



## **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**

### **Women's Roles in Advancing International Religious Freedom**

#### **Panel I**



**Rita Stephan** is the Regional Coordinator for Religious and Ethnic Minorities at USAID. From 2012 to 2020, she served in the U.S. Department of State as the Director of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in the Near Eastern Affairs Bureau's Office of Assistance Coordination and the founder and Acting/Deputy Director of Data Analytics in the Executive Secretary's Office. She was previously the Senior Syria/Lebanon and Social Media Analyst in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research and a strategic planner in the Global Engagement Center at State, and the MENA Survey Statistician at the Population Division of the U.S. Census Bureau.

Stephan holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Texas at Austin, a B.A. in International Affairs and Jewish Studies, and an M.A. in International Peace and Conflict Resolution from American University. Her publications focus on women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa and the Arab American population. They include three edited books and numerous articles on gender, social movements, and the Arab American population in the US Census.

#### **Panel II**



**Dr. Nazila Ghanea** is a Professor of International Human Rights Law and director of human rights programs at the University of Oxford. She has authored and edited a number of academic and UN publications and was one of the co-authors of the Oxford University Press Publication Freedom of Religion or Belief: An International Law Commentary, of the Bloomsbury publication Religion or Belief, Discrimination, and Equality: Britain in Global Contexts and as the sole author of the Martinus Nijhoff publication Human Rights, the UN and the Bahá'is in Iran. She was the author of the USCIRF report [Women and Religious Freedom: Synergies and Opportunities](#). She serves as Vice Chair of the Board of Governors of the Universal Rights Group, on the Advisory Board of the Oxford Journal of Law and Religion and is an Associate of the Oxford Human Rights Hub.

She previously served for six years as a member of the OSCE Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief.



**Dr. Azza Karam** serves as the Secretary-General of *Religions for Peace* – the largest multireligious leadership platform with 92 national and 6 regional Interreligious Councils. She also holds a Professorship of Religion and Development at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, in The Netherlands – of which she is a citizen. She served as a Senior Advisor on Culture, at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA); and as Coordinator/Chair of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development (UN IATF-R&D); and founder of the Multi-Faith Advisory Council of the UN IATFR&D. In those capacities, she coordinated engagement with members of a Global Interfaith Network for Population and Development with over 600 faith-based organizations from all regions of the world, representing all religions and interreligious affiliations. She was the Lead Facilitator for the United Nations’ Strategic Learning Exchanges on Religion, Development, and Diplomacy, building on a legacy of serving as a trainer cum facilitator of inter-cultural leadership and management in the Arab region as well as Europe and Central Asia. Professor Karam has served in different positions in the United Nations since 2004, as well as other intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations since the early 1990s, such as International IDEA, OSCE, and *Religions for Peace*. Simultaneously, she lectured in various academic institutions in Europe, North America (including the United States Military Academy/West Point), Africa, and the Middle East. Her Ph.D. in 1996, focused on Political Islam and became her first book in Arabic (her mother tongue) and in English.



**Palwasha Kakar** is the Interim Director for religion and inclusive societies at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP). Kakar joined USIP after four years with The Asia Foundation where she was the Afghanistan director for Women’s Empowerment and Development. Prior to joining the Foundation, Kakar led the Gender Mainstreaming and Civil Society Unit in the United Nations Development Program’s Afghanistan Subnational Governance Program managing a small grants program for Afghanistan’s civil society initiatives. Kakar also served as program manager for The Gender Studies Institute at Kabul University. She has experience working with the World Bank Group on gender, social justice, and environmental issues surrounding their various projects in the region. Kakar moved to Afghanistan in 2004 to work with the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), an independent research organization, on women’s participation at the local levels in the National Solidarity Programme (NSP). Before moving to Afghanistan, she was the director of the Newton Peace Center (currently Peace Connections) a faith-based civil society organization. An Afghan-American, she has experience teaching and researching religion, gender, security, and local governance. Her research has taken her to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Syria. She earned a master’s focusing on gender, politics and religion from Harvard University’s Divinity School and a bachelor’s in religion and global studies focusing on peace and conflict from Bethel College in North Newton, KS.