



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

“Strategies for Religious Freedom in Fragile States”

September 22, 2021

Written Statement, Corinne Graff, U.S. Institute of Peace

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

As armed conflicts in fragile states have increased in number, duration, and intensity since the 1990s, we’ve seen the spillovers from conflict zones rise exponentially, particularly the spread of violent extremism, as well as one of the largest displacement crises in human history. One percent of the world’s entire population – or 1 in 97 people – have been forcibly displaced from their homes.¹ According to the UN 250 million people lack any access to justice whatsoever because they have either been forcibly displaced or live in ungoverned spaces in conflict zones.² Conflict-related humanitarian emergencies have multiplied, stretching the capacity of the multilateral system to deliver emergency relief. The global hunger crisis is growing. While this is certainly being exacerbated by the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the first instance it is being fueled by persistent conflicts that have simmered in countries around the world for years or even decades – in the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, the Middle East and Central Asia. And we know that the impacts of global climate change will only exacerbate these trends.³

It is in response to these trends that the international community has coalesced in recent years around the need for new approaches to reduce conflict’s underlying drivers in fragile states. Fragile states are defined as countries where state-society relations and the social compact between citizens and their government are frayed – where governments substantially lack legitimacy and citizen trust in public institutions is very limited or nonexistent. The rationale for improving peacebuilding and stabilization policy in these places is clear: in addition to reducing human suffering, the UN estimates that the

¹ UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019*, June 18, 2021.

² World Justice Project, *Measuring the Justice Gap: A People-Centered Assessment of Unmet Justice Needs Around the World*, 2019.

³ U.N. Security Council, “Climate Change Exacerbates Existing Conflict Risks, Likely to Create New Ones, Assistant Secretary-General Warns the Security Council,” Security Council Press Release, July 24, 2020.

international community stands to save \$20 in costly military and humanitarian crisis-response for every \$1 invested in conflict prevention.⁴

This new consensus on fragile states is reflected in policy documents ranging from the UN and World Bank “Pathways for Peace” report, to the UK’s “Elite Bargains and Political Deals” research, and here in the United States, the Global Fragility Act of 2019.⁵ There are differences across these policy frameworks to be sure but they all share a number of common strategies and policy instruments that have withstood the test of time and proved effective. Several of these intersect squarely with the promotion of religious freedom.

It’s important to note that the relationship between freedom of religion and fragility and conflict is complex. My colleagues in USIP’s Religion and Inclusive Societies program have argued that religious discrimination and other forms of state repression can lead communities to take up arms, although that’s less likely to happen in situations of extremely high state repression, for example in Saudi Arabia and Iran.⁶ The converse is also true since conflict can lead to religious discrimination and greater regulation. We’ve seen this for example in Myanmar where violence between Buddhist and Rohingya communities has resulted in an uptick in discrimination. Ultimately it will be very important to conduct more analysis so we have a better understanding of freedom of religion’s impacts on peace.

And the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on this landscape are still coming into view. The virus continues to spread unabated in many developing countries and so we don’t yet know the full extent of its impacts. Yet we do know that the pandemic is further fraying the social contract and deepening fragility in countries around the world.⁷ We’re seeing rising numbers of antigovernment protests and we see very low trust in public institutions in public opinion polls.⁸ It will therefore be crucial that global recovery efforts integrate conflict prevention and the promotion of democracy and human rights into the global pandemic response. The substantial amount of assistance that is being delivered to address COVID-19’s impacts must heed the lessons we have learned about engaging effectively in fragile states.

⁴ United Nations, World Bank, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, 2018.

⁵ U.K. Stabilisation Unit, “Elite Bargains and Political Deals: Research and Analysis,” June 15, 2018.

⁶ Jason Klocek and Scott Bledose, “Three Things You Thought You Knew About Freedom of Religion or Belief,” U.S. Institute of Peace, November 12, 2020.

⁷ Erol Yayboke, Corinne Graff and Janina Staguhn, “Beyond Emergency Response: The Case for Prioritizing Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention,” CSIS Brief, August 10, 2021.

⁸ Edelman, *2021 Edelman Trust Barometer: Global Report*, 2021.

So in the time I have left I would like to turn to several of the strategies we have learned for engaging effectively in fragile contexts.

The first is to recognize that all development programs in these settings have a deeply political dimension. Addressing the root causes of conflict and violence is an inherently political enterprise — a lesson reflected across many of the reports of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.⁹ Diplomatic and development activities in conflict affected states should therefore be viewed not only as tools for policymakers to communicate with country representatives or promote economic development. They must also support local peace-builders and political reformers inside and outside government in these countries. To promote more politically-aware approaches we need professional incentives and rewards for U.S. foreign service officers, who support and incentivize national and local reforms.

Second, inclusive approaches are critical in fractured societies where state-society relations are weak.¹⁰ Representatives from local governments, civil society and grassroots organizations, including faith-based leaders and communities, as well as women and youth, should be involved as much as possible in strategy formulation and implementation phases of policy and programs. Failing to do so can reinforce the very conflict dynamics that U.S. policy is seeking to address, creating a perception that only elite actors are being engaged, and that they're accountable to external rather than domestic constituencies. Inclusive programs involve planning for how to engage diverse voices and asset mapping to identify local peace, reform and development resources.

Third, fostering local leadership at the national and local level, and supporting the reform agendas of local leaders, is key.¹¹ Over two decades of international engagement in fragile states demonstrates a hard-earned lesson: externally imposed solutions and timelines don't lead to sustainable progress. External actors are most likely to be successful when they support the efforts of national and local leaders – including faith leaders – who are committed to peace and political reform. The more ownership and agency for these leaders the more contextual and sustainable the solutions for peace and stability. Tools to facilitate international support for country-led solutions include country-led assessments of the risks of violence and conflict; inclusively developed plans that form the basis for partnership between the United States and international and local actors; and compact-based agreements between donors and fragile states that set out the terms of their partnership. To facilitate

⁹ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, August 2021.

¹⁰ United Nations, World Bank, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, 2018.

¹¹ Institute for State Effectiveness, *Re-Examining the Terms of Trade: Turning Promises Into Practice in Fragile States*, February 2020.

U.S. Government direct engagement with local organizations, Congress should support the localization agenda of the U.S. Agency for International Development, building on previous efforts like the New Partnerships Initiative.

Fourth, the management of development programs must be adaptive.¹² Adaptive program management involves gathering regular information about whether a policy intervention is achieving its goals and adapting the intervention as needed to better fit the changing context. USAID and other aid agencies must establish relationships, feedback mechanisms, and trust with the national and local stakeholders most affected by the program. Congress also has an important role to play in incentivizing more adaptive approaches in fragile states, for example, by requiring that agencies outline their annual strategic learning processes in these countries, rather than programmatic plans.

And fifth, there must be better alignment between development, humanitarian and peacebuilding programming in these countries.¹³ This principle is particularly relevant in complex emergencies where a peace process may be underway in the context of a humanitarian emergency. Policy innovations that can help build bridge across these sectors include: undertaking joint (international) assessments of fragility and structural drivers of conflict; mainstreaming ‘do no harm’ principles across humanitarian and development programs; and establishing donor coordination structures that regularly bring together international development agencies on the ground.

Finally, let me say that the Global Fragility Act offers an important opportunity both to improve the effectiveness of stabilization and peacebuilding in fragile states, and to protect religious freedom and other human rights in these countries. The State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development, Department of Defense and other federal agencies have released a robust U.S. Government strategy, as required under the law. This is significant because in the past we’ve seen humanitarian, development and security assistance too often work at cross-purposes, because it’s been delivered in the absence of an overarching policy framework. So the release of the new U.S. strategy to prevent conflict and promote stability represents a welcome departure from the failed approaches of the past.

In addition to releasing a new strategy, no decision will be more consequential to the new approach’s success than the identification of focus countries and regions where the United States will test the new approach. This process has been underway for nearly a year and is now significantly delayed. It will be critical to ensure the countries selected provide a window of opportunity for the United States

¹² Corinne Graff (ed.), *Addressing Fragility in a Global Pandemic: Elements of a Successful Strategy*, U.S. Institute of Peace Peaceworks Report, December 2020.

¹³ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus*, 2021.



Government to launch new partnerships with reformers. States where the prospects for such partnerships are extremely limited — including countries on the U-SCIRF Countries of Particular Concern or Special Watch List — should be excluded from consideration.

Let me stop there. I would like to thank the Chair, the Vice Chair and the other Commissioners for holding this hearing, and would be pleased to answer any questions that you might have.

* * * *