



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Strategies for Religious Freedom in Fragile States

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Nury Turkel, USCIRF Vice Chair

Thank you very much Chair Maenza. I would like to join in welcoming you all to today's hearing. As Chair Maenza has highlighted, many living in fragile states face significant barriers to worshipping safely and accessing their rights to freedom of religion or belief.

In recent years, policy- and lawmakers have increasingly recognized the threat that fragility and instability around the world pose to U.S. values and interests. In the 2018 Stabilization Assistance Review, then Secretaries of State and Defense and the Administrator for the U.S. Agency for International Development highlighted

that persistent and protracted conflicts and the instability they create “directly affect the security interests of the United States and our allies.” With the introduction of the 2019 Global Fragility Act, Congress identified that “violence and violent conflict underpin many of the United States Government’s key national security challenges.” The consensus is clear – fragility and violent conflict undermines U.S. interests abroad and at home.

All too many fragile countries have poor religious freedom conditions – in addition to Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Lebanon, and Somalia as mentioned by Chair Maenza, we can see the overlap in Central African Republic, the Sahel, Mozambique, Nigeria, Burma, the list goes on. While the link between fragility and violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief are clear, the avenues for successful policy intervention are often less so. In these difficult and complex contexts, policy tools like sanctions, raising awareness, and diplomacy often prove ineffective in addressing or changing conditions for vulnerable communities on the ground. Providing programmatic funding and capacity building support yields limited protection as insecurity limits how far these efforts can reach outside the capital. In fact, in some cases, sanctions or other punitive policies may weaken an already fragile government, exacerbating insecurity while delivering few-to-no results to vulnerable populations facing religious restrictions.

This is why it is so important that we think creatively and innovatively about how to construct and implement strategies that will improve religious freedom conditions in these fragile states and help cement religious freedom norms and protections as an important part of broader stabilization efforts. We look forward to hearing the testimonies of our witnesses on these issues, along with recommendations the U.S. government can implement to better protect and promote religious freedom in fragile states.

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