



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Online Hate Speech and Disinformation **Targeting Religious Communities**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Gayle Manchin, USCIRF Chair

Good afternoon and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom’s hearing on “Online Hate Speech and Disinformation.” I would like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us today to offer their expertise and recommendations.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad, using international

standards to do so, and makes policy recommendations to Congress, the President, and the Secretary of State. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

During the past two decades, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms have emerged as an invaluable tool for connecting people around the world.

However, we all now know how social media sites can easily be used to amplify hate speech and disinformation about religious communities, and mobilize real world violence, discrimination, and hatred. Vile rumors or conspiracy theories that might have previously spread in a village or town now can be shared online and make it around the world before being debunked. The algorithms that power platforms like Facebook and Twitter reward extremist discourse by incentivizing users to post provocative content that will receive attention through likes and reshares.

There is no definition under international human rights law of the colloquial terms “hate speech” or “disinformation”, but hate speech is typically understood to mean speech that prejudices a specific group. International human rights standards require states to prohibit the most severe forms of hate speech, specifically, any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to

discrimination, hostility or violence. Disinformation, sometimes referred to as fake news or propaganda, means false, inaccurate, or misleading information intended to cause harm. Disinformation and hate speech are interrelated and can overlap. To use an analogy: hate speech loads the gun, but disinformation pulls the trigger that transforms digital hate into real world violence.

Social media companies ban certain types of hate speech and disinformation from their platforms. Twitter's hateful content policy, for instance, bans the promotion of violence, threats and harassment against people in religious groups and the dehumanization of people based on their religion. Facebook similarly prohibits "attacks" based on religious affiliation in its Community Standards, defining attacks as violent or dehumanizing speech, harmful stereotypes, statements of inferiority, or calls for exclusion or segregation. In a welcomed move last week, Facebook announced that it would ban as hate speech content that "denies or distorts" the Holocaust. This policy change was in response to the global increase in antisemitic incidents. Twitter and Facebook also ban, flag, or counter certain types of disinformation, but neither have blanket policies against misleading information on their platforms. Despite these policies, the volume of hate and disinformation being shared online is astonishing. Facebook, for instance, [removes](#) three million pieces of hate speech a month, or more than 4,000 an hour.

Today, we will explore the complex role that social media has played in fomenting conflict — as well as hate, violence, and discrimination — towards religious communities. We will consider how the U.S. government and social media companies can better contribute to combating the digital spread of disinformation and hate speech.

I will now turn to my colleague, Vice Chair Tony Perkins, to further discuss content moderation and highlight some contexts of grave concern to USCIRF.