

Promoting Religious Freedom During the Campaign Against Terrorism": Mamoun Fandy Oral Testimony

November 27, 2001 DR. FANDY: Thank you for inviting me to testify, and in this testimony I was asked to answer four questions, and I will take them very briefly, in 10 minutes, and I will submit the full testimony, more coherent testimony, for the record. The first question was: How U.S. policy to promote human rights, including religious freedom, changed in the Middle East as a result of the events of September 11th? I think to answer this question, the answer to this question is both simple and complex. First, the September 11th event represented a watershed in probably the whole world, but more specifically in the public debate in the Middle East. Certain feelings dominated the discussion. First the issue of terrorism. People indeed started to discuss more vigorously the issue of terrorism in the Middle East. People of the Middle East seemed to engage in a soul searching about the impact of this historic moment on their societies. Terrorism as an issue crystallized the minds of many. I would like to just give very specific examples throughout the region to illustrate what I'm trying to say. There were debates about the immediate problems on the attack on America and the issue of terrorism in general, but throughout the Arab and Muslim world. Op-Ed pages and TV screens were filled with debates about the late causes of terrorism rather than the immediate issue of terrorism. A range of issues seemed to emerge from discussing root causes such as poverty, lack of political participation, absence of democracy, and issues of Arab-Israeli conflict and the issue of occupation in particular. Many also engaged the broader theme of clashes of civilizations or dialogues of civilization. Is it the west against Islam, or is it the civilized world against terrorist? This debate had not been settled yet. In aspect of the debate, the clash of civilization or the dialogue of civilization was clear warnings that there are problems relating to what Professor Sonn mentioned, interreligious problems that exist in the region. There was the camp of liberals, if you will, against the camp of conservatives, the camp of secular forces against the Islamists. There were also debates about minorities. For example, two conferences took place in the Arab world practically, one in Tunisia that was very general about the debate on the clash or dialogue of civilizations; and the second one that took place in October immediately in Egypt, in El Alram, about the issue of national unity and the issue of Coptic-Muslim relations in Egypt specifically. These are general parameters taking place post-September 11th. As for U.S. policy, one can say that the resolve of the United States against terrorism seemed to embolden the liberal forces throughout the Middle East to hold such conferences and engage in such serious debates. The tide seems to have turned. The Islamists, or at least the terrorist groups that were hiding behind the cloak of Islam, seem to be on the run. However, certain negative consequences are likely to take place. Many governments in the Middle East may decide to eliminate their opponents by labeling them as terrorists, whatever the truth might be. Thus far this did not happen. However, certain governments, like that of Egypt for instance, were emboldened to put terrorist organizations on trial, and some of them, like Elwab organization, were linked to al Qaeda. So in that sense the war on terrorism freed both governments and liberal forces to take on some of the terrorist groups. The second question was: what incentives can be offered to countries in the Middle East to encourage that governments improve the protection of religious freedom? Before answering this question, at least some classification of Middle Eastern countries are in order. Countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Sudan, probably form one category of radical Islamic state. Iraq is a very separate category in the nature of the regime there, as well as the issue of discrimination against the Shi'a of the south as well as the Kurds of the north, although neighboring Turkey discriminates against the Kurds, as well, it would be morally reprehensible actually to put the two regimes in one basket. Iraq should be treated as a category of its own. Although this is not a religious issue, per se, it is nonetheless very central to the issue of human rights, the issue of the Kurds I mean. We have also Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Jordan, and all have issues of religious freedom. Nonetheless, these are countries that we can engage politically and they usually respond to U.S. pressure, and we have number of tools to apply to at least make these countries respond. To improve this situation, to take Egypt as an example, where discrimination is more social than government policy, an improvement of the economic conditions in Egypt can help alleviate the tension between Christians and Muslims. Central to talking politics in Egypt is the issue of poverty and the competition for jobs. Egypt is not known to be a bigoted society, but one can argue that Egypt has been, for the last 1,400 years, a model of coexistence between Christians and Muslims. Of course, it's not a perfect model, but it's a very good one that last that long. In Israel, central to the issue of discrimination between Jews and non-Jews and the tension there is the Arab-Israeli conflict. It's obvious that there is a positive correlation between the movement and the peace process and the improvement of human rights conditions there. The same goes for Jordan, for it exists within the radius of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

So the basic principle of separating in these categories is one of countries that we are in political conversations with and we can influence, and those we don't have a great deal of influence on. The third question that I was asked to answer: what tools being developed in the campaign against terrorism can be used in the Middle East to promote human rights? The current tools might not be helpful. However, treating the root causes by engaging in issues of reconstruction of failed states such as Somalia, Sudan and Afghanistan, might give the incentive to a better record of human rights in these countries. The final question is: can religious freedom be a tool against terrorism particularly in the Middle East? It can only be a tool if we encourage an internal debate of religious freedom to promote tolerance. The one condition that complicates the issue in the Middle East is the direct external pressure, what really should be to help in creating conditions whereby this dialogue can take place peacefully. You might weigh in in broad general terms in favor of forces of tolerance against forces of extremism. Thus far we have been fighting the war on terrorism, but we did not signal that we are indeed serious about tipping the balance in favor of liberal forces. They are intimidated usually by the extremists on one side and by their government on the other side. We need to give these forces the tools to fight the local fight, and

to provide incentives for government to further democratize, and allow fresh voices to rally in their support. In the issue of religious freedom in general, I would conclude by saying that probably if we take one case in the Muslim--all cases in the Muslim world, I would argue that there are two ways of looking at this, a direct approach to talk about interreligious violence and communication. The other one is really indirect which I think is much more useful in the sense religious freedom, for instance, within Islam, is much more important. We need to promote the forces within Islam itself that allow for greater interpretation, because it's not really Muslims oppressing non-Muslims, but really Muslims oppressing other Muslims. So in that sense we need to encourage forces of tolerance with any religion, and then after that the implications will follow for intercommunal relations as well as interreligious relations. Thank you.