UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN AFGHANISTAN: ONE YEAR SINCE THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER

Wednesday, August 24, 2022

10:30 a.m.

Virtual Hearing

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

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Nury Turkel, Chair
Abraham Cooper, Vice Chair
David Curry
Stephen Schneck

C O N T E N T S

P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR TURKEL: Good morning and welcome to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing on Religious Freedom in Afghanistan: One Year Since the Taliban Takeover.

I'd like to begin by thanking our distinguished witnesses for joining us and offering their expertise today.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or commonly known as 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 religious freedom or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the United States government.

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

Today's hearing will delve into the status of religious freedom in Afghanistan under Taliban's

de facto rule. We hope to better understand the current situation and consider how U.S. policy toward Taliban can be more effective, effectively integrate religious freedom concerns.

Last week on August 15th marked the one-year anniversary of the Taliban takeover and their de facto rule in Afghanistan.

The Taliban's imposition of their narrow interpretation of Sunni Islam poses a grave threat to religious freedom and all Afghans who don't subscribe to that interpretation. The Taliban's harsh enforcement of its religious interpretation violates the freedom of religion or belief of religious minorities, women, members of the LGBTQI+ community, Afghans with different interpretation of Islam, and Afghans who don't follow any religion.

Despite continued promises to protect all ethnic and religious communities residing in Afghanistan, the Taliban de facto government has been unable to provide safety and security to religious minorities against attacks from Islamic State-Khorasan.

While some religious minority communities face the threat of extinction, others struggle to practice their faith in hiding because of their fear of reprisal.

Despite promises of change and inclusivity, the Taliban currently continues to rule Afghanistan in a similar manner to the way that they ruled the country from 1996 to 2001.

Afghanistan's diverse religious and ethnic groups have been decimated. Religious minority communities indigenous to Afghanistan, including Hindu, Sikh, and Jewish communities, have become nearly extinct, while others such as Ahmadiyya Muslim, Baha'i, and Christian communities practice their faith in private due to fear of reprisal.

The Taliban and ISIS-K consider Afghan Christians, Ahmadis, and Baha'is to be converts from Islam. Consequently, these religious minority communities must remain hidden since Taliban's strict interpretation of Hanafi jurisprudence deems conversion from Islam to another religion as apostasy and punishable by death.

Now I'd like to turn the floor over to Vice Chair Cooper to talk more about our hearing today.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Nury.

As Chair Turkel outlined, the Taliban and their rivals, ISIS-K, have played a significant role in creating, maintaining, and escalating conditions hostile to freedom of religion and belief in Afghanistan.

Several important areas of interest we would like to discuss today include an overview of steps taken by the Taliban since they came to power that violate freedom of religion or belief, and to better understand the Taliban's approach to addressing threats to religious freedom from other armed groups in the country, and how they are falling short of international standards.

Panelists will give us the overview of U.S. strategy in deterring the Taliban's persecution of religious communities, such as targeted sanctions, promoting human rights and religious freedom, and providing humanitarian

relief to at-risk groups through USAID.

We would also like to explore additional options for U.S. policy and how the U.S. government and international community can better work to protect Afghan religious minority communities.

We'll also hear about the U.S. Afghan Resettlement policy and the U.S. government's evacuation programs, and ongoing Afghan refugee resettlement process, including policy recommendations for the United States refugee resettlement process that can better support religious minorities at extreme risk of persecution.

Finally, speaking as an American citizen, I want to apologize to the thousands of Afghan women and men who stood with America and are still trapped over there. It is my hope that the U.S. government will do much, much more in the coming days, weeks, and months to help these brave and loyal friends, and I hope that the United States State Department will be more forthcoming and open, not only to the Commission, but to the American

people about stepping up all of these efforts.

Thank you, and I turn back the floor to Chair Turkel.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you, Vice Chair Cooper.

I'd like to now turn to our witnesses. Our witnesses, today's witnesses, are Fereshta Abbasi. She's a researcher in the Asia division at Human Rights Watch, focusing on research and documentation of the ongoing abuses in Afghanistan.

Our second witness is Anne Richard who joined Freedom House as a Distinguished Fellow and Afghanistan Coordination Lead in 2001, 2021. Before that she served in the State Department at the senior level.

Our third witness is Joseph Azam, who is a lawyer, writer, policy advisor, currently serving as a board chair for the Afghan American Foundation, a national non-profit focusing on advancing interests of Afghan Americans and Afghans in general.

If I could ask Ms. Abbasi to go ahead and

start your testimony. Thank you.

MS. ABBASI: Thank you very much, Chair Turkel. Thank you for inviting me to testify at this important hearing today and for bringing increased attention to the situation of religious freedom in Afghanistan.

I will get straight to the point. Religious freedom does not exist in Afghanistan anymore. Since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the Taliban authorities, citing an order from their leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, have stated that the laws of the previous government are no longer in effect and that only Sharia, or Islamic law, is applicable in Afghanistan.

The Taliban's interpretation of Sharia, however, and the new rules and policies that they have announced since taking over cannot be found in any other country with Islamic populations.

Almost all of their rules severely restrict Afghans' basic human rights and, in particular, women and girls. Under the Taliban's extremist interpretation of Sharia, Taliban

officials have imposed a de facto ban on girls' secondary education, mandated women's bodies and faces to be completely covered when they are outside their homes, and prohibit women from traveling or working without a male relative as a chaperone.

There is no other country in the world where women face such sweeping violations of their basic human rights.

The Taliban have also banned various other activities by men and women, citing Sharia, including prohibiting unrelated men and women from appearing in public together or going to parks and restaurants.

These restrictions also violate the rights of Afghans to live according to their own conceptions of their religious faiths.

But there are further abuses. The Taliban are failing to protect Afghanistan's religious minorities from violence and are subjecting some groups to persecution.

The Taliban follow an ultraconservative

Sunni interpretation of Islam. Yet, approximately ten to 15 percent of Afghan population are Shias, and there are a significant number of Sufi, small numbers of Ahmadis, and some Hindus and Sikhs in urban areas of Afghanistan.

The Taliban have not stated that Shia or Sufi practices are forbidden. And the authorities have also promised to protect Hindus and Sikhs, although the members of both communities have continued to leave Afghanistan and only a little over a hundred remain.

The Taliban does not consider Ahmadis to be Muslims and have persecuted their leaders in the past. Most of Afghanistan's population of non-Muslims also continue to live under threat of persecution, in particular, Baha'i, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and Christians, who practice secretly or have gone into hiding.

An unknown number of Afghans consider themselves agnostic or atheist or otherwise do not practice Islam or any other religion.

Taliban authorities view anyone who has

left Islam is to have committed apostasy, a crime that they believe should be punished by death.

Serious problems for Shia, Sufi, and non-Muslims in Afghanistan today come from the Islamic State of Khorasan, the Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan, an armed extremist group.

The ISKP has repeatedly carried out suicide bombings and other armed attacks against Shia communities, in particular ethnic Hazara.

The Hazara, a predominantly Shia ethnic group, have faced discrimination and abuses by successive Afghan governments for over a decade. Since the Taliban takeover, the ISKP has claimed responsibility for 13 attacks against members of Hazara community, killing and injuring around 700 people.

This is the situation that Afghans are enduring today under the Taliban rule. The entire population is being forced to live according to ultraconservative interpretation of one branch of a single religion.

Over half of the population, women and

girls, are subjected to sweeping and severe violations of their basic human rights.

Afghan men and boys also suffer abuses under the Taliban rule. And the Taliban is doing little as an Islamic State hunts opportunities to murder Afghanistan's vulnerable religious minorities.

Afghanistan is a nightmare for religious freedom and other basic human rights.

Taliban leaders need to recognize their vision for Afghanistan's future is built on oppression, and that to address the concerns for all Afghans, they need to take a rights-respecting approach to religion and other fundamental freedoms.

This will mean engaging with international community in a more cooperative manner and adopting international standards for human rights.

For instance, by reversing policies violating the rights of women and girls to education, employment and freedom of movement and fully cooperating with the United Nations

Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and the United Nations Human Rights Council mechanism.

Greater Taliban respect for human rights can also contribute to better international cooperation in addressing the threat posed by the ISKP, especially for religious minorities in Afghanistan.

The U.S. government, which has made serious missteps in Afghanistan over the past 20 years, can nevertheless make important contributions to human rights, particularly the rights of women, girls, and religious minorities.

This includes continuing to negotiate with the Taliban on shared concerns about Afghanistan's humanitarian and economic situation and the threat posed by the ISKP.

The U.S. should support efforts by the U.N. Mission and U.N. Human Rights Council to monitor, report on, and ensure accountability for human rights violation.

The U.S. should urge other governments to press the Taliban to improve human rights, as

coordinated efforts are critical for Afghanistan's future.

We cannot give up.

Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you, Ms. Abbasi.

Now I'd like to turn the floor over to Ms. Richard for testimony.

MS. RICHARD: Thank you, Chairman Turkel, and thank you to Vice Chairman Cooper, Commissioner Curry and Commissioner Schneck, for the invitation to speak today and for ensuring we continue to pay attention to the plight of those threatened by the Taliban.

I serve as a Distinguished Fellow at Freedom House and lead our Afghanistan Human Rights Coordination Mechanism.

This Mechanism was developed last autumn following the fall of Kabul to the Taliban and was launched in January with seed funding from the Open Society Foundations.

Freedom House joined with four non-governmental organizations, two Afghans—the Afghan

Civil Society Forum and Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization—and then two international, the International Federation for Human Rights and MADRE.

And we joined together to create the Mechanism and invited others to join us. We now have hundreds of participants, who include Afghan human rights defenders inside their own country, Afghans in exile, and Afghan specialists in international or U.S.-based NGOs.

Through this network, we share information with Afghan human rights defenders and arrange for them to hear from and question key policymakers.

We also seek to channel support to those who need it to help them get to safety and in the best cases resume their work.

I'm honored to join today's panel, and I want to discuss options for U.S. policymakers, and I've been asked particularly to propose ways forward for U.S. refugee policy and practices.

I have submitted a written statement but will read parts of it to keep to the time limit,

and I also want to associate myself with the remarks of my co-panelist Fereshta Abbasi, who has so clearly described what is going on inside Afghanistan.

Freedom House has tracked Taliban abuses over many years and recognizes that the Taliban has perversely justified the massive violation of rights in the name of religion, from imposing restrictive rules on women and girls, to classifying who the "true Muslims" are.

The Taliban regime imposes obedience as a principal value and the religious hierarchy is the power that moves the country to make any national or international decision.

The Taliban regime encourages and incites social hostility and seeks to hinder all personal rights. Taliban leaders and members intervene in how people should live their personal lives. No space is considered private.

The Taliban will not stop seeking to change all of society to become part of its group. They understand that a functioning judiciary,

education, and women's rights could undermine their aims.

They want to impose their ideas and transform the education and criminal justice system, including the courts, to produce a submissive community. Personal lives and family values have been threatened and subjected to pressure and supervision by the de facto authorities to match what the Taliban aims to create.

It is essential that we continue to pay very close attention to the rights of religious minorities and religious reform in Afghanistan, as this will be central to reducing violence there and restoring the rights and freedom of all Afghan people.

According to the U.N. Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, attacks against ethnic and religious communities are escalating across that country.

While discrimination and violence against ethnic and religious minority communities have

plagued Afghanistan, attacks against Hazaras, Afghan Hindus and Sikhs, Ahmadis, Sufis, and other at-risk groups have escalated at alarming rates since the Taliban seized power.

Some attacks have been claimed by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province, or ISIS-K, which is fighting the Taliban.

Nevertheless, as the de facto authorities, the Taliban must be held to account for they are responsible for the safety and security of all Afghans and must take action to protect them and detect and stop violence and attacks of this sort in accordance with international standards.

I'll skim over the parts of my testimony where I talk about attacks that have taken place.

The commissioners are well apprised of these.

I did want you to know about a special event that was held recently in July. The United States and European Union sponsored a high-level event on the protection of religious and ethnic minorities in Afghanistan.

It took place on the sidelines of the 50th session of the U.N. Human Rights Council. Freedom House was pleased to be asked to co-host this event, and our Executive Vice President, Nicole Bibbins Sedaca, moderated the conversation attended by 200 people, including many international diplomats as well as Afghan human rights defenders.

During this session, U.S. Special Envoy Rina Amiri, E.U. Special Envoy Tomas Niklasson, and Special Rapporteur for Afghanistan Richard Bennett concurred that Afghanistan's ethnic and religious diversity is its greatest asset and called upon the Taliban to take concrete steps to protect at-risk communities.

Leaders from Afghan Ahmadi, Hazara and Sikh communities discussed the security and human rights challenges these and other vulnerable populations are experiencing, as the human rights situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate.

Noting that condemnation is not enough, they called for greater protection measures, including documentation and investigation

mechanisms and relocation of those at greatest risk.

It was noted that under international human rights treaties ratified by Afghanistan, the rights of ethnic and religious minorities are protected, and they have a right to equality of treatment with other groups.

Given the situation my fellow panelists and I have outlined, we urge action on the following recommendations to help ethnic and religious minorities in Afghanistan:

Once again recommend that Afghanistan be designated as a Country of Particular Concern;

Prioritize the collection of views and recommendations from grassroots activists and community members;

Support efforts to document human rights abuses to have a record and eventually seek justice against the perpetrators. Ideally, human rights violations must be investigated and perpetrators held accountable, and incidents should be prevented from reoccurring in the future.

Ensure that there are no barriers to deliveries of humanitarian aid on the basis, on the grounds of religion or ethnicity; and

Provide relocation and protection support to the minorities and women's rights and human rights defenders who are at high risk.

In the United States, another life-saving action we can take is to offer those who flee the Taliban in Afghanistan a chance to restart their lives here.

Both the 1951 International Refugee Convention and U.S. law include in the legal definition of "refugee" people fleeing persecution because of their religion.

So I will skim over some of the background to how Afghans have been brought here last year and this year and point out that Afghan refugees may enter the United States through several pathways:

One is Special Immigrant Visas. These visas are for people who provided services for U.S. government and the military and for Afghans who did similar work for U.S. contractors, and there is a

backlog of more than 70,000 SIV applicants, and many applications have been rejected because of missing paperwork.

Secondly, humanitarian parole. Many of those who arrived in the United States during the large-scale evacuation from Kabul in August 2021 were allowed in the country on humanitarian parole.

This allowed Afghans to enter the U.S. on a temporary basis and entitled them to no special benefits or help although we can discuss how they have received help, both from an outpouring of support from the American people and also from arrangements made by Congress to ensure they got normal refugee benefits.

But these folks, as we'll discuss, continue to need help.

Third, U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, which is the program I used to have oversight of from the State Department. It's not a visa. This is an annual program run as a public-private partnership with refugee resettlement agencies.

It has been an excellent way to bring

refugees here in the past. Very challenging for the refugees, very generous on the part of Americans, but has been, as everyone knows, weakened in recent history and needs help being strengthened.

And finally travel to the United States on one's own and to claim asylum.

Each of these pathways has different complications, and the odds are against anyone getting here fast. Advocates, including Freedom House, support the Afghan Adjustment Act, which was recently introduced in Congress on a bipartisan basis.

The Afghan Adjustment Act allows certain Afghan evacuees to apply for permanent status after one year or two years of being paroled into the United States.

I'm happy to take questions on the Afghan Adjustment Act, on the different ways refugees find to get to the United States, on the fact that so many of them have such a hard time leaving Afghanistan, and also if they do get to a

neighboring country, they often get stuck in an impossible situation there.

Finally, for hundreds of years, United States has accepted those seeking freedom of religion and welcomed them to our shores. Now, many religious minorities in Afghanistan are facing religious persecution, and the United States owes it to those, in a country where we have invested so much, to help them find protection at home or refuge elsewhere.

Thank you for calling attention to the crisis in Afghanistan and the particular threats to religious minorities.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Ms. Richards.

Now I'd like to turn the floor over to our final witness, Joseph Azam. Mr. Azam, you may begin.

MR. AZAM: Thank you.

Good morning. My name is Joseph Azam. I am grateful to the Commission and Chair Turkel, Vice Chair Cooper, and the distinguished

commissioners present today for inviting me to appear as a member of the Afghan-American Foundation to speak about this important issue.

The views I express today are my own. They don't necessarily reflect the views of our other board members or our organization, though on most things I hope that they do.

I sit before you today as an Afghan refugee myself who came to the United States in the 1980s, in the midst of a war, as part of a family that was being persecuted, though at the time the danger that drove us from that country came as a result of our political beliefs, not our faith.

Nonetheless, the issue is of tremendous importance to me and many in our sizable and diverse community of Afghans in the United States and in the global diaspora--all of us displaced, many of now living in countries where the faiths we choose to practice or not practice, as the case may be, or how we choose to practice them have little to no bearing on our ability to lead dignified, fulfilling and safe lives.

My remarks today will focus on the fact that this is not the case for many Afghans who now find themselves living under the archaic, oppressive, and unrelentingly violent rule of the Taliban.

The Commission anticipated this almost a year ago when it called on the State Department to prioritize the resettlement of Afghans from religious and ethnic minority groups, and I recall very clearly at the time Commissioner Maenza noting that even in those early days, Afghans were being forced to flee their homes on account of their beliefs.

I am very sorry to say that the Commission was very prescient in raising its concerns so early as things have only gotten worse.

In its work as recently as this week, the Commission outlined how substantially conditions have worsened in Afghanistan in this particular regard.

This is true or potentially true, in differing measures, for virtually every one of the

38 million Afghans who do not adhere to the very narrow and, I would argue, deeply misguided brand of Sunni Islam espoused by the Taliban.

You've heard from my colleagues already on the issues I'm going to discuss, but I think these accounts and this alarm bears repeating.

I'm going to briefly discuss some of the groups that are suffering under the current regime, either by being targeted by the Taliban or, as the case may be, by not being afforded any protection by the Taliban as others attack them.

I'll do this by offering some very salient examples of what many Afghans are facing everyday they choose to worship as they see fit, even if that runs afoul of what the Taliban believe to be appropriate or acceptable.

I'll frame my discussion with a couple of compelling examples that represent the dangers that religious and ethnic minorities face, and I hope that we can dive more deeply into these examples during the question and answer session.

On June 18th of this year, barely two

months ago, explosions and gunfire tore through a Sikh gurdwara, a house of worship in Afghanistan's capital of Kabul.

A gunman, purportedly part of the Islamic State-Khorasan, an extremist group, threw a grenade into a temple, then eventually began firing at those worshiping inside.

A vehicle that was driven to and parked outside of the temple was then detonated.

This was not the first time the Sikh community in Afghanistan had been targeted in such a way. In 2020, a lone Islamic State gunman stormed a temple in Kabul, killing 25 innocent Afghan Sikhs, including a young child.

At the time of that attack, there were approximately 700 Sikh and Hindu Afghans in the country that we were aware of or thought we were aware of. There are far less now as many have fled.

But it's important to note that not everyone can escape, and those who remain now are living under the rule of the Taliban and must rely

on that group for protection—the very same group that during their first rise to power in the '90s and early 2000s, at one point had ordered Hindu and Sikh Afghans to carry with themselves yellow badges that would distinguish them from the Muslim majority.

Earlier this month, during Ashura, one of the most important and solemn holy days for Shia Muslims around the world, including many in Afghanistan, Shia Afghans in the country were targeted in three violent and deadly attacks over the course of four days.

The last of these attacks was a bombing near a religious gathering that killed several worshippers, including women and children, focused on this annual time of deep mourning.

These attacks again were purportedly carried out by ISIS-K. There was some attempt by the Taliban to condemn these acts, but it's worth noting that one of the first formal acts that this current Taliban regime undertook was to blow up a statue of Mazari, a very important Shia militant

leader in northern Bamian province, a region that is the Afghan Shiite and Hazara homeland.

Moreover, in July 2021, as the Taliban was on its march through the country, the group itself was reportedly responsible for the massacre of ethnic Hazaras.

In one very harrowing example, documented by Amnesty International, the Taliban shot six men to death and tortured another three to death. One man was strangled with his own scarf and had his arm muscles cut off by his murderers.

These brief examples include Afghans who fall outside of the Sunni majority that has always dominated Afghanistan demographically.

You will hear similar accounts, similar fears, from Afghans who are Hindu, Baha'i, Christian, Jewish, and Ahmadi.

When we talk about religious freedom in Afghanistan, we also have to remember Sunni Muslims, many of whom have not been indoctrinated in the extremist thinking that drives the Taliban and informs the way in which they've tried to

govern Afghanistan.

They're also not able to practice their faith freely in Afghanistan today. For example, the Quran commands all Muslims, irrespective of sector, gender, to read and think and pursue knowledge. The Prophet himself went so far as deeming education a religious duty.

In that regard, pursuing an education is arguably one of the most important rights and duties granted to any Muslim woman in Afghanistan.

We are nearing almost 400 days of secondary schools being closed to most Afghan women and girls. Women who had been studying at universities and professional programs have been turned away from those institutions that they were primed to lead one day.

And by and large, if you ask these women about the compatibility of what they aspire to do and their faith, they would say they see no conflict, and yet they continue to be limited and deprived.

I would note that a significant element of

education in Afghanistan is religious education, and so when you deprive women and girls of their education, you are also depriving them of their religious education.

Similar tensions exist for Afghans who identify as Muslim and also identify as members of the LGBTQ community. Since the Taliban takeover last August, members of that community in Afghanistan have faced harassment, torture, and killings.

I want to spend a moment on this because I don't think that we do--and when I say we, I mean our government, our cadre of advocates and allies, and also our community--we don't do enough of that. We don't spend enough time talking about this community.

But it's important to note that many of these Afghans identify as Muslim. They have deep and meaningful spiritual practices and spiritual lives that have been all but shut down across Afghanistan.

To be sure, Afghanistan has never been a

safe place for LGBTQ community members, including many people of faith. For its part, after the takeover, the Taliban has echoed the previous Afghan government's animosity toward LGBTQ Afghans.

But as with so many things with the Taliban, they have made sure to adopt the most extreme, the most violent, and the most damaging expression of this animus possible.

Just before the fall of Kabul, members of the Taliban were asked about their views on the rights of LGBTQ Afghans, and one Taliban judge responded by saying that for these Afghans, there can be only two punishments: either stoning or standing behind a wall that is then brought down on top of them.

The Taliban have absolutely followed through on this promise of retribution and punishment. While the circumstances these Afghans face in this demographic deserve their own dedicated session, I would draw your attention and recommend you refer to an extensive report that Human Rights Watch and Outright Action

International published earlier this year.

In that, you'll hear first-hand accounts of the intimidation, the harassment, the extortion and the blackmail, the torture, the sexual violence, and the killing of these Afghans, these Afghans, Afghans of faith, face every day.

You'll see how like Afghan women, they've been erased from public life, been forced into hiding like so many other religious minority groups, and, perhaps more than any other subset of Afghans, they have little to no prospects of being evacuated from Afghanistan, not under the current circumstances, not in the current climate.

You will see that all aspects of their lives have been curtailed, including their abilities to carry out their faiths or live their spiritual lives. They are in hiding. They are erased. They do not exist.

I look forward to more discussion of these circumstances in the Q and A as well.

My colleagues already rightly talked about the ongoing resettlement of Afghans across the

United States. Our foundation has been deeply involved in that work. We're a member of the Evacuate our Allies Coalition, and have been a leading voice advocating for generosity, equity, and welcome for these Afghans, many of whom have worked in concert with and have supported the U.S. and have believed in the promise of democracy and progress in Afghanistan.

As far as a thread to connect all of these issues that I've discussed, including the work of resettlement, it's this: policymakers across the U.S. government in every nook and every silo of our sprawling democracy must realize that for many Afghans, the only option for survival, the only option for freedom, the only option to be able to build meaningful lives is to leave.

And leaving requires assistance, especially for members of minority religions, ethnic minorities and other groups who cannot survive, let alone thrive, in Afghanistan.

As we continue to rebuild our broken immigration system, as Anne talked about,

specifically U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, which has been gutted and neglected for years and has become a political chip when it should be a super-partisan crown jewel of our country, I hope that our nation will turn again to welcoming immigrants and offering refuge to those who believe in freedom and liberty.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the Afghan Adjustment Act, which Anne mentioned as well. Simply put, Afghans who have been fortunate enough to have been evacuated to the U.S., many of whom are from vulnerable communities, including members of our Shia and Hazara communities, must be given permanent safety and a permanent home in this country.

I look forward to your questions and a discussion of this important topic. I thank you for your time and attention and the space.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much, Mr. Azam.

I wanted to thank our witnesses for those compelling testimonies. If I may, I'd like to ask

some general questions. Any of you can jump in and answer or address.

The first one is quite generic. How can the United States government effectively hold Taliban accountable for religious freedom violations?

And what are the strategic U.S. government actions we can take, or U.S. government can take, to deter Taliban's persecution of religious communities?

One thing that comes to mind is targeted sanctions. Targeted sanctions, as we have been recommending as an organization and agency over the years, works because they hurt.

It sends a message to those bad actors and perpetrators, essentially a very simple message such as we see you, we know who you are, we know what you're doing, and we will ensure that you face consequences.

So if you can comment on those two questions, it would be great.

MR. AZAM: First, Anne, did you want to

start?

MS. RICHARD: I can start by suggesting a few things.

First, it's very important, and I've heard this over and over again from Afghan contacts, the Taliban not be recognized as a legitimate government.

And so you'll notice I referred to it as the "de facto authorities," and any time it's treated like a legitimate government, it's really a slap in the face to many of our Afghan colleagues.

Secondly, there's a travel ban on members of the Taliban cabinet and leading Taliban leaders from traveling, and it's not, it's not comprehensive right now, and so a recommendation is to ensure that the Taliban stay in Afghanistan and not feel free to travel widely, as they are seen as such a sinister factor in what's happening to Afghanistan.

Importantly, many of us who are working with human rights defenders would like to see more U.S. government support for investigating and

documenting human rights abuses, and this is something that Afghan people themselves can do, but they need protection, and they need some financial support in order to carry out that type of activity.

I'll turn now to my fellow panelists.

MR. AZAM: Fereshta, did you want to add anything?

MS. ABBASI: I would, I think Anne kind of covered all that we have called on for the past couple of months.

I just wanted to add one more point, that I mean ideally we would like to see the U.S., as the biggest contributor in Afghanistan for the past two decades, to take the lead on a coordinated effort to press the Taliban and put more pressure on the Taliban.

And I think Anne talked about the practical steps on how that could happen.

Thank you.

MR. AZAM: Chair Turkel, I would add two very brief things to that. I mean, one, I think we

should never forget that the Taliban were flown into Afghanistan on Qatari Air Force planes, and so this regime, these people have patrons, they have supporters, they have people who guide them.

And so I think one of the things the U.S. can do is really bring some pressure to bear on those actors. I don't have a lot of faith in our ability to do this bilaterally, but I do think that there are actors that the Taliban relies on for funding as well that we could put pressure on.

Second thing I would add around sanctions is to be really judicious about how those are applied.

For example, a restriction on movement is one thing, but sanctions that end up delivering a message to the world that you can't engage in Afghanistan because there is risks for you to do that, even for humanitarian reasons, ultimately don't end up hurting the Taliban. They hurt the Afghan people.

And so I think what I would recommend is to be very judicious and beyond targeted in how we

talk about sanctions on the Taliban. And I know that the Taliban have been sanctioned for decades, and it didn't prevent them from ascending to power again the way they did.

So I think it's really important that we have a humanitarian lens when we talk about sanctions, and specifically we figure out what on an individual level would impact behavior as opposed to the regime.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

I'd like to recognize Vice Chair Cooper for questions.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Chair Turkel, and thanks to all the witnesses for their sobering and powerful commentary.

I just have one or two questions. In terms of the movement of the officials of this current government, has the United States approved the Taliban to attend the United Nations General Assembly?

Do we know what the status is on that? And do we know what options are available to the

United States government?

And have any of you, Joseph, or any of the other human rights groups that are following really closely given any thought to this issue or have addressed their concerns to our government?

Secondly, you mentioned Qatar. I think it's extremely important. Again, this may not be the best venue to bring it up, but it's my only opportunity with such distinguished experts, Qatar is hosting the World Cup. If you want to talk about a lens, it's a global lens.

And I think that the members of the families and expats and the human rights groups may want to consider effective and creative ways to ensure that the humanitarian plight of the Afghan people come to the attention of the entire planet, where you will have literally billions of people focusing on Qatar for an extended period of time.

And third, if you will just allow me a comment. When it was mentioned about yellow badges made, I'm the associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and just for the record, anyone

can go ahead and google it, no one who is familiar with some of the more extreme early caliphates of Islam would be surprised.

This was not just plucked out of the air. The notion of forcing Jews and other non-Muslims under their control to wear yellow badges goes back incredibly to the 9th century and, of course, I think many more people understand that this also was pushed by one of the popes, the Medieval Time, and we know it happened in the last century in terms of Nazi Germany and the yellow star.

I think that image itself and the history that is linked behind such a move is worthwhile for all people of faith, whatever their faith, or lack thereof, to reflect on. To me it's a clear signal to the rest of the world about the priorities of the Taliban.

And I appreciate your comment about not linking aid to the issues that we've heard about today, but speaking frankly, if you take that off the table, in a more generic way, why would anyone in the Taliban regime pay any attention to our

concerns?

MR. AZAM: Vice Chair Cooper, I'm not actually aware of what the decision is on the General Assembly so I'll defer to others on that. I think it's a really good question.

I do know that the U.N. travel ban expired, I believe yesterday. And so I think that's something that we should be mindful of because we're a part of that body.

Just replying briefly to your comments, the image that you saw is the one I saw. My fourth grade teacher in New York City public school was a descendent of Holocaust survivors. So I learned very early of the history that's behind it—these sorts of actions, and these requirements, and certainly aware of the history that you've outlined beyond that.

I think that your point about humanitarian aid is a good one in terms of like what our levers are. There are so few. I think one of the things that we've said is we have to figure out how Afghans across the country survive long enough to

help rebuild the government that would represent them.

And so I think that's the challenge. I don't have the answer, but I think that's the challenge, is how do we make sure people survive long enough to maybe one day have a democratic government again that represents their interests and protects their lives?

And I wish I had a better answer for you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Anyone else want to comment?

MS. ABBASI: On the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and the human rights crisis both, I would like to just, just to add a few points.

I mean what we have been calling in the past few months on the international community was to not, to not punish Afghan people for the violations that the Taliban are doing right now.

The current humanitarian crisis unfortunately is getting worse, and that's why we have been calling on international community to find ways to help the Afghan people, but to make

sure at the same time that the budget and resources and the aid is not going to the Taliban authorities.

I think it would be, I think if international community has, and they would be ready to, there would be definitely raised some solutions to solve the problem.

We have also—I mean one of things that I think at the time of one-year anniversary of the Taliban takeover is a good time for the Taliban leadership, is also to rethink their priorities in Afghanistan, and rather than putting more restrictions on women's rights, for example, it's good for them to think of the message that the international community has sent them over the past year for engagement and to end their human rights abuses, to be able to cooperate with international community to address the humanitarian crisis.

What I would like to really emphasize here is that I hope that the international efforts could lead to find a solution to address the humanitarian crisis and to stand and support the Afghan people.

MS. RICHARD: I guess I could add that in terms of the August 2021 evacuations of people who had worked closely with the United States Embassy and military, and also, you know, the small number of human rights defenders and religious minorities that were brought out, under the U.S. government's organization, both Qatar and United Arab Emirates cooperated with the United States to provide a place, sort of, what they were called, lily pads, staging areas, for the evacuation before bringing Afghans onward to the United States.

And there were also other places, inside Europe, for example, and the region. So, and I recently saw a Voice of America half-hour documentary, "Symphony of Courage," of how the music school in Afghanistan was, all of the students were brought through Qatar to now where they are in Portugal.

So as someone who is trying to find ways to improve the situation in Afghanistan, I think we're looking for the involvement of majority Muslim countries, Middle Eastern and North African

and South Asian countries, to engage with the Taliban in a way that encourages them to change their behavior.

And one dilemma that I think a lot about is who can influence the Taliban? Who can really move them to change a dismal record of oppression of Afghan citizens and start to restore rights to Afghan people?

And so it would be very, very good if, if the U.S. is in the lead, but it also would be good if allies, including majority Muslim countries, were involved in that, too.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

A few countries come to mind when you said the others might be able to influence. China has an influence over the Taliban, during the earlier period, even today, so another organization that we need to look at or try to explore opportunities, the Organization of Islamic Conference.

It has 56 member states, an important entity. It's almost as important as the U.N.

With that, I'd like to pass it over to

Commissioners Schneck and Curry for their questions.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, Chair Turkel.

I'd like to—first of all, I want to thank all of the witnesses for their candor in recounting the horrible situation for religious freedom and freedom of belief in Afghanistan.

It is, honestly, it's shocking and eye-opening to really sit through your presentations and read your reports. So I thank you for that.

I guess I'd like to begin with two general questions, and, if possible, let me first begin by posing these questions to you, Ms. Richard, and then subsequently to Mr. Azam and Ms. Abbasi.

The first question I have is where are current U.S. policies off target, wrong, failing? What are we doing wrong? What is the U.S. government doing wrong in regard to the situation in Afghanistan, particularly in regards to, you know, these questions of religious freedom?

MS. RICHARD: First, I'd like to say that

I'm in touch with a lot of civil servants, political appointees inside the U.S. executive branch, and some key congressional offices. And there is a tremendous desire to help Afghans who are in danger right now, especially the rank and file of our national security and foreign policy agencies.

So many of them have served in Afghanistan, visited Afghanistan, worked on Afghan issues, worked alongside Afghan allies, that there is, this is an emotional issue for many, many government staff members and not just an ordinary item on a long list of foreign policy topics that Americans care about.

This is something that is deeply felt, and I find it encouraging that the mid-level, senior staff members of State Department, DoD, Department of Homeland Security, they want to make a difference in the lives of Afghans.

That said, the scale at which the U.S. is working right now will help some, but not all, who are deserving. And when the U.S. government wants

to mount something really, really big, it requires top-level leadership in the White House.

It requires top-level leadership from Congress. And so what's being done now is good and in some areas some improvements are being made to the practices of bringing people to safety in the United States, and I talked about the four ways people come in.

But all of those pathways are oversubscribed. There are long waiting lists. There is not enough ability to move people fast. They have to be vetted, and then they have to be welcomed in the U.S. and in other countries.

U.S. through its diplomatic efforts can also engage with other countries and say let's work with us to bring in Afghans who are in danger. And, of course, the even better outcome would be that Afghans could stay in Afghanistan safely.

But in the meantime, we need a much bigger effort with a lot more discussion at senior levels, with the public, with the Congress, to endorse not just doing what we're currently doing, but to do

things bigger, faster, and affecting more Afghans.

Much easier to say than to do, but I think that our allies deserve this from us.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you.

I have some follow-ups, but let me pose that question to Mr. Azam as well. Mr. Azam, is there anything that the government is currently doing wrong or needs to change?

MR. AZAM: Thank you for that question, Commissioner Schneck.

Yes, there are three things that our government can do differently.

I think the first is to get back to a values-based approach to Afghanistan. One of the things that we've noticed in seeing how our government acts and how the Taliban reacts is a hyper-focus on security, which is very important to us, of course, as a country.

But I think that we've left our values on the table somewhere else, not at the table when we're sitting with the Taliban. So talking to the Taliban about the importance of these issues in the

context of normalizing relationships would be important.

And my sense is that right now we're hyper-focused on security, and that's why we're not seeing a different response from the Taliban.

The second, I think, is to really think about how the economic crisis is related to the humanitarian crisis and circumstances for Afghans writ large, including minorities.

I know that Special Representative West has been working really hard, and I believe that he is coming up with a solution, for example, that will unlock the frozen Afghan funds and deal with the liquidity crisis in Afghanistan right now.

By really coming up with an urgent way to, you know, fix the economic crisis, I think, will create some sustainability for people to breathe.

And the third, I think, is, you know, we went in together and we left alone. And I really feel like, you know, in talking to folks within this community and certainly on our board, there's a sense that the U.S. has abdicated some leadership

in the international community in solving this issue and addressing the things that we're talking about today in terms of at-risk populations.

And so reasserting some leadership on these issues internationally would be really good because I think that for better or for worse, we helped create the situation that exists right now, and we don't believe the rest of the world is going to act with urgency if the U.S. isn't seen acting with urgency on these issues.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you.

Ms. Abbasi, anything that you'd like to add as well, areas where you think that current U.S. policy is misplaced or wrong or problematic?

MS. ABBASI: I very much agree with Mr. Azam.

One of the things that I mean I would like to echo the local voice here is that as far as I have talked to Afghans back in Afghanistan, what they're telling me about how they think the international community, including the U.S., acted in the past year is whatever the international

community did, it has never been enough because it didn't change anything on the ground for Afghans.

So one of the things that I think would be very helpful is that whenever the U.S. is engaging diplomatically with the Taliban, to bring back all of those red lines on the table, and to make this message clear to the Taliban that they need to restore the fundamental rights of the Afghans back to them.

I think with the recognition we always have leverage, while the Taliban wants recognition, they want to sustain the government, and if they want to stay there, I think we do have leverage over them.

And in that sense, one of the things that I have I mean previously mentioned as well is we don't see a strong correlation from the international community to warn the Taliban that they stand with Afghan people.

And I think in the absence of such a strong structure there, the Taliban are using this gap and increasing their violations against Afghan

citizens. We need international community to stand together, and the U.S. is the biggest contributor. We do expect the U.S. to take a lead on those efforts.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you.

If there's time, I'll come back with some additional questions, but let me pass the microphone to my colleague, David Curry. David.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Thank you so much.

Really interesting conversation, and I'm going to ask, kind of go back to a more general question, and it's going to reveal my ignorance, so I hope you guys will understand.

I'm curious as to what the historical experience has been in Afghanistan to the degree you can answer this question. At one point, there was a church for a short period of time in the '70s, a Christian Church.

But is there any sort of context within the Afghan society for someplace in the past? You can look at Iran and say, well, they had, they had a culture that understood pluralism and all these

kinds of conceptual ideas.

To your experience or your knowledge, what is the Afghan perspective on these kinds of ideas? And maybe I could ask Ms. Abbasi to start and then move from there.

MS. ABBASI: I'm afraid I don't have much historical concept, and I don't have any information on the question that you have asked, but one of the—from the very personal experience, one of the things I would like to say is I do remember that when I was in Kabul, there was a church that Christians used to go and pray.

It was, at least we knew that this is a church, it's for Christians, but I'm also trying to imagine how would it look like for Christians now?

I'm talking about the years 2016 and '17, it was, the church that I knew was in the center of Kabul, and I know, I mean it has never been, the visibility has never been that public, but at least it was a safe place that they could go.

I don't know how, what is happening on the ground right now with the Taliban being ruling the

country.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Do either one of our other panelists feel confident enough to venture a guess? It is a point of view I'm asking about.

MR. AZAM: Yeah, I mean, Commissioner Curry, and I, full disclosure, the source I have for this is often actually the Commission so credit to the Commission for this work.

But, I mean Afghanistan has had a history of having Jews, Jews and Christians there. I think if you look at what's happened over the 20, last 20 years, a lot of that stuff has gone underground, and I think the estimates that I remember seeing where there was something like ten to 12,000 Christian converts in Afghanistan, right, that have been practicing in secret.

But to Fereshta's point, there isn't a long-established tradition, for example, for Christians in Afghanistan. I think that what's changed is their ability to practice, and I think practicing in hiding is very problematic.

Obviously, it's not really truly freedom,

and so clearly how good things ever were, but they've gotten considerably worse in this period. I think I remember reading reports of the Taliban going door to door asking for people who work with the U.S., and part of the subtext of what they were asking for was asking about converts.

And so that has not happened before, right, in our previous history with Christians specifically, and the same with the Jewish community in Afghanistan. There's been a lot written about the last Jew who left Afghanistan, you know, after this current crisis.

Well, the truth is there are still Jews in Afghanistan. They are practicing in hiding. There's reporting about that; right? We have some names of folks, in Kabul particularly, who are part of longstanding Jewish families in Afghanistan.

And so, like Christians, they just haven't been able to practice freely, and that's the unfortunate truth that I'm aware of.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Yeah. I thank you very much. I know it's a hard question.

Another thought I had is there's a reference to somehow systematically documenting these kinds of atrocities. So much of this becomes anecdotal, and as we're now at that year marker, people have pictures that they're remembering, but unless there's a systematic documenting from trusted authorities that, yeah, they did go door to door, and here's what happens, and this continues to happen.

Those kinds of stories, in my view, are what can shift public opinion and public opinion shifts policymakers into action.

Is there anybody who's tracking this on the—is the U.S. government doing this? Is the U.N. doing this where they're documenting what kind of transition has happened beyond the anecdotal level?

MS. RICHARD: The U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, UNAMA, has a mandate to undertake human rights work, in addition to a series of other responsibilities it has, and they came out with a report recently in July that talked about the numbers killed, targets of the Taliban, and gave

some examples.

The report was a little controversial because some of the Afghans with whom I'm in contact fear they may have underreported what's really going on, and also they felt it could have been a much more tougher report.

And so this is one of the ways, though, that reporting can be done, is by the United Nations when the government, which right now are the de facto authorities of the Taliban, cannot do this themselves or are, in fact, perpetrating some of the atrocities that are being documented.

In addition, there are human rights defenders who want to do this and need support. Both the international well-known human rights groups, like Human Rights Watch, where Fereshta works, and also the less well-known Afghan groups with which we're in contact.

And so they are remarkably brave people who are still in Afghanistan. Some are in hiding. Some have changed their locations. Some are willing to acknowledge the work that they've done

in the past, but it's a very brave thing to be doing to be a human rights defender inside Afghanistan today.

MS. ABBASI: And just to add, I mean there is also a report by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Human Rights, Richard Bennett, which may come in the upcoming months on the overall situation in Afghanistan.

I think one of the issues that is very critical at this moment in Afghanistan is to have a strong monitoring body, a U.N. body, because that information has become very limited in Afghanistan, and the restrictions that the Taliban have put on the local media has made it impossible for the local media to report on the violations there.

As Anne also mentioned, being a human rights defender, being a journalist in Afghanistan, literally means that you're risking your life, and you're risking your safety for the work.

So I think at this point it's very critical to have a strong monitoring body inside Afghanistan to be able to document and to get this

information from because it has become very difficult and nearly impossible for the local Afghans to report and document on these issues.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Thank you.

One last question. This is much more specific. There's about 1,600 Afghan refugees in Abu Dhabi who haven't been given P-2 status. I don't know if Anne would be the best one to answer this or who.

Does USCIRF have any voice with—this might be for Erin as well—but I'm kind of wondering why and how the border, Customs and Border Patrol, would not process these specific religious minorities who are stuck in limbo? It seems like an attainable thing.

Does anybody have any insight into that particular group and why they're being held in Abu Dhabi indefinitely?

MS. RICHARD: I don't have details on that particular group. I do know that one of the issues of bringing people who are in danger from overseas to the U.S. quickly is that we require extensive

vetting of applicants before they get to the U.S. to ensure and to be able to assure the American people that no danger is posed by bringing folks in.

And so in my experience, you know, and I've met with thousands and thousands of refugees over the course of my career, these are mostly people who are fleeing persecution, they're fleeing danger, and want to live in peace.

But that vetting piece is very, very important and in order to assure the public that this program, these programs can work.

So I'm sorry I don't have the specifics on this particular group, but it isn't surprising that some people have moved quickly to U.S. and others are moving slower.

For example, the people who worked with the U.S. Embassy, worked for the U.S. military, may have more documentation to show that they are who they said they are, whereas ordinary citizens may not have the type of paperwork, especially if they fled and destroyed their documents at some point in

fleeing.

So this is an example of the challenges of bringing people quickly and in an emergency. It's just very hard to do for the U.S.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: Yeah, I understand. I guess there is a question. I know you're not suggesting it, but what qualifies as "quickly"? A year later, you know, there's less focus on it than there was last August, and over time, there will be even less.

And in my mind—this is a general statement in a hearing. This is not directed at you, Anne, because I know we're on the same page on this. In my mind, 1,600 people, who is an attainable number of people for a government the size of the United States, considering all of the conditions under which to vet these people and to make sure that they are moved into some kind of living condition somewhere where they're free to practice their faith, whether they be Jew or Baha'i or whatever.

So that might be something that we want to, you know, continue to keep as USCIRF on the top

of our mind. These folks and folks like them. So thank you very much. I'm sorry if I took too much of the time there.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you, Commissioners Schneck and Curry.

If I can go back to all of the points that, Ms. Richard, you made in your testimony, which is the Taliban regime, Taliban is falling short of international standards.

How do you deal with or address even international standards with a regime such as Taliban itself commits atrocity crimes?

MS. RICHARD: This is not the first time we've seen this, of course. The Taliban was in power 20 years ago and also situations I've worked on in the past, for example, in southern Sudan, after civil war, the generals came into power and tried to create a democracy, and this was very, very difficult to do.

And, similarly, in Syria, we see that a country, the government is attacking its own people and not protecting them and not fulfilling its

responsibilities to help the forcibly displaced, the internally displaced, and instead sends people running across borders.

So the frustrating thing is in this day and age to have to have these examples, the current examples of what's going on in countries, and in Afghanistan, after 20 years of great investment by the Afghan people and by Americans and others who were involved in trying to build a country with rights and a country that could have democratic government, it is heartbreaking to see the Taliban again in power.

And they are not, they are not well positioned to govern at all. So this creates a dilemma for the U.S., and in our foreign policy, we do try to bolster democracies, bolster freedoms in other governments, support community of democracies, and put pressure on governments that do not adhere to these basic principles of governing on behalf of and to serve their own citizens.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

It's a monumental challenge in the world that we live in today where even state parties of the Genocide Convention committing genocide and others knowing its treaty obligations even won't call it out when they see it as directed under the Article 1 of the Genocide Convention.

Ms. Abbasi, is this fair to say that the Hazara community is the most vulnerable religious minority in Afghanistan today for religious persecution or persecution by Taliban?

MS. ABBASI: I will also add the ISKP because most of these attacks are being launched by the ISKP against the Shia community, in particular, the Hazara ethnic group.

So if you go back to the history, 1990s, there was two massacres that the Taliban committed against Hazaras in that time, and with the Taliban taking over again, as for the conversation that we had with a member of the Hazara communities, they really fear their own safety because the Taliban are not providing enough protection for the Hazara community.

The attacks continue as citizens of this community go to, go for praying, they attend hospitals or go to schools. We have a report actually coming up on September 6 about the attacks on the Hazara minority in Afghanistan and the implications and the long-term effects that it has.

It's not only the physical harm and the number of injured and killed people that we will be reporting on, but it also discusses the long-term effects that it has on the survivors, as well as the family members of the victims.

So one of the things that we have found out during the report is that the rights, it has actually affected this community to exercise their right to religious beliefs because most of these mosques have been closed because they fear their own safety.

They don't go to mosques anymore, and also in some cases, the mosques have been attacked. Those mosques have been closed. So, for example, in bringing, one of the, as an example, in bringing the attack on the mosque in Mazar-i-Sharif, which

killed or injured 60, 70, sorry, 60 people killed and injured, over 60 people there, so this mosque has been closed since the attack.

And as for the interviews that we had with those family members, they have told us that they are not sending their kids to school anymore. It's the same case in Kabul.

So I would say that the situation is overall, I mean is very critical for all Afghan citizens but definitely the Shia community and the Hazara ethnic group are facing severe effects and they're living in a worse situation.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much for your thoughtful answer.

Vice Chair Cooper, I thought that you might have some additional questions.

VICE CHAIR COOPER: No, I don't have any further questions.

I just want to reiterate USCIRF's commitment to do our share on this, and I think unfortunately part of what our responsibilities will be will be to try to focus some pressure on

the officialdom of our government to move more practically on some of the areas.

I think Commissioner Curry's question about a group of I think a specific religious group sitting now for almost a year. Of course we want to make sure we have the right people coming in.

But if we have enough information, USCIRF should act to try to keep this in the public eye and also pressure directly the appropriate U.S. government agencies.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

Commissioner Schneck.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: I have maybe some questions that I'll pose to some of our witnesses privately, but I'd like to give all three of them an opportunity to talk just very briefly about the Afghan Adjustment Act and its importance.

MR. AZAM: I'm happy to start, Commissioner Schneck, and I know Anne and Fereshta really have views on this, but I think domestically this is probably the most important issue right now and will be for the next couple of months for the

76,000 Afghans who have been evacuated.

Most of these Afghans, as you all know, have been brought in under humanitarian parole. That's a temporary status, right, one to two years. And so, in theory, it's possible that people will fall out of status and be put in a position of having to be sent back or sent to a third country.

And for particularly the types of people that we're talking about today, that's a death sentence.

And so what the act does, and why we're really supportive of it, is that it provides a pathway to permanent status just like we did after the Vietnam War for Vietnamese Americans, for the people who have been evacuated to adjust, legally to be able to stay here long-term.

The other thing it does that is important for our conversation is it expands the pool of eligibility for these really valuable SIV visas; right? And also has implications for P-1 and P-2.

And that's really important because what we're doing is capturing more people and making

them eligible for evacuation, which is really critical.

And the third thing it does, I think, is accountability. I mean baked into that bill is a director for resources at the State Department and, you know, attention to the issues that we think have been neglected by the Biden administration unfortunately in the last year.

And so at the end of the day it gives Afghans who are here peace of mind, and I think AAF's position is that it actually is a step towards repairing the moral injury that we've incurred as a country based on how we withdrew from Afghanistan and how we've handled our policy vis-à-vis that population in the last year.

So that's why we're supportive of it, and I think every American in every state has an opportunity to help by being supportive of it as well, and reaching out to their members of Congress, and that the same is true for people affiliated with the administration.

MS. RICHARD: The Afghan Adjustment Act

was only recently introduced after months and months of the drafting process. It has bipartisan support in both the House and the Senate, and we all know how rare that is today, and so it is a very doable initial step to address some of the problems we've discussed today.

It also, it relieves the immediate burden on the SIV process, which as I mentioned has over 70,000 applications in the backlog, and the asylum process in the U.S., which is a normal way for people who have come in to try to make the case that they should stay is to make the asylum claim.

But there is currently more than 1.4 million cases in the backlog for asylum cases, and so this will prevent Afghans paroled in the U.S. from losing their jobs or being deported, as Joseph has said, and while their applications are pending.

So this would be a great help to those Afghans who have arrived since the fall of Kabul. It's not the only thing that needs to be done, but it is a very doable immediate next step that can be done by members of Congress and has the support of

the White House.

MS. ABBASI: As a very personal experience, although I am not in the U.S., but being out of Afghanistan does not necessarily mean that everything is fine.

The whole complication as far as being a refugee has a lot of challenges, and it usually takes a lot of time and energy for you to integrate to the new society and develop a stable life.

I think that these acts would definitely help those Afghans who have stood by the U.S. in Afghanistan for the past 20 years, who have helped the U.S. in Afghanistan. It is part of the promises that the U.S. made, and it would definitely help them to have an easier life.

It will make their life easier, and it will give them that sense of stability that they can stay in the U.S., and they can build their own lives.

I do think that the refugees who all have been evacuated during the fall of Kabul need more support, but as a first practical step, it will be

a great help for them too, and it will definitely make their life much, much easier than it is right now.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, all, for everything that you said today. It was very, very revealing, very helpful. Thank you very much.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you. Thank you, Commissioner Schneck.

Commissioner Curry.

COMMISSIONER CURRY: I don't have any questions, but thank you so much. It was a very interesting discussion.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

If I may ask one more question. We talked about the slow process. If any derogatory information or perception of individuals who are waiting in line to be resettled in the United States, how might the derogatory information come into play in the U.S. government's processing, the process that the U.S. government is applying to those individuals?

MS. RICHARD: Derogatory information about

individuals who are applying for these different pathways can stop their application for their entire families.

But so does even more innocent things like lack of documentation, lack of paperwork. Right now Afghans can't get out of Afghanistan unless they have a passport, and very few did before the fall of Kabul, and things like having a baby can undermine a family's plans to try to relocate since the baby won't have a passport.

So all of these processes, the good news is they exist, and the bad news is they're not, they're not rescuing people who didn't work on the U.S. payroll but did work as allies in so many ways in trying to, for the past 20 years in trying to construct an Afghanistan that had rights and freedoms.

And so I think that the people I salute are the ones who don't give up as soon as their first rejection happens but instead come back and try to set the record straight, try to get the witnesses, try to get the documentation that they

are deserving to benefit from these programs.

But it is, for people who have been traumatized, for people who feel targeted, it is very, very challenging experience to get to safety in the United States.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much.

We are coming to a close to our hearing. I'd like to give our witnesses a chance to share any final thoughts or hopes that they wanted to share with us today. If I can start with Ms. Abbasi.

MS. ABBASI: Thank you.

I will be very quick. I think Afghans have seen years of war, and at this point, they deserve peace. I hope that the U.S. and international community can rethink their efforts that they have in Afghanistan for the past 12 months.

Right now that we are at the anniversary of Afghanistan so we hope that we would see more practical steps in the future.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

Ms. Richard.

MS. RICHARD: In preparing for testimony today, the materials on the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom's website were tremendously helpful.

I want to salute you for having had witnesses in the past, like Mark Hetfield of HIAS, Jenny Yang, World Relief, Krish Vignarajah of Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Services, who have been afforded an opportunity to make these arguments before, and for your own report that came out yesterday.

I think that the service you're providing, even on days where there aren't expert witnesses brought in, are very, very, very important.

Thank you.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you.

Mr. Azam.

MR. AZAM: I mean actually I'd like to take this last moment to acknowledge a group that we didn't acknowledge. That's the Afghan Group of Uighur Muslims, and as we talked about China and we

talked about the influence China has, I wanted to make sure we mentioned those several thousand Afghans who are in danger of being sent back to a certain death and persecution in China.

So that's what I actually wanted to use my last moments for. And it's a reminder that no matter what we do or what we talk about, there will still be people who are forgotten. There will still be people who are left behind, and there will still be more work to do. So really appreciate your engagement and this space today.

CHAIR TURKEL: Thank you very much.

I agree with you, Mr. Azam, when you mentioned the value-centric foreign policy is something that we need to stick to to advance our national interest even though values in foreign policy may end up creating obstacles in our diplomatic engagements.

We just cannot send a signal around the world letting those hopeless, millions of hopeless people feel that we value or sympathize their struggle when it's convenient, and we officially

express our sympathy or do something in response, but when it comes to national interests, you're on your own because we have so much at stake.

We've seen this over and over again in our foreign policy approach, and some of it ended up being a—results in disastrous outcome. Religious persecution is national security issue. Failure to detect early signs, warning signs, end up resulting in humanitarian crisis, genocide, war.

And I wanted to conclude by saying, reiterating that religious freedom abuses cannot go unchallenged, whether posed by government, government action or inaction or bad actors. We need to hold them to account.

I wanted to thank you again for participating in this hearing. We appreciate your thoughtful, compelling, powerful testimony. I also wanted to thank the audience for taking the time to tune in and listening to today's conversation.

And finally I wanted to thank the professional team at USCIRF for putting together this timely hearing. With this, today's hearing is

adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:00 o'clock noon, the hearing was adjourned.]