

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING ON STATE-SANCTIONED RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM VIOLATIONS AND COERCION BY
SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN

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Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR MAENZA: Good morning and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom today on State-Sanctioned Religious Freedom Violations and Coercion by Saudi Arabia and Iran.

I would also like to thank our distinguished guests and witnesses for joining us.

Thank you so much for joining us to all of those of you who signed up today to attend.

As you know, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, or IRFA.

The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual

hearing. USCIRF works to monitor and improve religious freedom in a diverse array of countries and contexts.

This diversity calls for a variety of tools and approaches as different contexts present different landscapes for the success and failures of religious freedom efforts.

For today's hearing we'll be focusing on the religious freedom implications of state-sanctioned religious coercion in Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Saudi Arabia's official interpretation of Islam is rooted in Sunni jurisprudence while Iran's is rooted in Shi'a jurisprudence. However, both governments use coercion in similar ways to denying freedom of religion or belief to those within their borders.

Many governments restrict freedom of religion or belief to a lesser degree through prejudiced messaging, employment discrimination, or unequal provision of social services.

Saudi Arabia and Iran, however, go well beyond these restrictions, harming religious minorities, dissidents, and peaceful activists through their use of force and other forms of coercion.

Religious minorities in Saudi Arabia and Iran have suffered immensely as a result of coercion. In Saudi Arabia, Shi'a Muslims who peacefully protested in 2011 continue to be prosecuted, convicted, and incarcerated on the basis on their faith.

Several of those on trial include religious clerics who are both Sunni and Shi'as. This past June, Saudi Arabia executed a Shi'a Muslim man named Mustafa Darwish.

In 2011, when he allegedly had committed many of these offenses for which he was executed, he was just a minor.

In April 2019, Saudi Arabia executed 32 Shi'a Muslims for "attempting to spread the Shi'a confession," and other charges. Many of these men

executed were reportedly tortured into confessing.

In Iran, officials from the Ministry of Intelligence and other state agencies regularly use force to enter the houses of Baha'is and other religious minorities, confiscating property and arresting those who live inside.

The government has also moved ahead with plans to seize Baha'i land in the village of Ivel, and forcibly displace Baha'is who have lived there for 160 years.

Iran also continues to execute Sunni Muslims, including three who were executed on December 31, 2020. It continues to target Christians, including USCIRF religious prisoner of conscience Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani. After being accused of "promoting Zionist Christianity," he was arrested in 2018 by plain clothes security forces who forcibly entered his house and used a taser gun on his son.

In February 2021, U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued an opinion that

Nadarkhani's ongoing detention violates several international legal obligations.

Women in Saudi Arabia and Iran are particularly impacted by state coercion and violence. Both governments use such measures to enforce laws that restrict women's ability to exercise their freedom of religion or belief.

Saudi Arabia continues to detain nonviolent activists who protect male guardianship laws. These laws are premised on the state's interpretation of gender roles within Islam. These jailed activists have reported the use of extreme violence, sexual assault and threats of murder against them during interrogations in prison.

Further, guardianship laws allow for state violence by giving abusive men the power to enlist state resources to forcibly return women to their houses.

In Iran, security forces harass and arrest women who protest mandatory headscarf laws. Iranian authorities have arrested and seriously

mistreated scores of women who have peacefully protested these provisions.

In 2019, an Iranian woman named Sahar Khodayari was threatened during a court hearing with a six-month sentence for "appearing in public without a hijab" after she tried to enter a soccer stadium, from which women in Iran are banned.

Following the hearing, she set herself on fire outside the courthouse. She died three weeks later after suffering third-degree burns on almost 90 percent of her body.

Religion coercion extends far beyond these examples in Saudi Arabia and Iran. We're going to hear more about that from my colleague Anurima Bhargava, and I do know that we are also waiting for Congressman Ted Deutch. I don't believe he has joined us yet so I'll hand it off to my colleague, Anurima Bhargava, to continue this conversation.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thank you very much, Chair Maenza.

I join in welcoming you all to today's

hearing, and I'm grateful to our expert witnesses for sharing their wisdom with us today.

In addition to the examples Chair Maenza mentioned, both Saudi Arabia and Iran use or tolerate violence against prisoners detained on religious grounds.

Prison officials in Saudi Arabia have used or threatened physical force against those who dissent from the government's official interpretation of Islam. Multiple credible accounts confirm that Saudi prison officials used violence against women who peacefully protested male guardianship laws.

These allegations include electric shocks, whipping, beating, and sexual assault. One account by an anonymous Saudi prison guard details torturing an anti-guardianship activist to the point that she became unconscious, noting, quote, "we feared that she had died and that we would bear responsibility," end quote.

The Saudi Human Rights Commission and

National Society for Human Rights both investigated these allegations but claimed that there was no evidence to support them.

In Iran, Amnesty International reports that in recent years intelligence and security forces and prison officials subjected detainees to prolonged solitary confinement, beatings, floggings, stress positions, forced administration of chemical substances, and electric shocks.

One such prisoner was a Gonabadi Sufi man named Benham Mahjoubi. Mahjoubi was arrested in 2018 while protesting the house arrest of the Gonabadi Sufi religious leader.

He was sent to the infamous Evin Prison near Tehran despite being judged mentally unfit for prison and suffering from a panic disorder.

In prison, Mahjoubi was subjected to torture and given unsafe medical interventions against his will. He was also periodically denied access to proper medication. These interventions left him with seizures and partial paralysis. He

slipped into a coma this February and died soon thereafter at the age of 33.

Iran's government also actively uses violence to enforce the state's interpretation of religion against the LGBTI community and does not intervene when the LGBTI community is targeted on the basis of religion.

In 2019, Iran hanged a 31-year-old man for allegedly violating laws against same sex relations. This past May, Iran refused to investigate the killing of a 20-year-old gay man whose half-brother beheaded him and dumped his body under a tree.

Saudi Arabia has continued to use religion as a basis to target the LGBTI community and has similarly failed to intervene in religiously-based violence against the LGBTI community.

In 2020, a Yemeni blogger in Saudi Arabia named Mohamad al-Bokari was arrested after publishing a video in support of rights for LGBTI persons. In prison, al-Bokari was beaten and

tortured into a forced confession and charged with, quote-unquote, "perversion."

USCIRF is particularly concerned that this violence does not stop at the Saudi or Iranian border. Saudi Arabia has targeted dissidents abroad in recent years, following physical and electronic surveillance.

Many of these dissidents have expressed peaceful opposition to the government's religious interpretations. The Saudi government has tried to force Saudi women fleeing guardianship abroad to board planes to take them back to the country. And Iran recently tried to kidnap a U.S. citizen from Brooklyn, New York, who has expressed opposition to mandatory religious headscarf laws.

Today's hearing will explore the nature and extent of the Saudi Arabian and Iranian governments' violence and coercion against religious minorities and when that violence and coercion is undertaken on the basis of religion.

We will hear from expert witnesses who

will help us understand how religious minorities and those who dissent from these governments' religious interpretations are treated in these countries and what the United States can do to effectively promote freedom of religion and belief for all.

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

Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much, Commissioner Bhargava, for those important words.

Next, we will be showing a video about former USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience Mohamad Taheri before we begin our panels.

[Video presentation.]

CHAIR MAENZA: This video really puts it into perspective how these countries' policies really impact the lives of religious minorities.

Next, I'm pleased to welcome Representative Ted Deutch to give opening remarks. He represents Florida's 22nd district and has been

a leader in Congress on religious freedom. We are so honored to have you with us today, Congressman.

MR. DEUTCH: Thanks. Thanks very much. Let me just make sure--thank you very much.

Good morning to Nadine, Sharon, and USCIRF leadership team. Thanks for inviting me to join you for this important hearing.

I would also like to extend a special greeting to Dr. Hala Aldosari, who has lent her expertise to our subcommittee. It's great to see her here today. I look forward to hearing what all the panelists have to say.

On Friday will mark 73 years since the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document that outlines and protects the fundamental rights and freedoms of every human being.

The Declaration unequivocally states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Everyone has the freedom alone or in community with others in public or

private to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. And everyone--that's all peoples and all nations.

Of course, the reason we're here today is that those universal rights are not universally respected.

As a senior member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, and as chair of the Middle East Subcommittee, I've worked with my colleagues for years on ways in which the United States Congress can effectively promote freedom of religion and other basic human rights on the world stage and hold human rights abusers to account.

I'm clear-eyed about the challenges that religious minorities face in the Middle East, in particular, from imprisonment of religious dissidents in Saudi Arabia to the execution of religious minority leaders in Iran. And I have spoken out forcefully against these abuses in the Middle East and around the world.

In my time today, I'd like to highlight

two specific issues that have been priorities of mine in my work.

First, those who know me know that I'm not a stranger to the issue of persecution or wrongful detentions in Iran as one of my own constituents, Bob Levinson, is the longest-held American hostage in history, and we know that one of the dangers that religious minorities and those who advocate for them face, particularly in Iran, is arbitrary and unlawful arrest and detention.

Those of you at USCIRF have seen firsthand through your advocacy the horrors that, for example, Raif Badawi has faced in prison for insulting Islam because he "liked" a Saudi Christian Facebook page and advocated online for the equality of Jews, Christians and Muslims.

I sponsored multiple pieces of legislation that not only condemn actions like those, but also bolster our ability to hold accountable those who take prisoners of conscience and other unlawful detainees abroad so we can move toward a future

where no family has to suffer what Bob's family has suffered.

During my time in Congress, I've also been a persistent advocate for the Baha'i community in Iran. Congress has long expressed bipartisan support for the human rights of the Iranian people, including the right to freedom of religion. Going back decades, long before I became a member of Congress, the U.S. Congress stood firmly behind religious and ethnic minority communities in Iran, and, in particular, the Baha'i, and over the last 11 plus years since I've been here, my colleagues and I have done so as well.

In keeping with that tradition, I was proud to reintroduce a bipartisan resolution in the 117th Congress H.Res. 744, which expresses the support of the House of Representatives for the rights of the Baha'i community in Iran and condemns the Iranian regime's egregious record of human rights violations against its own people, including persecution of religious and ethnic minorities like

the Baha'i.

The resolution highlights the abuses that the Baha'i community has persistently faced at the hands of the Iranian regime, from restrictions in their places of worship to barring and dismissal from employment and education, from harassment and intimidation to physical attacks, and from arbitrary arrests to execution. It demands immediate action by the government of Iran to reverse and remedy these injustices, and it reiterates the obligation of the United States government to utilize all available tools to hold accountable those responsible for these abuses, including international diplomacy with our partners and allies, and sanctions where appropriate.

Human rights are fundamental. And every human being is inherently entitled to their protection. Whether abuses of those rights take place in a nation where diplomatic ties have been severed or in a nation we consider a partner or ally, we must speak out against them.

From my days in college advocating on behalf of Soviet Jewry, I know that a threat or attack against any minority community is a threat or attack on all humanity, and the U.S. must be unyielding in our efforts to protect all people, especially ethnic and religious minorities, to crack down on those who perpetrate human rights abuses, support victims of those abuses, and that's true wherever they occur.

Our legitimacy, quite frankly, our legitimacy as a global leader and our moral standing in the world depends on it.

So I look forward to continuing to collaborate with USCIRF, with the esteemed experts here today, on ways that Congress and the United States government can make progress to support victims of religious freedom abuses and to hold abusers accountable.

I thank you again for inviting me to join you today, and I look forward to the rest of the program.

Thanks so much.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much, Congressman, for your powerful remarks, and you are right: a threat to any group is really a threat to all the groups, and that's why it's so important we stand together, and we so appreciate you joining us today and you continuing to work with us, and of course we look forward to continuing to work together.

So thank you again.

MR. DEUTCH: Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: We will now move to our first panel. We are honored to have with us Dr. Ahmed Shaheed.

He is the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. He is also the Deputy Director of the Essex Human Rights Centre. Previously, he was the first U.N. Special Rapporteur on Iran and is certainly one of the leading voices for religious freedom globally.

You can read his full biography, and all

of the others presenting today, on the USCIRF website at uscirf.gov. And when he is done presenting, we will have a time of questions and answers with just him before we begin our second panel.

Welcome, Dr. Shaheed. We are so glad you are with us, and we look forward to hearing from you.

DR. SHAHEED: Thank you, chair. Thank you for inviting me to speak at this hearing.

I shall focus my remarks on Iran. While many states declare official religion, very few are like Iran in actively enforcing religious precepts in all areas of life through coercive measures.

This results in numerous human rights violations, including freedom of religion or belief. Institutions and activities of minority religious groups are highly restricted while discriminatory practices have led to devastating consequences for those minorities and dissenters from the main religion, and women, girls, and LGBTI

persons, as we heard from previous speakers.

Religious practice is civilly restricted for non-favored or unrecognized religions, and their places of worship are frequently surveilled to ensure that members of the favored religion do not attend these services held on those premises.

Moreover, the conversion of religious minorities to the state religion is actively encouraged, but conversion away from Shia Islam is sanctioned.

This also means that proselytism by minority religious groups or members of the minority religion is prohibited on pain of criminal sanction.

Of particular concern at this time is the persecution of the Baha'i, as we heard just now, through a raft of measures designed to make life intolerable for any Baha'i that remain in the country, suppressing both religious freedom rights as well as economic and social rights.

And the assault on the Baha'i is not

limited to those in Iran, but is also rising in countries in the region where Tehran is able to exert some influence.

Likewise, the Sunni community has been facing particularly harsh treatment, as you just referred to, Commissioner, through framing of them as a national security threat.

Iran also remains the foremost state perpetrator of anti-Semitic hatred globally. In one recent I suppose welcome development, however, the country's Supreme Court struck down a decision to sentence nine individuals to five years in prison for forming a house church and propagating evangelical Christianity under the penal code provisions that sanction such activities, in fact, called anti-state activities.

House churches are often used by minorities because they can't get property authorization for a building to hold religious services. The Supreme Court last month held that promoting Christianity in home meetings cannot be

considered to be a manifestation in society and does not conspire to disrupt the security of a state as specified in penal code provisions 498 and 499.

This is an unprecedented ruling though it's uncertain if the retrial they're committed to would acquit these individuals or would have been for some 20 other individuals who have been detained on similar charges.

But the broader question, therefore, is what should the U.S. and other countries do? In my view, the most important thing is to support the people of Iran, especially those who have been denied their human rights that live in Iran at the present time or elsewhere because of compassion.

This also means supporting the capacity of human rights defenders in Iran to monitor rights' violations. Again, they come under intense pressure, including long prison sentences.

At the present time, the attempt to limit the Baha'i from Iran requires special attention,

and we should always speak on this at every opportunity.

Secondly, in revisiting U.S. policy towards Iran, policymakers should consider that promotion of respect for human rights in that country and in the region would be a strategic means of promoting stability and security in the region and elsewhere.

This recommendation is also inspired by the fact that efforts over the past 40 years to engage Iran while sidelining human rights for Iranians for the purpose of securing and fostering stable bilateral relations with the government have failed to generate accountability on several fronts, including very serious rights violations.

The U.S. should also work through various U.N. bodies to challenge the legitimacy the government of Iran seeks from these bodies. And also leave no stone unturned in getting other Muslim states to denounce Iranian practices.

Accountability should be stressed. To do

so, the U.S. government should continue to use and even consider expanding various measures permissible under international law, such as targeted sanctions imposed under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act to target key perpetrators.

And, finally, when the U.S. rejoins the Human Rights Council, it should work with other member states, such as Iceland and Canada, who have been leading on this issue, to end the business-as-usual approach that has come to characterize the way the Council has engaged on Iran, by adopting a substantive resolution that focuses on accountability and Iran's continued failure to cooperate.

Such a resolution could also mandate several U.N. procedures to carry out a joint investigation and to present a joint report to the Council that focuses on accountability for grave and persistent violations. It's important the worsening rights situation in the country is met

with commensurate heightened scrutiny of the country's practices.

Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much for that fascinating testimony.

Do you think there have been any changes with the new president assuming office in Iran? Have you seen any sort of changes?

DR. SHAHEED: Well, what we are seeing is a worsening of the situation. The elections themselves, it's always a farse, but it was I think especially bad compared in previous times, and the challenges to his authority have been met with even more repressive measures.

So I think, you know, in the past time I've been observing Iran, the past few years have especially been worse than before, and, of course, the more recent times are particularly troubling.

I think the Baha'i is a litmus test of where the government stands on issues. There is a sustained, I believe a concerted effort to limit

the community and that shows precisely how, if you like, nefarious the government's attitude towards minorities has become.

CHAIR MAENZA: Wow. Okay. Thank you for that.

Commissioner Khan, I believe you have a question. And you are mute.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: I yield to Commissioner Bhargava if she wishes to proceed first.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Please go ahead, Commissioner Khan.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: Okay. Dr. Shaheed, good morning from U.S. but good afternoon where you are.

Acknowledging your world perspective and your subject matter expertise, I wish to take advantage of your observation and ask this question.

From your perspective, how effectively USCIRF can promote our mission, our mandate, which

is implementation and advancing international religious freedom? How effectively we could do our work so it will promote religious freedom in the world?

DR. SHAHEED: Thank you, Commissioner.

As a bipartisan institution, I think the Commission is very well placed to target the, if you like, the folk like Iran is trying to create about its actual practices. So creating more clarity on what's happening in the country is essential, and, of course, using that clarity, first and foremost, to persuade the U.S. government to take a more coherent and sustained approach towards Iran.

Also, not in its own dealings but also in coordinating a broader global approach. Right now there's a very scattered, fragmented approach towards Iran. There is a huge disparity as to on certain levels how to deal with Iran that stems in part from I think, I suppose, the Rouhani years and ambiguity as to what should be done. But I think

what we see when there is sustained pressure, advocacy, Iran does take a step back. And that will remain in that situation if you keep that pressure up.

What is really not so welcome is when we allow Iran to put ambiguity about its own intentions and about where things are, and, of course, they transmit that ambiguity to our own actions. So we are very clear what we want to benchmark and demonstrate a direction to go and marshal, I suppose, coordinate the global community in that.

And this I also include the U.N. institutions. U.N. is a huge family of a variety of institutions, variety of mandates. I think we can demand that they also put human rights up-front as they have said they would. Right now, of course, they fail to do so.

So an easy task, but I think we have to have a moral clarity and, of course, clarity of the strategy that we want to pursue towards Iran.

I also want to add, Commissioner, one last issue. You know, while 81 states around the world have state religions, it's a very few states like Iran and Saudi Arabia that are in a theocratic mode, as it were. And also within the OIC, very few states retain or have reinstated the so-called "hudud penalties," the code of penalties. There is scope within the Muslim majority states to also reexamine what's been done in their name, as it were. So that there is less legitimacy for Iran in that space as well.

And, finally, Iran does have some of the richest intellectual output in terms of progressive Islam, and, of course, the Islamic frame does, you know, resound with some of the community, not everybody, but to legitimize that with reformist progressive thinking from Iran itself would be important to invest in as part of a broader strategy to legitimize Iran on its efforts and, of course, put more clarity on what we should be doing.

Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: Thank you, Dr.

Shaheed.

I will be listening to your advice multiple times so that it sinks in, and I commend you for your last report that you submitted to the United Nations. I have been reading it. I have saved it, and it's an amazing report. So my sincere gratitude for that effort.

Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Commissioner Bhargava, I believe you have a question.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thank you, Chair Maenza, and I want to join in Commissioner Khan's gratitude to you, Dr. Shaheed, for the report and for leading this work in so many ways around the world.

I wanted to ask you about--and you spoke about the ways in which not only other Muslim countries but, you know, the ways in which many

need to engage in the process of trying to protect religious freedom in Iran and Saudi Arabia, and I wanted to just ask about how the U.S. can work with multilateral institutions like your own and others to try to do that and to really have it be--I mean we have a summit on democracy this week in the U.S. but also want to think about the ways in which the U.S. can engage other Muslim countries and multilateral institutions in trying to support efforts to make sure that people can practice their religion freely. Please comment on that.

DR. SHAHEED: Thank you, Commissioner.

You know, I think evidence shows what can be done. When the U.S. joined the Council the first time--it was in '09 I think it was--there was an immense ability of the Council to look at rights violations, and Iran mandate was created largely because the U.S. was able to give leadership effort at that time.

I think coming back now is a similar situation to give that leadership, and that matters

both because we need a leader to sort of provide coherency of approach towards Iran. And, of course, U.S. also has immense capacity to mobilize the region as well in terms of focusing on what's happening in the country, including on transnational issues that I referred to against the Baha'i, and also right now the U.S. is part of a wider global coalition--it's called the IRFBA, Alliance on Freedom and Belief, and that's another forum which can be used to look at matters of serious concern.

And I do think that given the numerous engagements the U.S. has with the various U.N. forums, there is place for diversified approach to looking at the issue, but from a coherent framework, and engaging with those elements in Iran that can support change, and these are nongovernmental actors, in particular, but having a domestically-led narrative, a Muslim-led, if you like, initiative that documents, monitors and offers recommended solution to these issues.

And what it must, in particular, do is have enough I think focus and resources devoted to Iranian rights monitors to know they have access to policymakers, access to other means of mobilizing. So they, in fact, can be empowered to do their work. The Impact Iran Coalition, for example, something that came out of my time on the mandate, has been able to go around the world creating awareness around the world on what's happening.

When I came out with the mandate, there are many countries which only believed that Iran's problem with the U.S. was something else, not with human rights. It was on, you know, West, North, South, whatever, a different issue, and it took time to realize that they were actually serious issues to be addressed.

So I think that is one area in which the U.S. can be helpful. The other, of course, is making sure that the various U.N. bodies, which have various functions in Iran and elsewhere, do actually comply with their own commitments to

mainstream human rights, that they don't take the soft option of doing their work and just, you know, ignoring their larger responsibilities. There's an accountability for the U.N. bodies the U.S. can demand along with its allies.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thank you very much.

There's a lot there, and I really appreciate your laying it for us. I will turn it back to Chair Maenza.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

How about prisoners of conscience? I know it's difficult for the U.S. especially because we don't have diplomatic relationships with Iran. So how, what kind of recommendations do you give for both the U.S. government, but also civil society and others who might be listening, the way that they can support prisoners of conscience that are being held by Iran?

DR. SHAHEED: I think, you know, Iran

remains very vulnerable to social pressure. I say this because I can't show any examples of where it has taken a step back when the framing has hit a vulnerable chord with them.

So I think the term "prisoner of conscience" can be used in a way that Iran would say, no, we're not doing that because as Shi'a, they also have a raw nerve in that area. So even if the U.S. could not directly take this case up, there can be, you know, civil society actors who can demonstrate that there is a real issue to be addressed here and really highlight their cases in significantly high profile. Iran has to take notice of that.

The fact that, you know, you know how practice of adopting, as it were, prisoners of conscience is a very good one, I think more states ought to do that as taking the cue from you and really create that global moment of having Iran focus on those issues.

Dr. Taheri, we saw just moments ago, is a

clear case of this. It took years, of course, to get something done. But the persistence by his supporters, by his champions of the case was a very important one.

It might take years to get this done, but I think we have to pursue that line. And the more people we can bring into this, who can speak on the issue of nonviolent, as it were, you know, just people practicing their faith, that's not something Iran can defend. That's why they have to frame it as a anti-security measure.

Now this ruling by the Supreme Court recently has many prospects in the sense that that does have the highest court saying you can't call this anti-state activity. Iran, of course, can do a lot of it. We saw it on Pastor Nadarkhani's case. They had a new charge brought against him. But I think we can still push back against those 20 people, or their case, by using the Supreme Court finding.

So there are elements within Iran who

don't subscribe to the most conservative hardline views that the Guardianship Council often propagates. So I think there is scope to work on that.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you.

That's very interesting. I'd like to see if my colleagues have any additional questions for Dr. Shaheed. No, okay.

Well, thank you, Dr. Shaheed, for joining us today. It's hard to overstate the impact you've had on religious freedom in pulling together like an international coalition how you've come alongside so many of us and offered advice and been so available.

So thank you for all that you've done to this field and continuing to be a loud voice for all to have the right to believe or not to believe. We know you've been a big voice for that as well, and it's been so important in your work on anti-Semitism.

It just goes on and on. So thank you

again for your leadership and for joining us today.

DR. SHAHEED: If I may, thank you so much for your kind words and also for your continued support to my work. Thank you.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you. God bless you.

We will now continue on with our second panel. We are so honored to continue with an impressive group of experts that have contributed to this field in a huge way.

So our panel, we have three additional people joining us. The first one is Eric Goldstein. He's the acting Executive Director of Human Rights Watch Middle East and North Africa division. Thank you so much for joining us.

We have Marjan Keypour Greenblatt, the founder and director of the Alliance for Rights of All Minorities, or ARAM, an international network of activists that promotes human rights in Iran.

And then we have Hala Aldosari, Ph.D., a scholar and activist from Saudi Arabia, now in the United States, who focuses on the social

determinants of women's health, violence against women, and women's rights and human rights across the Arab Gulf States.

So Mr. Goldstein, we will begin with you. Thank you.

MR. GOLDSTEIN: Good morning. I would like to thank USCIRF for inviting me to provide an overview of human rights conditions in Saudi Arabia and Iran, two of the more than 90 countries around the world that Human Rights Watch reports on.

On January 13, we'll publish online our country by country report on developments in 2021. Although geopolitical rivals, Iran and Saudi Arabia are deeply repressive in similar ways.

I'm going to start by listing ten ways that they resemble one another.

First, intolerance of dissent. Authorities in both countries have little tolerance for any public questioning of government policies on domestic issues, foreign policy, human rights, or official interpretations of Islam.

The list of Saudi and Iranian writers, lawyers, activists, human rights defenders currently serving long prison terms on dubious charges stemming from their peaceful expression is quite long.

A few courageous people continue to speak out in defense of rights, but they know that they can be arrested at any time.

Second, fragile civil society. While both countries have a legal framework to allow for independent associations, and Iran especially does have many such associations, groups that openly challenge official orthodoxy by, say, highlighting human rights abuses risk dissolution and the prosecution of its members.

Three, no independent judiciary. When it comes to cases with any political coloration, courts are really just an appendage of the security apparatus, imprisoning defendants after sham trials, ignoring credible complaints of confessions that were extracted under torture, and sentencing

defendants on such vaguely worded charges as, quote, "distorting the kingdom's reputation in Saudi Arabia," and, quote, "waging war against Islam in Iran."

Four, death penalty. Both countries are among the leading practitioners of capital punishment. According to the Interior Ministry of Saudi Arabia, there were 52 people executed between January and September of this year.

And, in Iran, in 2021, so far, it's executed at least 254 people. Legal codes in both countries provide also for corporal punishment such as lashing for certain offenses.

Five, intolerance of religious minorities. The Shi'a majority Iran and Sunni majority Saudi Arabia are both intolerant of and discriminate against certain religious minorities.

In Iran, Baha'ism is considered a heretical sect and is subjected to severe discrimination in law and in practice.

In Saudi Arabia, with few exceptions,

there's no tolerance for public worship by adherents of religions other than Islam, and the government systematically discriminates against Twelver Shi'ah and Ismaili Muslims, including in public education, the justice system, and employment.

Other speakers will cover this subject in more detail.

Six, gender discrimination. Women have an inferior status in law and in practice in both places. The Saudi guardianship system for women effectively renders them minors under the law. They still need the guardian's approval to get married or obtain certain types of health. They face discrimination in relation to marriage, family, divorce, and decisions relating to children, including custody.

And, in Iran, women face discrimination also in marriage, divorce, inheritance, and decisions related to children.

Under Iran's passport law, a married woman

may not obtain a passport or travel outside the country without the written permission of her husband, who can revoke such permission at any time.

Seven, intolerance of sexual minorities. Both countries punish homosexuality. It is explicitly criminalized in Iran along with all sexual relations outside of marriage, including adultery.

The law provides for punishment of homosexuality up to and including the death penalty. Saudi Arabia has no written laws concerning sexual orientation or gender identity, but judges use principles of uncodified Islamic law to sanction people of committing sexual relations outside of marriage and homosexuality.

Eight, online censorship and surveillance. Both countries police the Internet. Iran and Saudi both limit access to content, blocking websites, and have prosecuted people for attempting to share human rights information through secure access.

Iran cut off or slowed down the Internet during the protests of 2019, 2020. Saudi Arabia famously uses sophisticated spyware to conduct surveillance of dissidents at home and abroad.

Nine, transnational repression. The killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi is only the most dramatic example of Saudi Arabia acting beyond its border to muzzle its citizens who peacefully dissent.

Iran has a history, of course, of assassinating Iranian dissidents abroad. In 2020, an exiled dissident who had obtained refugee status in France traveled to Iraq, was transferred to Iran, and sentenced to death and executed.

And, finally, ten, supporting abusive regimes abroad. In foreign policy, both countries support some of the most brutal governments and forces in the Middle East. Iran backs Bashar Assad in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon. Saudi Arabia provides massive aid to Egypt's President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, and, of course, it's the leading

party in the coalition that has been fighting a war in Yemen, now in its seventh year.

I've listed ten areas where the countries overlap in human rights practices, but I just want to briefly mention some differences between them.

Of course, Saudi has a huge population of foreign workers, estimated at ten million persons, with a range of abuses to which they are especially vulnerable related to their status in the country, including exploitation at work and arbitrary long-term detention in barbaric conditions, followed by expulsion to countries where they face grave dangers.

Iran, unlike Saudi Arabia, holds elections for president, parliament, and the president's and local offices. The presidential elections are manipulated, mainly by a vetting process of candidates that disqualifies the majority of them.

The 2021 presidential election was not competitive, but others have been in the past, but that said, the president yields much less power

than Iran's unelected Supreme Leader.

Iran has sustained popular street movements that broke out in multiple cities at once, including the so-called "Green Revolution" in 2009 and socioeconomic protests in 2019, 2020.

Of course, the security forces suppress them, using excessive and deadly force and large-scale arbitrary arrests. Saudi Arabia has not known any street protests of that scale although there have been periods of public protesting in the restive Shi'a majority Qatif province.

And there have been modest reforms in both countries narrowing the discrimination gap for women in Saudi Arabia and the protection gaps for migrant workers and some restrictions on the application of the death penalty.

We've also reported on a reduction in anti-Shi'a content in Saudi school textbooks. In Iran, there's an important new bill on violence against women. You can find our reporting online, our analysis of some of these positive

developments, but they do not fundamentally alter the grim picture of human rights conditions in both countries that I've given you here.

Just in closing, policy recommendations. I agree strongly with Dr. Shaheed's recommendations for U.S. engagement in multilateral institutions like U.N. Human Rights Council; a clear public engagement as part of--on human rights issues with Iran as part of a regional approach that includes the same kind of public criticism of human rights practices of our allies like Egypt and Israel; and reviewing restrictions on academic exchange programs that hinder contact with Iranian civil society.

On Saudi Arabia, Human Rights Watch has called for a suspension of arm sales in view of Saudi's conduct of its war in Yemen, and that we publicly press for the release of political prisoners, and that there be a complete reassessment of our relationship with Saudi Arabia and that prioritizes human rights as part of that.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to your questions.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much for that. Very fascinating.

We now will go to Ms. Greenblatt. The floor is yours.

MS. GREENBLATT: Sure. Thank you very much for this opportunity to present to you today.

It is my honor to be part of this esteemed panel to share some insights and observations regarding the systematic discrimination and harassment of religious minorities in Iran.

As I present this testimony to you today, a total of 249 members of religious minorities are known to be in prison in Iran. They include 184 Sunnis, 36 Bahais, 21 Christians, six Sufi Gonabadi Dervishes, one Yarsan, and one member of the Erfan Halgheh.

Iran's minorities suffer systematic and pernicious discrimination regardless of their standing in the constitution. As a matter of fact,

one could argue that the constitutional recognition of Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians is an institutional designation of these groups as a second-class citizen class and a justification for discriminatory practices against them.

In today's presentation, I will refer to some of the most recent examples of repressive measures against religious minorities and when possible I will try to highlight the comments of the communities' leaders regarding their own status.

I will focus on three areas of repression in the following order: discrimination and propaganda; lack of resources; and, three, control and surveillance.

Number one, discrimination and propaganda. Iran's recognized minorities are used as propaganda tools for the regime and to promote a facade of tolerance and acceptance, while the real experiences indicate otherwise.

In April, President of Tehran's

Zoroastrian Association, Afshin Namiranian, praised the Islamic Republic's Constitution and reprimanded members of his faith who see themselves as targets of discrimination. Yet, a month later in May, Sepanta Niknam, a Zoroastrian civil servant, who had registered for the sixth term of the city council in Tehran, was disqualified on the grounds of non-adherence to Islam.

This is not the first time that Mr. Niknam was disqualified from serving as an elected leader due to his religion.

The Sunni population suffers from the systematic discrimination in government employment with a few token exceptions. Sunni religious leader Imam of Zahedan, Molavi Abdolhamid, has issued numerous statements and made pleas to halt the discriminatory treatment of his Sunni community. He has criticized the "Planning Council of Sunni Schools" as an instrument positioned to take over all Sunni religious affairs and apply pressure and surveillance of their institution in

different parts of the community.

In May, he criticized the pressure imposed on the Sunni population to participate in the election and stated that given the ongoing deprivations and discriminations experienced by the Sunnis, it is unrealistic to expect the Sunnis to engage in the elections.

This community also suffers from disproportionate levels of poverty and unemployment, which I will address in the next section. Yet, Iranian officials try to whitewash the experiences of the Sunni population in the name of unity.

In a press conference targeting the Sunni audience, Hojjatoleslam Asgar encouraged all religions to participate in the "Hafteye Vahdat," or the Unity Week, citing unity and empathy in Islam, and he discouraged the feeling of discrimination rather than act of it, stating that "feeling of discrimination is more deadly than discrimination itself."

Among Christians, Robert Beglarian, a representative of the Armenian community, who walks a fine line of praising the regime in order to protect his community, engaged in a careful conversation with Mohabbat News where he revealed that his community suffers from systematic discrimination in employment and particularly with the government offices.

His counterpart, however, Ara Shahverdian, delivered remarks where he praised the freedom availed to the Christians to freely practice their religion without addressing the imprisonment of converts and closure of their churches.

This type of so-called representation has also occurred with the Assyrian community where the community leaders do not publicly object to the repressive measures against their communities such as the closure of the Assyrian churches.

In Iran, the practice of discrimination is systematic. Iran continues to pass laws that discriminate and persecute the minorities, such as

an amendment to the Penal Code which criminalizes any insult to Iranian ethnic groups. Even when they rule to end discriminatory practices against the group, they do not implement their own laws, such as the newly "landmark" ruling that was mentioned earlier of the Supreme Court which decided to end the criminality of house churches and underground churches.

It is also fundamentally important for us to recognize the encompassing practice of discrimination and propaganda used against the Bahai community. The discrimination against the Bahai community is practiced on every level literally from cradle to grave.

The discrimination against them is promoted in state-sanctioned media. It is promoted through fatwahs, through laws, and publicized through state-sanctioned media. Ultimately, it is fear to be ingrained in the social practices in the different sections of the country.

The ongoing arrests and closure of

businesses are only examples of these repressive measures against the Bahai community.

Iranian regime through its textbooks and media continues to promote hostility and antisemitic falsehoods, Holocaust denial and conspiracy theories. The regime seeks to equate Jews with Zionism and the state of Israel and forces the community leadership to speak out and protest against the Jewish state.

I encourage everyone to refer to the ADL website as well as a recently published report on IranWire for further information on those practices.

Number two, Iran's minorities suffer from a lack of resources. Obviously, it is evident that due to economic mismanagement of the country, everyone suffers some lack of resources and opportunities, but, arguably, Iran's minorities bear the brunt of these consequences.

To name a few, Sunnis, particularly around the borders of the country in Kurdistan,

Baluchistan, and Ahvaz, suffer from disproportionate levels of poverty and unemployment. They are most likely to be arrested and jailed and executed. Religious and ethnic discrimination are two sides of the same coin for this population, particularly in the region where this type of discrimination is exacerbated by the ethnic deprivation.

Protests over water shortage did not begin with Esfahan, rather it began with these regions, and it particularly turned violent in Ahvaz region where primarily our population resides.

Among the Armenians, Armenian representative of the parliament, Robert Beglarian, also referred to the lack of resources in his community. He indicated that religious education for his Christian community is limited due to the restrictions to do instructions in modern language.

And because of the lack of human and financial resources, it is difficult for this community to publish their textbooks or have

resources to provide mother language instruction of their religious beliefs and conduct those services.

Their churches continue to be forcibly closed.

Among the Bahai community, it is arguable that this most persecuted minority group has absolutely no rights. They continue to experience confiscation of their properties, business closures, lack of access to higher education, and even access to cemeteries where they can conduct ritual burial.

Iran Press Watch reported yesterday that amid the water crisis in Iran, 13 irrigated farmland plots belonging to the Bahais in the village of Kata were targeted for the purpose of confiscation.

Three, control and surveillance. The regime imposes excessive control and exerts intrusive surveillance measures on its minorities. In Sari, the Commission on Ethnicities, Sects and Religions adopted a detailed plan to exert more

control over the Dervishes and the Bahai communities. Recent court orders were issued to expel Bahais from their ancestral homes in the village of Ivel.

For Gonabadi Dervishes, according to this community's leadership abroad, the rules of conversion to the Sufi order have changed, and for those who are seeking to join this order, they have to pass new educational period along with Marja Taghlid, who is approved by the government clergy before entering the faith.

This is a departure from the traditional system of conversion to Sufism, which is generally open and accepting to all.

For Sunnis, the Planning Council, which I referred to earlier, is used to monitor and control all aspects of life in the Sunni communities around the country, including educational content, religious sermons and civic life.

Despite these challenges, the U.S. and other nations have the potential to implement

robust policy agendas that could mitigate the suffering of Iran's religious minorities and address the issue in a systematic manner.

Here are some recommendations:

Continue to designate Iran as a Country of Particular Concern, or CPC, for violations of religious freedom as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act;

Number two, press Iran to release all prisoners of conscience due to their religious beliefs according to the most recent Supreme Court ruling;

Number three, raise religious freedom and other human rights abuses in any discussion of governments regarding the U.S. entry to the JCPOA;

Number four, continue to impose targeted sanctions on Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for the severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and barring them from reentry into the United States under human rights related financial

and visa authorities;

Number five, work with members of International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance to exert multilateral pressures on Iran to improve religious freedom conditions and release prisoners of conscience.

Thank you very much for this opportunity.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much for such informative testimony.

Dr. Aldosari, you may begin.

DR. ALDOSARI: Thank you, Nadine, and thanks to my co-panelists for such powerful statements.

I've learned a lot though I am someone from the region, but I think the similarity presented by Eric really is astounding to understand that authoritarianism is the threat to religious freedom rather than a specific, you know, religious identity.

So, in Saudi Arabia, religious freedom, as with other rights and freedoms, remain a serious

challenge, both because of the theocratic historical nature of the state formation and because of the recent requested transformation of the state.

In the last few years, in particular, certain reforms were enacted, mainly because of attempts to enact certain economic reforms and a desire to promote and elevate the newly appointed conference to Saudi youth and to their Muslim allies.

One notable reform is banning the notorious religious police from any kinds of field work but not from conducting online surveillance.

These reforms have encouraged more engagement of women and gender mixed work in public spaces, and the newly established public recreation and activities and performances were aimed to encourage tourism and foreign investment by improving the quality of life.

There was an active attempt to review education and textbooks as well to remove religious

references, radical thoughts and violent actions.

However, these reforms have coincided with excessive use of regressive tactics. Newly established online surveillance system and the state security apparatus began conducting waves of mass arrests and issuing strict laws and regulations against perceived critics or dissidents inside and outside of the state.

State-sponsored media outlets in the religious institutions were also deployed in an orchestrated campaign against persons and thoughts aimed the challenging or promoting disobedience to the ruler.

One notable religious edict by Sheikh Saleh Al-Fawzan--he's a member of the Council of Supreme Scholars and a father-like figure to the crown prince Mohammed bin Salman has actually called for killing dissidents who disobey the ruler, especially those using media outlets to incite the public against the ruler.

The edict was issued one month before the

notorious killing and dismemberment of Jamal Khashoggi. Likewise, the Friday sermons across Saudi Arabia in all the mosques were actually deployed also to politicize and lobby the public against perceived acts of disobedience.

The results were catastrophic and manifested in many brutal incidents. They were involved, they involved extrajudicial killings and local arrests and closing up any spaces for public debates around religious beliefs or rights.

Systematic use of spyware, arrests and torture became widely employed. Judges who were trained in strict Islamic jurisdiction admitted confessions extracted under torture, and there were no serious investigations in any of the torture claims by business, including in the case of the tortured women activists.

In 2017 with the rise of MBS to power of the conference, episodes of mass arrests also involved notable Saudi figures of all backgrounds. Among them were some of the most influential

religious figures, and whose line of thoughts, most common actually connection among those arrests is that the line of thoughts and advocacy were independent from the state.

Some of the charges brought against these figures, as Eric had mentioned, included inciting the state--inciting the public against the state fundamental religious beliefs or foundations, acquiring banned books, or working for foreign entities.

These have also been used against the women activists. The prosecution in these cases demanded death penalty, as in the case of prominent scholar Salman Odah or Hassan Farhan al-Maliki, lengthy prison sentences, as in the case of the young scholar Abdullah al-Malki, who has been advocating for democracy within the Islamic framework.

Sentencing online bloggers who challenge the dominant Islamic beliefs or declare different religious beliefs is also ongoing. A Saudi-based

Yemeni journalist, Ali Muhsin Abu Lahoum, was sentenced to 15 years in prison for holding a Twitter account promoting ideas of apostasy, atheism and blasphemy, a manner that shows the false claim of religious tolerance that the state has been actively promoting worldwide, and really is consistent with what happened to the prominent blogger Raif Badawi, in 2012, where he receives a thousand, a sentence of ten years in prison and 1,000 lashes for having the online forum for free Saudi Liberals discussion.

Shia minority continue to be banned from rights to have their own Islamic beliefs taught in school and from rights to build their own mosques outside their historical areas or places.

Hate speech, as has been documented by Human Rights Watch report, it was against Shia or other religious minorities, and fueled by state-sponsored accounts online as the war with the Houthis in Yemen escalated.

Saudi Arabia government has also exploited

religious oversight of the two Islamic holy mosques. They are the place where millions of Muslims frequent for religious rituals or performing religious rituals every year.

Over the past four years, Saudi Arabia deported four Uyghurs to China while they were visiting Mecca, and the Saudi crown prince has made a public statement in support of China's treatment of the Uyghurs.

In order to stop a U.N. investigation into possible war crimes in Yemen by all parties involved, Saudi Arabia has threatened Indonesia, the most popular Muslim country in the world, that it would create obstacles for Indonesians if Indonesia supported the investigation.

Women rights show areas of progress and attenuation. The government ease of restrictions on women's mobility and family have given women, many women in Saudi Arabia, a newly founded sense of freedom to seek work opportunities or have greater independence.

However, these legal reforms keep the men guardians' control of women's choices by enabling the disobedience claims in courts.

The Saudi court considered the case of women disobedience valid if the main guardians express the religious concerns over certain women choices, such as her choice of dress code or working in mixed gender places or traveling alone.

And this is important because as social norms are increasingly changing with more women taking new roles in their country and making different choices, unrelated violence becomes a prime concern.

In Saudi Arabia, violence against women is really prevalent with inadequate response system. In 2019, the state introduced its public decency law with 19 violations deemed as an inappropriate social behavior by the state including a vague reference to improper dress code or indecent acts.

Saudi Arabia used to have a viable community of women activists who have engaged in

public debate and mobilization on important aspects of women's rights, including religiously inspired social and legal norms that harm women. However, the climate of repression and fear created by the state in the last few years not only wiped out the significant organic transformation but also closed off venues of community support for vulnerable women who aren't able to access help or support through the state resources.

The situation is even dire for migrant women. As Eric had mentioned, a third of our population are migrant workers, who are exempted from any kind of reforms in the sponsorship system, especially domestic women, domestic workers women.

Religious freedom can only be maintained and defended in a society free to express and debate thoughts and opinions, a situation that is now rendered unattainable in Saudi Arabia.

Thank you for that.

CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you so much for that important testimony.

We're now going to open it up for some questions, hopefully have a discussion. There are so many different things we can bring up. I know we have a lot to cover in a short amount of time.

I wanted to start with to talk about the prisons in Saudi Arabia and Iran for religious minorities, particularly in light of COVID-19. I think about this because I have a strong attachment to Raif Badawi, who I adopted from Saudi Arabia who just endured horrible conditions, as well as Youcef Nadarkhani in Iran.

So it immediately comes to light, and I would love to get your input and thoughts so people can understand the kind of conditions they're dealing with especially with COVID-19.

DR. ALDOSARI: So I think--actually research on the prison conditions inside Saudi Arabia was released this year by organizations for human rights. The report really looks into different aspects of prisons and, in particular, neglect and--medical neglect and use of arbitrary

detention or secret detention facilities, medical deterioration of basically unhygienic situations within the prisons.

But to answer your questions, and other prisoners of conscience, they are among some of the most vulnerable abuses in prison because of their beliefs. Sometimes they would place a prisoner of conscience, especially someone who holds different religious beliefs, in a cell that is occupied by hardliners, and they will experience a lot of hardship because of that.

We recently found one of the activists killed actually, killed violently, because they put him with hardliners. And there's another case actually beside that of another person who wrote a poem that is online that was considered at the time offensive to Islam.

So what happened to him was that his mother required that he would be placed in a solitary confinement and resisted any attempts to face transfer to any cell because of the

anticipated hostility and violence that he might experience. So I would say that, you know, people have to hide their religious beliefs, and if it's known in any kinds of prisons that they have, you know, like a different religious beliefs than the norm, this is really seriously, you know, considered respectable violence against them in prison system.

CHAIR MAENZA: Other answers for that? If not, we'll move on to my colleagues. Okay. Commissioners, do you have any questions you'd like to ask?

Commissioner Khan, go right ahead.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: Sure. Khanem Marjan Greenblatt. Khosh Amadi.

MS. GREENBLATT: Khayli mamnoun.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: Dr. Aldosari, Mahava

DR. ALDOSARI: Thank you. Mahava.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: Mahava.

Mr. Goldstein, and Human Rights Watch, welcome. Welcome.

To all three of you, thank you for your valor, thank you for being the voice of voiceless. We will be reflecting on your presentations.

My question to all three of you is within our mandate, within USCIRF's mandate, what do you think we would be doing to address your concerns, address the concerns that you have raised in your presentations? We can start with Mr. Goldstein.

Mr. Goldstein.

MR. GOLDSTEIN: Yes. Thank you for your question.

I think that Dr. Aldosari raised an important issue, which is the foreign policies of these governments and the support expressed by the Saudis for China's handling of the Uyghur issue in Xinjiang and efforts to strong-arm parties at the U.S., at the U.N. Human Rights Council.

This is part of the transnational activism of these governments. I think this deserves an increasing focus, calling out what our allies are doing that undermine some of the positions that the

U.S. government is taking to call out China's repression of the Uyghurs. This is just one thought that I have.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: Thank you.

Marjan Greenblatt.

MS. GREENBLATT: Sure. It's really a pleasure to be at this meeting with you, Commissioner.

I think that with respect to amplifying the work of USCIRF, I think that USCIRF already has so much influence and so much respect in the human rights and religious freedom space, and I believe that people like you, like all the commissioners, your individual voices, in addition to the collective voices of USCIRF, can be very influential.

I believe that, as Dr. Shaheed said earlier, Iran is very vulnerable to public pressure, and I think if individual commissioners in addition to the Commission as a whole makes particular statements from time to time about

issues that resonate with you, if that's possible, I think it would be very valuable.

I will think a little bit more about this question, and I will add my thoughts in the next question.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: Dr. Aldosari.

DR. ALDOSARI: Well, thank you for the thoughtful question. I think more of these types of meetings where you bring people who are from those communities to physically voice their concerns and have their concerns weaved into the work of the USCIRF.

Another thing I think would be important is to target those people or communities in the U.S. who might be playing a very negative role against the religious freedom.

For instance, we've seen how MBS, and how basically has been shielded by certain groups within the U.S. such as the evangelical groups who are actually among the first who promoted MBS,

visited MBS, and some of the strict religious Jewish groups as well.

So we think that those groups could be brought on the table and have an honest discussion within a safe environment like a USCIRF about the impact that they're doing by empowering such groups' leadership.

Other things, as Dr. Shaheed mentioned, as well, is the fact that working collectively with other agencies could be such a powerful thing, creating the network among people working on the same issues. I see glimpses of life, but very much fragmented, in supporting the civil society in those countries. I see academia has, for instance, certain collaboration to support academics who are targeted for their thoughts and beliefs, but this, they remain very I would say isolated from the work of other influential groups or influential organizations. So bringing together other advocates who are calling for freedom of thoughts and beliefs. I think that would be also a very

useful metric within the USCIRF.

And also I will think. Like Marjan, I will reflect more and send my thoughts later.

COMMISSIONER KHAN: Thank you.

I yield to Chair Maenza, and, again, I pay tribute to your valor and your dedication and your scholarship and being the voice of voiceless. Thank you. Thank you very much.

I yield to Chair Maenza.

CHAIR MAENZA: I agree with him and thank you for the thoughtful answers to that question, and as you think about it, and even after the event is over, we would continue to welcome those kind of input from you.

I'd like to hand it off to Commissioner Bhargava to see if she has a question to ask.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thank you, Chair Maenza.

I actually have two. I wanted to--there's been a conversation around the ways in which the U.S. seeks to recalibrate its relationship with

Saudi Arabia, and I wanted to get your thoughts about what are the ways in which we can make recommendations about how religious freedom should play a role in that recalibration.

I'll stop there and then I'll ask my other question after that one because it will get conflated otherwise.

DR. ALDOSARI: I think this is one of the most challenging questions because we need to separate what effect of public interest inside Saudi Arabia from what the effect of behavior of the system of the leaders, and these are highly, I would say, interlinked, and it becomes very difficult in an authoritarian regime to target certain problematic leaders.

For instance, the sanctions that were issued by the State Department against those involved, the squad who were involved, in the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, has been a very powerful, I would say, thing to enact.

There is a resolution in the Congress that

aims to punish under the Magnitsky Act certain groups or certain leaders who really get involved in so much severe repressive measures. I think if it acts, looking at the business opportunities, looking at business opportunities that involve those leaders, we know how, for instance, has very expensive properties across Europe and the U.S.

So having this kind of visa ban, having those kinds of asset freeze for problematic leaders would definitely send a strong message, and this is something that can be worked with the business community. The business community that were the first actually--it was the first community to actually open up after the Khashoggi murder. So having some kinds of I would say engagement with the business community on the impact of such behavior I think that would be also good.

But encouraging also dialogue and debate, creating opportunities for dialogue and debate with influential figures within Saudi Arabia is also important in trying to change the mindset,

empowering those actors within the state who are perceived to be a source of reason, a source of power, positive power in the state. Identifying those leaders and making sure that they are more engaged in the dialogue with the U.S. is important, as well, and in the dialogue around religious freedom and the dialogue around rights and freedoms, in general, having people who have to be well-placed in the system engaged in those kinds of dialogues.

I see, for instance, that the Saudi government has sent its envoys in the U.S. and created those kinds of, you know, like more of a personal nature meetings with members of Congress, members of the State Department. It's like invitations at the embassy, at the house of the ambassador, the Saudi ambassador, or at the house of former state officials, Saudi state officials, who think about the elites in the community, in the U.S. community, for dinner parties, and they discuss their own version of, you know, state

affairs.

So I think if the USCIRF was able or other, you know, governmental entities is able to raise up those concerns in those kinds of informal meetings, that would be something that is helpful.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thank you very much.

If either of our other panelists want to speak to this? Otherwise I have one more question, and then I will yield the floor back to Chair Maenza.

MS. GREENBLATT: I would just add something here. I think it also relates to the last question because we don't have real diplomatic relations with Iran and, you know, for good reason. But something that could be, that I think our government officials need to keep in mind is that rather than engaging with some of the officials, I think it would be good to highlight the individuals who are trying to fight for religious freedom, fight for human rights, inside Iran, when the

environment is safe and when it is possible.

So rather than engaging with some of the officials who whitewash what is happening in the country, I think it would be good to highlight the activists and advocates who are fighting.

I was so pleased to see Dr. Taheri's presentation today. He does not get a lot of attention or it's not--he does not get sufficient attention in a lot of the conversations, and I think by highlighting individuals like him, and activists, prisoners, former prisoners of conscience, who will speak the truth rather than whitewashing what is the government doing, I think that could be a step in the right direction.

One more thing I just wanted to add and that perhaps answers Commissioner Khan's question as well. I just have to share that while I was doing this presentation, I received a warning that government agents are trying to hack my email, and I think this is a real challenge that many of us activists face.

Whenever we are doing our work, we have to confront so many different barriers and challenges in doing our work, and I think recognizing this challenge, recognizing the threats that exist, you know, for many of--you have heard the news about so many of the Iranian activists. I think that is something to keep into consideration as well.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thank you.

And let me--sorry, Mr. Goldstein, do you want to add anything?

MR. GOLDSTEIN: Yeah. I would just add that there are areas where there's been some progress. I mentioned the textbooks in Saudi Arabia lowering the volume of anti-shi'a rhetoric.

So it's important, in addition to what my colleagues have said, to call out things that are kind of a little bit outside of our usual radar such as monitoring textbooks and seeing what they say, monitoring the Saudi funding of intolerant strains of Islam elsewhere in the region, in other countries, and calling that out as well.

And the issue of the threats made to Indonesia on the pilgrimage, things that sometimes lay outside our more conventional sphere of action because all that plays into the religious freedom issue.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thank you very much.

So my second question is, just kind of builds on that a little bit. As you heard, we have, you know, there are many concerns we have about what's happening in Saudi Arabia and Iran. We've spoken particularly about the ways in which laws and, you know, the state sanctioning of coercion and violence have impacted women and the LGBTI community.

And I wanted to ask you if you have any recommendations on how we frame the concerns we have about what's happened, you know, the impact of particular laws on women and the LGBTI community in the context of religious freedom concerns and human rights? If you had just any recommendations on how

we raise those kinds of concerns and continue to in the kind of context?

So I just wanted to see if there's any additional thoughts on that and how you thought about those, the ways in which these impacts are, you know, impacting many of the vulnerable communities, but particularly women and LGBTI?

DR. ALDOSARI: This is one of the most challenging I would say areas to raise inside Saudi Arabia or in the region in general.

There was an incident recently in which a very famous football player, former football player, made a statement to basically refuse the media promotion of LGBTQ rights, and he received a wide, you know, I would say the most notable praises and support for his hate for LGBTQ.

It is one of the most sensitive because sexuality, in general, in the Arab world, and particularly in most of the Islamic countries, is something that is very difficult to raise publicly.

It can be raised within informal setting

again. People can talk about it. Attempts to empower the privacy of the, the private rights of people, these are things which are accepted so the one thing that they would, you know, tolerate is people who are actually involved in those kinds of behavior but privately.

But once it goes online or once it is expressed publicly, the governments in most of those regions, and particularly in Saudi Arabia, actually feels that they are obliged to take action against it.

So I think sexuality in general can be raised within the context of protecting individual safety and promoting more of a tolerant Islam. It is something that there is a little research done on that. There's some of the scholars who are now arrested inside Saudi Arabia have actually created waves of resistance, aggression, because they've actually called for, you know, tolerate basically LGBTQ rights as long as it's not publicized.

So, yes, I agree these are some of the

most challenging issues, but I think we need more of a raising the issue on more of I would say tolerant and private ways. I'm sorry. I have to--

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Perhaps while we're waiting we can turn to the other panelists and then--oh, Hala is back. Sorry. Go ahead.

DR. ALDOSARI: So, yeah, just basically saying that these are one of the most difficult in general issues to raise within Muslim countries or within Arab countries, but they think it's worth to have these discussions going at least with, in an informal setting by invoking, for instance, the more tolerant Islamic spirit or invoking safety and zero tolerance for violence, for instance. These are all issues that are more accepted by people that are talking about, directly talking about LGBTQ rights.

These are my thoughts on it, but, you know, I agree that this is one of the most challenging areas.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thank you.

Mr. Goldstein.

MR. GOLDSTEIN: Thank you.

I mean there's no country in the Arab world where open homosexuality is tolerated. Either there are laws that criminalize it, or, if there are not, there are morality laws that are used to prosecute it.

But having said that, there's a wide range of practice. In some countries, it's aggressively prosecuted. In Tunisia, there are dozens, if not hundreds, of men currently serving prison terms for homosexuality.

In other countries where despite the existence of such laws, they've stopped prosecuting such cases. The number of cases in Morocco is way down. So I think that we might like to see the decriminalization of same sex acts between consenting adults, that's not going to happen.

But there's a whole range of in terms of enforcement, and we can--and there are countries where there are actually LGBT organizations that

operate that are semi-tolerated. So there's a range of practice, and we should encourage going, moving toward decriminalization in practice if we can't really hope to see it in the near term in law.

MS. GREENBLATT: I'll just weigh in as well. I think there needs to be more education for the general public, including the activist community, about the ways to advocate for the LGBT community and also how to better elevate the voices and experiences of women.

I think USCIRF is well positioned to maybe highlight the experiences of some of the female prisoners of conscience in these countries. Their voices are still not heard as much as the voices of men are heard.

And their experiences in prison, during arrest, all of these experiences are totally different than what the men experience. And we don't know enough about them. Those stories have not been sufficiently shared.

I also believe that some of the misconceptions of--misconceptions of religion that lead to violence or discriminatory treatment toward women need to be addressed, and perhaps through educational programs, through awareness raising methods, it would be helpful to address some of the misconceptions that are used as a justification to discriminate against women or to treat them with violence.

COMMISSIONER BHARGAVA: Thank you very much to all of you.

It's all very helpful. Let me turn it back to Chair Maenza. I know we're overtime so appreciate all of your very thoughtful answers.

CHAIR MAENZA: Yes. Thank you so much to our panelists for their insightful testimony and, of course, to my colleagues for your terrific questions.

I've learned so much today, and I'm sure that all of our guests have as well. I also want to send a special thank you to our USCIRF

professional staff as these hearings are a team effort, but especially Nina Ullum, who is our USCIRF congressional relations and outreach specialist; Gabrielle Hasenstab, who's USCIRF's communications specialist; Scott Weiner, USCIRF's supervisory policy analyst, who oversees these countries; Danielle Ashbahian, USCIRF's supervisory public affairs officer; and, of course, the excellent leadership by our executive director Erin Singshinsuk.

So the remarks, the testimony, the video of this hearing, and the event summary will be posted on our website at uscirf.gov. And you, of course, can go to uscirf.gov and download our Annual Report and our special country and issue reports on things like blasphemy. We just got a report on Saudi Arabia.

So we welcome, invite you to come download our resources. And thanks again to everyone for joining us. We look forward to having you at future events, and we hope you have a wonderful

day.

Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 12:05 p.m., the hearing was
adjourned.]