

Thank you for that kind introduction.

I want to thank all of you for joining us this evening -- and I especially would like to thank the members of the International Religious Freedom Caucus and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for co-hosting today's event on the plight of religious minorities in the Middle East.

I know that I speak for my colleagues at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom when I say that we have genuine cause for concern about the conditions these minorities face in the region today.

This is certainly the case for some of the smallest religious groups, such as the Mandaeans of Iraq, whose numbers have been falling dramatically in recent years.

With nearly 85 percent of Mandaeans having fled Iraq or been killed, we could see the disappearance of this group if current trends continue.

This is exactly what happened decades ago to another religious minority which had lived there for nearly 25 centuries.

I'm referring to the Jewish community, whose members emigrated not only from Iraq, but from Egypt, Libya, and other nations in the region due to discrimination and fear for their safety.

The Mandaean and Jews are but two examples of how religious minorities have fared in Iraq.

The plight of Iraq's other minorities, such as Christians and Yazidis, remains desperate. Facing discrimination and marginalization, displacement and violence, they have not received proper protection and justice from the state. A decade ago, there were over a million Christians living in Iraq. Today, there are only half that many remaining in the country.

Like their counterparts in Iraq, religious minorities in Egypt continue to face severe persecution. As in Iraq, the biggest problem remains that of impunity, with entrenched

government policies adding fuel to the fire.

For decades, Egypt's government has fostered a climate conducive to violence against Coptic Christians and other minorities, and has done so in at least two ways.

First, Cairo's long history of restrictive laws and policies – from blasphemy codes to an Emergency Law to across-the-board discrimination – has drawn unwelcome attention to religious minorities, leading to violent words and deeds launched by radical individuals and religious groups.

Second, the government's continued failure to protect people from attacks and to convict those responsible has served to encourage further assaults.

For years, former President Mubarak's government tolerated widespread bias against religious minorities and disfavored religious groups, from dissident Sunni and Shi'a Muslims to Baha'is, as well as Christians, while allowing state-controlled media and state-funded mosques to deliver hateful messages against them. The regime also tolerated state media attacks of a clearly anti-Semitic nature.

After Mubarak's departure, a breakdown in security and a rise in violence made 2011 one of the worst years for the country's religious minorities.

As before Mubarak's exit from power, Copts were the primary target of the violence.

Last October, Egypt's state media falsely accused Copts of attacking the military.

Following the media's call on civilians to counter this imaginary threat, armed men attacked peaceful demonstrators, killing at least 26 of them, most of them Copts, while injuring over 300. Responding to the violence, Egypt's military used live ammunition and also deployed armored vehicles which deliberately crushed and killed at least 12 protestors.

While religious minorities in Iraq and Egypt are threatened by a climate of impunity that encourages violence against them by private citizens, in other Mideast nations, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, the biggest threat they face comes from the direct hand of government.

In Saudi Arabia, this threat takes the form of an institutionalized, repressive monarchy which severely restricts all forms of public religious expression that fail to conform to its own interpretation of Sunni Islam, while also interfering with private religious practice.

These restrictions blatantly violate the human rights of large communities of Muslims, from dissenting Sunnis to Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims to expatriate workers from a variety of faiths.

They have led to the deportation of members of the Ahmadiyya community, which has refused to renounce its claim to be a Muslim community.

The Saudi government also bans churches, synagogues, temples, and other non-Muslim places of worship, and uses in its schools, and posts online, state textbooks that espouse intolerance and incite violence.

The government continues its support of global activities which promote an extremist ideology, and in some cases, violence toward non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims around the world.

To this day, the government uses criminal charges of apostasy and blasphemy to stifle discussion and debate and silence dissidents of every kind.

In Iran, a theocratic republic run by Shi'a clerics continues to tyrannize the nation, with religious minorities, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, being among its worst victims, and Shi'a majority dissidents also being targeted.

Last September, for example, a Sufi Muslim was killed and several were injured during a crackdown in southwestern Iran.

Since 1979, Iranian authorities have murdered more than 200 Baha'i leaders, while removing 10,000 from government and university jobs. For the first time since the early years of the Khomeini revolution, more than 100 Baha'is are being held in prison solely because of their religious beliefs, including seven of its leaders and several Baha'i educators.

Even officially recognized minorities, including Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews, are badly mistreated, and Christian religious services are targeted by arbitrary raids resulting in periodic arrests and imprisonment of church members.

A number of pastors remain jailed amid reports of physical and emotional abuse, including Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani who faces execution for apostasy.

State-run television broadcasts anti-Semitic messages, and President Ahmadinejad and high level clerics have used anti-Semitic rhetoric and denied the existence of the Holocaust.

Our Commission considers all four of the nations I've mentioned – Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran – to be among the world's worst religious freedom violators. For years, we have covered them in our annual report, and we've recommended that the State Department designate them all as CPCs or "countries of particular concern." Thus far, only two of these nations – Saudi Arabia and Iran – have been designated.

Besides our CPC recommendations, our Commission also has proposed very specific recommendations tailored to the particular conditions of these countries.

For Iraq, where impunity is the overriding problem, we continue to advocate a serious plan for

Iraqi military protection of sites and areas where vulnerable religious minorities live and worship, as well as fuller investigations of religiously motivated attacks and a stronger commitment to bringing the guilty to justice.

For Egypt, where the impunity problem is worsened by long-standing government bias against religious minorities, we recommend that pressure be brought to bear on Cairo not only to bring violent attackers and those who incite violence to justice, but also to repeal discriminatory decrees against religious minorities, remove religion from official identity documents, abolish blasphemy codes, and pass a unified law for constructing and repairing places of worship.

For Saudi Arabia, where the problem is a religious ideology that represses all religious competition and is exported globally through literature which fuels violence against disfavored religious groups, we recommend that the United States lift its waiver on the application of punitive measures on the Saudis for these and other abuses.

And for Iran, where the problem is religious repression through the dictates of specific Iranian officials, we advocate that the United States continue to identify these officials – including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad – and impose asset freezes and travel bans on them, while demanding the release of all prisoners of conscience.

Among the Mideast countries we haven't yet considered, either as CPCs or for designation on our Watch List of religious freedom violators whom we monitor closely, we are increasingly

concerned about religious freedom conditions in Bahrain and Syria.

While in Iran, a Shi'a majority tyrannizes Muslim and non-Muslim minorities, from Sunnis to Baha'is, in Bahrain, the situation is reversed.

Between March 1 and May 11, 2011, for example, the Sunni-run government destroyed as many as 53 Shi'a religious structures.

While USCIRF welcomed the King's decision to establish an independent commission to investigate these and other abuses, as well as his announcement that the government will rebuild such structures, it found that, among other things, the commission's report did not address allegations by human rights groups that Shi'a members were harassed, interrogated, and arrested for returning to some of the destroyed sites to pray or to retrieve religious objects.

In Syria, President al-Assad, from the minority Alawite community, has long ruled over the country's Sunni majority and has been killing thousands in an attempt to stave off a revolution threatening the survival of his dictatorial regime.

Not only the Alawites, but other religious minorities, including Christians, fear that as the violence spreads, their plight will deteriorate dramatically.

Clearly, then, the plight of religious minorities in the Middle East appears grim indeed. Nonetheless, there remain glimmers of hope on the horizon.

In Libya, for example, the overthrow of Ghaddafi has led to the ascension to power of a government that appears open to the forces of democratic reform.

This presents a potential opportunity for religious minorities to use this time to try to open up the country to religious freedom and to the return of Jews and others who had left due to violations of this fundamental right.

And it is still too early to tell whether, across the Middle East, the Arab Spring has turned into a permanent winter or whether it will lead to a pro-human-rights alternative to authoritarian dictatorships on the one hand and violent religious extremism on the other.

Finally, the efforts of various countries to draft constitutions provide a window of opportunity to consider not only protection for members of religious minorities, but for every individual.

The constitutional process provides a chance to enshrine the fundamental notion -- affirmed by international law and treaty -- that all human beings have the right to think as they please, believe or not believe as their conscience dictates, peacefully practice their beliefs, and express them publicly without fear or intimidation.

Speaking for USCIRF, let me conclude my remarks with these words:

Whenever nations perpetrate or tolerate religious freedom abuses, our Commission will continue to stand up for those being abused – from religious minority members to those who are in the majority.

We will seek every opportunity, through every means possible, using every tool at our disposal, to hold countries accountable for their behavior. We will remind these countries of the commitments they made to uphold international agreements guaranteeing freedom of religion and related human rights for each and every person they govern.

For those in this room whose life's work includes religious freedom, know that our door remains open to you. Feel free to contact us at any time. Let us meet together, and let us join hands together, to advance this precious human right -- in the Middle East and across our world.

Thank you.