



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Strategies for Religious Freedom in Fragile States

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Nadine Maenza, USCIRF Chair

Good morning and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing today on *Strategies for Religious Freedom in Fragile States*. I would also like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us.

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 virtual hearing.

USCIRF works to monitor and protect religious freedom in a diverse array of countries and contexts. This diversity calls for a variety of tools and approaches, as different contexts present different landscapes for the success and failure of religious freedom efforts. For today's hearing, we will be focusing on strategies for promoting religious freedom in fragile states.

A fragile state is a country characterized by weak state capacity or weak state legitimacy, leaving citizens vulnerable to a range of shocks. From our vantage point, protection of freedom of religion or belief is under constant threat in fragile states. Often governments in fragile states are incapable of holding perpetrators of religious freedom violations accountable because they lack the capacity and territorial control to enforce legal and social protections for religious freedom. In some instances, fragile governments may be complicit in these violations as they ally with or tolerate nefarious actors to strengthen or expand their tenuous control and legitimacy.

For example, in Syria, armed actors have laid siege in towns and villages with sizeable religious minority populations, defaced and destroyed Yazidi and Christian shrines, and detained, prosecuted, and even tortured Yazidi Christians and other religious minority communities for their religious beliefs. In Afghanistan, political instability has exacerbated the risk of violence for those who hold minority or alternative religious beliefs from the Taliban. Furthermore, with security now in the hands of the Taliban's assigned "special forces" and the reestablishment of the ministry of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice policing the streets, communities that hold opposing beliefs fear reprisal. In Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen, Jews and Baha'is continue to be harassed and arrested for their beliefs amidst a six-year armed conflict. In the face of state weakness in Lebanon, the government empowers religious elites with a monopoly on spiritual matters that can restrict alternative religious beliefs and exacerbate sectarian violence. In Somalia, parishioners risk suicide bombs and targeted attacks against houses of worship as the fledgling government struggles to wrest control of key parts of the country from the violent terrorist group Al-Shabaab. These are just some of the many examples we can see of the overlap between fragility and religious violence.

I will now turn it over to Vice Chair Turkel to discuss U.S. government efforts to date and some of the challenges that our government faces in responding to religious freedom violations in fragile states.