

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN TAJIKISTAN:
POLICY OPTIONS FOR A COUNTRY
OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

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Virtual Hearing

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

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Abraham Cooper, Chair
Frederick A. Davie, Vice Chair
Stephen Schneck
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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR COOPER: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing on Religious Freedom in Tajikistan: Policy Options for a Country of Particular Concern.

Thank you very much to our distinguished witnesses for taking the time out of their busy schedules to join us today and for coming to offer their insights on how the U.S. can support religious freedom in Tajikistan.

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 United States government.

Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory

authority under IRFA to convene this important and timely meeting.

I would like to start off by saying that USCIRF was very glad to hear that Tajikistan allowed United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, to conduct an official delegation to the country this past spring.

She will be our first witness this morning, and I'm very interested to hear her observations and initial recommendations arising from her visit.

Given the opening her trip has afforded, we at USCIRF believe the government of Tajikistan has a unique opportunity to reform laws and policies that severely constrict religious practice and expression.

Similarly, the U.S. government has an opportunity to look for new ways to engage Tajikistan to lift religious freedom restrictions and allow religious communities to worship more freely.

Since 2012, USCIRF has recommended the United States government designate Tajikistan as a country of particular concern, or CPC, for systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.

The State Department has agreed with our recommendation since 2016, and each year since has designated the country as such in recognition of its severe repression and control of all religious expression in the country, regardless of religious affiliation.

Tajikistan is one of only four countries currently designated as a CPC that the U.S. government has chosen not to take any corresponding punitive action, choosing instead to waive presidential action that should accompany the designation in the national interests of the United States.

Since 2009, the government of Tajikistan has passed and enforced a web of laws controlling and restricting religious expression and practice.

Though the most widespread group affected

in the country is the Sunni Muslim majority, the government similarly targets religious minorities such as Ismaili, Shi'a Muslims, Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Youth under the age of 18 and women are prohibited from attending public religious services. In effect, this means women are not permitted to attend prayers at the mosque. It means if you're a Muslim man and would like to go to religious service, you must leave your wife and children at home.

It means you're not permitted to worship publicly as a family or to teach your children what it means to worship together as a member of a faith community.

All religious communities in the country are required to register, but many groups' registration applications are not accepted by the government, in particular Christian groups.

Unregistered religious communities cannot legally convene religious meetings or assemblies, which then forces these groups to worship in secret

at great risk to themselves.

In addition, religious education outside of the nuclear family is banned. Religious literature must be approved by the state and any religious gathering or expression outside of the state's regulation is met with fines and prison sentences.

These are just a few of the circumstances facing people of faith in Tajikistan, which our witnesses will share about in much more detail.

I'll now turn the floor over to my colleague, Vice Chair Fred Davie, for his opening remarks.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Chair Cooper.

And I would like to join in welcoming everyone to today's hearing. In addition to the concerns raised by Chair Cooper, over the past year the government of Tajikistan has implemented new methods of persecution, specifically aimed at the country's Ismaili Shi'a Muslim population, largely located in Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region, or

GBAO.

As the government has targeted peaceful protesters and conducted large-scale military operations in the region, it has also enacted new forms of religious repression, including closing religious schools and community centers, shuttering religious bookstores that sold Ismaili literature.

It has fined individuals for holding private prayer meetings in their homes and has required families to remove from their homes pictures of their spiritual leader, the Aga Khan.

USCIRF carefully documents the arbitrary imprisonment of individuals for expression of their faith through our Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List.

We are actively monitoring the cases of nine people currently imprisoned in Tajikistan for their belief. One example is Ismaili cleric Muzaffar Davlatmirov, who last year was detained and sentenced to five years in prison after officiating funeral services for protesters killed by the government.

Another recent example is 71-year-old Jehovah's Witness Shamil Khakimov, who was sentenced to prison for inciting religious hatred after he shared his faith in public. He was just released this past April after serving out his full sentence of four years.

If you know of any individuals who have been targeted due to their faith-based activity or advocacy in Tajikistan and should be included on USCIRF's FoRB Victims List, I invite you to visit the USCIRF website and submit information for us to review.

I will now turn it back over to Chair Cooper. And Chair Cooper, you are on mute.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you, Vice Chair Davie.

And we'll be hearing from our other distinguished commissioners during the Q&A upcoming both in the first and second sessions.

I would now like to briefly introduce our first witness. Each person's full biography can also be found on our website, and we will drop the

link into the chat.

Our first panel dealing with policy options for a country of particular concern is Nazila Ghanea, who assumed her mandate as Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief on the first of August 2022.

Ms. Ghanea is Professor of International Human Rights Law and Director of the MSc in the International Human Rights Law at the University of Oxford.

Though her nearly 30-year career has been rooted in academia, Ms. Ghanea's academic work has often connected with multilateral practice in international law. She has contributed actively to networks interested in freedom of religion or belief and its interrelationship with other human rights, and advised states and inspired stakeholders, including many of the commissioners that are participating today.

It's an honor to listen to Special Rapporteur Ghanea, and the floor is yours.

MS. GHANEA: Chair, Vice Chair,

Commissioners, ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to thank USCIRF for having invited me to this important event and for the opportunity to share with you a snapshot of my findings following a mission to Tajikistan from 11th to 20th of April 2023, upon the invitation of the government.

This was my first visit since having taken up the mandate, but the second of the mandate to Tajikistan, the first having been carried out by Asma Jahangir in February/March 2007.

The cooperation extended by the government to my delegation allowed us to carry out this visit.

During the visit, the delegation met government officials from various ministries, representatives of the Parliament, Supreme Court, General Prosecutor's office, relevant state committees, the Commissioner for Human Rights, or the Ombudsman, and many more.

We were also able to visit a prison where religious prisoners were detained. We further had fruitful meetings with the U.N. Resident

Coordinator, the U.N. country team, diplomats, regional and international human rights organizations, representatives of religious associations and communities, and faith-based actors, NGOs, human rights lawyers, journalists and scholars.

One of my main findings was that government laws, policies and practices in the field of freedom of religion or belief today are—there are obstacles to the enjoyment of these freedoms. And the obstacles that are often cited are the geopolitical, strategic, security and economic concerns of the country.

Something that is often mentioned is the situation in Afghanistan after the return of the Taliban to power and the joint 1,400 kilometer border that is shared with Afghanistan. Also relations with Russia and the war in Ukraine, tensions with Kyrgyzstan, and the economic cooperation with China are cited by others as part of the rationale for the restrictions of freedom of religion or belief.

The authorities themselves, without us prompting them, of course, noted on a number of occasions that the U.S. State Department's designation of Tajikistan as a country of particular concern since 2016 bothered them, and they indicated that they were eager to be removed from that list.

So I want to emphasize at the outset that one cannot say that freedom of religion or belief is completely absent in Tajikistan. There is a spectrum of treatment being experienced by both Muslims and non-Muslims, and the restrictions are not necessarily implemented either in an identical fashion through time or through different parts of the country.

Regardless, the spectrum of the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief clearly falls alarmingly short of the scope of the guarantees of the international standards that Tajikistan itself has committed to and is obliged to uphold. And I particularly want to highlight those under the International Covenant on Civil and Political

Rights.

What seems to drive the highly regulated scope, and I mean highly regulated scope, of freedom of religion or belief in Tajikistan is an almost singular overarching drive to address extremism and terrorism.

The legislative framework consists of the 2020 Law on Countering Extremism and the 2021 Law on Combating Extremism, amongst others.

However, both these laws and the criminal code offer overbroad and ambiguous definitions, which do not meet the threshold of seriousness required for such acts, notably that the intent should be to cause death or serious bodily injury.

In addition, the overly broad definition of terrorist organizations in Article 4 of the same law has had practical implications, including in relation to the ever-growing list of banned groups, and I mean practical implications for freedom of religion or belief.

The mandate reminded the authorities that legal provisions addressing incitement should also

be in line with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 19 and 20, and consider the guidance set out in the Rabat Plan of Action.

The evidentiary requirements and threshold for incitement, as well as those of extremism and terrorism, need to be clear in the law, need to uphold international human rights standards, and be applied in conformity with human rights, including due process.

On a positive note, I welcome the fact that the punishment for incitement for first-time offenders had been reduced to a fine and indicated that this reduction of punishment is good, and it should be more widely applied in the country's process of harmonizing its laws and policies with international human rights standards.

There is a cluster of concerns that are often referenced around religious organizations and movements, religious enmity, and forcible overthrow of constitutional state structures and political parties and armed groups acting against nationalism

and religious hatred.

These can only really be, you know, our only effort in trying to understand the cluster of concerns would be in light of the civil war from 1992 to 1997 in Tajikistan.

I reminded the government that scope needs to be offered nevertheless to freedom of religion or belief in the country, and that religion or belief in itself does not pose a severe risk or does not pose, is not a risk factor to societal life.

In fact, enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief can contribute to development, peace and understanding. That was my appeal.

The Tajik authorities often describe freedom of religion or belief as an individual and private freedom, and by private, essentially we might not even mean the home, the family home, but the individual's room.

There is a strongly selective application of the right to freedom of religion or belief which reduces it essentially to its "forum internum" and

results in violation of many other aspects of the right, specifically manifestation of freedom of religion or belief, and especially with others and in public.

Worship observance, practice and teaching disappears under this private understanding or assertion of freedom of religion or belief. We should note that manifestation cannot be restricted, limited on grounds of national security, but explicitly this is violated in Tajikistan.

It is often, national security is often cited as the reason for restricting it. In fact, we see in Article 4.2 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that freedom of religion or belief cannot even be derogated in times of public emergency that threaten the life of the nation.

In terms of worship, the number and regulation of mosques and other places of worship throughout the country leads to severe restrictions on manifestation. Surveillance, imposed reporting

and intrusion, apply across the board but have a disproportionate and disparate impact on religion and belief minorities.

I wish to add the concern that Commissioner Cooper raised, that children and youth are not able to enter a mosque. Now essentially I'll say that boys are not allowed to enter mosques, and I'll explain that a little bit later.

All those under 18 cannot participate in any religious events, apart from funerals, and children cannot receive religious education outside the home.

And, you know, even inside the home, that's restricted to the parents, not let's say an aunt or an uncle or a grandparent.

With regard to women and girls, of course, they do not have the possibility of praying in mosques and they cannot wear particular types of headdress because these would be taken as indication, worst still as proof, of extremism or belonging to banned terrorist groups.

On a positive note, in July 2022,

Tajikistan enacted its first ever anti-discrimination law, but we need to press for the harmonization of legislation with this new law and conduct awareness raising and other activities to ensure that this law is actually implemented and enjoyed.

There are many instances in which discrimination is rife, and although that law refers to reasonable accommodation, there was little evidence or no evidence of reasonable accommodation on grounds of religion or belief.

Just one instance of this relates to the refusal to recognize conscientious objection to military service and provide for an alternative service. In fact, Jehovah's Witnesses had their registration as a community withdrawn due, in large part, because of their refusal to perform such military service.

In light of the 2022 Views of the U.N. Human Rights Committee on this matter, we see that the Human Rights Committee found violations to Article 18.1 and 22.2 of the International Covenant

on Civil and Political Rights, and therefore there is, you know, that is an outstanding request by a U.N. treaty body on the government of Tajikistan.

As Vice Chair Davie mentioned, there have been many reports and, regrettably, many recent events since November 2021 onward especially in the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region, and upon receipt of the special permission required, our team dedicated 15th to 18th of April for a visit to GBAO.

I very much regret that the authorities did not facilitate official meetings with the provincial authorities, but nevertheless we were able to visit and confirm some of the reports that we had received.

We did reach out to a range of religion and belief communities and faith-based actors in GBAO, but there was a widespread reluctance, an understandable reluctance, to speak with us under fear of reprisals.

We had firsthand information on GBAO, and we cross-checked and many of those reports were

strongly confirmed through direct observation on the ground by us.

According to tens of sources, the State Committee on National Security invited heads of some 128 local NGOs to a meeting in GBAO, almost concurrently with our visit, and persuaded, or should we say forced them, to "voluntarily self-liquidate."

More than 30 of these NGOs, even those working with children and persons with disability, had already suspended their activities in May of this year, and more, news of more pressure and self-liquidations or bannings have come to our attention since then.

There has been a lot of alarming news that I'm sure we will be hearing more about in the second part of this meeting.

In conclusion, as I mentioned, at the end of my visit, countering violent extremism and terrorism can constitute legitimate grounds for limitation of manifestation of freedom of religion or belief.

However, this must be carried out in a manner that does not risk extinguishing freedom of religion or belief all together. In Tajikistan, this balance has not been struck in a way that fully upholds freedom of religion or belief, not yet.

I urged the authorities to reexamine each of the areas I had outlined in my end-of-visit statement and to widen the scope of the enjoyment of manifestation of freedom of religion or belief in particular.

I also recalled that the authorities' pursuit of security does not stand at loggerheads with freedom of religion or belief. I would state quite to the contrary.

I will submit my visit report and full observations and recommendations as I'm obliged to at the next session of the U.N. Human Rights Council. So that will be in March 2024.

Recommendations will include those around upholding freedom of religion or belief whilst also countering terrorism, extremism and incitement to

hatred.

But the laws and practices on this matter need to be sharpened and we need to realize that dealing with discrimination, hostility or violence does not justify violations of freedom of religion or belief.

The rights of women need to be upheld. The rights of children, youth, prisoners, religious and belief minorities and conscientious objectors to military service, religious education, fair trials and due process and the maintenance of an open civic space will all be priorities.

I believe that the Tajik government has a unique opportunity to reform laws and policies that severely restrict religious practice and expression. I have indicated to the government that I stand ready to be of assistance in advancing these objectives, even if these steps were to be taken in a step by step and careful way.

I thank you for the continued attention of USCIRF and other entities to freedom of religion or belief in Tajikistan and your follow-up to these

recommendations and our joint concerns.

Thank you so much for your attention.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you so much, Special Rapporteur.

Amazing presentation. Let me use the fact that I'm chair of the event to pose the first question. Based on your meetings with Tajik government officials, do you think the government is willing to make any reforms, any additional reforms, and if so, what are some of the ideas that you're most interested in proposing and feel that have an opportunity at some success?

And, finally, how can USCIRF coordinate recommendations through our government here in the United States in a way that is helpful for your work?

MS. GHANEA: Thank you.

What was highly evident and confirmed by other actors in Tajikistan that there is always an openness to training in Tajikistan, including by the authorities. So I think the opportunity of seminars and exchanges and, you know, we can call

it brainstorming if "training" is objectionable, let's say. Judges around the world don't like the word. So, you know, whatever we call it, but the opportunity of exchange has to be prioritized.

There was at least some curiosity about how stark the exclusion of children from freedom of religion or belief is in Tajikistan, and how odd it is even when we consider the many violators of freedom of religion or belief around the world.

There was some curiosity about incitement, how other countries deal with this matter, and I think we must ensure that the—I know that the Special Rapporteur on upholding human rights while countering terrorism, there's going to be a change of mandate orders in the near future, but that also has to be a priority, and at least some of the authorities mentioned that they would be keen to hear from that Special Rapporteur, too.

We have to join together the support of Tajikistan in the area of security and countering terrorism with our concern with freedom of religion or belief.

If, you know, USCIRF, the mandate and some other actors are saying that these two, you know, you don't have to choose between these two, then our actions are really important, that when there are security agreements and visits, that that too emphasizes that, you know, these security concerns can be addressed without violating freedom of religion or belief, and, in fact, it is a contributor to dealing with the risk of violent extremism, terrorism, and incitement to hatred.

I commend the government for being concerned about, you know, harmony and cohesion in society and addressing discrimination, but this cannot be the price that is paid for it nor a contributor to it.

Also, some things are somewhat camouflaged so, you know, when one asks about headdress and women, the response is that this is our culture, this is how Tajik women choose to worship, to not go to the mosque and worship in private. This is how they choose to wear their headdress.

Well, then, let's see people given the

scope to choose that indeed as how they, you know, how they express their belief.

CHAIR COOPER: Thank you very much.

I now want to turn over the rest of this Q&A session to my colleague and friend Vice Chair Davie.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Chair Cooper, and thank you, Special Rapporteur. Thank you for your presentation and for your service.

I'd like to know, if I might, knowing that Tajikistan is one of the world's leading perpetrators of transnational repression, were you able to bring the topic up with Tajik officials or gain any insight into some of the tactics they are using to target religious affiliated political dissidents abroad?

MS. GHANEA: Indeed. When I refer to due process, a lot carries on that. We not only have unclear evidentiary requirement or hugely problematic evidentiary requirement for who is allegedly an extremist or terrorist, and already I'm concerned because we shouldn't be using the

term "extremist."

We should be using the term "violent extremist" if we want to uphold international human rights standards and concerns. So already the evidentiary requirements for the person who is accused is problematic. So let me just say extremism, terrorism, and somebody who has incited hatred.

But then we have, you know, due process, equality before the law, their defense, but also the lawyer that takes their case, also the journalist that reports on their case, also the NGOs that are drawing attention to that case. Hence, the concern for the broader civic space and, you know, the ability of the actors that are really pillars to the enjoyment of various human rights including freedom of religion or belief.

One of the ways in which this is carried out is, of course, through surveillance, and for those entities that are selling surveillance equipment and, you know, they too have a role in ensuring that that is not running counter to

international human rights objectives and freedom of religion or belief.

In fact, some of the civil society actors were saying that why can't there be religious education for children, even for the majority, you know, even in the mosques that are recognized, which are very limited. There's a very limited number of mosques that can operate.

But even those mosques are carefully surveilled; therefore, wouldn't that be the best place ever for the religious education to be taking place because not a word would go unnoticed in any case. But that, too, is prohibited.

So some of, even if there is a concern and a control, some of the policies that follow are hard to grasp.

If I return to the chair's question about where is there an opportunity, I think we have to use all opportunities. I think all our collaborations with the country need to raise this, and even if it is a step-by-step improvement because this is highly imbedded, highly

centralized, and maintained over many decades.

But we must see steps in a positive direction. I did take it as a curious and interesting point, but, you know, a U.N. Rapporteur walks into a meeting with certain government authorities, and they say we want to be off the CPC list. So there must be attention and concern about being on that list, and therefore perhaps it's an opportunity to encourage positive change.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Great. Thank you so much.

I'll now turn to my fellow commissioners. I'll start with Commissioner Ueland.

COMMISSIONER UELAND: Thank you very much. I appreciate it. And Special Rapporteur, thank you for your testimony this morning and your work on this tough issue.

Quickly, during your visit, were you able to meet with any non-Muslim communities, such as Christians or Jehovah's Witnesses, and if so, what were your observations?

MS. GHANEA: Thank you.

I did meet with all of those mentioned religious and belief communities and more, some of them inside the country and some of them outside the country.

So we complemented and supplemented the mission with a number of interactions because if civil society and communities are not comfortable to meet within the country, then, of course, we need to allow them the opportunity to send information in written form or to have exchanges with us, and we certainly did so regarding the Tajik commission.

They are concerned about their freedom to worship and to gather and to associate, their ability to be registered and to continue to be registered.

They are concerned about the fact that they need to report annually on their finances and their activities. They are concerned about the education of their children and their ability to celebrate religious occasions and celebrations.

They're concerned about having access to

publications. They're concerned about their interactions with the wider community not being misread and used against them.

So they mirror many of the concerns. In a way, Tajikistan is very curious because many of the issues that we would normally explore only in relation to religious or belief minorities in a country are, in some way, also reflected for the majority.

Nevertheless, even with the restrictions, the knowledge base and the cultural transmission in broader society, of course, of the majority religion is, you know, more prevalent than those of minorities, and so we need to maintain an onus and a concern on the minorities as well.

Thank you for that question, Commissioner.

COMMISSIONER UELAND: Thank you very much for that answer. I appreciate it.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

And we'll now turn to Commissioner Schneck.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you, Dr.

Ghanea.

It's a very concerning report. If possible, I have two questions that I'd like to pose.

The first one, I think you indicated that you were able to visit some prisons where prisoners of conscience, where prisoners are kept. Can you describe the conditions in those prisons, and, in particular, were you able to ascertain the specific conditions for the prisoners at risk for freedom of belief?

MS. GHANEA: I don't want to draw too much from a single visit to, you know, a prison near the capital although I'm grateful that we were able to visit.

But if we look, the condition in this particular prison on the surface was better than one might have otherwise expected, but there are routine regulations that apply regarding also the right to worship in the prison.

So there is one assigned area that also there is surveillance and that's the only place of

worship that is available, and worship cannot take place elsewhere.

The beard is shaved immediately on entry and on a weekly basis, and the garb, of course, is highly restricted. That's what I was hinting at in talking about reasonable accommodation. If one looks at the equality law from last year, allowing reasonable accommodation on the grounds of religion or belief has huge implications, potentially, for diet, for headdress, for beard, for being able to practice also in detention.

But there was no evidence of that being applied or even understood as being applicable. Hence, we mustn't ask only for improvements to the law. Obviously, we will call for improvements to legislation, but immediately after that, we need to ensure that it is being enacted in the country and that it is being practiced and, indeed, being enjoyed in the country.

So we also need to take our recommendations to the next level to ensure enjoyment.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you.

Vice Chair Davie, do I have time for an additional question?

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: I want to respect the Special Rapporteur's time. Special Rapporteur, are you, do you, for one more?

MS. GHANEA: My pleasure. Absolutely.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Great.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Very, very briefly. You referenced that the Tajikistan government identifies economic and security relations with Afghanistan, with China, with Russia, as part of the rationale for some of these provisions.

I certainly understand the takeover of the Taliban in Afghanistan being part of those explanations, but I'm not quite sure I understand the role of Russia, Russia relations, and China relations there.

Can you give me just a hint of the logic that they—their rationale for that?

MS. GHANEA: I'm sorry. I should really unpack that. You're absolutely right.

So some of those grounds or geopolitical and strategic rationales were given by the government and some by others and some by other actors, but the Tajik authorities did refer to terrorist attacks in other countries where a Tajik was involved.

So they mentioned terrorist attacks in India, in Iran, in Russia and elsewhere, and they used this as an argument regarding how effective their counter-extremism and terrorism actions are at home, that these terrorist actions, these Tajik extremists are not operating within the country. They are going abroad.

Another way, of course, to look at it is that perhaps Tajik youth and nationals who go abroad will not be at risk of being enticed into extremism and terrorism if they had a more solid and more confidence in their religion or belief and in what they believe in.

So the rationale of China, Russia relations impacting was primarily by the non-government actors and observers.

Thank you for asking me to unpack that.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: Thank you very much.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Well, thank you and thank you, Special Rapporteur.

We really appreciate your time, your testimony today, and your service, and we look forward to USCIRF to continuing to collaborate with you to address issues related to Tajikistan.

So thank you.

MS. GHANEA: My pleasure.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

We'll now welcome our second panel. I'm going to invite them to join us and to come on camera. I see—great. All right.

I will do a brief introduction of each of the panelists. You have full bios in the chat to get more on their history and experience.

Let me start first with Felix Corley. He is the editor of Form 18 News Service, which provides monitoring and analysis of freedom of thought, conscience and belief violations in

Central Asia, Russia, South Caucasus, Belarus and Occupied Ukraine.

Our second speaker is Bakhtiyor Safarov. He is a passionate advocate for human rights, dedicated to making a difference in the lives of individuals and communities.

And then our third speaker will be Dr. Edward Lemon, who is President of the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs and Research Assistant Professor at The Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, Washington, D.C. Teaching Site.

So we will start with Mr. Corley. Is Mr. Corley with us? Well, why don't we go to Mr. Safarov and we'll come back to Mr. Corley.

MR. SAFAROV: Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. Davie, Commissioner Davie, Chair Cooper, and all of participants. Thank you for inviting me today to discuss the situation regarding religious freedom in the Republic of Tajikistan.

It is disheartening to witness that the people of Tajikistan are currently experiencing a

state of affairs that is similar and in some cases even worse than the Soviet Union era during which I lived until it collapsed.

Little did the people of Tajikistan know that after gaining independence and overthrowing the Communist regimes that W. Cleon Skousen described in his book, *The Naked Communist*, as the criminal conspiracy people would be confronted with even more challenging and unsettling future.

In this future, individuals face significant restriction on expressing their religious belief.

Since coming to power with the help of foreign military intelligence in December 1992, the Tajik state has become a heartless institution.

Many of the authorities who are ex-Communists now establish a family-run government that is also nationalistic. They are determined to exert control and influence over religious practices, actively suppressing and opposing any religious movement or organization that forces unity among people.

The Tajik republic since its independence in 1991 embraced that various religious communities, including Christians, Jews, Baha'is, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians, no longer exist. Organizations known for their beliefs ensure mercy to suffering and seeking justice against evil action have been shut down, which alarm all of us.

I would like to outline some of the many issues faced by the people of Tajikistan, categorizing them as follows:

First, blaming religious individuals and organizations for the Tajik-Russian war of 1992-1997. The government wrongly attributes the Tajik-Russian war solely to Muslim religious people and the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, which was banned in 2015, wth its members currently serving long prison sentences.

This attribution fails to acknowledge that the conflict involved various political parties and movements.

Number two, discrediting religious leaders. The authorities actively engage in

campaign to portray religious leaders as morally corrupt and unethical individuals.

This campaign involves fabricated sexually-explicit set-ups with priests who were broadcasted on television.

Tragically, this action has led to a further association of religious leaders, the so-called "extremist" and "terrorist."

As a result, Muzaffar Davlatmirov, a 59-year-old priest, was sentenced to five years under criminal code, Article 307, public calls for extremist activity, just for leading a funeral ceremony for Muhammadboqir Mahamhadboqirov, a Pamiri community leader, who was tragically killed by a sniper rifle in GBAO during May 2022.

It is important to know that during this period at least 34 individuals lost their life, and their remaining families and friends under severe pressure by authorities.

Number three, stigmatizing religious dress as religious practices. Authorities such as himself, President Rahmon, have made public

statements on television suggesting that women who wear headscarves lack education.

Teach children, discourage from attending mosques and men are discouraged from growing beards. Additionally, people have been fined for conducting prayers in their home. The historic synagogue, the only prayer house in Dushanbe, did not survive even and was demolished in 2005.

Number four, interference in religious affairs undermining religious autonomy. The State Committee for Religious Affairs and regulation of tradition, ceremonies and rituals exercises control over religious practices, doctrines and leadership appointment.

This severely limits religious independence. In late 2023, authorities in Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast banned voluntary lessons for secondary schools, [?] children based on book published by Aga Khan Foundation. Aga Khan Lyceum for high school students has been closed. Ismailis are no longer permitted to travel to Britain for education at the Institute of Ismaili

Studies in London.

The activities of Ismaili [?] and religious education board which oversees religious education for Ismaili community members has been suspended.

Number five, forced assimilation and revocation of legal status. There are recent reports indicating that the government authorities inquire about individuals, whether they're Tajik or Pamiri ethnicity, going door by door.

And there are restrictions on the use of Pamiri languages in government buildings. These practices raise concern about potential discrimination and violation of linguistic and cultural rights.

It is evident that the state is receiving valuable support from the international community, including assessments on institutional building and financial aid.

However, it appears that the state has chosen not to pursue the establishment of democratic system at this time. It also appears

that peaceful coexistence in post-Communist countries does not work in reality.

These examples are just a few among many highlighting the unfortunate realities faced by people of Tajikistan. The current government has failed to embrace independence and democracy and has instead perpetrated the Communist tradition of banning religion and persecuting religious individuals, further tarnishing their image as shabby and uneducated.

Such actions not only weaken the influence of religious leaders but also discourage support from their followers.

Dear U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, the information I have presented today provides you with an historic opportunity to draw your conclusion and take necessary action in solidarity to the freedom of religion in Tajikistan.

I don't know of any other nation that could stay as strong in helping people in need as United States of America. I'm grateful for the

chance to shed light on the atrocities occurring in this part of the world.

Thank you for attention.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, sir, and we will come back to you shortly with questions.

We'd now like to turn to Dr. Lemon.

MR. SAFAROV: Thank you.

DR. LEMON: Thank you, Chair Davie. Thank you for the invitation to testify about religious freedom in Tajikistan today.

My remarks will focus on U.S.-Tajikistan relations and on the issue of transnational repression, which has already been raised in the first panel.

Tajikistan's importance to the United States has waxed and waned over the 31 years of bilateral relations.

Given the country's small size and limited resources, security concerns have always been at the forefront of these relations.

Early efforts during the country's civil war from '92 to '97 aimed at bringing the war to an

end and preventing the country from becoming a haven for terrorists and violent extremist organizations.

Tajikistan, of course, became more important to the United States once more in 2001 with the invasion of Afghanistan, a country with which Tajikistan shares an 833 mile border, the longest border between a Central Asian country and Afghanistan.

While Tajikistan never hosted U.S. troops, the U.S. government focused on bolstering border security and counterterrorism. U.S. security assistance peaked at \$35 million in 2014, just before the first proposed withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan and gradually declined to a figure of \$9 million today.

During the first two decades of independence, the U.S. was the country's largest donor, donating \$1 billion in humanitarian aid, but over time, its role has been overtaken by other patrons, most notably China.

With the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan

in 2021, improved relations with Uzbekistan since 2016 and authoritarian Tajikistan's continued close relations with both Russia and China, the country's importance to the United States is now, I think we can say, on the decline.

Despite efforts to raise human rights issues and support civil society, the human rights situation has continued to deteriorate, as the other panelists have already discussed.

Emomali Rahmon, who has ruled the country since 1992, has consolidated his power by extending his family's control over the economy, banning opposition groups, and cracking down on civil society and the media.

These latter efforts have lead the government to put pressure on a number of USAID projects in the country and upon Radio Free Europe's service in Tajikistan, Radio Ozodi.

Given limited U.S. interest and leverage over Tajikistan compounded by its closer relations with Russia and China, addressing severe violations of religious freedom, as we discussed today, remain

an uphill struggle.

A number of options for U.S. policymakers remain. Firstly, private pressure rather than public shaming seems to have worked in cases where individuals have been released, not to say that mentioning these things publicly is not important, but raising them privately has proven to be more successful.

I think we can see continued raising of human rights issues, including specific cases and general policies violating religious freedoms, during meetings with Tajik officials will signal that the U.S. continues to view this matter as important.

Second, while Tajikistan has been classified as a country of particular concern for engaging in systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom, since 2016, it has waived—the U.S. government has waived the application of sanctions on national security grounds.

But given that U.S. security interests and

leverage have decreased, I would argue that targeted sanctions could now be applied to individuals within the State Committee on National Security and Ministry of Internal Affairs, two governmental bodies that are responsible for some of the violations of religious rights already discussed.

Convening an expert working group with stakeholders from academia, civil society and human rights organizations, as well as governmental stakeholders, could be a useful first step in compiling the necessary evidence on individual violators of religious freedom and consider the different options for punitive measures against them.

Third, in promoting alternatives to Tajikistan's "assertive secularism," we need to be more imaginative I think in terms of different models for state religion relations and tolerance of difference, perhaps looking at countries from the Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina or Albania, as different models of state religion relations in

Muslim-majority countries.

Coming to transnational repression, despite its small size, Tajikistan is one of the most prolific users of transnational repression in the world.

According to Freedom House's dataset of 854 incidents since 2014, Tajikistan is the third most direct—has the third most-direct physical cases in the world, according to that dataset.

By 2018, Tajikistan's government had issued 2,500 Red Notices, which are arrest requests issued through Interpol, which accounts for 2.3 percent of those in circulation at the time, this in spite the fact the Tajik population accounts for just under one percent of the world's population.

I in my research have compiled my own dataset of publicly reported cases of transnational repression by the government of Tajikistan, numbering 89 incidents, with 45 of those individuals since 1991 being forcibly returned to the countries, so half of those entries.

Russia is the main site for Tajikistan's

global campaign, accounting for over two-thirds of the entries in my dataset, and the data points to an increasing frequency of the use of transnational repression by the government, with 71 of those 89 cases occurring since 2014, and 22 of them in the past three years.

Spikes in the data, the number of people being targeted, occur when the government cracks down at home, such as when it banned the Islamic Renaissance Party, as Mr. Safarov mentioned, in 2015, and during the recent crackdown in the Pamirs, which we've already discussed, since late 2021.

Just under half of the cases in this dataset of 89 can be considered as being related to religion either directly by accusations of religious extremism or indirectly by targeting minority groups like the Shi'a Ismaili population of the Pamir region, which accounted for a dozen of the incidents, or 12 of the incidents, in this dataset, dataset of publicly recorded cases.

As much of the targeting is taking place

in adversarial regimes such as Russia and Belarus, there is a limit to what the United States government can do directly beyond raising concerns with the Tajik government over these practices.

Here in the United States, the Department of Homeland Security can ensure that it does not follow in the footsteps of Germany and Austria, who extradited Islamic Renaissance Party members Abdullo Shamsiddin and Hizbullo Shovalizoda, in the past two years, who received upon return to the country sentences of seven and 20 years in prison respectively on charges of violent extremism and terrorism.

This includes granting asylum to those fleeing religious persecution and ensuring that the U.S. justice system is not corrupted by authoritarian regimes.

The TRAP Act, the Transnational Repression Accountability and Prevention Act, that was passed by Congress last year, provides some protections against the abuse of Interpol on U.S. soil by requiring a valid extradition request and arrest

warrant for the individual, ending the practice of detaining individuals solely based on an Interpol Red Notice.

These measures could go a long way in addressing the problem.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to today's discussion.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you so much.

And before we go to questions, I want to acknowledge the presence of our Commissioner Nury Turkel.

So I will start the questioning, if I might, with a question to Mr. Safarov. You've all noted—I'm sorry—Mr. Corley is with us. We had a technical issue before, but he is back so before we start the questioning, we'll let Mr. Corley do his presentation.

Mr. Corley.

MR. CORLEY: Thank you very much, and apologies for the technical problems.

Okay. Thank you for inviting us to take part in this hearing.

I'm from Forum 18. We cover freedom of religion or belief monitoring and analysis of violations in Central Asia, as well as in Russia, Russian-occupied Ukraine, government-held Ukraine, Belarus and the South Caucasus, particularly Azerbaijan.

As Special Rapporteur Ghanea observed at the end of her April country visit, quote, "the spectrum of the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief falls alarmingly short of the scope of guarantees in international human rights law." End of quote.

A written briefing document in Forum 18's monitoring and analyses of freedom of religion or belief in Tajikistan has been posted online by USCIRF.

Among the numerous violations of freedom of religion and belief obligations, which are also linked with interlinked human rights, such as freedoms of expression, association, and assembly that we have documented, these are a ban on and punishments for all exercise of freedom of religion

or belief without state permission, bans on visible signs of faith, including hijab, so it's headscarves and beards, severe limitations on the numbers of mosques permitted and activities allowed inside those mosques, restrictions on how funerals can be conducted, including a 28th of April 2023 presidential decree, which was just after Special Rapporteur Ghanea's visit, denying the families of those killed in alleged, quote, "anti-terrorism operations," unquote, the possibility of, among other things, burying their dead with the religious or other rights they would have chosen, or even knowing where they are buried.

A human rights defender, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of state reprisals, told Forum 18 that this is to, quote, "publicly threaten that people who protest against the government will die and will not be buried as Muslims." End quote.

Another human rights defender, journalist Anora Sarkorova, noted that, quote, "the authorities are enforcing the decree violently," unquote, citing an early May 2023 case when the

National Security Committee secret police tortured the relative of a protestor killed in May 2022 after the relative put the deceased's name on the gravestone.

The National Security Committee did not answer its phones when Forum 18 called to question officials.

Other violations that Forum 18 has documented include a ban on all public exercise of freedom of religion or belief apart from funerals by people under the age of 18. We've already heard from Special Rapporteur Ghanea about this issue.

Also another thing we've documented, demanding highly intrusive details on individuals' and religious communities' lives.

In August 2022, for example, non-Muslim religious communities were ordered to reveal full details of all religious community employees and their families. Some suggested to Forum 18 that this information is being collected for the National Security Committee secret police, quote," so that it will be easy to identify us and our

family members if, in future, they decide to target us." End quote.

Another violation, jailing Muslims, Jehovah's Witness, and Protestant prisoners of conscience on alleged, quote, "extremism charges."

The most recent known such jailings were on 23rd of March 2023 when Imam Mukhammad Mukharramov, who is now 50, was jailed for eight years for privately teaching Islam to a group of 12 Muslim men throughout 2022.

The 12 men whose names are unknown, whose ages range between about 30 and 40, they were jailed for between six and nine years each.

Elsewhere, a man was fined nine months' average wages for privately teaching Islam to his brother's wife, and a Muslim woman was fined one month's average wages for teaching the Koran to a neighbor's eight-year-old daughter.

So, as of today, there are at least 19 known prisoners of conscience currently jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief, all of whom are Muslim men.

The previous known jailing was on 3rd of August 2022. Muzaffar Davlatmirov, a 59-year-old Ismaili Muslim religious leader in Mountainous Badakhshan Region, was jailed for five years. Independent journalist Sarkorova commented that the regime did not like the fact that Davlatmirov was respected in the region and thought it was possible he was jailed because he said the Janazah funeral prayers of the funeral in May 2022 of three local informal leaders killed during the regime's violent suppression of peaceful protest.

Officials from the regional government, the police, the regional court and the Supreme Court all refused to explain to Forum 18 what exactly Davlatmirov did that led to the five-year jail term.

On 14th of January 2023, officials told village elders at a meeting in Badakhshan's regional capital Khorog not to allow prayers in homes and warned that those who take part would be fined.

Quote, "People met outside the elders'

homes to hear the news, and many were crying," end quote, an Ismaili told Forum 18.

Quote, "but people are too afraid to protest. They can only pray at home on their own." End quote.

The regime sees people exercising their human rights outside state control as a threat, and its actions appear to be motivated by a wish to control everything.

The experience of the people the regime rules wants to continue to violate binding international obligations to respect freedom of religion and belief and other fundamental human rights.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to our discussion.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you, Mr. Corley. Thanks to all the panelists who have testified and offered their testimony today.

We'll now go to Q&A. I'll start with a question, if I might, to Mr. Safarov. We've heard about this increasingly targeting and closing of

development projects led and funded by the Ismaili Shi'a spiritual leader Aga Khan, and with more closed in just this past month.

So just curious as to why the government is taking these actions, and can you say a little bit more about how it's affecting and impacting people's lives?

And I think you're on mute, Mr. Safarov.

MR. SAFAROV: Sorry about that.

Thank you. Thank you, Vice Chair Davie, for question.

Though, in general, since 1992, the whole GBAO has been in economic blockade. So if it wasn't for Aga Khan development institutions and other international humanitarian organizations, we would probably all starve from death.

So basically what government is doing is continuing the economic blockade so people would be more dependent on government and where the government can continue its narrative.

So that's the main purpose is economic blockade.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

I would welcome if the other panelists, if they want to comment at all on this as well.

DR. LEMON: I think Tajikistan is an authoritarian state with a cultive personality around the president, who was declared leader of the nation back in 2016, and made effectively leader for the rest of his natural life. He's 71-years-old, 70-years-old actually right now.

So I think having an alternative figure, the people, especially the Ismailis worship the Aga Khan as a, revere him as a prophet, and having an alternative source of authority, moral authority, to the president, I think has always been something the central government has had issues with, and as it's extended its control over the country after the end of the civil war.

The Pamirs was the last place where people had greater autonomy from the center, and the center. There were informal leaders who were more powerful than the central government.

I think the targeting of the Aga Khan

Foundation is part of this final process of consolidation of the authoritarian power within the country.

We've had some very egregious acts, the closing of the prayer house, the nationalization of some of their investment projects, like the Serena Hotel, sort of luxury hotel in Khorog, in the capital of Pamirs. It's supposed to help tourism.

We've seen restrictions on the teaching at the university. We've seen representatives of the Aga Khan unable to visit the site of various natural disasters in the area, prevented by the government from coming and helping with relief efforts.

So it's really been an egregious crackdown on what was, as Mr. Safarov said, a real, an alternative source of support for those communities.

MR. CORLEY: I think also, if I can jump in here, the Aga Khan seems to have just been the target of such a personalized attack by the government. I mean he's not been able to visit the

country for more than a decade.

About seven or eight years ago, the authorities told their center in Dushanbe to take down portraits of the Aga Khan.

They gave two reasons. One was that he was not the president, and they were taking respect away from the president. So it's obviously a very personalized battle.

But the other thing was that he was promoting Ismaili Islam, and Sunni Hanafi Islam is the Islam that the government is perhaps least intolerant of, provided it's under government control.

So the two motivations are both very clear in that letter that they wrote to the Ismaili Center in Dushanbe all those years ago, and also in January of this year, they were telling people in Badakhshan to take down portraits of the Aga Khan from their homes.

So very personalized sort of attack on him and everything that he symbolizes, that the Ismaili people have a different faith from the, or they've

got their own faith. They've got their own culture, their own identity, which is separate from the identity of perhaps the majority of the Tajik population.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you. Thank you all for your responses.

I will now turn to my fellow commissioners, and I'll start with Commissioner Ueland.

COMMISSIONER UELAND: Thanks very much.

I appreciate that, and thanks, as well, everybody, for your testimony today. I really appreciate that very much.

Dr. Lemon, a question. As you mentioned in your testimony, Tajikistan is one of the worst perpetrators of transnational repression around the globe.

Could you expand in a little more detail about how cases of transnational repression are related to religious, religion, I should say, or religious freedom, and what justification does the government offer to the international community

when rounding up religious individuals who really haven't committed any crimes?

DR. LEMON: Yes, the latter part of that question, as they do domestically, it's grounded primarily in the criminal code and the laws around extremism and terrorism. They're accused of religious extremism, terrorism in the case of the Pamiris, often inciting ethnic hatred on charges of separatism, calls for violence.

So there are various very loosely defined laws in the country that are abused to effectively lodge criminal charges against these individuals.

And so I think, you know, Tajikistan's transnational, efforts of transnational repression far outweigh its power and its weak state effectively. The state certainly has weaknesses.

And so it's, you know, to have it being able to go to Russia, Russian and Turkish territory, Belarus, elsewhere, and be able to detain individuals and bring them home gives an important signal to those individuals within the community, and there are large diaspora

communities, of course, in Russia.

Over a million Tajik citizens are living in Russia with labor migrants increasingly getting Russian citizenship and holding jewels [?].

So it's a real signal that those communities beyond the borders are not outside of the purview of the state. The state can reach into those foreign jurisdictions and target individuals there.

You can't be safe in those spaces. So these, the religious category of these half of the entries in the dataset, as I said, some of them are more directly related to religion, and so far they're accused of being part of the Salafi movement that's been banned in the country since 2008 or they're accused of being members of the Islamic Renaissance Party that was banned in 2015.

Others are more indirect insofar as they're members of the Pamiri community. You know, there are a range of actions they can take against them including the most extreme is, of course, rendition, bringing them back to the country, but

they also target them with harassment, surveillance, various threats, and, of course, in doing so, Tajikistan is certainly not unique.

There are other countries in the world who are also targeting communities such as Chinese target the Uyghur communities.

Certainly a lot of learning that's taking place between these different regimes, but it certainly overall is supposed to signal to people that they're not safe even if they leave the jurisdiction of Tajikistan, and they can restrict their religious freedom abroad.

Of course, it's most successful in jurisdictions where, especially Russia, where there are similar restrictions on religious freedom, similar acceptance of counter-extremism and terrorism. It's a tool of authoritarian governments.

So once people reach Europe, of course, they're more likely to be safe, but, unfortunately, as I mentioned in my testimony, there have been some unfortunate cases against the advice of the

expert community, the human rights community, of extraditions of citizens who had very good cases for asylum in those countries, and unfortunately they were proven right insofar as when they were arrested upon arrival and now ended up in prison with very long sentences.

So, even, seemingly, when people move to safer democratic jurisdictions, such as the European Union, they're still even at risk of being deported.

MR. CORLEY: Could I just jump in again here? I'm sorry to keep interrupting.

The flip side of this, while the Tajik government feels perfectly free to extend its control and powers anywhere in the world among the Tajik community, at home, it's trying to isolate the country from any religious influences from abroad.

So they're trying to strongly discourage or punish people who try to get religious education abroad. And one of the parts of the crackdown in Badakhshan was to stop people going in future to

the Institute for Ismaili Studies in London, one of their main educational institutions.

People who have had religious education abroad, it's almost impossible now to become an imam. There are specific punishments in the administrative offenses code for wrongdoing in the area of religion by foreigners, foreign organizations.

Foreigners would be deported even for doing things that they ought to have the perfect right to do, just attending or taking an active part in the religious community.

So there is this sort of flip side, while Tajikistan extends its power abroad, they're preventing their own people from having any real meaningful content with foreign co-religionists.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER UELAND: Thank you for that, and, Mr. Safarov, I didn't know if you had a quick comment on these observations?

MR. SAFAROV: No. No. I fully agree with the participants. Thank you.

COMMISSIONER UELAND: Thanks, Vice Chair.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Good. Thank you.

Commissioner Schneck.

COMMISSIONER SCHNECK: I'd like to thank you all for your testimony. It's been very, very concerning, but very revealing, and I believe I've learned a lot.

I have one general question I'd like to pose to everyone, and then if there's time after Commissioner Turkel has asked his question, perhaps I could come back.

The general question that I have is I'm curious as to what extent ethnic differences in the country and regional patterns in the country overlap with religious repression of the sort that we're hearing about here?

And perhaps, Mr. Safarov, you might start, start us on that.

MR. SAFAROV: Like I said, you know, the main thing is problems too deeply rooted in the nature of the government. As I already mentioned, that they are ex-Communists. They have really,

really big hatred to religious political movements and generally for democracy.

So based on this, they start building these policies since they came to the power. So I just, for many of you know, for the history of how the whole, you know, Communist movements and what kind of doctrine they had when they actually started the whole process of, you know, making socialism and Communist movements, which was, number one, against, you know, against any religion.

So that's why when these people after their independence, we had very, very, you know, diverse country where all religions started coming. We had a lot of organization, Christian, Jews, Baha'is, Buddhists and Zoroastrian, so many other organizations. They were registered. They were operating freely. And, then, gradually, you know, over the years, so now nobody. So any, any organization or religions that actually believes in seeking justice against any evil actions are being shut down.

So you basically cannot do anything even if you go practice your religion or any political activity, and even the head of the states on the TV sets, listen, go do your prayers, but do not talk about politics.

If you talk about politics, you will be jailed. He is saying this up-front on TV.

So that's how bad it is. So it just, it just, I don't know how people are. A lot of people actually, that's why we have the highest migration, you know, over a million people leaving Russia, and now we have a lot of people like going beyond Russia because of the crisis. They're going to Europe and other countries.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Anyone else like to comment before we go to Commissioner Turkel?

DR. LEMON: I can. I think to speak to your question, that the situation is dire, I think research points to this being somewhat unevenly enforced. Certainly, of course, it's an authoritarian regime, and there is one rule for the elites, and there is one rule for the rest.

Rahmon is in Saudi Arabia right now for the first summit of GCC leaders with Central Asian leaders, and he's been to Mecca various times, as has his entourage, something that everyday citizens don't have the right to because there's a quota.

So, certainly, this, I think as we've already mentioned, there's tension between the state promoting and celebrating Eid, for example, but in a very restricted way, very top down way where the state controls the narrative, and the state controls the influence and propagates this local vision of Islam that is against any external influence.

So I think there is that tension in the relationship. I think it's also in various areas of the country where we see uneven restrictions on religious freedom. The Pamirs is what we talked about a lot. The Rasht Valley, which was also associated with the opposition, overall area that has long been claimed by the government to be a haven of terrorism and extremism.

What we've seen is this localization

effort where the elites who come from the south of the country have started to fill the local positions with their deputies from that part of the country, and they're repressing the local population in disproportionate ways.

So I think it's dire in general, but it's being unevenly enforced and uses a tool to punish different communities that are maybe trying to gain more autonomy from the center.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Commissioner Turkel.

COMMISSIONER TURKEL: Thank you, Mr. Vice Chair.

First of all, I want to welcome our witnesses to testify today and sharing their knowledge and expertise on these important issues.

And I apologize for not being able to participate from the beginning.

I have three questions. I'm going to take this conversation to a little different direction.

One, what is the source of the hostility towards Pamiris or Ismailis in Tajikistan? The Ismailis are the second-largest branch of Shi'a

Islam. They promote the type of religious belief that is in line with the democratic values, or, if you will, the values that we cherish here in this country, the United States.

So it is perplexing that despite their ethnic origin similarities, the Tajiks in Tajikistan discriminates to the extent persecutes the Ismailis.

If you could comment on the source, whether it is geographical, based on the geography? Religion? Culture? Or political? That's my first question.

The second question is the role of SCO. To me, that's the elephant in the room. The SCO has very specific agenda, anti-democratic, anti-religion, and they have recently added two members, India and Pakistan, which that we also cover.

They have four observers, including Iran and Belarus. Although we don't cover Belarus, we cover Iran. So this organization with approximately covering 60 percent of the Eurasian continent, 40 percent of the world's population,

combined GDP over 20 percent, this is a huge organization that deserves a lot of focus and attention.

So my question is, what role that SCO is playing specifically on religious persecution, whether it be in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan or Tajikistan?

If there is specific things that SCO is promoting under the guise of anti-separatism, terrorism, and extremism, where do they get this policy ideas? Is it from Beijing or from Moscow?

And, finally, on the transnational repression, it was not the first time for Germany being in this situation. Germany deported refugee asylum seekers a few years ago claiming that there was a communications meltdown, essentially their fax machine broke down, which is laughable.

And also, Tajikistan has been kind of used as a hub for refoulement. Turkey deported a Uyghur mother and daughter, a child, a few years ago, and we never heard from them again.

So what kind of consequences that these

nations wittingly/unwittingly engaging in transnational repression?

Thank you.

MR. SAFAROV: So if you don't mind, I'll start with your first question, Commissioner Turkel.

So the source of hatred, as I said, the government blaming for the Tajik-Russian war, a lot of experts say civil war of 1992-1997, so the government wrongly attributes this war to Muslim religion, for all people who practice Muslim, and to Pamiri community, who actively took really active part on all pro-independent movements in Tajikistan.

So this, the first source of hatred comes back from '90s. So that's why they still—and the whole opposition movement stronghold was in Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous area, and that's where all, a lot of people who were prosecuted, and basically government was going door to door looking for Pamiris and people from GBAO, and the people had to flee and they took the refuge in Gorno Badakhshan,

which is a mountainous area on the border between China and Afghanistan.

So that's why, and a lot of people, a lot of opposition did retreat from that area and eventually was very close to Dushanbe seizing the power, but then in 1997 with the whole power-sharing situation happened.

So this all goes to the war between, you know, 1992, Tajik-Russian war, which Russia supported the [?] government versus Tajik. They included different. Tajikistan, it wasn't only Tajiks. There were a lot of other ethnicities who were part of the opposition movement at that time.

COMMISSIONER TURKEL: Thank you.

DR. LEMON: I guess I can come in on the latter two questions. The SCO, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and it now does actually include Iran as a full member. They were elevated to that status at the previous summit last month or earlier this month. So it also includes Iran.

It has, of course, a mandate and various documents and shared documents around fighting the

three evils, of course, a term that comes from Chinese strategic thinking, the three evils of separatism, extremism, and terrorism.

And I think it's certainly practically involved and given the ability of the states that are members that include four of the five Central Asian republics, minus Turkmenistan, to officially go into the jurisdiction of other member states and take people who are accused of extremism, separatism and terrorism and bring them back to those countries.

It also has a mutual recognition clause which means that if the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan is recognized as a terrorist or extremist organization in Tajikistan, then Russia has to reflect that, at least in its practices of allowing them to go to those countries and bring people back.

So I think it certainly is an avenue, an organization that promotes authoritarian exchanges of information and policies. Certainly, I think certainly, yes, they're coming from China. They're

coming from Moscow. I think in Central Asian cases of extremism and terrorism, a lot of their legislation is borrowed from the Russian legislation.

I've done some research on that and it shows 40 percent of the wording from the Tajik and Kyrgyz laws comes directly from the legislation in Russia, but Beijing, certainly obviously that is some of that language to that.

Just briefly, as I know we're running out of time on transnational repression, I think we see some tit-for-tat exchanges. In the case of Turkey, in some cases, there have been, Tajikistan has extradited members of the Gulen movement, people wanted in that country in exchange for those kind of practices, and that is something we have also see with Russia.

So certainly there are mutual exchanges of individuals who are wanted or there are exchanges or concessions in terms of policy.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Mr. Corley, a quick comment?

MR. CORLEY: I would say that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is very sort of, you know, closed sort of system, but I would say it's more of a symptom than a cause of repression.

I would say the governments already mind—they already have the same mindset, same opposition to democracy, human rights, and fundamental freedoms. It's a mutually reinforcing kind of outfit, and it, I out with it. I mean people can copy laws from another country without needing to go through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

I think they already have the content. They can read the media. They can read Russian government websites and texts of laws, and just copy them into words and the depth and the base and translate them, and there you go.

So they don't need the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, but it's mutually reinforcing club of dictators.

VICE CHAIR DAVIE: Thank you.

Unfortunately, we're out of time. I'm sure we could spend hours more on this very

important topic, but I want to thank you, the panelists, Dr. Lemon, Mr. Corley, Mr. Safarov, as well as Special Rapporteur Ghanea, for your testimony today and for your willingness to be with us. We very much appreciate that.

Thank my fellow commissioners, particularly our chair, Rabbi Cooper, who had to depart for another meeting, and I want to thank the staff of USCIRF for their work in putting this hearing together.

Thank you, all, and we appreciate everyone being with us today. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 12:01 p.m., ET, the hearing was adjourned.]