



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

November 2021

STRATEGIES FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN FRAGILE STATES

Nadine Maenza
Chair

Nury Turkel
Vice Chair

Commissioners

Anurima Bhargava

James W. Carr

Frederick A. Davie

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Sharon Kleinbaum

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

On September 22, 2021, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) hosted a virtual hearing on [*Strategies for Religious Freedom in Fragile States*](#).



USCIRF Chair [*Nadine Maenza*](#) led the hearing convening [*four witnesses*](#) from a variety of perspectives. She opened the hearing by introducing the overlap between the weak capacity of governments in fragile states and the increased likelihood of religious freedom violations. A fragile state or region has weak capacities to carry out basic government functions, lacks the ability to develop mutually constructive relations with society, and is vulnerable to internal and external shocks, such as an economic crisis or natural disasters, according to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development. In some instances, fragile governments may be complicit in international religious freedom violations as they ally with or tolerate nefarious actors to strengthen or expand their tenuous control.



USCIRF Vice Chair [*Nury Turkel*](#) discussed the challenges the U.S. government faces in responding to religious freedom violations in fragile states. "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," he stated.



[*Dr. Elie Al Hindy*](#), Executive Director of Adyan Foundation, discussed embracing religion and identity, as well as opposing forced secularism, in a globalized world in order to ensure freedom of religion or belief. He provided the following observations to guide U.S. policymakers:

- Let go of a "one-size-fits-all secular democracy" in favor of complex and unique democratic systems that are adapted to the reality of the country;
- Encourage mutual respect by creating religious narratives around tolerance and acceptance of other communities;
- Elevate social responsibility within religious institutions and interfaith dialogue between religious leaders; and
- Promote state building that balances rule of law, equal citizenry, and the respect of different religious traditions.



Dr. Corinne Graff, Senior Advisor for Conflict Prevention and Fragility at the United States Institute of Peace, provided the following strategies to the U.S. government when promoting religious freedom in fragile contexts:

- Recognize that all development programs in fragile settings have a deep political dimension, and a central goal of diplomatic and development activities in conflict-afflicted states should be to support local peacebuilders and political reformers inside and outside of the government;
- Strengthen engagement with local actors (such as local government representatives, civil society, faith leaders, women, and youth), including by designing policies and programs to specifically engage local actors, by facilitating support to country-led solutions, and by building trust through relationships and feedback mechanisms;
- Incentivize agencies supported by the U.S. Congress to use more adaptive approaches as they outline their annual strategic learning processes in fragile states;
- Improve alignment among development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding programming by building bridges across sectors that includes undertaking joint assessments of fragility and structural drivers of conflict, mainstreaming do-no-harm principles across humanitarian and development programs, and establishing donor coordination structures; and
- Now that it has passed in Congress, move the Global Fragility Act forward by choosing the countries or regions in which it will be implemented and prioritize contexts where the prospects of local partnerships are particularly promising.



James Patton, the President and CEO of International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD), discussed how isolation and restrictions on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) can be significant contributors to the conditions of potential conflict. ICRD

engaged with nonviolent conservative Salafi leaders in Tunisia that had seen a significant number of recruits go to foreign terrorist organizations. These imams had the influence and access to at-risk community members to reorient them away from violent extremism. The primary grievances found among the community related to a sense

of prejudice toward the Salafi community by civil society, the media, and the government. If social and governance structures support restrictions on FoRB, pitting protected religious groups against excluded ones, they contribute directly to a powerful driver of identity conflict. Mr. Patton made the following recommendations:

- Where the state is weak or absent, universalize a commitment by faith communities to FoRB that may reduce identity conflict;
- The U.S. government and its allies must prioritize FoRB protections in domestic and international policies; and
- It is important to have a clear articulation of the boundaries of religious freedom, not in worship or belief, but when inciting a violation of the rights or equal protections of others.



Dr. Ebrahim Moosa, Mirza Family Professor of Islamic Thought and Muslim Societies at the University of Notre Dame, emphasized that in territories where the state is weak or captured by extremist ideologies, the U.S. government can work through

faith-based actors to provide critical services such as humanitarian aid and education. However, any program should be conflict-sensitive and clearly map the intervention's impact on religious power dynamics in the area, while supporting and serving residents equitably. Further, to protect FoRB in fragile states, the U.S. government needs a deep knowledge of local ecologies to effectively support minority religious groups' dignity and inclusion. This will involve empowering endogenous pro-pluralism modes of thinking and practice. "A nuanced and conflict-sensitive approach that partners with long-term stakeholder-led efforts to build pluralism is, in my view, the path forward," he stated. Dr. Moosa concluded with the following recommendations:

- Deepen U.S. policy actors' cultural and religious literacies by extending outreach to non-typical actors outside the liberal Western frameworks of aid and NGO intervention;
- Ensure conflict-sensitive work with faith-based organizations in fragile contexts; and
- Empower endogenous intra- and inter-religious efforts that lay the building blocks for enduring plural social recognition.

All the witnesses agreed that broader violence prevention efforts in the context of fragile states tend to have positive religious freedom implications, and, conversely, inclusive approaches to promoting religious freedom and tolerance in fragile states tend to have positive implications for U.S. stabilization goals.

Chair Maenza concluded the hearing by thanking the witnesses for their expertise and testimonies.

USCIRF recommends the U.S. government:

- Increase the capacity of U.S. mission officials and foreign service officers deployed to fragile states, by integrating a religious freedom lens into their activities, including through country-specific religious freedom trainings and resources; and
- Incorporate an analysis of religious dynamics and drivers of religious freedom violations into the design and implementation of interagency stabilization efforts in fragile states, including in the implementation of the Global Fragility Act.



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The Commissioners listed below were present at the hearing.



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Vice Chair
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James W. Carr



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Jason Morton
Senior Policy Analyst

Mohyeldin Omer
Policy Analyst

Dylan Schexnaydre
Victims List and Outreach Specialist

Jamie Staley
Supervisory Policy Advisor

Zack Udin
Researcher

Nina Ullom
Congressional Relations and Outreach Specialist

Madeline Velluro
Policy Analyst

Scott Weiner
Supervisory Policy Analyst

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.