

USCIRF Hearing: Strategies for Religious Freedom in Fragile States
Address by Elie Al Hindy – Executive Director of Adyan Foundation
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Honorable chair, Dear members of the commission

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

The challenge of FORB and conflicts based on identity are increasing rather than decreasing with time. To understand this, we need to start by reflect on why are humans becoming more aggressive, more attached to their identities, less willing to compromise, to find common ground, and to accept the other. Religions of the world have been a major reason for this, or to be clearer, it is how we deal with religions that is the problem.

Events of the past two decades, prove that the world have dismissed religion and identity politics too early, we thought that an extreme and sometimes even forced secularism would be the best antidote of religious extremism, we thought that globalization is the best way to unite people around the world. In fact, western style secularism that is aggressively excluding or at least neglecting religious and other identities is doomed to implode and cause reaction. A globalized world does not solve identity-caused conflicts, on the contrary it makes these conflicts and the fragile states resulting from them an international concern that needs to be addressed collectively.

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

1- Promoting Inclusive Citizenship:

The promotion of a one size fit all western style, secular democracy, has to be dropped, in favor of the promotion of complex and unique democratic systems that are adapted to the reality of each country. Equal citizenship, equality before the law and equal dignity & rights to all human beings are and must continue to be the essence and the base of every potential solution, yet are not sufficient. Any solution that aims at successfully bring sustainable peace and proper state building needs to take into consideration and maybe even be based on the respect of religious and other identities, and on transforming these from a reason of the conflict to a partner / a tool for the solution. People's attachment to their faith and religious identities must not be neglected or put down because if it is, it has a high probability of radicalizing and turning in to extremism. And as we have seen every extremism encourages the rise of a counter extremism, leading to the vicious cycle of feeding on the existence and strength of each other, and feeding on xenophobia and victimization. Inclusive citizenship is the best way to address the issue of religious identities within the norms of democracy and strong statehood.

We have seen that millions of believers around the world still hold on tight to their religious identity and belonging and still see for themselves as individuals and institutions playing a major role in the public sphere, in public affairs and in public issues, completely rejecting the theory that faith is a private matter that should play a role in the common civic space.

2- Promoting Alternative Religious Narratives:

Violations of FORB requires an aggressive religious discourse that dehumanizes others, promotes hate speech and discrimination and thus prepares the ground to legitimize violence against them. While we have witnessed in the past years, huge efforts and steps forward in presenting alternative religious discourse and interpretations that promote tolerance, acceptance of the other and the role of inter-faith dialogue in promoting mutual acceptance and respect. Yet we are far from reaching a time when these moderate alternative religious discourses are mainstreamed. We must promote the existing narratives, encourage new ones, connect moderate religious leaders together, introduce alternative narratives in religious schools, and protect/support champions of this frontier battle front from all religious backgrounds.

We have seen the huge power of the faithful be used as a power for destruction but also as a power of building bridges and of human fraternity. We have indeed seen faith-based actors strongly engage on the issue of refugees, of inclusion, protection, alleviation of pain, and of solving conflicts. A US strategy must empower and build on the faith-based activism that strives for peace, mutual respect and inclusive citizenship.

3- Promoting Religious Social Responsibility

Serious efforts must be invested in re-humanizing religion and promoting the social responsibility of religions, religious institutions and religious leaders. Worshiping God in almost all religions goes hand in hand with a good relation with his children. In addition to the theological dialogues that are increasingly happening, a more urgent dialogue is needed: An Interfaith Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation. A dialogue that happens in refugee camps, in the poor suburbs of our cities, behind the scenes of battle fronts and on peace negotiation tables, in soup kitchens feeding the poor, in the effort of religious leaders from different religions working together to address the social, economic and ethical challenges of their communities. A US Strategy must support the efforts to re-humanize religions, to promote inter-faith initiatives, and to support faith-based actors for peace and reconciliation.

4- Promoting State Building

Most importantly, and beyond all of the above, a US Strategy for FORB must continue to have an ultimate aim of preventing fragile states from falling to failed states. The first victims of the failure of the state are moderate voices, and peace builders. Thus, proper state building, balances between rule of law and equal citizenry on one hand and the respect of the different religious traditions and values on the other, should be our ultimate goal.