you for your continued support for the project.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Kim.

[Applause.]

MS. STANTON: So thank you very much.

Thank you for the invitation to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission to join you all today in this wonderful celebration of 25 years of incredible work that you, that the Commission has done.

I will be brief because I think Judy hit all of the key points, and also we had a lot of, we had great times working together when I was first on the Commission, so it's a real pleasure to be with you here today.

I mean I would say the first thing building on Congress', as Judy said, long history actually of supporting individuals fighting for human rights and in specific different contexts, going way, way back.

The first thing the founding of the DFP was about was just recognizing in one place the incredible centrality of human rights advocates for human rights.

The work that we do would be impossible without people on the ground documenting, being willing to take their concerns and try to hold

governments accountable for their obligations, and accompanying victims.

And that's true for all human rights defenders and certainly including those who advocate for the right to freedom of conscience and thought and religion.

And just, it was an opportunity to say we recognize the risk that people take, and that by simply advocating for human rights, most countries in the world support, endorse the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it's pretty broadly recognized at this point.

Yet advocating for the rights contained in that document can lead people to be threatened, attacked, unjustly imprisoned, and even killed.

And so the Defending Freedoms Project is an opportunity to highlight those individuals.

And then, secondly, it was a way of bringing, of bringing and increasing the involvement of members of Congress in human rights. And from those members that I've been able to talk to who have had the opportunity to advocate for

human rights defenders, for religious freedom defenders, through DFP, it's been a really wonderful thing.

It is a great feeling and a great experience to have the opportunity to improve the conditions of somebody who suffered due process, who's living, perhaps has been tortured, who's living in miserable conditions for a very long time, to improve those conditions or even to help release, earn their release, is a really wonderful personalized, as Judy said. It's a personal connection to everything that human rights means and can mean for individuals.

There have been 49 members of Congress over the years who have participated, who have advocated for prisoners in the DFP, according to the statistics that we have, and that my colleague Sasha can say something about quickly. There is room for so many more.

We have many prisoners who do not have advocates and many, we would love to have many more members of Congress participating in the Defending

Freedoms Project.

And with that, I'll pass it back to you.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Well, before I ask Sasha a question, can we thank these ladies again for their work?

[Applause.]

COMMISSIONER CURRY: The diligence, and I know I speak for everyone on the Commission when I say our hope is that everyone will find somebody on this list that you care about and will adopt and advocate for them.

It's too important to overlook or just be another list on a stack of papers.

Now, Sasha, can you please tell us maybe a little bit about some of the current folks, DFP cases? And we sure appreciate your work as well.

MS. LaPONSA: Thank you, Commissioner.

There are currently 78 active cases in the Defending Freedoms Project, representing about 20 countries. 66 of those individuals are currently imprisoned and 12 of which have been released, but under harsh conditions, such as surveillance,

restricted communications or travel bans.

As we've heard, USCIRF has been a major part of the DFP since its creation, and this continues to be visible today.

We currently partner with USCIRF on 17 cases in the DFP, and an additional 15 cases are also on the Freedom of Religion on Belief Victims List.

This makes for approximately 41 percent of the Defending Freedoms Project that is also covered by the FORB Victims List.

For a couple of the cases, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the 11th Panchen Lama, was disappeared in 1995, and as his DFP advocate, co-chair McGovern regularly calls for the Panchen Lama's release and for the Chinese government to allow for independent verification of his well-being.

Mubarak Bala is president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria. He has been serving a 24-year sentence in prison on charges related to his atheist and humanist beliefs.

He has received threats to his well-being

for years prior to his arrest, including by members of his own family.

As his DFP advocate, Jamie Raskin has sent multiple letters to the President of Nigeria calling for Bala's release.

Finally, for a success story of the project to demonstrate the impact that these projects have, Nguyen Bac Truyen, who we will hear from shortly, was released on September 8th of this year, five years before the end of his 11-year prison sentence, as a result of an agreement negotiated by the Biden administration.

As his DFP advocate, Representative Zoe Lofgren, had sent multiple letters to the administration since calling for them to push for Nguyen's release since taking up the case in 2020, including a letter to President Biden that was sent just before his release.

[Applause.]

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Thank you to our folks. We sure appreciate it. We have some video testimonials that we're going to show directly

after this event so I hope you'll stick around and watch some of those.

I'll pass it to Commissioner Ueland.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Commissioner Ueland, before you get started, if you don't mind, we would like to hear from another congressional representative who is with us.

Congressman Jonathan Jackson from Illinois. Congressman Jackson.

[Applause.]

MR. JACKSON: Thank you very much.

My name is Congressman Jonathan Jackson. I serve the first congressional district of Illinois. I'd like to give my heartfelt thanks to the members of the Commission, to the religious authorities that are here today, and I must say I'm a first-term congressman, and this has been one of my highest and greatest meetings that I've had on the Hill, that there is a room for religion, there is a room for peace, and we must give peace a chance.

I've had the opportunity to travel to many hostage areas around the world with my father, the Reverend Jessie Jackson, and I'd just like to highlight a few lessons that I have learned.

When we went to meet Hafez Assad in Syria to bring back Lieutenant Robert Goodman, it was discovered that the United States, many members in the State Department, weren't even talking to the president of Syria at that time. And that's how his release was secured.

When we went to meet Saddam Hussein after he had created human shields, 400 persons, we flew into Amman, Jordan after there was an embargo, then flew into Iraq, met with President Saddam Hussein. This is while President George Bush was transmitting emails and sending out links over CNN.

The leaders had stopped talking. At that point we were able to go in and meet with Saddam Hussein, go into the Green Room, the Green Zone, and bring back 400 hostages by giving peace a chance without a government portfolio in Syria, without a government portfolio in Iraq, able to

return prisoners home, talking with ecumenical leaders giving peace a chance.

And now when we see that we're on the brink of war, I would tell you and leave you with this, in the Book of Matthew, blessed are the peacemakers, not peacekeepers, the peacemakers, those that are willing to have dirty hands and keep a clean heart, those that are willing to reconcile people on both sides.

We must give peace a chance. I see that we have a large gunboat off the shore, and I know there's been horrific acts and atrocities and people have been killed and brutalized, and now there's murder, and now there's people being killed in astronomical numbers.

Somewhere we have to break the cycle of pain and to give peace a chance. Our scriptures teach us in the Christian faith that those are the people that are called the children of God, those that are trying to look at this through God's eyes.

It cannot be a radical idea to sign a letter like I signed to give a ceasefire and peace

a chance. That should be the norm.

I would like to see not just a gunboat off the shore strengthening defense, but also strengthening our diplomacy. As we speak right now, there is not a confirmed ambassador from the United States to Israel. There is not a confirmed ambassador from the United States to Egypt.

We must give peace a chance. Equal parts defense and equal part diplomacy to give peace a chance.

And in closing, we remember the words of the prophet Rabbi Abraham Heschel: The prophets give us hope. The politicians can stir fear. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit, when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past, when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain, when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion, its message becomes meaningless.

These are the words of Rabbi Abraham Heschel. This is a rabbi that worked very closely

with Reverend Martin Luther King. I implore people in this chamber and those that are watching, let us move forward in God's grace, and let us have peaceful means, as best we can, strong defense, strong diplomacy to give peace a chance.

I thank you.

[Applause.]

CHAIR COOPER: Congressman Jackson, thank you for sharing your honest views and invoking the New Testament.

I'd just like to briefly quote the Old Testament. King Solomon said: There's a time to love and a time to hate. There's a time for peace and a time for war.

When you have absolute evil, deal with that and then bring all the peacemakers. Let them help heal different nations and bring people together.

But the Old Testament or the Torah also instructs us that when you are confronted with absolute evil, you have to deal with it or it will grow.

So thank you for your honesty. We appreciate that you're here.

[Applause.]

CHAIR COOPER: And as a rabbi, I felt I wanted to just share some words [inaudible].

MR. JACKSON: Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

COMMISSIONER UELAND: Good afternoon. My name is Eric Ueland, and I too serve as a commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

We've talked a lot today about our past 25 years and so many people who support the cause of religious freedom here at home and around the globe.

And before we move forward, quickly, I'd like to recognize in the audience a former USCIRF commissioner, a former chairman, and now the co-chairman of the International Religious Freedom Summit, Katrina Lantos Swett.

If she could please rise so we could all say thank you very much for everything you've done.

We really appreciate it.

[Applause.]

COMMISSIONER UELAND: In addition to the many members of Congress who have joined us today so far, which demonstrates the breadth and depth of our support, we received written remarks from Senator Ben Cardin, and video remarks from Senators James Lankford, Marco Rubio, Tommy Tuberville, and Representative Jared Huffman and Representative Darren Soto.

I'll read the letter from Senator Cardin, and then we will run the video remarks.

Senator Cardin wrote to all of us today:

[Letter read by Commissioner Ueland as follows:]

Dear Friends: I would like to extend a warm welcome to everyone attending today's event commemorating the 25th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 and the establishment of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Since its establishment 25 years ago, the

Commission on International Religious Freedom has championed the ability of people to exercise their rights to freedom of religion or belief.

I was proud to vote for the legislation which created the Commission, and I will continue to support the Commission's efforts to draw attention to the worst violators of this fundamental human right.

This event provides an important opportunity to reflect on the impact the Commission has made on our nation and the international community as a champion of religious freedom.

It is also a time to reflect on how the Commission can further elevate its efforts as we all know that far too many countries continue to restrict or deny these fundamental freedoms.

The Commission has been and will continue to be a powerful force to protect the rights of those who wish to practice their belief without fear of persecution.

I commend the Commission on International Religious Freedom for its continued leadership and

service to the global community.

Best wishes for a wonderful event to all of you. Sincerely, Ben Cardin, Chairman, Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

[The reading of the letter is concluded.]

COMMISSIONER UELAND: Thank you Senator Cardin.

[Applause.]

COMMISSIONER UELAND: With that, we will go to our video remarks.

SENATOR LANKFORD: [Prerecorded video remarks.]

I am Senator James Lankford, and I wish I could be there with you in that beautiful room to also celebrate with you 25 years of the International Religious Freedom Act.

It's a significant act at a significant time when quite frankly, as we think about the late '90s, all that was going on around the world and the Cold War coming down, and the rise of freedom around the world, there was a real sense of optimism that we had the opportunity to be able to

push out and to really have a significant change.

While there has been significant progress on the issues of religious freedom, in many areas around the world, we've seen even in the past few weeks the real pain, the real trauma, of antisemitism and of people violently attacking based on faith.

We've seen it not in Israel in the heinous terrorist attacks there. We've seen it in China in what continues to be able to happen over and over again with Uyghur Muslims, with Tibetan Buddhists, and limitations that they continue to be able to face in the reeducation camps.

We've seen it in Nigeria. We've seen it in allies and friends like India in the limitations of freedom that's happened there of so many people that are just trying to live their faith.

Of course, we've talked over and over again about Pakistan and our continual push to be able to make sure that we are continuing to hold Pakistan to account for what is occurring.

Listen, we've made a lot of progress.

There are many areas to celebrate. But there will always be areas of focus so I'm so grateful for many of you who continue the work that you have, for my friends that have stayed so engaged in this, to make sure that government leaders around the world and members of the United States government also never forget there are people everyday who just want to be able to get up in the morning and to be able to live their faith for that day.

Let's continue to be able to speak out for those folks because a where freedom of faith thrives, freedom also thrives.

God bless you. Thank you. I look forward to getting a chance to see you each face-to-face in the days ahead to personally say thank you for your ongoing work.

SENATOR RUBIO: [Prerecorded video remarks.]

Senator Marco Rubio here. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today, and I especially want to thank Don Nickles, Joe Lieberman, and Frank Wolf.

More than two decades ago, you wrote the legislation that would make the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom a reality, and in doing so, you laid the groundwork for committed and clear-eyed advocacy on behalf of the persecuted.

That advocacy has done a lot of good over the years. Unfortunately, we need it now more than ever.

On the 7th of October of this year, it was the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust. And in the days that followed, we saw the ancient poison of antisemitism rear its ugly head once again.

We saw it in the Middle East where supporters of Hamas cheered the slaughter, the rape, the mutilation, the kidnapping of innocent Israelis, and tragically we've also seen it in here in America with our own college students often defending the terrorists.

And that's not all. Religious oppression is on the rise in China, in Nicaragua, in Nigeria, and many other places.

America can't stop all these horrors, but it can shine a light on them. And that's what makes this Commission so valuable. Under its watch, no persecutors can hide their dirty work, no matter where they live.

So thank you again to everyone here. God bless you and God bless America.

SENATOR TUBERVILLE: [Prerecorded video remarks.]

Hey, this is Coach Tommy Tuberville. I just want to take a minute to join you as you mark the 25th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act.

I want to say thank you to USCIRF for all you do to protect the rights of the religious minorities around the world.

IRFA was a bipartisan bill that recognized our first freedom, the freedom of religion. Yet, from Cuba to Iran to North Korea, all over our world, there are attacks on religious freedoms.

Worst of all, we've seen threats to religious freedoms here and at home. Today's

radical woke ideology has redefined the religious beliefs of billions of Christians, Muslims, and Jews as bigotry and hatred.

Anyone who does not bow down to the new woke orthodoxy gets cancelled.

In Canada or the United Kingdom, which were built by people of faith, it is now, it is now illegal to read certain passages from the Bible in public.

Christians in England have been arrested for praying silently in front of abortion clinics. This is absolutely appalling, ridiculous.

Our founders would have had no doubt that this is tyranny. James Madison wrote that all men have a right to their property and the most sacred property is their self-conscience.

Yet in today's America, the woke left has tried to redefine freedom and freedom of religion as freedom of belief, but that's not what our Constitution says.

The Constitution protects the free exercise of religion. It's not just the freedom to

believe in your head. It's the freedom to live out your faith.

Like you, I am deeply troubled by these trends at home and abroad. But that's why I'm so grateful to USCIRF and the countless, countless people of faith who are working and praying everyday for the full protection of freedom of religion.

I take comfort in the words of Saint Paul. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

Thank you and God bless you in your very, very, very important work.

MR. HUFFMAN: [Prerecorded video remarks.]

Hi, folks. I'm Congressman Jared Huffman. I have the honor of representing California's beautiful second district.

As the co-chair of the Congressional Free Thought Caucus and the only openly humanist member of Congress, it is an honor to be part of an event that celebrates the 25th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act with the very people who created this law.

So thank you to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for inviting me to share a few words. This is an issue that is incredibly important and personal for me.

Some of my colleagues in Congress are coy about their religious beliefs, but I've come right out and said it, I'm a humanist.

I announced this in 2017 because I felt that my constituents deserve to know where I stand, and that includes the moral framework that informs the work I do in Congress.

So along with my friends, Congressman Jamie Raskin and former Congressman Jerry McNerney, I founded the Congressional Free Thought Caucus in 2018, and this group just keeps growing.

We are now up to 19 members, and the steady increase in membership is a real testament to how Congress is starting to catch up to actually representing the religious makeup of our constituents.

Our work in the Free Thought Caucus is driven by a few key pillars: first, promoting

public policy based on reason and science; second, protecting the secular nature of our federal government; third, opposing discrimination against individuals for their faith or their lack of faith; and finally, providing a forum for members of Congress to discuss their moral frameworks, ethical values, and personal religious journeys.

And I think all of that really aligns with the goals that you set out to achieve when the IRFA was first passed.

When it comes down to it, religion plays a vital role in the daily lives of many people, but subjecting others to one's religion or beliefs with government resources is not only unacceptable, it is illegal, unconstitutional.

Since IRFA's passage, the U.S. has stepped up its efforts to monitor and raise awareness about international religious freedom issues, and to integrate these concerns into U.S. diplomacy, human rights programming, refugee resettlement, humanitarian aid, and training, and a lot more.

That is important progress, but the

unfortunate reality is that while we've seen improvements, religious persecution is still a very serious threat, especially for people living under the most repressive regimes.

And, unfortunately, we're even seeing America backslide under the extreme influence and infiltration of White Christian Nationalism.

The separation of church and state isn't just a critical pillar of our Constitution, it's what keeps democracies healthy and strong.

It's a shield that protects everyone regardless of your belief or lack of belief.

I'll continue to passionately advocate for true religious freedom and separation of church and state at home and abroad. With our collective efforts, I know we can continue to hold foreign violators accountable, combat persecution and improve conditions for people across the globe.

Every person deserves to live out their beliefs openly and without fear.

I look forward to continuing this important work with all of you.

Thanks for letting me join your event.

MR. SOTO: [Prerecorded video remarks.]

Hello, I'm Congressman Darren Soto. And I'm happy to join the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

You know, in Florida's ninth congressional district, we have so many different religions, from Christian to Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and more, and I'm so proud to be able to embrace and support all these different constituents as they practice their First Amendment rights here in the United States, and as we respect these rights around the world.

As we're dealing with struggles in the Middle East, it's a reminder that we need to make sure we respect all religions and people's ability to practice them.

Once again, excited to commemorate the 25th anniversary here today. Thank you.

CHAIR COOPER: I think it's back to me. I know that a number of people in the audience are

looking at their watches now. Here's the good news.

By standard Jewish time, we're actually early.

[Laughter.]

CHAIR COOPER: However, by congressional time and also because of the use of this amazing hall, we realize that we're about 15 minutes over. We're going to crunch the last section and hope that everyone will be able to stay.

It's been an absolutely remarkable afternoon. But for this last section, let me go to each of the commissioners to introduce themselves and to share a few thoughts.

First, my close friend, my brother in faith, Commissioner Mohamed Magid.

COMMISSIONER MAGID: Thank you very much, Chairman Cooper.

We are nine of us. Two of us are not here. Commissioner Nury Turkel and Susie Gelman, they're not here. We really appreciate their service and their contributions to this Commission.

Before I say my written remarks, I want to say that I as a clergy, as a man of faith, I'm really disturbed by the loss of civilian lives in Israel and Palestine, in Gaza. And also I understand again it's antisemitism and Islamophobia in America on campuses. Also the loss of many lives as we speak now of civilians, in Gaza, of children, and therefore we have to value all of human lives, but I'm really standing with my brothers and sisters in Jewish community and brothers and sisters in Muslim community.

And we should model in America not to allow rise of antisemitism and Islamophobia, and, as I said, it has to be modeled by people of faith to young people on campuses. That's first what I want to say.

[Applause.]

COMMISSIONER MAGID: The other things, they asked me to explain to you what this Commission does.

You know, this wonderful staff of ours, they are the ones who are the brain of this

Commission; we are the spokespeople of the Commission. And they do wonderful research, researching about religious scene around the world.

And our Commission reports to the President of the United States, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

And as you have seen, that we publish a list of Prisoners of Conscience so we raise awareness in this country about important religious activities around the world.

That's my remark.

[Applause.]

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you.

Commissioner Schneck.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Hi. Good afternoon, everybody.

First of all, I'm Steve Schneck. I was appointed to the Commission last year by President Biden, and it's an honor to be here today and to stand with you all, really bearing witness to the importance of freedom of religion and freedom of belief around the world.

So thank you for your patience and your time.

I've been asked to read—Senator Joe Manchin of the West Virginia sent us a text, and I've been asked to read that text. So bear with me. It's from Senator Manchin.

[Text read by Commissioner Schneck as follows:]

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: I appreciate the opportunity to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act.

Gayle, my wife, and former chair of the Commission on International Religious Freedom, and I are undeniably committed to advancing religious freedom for people in the United States and throughout the world.

Freedom of religion is a bedrock principle of our democracy and the foundation of a free and prosperous society.

The founding fathers understood religious freedom to be a universal human right for everyone. Oftentimes, we can take our right to practice

religion freely for granted.

As you know, there have been several acts or violence committed against religious communities here in the United States and across the world in the wake of the ongoing conflict between Israel and the terrorist groups in the Gaza Strip.

Antisemitism is fundamental to the principle of Hamas whose heinous attacks led to the single-worst mass killing of Jews since the Holocaust.

We must come together and do everything in our power to reject antisemitism and hatred in all of its forms.

For 25 years, the IRFA, International Religious Freedom Act, has made important steps toward advancing religious freedom through the Office of International Religious Freedom in the State Department, the position of Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, and USCIRF, our Commission.

IRFA is focused on advancing religious freedom as recognized by international law,

allowing every individual the right to believe or not to believe and to live out one's beliefs honestly and without fear.

In 2019, my colleagues and I successfully came together to reauthorize USCIRF and renew its mandate to advance international religious freedom.

While we have taken these important steps, now more than ever, we must work every day to defend and support religious freedom at home and abroad.

As a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I am committed to ensuring that USCIRF and the Office of International Religious Freedom at the State Department have the resources they need to defend this sacred right around the globe.

Senator Manchin.

[The reading of the text is concluded.]

[Applause.]

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: I've also been tasked here at the conclusion of our meeting to make the ask.

So what now can be done? Speaking for

USCIRF, we urge the administration to use the CPC designation tool more effectively. Too many of the State Department CPC countries are repeatedly named as such each year, but those designations result in little or no substantive change.

Accordingly, we recommend that the State Department impose more meaningful consequences on violator governments when it comes to its CPCs.

For example, it should not issue waivers based on other U.S. interests that have, so far, allowed Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan to avoid penalties for their religious freedom abuses.

I'll take a moment to think and appreciate the scope and the depth of the work that USCIRF has been tasked by Congress.

In terms of recommendations to Congress, we urge the relevant committees to hold oversight hearings on USCIRF policy.

We also recommend that individual members of Congress raise international freedom issues on hearings, floor speeches, and congressional

delegations abroad, and advocate for religious prisoners of conscience through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project, we just heard about.

We also hope Congress will permanently reauthorize USCIRF. Bipartisan support in Congress for religious freedom abroad is a powerful driver of U.S. leadership on this important issue and helps ensure that America's commitment to international religious freedom remains strong.

And let me say, in closing, that I completely agree with my colleague, former Congressman Frank Wolf, here on my right.

USCIRF needs a budget in line with what its original intentions were when it was created in 1998.

Thank you all very much.

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Commissioner Schneck.

Now I have the distinct pleasure of introducing the people who make all this happen

every day who are extraordinarily committed public servants who make us look very, very good, and who deal with our myriad questions, comments and sometimes harassment about various things.

We do it in fellowship and in love with them and so we're going to ask the entire staff of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom to stand. So will you all stand?

[Applause.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

And we had wanted to ask all of you to introduce yourselves and talk about your portfolios, but we are now on Congress' time and not on Rabbi Cooper's time.

So we'll have to, we'll encourage everyone here who does not know you to go to the website and see your really very impressive bios and your professional, your professional history.

So thank you.

CHAIR COOPER: All right. And tragically that applause was in lieu of a well-deserved raise.

[Laughter.]

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Although we are working on it.

CHAIR COOPER: We are working on it. We are working on it. We do owe everyone on the staff an amazing thank you because based on their amazing research work and skills, we go out to heads of state, to the media, to the public, and try to also help people who are desperately in need of assistance, and the backbone of what it is that we do is all the work of the amazing people who are part of our team or you might say we're part of your team.

One other comment about the audience. I'm pretty sure that just about everyone else who is sitting here today, themselves, either through choice or through fate, are also human rights leaders, courageous people who have made a difference in their native lands, some of whom hope to get back someday to there.

In the meantime, America is a much more amazing and stronger place by virtue of your presence here. We're so grateful for each and

every one of you.

And for those of you who have the time, in about three minutes, we will show the videos of testimony of some of those great individuals, but for now, without a gavel, we thank you all for coming, and we call this meeting to an end.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

[Whereupon, at 5:20 p.m. ET, the meeting was adjourned.]

[Following adjournment, video testimonials of Nguyen Bac Truyen of Vietnam, Jahongir Kulidjanov of Uzbekistan, and Seymur Mammadov of Azerbaijan were played.]