

## Testimony for USCIRF Hearing on Strategies for Religious Freedom in Fragile States

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Religious freedom is not a concept uniformly accepted around the world. In many fragile states and regions with Muslim majorities or minorities, for example, the conception of “freedom” is contested and variegated; and in certain circumstances it is subordinate to religious claims. Deep knowledge of local ecologies is necessary for US government actors to effectively support minority religious group’s dignity and inclusion, and to do so in the most enduring way: empowering endogenous pro-pluralism modes of thinking and practice.

The Madrasa Discourses program, begun five years ago seeks to revitalize Islamic theological education in different settings in South Asia. Our experiences offer insightful lessons as to how long-term engagement focused on supporting local efforts rooted in tradition can lay the groundwork for tolerance and further embedding into local communities. Our approach was elicitive, beginning from values that communities find commonality in. There are more pervasive processes of social recognition outside the state and elections. Social recognition refers to the social-psychological, ethical, and political practices through which actors evaluate, acknowledge, and engage with their fellows in society. (Hefner 2021)

In diametric opposition to lightning interventions that cherry-pick scripture verses to educate religious leaders on the values of tolerance, pluralism, and countering violence, Madrasa Discourses instead educates future and current Madrasa educators on the rich resources and examples within the Muslim tradition. These efforts equip religious scholars to construct narratives for themselves that uplift human dignity and allow participants to constructively respond to modern concerns. Emerging from the stated needs of scholars in the Indian and Pakistani Muslim communities, and relying on authentic traditional knowledge, the program graduated participants who are comfortable with diversity and now view the world as a complex place, not black and white. When you make people comfortable with understanding diverse knowledge frames, they are amenable to diversity and complexity.

There are porous boundaries and complex interplays between what we mark as religion and a range of fields of practice such as knowledge acquisition, the role of tradition, questions of belonging and governance. While these are indexed as distinctions they resist strict separation and dichotomies. Religious freedom is not a goal to be achieved but is part of an upshot of social and moral goods that flourishing societies generate. It requires the broader public and social goods to be met as a precondition, otherwise religious freedom often becomes an instrument to reach political ends without overall social and moral accomplishments.

--Story of sectarianism--

The Madrasa Discourses (MD) program makes no explicit reference to buzzwords such as religious freedom, countering violent extremism, to defending religious minorities. These themes and topics emerge organically out of structured conversations on broader investigations and mutual study on theology, history, and justice. Yet MD graduated religious leaders who are now issuing religious rulings and teaching future Islamic studies students whose renewed knowledge of tradition shifted their worldviews. Across fragile contexts, religious actors are already leading the kind of intra-traditional work that can lead to lasting positive changes in how communities perceive “the other.” US policy actors and NGO partners can sensitively support and expand such programming, which can also pair seamlessly with interfaith exchange opportunities.

Religion is an ambivalent force when it comes to peace and conflict. Some institutional capacity already exists within the US government to map the role of religion and religious groups in situations of fragility, such as the Religious Landscape Mapping in Conflict-Affected States initiative at the US Institute of Peace, or the Inter-Agency Conflict Assessment Framework developed by the State Department. Yet much more deep and nuanced understanding of fragile contexts and their religious dynamics is needed. Afghanistan is a glaring example where the US avoided a cross-section of actors and only focused on urban elites. Universities, NGOs, and diaspora communities can help build this capacity provided they can identify with a range of local actors and not selected one.

In territories where the state is weak or captured by extremist or exclusive ideologies, such as narco-states or those where government services are offered to communities based on patronage and identity, faith based actors often fill the gap. The US government can work through these faith-based actors to provide critical services from humanitarian aid to education, but must do so in a conflict-sensitive way that clearly maps an intervention’s impact on the religious power dynamics in an area. A successful program could equitably serve residents and displaced persons, for example, and integrate practices that undergird tolerance between groups, such as social cohesion. An intervention that doesn’t pay attention to power dynamics, meanwhile, can end up supporting only one religious identity group and deepening patterns of animosity that exacerbate intolerance.

Concluding Recommendations:

1. Deepen US policy actor’s cultural and religious literacies by reaching out to non-typical actors outside the literacy of liberal Western frameworks of aid and NGO intervention.
2. Ensure conflict-sensitive work with faith-based organizations in fragile contexts.
3. Empower endogenous intra- and inter-religious efforts that lay the building blocks for enduring plural social recognition

Local and contextual understandings of religious freedom are varied, and furthermore, the notions of minority and majority religious groups is complex—just look at Syria, where the

minority Alawites control the government. A nuanced and conflict sensitive approach, that partners with long-term stakeholder led efforts to build pluralism, is the path forward.