

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING

ADDRESSING ENTITIES OF
PARTICULAR CONCERN:
NON-STATE ACTORS AND EGREGIOUS
VIOLATIONS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Virtual Hearing

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

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Stephen Schneck, Chair
Mohamed Elsanousi
Vicky Hartzler
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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR SCHNECK: Good morning, everyone.

I'm Stephen Schneck, the current chair of the U.S. Commission on International Freedom and welcome to today's hearing on Addressing Entities of Particular Concern: Non-State Actors and Egregious Violations of Religious Freedom.

My sincere thanks to you, our distinguished witnesses, for sharing your knowledge, experience, and insight on how the United States should best understand, approach, and address the unique challenges that Entities of Particular Concern and other non-state actors pose to religious freedom around the world.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, 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 important hearing.

I'd like to begin today's discussion by providing some background on the Entities of Particular Concern designation, including the unique role that it plays within the IRFA mandate and the vital gap that it fills in terms of bringing attention and accountability to the world's worst violators of freedom of religion or belief.

Since the passage of IRFA in 1998, the focus of U.S. international religious freedom policy has fallen on governments that either commit or tolerate ongoing, systematic, and egregious violations.

Sadly, we have no shortage of such violators 26 years later, from the genocidal abuses of the Chinese Community Party against Uyghur Muslims and its corrosive policy of sinicization; to Iran's repression of women, religious

minorities, and others who reject its narrow interpretation of religious law; and India's worsening descent into the intolerant throes of religious nationalism.

This emphasis on foreign government policies and actions rightly remains at the center of USCIRF's reporting and recommendations for advancing religious freedom wherever it is at risk.

However, by 2016, some 18 years after the passage of IRFA, it became clear that U.S. international religious freedom policy, as it then stood, was failing to adequately address another crucial source of abuses and violations, namely, non-state actors, who operate beyond the control of sovereign governments and yet cause massive devastation in the lives of individuals, families, and communities in the name of religion or belief.

With these egregious religious freedom violations in mind, the 2016 Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, named for former Congressman and my former colleague on the Commission Frank Wolf, sought to amend IRFA and to

fill in this glaring gap, among other measures.

It created a new category of Entities of Particular Concern, or EPCs, requiring the U.S. government to designate as such any non-state actor engaging in particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

It laid out a clear standard that such an actor must represent, and I'm quoting here, "a non-sovereign entity that exercises significant political power and territorial control outside the control of a sovereign government and often employing violence in pursuit of their objectives"—unquote.

2016 was, after all, a mere two years after the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, had shocked the world by committing genocide and crimes against humanity, in attempting to eradicate the Yazidi people, enslaving women and girls from that community, and extending its genocidal violence against Christians, Shi'a, Turkmen, and many others.

And in a tragic coincidence, it was also

just two years after Boko Haram kidnapped 276 mostly Christian girls from a school in northern Nigeria, 82 of whom remain in captivity a full decade later.

Today, our objective is to examine the present state of EPCs: the religious freedom violations they commit; the communities whose religious lives they imperil; and the most effective policy tools at the disposal of the U.S. government to address and counter their violent activities and corrosive ideologies.

To do so, we hope to highlight related circumstances in South Asia and Africa, in particular.

I will now turn the floor over to Commissioner Vicky Hartzler for her opening remarks.

Commissioner Hartzler. You're muted.

COMMISSIONER HARTZLER: Thank you, Chair Schneck.

I would like to join you in welcoming everyone to this very important hearing.

Secretary of State Blinken named the current slate of EPC designations in December of last year, which included eight non-state actors—al-Shabab, Boko Haram, HTS, the Houthis, ISIS-Sahel, ISIS-West Africa, al-Qaeda affiliate JNIM, and the Taliban.

Keen observers may note that this list is almost identical to USCIRF's 2023 and 2024 EPC recommendations with one glaring difference—the Taliban.

The Taliban, of course, represents a unique case. It is, at once, a Specially Designated Global Terrorist Group, the de facto but unrecognized government of Afghanistan, and an ongoing, systematic, and egregious violator of religious freedom.

Both USCIRF and the State Department recognize its utter disdain for religious freedom and active repression of it, but we differ in acknowledging its government function.

In this case, USCIRF recommended the designation of Afghanistan as a Country of

Particular Concern, or CPC.

The Taliban's disputed role as a governing authority and its omission from USCIRF's most recent EPC recommendation illustrates a distinction that is both legislatively mandated but admittedly challenging at times.

Following the letter of the Frank Wolf Act means that we cannot recommend for EPC designation every bad actor or religiously repressive group that we identify, although we may find its actions abhorrent and its ideas utterly incompatible with religious freedom or other essential human rights under international law.

ISIS fighters may still target religious communities in Syria and Iraq, but in contrast to HTS in Syria's Idlib Province, it has mercifully not held territory or political power since early 2019.

And Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or IRGC, has spent decades fomenting, funding, and itself committing violence against its perceived religious and political opponents,

including attempting to engage in transnational repression here in the United States.

However, USCIRF does not recommend for EPC designation the IRGC, its internal Basij militia, or its external Qods Force for the simple reason that they are part of the Iranian government, which USCIRF has long recommended for CPC, and the U.S. Department of State has long designated as well as a CPC.

Despite such exceptions, USCIRF has taken great care since the passage of the Frank Wolf Act to regularly report on EPCs, the violations they commit, and the communities whose religious freedom they threaten.

For the last several years, we have been at the forefront of calling out the tragic coincidence of religious freedom violations that regional authorities in Nigeria commit such as in Kano State and the egregious violations that groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State-West African Province, or ISWAP, perpetrate upon Christians, nonbelievers, and other vulnerable religious

minorities in their crosshairs.

USCIRF has likewise labored to make sure that neither the U.S. government nor our like-minded international partners overlook or forget the horrors that Taliban affiliates and ISIS-Khorasan Province, or ISIS-K, have visited on Hazara Shi'a Muslims in Afghanistan, or the existential threats from other non-state actors that continue to hang over Yazidis, Christians, Kaka'is, and others in Iraq.

Nevertheless, it is evident that non-state actors generally, and EPCs specifically, represent a clear set of policy challenges for USCIRF to recommend and for successive U.S. administrations to implement.

How can the United States and its likeminded international partners most effectively counter the threats that such groups pose to religious minorities and freedom of religion or belief, or FoRB, writ large, wherever they may operate?

What lessons can we learn from policy

mistakes of the past or from the best practices of civil society actors who have fearlessly and tirelessly worked at the grassroots level to counter the dangerous actions and ideas that such groups espouse?

Our hope is that today's discussion will guide us toward some answers to these questions and others.

I will now turn it over to fellow Commissioner Mohamed Elsanousi for his additional opening remarks.

COMMISSIONER ELSANOUSI: Thank you. Thank you so much, Commissioner Hartzler, and good morning and a warm welcome to our witnesses and participants joining us today.

My colleagues have already noted the importance of always keeping in mind the real, the real flesh and blood, human cost of religious freedom and broader human rights violations that EPCs and other non-state actors commit against individuals, families, and communities.

And amid our policy-level discussion

today, I would like to also take a few moments to emphasize one essential component of any effort to counter, reduce, and ultimately end all such violations: that is, partnerships.

The U.S. government simply cannot assume or attempt to work alone with any such endeavors; it must operate in cooperation, concern, and meaningful, meaningful partnership with civil society and other governments who share our commitment to freedom of religion or belief, and our sincere goals of addressing the impact of EPC violations as well as their roots.

Civil society, first of all, must be at the heart of U.S. IRF policy that address EPCs and their violations.

Civil society organizations, or CSOs, know their communities; they know their contexts and cultures; and they know, often from direct experience, the horrible impact that non-state actors can have on religious freedom in the areas where they operate.

So these CSOs are on the front lines of

engaging local religious actors to counter the violent ideologies of terror groups, of sheltering religious converts and others who face special risks of persecution and death; and of sharing best practices, experience, insight, and data that shed light on related conditions and cases.

So these brave organizations and advocates need partners, and they need support as well.

So, thankfully, the United States is not alone in seeking out ways to support and partner with civil society organizations, as well as to implement other policies to counter FoRB, to counter FoRB abuses of EPCs and other non-state actors.

USCIRF has witnessed in recent years—and indeed has helped create—a groundswell of international support for these sorts of partnerships among likeminded nations, CSOs, and religious actors, along with other means of advancing religious freedom whenever and wherever it is under threat.

A growing collective of initiatives,

including the Article 18 Alliance of now 43 member states, and counting, the FoRB Women's Alliance, and, of course, the IRF Roundtable, stands ready to eagerly adopt and widely disseminate any and all best practices, opportunities, and interventions for the cause of religious freedom.

They, too, should serve as our partners and advisors in any multi-faceted efforts to address the religious freedom violations of EPCs and the corrosive ideologies that inform them.

On that note of partnership, I turn the floor back over to my colleague Chair Schneck to proceed with today's hearing.

Commissioner Schneck.

You are muted, still muted, commissioner.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Commissioner Elsanousi. Sorry about the muting there.

I'd like to now briefly introduce our witnesses. Each person's full biography can be found on the USCIRF website, and we will drop a link to those biographies in the chat.

First, we will hear from Dr. Aaron

Zelin, who is the Gloria and Ken Levy Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, where he also directs the Islamic State Worldwide Activity Map project.

Dr. Zelin, I give you the floor.

DR. ZELIN: Great. Thank you so much, and thank you to the commissioners and members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, for giving me this opportunity to testify today on non-state actors, in particular in the Sahel and South Asia, that are designated as entities of Particular Concern, or EPCs.

And the designated EPCs from these regions include the Islamic State's Sahel Province, al-Qaeda's Sahelian branch Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslim, JNIM, and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

It's important to recognize that these three groups have different histories and backgrounds. They also diverge on different points ideologically, even if they can all be viewed within the broader umbrella of jihadism.

However, they all have sort of a

fundamental in-group and out-group worldview, which pits sort of their view of what a Sunni Muslim should be versus anybody in the out-group outside of sort of their interpretations of this.

How each of these three EPCs deals with the out-group varies, especially with the Taliban compared to the two Sahelian EPCs.

Part of this is because the Taliban controls an entire country now and has a monopoly on violence.

This is why, you know, sort of referring back to Commissioner Hartzler's comments, the next designation process, it might be worth changing the Taliban status from an EPC to include Afghanistan as a Country of Particular Concern, especially as it relates to the Taliban's Islamic Emirate and its treatment of the Shi'a Hazara minority community, as well as, you know, people that are not religious at all.

As for the two Sahelian EPCs, as both have continued to push farther south in their insurgencies, both have come into great contact

with more Christian communities in the countries that are not majority Muslim, which has led to major human rights and religious freedom violations through a series of massacres.

I refer people to my written testimony for a lot more specific details, but essentially when we're talking about the Taliban Islamic Emirate and it relates to Shi'a Hazara community, you see a lot of insecurity, and part of this is because they are unable to stop the Islamic State's Khorasan Province from continuing to attack the community, and therefore there are currently other Islamic state provinces that are, you know, EPCs. It's worth adding ISKP as well.

We also see theft of property, arresting women for wearing bad hijab allegedly, steering aid away from the Shi'a Hazara community, as well as restricting religious festivals, even though on the whole, compared to their time in power in the late 1990s, they have engaged the community more, but there is still a lot of religious freedom violations that go on.

As for JNIM and IS-Sahel, while both are rivals and fought each other in the region over the years, their views on Christians retain the same foundation insofar as it necessary for Christians to convert to Islam, and if they refuse and do not accept paying the jizya tax, those historically levied on non-Muslims living under Muslim authority, then it is necessary to fight and subdue them.

And we've seen that as a consequence, there have been a lot of massacres against the Christian communities locally, especially in Burkina Faso more recently.

And a recent testimony from a survivor noted that, quote, "they had warned the Christians in the area to either convert or leave the area, failing which they would kill them"—end quote—which has occurred.

Like I said, there's a lot more details in the written testimony, but I thought it would be more worthwhile to talk about some of the policy challenges and limitations that we have in dealing

with these issues nowadays.

As a consequence of challenges to the American-led world order in recent years, in both the Sahel and Afghanistan, there are limitations on what the U.S. can actually do from a policy perspective.

Adversarial actors are in control of the space, whether the Taliban's Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan or Russia taking charge of counterterrorism duties with local countries in the Sahel region.

Therefore, due to Washington more or less unable to deploy sort of traditional counter-violent extremism programming or supporting local civil society actors in the same way as other countries, the U.S. government needs to be more nimble as well as show some level of patience.

It is also important to distinguish the Taliban and JNIM's interest in engagement versus say the Islamic State.

While both the Taliban and JNIM are extreme in their own right, they both want to

develop some level of legitimacy within the international community or with the governments in their own region.

That is why it might be worthwhile to first reach out to organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, who engage non-state actors globally on various issues related to international law, human rights, and religious freedom.

This past weekend, for example, the Taliban's Afghan Red Crescent actually engaged with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Kabul.

Although such meetings is not geared towards dealing with religious minorities, there is room for potential longer-term generational-type of engagement.

Similarly, in a recent interview with France 24 journalist Wassim Nasr, a senior leader in JNIM, Muhammad Kufa, stated that it would be acceptable to have NGOs operate within JNIM's territory so long as their activities not run afoul

of their worldview. Again, not ideal but a potential starting point.

Both these examples are in contradistinction to the Islamic State, which is uninterested in any dialogue at all, and therefore there is no room for likely change in their behavior.

Of course, I would be quite skeptical that one could convince the Taliban or JNIM about lightening their views on religious minorities, too, but at least there is an avenue that is not wholly shut off like with the Islamic State.

It also makes sense from a policy perspective to engage those countries at the perimeter of the jihadi insurgencies in the Sahel where it is not too late yet to potentially stem the tide of increasing cross-border violence.

Therefore, it would be worthwhile for a team of specialists and experts from USCIRF, USAID, Global Engagement Center at the State Department, other parts of the U.S. government, alongside partners abroad, such as Morocco, which has a lot

of ties to the Sahel region, as well as a country like the United Arab Emirates that can better prepare those governments potentially for the confrontation ahead from both an informational operations level but also inculcating society through education and programmatics, whether religious that Rabat could assist with or political that Dubai could potentially help with, to undermine the messaging and potential recruitment value that either JNIM or IS-Sahel could pose to local Muslim minority communities in places like Benin, Togo, and Ghana, or demographic parity in Cote D'Ivoire.

It could also hopefully safeguard the Christian population then too and make the societies more broadly resilient.

However, it will not be easy, and Washington should not be under any illusions that there are quick fixes.

Many of the underlying issues of religious freedom in these various societies will come down to local agency and not social engineering from the

outside.

Local actors, in good faith, that truly want to degrade the ability of these groups to advance their monopolizing view on religion and undermining multi-religious societies will have the best chances to succeed.

The U.S.'s role should be there to assist or force-multiply as necessary but not push something from the outside that will not work without local cultural knowledge and respect.

Either way, these two particular cases from Afghanistan and the Sahel highlight the complications that Washington will have going forward in an era where the U.S. is no longer the unipolar power in the world.

Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Dr. Zelin.

Next, we will hear from Ebenezer Obadare, who is the Douglas Dillon Senior Fellow for Africa Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Dr. Obadare, I give you the floor.

DR. OBADARE: Thank you, Chairperson,

Commissioner Mohamed Elsanousi, distinguished fellow panelists.

I'm grateful for the invitation to testify before this virtual hearing, whose timing, as it were, could not have been more auspicious.

As we speak, the news cycle in Nigeria is being dominated by the activities of a new Islamic State-linked group called Lakurawa, comprising insurgents from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad, and currently active across the Northwest region of the country.

On November 9, gunmen with connections to the group attacked a village in the northwestern state of Kebbi, killing at least 15 people.

While more will be known in the coming months about the group and its relation to other Islamist groups, particularly Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa, ISWAP, which have been joined in battle with the Nigerian authorities for almost two decades, their collective threats to religious freedom in Nigeria is all too well-known.

We see this in various ways:

In the first place, by launching coordinated attacks on places of worship, Islamist insurgents deny others the freedom and space to practice their faiths.

A report by the Nigeria-based International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law, Intersociety, estimates that 18,000 churches have been set ablaze by Boko Haram in Nigeria since 2009.

During this same period, more than 50,000 Christians and 34,000 moderate Muslims are estimated to have been killed. The fact is incontrovertible: extremist Islam is a threat to the religious freedom of Christians and Muslims alike.

Furthermore, by attacking state institutions like police stations and administrative buildings, Islamist insurgency groups weaken the state materially as well as symbolically.

By weakening state capacity, they erode citizens' trust in the ability of the state to

protect them, which ultimately affects their, that is, citizens' freedom to practice their religion.

In an atmosphere of chronic insecurity, religious freedom becomes a luxury as people become wary of going out to places of worship. The essential connection between freedom of movement and freedom of religion is such that rarely can you have the latter without the former.

If only for this reason, policy intervention must begin by focusing on the restoration of public safety in the country.

To this end, continued U.S. security cooperation with Nigeria is absolutely essential. The United States must continue to back the Nigerian armed forces with material support and technical and counterinsurgency training.

A key aspect of security is border security. In northern Nigeria, the notoriously porous borders with Niger and Chad are an open invitation to unrestrained terrorist operations and weapons trafficking.

Accordingly, tightening border security by

investing in or upgrading border infrastructure, as the case may be, is a matter of urgent priority.

A competent and well-governed state is the greatest antidote to religious terrorism, and, ipso facto, the surest guarantor of freedom of religion.

While Boko Haram and similar insurgent groups are no doubt motivated by visions of a theocratic paradise on earth, the extent to which they draw on legitimate political disaffection with the state, particularly in their appeal to rank and file, has become quite clear.

Policy interventions to strengthen good governance by enhancing transparency and political accountability in Nigeria are needed as a means to undermine this appeal.

The more truly democratic Nigeria is, the greater the latitude for individual religious freedom and expression, including, crucially, freedom not to practice any religion.

Finally, the U.S. should continue to bolster efforts aimed at strengthening interfaith conversations and collaborations by supporting

international and local organizations dedicated to this end.

Thanks for listening to me.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Dr. Obadare.

Finally, we will hear from Haris Tarin, Vice President of Policy and Programming with the Muslim Public Affairs Council.

Mr. Tarin, you have the floor.

MR. TARIN: Thank you so much.

Good morning. I wanted to start off by thanking the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, USCIRF, the commissioners, and its staff for inviting me to address some of the most egregious instances of violations of religious freedom by non-state actors.

This panel could not be more timely. There is no doubt that we have seen an acute increase in the number of non-state actors around the world engaged in promoting religious nationalism, proliferated through the use of the Internet and dark web, while continuing to find new ways of violating the religious freedom rights of

minorities and vulnerable populations around the world.

We are entering a new reality where hate is no longer contained within borders.

Let me start off by stating that it is the belief of my institution, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, that religious freedom is a basic human right, but most of all a God-given right.

We deeply believe that the right to worship should extend to every human being regardless of what they choose to believe or not.

That is why, since the inception of our institution, we have been on record calling out the violations of religious minorities, the rights of religious minorities wherever they may occur, even and especially in Muslim-majority nations.

When Christian minorities were under attack by non-state actors in Pakistan, we were amongst the first groups to condemn them and asked the authorities to protect the Christian community. When synagogues and Jewish institutions were under attack in Turkey, Tunisia, and in India by non-

state actors, we were amongst the first to condemn them and asked authorities to ensure their safety and security.

So our record has been clear and consistent regardless of the perpetrator.

Some of the most egregious violations of religious freedom are being live-streamed in nations who proudly call themselves democracies. These violations are happening in nations which are partners to us and allies, nations who we have deep economic, military, and diplomatic ties with.

In Europe, we have seen an acute rise of Islamophobia led by non-state actors.

In England, recently, right-wing Islamophobic riots wreaked havoc on British Muslim communities.

In France, French Muslim communities have been facing anti-Muslim sentiments by the right-wing and left-wing groups under the guise of stricter immigration policies.

But today, I want to address two immensely concerning trends taking place in the occupied

Palestinian territories and in India.

It is important to note here that in many of these instances, the states of Israel and India are either turning a blind eye or, worse, encouraging this violence by non-state actors. The lines between the state and non-state actors are increasingly being blurred.

In the occupied West Bank and specifically in Jerusalem, Israeli right-wing extremists have a free hand in committing acts of violence and intimidation against Christian and Muslim worshippers and houses of worship.

Recently, Dimitri Diliiani, head of the Palestinian National Christian Coalition, said they felt more threatened now by Israeli policies than in any other time.

Tag Meir, an Israeli organization working on hate crimes and racism, has documented dozens of attacks by Israeli civilians against churches, mosques, cemeteries, and monasteries in the occupied West Bank.

Over the past year in Gaza, countless

videos and testimonies have publicly appeared of Israeli soldiers, many of them reservists, part of extremist settler organizations, vandalizing mosques and churches and desecrating copies of the Quran.

In August of this year, far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, with thousands of Israeli settlers, stormed into the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in occupied East Jerusalem performing prayers.

Despite Jewish religious rights being banned at the location, Israeli police reportedly offered protection to extremist illegal settlers involved in the violence in the West Bank.

The situation has gotten so bad that even in the United States, the government has sanctioned a handful of extremist Israeli settlers and dozens of members of Congress have recommended sanctioning two Israeli ministers: Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir.

Just today, this morning, the State

Department sanctioned Amana, a U.S. entity that funds illegal settlements.

The troubling alliance between Hindu nationalist forces in India, represented primarily by RSS, and extremist Zionist entities, a partnership rooted in a common anti-Sikh, Muslim and Christian agenda.

Over recent years, the RSS and key Israeli figures have engaged in reciprocal visits, promoting a shared ideological affinity, one rooted in hate.

Notably, RSS leaders, including Indresh Kumar and Ram Madhav, have visited Israel holding discussions with high-ranking officials.

In return, figures from the Israeli government have attended gatherings in India organized by RSS-affiliated groups.

In the United States, institutions which recently were described by the Congressional Research Service as RSS-affiliated entities, have furthered this bond, publicly tweeting about anti-Muslim events, reinforcing its roles as significant

promoters of RSS's anti-Muslim rhetoric within the borders of the United States.

Many Kashmiri Americans have expressed deep concern that their advocacy here in Washington has directly led to repercussions by Indian forces against their families back in India-occupied Kashmir.

Dossiers with names, faces and known relatives of Kashmiri activists, religious freedom activists, have been circulated by Indian-controlled police forces in Jammu and in Kashmir.

The alignment also has alarming transnational implications. Canada, for instance, has publicly accused Indian diplomats of orchestrating a campaign of extortion, arson and murder targeting Sikh diaspora.

In October, Canada expelled six Indian diplomats following revelations that these officials were collaborating with incarcerated gang leader Lawrence Bishnoi, allegedly under the direction of India's Home Minister Amit Shah, a far-right RSS architect of India's anti-Christian

and anti-Muslim policies.

According to Canadian investigation. Bishnoi was instructed to use local, non-state actors to eliminate targets identified by Indian officials.

The assassination of Haardeep Singh Nijjar in British Columbia is a striking example. Several non-state actors have been apprehended, exposing the extent of India's covert operations on foreign soil.

Further evidence of India's transnational repression surfaced when Nikhil Gupta, a non-state actor linked to India's intelligence agency, RAW, was apprehended in Prague for plotting to assassinate a Sikh American activist, who is now in U.S. custody and has been indicted.

In the U.S., the issue has led to bipartisan condemnation, with both Republicans and Democrats highlighting India's use of non-state actors to target U.S. citizens.

Congressional hearings in 2023 and '24, held by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the

House Homeland Security Committee, and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, have underscored the severity of India's transnational repression.

This September, Congressman Adam Schiff introduced H.R. 9707, proposing a mechanism within the Department of Justice and other federal agencies to track and address these threats.

The Trump and Biden administrations have failed to direct federal agencies to take the threat of transnational repression seriously, hold perpetrators accountable, and use multilateral institutions to uphold their own state sovereignty but also international law.

The implications are clear: India's RSS-aligned network is more than a domestic entity; it is actively fostering extreme global partnerships to pursue an anti-Christian, anti-Sikh, and anti-Muslim transnational agenda. It is time we recognize these Entities of Particular Concern.

I want to end by stating that these threats are not theoretical for us. It is a very personal for us at MPAC.

In 2001, two Jewish Defense League leaders, chairman Irv Rubin and his associate Earl Krugel, had been arrested in California, charged with plotting to blow up a mosque, along with MPAC's offices, and the office of Congressman Daryll Issa, an Arab Republican from California.

According to U.S. Attorney John S. Gordon, the militants were arrested after the last component needed to make the bombs—explosive powder—was delivered to Krugel's home.

I wanted to thank the Commission for having me, and I look forward to answering any questions.

Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Mr. Tarin.

At this time, I and my fellow commissioners would like to take the opportunity to pose some questions to our witnesses and to continue our effort to gain more insight from their expertise on this particular subject.

I wonder if I might take the prerogative of the chair here to ask the first question. It's

a general question related primarily to Africa.

I'm very much concerned about the continuing growth of Entities of Particular Concern in the Sahel and Nigeria, and the Lake Chad region, and so forth.

And I pose this question particularly to Dr. Obadare and to Dr. Zelin, but Mr. Tarin, if you'd like to comment as well, I'd be curious.

What are the, what are the social factors, what are the material factors, the political factors, economic factors, climate factors? I mean what is driving the growth of these entities in this part of Africa?

DR. OBADARE: Thank you, commissioner.

This consists of five things. You can group everything you've just mentioned under the umbrella of state failure, of lack of capacity, or absence of governance.

In every matter in particular, you are talking about states where the very fabric of governance has more or less unraveled.

You have this in Mali. You have it in

Guinea. You have it Burkina Faso. You have it in northern Nigeria. And it's not an accident that it is in all these places that all these extremist groups have taken root.

Boko Haram in Nigeria started in the northeastern part of the country, and initially everybody hoped that with proper mobilization from the state that it could be contained in that part of the country.

But experience has not borne that out. On the contrary, not only has it spread through the middle part of the country, it's also spread, as I mentioned in my report, to the western part of the country.

So insofar as you can bring all of this down to one thing, it's politics, and that's why I said in my remarks that if you get the politics right, if you get, if you insist on accountability, if people have belief that the state would do the thing that the state is supposed to do, what you then do at least is pull the rug from under the feet of these entities.

They are resting on two pillars: the theocratic pillar of having the paradise or not, and the political pillar. Once you remove the political pillar, you peel away sentiment, you know, from all those people who think, who dislike the theocracy or say, oh, hold on, they do have a point with respect to the politics.

Once you take care of the politics, you are able to focus on the theology, and even among Muslims, you're able to say these people do not represent what mainstream Muslims believe, and to the extent that you can do that, you're going to have success in combating that.

DR. ZELIN: I agree with my colleague here, Dr. Obadare.

A lot of it comes down to poor governance, as well as corruption within many of these governments, and unlike say when, you know, we're thinking about like the Cold War era where there was a competition between communism and capitalism as economic models, I would say the biggest, you know, thing that we're seeing nowadays, globally,

not just in Sahel, West Africa, what have you, is that we're having a competition over governance models.

And groups like al-Qaeda, as well as the Islamist State, have their own model of governance, and if they're providing more for a local population than maybe a government, and then on top of that, it's being viewed as sort of within the context of being on the side of God, and that they're winning, there is a lot of appeal of this, especially in places, in many of these countries in the peripheries of them where the state governments really haven't had a ton of, you know, connection to going back to since their own independence.

I'd also add that I think it's important and instructive when you're doing it from the outside perspective, beyond just the local perspective, at least in Mali and Burkina Faso and Niger, we've seen that these coups have happened over the last four years, and unlike in the past where the governments, you know, partnered with the French, primarily, with some U.S. assistance, to

fight many of these groups locally, they decided instead to work with Russia's Wagner Group or their refashioned Africa Corps.

Of course, France, the U.S., were in no way perfect in the way that they dealt with these groups—I think that's important to acknowledge.

However, the level of violence has increased four-fold since 2020 when the Russians first started going in more actively, and part of that is because they have a different rule of engagement in the way that they deal with and fight these groups where a lot of it is just killing anybody that's in the way, and it doesn't matter whether the person is a militant or a civilian, and that's led to people either fleeing, as IDPs or refugees farther north, or people wanting to join up with these groups as a form of vengeance.

And because of that, that's caused destabilization generally in a lot of these locations, and that's why it's continued to grow larger, and we now see cross-border attacks into countries like Benin and Togo.

So, you know, I think it's important to recognize both those local factors as well as some outside factors that are sort of making it worse as well.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, both.

MR. TARIN: I'd like to add one thing--

CHAIR SCHNECK: Go ahead.

MR. TARIN: --to my colleagues' comments.

Especially in Africa, in West Africa, North Africa, and East Africa, as well, there has been a perception on the ground, and there's some reality to this perception, that for the past 20 years, two decades, especially post-9/11, engagement with the region has been focused on counterterrorism and national security, and that our focus has shifted from providing partnerships, aid, economic development, investment in education, investment in vulnerable populations like women and children, and all of these issues that historically we had had some engagement with the region with, towards a counterterrorism and national security lens.

And outside forces, unfortunately, including China and Russia, have taken advantage of that perception, and they have continued to send mis- and disinformation into the region, stating that the U.S. is focused on military and counterterrorism engagement and investment, and they don't care about your livelihood.

They don't want to build roads for you. They don't want to build buildings for you. And so you have this perception that the U.S. is no longer invested holistically in Africa, and that you have China and Russia who are more invested in economic development.

So I think that is something that our national security and foreign policy infrastructure has to take into consideration. How do we shift from the counterterrorism and national security lens towards a partnership, engagement and development models with nations in Northeast and West Africa?

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, gentlemen.

I recognize Commissioner Mahmood.

COMMISSIONER MAHMOOD: Thank you so much.

Thank you for this wonderful opportunity and this extensive knowledge and bringing all the facts.

My question will be particularly towards Haris because the areas he covered are more focus of my attention, but everybody has I think extensive knowledge. Anybody can jump into this thing.

My question or comments will be a little longer. I am glad you mentioned several different groups, and especially bringing India into attention. I'm so sorry that you did not mention a word about Manipur, where hundreds, if not thousands, of Christians have been killed in the last few years.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of churches have been burned in the last few years. And thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of Christians have been displaced, and things keep on going, and at this point I think when you're speaking, there's a curfew in that state, and which

is happening under the umbrella of our biggest ally right now.

If we go back, what happened in Gujarat, thousands of Muslims were killed, and they are under extreme risk even today.

What happened in Kashmir, everybody knows that Kashmir although had elections and so-called liberty and freedom, but I talk to those people firsthand personally, and I'm not talking about just Muslims. I'm talking about hundreds from India who are Hindus in Kurastok [ph]. They also accepted this is what is happening.

And we have not talked about, I know you mentioned the RSS, any entities which have played a huge role. This is not in the—these are organized systemic ways to do that.

In a country where over 250 million Muslims are living, there's a larger, I think the largest conversion to a religion is Christianity. More people are converting to Christianity, and that is probably one of the root causes of problems in Manipur.

And other parts of India, too. We are not bringing any of those entities, and I don't see anywhere in the last six months or even before, which has been, seriously been considered that, okay, this should be an EPC. This should be—and we and we should be putting any sanction or any restriction on India, not even bringing India to a Country of Particular Concern because of one single factor—national security.

Going back to Pakistan where churches are being burned, maybe not to the extent of India. Ahmadis cannot live as normal citizens. Hazaras are being persecuted every single day.

Not a single entity which is locally working is being considered for--the question is we always talk about, okay, we're not investing economically. India is our biggest economic partner. We are spending hundreds of billions of dollars there in making business.

What is making a difference? It is going the wrong way. So there is some basic problem. There is some basic issue, and I can keep on going

on to the country. I'm not bringing Burma. Nobody has mentioned about Burma so far and Myanmar where hundreds of thousands of people are still living in camps.

And we are highlighting other things. Everybody is very well aware of what is going on. We keep on pushing on Iran totally—there's nobody in disagreement. Iran is a factor which is spreading all kinds of terrorism and doing everything a state can do, or China, or Russia, or North Korea, where we have not any leverage, and the countries where we have leverage under our own eyes.

We cannot, not only USCIRF, any human rights organization cannot go and visit India to get the basic facts. We have tried every possible thing in the last several years, even when I was doing a hearing on human rights abuses in Kashmir.

There were people come from there to do as a witness. So where is the gap? And how does, I brought this special particularly to you because you have Washington experience, you have worked

inside the department, which on activity, on policy, and who deal with all these things. That is why I think you will be able to answer.

When and what can be done, where we can do something where we can really give some kind of safety and security, hope to our millions of Christians and Sikhs, and I move on to more Sikhs, because you already mentioned everything with trans-Atlantic repression and everything, where we can give them, where we can give them guarantee to largest minority in the world, the Muslims—over 250 million people in India—that the coming years, the coming decades are going to be safe for them?

They will not be forced to convert. They will not be forced to shut down their mosques, and churches will be able to survive, and people can have freedom of religion and belief and able to do their things.

Thank you so much. Sorry for the longer thing, but I had to bring the perspective.

MR. TARIN: No problem. Thank you so much, commissioner. I appreciate your question,

and it is an extremely pertinent question.

So I had to, of course, in respect of timing, trying to stay within the six minute mark, I couldn't bring up all the issues.

I tried to address some of the issues that specifically had transnational repression components tied to it, but, yes, the Christian community, and this is why when I mentioned the overall RSS agenda, I didn't say it was an anti-Muslim agenda, I said it was an anti-Christian, Sikh, and Muslim agenda.

It is not tied only to one specific community. The Christians in Manipur over the past few months, especially when the elections took place, were reeling from violent non-state actor violence.

Over 250 people were killed by Hindu nationalists and extremists. Churches burned down. Christians were essentially forced to stay home and unable to actually go to worship and Sunday services because of fear of violence.

So Manipur is a perfect example of how

when we allow one group of minorities to feel the state and non-state actors' wrath and hate, it will not stop with that specific group.

It will continue to snowball in addressing. So, of course, it's Muslims, it's Christians, it's Sikhs, and it's also a class-based issue in India as well.

So for us, what we can potentially do here is I think send signals. Our government, at the National Security Council, at the White House, at the State Department, when President Modi is coming to the U.S., there needs to be very direct signals sent, not only by faith leaders in the Christian community, in the Muslim community, in the Jewish community, in the Sikh community, but also by our national security staff, that the rights of minorities, both Christian, Muslim, and Sikh, are integral to our foreign policy interests in India.

Yes, we have great, we have great economic, technological, diplomatic and cultural ties with India, and that is an important thing, and we should continue to build those ties out.

But within that framework, human rights, religious freedom, should also be part of the conversation, and I don't think we should fear that our counterparts or colleagues in India would somehow, you know, be upset or be impacted by us bringing up these very difficult conversations when that, essentially, what, you know, when President Reagan would meet with foreign, foreign leaders, especially nations where there was religious freedom violations taking place, that was one of the first things that President Reagan would have on his agenda because it was important.

Religious freedom was an important component of that administration, and I think there's opportunity now with the Trump administration and the rest, you know, in the couple of months left in the Biden administration, for us to ensure that our government officials, and specifically our national security infrastructure, bring up those conversations.

When I was in government, I know there was a real fear for us to bring those issues up in

bilateral meetings because of the fear of repercussion on other issues.

So it has to be, we have to kind of break that barrier of fear with our foreign counterparts.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Mr. Tarin.

Commissioner Hartzler. You're muted.

COMMISSIONER HARTZLER: Did that again. Sorry.

Thank you, again, Chair Schneck, and I wanted to follow up on this line of advice there that you were sharing, Professor Tarin, about what we can do now.

As you know, we do have a change of administration coming in in January. And as they look to formulate policy on this, I'd like to hear from all of the witnesses on what specific things that you would recommend that this administration do to try to address EPCs.

And I've already got down, number one, Haris, your suggestion on India, you know, when President Modi comes to include that as, you know, first and foremost that we care about human rights

and make sure he understands that.

And then also to make sure, like President Reagan, you would advise that whenever we're dealing with foreign governments, the first thing they bring up is our belief in the United States in the sanctity of religious freedom, and that is paramount.

And so it's paramount to our bilateral relationships. So I thought those were, those were two really good pieces of advice.

But do you have any other specific things? I know, Dr. Obadare, you mentioned in Nigeria, which obviously we're very concerned about what's going on there. You listed in your testimony some specific things that you thought could be done such as helping infrastructure on the border, continuing to help—I forgot what some of the other things there you said—but you gave some specific things, too.

So I just turn it over to each one of you to share some specifics you would recommend as this new administration comes into office.

So, Dr. Obadare, you want to start?

DR. OBADARE: Sure. Yeah. Thank you, commissioner.

So maybe I should use this moment to first reiterate what my colleagues said earlier, first, also following on part of what I said, Dr. Zelin, which is about this is governance, governance, governance.

At the end of the day, if you get the politics right, if people perceive that the state is more transparent, less corrupt, and that their leaders more accountable, you are going to have long-term success.

We're not going to win this battle in the next three months. We're not going to win this battle in the next six months. We're going to win this battle in the next six years, in the next six decades. Long-term thinking is extremely important.

The second thing, now you brought this up, it seems to me that it's the right opportunity to sort of have, maybe a deeper conversation about

this, and this is the issue of human rights.

If you listen to, there's a strand of the conversation about this, which especially given the gains that Russia and China have made in Africa over the last few years, some, the argument has been suggested that the United States should make some concessions.

And one of those concessions is that we should just take it easy on human rights. I think it's important for people to realize a couple of things:

One, we can't on the one hand insist on religious freedom and then walk away from human rights. The two go together; right. If you don't have human rights, you can't have religious freedom.

It's important for the United States as the foremost democratic country in the world to continue to insist on human rights.

It's one thing for the United States to admit that it has been wrong in the past. There is the matter of the imperialists. There is probably

steps on those, and there has been arrogance. But that's no excuse for walking away from human rights.

You can be penitent without prostrating. There has been no better time. There is no better time than right now to insist on human rights.

Let me give you one example, and I'll stop. Think about all the poor countries in the Sahel—Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso. What's going on in those places now?

As the allure, the attraction, that first flush of love with the military as one of, what all of us said, some of us who have lived under the military before, that it's being realized right now, which is at the end of the day, there is nothing to be had from the military.

At the end of the day, what you're going to get is a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth. The United States can support local groups which favor transparency, civil society groups which are going to deepen democratic rights, and double down on human rights, not African rights, not Arab

rights, not Muslim rights—human rights.

They are universal rights. They are not alien to Africa. The United States should lead the pursuit of this goal.

COMMISSIONER HARTZLER: Could you clarify what do you mean by human rights? Get more specific. What specifically could we help with?

DR. OBADARE: Human rights are what I'm entitled to because I'm human. It's antecedent to the fact that I am male. It's antecedent to the fact that I'm black. It's antecedent to the fact that I'm educated. It's antecedent to the fact that I am XYZ.

I am entitled to human rights because I'm human.

COMMISSIONER HARTZLER: Sure.

DR. OBADARE: We cannot concede the ground on those. Once you begin to split the difference on identity grounds, you're going to lose.

Women are entitled to human rights because they are human. Minorities are entitled to human rights because they are human. It is universal.

You don't get these on account of religion or faith or identity. You get it because you are a human being. It's one of the attributes of the West. We cannot give up on it.

COMMISSIONER HARTZLER: Great. Thank you.
Dr. Zelin.

DR. ZELIN: Thank you.

Look, it's not an easy issue dealing with this problem, especially in a world where Russia and China are making bigger attempts to leverage sort of, I guess, the illegitimacy many people see of the United States due to policies over the past 20 years or so.

That being said, the United States still, for whatever flaws it has, is a, you know, a democratic free country that does believe in human rights. Even if it is imperfect at times, and therefore we still have that message, it's important to keep on pushing in many parts of the world.

And one of the things that neither Russia nor China or regional governments have is that we

have large diasporas within the United States that can assist with this as well.

So it's not just some white male from the outside coming and badgering people, but using people from these regions, better understanding the local context, cultures, as well as bringing them in, because many of them have been involved in developing, you know, entrepreneurial businesses or getting involved in community activities, and therefore can provide help within these local communities as well because while the U.S. might have, you know, specific aid packages or helping out with development, usually it's not like, oh, we're only going to put money to this particular village or city because they're a minority dealing with some issue with the government.

And, therefore, you know, bringing in some of these diaspora communities can help maybe fill that gap where developments or even local governments might not be able to do it because of their own policies or views of the inadequacies of a minority religious group in their own society.

So that's something that I think for awhile the U.S. hasn't really taken advantage of considering the fact that there are so many people from all over the world that live in the United States.

COMMISSIONER HARTZLER: Okay. So I was looking for specifics. I appreciate that. You know, we're looking for something specific the administration can do to help maybe that hasn't been done in the past.

So you're saying reach out to diaspora and bring them in and see what ideas they have or maybe involve them in helping reach out to these communities. So I like that.

Dr. Tarin.

MR. TARIN: And, commissioner, I would add just a couple of things. I would add that the first thing that any administration, the incoming administration or anyone should think of, is think of human rights and religious freedom as a tool in our foreign policy and national security infrastructure.

It is not something that we, that's a window dressing for us. It should be part and parcel of how we conduct our foreign policy and how we conduct our national security abroad.

And I think there needs to be a mindset shift within our, our national security and foreign policy infrastructure that has post-9/11 especially shifted, which has become very much focused on militarism, very much focused on counterterrorism, and does not take a holistic approach to understanding the world and societies. That's the first thing.

The second thing is the United States has something that China, Russia, or any other nation does not have, and that is that everybody wants to come and live in the United States of America.

Regardless of the criticism, regardless of the challenges that we've had with our foreign policy, we are still a place where people want to come to invest, engage and be part of our national mosaic even if they disagree heavily with our foreign policies in certain parts of the world.

Understanding that, and creating that people-to-people engagement is extremely important. There's a really, you know, people-to-people engagement at the State Department does not get much investment; right?

We have, you know, these trips of foreign dignitaries, professors, teachers, police officers, who come to the United States, spend a few weeks. It's a very low cost way of ensuring that people understand our values, our principles, how we look at religious freedom, how we look at human rights, civil rights, and there's not much investment that happens in that people-to-people trade or engagement unfortunately.

Number three, we have to go back to investing in civil society groups abroad and strategically.

We have pulled away from investing in civil society groups, democracy groups, civil rights groups, women's groups, women's rights groups.

These are folks who are locally trained,

indigenous to their communities, understand culture, understand laws, understand religious and cultural sensitivities, that we, from the outside coming in, do not understand.

Finding creative ways of empowering them, investing in them, is something that we've actually moved away from to a large extent, and I think those are three areas that any incoming administration can really look at in terms of shifting mindset and also practical engagement.

COMMISSIONER HARTZLER: Thank you very much.

I yield back, chair.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Commissioner Hartzler.

Would any of the other commissioners like to pose a question at this time?

COMMISSIONER ELSANOUSI: Yes, Commissioner Steve. Yes, thank you so much.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Commissioner Elsanousi.

COMMISSIONER ELSANOUSI: Yes, yes. Can you hear me? Yes, no, thank you so much,

Commissioner Schneck.

I just want to, it's a number of questions that I want to pose here, but I wanted clearly to appreciate, Dr. Zelin, you brought up the critical role of the diaspora communities and something that's really I hope the upcoming administration will pay attention to that.

We have seen during Obama administration when Secretary Clinton was Secretary of State, she had her famous phrase, you know, "brain gain," instead of, you know, brain drain. She said "brain gain."

And she had a number of, you know, civil society and diaspora meetings at the State Department. The purpose is how we can, you know, actually how these countries can gain from the United States, and something that was very critical.

And I'd also mention during the Bush administration, after September 11th, I mean there was a whole strategy was created how to win the hearts and minds of the Muslim world.

And some of you probably remember that when Karen Hughes was, you know, was our Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, and how she was able to actually work with the diaspora communities to actually, you know, gain that trust we needed back as a nation.

Anyway, that just to emphasize the critical role of the diaspora community. But I want to come back and, you know, to you, Dr. Obadare, a couple of things I wanted really to mention.

One is that in your remarks, you mentioned extremist Islam. And usually we have this debate back and forth, there is nothing called "extremist Islam."

I mean there are Muslims that are extremists that destroy the message of Islam in committing all of these violent crimes; right?

But the religion itself should not be blamed, and so I would like you maybe to comment on that. We always say the Muslim extremists or those who are interpreting the scripture in a very

extreme way.

And, then, second, also I wanted you to shed light, because there is a critical role of civil society, and, you know, Mr. Tarin mentioned that, you know, just now, but in a country like Nigeria, Dr. Obadare, there is, we cannot, the mechanisms of the past are not working anymore.

We need to work with indigenous communities. We need to bring customs and cultures that work for them, for Africans; right?

And we need to invest in those who do their best. We understand these civil society organizations, particularly religious communities, they're underutilized and under capacity. So what mechanisms that we can implore then locally to do that; right?

I mean I can give you a number of examples. I mean in the northeast of Nigeria, in Bauchi, for instance, the Tijaniyyah movements, I visited their schools. They have 10,000 kids that they picked them from the street and put them in the schools. They did it for keeping them from

joining Boko Haram; right. It's a strong kind of, you know, work that they do.

And here, you know, we can work and talk about human rights and the universal human rights, Declaration of Human Rights, and all of that, but we have to also recognize the critical role of religion and our scriptures, particularly when it comes to the dignity of human beings.

It's all in the scriptures, in the Bible, in the Quran, in the Torah, and all of it—the dignity of human beings.

All of these human rights laws, they came later actually, to actually affirm what is in the scripture. So, therefore, local communities would know better what is relevant to them, not only their own religions, but even their local customs and culture that could use to address issues of, you know, violation of religious freedom.

So I just want to really, want you to shed light there.

And to you, also, Dr. Zelin, we know that a number of imams were killed. Why? Because they

spoke against, you know, extremist groups and non-state actors.

We yet to see any mechanisms that actually can provide safety and security to those local people who are actually talking about the, or challenging extreme ideologies.

Thank you so much, Commissioner Schneck.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Commissioner, Elsanousi.

I'd like to give Commissioner Soloveichik a chance to pose a question, too. Since we're coming to time, I want to make sure that all commissioners get a chance to add a question.

Commissioner.

COMMISSIONER SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you, Chairman Schneck.

I'm actually going to build on what Commissioner Elsanousi spoke about just a bit.

A lot has come up in this hearing, some of which I have a great deal to say and have written about myself. But I'll focus on the subject that is actually the subject of our hearing, which is

extra-state actors and EPCs, which is, as the chair mentioned in his testimony, a non-sovereign entity that exercises significant political power and territorial control, is outside the control of a sovereign government, and often employs violence in pursuit of their objectives.

That's the subject of our hearing. And so I want to focus on that subject, and focus directly on something I think really interesting that Dr. Obadare said, and this will connect to what Commissioner Elsanousi mentioned as well.

Doctor, you mentioned that when it comes to non-state actors such as these, fitting this definition, often at times the best way to address it is to strengthen the democratic features of the larger country that these non-state actors seek to attack in the first place.

That seems right to me. Of course, it also seems that one of the most vexing questions in foreign policy in general is how to strengthen democratic elements in a country. Obviously, this has come up any number of times.

Without taking a position on how to apply it to a specific country, obviously this came up during the Bush administration when it came to Iraq, or during the Obama administration when it came to Egypt.

It seems to me one of the most complex but also most important questions, especially on the subject of our hearing, which is these extra-state actors.

So I'd be incredibly interested in your thoughts on just following up on your really interesting testimony on what are the best ways to achieve that, to strengthen the democratic dimension in the larger country and thereby address the threat of non-state actors and to do so in a way that is actually effective and achieves both U.S. foreign policy goals and strengthening of human rights around the world, to which you gave such eloquent testimony?

DR. OBADARE: You want me to respond, commissioner?

CHAIR SCHNECK: Yes, go right ahead.

DR. OBADARE: Oh, thank you.

So three, I think similarly different questions. Let me see if I can sort of respond to them.

So the extremist Islam, fundamentalist Islam, Islamism, I think we all agree we know what we are talking about.

It's the version of the faith that says "I'm right, you're dead." That's what I think we're up against.

And the interesting thing is that these versions of the faith, it's not just anti-Christian, it's also anti-mainstream Muslim, which is why in many parts of Nigeria. I gave some of the numbers in my testimony.

Boko Haram is not just destroying schools. It's not just destroying churches. It's attacking mosques and Muslims, as well. So if we're going to be able to combat it effectively, one of the things we have to do is to recognize that we're fighting against an interpretation of Islam that is very stringent, but that is not shared by the majority

of Muslims.

So this is something that Muslims and Christians alike in Nigeria are fighting, and I think one of the things that United States has to do, which it has been doing also, is to lend support to that. I hope that clarifies that.

About culture and custom, let me see if I can put it in a very, in the broadest way. Whenever custom or culture comes into conflict with human rights, culture surrenders. Culture must give way.

That's my argument. So what do I mean? I'm saying that unless we put it that starkly and unless we are put it or write it in that way, we will not be able to protect or guarantee the interest of the rights of individuals to practice whatever faiths they want to practice or to not practice whatever faith they do not want to practice.

So let me give an example that I think all of us are familiar with. The young woman, maybe she's not so young now, from Pakistan, Malala, the

way to defend Malala, and the way she's been defended, is to defend her against the rights of custom.

We don't say, Malala, you're a Muslim girl. We say, Malala, a woman, a human being. So my point is it doesn't matter whether people in folk Afrikaan or Arab custom or Canadian custom, custom bows before the individual.

There are no cultural rights. There are individual rights. There's a reason why it's called human rights. "Human" should be an emphasis. Once we lose the battle on that foundational epistemology or ground, we have nothing to work on.

We have nothing to work with because in every circumstance, what someone has to do to undermine it is to say, oh, culture. Hey, custom.

Once you say on this rock of individual human rights I stand, I can do no more, you're fine. It becomes universal. And everybody irrespective of circumstance or context or whatever cultural, cultural framework or matrix that it's

ascribed to, everybody is welcome to this, universal human rights.

The final point is about what we can do to strengthen or deepen democracy. Given my insistence, my insistence that this is all about politics, I think one thing we should all recognize is the U.S. is actually doing a lot in this respect: supporting electoral reform; helping countries push back against dictators and dictatorship; working with civil society groups that promote transparency; deepening public discourse; giving money to media organizations; helping social justice advocates and human rights advocates of all stripes in different parts of Africa.

I think the United States should continue to do those things, but here's the most important thing. I think because of the situation on the continent and sometimes if you look very closely you wonder what progress have we made; right?

But as a Nigerian, I can tell you, Nigeria became a democracy for the first time in 1999.

It's not a perfect democracy, far from it.

But you can begin to see the shoots of progress. Where those shoots of progress are starting to emerge, the United States should be foremost in working with local organizations and institutions to nourish and nurture those shoots.

The most important things for us to recognize that we're not just in Africa to build bridges. We're not just in Africa to build infrastructure. China can do that. Russia can do that.

We're looking to build modern democracies, secure on the foundation of human rights. It's going to take a long time. It's not, as I said earlier, something that you can achieve in two months, in two years.

But there's enough out there in terms of public sentiment that we can work on, and I think in the long-term we can get to where we want to get, you know, and build strong alliances with these countries.

Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Dr. Obadare.

I'd like to give Dr. Zelin and Mr. Tarin a chance to make a few closing comments in the few minutes that are available to us.

Dr. Tarin, perhaps you first.

MR. TARIN: Thank you so much.

I'd like to make a couple of points to address some of the challenges brought up.

The first point I will actually make is that, you know, there are very few real non-state actors, really very few.

If you truly look around the world, you will not really find true non-state actors. There's always either a state-funding component that, that is involved domestically or foreign states who fund these entities to destabilize regions, to destabilize societies.

Whether you're looking at Afghanistan, as we mentioned, if you're looking at Pakistan, if you're looking at Nigeria, wherever you're looking at, you're always looking at non-state actors who have the support, funding, or the blind eye of the

state that allows them to function.

And I think when we see that those lines have been blurred, we would be able to then address issues a little bit more clearly because there is no such thing as a true non-state actor.

The second thing is the individual versus communal challenge. Yes, human rights, we can sell human rights to the world as a very noble thing, individual human rights, civil rights.

It is noble, it is valued in principle that we can promote, that we can cherish, that we can bring about to different parts of the world.

But we have to understand that when we do that, there are local forces, and I won't even say cultural, communal, institutional, legacy forces within societies, that push back against these what they call so-and-so "human" or "religious freedom rights."

And so the way, so we have to be very nuanced in how we approach, how we're promoting human rights, how we're promoting civil rights, how we're promoting women's rights, and understand

cultural sensitivities and context that will allow us to be more effective in getting our goal done and getting the right actors on our side.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Mr. Tarin.

MR. TARIN: And the last thing I would say--

CHAIR SCHNECK: Very briefly. Very briefly. I want to give--

MR. TARIN: The last thing I'll say is we have to be consistent. I think there's a perception around the world that we are for religious freedom and human rights in one area and not in another area.

And that consistency diminishes our impact around the world so consistency is key.

Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you very much.

Dr. Zelin.

DR. ZELIN: Thank you.

I think we're dealing with some of these EPCs, specifically, to discuss, reiterate what I said in my discussion about the countries that are

surrounding the Sahel where the U.S. has been trying to engage so that what has happened already in Mali and Niger and Burkina Faso doesn't happen in places like Benin and Togo, Ivory Coast, Ghana, et cetera.

To learn the lessons of why things failed in Mali, in Niger, in Burkina Faso, from the local perspective, but also the outside perspective as well, and therefore while I take Mr. Tarin's comments about the securitization thing, there still needs to be some security component to it, but it also needs to include a lot of other activities related to this too.

Bulking up diplomacy. One of the reasons why we didn't see what happened in those countries happening is because there's sort of a "fortress America" with the embassies, and they're not allowed to meet with anybody outside because of concerns related to security.

Too, while, you know, aid is great when we're thinking about the future of how we do it, you know, the way China has done it, obviously not

the loan part of it, but building infrastructure I think that that needs to be thought of as an important component of these things, too, instead of just providing money and then letting the governments kind of go wild with it.

And to piece that together then with the comment I said before is that there are many people in the diasporas, in the U.S., that are business people. They can potentially help out with these projects so that there can be sort of a local familial face to this, as well, instead of it seeming like outside activity.

And then when you marry all this kind of thing together, obviously you're not going to have, you know, answers, solutions like we've already been talking about in like three, six months or a year or two.

But this needs to be like a generational project, the way we think about this long-term thinking. So that over time you do see the chipping away at things and that, you know, societies are more resilient, there's more

opportunity for more people, whether economically or politically.

And then, hopefully, from there, because people feel bought into these, you know, opportunities and systems, that they don't go looking for more extremist entities that are selling them something that is more utopian and not necessarily realistic, but sounds good because things are so desperate or the alternative just seems so bad already.

So, obviously, a lot of work ahead and many aspects that are not easy, but I think it's important to think about this from a holistic perspective and not just silo one thing from the other.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Dr. Zelin.

We've run out of time, but I just want to say, you know, what an extraordinary session this was and how truly grateful we are for the witnesses, for their testimony today.

At this time, the hearing, however, is officially adjourned. Thank you all very much.

COMMISSIONER ELSANOUSI: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER MAHMOOD: Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 11:31 a.m. ET, the hearing
was adjourned.]