

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING ON PROTECTING HOUSES OF WORSHIP
AND HOLY SITES

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

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Tony Perkins, Chair
Gayle Manchin, Vice Chair
Nadine Maenza, Vice Chair
Gary L. Bauer

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR PERKINS: Good afternoon and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing on "Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites."

I would like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us today to offer their expertise and their recommendations. We will have three panels for a total of four witnesses that will speak to us today.

Also I want to thank Senator Coons and his office for securing this hearing room for us today.

As many of you are aware, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent bipartisan U.S. government commission that was created in 1998 via the International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission monitors universal rights to freedom of religion or belief abroad using international standards to do so and makes policy recommendations to Congress, the President, and the Secretary of State.

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

Houses of worship and religious sites should be sanctuaries where worshippers feel free to practice their faith. Under international law, this has been recognized, and it is seen as the ability of religious communities to establish and maintain houses of worship as being essential to religious freedom, as this fundamental freedom includes the right to manifest religion or belief through worship in community with others.

To protect these rights, states must ensure that religious places--that's sites, shrines, and other symbols--are fully respected and protected, including when vulnerable to desecration or destruction.

Despite the protection afforded under international law, violent attacks on houses of worship are increasingly occurring globally, turning these sacred and peaceful spaces into unimaginable sites of bloodshed. Recently, massacres directed at worshippers in Sri Lanka, New

Zealand, and just two weeks ago in Germany, made global headlines. Similar attacks directed at houses of worship have occurred across the world in countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Nigeria.

The attack on the synagogue in Germany during Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, is another sobering example of the reemergence of anti-Semitism around the world. The gunman chose to attack on this high holy day knowing that the number of people in the building would be higher than usual.

He repeatedly shot at the door's lock and set off an explosive device, but thankfully was unable to breach the building due to enhanced security measures that the synagogue recently installed. And that is the reason we are gathered here today, is how do we make other houses of worship and religious sites hardened targets for those that would destroy these places of worship?

In addition to houses of worship, different types of buildings and properties that

are significant to religious communities, such as cemeteries, monasteries, or community centers, have also been targeted. Gravestones of Jewish people have been defaced with swastikas. Buddhist educational centers have been bulldozed. Crosses have been torched. No faith is immune from this violence.

Attacks on houses of worship are reprehensible, as they aim to destroy the place of worship precisely for its religious significance, cause harm to unique religious groups, and instill fear in those who worship there. The devastating impacts of these attacks extend far beyond those directly affected by these acts of violence, sending shockwaves through faith communities who fear that their own congregation may be the next target.

Today, as I mentioned, we are focusing on identifying how the United States and the international community can respond to this global uptick in violence targeting houses of worship to ensure the safety of those gathering to worship

God.

Specifically, we will evaluate efforts to ensure that houses of worship are hard, not soft, targets.

USCIRF in its 2019 Annual Report recommended that the United States government implement programs to train and equip local officials and communities to protect places of worship and other holy sites, especially in countries where such sites face a high risk of attack. We will explore the implementation of this recommendation along with highlighting other U.S. programs, intergovernmental initiatives, interfaith efforts, and related policy recommendations that aim to protect the peacefulness of holy places.

I will now turn to my colleague, Vice Chair Gayle Manchin, to further explain an array of threats facing houses of worship.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you very much, Chair Perkins. I also would like to join in welcoming all of you to today's hearing.

Non-state actors, including terrorist

organizations, are often responsible for the vicious attacks that Chair Perkins has been highlighting. Branches of ISIS have claimed responsibility for the killing of worshippers in their place of worship in countries such as Egypt, Iraq and Syria.

In the worst such incident, in Egypt, in November 2017, ISIS fighters bombed a mosque in North Sinai and then fires on the mostly Sufi Muslim worshippers as they fled the carnage, killing 311 and injuring over 120.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram's campaign of mass terror has similarly included countless attacks on churches and mosques. These attacks are particularly savage, aiming to decimate the sanctuary of houses of worship and instill widespread terror.

These kinds of attacks also impact the victims in unimaginable ways. As explained by Yamini Ravindran, one of the victims of the terrorist bombings on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka that spoke at the State Department's Ministerial to

Advance Religious Freedom this past summer, the impact of the attack has left the Christian community "with a fear psychosis like never before."

At the Ministerial, Ravindran told the story of a six-year-old girl that suffered severe injuries that left her blind. The girl lost both of her parents in the attack and now lives with her grandmother. She is too young to begin to understand what happened and repeatedly asked her grandmother where her parents are and why it is so dark?

How do you answer questions like this or console a child in this situation? Many of the victims of Sri Lanka, like this little girl and her grandmother, are left broken, forced to face inconceivable questions.

Vigilante mobs have also targeted places of worship to harm specific religious communities. For example, in Pakistan, in May 2018, a mob destroyed a 100-year old Ahmadiyya mosque in the city of Punjab. The mob was instigated in part by

a law that permits the imprisonment of Ahmadi Muslims who call their house of worship a mosque. Mobs in Sindh Province of Pakistan also attacked and vandalized Hindu temples after a Hindu principal was accused of blasphemy in September 2019.

Alongside these horrific attacks on houses of worship, we also are deeply troubled and concerned about the less overt tactics that threaten them. Sometimes these are more scary-- the overt actions. States often employ video techniques and violent techniques as part of a wider campaign to restrict and control religious freedom.

One technique we frequently see imposed by states, for instance, is the impermissible seizure of places of worship or other holy sites belonging to particular religious communities. Without a place of worship, a religious group's ability to manifest its religion or belief is often extinguished.

For example, in May this year, Iranian

intelligence agents changed the locks to 100-year-old Assyrian Presbyterian Church in Tabriz, Iran, and removed the cross from the building. Although the cross was eventually restored, the congregation is still not permitted to worship in this church.

Other alarming tactics we have observed are the malicious surveillance of holy sites to intimidate worshippers, the misuse of registration procedures to target the houses of worship of specific religious communities, and the physical destruction or demolition of holy sites and other forms of religious and cultural heritage, specifically because of their religious significance.

I would like to invite you all to take a copy of USCIRF's factsheet on protecting houses of worship, just released today, which further outlines the type of assaults on houses of worship and provides illustrative examples of these attacks that have occurred in 2019.

I also want to thank the journalists at the U.S. Agency for Global Media, who are with us

today, for their help in raising awareness of our Religious Prisoners of Conscience. You can see and view some of the excellent editorials that they have produced on the RPOC pages of the USCIRF website.

Commissioner Nadine Maenza will now turn to the U.S. and international efforts to combat these very violent and restrictive tactics.

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: Thank you very much, Commissioner Manchin.

In light of the myriad of threats to houses of worship outlined by my fellow commissioners, worshippers of every religion are in urgent need of international support to safeguard their protection in their places of worship.

While the momentum to address these issues is increasing, we must ensure that the United States is effectively doing its part to support protection measures and coordinating with international efforts.

Houses of worship and other holy sites are representative of the history, social fabric and

tradition of religious communities. The destruction of such sites and the loss of their associated spiritual significance often strikes the very heart of those who practice their faith or find religious meaning there.

In response to the increasing number of attacks on religious sites, President Trump announced last month that the United States would dedicate an additional 25 million to protect religious sites and relics. This additional allotment of funds will be essential for expanding programs that train security forces overseas to provide the protection needed to ensure that religious sites are not soft targets and that worshippers can peacefully practice their faith without fear.

To ensure the preservation of religious and related cultural heritage, the United States government has sponsored several initiatives that support its protection. Notably, the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation contributes towards post-conflict and post-disaster recovery efforts.

Since 2001, the program has awarded \$74 million for close to 1,000 projects in more than 125 countries, including many projects that preserve and restore religiously significant buildings and objects.

Just this month, the first regional conference on Cultural Heritage Protection for Religious Communities was held in Morocco to further explore opportunities to protect religious sites in the Sahel region.

We look forward to hearing more from Ambassador Brownback regarding these programs and other U.S. government initiatives.

Alongside these initiatives, there are several noteworthy intergovernmental and interfaith efforts that strive to protect houses of worship. In the hopes of guaranteeing the sanctity of religious sites, the High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilization developed a Plan of Action to safeguard religious sites that provide concrete recommendations to support countries in their efforts to ensure the safety of

religious places and worshippers.

Search for the Common Ground and a coalition of NGOs has also developed the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites that aims to improve the protection of holy sites and promote inter-religious reconciliation. We will hear more about these two initiatives today and consider opportunities for the United States to contribute to their implementation.

On behalf of USCIRF, I look forward to hearing the recommendations from our witnesses about what the U.S. and the international community can do better to help protect houses of worship.

Thank you, and I will now turn the floor back to Chair Perkins.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Maenza.

We now turn to our first witness who, in large part, is responsible for the creation of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, back when he was a member of Congress and then serving as a senator.

In fact, he created his own position that he now holds as Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and we are grateful for the work that he does, as well as the Secretary of State, who I spoke with earlier today, who has made this a top priority in foreign policy as to advance international religious freedom.

So, Ambassador, thank you for being here today. We look forward to your remarks.

MR. BROWNBACK: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. A pleasure to join you and my fellow commissioners on this topic. I'm delighted that you're holding it on "Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites."

It's a very timely hearing. There is an ongoing worldwide crisis where religious diversity is under assault where government and non-state actors attack individuals and communities because simply their beliefs. And oftentimes those same actors systematically work to destroy symbols of those cultures and faiths.

As the State Department's Ambassador at

Large for International Religious Freedom, I'm constantly pressing governments to stop persecuting religious groups they deem a threat to their rule, to simply allow people to practice their faith freely.

We've been pushing on many different governments, recently really pushing hard about what China is doing in their war on faith against Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Falun Gong. In addition, I focus on how terrorists and other non-state actors, including, but not limited to, ISIS and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Boko Haram, have been among the worst abusers of religious minority communities in recent years. Terrorist violence against religious minorities threatens people of all faiths and people of no faith.

They threaten Muslims and Buddhists, Christians and Jews, Yazidis and Bahais, Hindus and Sikhs, converts and those who don't hold any beliefs.

To give a few examples, in China, the government has pushed thousands of Tibetan monks

and nuns out of their homes and bulldozed their monasteries. In 2017, the Chinese government evicted approximately 9,000 monks and nuns from the Larung Gar Institute of Tibetan Buddhism and demolished an estimated 4,000 residences there.

The same year authorities destroyed at least 2,000 residences and evicted approximately 2,500 monks and nuns at Yachen Gar Institute of Tibetan Buddhism.

We're also deeply concerned by press reports and satellite imagery analysis that found in just the past two years dozens of Uighur cemeteries and mosques have been destroyed in Xinjiang. This along with an untold number of house churches and churches that have been destroyed throughout China.

In the face of these challenges, United States is responding both in principle and action, working rigorously to help advance the right of all people worldwide to practice their faith. As you noted, Secretary Pompeo convened two ministerial summits to engage the international community about

how to promote and protect religious freedom for all.

These were unprecedented--one had not been held before, but that alone two in a row. This year's Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom reaffirmed international commitments to promote religious freedom and urged progress towards concrete outcomes that can produce durable and positive change.

We had a broad range of stakeholders, including over a hundred governments, international organizations, and more than a thousand members of civil society organizations, including religious leaders, all that attended. At the end of this year's ministerial, we released a statement on protecting places of worship, and I was glad to see more than 45 countries signed it as a full endorsement.

We're doing more than issuing just statements. We also are convening regional actors to discuss challenges and opportunities to protect religious sites. As was noted by the commissioner,

launched earlier this month with our Moroccan partners the first ever regional conference on Protecting Cultural Heritage of Religious Communities. This we did in Rabat, Morocco.

This conference was co-sponsored by USAID, who did a fabulous job with it, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Morocco. It brought together government officials, religious leaders, heritage experts and NGO activists to discuss these tangible ways to restore cultural and religious sites.

And we do this because they're important to our shared history. They're critical for building respect among diverse communities and essential to cultivating peace.

And then finally I want to mention the historic event on religious freedom that was hosted by President Trump at the United Nations in September. This was the first ever head-of-state level event at the UN focused on religious freedom. Hard to believe, but it was and it is a ground-breaking event. At the event, President Trump announced, as you noted, an additional \$25 million

to protect religious freedom and religious sites and relics.

These new funds will be used to prevent the intentional destruction of religious sites and relics, and we're hopeful it will contribute to meaningful restoration of key cultural heritage sites in places of worship around the world. We were honored that the Secretary General of the United Nations, Secretary Guterres, participated in the event. We are grateful for his commitment to religious freedom and welcome the initiatives of the UN Alliance of Civilizations.

We say thank you to His Excellency Miguel Moratinos for joining us today to talk about that important work. He and I met earlier today and had a fabulous meeting, and I think there are many things we can do together.

We envision this new funding helping to rebuild areas that have been attacked and damaged by foes of religious freedom. We hope that these funds will also be used to help communities learn best practices to protecting people of faith as

they worship, and we also hope that by doing so, we can usher in a new time of respect for people of all faiths all over the world.

We know that restoring and protecting these sites can even stimulate the local economy for growth and provide places of tourist sites.

One of my favorite moments of the ministerial this past July was our opening event. We heard testimony from three representatives of religious communities who had recently been attacked. We heard accounts from a survivor of a mosque attack in New Zealand. We heard from the rabbi from the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, and from an advocate of the Christian communities in Sri Lanka that followed their horrendous Easter bombings there last April.

Now the overwhelming feeling of that opening segment was not one of sadness. But it was one of hope. And today even amidst the challenges, we should have hope that we can help these communities encourage their faith and even help them rebuild back up.

We should be encouraging and building on that hope. Imagine what we could do if we restore the Tomb of Jonah, for instance, in Northern Iraq. That was one that was widely broadcast by ISIS when they destroyed it. They filmed it and they put it on the Internet and showed it to the whole world, we destroyed this site, as something that they were very proud that they had one.

Well, imagine if we say to the world's terrorist community you are bent on destruction, but we are going to rebuild. We will rebuild this site. We will make it more protected so that this will not happen again, to thwart that activity of the terrorists to try to destroy something of such significance and importance, and we can and we should do these things.

I've been in dilapidated churches, run down during the Soviet era. Their restoration would also be the restoration of souls in that community.

I've seen pictures of religious buildings in occupied territories that are now being used as

hay barns. Humanity will be better off if they are restored and protected and honored.

We have much to do. We have a moment, I believe, where there's a lot of interest in the world community of doing this. I've talked about these protection of religious heritage sites with many world leaders. They're very interested in doing this. I think if we can find the right way to do this in an inclusive engaging manner, I think we're going to find a lot of support around the world. I think we're going to find private funding that would come on board to help this as well as the government figures a way to, okay, these are key sites, they ought to be rebuilt, that we can use some of these ways, even crowdsource funding in some of them.

We've got some government money that we put forward, but it would honestly be my hope that that's the small end of it, that there would be a lot more private funds that would come in and help the restoration of these because they do restore the soul. They restore the soul of a community,

and I think they can be a great thing that we can provide to humanity and to our heritage.

So thank you for this timely hearing, and I look forward to your questions and anything I can do to be helpful on this topic.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Ambassador Brownback.

I'll turn to my colleagues if there's a question from one of our commissioners. Mr. Bauer.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Ambassador Brownback, eloquent as always. Thank you very much.

I wonder if you've had time with everything else you're dealing with to think about what I think is a little bit of a paradox in this issue? That is the basic religious liberty that all people should be able to have is to seek and worship God as they see fit.

But what do we do when one of the things that may be driving mobs to attack other people who are worshipping may very well be that that mob has just heard a message in another house of worship that God would be happy if they attacked the

infidel, which is the other set of believers that come under attack?

How do we find out that a house of worship may be engaged in teaching something other than adoration and love for God, but, in fact, is promoting the hatred that results in the mobs?

MR. BROWNBACK: That's a key question that I hear leaders all over the world struggling with, commissioner. I hear this question raised a lot in a number of countries that they then will confront this. For us, our standard is religious freedom for everybody everywhere all the time, and that you practice your faith peacefully is the other piece of that, that this is a peaceful practice, practice of the faith that's protected.

And I think that's one of the things that we've got to continue to emphasize, that it is a peaceful practice of the faith. That is the protected practice of the faith. It's not, it's not a mob violence. It's not hate and killing somebody else. It's the peaceful practice that is protected.

And the others, if you're going to conduct that type of activity, then you're going to be subject to the full extent of the law for what you have done, for the violence and for the destruction that you have done. And these are things as a former governor that I wrestled with where you had people that attacked houses of worship, and we made in every case that we are going to fully prosecute the individuals that did this act, in whatever way they did it. If it was destruction of the place, if it was an attack on an individual, you're going to be prosecuted to the full extent of the law no matter what you were thinking you were doing at the time.

The other thing that I honestly believe that one of the things we've got to do a lot more in amongst the faith community, and I really hope we can get this right, is not just teach tolerance of other faiths but teach respect.

This is the common human search for God that you're about, and we should have a respect for that. Now you may search one way and I may search

another way, but I respect the search or, as Mother Teresa would put it, "I love all faiths; I'm in love with my own."

[Laughter.]

MR. BROWNBACK: She loved all of them because it's the search for God, and I think we've really got to up our standard of respect for other faiths and not just tolerance.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Thank you, Ambassador.

CHAIR PERKINS: Commissioner Maenza.

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: Yes, thank you so much again for coming and your commitment to freedom of belief and religion and also your commitment to houses of worship and cultural sites. We know that communities around the world appreciate your advocacy.

I was curious about the funding for the State Department's programs to ensure the protection of houses of worship. Is there gaps in funding? How does that program look from your perspective?

MR. BROWNBACk: If I'm understanding right, the two areas that we're looking at here, one is this \$25 million, the new funds that the President has put forward, which I'm very excited about. This is the first time that this has been tried this way.

It's been in a way piloted already by a number of ambassadors that one of you mentioned, these cultural sites, the Ambassador's Cultural Heritage Site Fund, and I've been to a number of embassies around the world. They've taken me to a place that the Ambassador's Fund has been used, and many of them are religious heritage sites, and it's a matter of great pride for that country that the site has been renovated and protected.

That's about 75 million, I think, that somebody said here, and I don't, I think that's an accurate number as well. I look at this as a chance to build on that.

But again I honestly hope that this is the small end of the funding.

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: Okay.

MR. BROWNBACK: That the bigger end of it is us being able to figure out how do you source private funding, how do you crowdsource on something like--how could we identify key sites that ought to be rebuilt, and then the fund that's a legitimate fund, and not one that's going to go into somebody's pocket somewhere and that people can't trust, but is a legitimate site to rebuild this religious heritage site and see if we could really attract a great deal of capital into doing that? That would be my hope because I think we can access far more funds.

CHAIR PERKINS: Commissioner Manchin.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Ambassador Brownback, one of the things that we find very concerning when we visit countries and we speak with the ministerial leaders and government officials, and particularly countries that are more on a watch list so they are doing and saying a lot of the right things, but it's the covert actions that are going on that are being used to intimidate minority religions or refusing registration or refusing to

allow a place of worship to be built but done sort of under the radar.

So as commissioners--they don't, they certainly don't reach that height of egregious, you know, behavior like you would see in China, but yet it's concerning, and it's hard to say to these countries, pat them on the back, which is what they really want us to do when we know that there are still these activities and many times it's being accepted by the government. They're just sort of looking the other way.

So do you have any recommendations, Ambassador, on how we, on how we deal with these situations?

MR. BROWNBACK: Two things I think would be really important. One is I think we need to keep pushing educational systems in these countries to not denigrate religious minorities because you see that seeping into a lot of educational material in some places.

And I think we've really go to draw a hard line on if you're denigrating a religious minority

in your educational materials, this is bad. This is the way you're training your future generation. It's going to come back and haunt the world, what you are doing--number one.

Number two, I think it's really time for a group of nations that are committed to religious freedom to establish some protocols on basic religious freedom. We've done this--apparently some of the people in the human trafficking space have established just some basic protocols, and I would like to see this Alliance on International Religious Freedom that the President has announced that we're putting together that we hope to put, put the first countries together on this, that some of the original nations that really care about religious freedom would establish some international protocols like no blasphemy laws, that these tend aggressively towards communal violence.

You can't lock up people for being a peaceful minority religion. That you have to protect people's peaceful practice of their faith.

Just some basic protocols that would be established by an international group to put forward so that when you go into a country that's--I know exactly what you're talking about--I mean they want to say, hey, look at all the good things we're doing, and some of it is, but a lot of it is they're doing things--they're not registering, like you say, they won't register churches or houses of worship or they'll take five years to do it or, you know, it's a way to not register them but not be aggressively open about it. It's just hidden religious persecution.

That we put those protocols out there so that we can say now this is what it means to have your basic religious freedom standards in a nation, but it needs to be an international standing putting forward on it. The United States needs to be a key part of it because we care so much about this right, but it does need to have an international imprimatur, I think, for us to really effectively push it.

CHAIR PERKINS: Any further questions from

the commissioners? Ambassador Brownback, thank you so much for joining us today.

MR. BROWNBACK: Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: We will now transition to our second panel. Mr. Miguel Moratinos is the United Nations Under Secretary General holding the post of the High Representative of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations. He's held that post since January of this year.

Mr. Moratinos has committed his professional and political career to international relationships and development cooperation, notably as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Spain from 2004 to 2010.

Between 1987 and 2004, he served as Deputy Director General for Northern Africa, Director for the Institute of Cooperation with the Arab World, Director General of Foreign Policy for Africa and the Middle East, Ambassador of Spain to Israel, and the EU Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process.

As the top diplomat in Spain, he

represented his country presiding over the UN Security Council in 2004, holding the chairmanships-in-office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe, and the Council of the European Union.

Mr. Moratinos succeeded in fostering the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

And he's here to solve all the world's problems today.

[Laughter.]

CHAIR PERKINS: And we are grateful that he is with us. Welcome.

MR. MORATINOS: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Honorable Tony Perkins, Madam Vice Chairs, Madam Gayle Manchin and Madam Nadine, Commissioner Mr. Bauer, dear witnesses, ladies and gentlemen, let me first convey my gratitude, my privilege, to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom for inviting me to this hearing. For me, it means a lot, a special moment for my career, a special moment for my responsibility, and

gives me the opportunity to present and discuss with you what is today one of my mandates as High Representative of United Nations Alliance of Civilizations.

When I was preparing this address to this hearing, I discovered that the Commission, your commission, was established in 1998. What a vision. Can you imagine in 1998 that the U.S. Congress, yourself, Ambassador Brownback, decide to introduce as a committee the freedom of religion, international freedom of religion.

The religion dimension in politics was not that much taken into account, and you were pioneers. So I have to commend your commission because I think it is the one who can understand what is today an urgent task for all of us.

While the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations has been established in 2005, so next year we'll have 15 years. So in certain extent, we came a bit later than you, but at the same time, we were also pioneers in the UN system because we were aware of the need to address the multicultural

challenge, multi-religion challenge, and multi-civilization challenge.

So we have certain similarities in our task, and that for me is really important to address to your important commission.

The Alliance of Civilizations is a political tool for preventive diplomacy through promotion of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue as regards the UN Alliance of Civilizations, and today, of course, the mission of today, the topic of today that brings us together this afternoon, is to listen and to try to understand the need, how we are going to serve God, religious sites in the international community.

Well, reading also your concept paper and listening to you, Mr. Perkins, today to introduce the issue, I was closing my eyes and I was reading myself the preamble of our Action Plan. The same concern, the same objective, the same instruments, we are on the same board. And that's the reason we have to work together.

When we have been mandated by the

Secretary General Antonio Guterres to draw this plan, to establish this plan, we engaged in an inclusive and consultative process with governments, religious leaders, faith-based organizations and other relevant stakeholders to listen carefully to their ideas and inputs for the plan.

It was a quite challenging endeavor. We travel, we meet, we engage, we debate. It was quite enriching experience but at the same time quite sensitive.

As a result of these consultations and my own reflections, it was clear to me that the Plan had to be action-oriented, an action-oriented document, containing clear recommendations for all relevant stakeholders to work better individually and jointly in the multi-faceted approach to safeguard religious sites.

I am pleased to inform you that the Plan of Action to safeguard religious sites was officially launched by the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to Member States on the 12th of

September in New York this year, and it has received positive feedback.

In general, everybody agreeing. In general, everybody's support, and we have now to enter what for me is the most challenging activity, is to implement it.

So as we have shared with you the Plan, let me present to you the main highlights of the Plan and focusing in particular on some recommendations addressed to Member States which can be especially relevant in the context of this hearing.

The Plan is anchored in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, mainly on Article 18, of course, a relevant United Nations resolution, and rooted in the following guiding principles, what we say, two Rs, two Ds, three Ss.

Two Rs: respect for all people; responsibility to build bridges of mutual understanding and cooperation.

Two Ds: diversity to accept and respect differences among human beings; dialogue as a tool

to better communicate and engage with one another.

And three Ss: solidarity to support one another, particularly in times of sorrow or trouble; standing together as one to respond with unity to attempts to divide us; and staying together as one to ensure that unity in response to attacks against religious sites is sustained and reinforced over time.

The plan is structured in two sections: on prevention and preparedness and response.

The section on prevention stresses the role of Member States, religious leaders, faith-based organizations, civil society, youth, women, local communities and parliaments--in this case the U.S. Congress--as the way that they can really facilitate and help us to propose legislative regulation in order to counter violent extremism and how to contribute to public debate and advocacy related to safeguard of religious sites.

Two key components have this prevention section:

The first one is education. As Ambassador

Brownback was mentioning, and I think most of your members of the Commission have a long experience. You know Mrs. Manchin has a long interest in education. If we don't touch education, I think we will not be able to prepare the new generation for the future. Education programs are, of course, essential.

The second element in prevention is addressing what we call now hate speech and online hate speech, which may be of special interest to some also of your commissioners.

We have a debate about the church call for action and how we can really work together with social networks. That has to be done. I think it is a common responsibility of all of us to really work on that.

Among the recommendations on prevention addressed to the United Nations system, states, religious leaders, civil society and online providers, I would like to briefly highlight some recommendations addressed to states:

First, engage with religious leaders to

promote respect and mutual understanding through interfaith activities;

Secondly, facilitate the involvement of civil society in strategies and programs to prevent violent extremism through different initiatives and establish benchmarks to measure progress;

Third, mainstream gender in plans and actions to prevent violent extremism.

But I think we also have to be aware that religious sites are especially vulnerable to attacks due to their accessibility and the fact that there are usually limited security measures in place. We had a long discussion with some religious leaders and communities. Some of them say we don't need security; we prefer to live in this kind of environment of harmony and peace. We don't need to see security bodies, police, but at the end of the discussion, they said, well, but we need protection.

So we came to the conclusion that something on the security side has to be totally included. For that, I think we have to really work

with them with analysis of potential threats, risk assessments to adapt policies to the evolving nature of threats, information sharing at top level of government, as well as with religious leaders.

The Plan encourages Member States to: develop a strategy to strengthen national plans to address early warning system, emergency response, crisis management, security and resilience.

We have also to consider establishing, where appropriate, in accordance with national legislation and procedures, specialized units in central and local administrations to safeguard religious sites.

And finally, develop a sustained relationship between government and religious leaders to build trust and help ensure information sharing.

Distinguished members of the Commission, the success of the Plan is to be measured by the implementation of its recommendations. This is why I am engaged with all relevant actors to make progress on the following issues:

We will prepare and launch what we call a Global Communication Campaign. I am working with relevant colleagues in the United Nations system to develop a campaign to foster mutual respect and understanding. Terrorist attacks seek to divide us. A campaign to foster unity and solidarity can be a powerful tool to counteract those messages.

Secondly, mapping of religious sites. Again, I am working with the relevant United Nations colleagues, UNITEL [ph], UNOCT, and with Google, in order to really produce an online interactive tool to map all the religious sites all around the world.

People have told me it's a huge endeavor, but I think we can produce and have an impact to demonstrate to the international public opinion that spirituality is back, that we live in a complex world where we cannot neglect the religious dimension of our societies.

So with this mapping, we will demonstrate that there are not only some churches here, some synagogues there, some temples there, no. But the

whole world has this need for safety in worship.

And then, thirdly, in the context of the future program of protection--sorry--and thirdly, we will have to convene with the Secretary General in 2020 a global conference to bring together Member States, political figures, religious leaders, faith-based organizations, media and civil society to spearhead political support for specific actions to take the Plan forward.

I think apart of the ministerial meeting that have taken place in Washington, D.C. the last two years, the other meeting of religious leaders was religious leaders alone. We need that everybody has to shoulder responsibility. So we have to gather all of them. We have to have political figures, we have to have religious leaders, we have to have social media, we have to have civil society, we have to have private sector in order that this collective responsibility can produce a difference.

In this context, the future Global Program also of the Director General for United Nations

Counter-Terrorism have offered us a specific global program for vulnerable sites, and religious sites are vulnerable.

So Mr. Voronkov, Vladimir Voronkov, has agreed to put into the Alliance of Civilizations the possibility to have operational task force in order that when the countries and nations need the support in order to protect their religious sites, we can call to them and have certain specific support.

We have also tried to start some specific pilot case, and I'm now engaged with the government of Burkina Faso in order to try to have a pilot case scenario, how we can put an end to the permanent successful attacks that Burkina Faso is facing in their recent times.

Let me finish my intervention by highlighting two areas in which I think that the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and United States can work together.

This morning we had a very fruitful meeting with Ambassador Brownback. We identified

certain areas that we can work together, but I have to tell to you, to the Commission too, to this hearing, that the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations is ready to support International Religious Freedom Alliance that was launched by Secretary of State Mr. Pompeo. It was of course launched and supported by President Trump, and I think at the same time, we want to work with them in certain areas that can produce certain I would say results for the future.

I think we have also the possibility to work with the Appeal of Conscience of Rabbi Schneier that is preparing a conference on education that will help advance implementation of the Plan. We look forward to support of the U.S. administration in this important endeavor.

So thank you again for this opportunity. Thank you for giving me this privilege to share with you my ideas and my commitment, and thank you again for having this important idea in 1998 to bring to this House and to bring to the foreign policy of the United States the importance of

religion and cultural affairs.

Thank you very much.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Your Excellency. Appreciate you being here today.

Any of the commissioners have questions? Mr. Bauer.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: I hope my question is not unfair, but you have such a long history of working on this issue as well as being in the diplomatic world and understanding diplomacy and so forth so I would just like to get any thoughts you might have on it.

Everybody notices, I think, that we're dealing right now, the world is dealing with a rising communist China, very powerful, getting more powerful economically and militarily, and as Ambassador Brownback referenced, the current government of China is an equal opportunity oppressor of religion. It's declared war essentially on all religious faiths.

We found out some months ago that when the ministerial happened, the Second Annual Ministerial

happened here, now only did China not come, which was not surprising, but what was surprising is that we found out they were contacting other governments around the world, that governments of countries they had lent money to, and was telling those governments they better not come to the United States to discuss religious liberty.

And I'm just wondering, you seem like an optimistic man and there's a great deal of optimism and progress being made, but how concerned are you that there's a very powerful country that is presenting quite a different model to the world of how religion should be treated compared to the model that I think you and all the commissioners would agree on?

MR. MORATINOS: Thank you. Thank you very much, commissioner.

You can imagine, I'm a United Nations High Representative so I try to represent all Member States, understand them, and my tool is to dialogue. Of course, identify the challenge, identify the problem, and then put my capacity as

not only a diplomat but as a responsibility of the United Nations to move forward.

And, of course, China is a member of the Group of Friends of United Nations Alliance of Civilizations. I have to say it's been now with this new project that is One Belt, One Road, that included in this prospect the dialogue among civilizations and religion. So it's part of the same philosophy.

The question, how we implement that? So, of course, I will have a dialogue with them. I will try to identify what are the problems, and always I will try, as I have been always in my political career and my professional career, to try to solve problems through dialogue and peaceful means.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Commissioner Maenza.

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: Yes, thank you so much for explaining to us your plan and your enthusiasm for your work. It really does touch us, that we're both really fighting for the same things.

I was curious as to the kind of feedback you have received from other countries to this plan.

MR. MORATINOS: Sorry?

VICE CHAIR MAENZA: The feedback you have received from other countries or other states?

MR. MORATINOS: I think, in general, I have to say I'm quite satisfied because during this, of course, when you have the Plan, you present the Plan, it's the result of in this case many months of work, but if we were in the old diplomacy, the Secretary General will say make a plan, I will have one year to make a plan, but today in politics, when Secretary General told me in 2020 March, you have to have a plan, I knew that the plan had to be done before the General Assembly in September.

And so we had only three, four months to discuss, to get the feedback of everybody, and to get everybody on board. And politics is difficult, but you know better than I that religion is even more sensitive because I mean how to address with

the Jewish community, what kind of rabbi? So how we address with the Muslim community, who do we address? The Catholic Church, you have the, you know, the Vatican, and they can give you feedback. But others, you have to find who is the right person to give you the right answer. What is the concern of everybody?

So it was a very enriching exercise. So when we finalized, we were satisfied because we have embraced and taken into account many comments. So when we presented that, I think the result was that there was a positive response.

I didn't hear any negativity. We presented to Member States. I didn't feel any I mean concern. There was some question of language. There was maybe the concern of certain countries that they want to have the upper hand to say this religious site protection belongs to the national sovereignty so the state will have the primary responsibility to exert these responsibilities.

But apart from that, I found there was, well, very positive. And then secondly, very

quickly, that's in terms of states. But in terms of religious leaders, for the first time, and I've been working with religious leaders many years before that, I found for the first time that, I mean when Mr. Bauer presented the question to Mr. Brownback before, I found the religious leaders more than ever ready to work together.

For the first time, they feel they are under attack whether you are Jewish, or Buddhist, or Christian. So the first time they are ready to put some common agenda. It's not only to express solidarity after the day, the black day of an attack; it's to start to work in a prevention and having a common agenda together, and that is something that is taking shape, and we should try to accompany that.

They are now very active, and I think we can help them if we formulate certain recommendations, certain policies that can benefit them.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Your Excellency.

You said you had two Rs, two Ds, three Ss.
I have one Q.

[Laughter.]

CHAIR PERKINS: One question for you. As you look at the implementation of this plan, what is the largest challenge you think you have in the implementation, and how might we help?

MR. MORATINOS: Well, first, as I told you, awareness of the public opinion. So when we launched the Global Communication Plan from the children at school to secondary school to the education level to the society, they have to be aware that we are talking about an important essential right of our society. So on the communication tool, we need it.

Secondly, we need also that each state, you already, I mean United States, you are one of the most advanced, and your model could be an example. You have a fund. No. I'm not asking you to fund because I will fund myself the fund for other countries. But I mean the idea of the fund is important to provide them some element that they

can really in countries like the Sahel, imagine, I'm going to challenge myself, my team to go to Burkina Faso.

I know it's going to be a mess at the beginning, but we have to start. We have to demonstrate that we can be of help, and so for that, we need some programs have to combine all the capacities in order that we can succeed.

And, then, well, I think the final requirement I will ask you is really to continue your work. I mean you are doing fantastic work. You are the only one. Tell your colleagues in the parliamentary, diplomacy, to do what you are doing. I have now, I will go to Spain, my country, I will tell the Spanish Congress do like the Americans. Create this commission.

So we don't, while they don't have several commissions similar in other parliamentarians, and that will help you. It will help me, of course, to really implement the national strategy.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: This is almost a rhetorical question, but you talked about people in

countries saying they don't like security and forces, and yet they want protection.

And so, two things: are we finding that having security around churches is protecting them from violence? And just the extension of that, is that the new normal? In order to worship peacefully around the world, is it going to call for protection so that when people go to church, they're going to--the new normal will be security around the churches?

MR. MORATINOS: I think we have to find the right balance. I mean everybody--I mean you go to church or you go to mosque or you go to synagogue, it's a special moment of each person when you find yourself; no?

You have this spiritual, you know, moment of your personal life. And for that you need to sense that you are in security. So I think we have to break the sense that you cannot take security measures because that breaks the atmosphere. While I remember long time ago when we go to the airport, you don't have security, and then suddenly it

becomes familiar.

And when I was in discussion with the Catholic Church responsibility, they tell me, no, we don't like to have, but in some cathedrals, you have, and they are in the back, and it's normal. That can happen. So we have to really tell them to really decide by themselves how they would get these protection measures.

And we have to work with the communities. That's the reason we present these units at local community level. That means the people of the churches are responsible; the local police, the local NGOs, can work together to create an environment that they can go to church or to worship in the sense of safety and peace.

I mean I think we have to make peaceful worship. That is the most important. And so I think, as you said to me, we have to find and strike the right balance; no? But you, the United States, you have a lot of experience on that. It has been, of course, it's an ongoing process, but I mean the model could be an inspiration for us for

the future.

But I think the sense of protection from my point of view, right, I think it's my responsibility as High Representative. I could say, well, no, we live in a harmonious world, don't care, God will protect us, okay, that would be--no, my responsibility is to tell no. We have to protect you. You know that you can exert your right and if you exert your right, then you'll be peaceful and you'll be in harmony with yourself.

CHAIR PERKINS: Your Excellency, thank you very much for being with us today. We're grateful for you appearing before us.

MR. MORATINOS: Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: We'll now transition to our third and final panel. I will introduce our two panelists, and they will both make their opening comments, and then commissioners will ask questions of our panelists.

I'll begin with Hassan Abbas. He is Distinguished Professor of International Relations at the Near East South Asia Strategic Studies

Center, National Defense University in Washington, D.C.

He serves as a Senior Advisor at Project on Shiism and Global Affairs at Harvard University's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, and a Senior Fellow at the Center of Global Policy, a think tank focusing on intersection of U.S. foreign policy and Muslim geopolitical affairs.

His current research work focuses on building narratives for countering political and religious extremism and rule of law reforms in developing states.

Our second witness on this final panel is Sharon Rosen. She has served as the Search for Common Ground's Global Director of Religious Engagement since 2017.

In this role, she oversees the development and project implementation of Search's Global Religious Engagement Strategy.

Sharon first joined the Search in 2005 as Senior Advisor to the Jerusalem office and

continued as the office co-director for nine years before assuming her current role.

Prior to Search, she co-founded and directed Education for Life, an international non-governmental organization that provides tools for the development and well-being of children within state educational systems.

She was also a faculty member at the Jerusalem Center for the Near East Studies Course, teaching courses on Bible, gender, and contemporary relevance.

We'll begin with Mr. Abbas. Thank you.

DR. ABBAS: Thank you very much.

It's a great pleasure and truly an honor to be here. I really appreciate the work of the Commission. The topic is of extreme importance without a doubt.

A house of worship is a sanctuary for reflection. It is a sanctuary for meditation. It is a sanctuary for spirituality and peace. But a glimpse at some of the attacks in the recent past from Afghanistan, just last week, Sri Lanka, New

Zealand, and United States would indicate that the trend is going in a different direction.

These attacks were not supposed to happen in the United States. We were never thinking like that. The lens through which I would look at these issues is both as an academic and as a practitioner, as a former law enforcement officer.

And my current work is visits to pilgrimage sites, and I recently about two weeks ago I was in Iraq. I have traveled to Iran, Saudi Arabia multiple times. I visited shrines recently in the last two or three months in Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Jordan. And what is a common theme across all these pilgrimage sites, especially those associated with minority groups, the common theme is that of fear and they are waiting for the next attack.

A house of worship is, of course, a soft target we know, but in case of these pilgrimage sites and these routes, like Arbeen, for instance, in Iraq, where people walk from Baghdad and Najaf for 40, 50, 60 miles to Karbala, they can be

sitting ducks in front of these terrorists.

So the question that I pose is that why is it happening now? What is different now? A history book will tell us this was happening when the Romans were there. This was happening historically, Crusades, Muslim expansions, the religious places or houses of worship, across history, but there is something different now.

And my question is why now? For instance, in South Asia where the Sufi mystics had brought Islam so there are major shrines in Ajmer in India, in Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and Karachi in Pakistan, others, which for the last thousand years were never attacked. All major shrines in Pakistan in the recent years have faced suicide attacks. My question is why now?

There's a short answer. Because--if there is time I'll later on be able to expand on this-- because the currency of our conversations has become violent and religion has become increasingly a currency of our conversations and dialogues.

Maybe now that we have the luxury of

googling, we can see whether in the 1920s or 1820s, for that matter, how many times our identities were linked to being a Muslim or a Christian or Jew. Yes, we know of the most horrible crimes in Holocaust and other instances of genocides, but by and large, at the normal level, the houses of worship were never part and parcel of this conflict zone. These are now contested spaces, and that is something which is new.

Five things that I would like to mention that my research tells me. First and foremost, these attacks have very clearly an ideological and religious motivation behind this--in most cases. What do I mean by that? You just will have to research for the words "Salafi" and "Takfiri." These are groups within the broader Muslim world which are linked to this idea that I am right and anyone else who is trying to approach, to borrow words Ambassador Sam Brownback said, this is a search for God. They don't believe in other's gods. They believe in their own god.

A very short anecdote. My daughter

Sharibano [ph] is sitting here. When we moved to Washington, D.C. from New York about eight, nine years ago, she was very young at that time, like four years or five years or so, and she realized that on every Friday, from McLean, where we were living then, we were going to Maryland, about 50 minute drive to our mosque, and she would often ask, she would see a synagogue or a church, and oh, what do you think about it, and we often had conversations about God.

And so she was, one day I saw her perplexed, and she said, so, Dad, or Baba, as we say in the Muslim tradition, she said, Baba, so this church right across our street, who lives there? I said God lives there. Our God? Yes, I said, yes, our God. She said then why do you every weekend travel 50 miles to go our God? Why can't we go to this church?

And I was speechless. I don't know how to answer that because we have boxed ourselves in so many ways.

So the five facts, it's ideological, it's

Salafi and extremists and Takfiris who want just their own version of Islam to be true, who are causing this finally. You don't have to go very far in history, 1925, the major graveyard in Jannat ul Baqae Medina in Saudi Arabia was destroyed and demolished. To this day, there are restrictions on how you can practice and how you can worship in that area.

Secondly, this is a law enforcement issue, and later on if there is time I can talk more about it. This is not only police, law enforcement providing protection. This is more than that. Are we training those people in security protocols? Are we enforcing certain rules and regulations about lighting outside these mosques or churches or synagogues? They are very basic common sense protocols.

Other places, parliament, the house of Congress is very well protected. Why? Because is police always standing outside? No. There are other specific protocols. Why we are not taking houses of worship that seriously?

Third point, there is larger ignorance about religion. And as we say, we are so close to each other, we are so near yet so far. We are so near through our Twitter accounts and Facebook and Instagram, but we are very far when it comes for talking heart-to-heart with human beings.

And last, but not least, it is about lack of respect for other religions, which is becoming a common theme across traditions.

I know I am almost done with my time, but in hardly a couple of minutes, so if my analysis of these four factors is correct, what can we do about it?

Number one, I would argue that we have to follow the New Zealand model. There was a terrorist attack. The prime minister of the country had the courage to go out, stand with the people who were attacked, with the victims. She was seen to be sympathizing with the people. It comes from top from the leadership.

When the leadership is ready to stand with the victims and show solidarity at that highest

level, the ordinary people of New Zealand have shown that they came together as human beings and stood together. That's the number one thing--the New Zealand model.

Number two, foster interfaith and intra-faith dialogue. This means we have to encourage these conversations and dialogue not only as--there are so many cases in my last 20 years as an American, and I would say in my proud homeland here, I have seen the Jewish-Muslim groups, Muslim-Christian groups, but those often meet once a year. There is no concerted systematic institutional approach to interfaith dialogue, and that is missing.

Third, the promotion of counter-narratives--and I promise I'll take hardly one more minute--which is there's no dearth of those. The Amman Message in Jordan did an amazing job by saying that we have to stand all together against Takfiris, and Takfirism, which is very isolated phenomena. We have the Shias, the Sunnis, the Wahhabis, every major Muslim group was there.

Then there was this Marrakesh Declaration, talking about safeguarding Christian minorities. Then there was this Washington Declaration a couple of years ago. How many people in Washington, D.C. even know about it? They were a huge number of Muslim scholars from across the world who came together and came up with certain principles.

Then Egypt's Al-Azhar University talked about antisectarianism. Sayyid Ali Sistani in Iraq said things which are amazing. I hope these statements are somehow linked to the website of the Commission.

And my very last point is about offering specialized security training to these volunteers from different churches, mosques, and enforcing these protocols, linking grants and fundings, or even their permits with the security training is not only getting a police officer out there but encouraging institutional relationships between these centers of faith and law enforcement.

And last, but not least, I wish more power to this Commission to do and implement these

things.

Thank you very much.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Mr. Abbas.

Ms. Rosen.

MS. ROSEN: Chairman Perkins, Vice Chairs Manchin and Maenza, and Commissioner Bauer, and commissioners of the United States Commission on International Freedom, it really is truly an honor to be here, to join you and with other respected colleagues.

I too want to thank you for convening this important and timely hearing on protecting houses of worship and safeguarding holy sites. I'm grateful generally for the United States' global leadership on this topic and to you for maintaining the focus on religious freedom.

I'm also proud to represent the international civil society organization Search for Common Ground as its Global Director of Religious Engagement. Search has been the leader in peace building for nearly 40 years, working in Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Asia.

I traveled here yesterday from Jerusalem where I have lived for the last 37 years, working in religious engagement and conflict transformation, and experiencing first hand the potential of religious spaces to promote peace, harmony and reconciliation.

While Search is a non-aligned organization, we've worked with religious actors throughout our history, and in 2017, we established this position of the Global Religious Engagement Department to deepen our understanding and our work on how to work with religious actors.

So while my testimony is informed by my 15 years with Search, the views I express here today are my own. I've been asked to limit my time to five minutes so I'll briefly highlight a few of the points drawn from my more detailed testimony, written testimony, which I believe you have received. I will be glad to answer questions as needed.

It's clear that there is a need for a multi-pronged approach to protecting holy sites as

the High Representative Moratinos has laid out here.

But I'll begin my remarks by briefly describing why Search is focusing on preventive community initiatives to safeguard holy sites.

This will be followed by an overview of the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites, which Search co-created and which has proven to be a useful and effective tool to build mutual trust and reduce tensions around holy places.

While the Universal Code has been implemented in diverse locations with really exciting results, and I'm happy to talk more about that if you want to ask questions about it, I'll case study here our efforts in Nigeria, which I understand is a priority country for the U.S. government.

Finally, I'd like to offer some recommendations to the U.S. government on ways to further protect places of worship. We've already heard today of the devastating attacks on holy sites, the terrible desecrations and the

concomitant loss of life. Holy sites are symbols of our deepest identities, of who we are and our traditions, how they shape us, and how we live our lives.

I too strongly identify with the statement when practicing my own faith as a observant Jew in the holy city of Jerusalem. It's not surprising therefore that they are deliberately targeted to inflict both physical and psychological harm as well as collective trauma on a particular community.

However, when all segments of society, including governments and people of faith and no faith collectively protect the holy sites of communities, an alternate and powerful symbolic message of healing and togetherness is broadcasted, which can prevent further violations.

Search has preventive community initiatives, which are one component of our broader efforts to help build healthy, safe and just societies. Focus on the root causes of conflict and emphasize inclusion and trust building as

guiding principles to reduce inter-religious tensions. We help mutual trust and cooperation to flourish by focusing on an issue of common concern, in this case, protection of holy sites, and in so doing, we reduce hostility between religious groups and build resilient communities.

It's only when we care for our common future and act together that we should truly feel safe in our sacred spaces.

In 2017, I was invited by two Norwegian civil society organizations, One World in Dialogue and the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights, to a meeting in Trondheim of religious, civil and political leaders, to present my rather mixed experience I have to admit of an initiative I've been directing on engaging religious leaders to protect holy sites in Jerusalem.

That meeting exposed the frightening frequency of attacks on and lack of access to holy sites in Europe and the Middle East. It became clear that there was a need to create a code of conduct to protect and preserve sacred spaces that

would both be endorsed by states and implemented on the ground.

The result was a dedicated partnership between Search, the two Norwegian NGOs, and Religions for Peace to develop such a code.

In consultation with senior religious leaders world-wide and over a period of three years, we developed the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites, in order to safeguard holy sites now and for future generations and to promote inter-religious reconciliation and mutual acceptance.

It was launched in 2011 and includes ten articles that are designed to establish a framework of norms, be adaptable to the location where implemented, and be applicable across all religions and faith traditions.

While every place is unique, the Universal Code reflects shared understandings on issues of establishment of a holy site, expropriation, archeological excavations, and includes steps to promote access, preservation, sharing, research and education.

I might just add that even though we tried to define what a holy site is, we actually found that very difficult, and therefore we made a decision to go for a very general definition rather than to start explaining in detail what a holy site is because that depends upon how each religion sees their site for themselves. The Universal Code also encourages the establishment of monitoring mechanisms.

The Universal Code is a normative rather than a legal document, as it focuses on codes of behavior and includes a bold call for cooperation among all relevant authorities, including religious actors, who are often in conflict with one another and are often not included in decision-making.

In cases where state authorities fail to effectively safeguard sacred spaces, and we've heard today that that happens in many places, the Universal Code enables bottom-up community level activities by empowering religious actors--men, women and youth--to play their part.

The Code is available in 15 languages and

has been endorsed by a variety of interfaith networks and religious communities and leaders worldwide.

Since its launch, the Universal Code has matured into a dynamic initiative with implementations in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, North America and Africa.

In terms of Nigeria, Search's experience is that the conflict is not inherently sectarian, but violence has often played out along religious lines to devastating effects. However, despite that devastation, by and large, Nigeria reflects mutual inter-religious acceptance.

A 2010 Pew study showed that 87 percent of the citizens believe religion plays an important role in their lives, and 71 percent think that it's a good thing for people of other faiths to have freedom to practice their beliefs.

Against this backdrop, we engaged male and female Christian and Muslim community religious leaders in Northern Nigeria to build consensus within their communities around the principle that

holy places are sites for peace and reconciliation and not targets for attack.

The ability of religious community leaders to come together across faith lines in a conflict zone on an issue of common concern was a unique step in itself towards facilitating collaboration and joint action.

Local, regional and national conferences were held across the three northern zones of Nigeria, ending in media conferences that highlighted the relationship between protecting holy sites and addressing hate speech, particularly by other religious leaders.

There were also calls to counter misinformation, abuse and rumors that spur confusion and raise tension between religious communities that in extreme cases lead to recruitment by violent extremist organizations. Particular attention was paid to engaging youth through a photo and video competition calling for a demonstrated understanding of holy sites as places of worship, peace and dialogue.

As one of the prominent sheikhs involved in the project said, "once a place of worship has been demolished, the conflict changes its identity from its real cause to a religious one, and the moment it becomes religious, everybody takes sides."

He added that if we can find a way of keeping religious sites out of conflicts, it becomes easier to diagnose and treat the problems.

A Christian pastor added that finding the common ground, finding that common ground brings us a step forward towards peace in God's world.

So I'd just like to conclude by offering five recommendations to the U.S. government drawing on the lessons learned. First of all, security approaches alone cannot solve the problem, and actually we've heard that from you today.

Sustainable solutions to inter-religious conflicts are built on mutual trust and finding common ground, which takes time, patience, and a policy of inclusion. The U.S. can make a difference by supporting, through diplomacy and

foreign assistance, holistic strategies for safeguarding holy sites, with an emphasis on sustainable and cost-effective people-to-people approaches that are community-based and are focused on common interests and concerns.

Secondly, multi-stakeholder approaches are essential. Policies and programs need to reflect the perspectives of all relevant faith and non-faith stakeholders. Religious leaders, particularly those working at the influential community level, have a critical role to play, and men, women and youth must all be engaged and empowered to protect the holy sites.

At the same time, effective protection approaches require collaboration with actors, such as local and national government representatives, law enforcement authorities, the media and courts of justice among others.

Similarly, we call on the U.S. to utilize multi-stakeholder approaches with other governments and in international fora, which we have heard from Ambassador Brownback that is already happening and

of course from you too.

Thirdly, we need to use resources to support programs in line with the Universal Code to prevent attacks on holy sites. Current protection efforts are clearly insufficient, and as we heard from Commissioner Maenza, the current administration recently dedicated \$25 million to protect religious sites and relics, and this is a very significant step and a great opportunity for initiatives funded by this allocation to reduce risks of attacks on holy sites in alignment with the Universal Code.

In addition, with growing awareness of the need to engage religious actors, resources also need to be invested in faith literacy training for U.S. employees and other international actors working in the fields of conflict, security and development.

Four, protecting holy sites requires addressing chronic conflict and fragility. As much as we need to focus specifically on protecting holy sites and houses of worship, this Commission also

needs to focus on addressing the complex emergencies that fuel violence and social tensions. Simply put, chronic conflict and fragility put holy sites at risk.

The U.S. needs to address and prevent violent conflict, including through the implementation of the Elie Wiesel Act, by passing the Global Fragility Act, and by ensuring that appropriations are both available to the places most at risk and are flexible enough to respond to emerging risks.

And finally, both governmental and non-governmental actors have an important role to play. Governments are critical for ensuring security and promoting human rights. In particular, they're uniquely positioned to institutionalize best practices by permanently integrating constructive educational programs for school students, law enforcement personnel, and other professionals, which are proven to reduce interreligious tensions into curricula.

However, many aspects of protection are

best implemented by neutral third-parties and religious actors themselves with expertise in the field who are able to lead efforts to foster inter-group acceptance and collaboration.

I remain committed to working toward sustainable solutions to protecting places of worship based on collaborative approaches that deal with root causes. I look forward to working with the U.S. government and other partners to make that happen. And I would be delighted to invite you to come and see for yourselves in the places where we are working, particularly in Jerusalem where I am based, the real changes that are taking place in communities where trust is built.

Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Ms. Rosen.

We have come to the end of our budgeted time for the hearing. However, I know that the commissioners have a couple of questions of our panelists on this last panel so each commissioner will have an opportunity to ask one question or make a final statement, and we'll still get you out

before you freeze. I know it's a little cold in here but we'll get you out so you can thaw out.

Commissioner Bauer.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Ms. Rosen, that was very encouraging testimony and thank you for that.

I wish you would have a talked a little bit more about your work in Jerusalem because it presents such unique challenges, but perhaps you could submit something for the record if you have time. I know you're very busy.

But I think it's interesting, and I don't know if you have any thoughts you want to express on this. There's a lot of security on the Temple Mount on Mount Zion, but in spite of the security, you can also threaten religious sites by erasing the history of them. And as you know, there's a very concerted effort. It even infects some commissions at the UN that try to suggest that there really isn't a historic Jewish presence in some of the most holy sites to Judaism, and I assume--and obviously you must find that terribly troubling--and I wonder if there is any progress on

that?

And then quickly, Dr. Abbas, you left us on the edge of our seats with this conversation with your daughter. And what you said, I almost feel like we need to bring your daughter to the witness stand to tell us what your answer was when you explained to her why you couldn't stop off at the church. But you can just submit that to the record.

[Laughter.]

MS. ROSEN: So shall I begin?

COMMISSIONER BAUER: If you want to, yes, ma'am.

MS. ROSEN: Yes, of course. Of course Jerusalem is very close to my heart, as I said, and it is very upsetting and very troubling when any religion's most holy sites are disregarded or even, as you say, try to be obliterated by others.

I have some very interesting stories to tell actually about senior Muslim religious leaders who are very aware and in personal one-to-one discussions recognize that this is--that the Temple

Mount is the most holy site for Jews, and not only that, that they will say that the Al Aqsa Mosque was built there specifically because it was known to be this holy site, and yet when a conflict comes into play, it's quite interesting to see how people are ready to use all their tools to try and win against the other.

What is clear is that a win-lose mentality will never ever solve conflicts. The only way to solve it is to try and find a win-win solution. So the denying the attachments of others is never going to work.

In terms of my work in Jerusalem, and I have been working over many years, the Temple Mount, the Haram esh-Sharif is a very tricky place to work with. It is in a way easier to work on Mount Zion, which is right just outside the Old City walls, and what has been fascinatingly exciting is that there has been a substantial reduction in tensions, into religious tensions there simply by bringing people together.

Ignorance creates suspicion, it creates

violence, and therefore just the opportunity to build trust, to build connections between people, but not only through the religious leaders, by bringing in the law enforcement officers, providing training for them in sensitivity of the different religions, by celebrating the attachments of all three Abrahamic faiths to the place, by bringing in volunteers who help and calm the situation, by bringing in the media who speak about how things can change, all this together can make a difference.

And I actually have written it in the written testimony, and I invite you to see the wonderful work that's being done there.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Fantastic. That's great news.

MS. ROSEN: Thank you.

DR. ABBAS: Thank you.

The short answer is we visited the Jewish site, and because my three daughters, who are in the second row, all three sitting there, they grew up in Boston, and that was the year--we came to

U.S. was the year the 9/11 tragedy had happened. And my wife, who is also here, in the first row, she from early on, there's a Boston Globe story on actually our family, how my wife started taking our three daughters to the closest synagogue and church and mosque. Actually Boston Globe had come to interview me for something, and when they heard my wife, they said, no, this is more important story. You are not important. This story is more important.

So there's a tradition--partly I guess me, in my own case, my parents were from two different sects. Those two sects fight with each other often, but I guess that might be the case, but that's what I--the first response was I was stunned because I thought I should have a better answer.

There's no immediate answer, but that made me think at my own level, why we box religions, why there is not often visits from different religious communities? I must add a point of self-critique--churches, many churches that I've gone to are very open--mosques in America will have to do a lot to

be more open to the communities where they are to take care of some of these issues.

COMMISSIONER BAUER: Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Mr. Abbas. I'm glad you brought your support team with you.

[Laughter.]

CHAIR PERKINS: I do have one question for you, that you talked about the protection and security, working with local law enforcement and the physical security. That actually was the focus of USCIRF's recommendation to the State Department through the Bureau of Diplomatic Security and the Anti-Terrorism Assistance Program, which is currently functioning in many of these countries--in fact, I used to work for the ATAP program--in that the physical security--I mean obviously we have to have awareness that was talked about earlier, and we have to have agreement, and we need to go deeper, but the immediate need is on the security of these facilities so that people can go and worship God in security and safety.

From your observations--you made comments

on that--what are the recommendations or what do you see as the best way forward on that?

DR. ABBAS: Thank you very much.

I think this is an extremely important point. We often hear about need for more engagement between faith-based institutions and mosques and local law enforcement issues. But I think one real big issue is, if I may say, there is no other way to put it, lack of trust between local law enforcement agencies and some religious institutions in the post-9/11 world, and we understand the reason--the Patriot Act, the other reasons.

Many Muslim communities, and there are excellent stories about NYPD. I think NYPD has been doing a great job. I'm a big fan of them. I often take my NDU students to NYPD, but they were known, also there were cases where there was surveillance of mosques. So in case of U.S., there is that issue.

But go to the many other countries in the Middle East and South Asia, multiplying the factor

that I mentioned to a hundred. In U.S. still, police and law enforcement is trusted. I see police vehicle, I immediately feel a sense of relief or sense of safety because our police forces are by and large very professional.

But that's not the case globally. So there have to be best practices. I was looking at, in my testimony, I have about eight or nine different reports that have come out, and I'm seeing increasing effort from law enforcement to reach out to Muslim communities, specifically in the U.S.

We need to mention those in the shape of best practices, to go out to some major Muslim centers and to police institutions and ask them, for instance, in the recent past, there was some religious holidays and the mosque that I go in Maryland, I saw everyday and every major event two or three major police vehicles outside. That was never the case even two years ago.

So we need to write those best practices, and some people, maybe the Commission can, and I'll

be more than happy to help in a case study Maryland and Washington, D.C. area.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you very much.

Commissioner Manchin.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: I just want to make a statement and commend all of our speakers that came today. What I was taken by was the commonality of much of what was said, both by Ambassador Brownback and then you look at our organizations, Search for Common Ground, National Defense, Alliance of Civilizations, and then USCIRF, and our mission and our role, and so it is my hope, because there is power in numbers, that we can continue to work together, working through certainly the commonalities that we share and the vision and our mission, that we can continue to work together and I would hope that USCIRF might be one of those bridges that can bring these groups together, that as we share, whether it's international protocols, what those look like, but I just believe the more we can work together, the stronger then we are globally.

But thank you all so much.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Manchin.

I will just conclude our time together, this hearing, by echoing Commissioner Manchin, thanking our witnesses for being here, and sharing with us their expertise, their experience, and their passion for this issue.

What I think has certainly emerged is I would say the top three. Number one is that there must be an agreement, and I think there's a recognition that this is an issue, and that there is universal agreement that we have to protect houses of worship and religious sites.

The awareness issue must be built upon, and that is a communication strategy, and we certainly will do our part as a Commission to continue to communicate the need that exists globally.

But I think the most important action or the most important item is action, which is what this Commission will focus on and has focused on in

our recommendations to the U.S. government. That is to Congress, to the Secretary of State and to the President. We need to study the issue, but we also need to act quickly because people are not only losing their lives but communities are being frightened away from their sense of community that they find only in these houses of worship by joining with people of like-minded faith.

And so we look forward to working with each one of you. We thank you for your testimony, we thank you for the time that you've spent on this, and I thank each of those in our audience that are here today that also share a passion for this issue of religious freedom.

And with that, we will adjourn our hearing. Thank you very much.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 4:46 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]