

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING  
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS IN  
TALIBAN-CONTROLLED AFGHANISTAN

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

10:30 a.m. ET

Virtual Hearing

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

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Stephen Schneck, Chair  
Meir Soloveichik, Vice Chair  
Asif Mahmood

C O N T E N T S

	<u>PAGE</u>
Opening Remarks	
Stephen Schneck, Chair, USCIRF	4
Meir Soloveichik, Vice Chair, USCIRF	8
Panel I	10
Richard Bennett United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan	11
Rina Amiri Former Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights	17
Q&A	23
Panel II	37
Metra Mehran Afghanistan Advocacy Fellow Amnesty International	37
Fereshta Abbasi Researcher Asia Division Human Rights Watch	48
Joseph Azam Board Chair Afghan-American Foundation	54
Kate Clark Co-Director and Senior Analyst Afghanistan Analyst Network	65
Q&A	73
Adjourn	90

P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR SCHNECK: Good morning and welcome to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing, Religious Freedom in Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan.

My name is Stephen Schneck, and I am currently chair of the Commission. I want to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us today and for offering your testimony as we learn more about the alarming and distressing conditions for religious freedom for Afghanistan's people.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body, created in 1998 by the International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA.

The Commission uses international standards to monitor religious freedom abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this morning's

hearing.

Today's hearing will focus on religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan under de facto Taliban rule.

These conditions have significantly deteriorated since 2021. Over the last year alone, the Taliban has strengthened and centralized its rule and has conducted a repressive crackdown against those perceived to have violated the group's narrow interpretation of Sunni Islam.

Immediately following its rise to power, the Taliban reestablished the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice to oversee the enforcement of these religious edicts.

These edicts include a religious ban on employment for women and prohibit women and girls from attending schools and universities.

Human rights activists, minorities and religious leaders who have vocally criticized the Taliban's policies have faced arbitrary detention, disappearances, public floggings or, in extreme cases, public execution.

Others have been forced to flee the country.

While many Afghans attempted to flee to neighboring countries immediately following the 2021 takeover, small groups of Christians, Hindus, Sikhs have stayed in Afghanistan.

Smaller numbers of Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslims also continue to reside there. However, it remains incredibly dangerous to belong to a religious minority in Afghanistan today.

Both the Taliban and the Islamic State-Khorasan Province, or ISIS-K, consider Christians, Ahmadi Muslims, and the Baha'is as converts from Islam, and therefore they are deemed apostates.

This, quote-unquote, "offense" is punishable by death. As a result, these communities often remain hidden in a desperate attempt to protect themselves and their families.

Causing further alarm, in 2024, the Taliban published a new so-called "morality law" that forbids all "non-Islamic" religious ceremonies, prevents association with those

considered "non-believers," and criminalizes wearing or "popularizing" crosses and other symbols deemed "un-Islamic."

And it bears stressing that "un-Islamic" impacts Muslims who disagree with the Taliban, as well as Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, and others.

Simultaneously, ISIS-K has carried out an increasing number of lethal attacks targeting religious minorities, specifically the ethnic Hazara Shi'a community and their mosques.

During the month of Muharram, Taliban security forces conducted arbitrary house searches in Shi'a majority areas and neighborhoods, which involved beatings, destruction of property, and unlawful killings. Several bombings against Shi'a mosques also occurred throughout the year.

In light of these disturbing developments and trends, we will also hear about the resettlement for Afghans fleeing this reign of terror.

We are facing a high level of uncertainty regarding the future of U.S. policy toward refugees

and asylum seekers, which could impact over 200,000 individuals fleeing religious persecution and repression.

Additionally, we are concerned about the uncertainty regarding the extension of Temporary Protective Status, or TPS, designation for Afghanistan or the legal uncertainty for Afghan nationals present in the United States under humanitarian parole.

We're looking forward to hearing more from our witnesses on this issue and potential ways forward for U.S. policymakers.

I would now like to give the floor over to USCIRF Vice Chair Meir Soloveichik to talk more about our hearing today.

Commissioner Soloveichik.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you very much, Chair Schneck, and I join you in welcoming all those watching today's hearing.

As emphasized, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan remain a source of profound concern.



Since 2022, USCIRF has recommended that the Secretary of State designate Afghanistan as a CPC, or a Country of Particular Concern, for the ongoing, systematic and egregious religious violations that are occurring there under the de-facto Taliban rule.

Most recently, in December of 2023, the State Department redesignated the Taliban as an EPC, or an Entity of Particular Concern, because of its severe religious freedom violations.

USCIRF is profoundly concerned by the Taliban's expanding efforts at enforcing its own ideology in Afghanistan, with one particular concern, among many, being the wellbeing and welfare of women and girls.

During today's hearing, we seek to better understand the numerous ways in which the Taliban has systematically imposed and enforced its own ideology in Afghanistan and to also discuss potential ways that the U.S. government can join with likeminded partners in order to better protect freedom of religion for all Afghans.

We seek to better understand, as well, the United States' strategy to deter the Taliban's persecution of religious minorities, including the use of targeted sanctions, and we seek also to consider additional options for U.S. policy and how the U.S. government and others can better work to protect Afghan religious minority communities with a particular focus on the welfare of women and children.

Thank you, again, and I turn back over to Chair Schneck.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Vice Chair Soloveichik.

I would now like to introduce our witnesses. First, we will hear, and we are privileged to do so, from Richard Bennett, who currently serves as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan.

Our next witness is Rina Amiri, who served as the U.S. Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights under the Biden administration.

On our second panel, we will hear from

Metra Mehran, an Afghanistan Advocacy Fellow at Amnesty International.

Then we will hear from Fereshta Abbasi, who is a researcher in the Asia Division at Human Rights Watch, who is documenting ongoing abuses in Afghanistan.

Our next witness in the second panel will be Joseph Azam the Board Chair of the Afghan-American Foundation.

And, lastly, we will hear from Kate Clark, the Co-Director and Senior Analyst at the Afghanistan Analysts Network.

Thank you all for being here.

Mr. Bennett, you may begin your testimony.

MR. BENNETT: Thank you, Chair Schneck, and greetings also to Vice Chair Soloveichik, Commissioner Mahmood, and my co-panelists in both panels.

I'm very honored to be invited to speak to you today in my capacity as an independent expert of the United Nations, and in that capacity, since taking up my position on first of May 2022, I

published nine official reports on the human rights situation in Afghanistan, which continues to deteriorate since the Taliban seized control.

The deterioration includes the Taliban systematic gender-based oppression, which may amount to crimes against humanity, as well as the harsh suppression of civic space and retaliation against individuals that supported the previous government, but, without a doubt, also to the situation of religious and ethnic minorities.

I'm concerned that discrimination exclusion of certain ethnic and religious communities and polarization between them, as well as current and past unresolved grievances, may prove to be early warning signs for worse to come.

Since the Taliban came to power in '21, attacks specifically targeting religious communities have continued, especially impacting Hazaras, most of whom are Shi'a, but also Sufi Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and others.

Afghan Christians have also reached out to me due to feeling pressure, and some have fled

Afghanistan since.

Generally, these violent attacks have been claimed by the Islamic State Khorasan Province, who pointedly refer in derogatory terms to the religion of their targets.

These attacks bear the hallmarks of international crimes, and they should be met with enhanced investigations, accountability, and protection.

In my recent reports, I've highlighted several areas of concern in which the Taliban and ISKP harms ethnic and religious minorities.

This includes the rejection of inclusive government with predominantly Pashtun men aligned with the Taliban taking all positions of power resulting in the systematic exclusion of other religious and ethnic communities as well as women.

Ethnic and religious minorities have also been harmed by land disputes with other communities or with the Taliban, and that's been affected by, they've been affected by intimidation and violence without protection from the de facto authorities or

access to an impartial and effective remedy.

The Taliban has also restricted religious and cultural practices. The recent so-called Law on the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice prohibits celebrations of festivals which are deemed not to have a basis in Islam, including Nowruz, which will be celebrated the day after tomorrow.

It also forbids the wearing or promoting of un-Islamic symbols, including crucifixes. Furthermore, Muslims are prohibited from being friends with or helping non-Muslims under the law, although so far this does not seem to be implemented strictly.

We've also documented the frequent use of derogatory terms by the Taliban to refer to religious minorities, especially the use of the term "kafir" and also "un-believer." The PVPV law, vice and virtue law, restricts all Muslims in their free exercise of their religion as it prescribes in great detail how to pray, dress and groom oneself, banning the practice, practicing or promotion of

Bid'ah, which are forms of worship not present in the Quran or Hadith, and in Taliban's interpretation might relate to practices from Shi'a, Salafis or Sufis.

These obligatory and uniform religious practices undermine the very personal and voluntary nature of faith and disregard the diversity of personal beliefs and expressions.

The Taliban has further frustrated the diversity in belief by limiting free discussions about religion, undoubtedly having wider implications that are yet to be assessed.

For example, the Vice and Virtue Law prohibits the publishing of content deemed to contradict the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia or Islamic principles.

The Taliban have also censored a wide range of books, including in relation to religion. For instance, the de facto Ministry of Education indicated to remove books that conflict with Hanafi jurisprudence from schools and libraries.

In addition, the Taliban urge religious

scholars to desist from discussing contentious topics, as doing so could give rise to turmoil.

Commissioners, I'd like to close my testimony with some recommendations to improve the situation in Afghanistan, and which I believe are also in the interests of the United States.

It's essential to send a strong signal that violations of human rights, including the freedom of religion, will not go unpunished.

To further accountability, I support an international inquiry into attacks on ethnic and religious communities in Afghanistan.

I also urge increased support for the International Criminal Court whose prosecutor may be investigating these violations.

It's also urgent to strengthen truth finding and documentation of violations of religious freedom, including by support to the ongoing activities of civil society organizations, the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, as well as my own mandate, which is seriously under-resourced.



An additional U.N. investigation mechanism that gathers evidence for prosecutions, including for crimes involving religion and ethnicity, as well as other types of human rights violations, such as gender persecution, is also warranted.

Support should be given to civil society organizations that promote freedom of religion in Afghanistan, as well as to Afghan religious minorities that have fled the country, including by opening up resettlement options.

Finally, the U.S. in its interaction with the Taliban has an important role to also insist on inclusive governance that includes representation of a variety of ethnic and religious groups.

I thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Special Rapporteur Bennett, thank you very much for your testimony, and thank you as well for your recommendations.

At this time, I'd like to welcome to the hearing testimony from Rina Amiri. Rina.

MS. AMIRI: Chairman Schneck, Vice Chair Soloveichik, thank you very much for having me as a

part of today's very important briefing.

I want to particularly thank you for continuing the vital work of putting a spotlight on the plight of ethnic and religious minorities everywhere, particularly the vulnerable population of Afghanistan.

I'm honored to join today's panel on the status of ethnic and religious minorities in Afghanistan, and I want to begin by just noting I fully endorse and support all of the recommendations that Special Rapporteur Bennett just made, and I'll try not to repeat too many of his points.

But it has been nearly four years since the Taliban seized power and imposed an authoritarian state with a narrow and extreme interpretation of Sharia that is unprecedented in any Muslim-majority country.

As it has consolidated power, the Taliban has doubled down on extreme policies that have erased the hard-won rights of the population.

The Commission rightly noted in its report

last August that the Taliban are violating the freedom of religion, or belief, of all Afghans holding a different interpretation of Islam.

Women and girls have particularly borne the brunt. As the Afghans' school year begins on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, it will mark the fourth year that girls will be turned away from the gates of secondary school, their dreams of a better future once again quashed.

Despite massive opposition domestically and international pressure, the Taliban have deepened and expanded repressive measures against women and girls, including the passing of sweeping Vice and Virtue Law, the so-called "morality law," that seeks to further implement and deepen policies stripping women and girls of their rights, including the right to education beyond sixth grade, work in most sectors, mobility, access to basic and life-saving health care, and so much more.

We should make no mistakes. These heinous restrictions, which make Afghanistan a virtual prison for half the population, will produce a

radicalized ideology that once again make Afghanistan a regional and global threat.

Afghanistan's diverse and ethnic heritage and population are also under attack. The Taliban have imposed a series of edicts that have restricted the religious freedom of many Afghans.

Ethnic and religious minorities, including Hazaras, Ismailis, Hindus, Sikhs, Sufis, Christians, and Ahmadis, face threats, discrimination and growing marginalization. Many are withdrawing from public expression of their faith for fear of reprisal.

Sikhs and Sufis have been exclusively denied the right to carry out many rites of their religious practice.

They've also been deliberately targeted by ISIS-K and have faced threats and deadly attacks.

Hazaras of Shiite and non-Shiite background are particularly under acute danger. Devastating attacks by ISIS-K have created what some have characterized as "genocidal conditions" for the Hazara population.

Hazaras also report being left as soft targets by the Taliban. They further note policies that have led to forced displacement, seizure of their lands and houses, destruction of property, the targeting of their schools and religious sites.

As one Hazara leader told me, he said my community does not feel safe anywhere. We don't feel safe in our homes. We don't feel safe in our schools, in our places of worship, in our community, and in our country.

Many of these targeted groups have been fleeing the country due to fear of persecution. The Trump administration's recent stop-work orders, funding freeze, the threat of ending all refugee support services, the potential closure of the Office of the Coordinator for Afghanistan Relocations, the CARE office, and a potential nationality-based travel ban, which could include Afghanistan, threatens to further leave this vulnerable population with no recourse.

The groups who are vulnerable today were at the forefront for fighting for progress and

democratic change in Afghanistan for two decades and more.

We cannot turn our backs on them. We should continue using every tool at our disposal to convince the Taliban to reverse their extreme policies.

But we must also do our part to support these at-risk groups through support for vital humanitarian assistance, and we must keep our doors open to those who have been forced into exile due to persecution.

When the United States champions human rights and defends and supports the vulnerable and oppressed, it becomes a beacon of hope to the world and exemplifies what makes America great.

I also have a set of recommendations, but I will offer them in my written testimony. Thank you very much.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Ms. Amiri. Appreciate your comments and witness today.

At this time, we'd like to turn to questions from the commissioners to this first

panel, and if I might begin with the first question. This is directed to Special Rapporteur Bennett.

Mr. Bennett, since the Taliban takeover, United Nations has led several discussions in Qatar focused on Afghanistan.

Can you share with us today a little bit about the structure and outcomes of those meetings, and to what degree have religious minorities and women been included in these discussions, and what more might the United Nations do to hold the Taliban accountable?

MR. BENNETT: Thank you, Chair Schneck.

Just as a preliminary comment, the part of the United Nations that is running those meetings in Qatar is not the part that I am part of. I'm related, I'm appointed by the Human Rights Council. And those meetings in Qatar were led initially by the Secretary General, the first two, and later by his designate.

But I will say that I have expressed concern in those meetings. The inclusion of what

some people call non-Taliban Afghans has been contentious.

In the last meeting, there was no inclusion. Ms. Amiri was present. She may wish to comment further on this. There was a separate meeting with women and non-Taliban Afghans.

And this has been, in my view, the cost of getting the Taliban around the table has been too high. I put that in writing actually. I wrote an op-ed in the New York Times just a day or two before the meeting, and I think there's a degree of bending over backwards to the Taliban in order to engage with them.

I think unfortunately that shows weakness, and the record of the Taliban is that if you show weakness to them, they'll take advantage of that.

And having said that, I think the meetings have had some value. There have been discussions in which human rights and rights of women and girls have been raised, including, I know, very strongly by Ms. Amiri, and there are working groups that have been set up following those agreed on on



counter-narcotics and on the economy and business sector particularly.

I think that is useful, but I don't think it's sufficient. I think that there needs to be a greater focus on broader human rights and including certainly rights of women and girls but also religious freedom.

We should not be shying away from this, and I would support the setting up, the establishment of a further working group on human rights as part of this Doha Process.

Thank you. I'll leave it at that.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Mr. Bennett.

Since you mentioned Ms. Amiri here, Ms. Amiri, do you have any comments on the Qatar discussions?

MS. AMIRI: Yes, I do. And I agree with everything that Special Rapporteur Bennett noted. I was part of the Doha Process when I served as Special Envoy, but as Special Rapporteur Bennett noted, it is right that there was a separate session in which women and civil society were

included.

I was very much encouraged by the fact that nearly every country that was a part of the Doha Process felt very strongly in support of the right of women and girls.

But I also agree that unless it's part of the process in a very meaningful way, and ways that we've done in many other conflict contexts, the message to the Taliban is that they can, they can determine the parameters of the Doha Process, and I think that's unhelpful.

We saw with the Doha Agreement the precedent that it set by not including Afghans, not including women. It set a precedent in which the Taliban came in with, with an intent to reestablish the order that they had in the 1990s, and they have certainly proven that that's the direction that they're going.

They need to get more than I think language from member states that the rights of women and girls and ethnic and religious minorities is an essential component of any type of outcome

that would be supported by the international community, and I think far more needs to be done, including a working group that addresses human rights in a meaningful way.

Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you very much.

Vice Chair Soloveichik, questions?

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you, Chair Schneck.

Two questions to the witnesses. Reference was made to civil society organizations that exist in Afghanistan that work for the betterment of religious freedom.

What actually is there? What are these organizations? What's actually occurring in Afghanistan in terms of civil society organizations?

And, secondly, I'd like to hear from the witnesses their own, their own views as to the impact that sanctions have had on Taliban behavior, and how that impact, what it might be, should impact our own thinking about strategy for the

future?

Either one? Please, either one of our witnesses can begin, please.

MR. BENNETT: Would you like to go first this time, Rina, and I'll follow you?

MS. AMIRI: Sure. Thank you.

Maybe on civil society, civil society, it's a rich spectrum in Afghanistan. It includes religious elements, tribal elements, but also a very vibrant civil society, but certainly I think strengthened in the two decades in which the international community was involved, but its origins are much deeper than that.

I am very much concerned about the situation of civil society because with the freeze on funding has really crippled the work of civil society in Afghanistan and their capacity to be able to do the work that they are doing.

They are taking extraordinary threats to carry out their work, but they need resources. They don't need hundreds of thousands of dollars, but they need resources, and that, the fact that

those resources have been halted, I think, really puts these groups and the country in a situation in which those that have been fighting the hard-line elements in Afghanistan, including the Taliban, are hindered from doing much of what they're doing.

In terms of sanctions, I think we need to think more broadly than the Taliban. Certainly, the Taliban do not like it, but it's also a signal to the population that we stand with them, with the 40 million Afghans, that the policies that the Taliban are carrying out are not ones that the international community supports, and that the international community is prepared to use every, nearly every tool in its toolbox to push back against the Taliban.

I believe that we should be doing more with our GloMag sanctions. There are many countries that have had far more determinations, GloMag determinations, than we've used in Afghanistan, and I think that's an opportunity.

There are an array of other sanctions and tools that should be put to use. It is the worst

situation in the world for women, and our policies should reflect our condemnation of that.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you.

Special Rapporteur.

MR. BENNETT: Certainly, I echo Ms. Amiri's comments about the impact of freezing or reducing funding on civil society.

I'd like to add to that that one of my recent reports, which I tabled in the Human Rights Council end of February, focuses quite a lot on the shrinking of civic space, in fact, really the collapsing of civic space.

And we do hear a lot, maybe in the media, about the repercussions on protesters, particularly women protesters, and that is itself totally unacceptable.

But maybe we hear less about how many civil society organizations and individuals are unable to function because of the pressure on freedom of expression, freedom of information, and freedom of movement, and so on.

For example, a huge pressure on the

academic sector and on the artistic sector. So Afghan, Afghanistan has many, many poets and artists, musicians, and all of this is now banned.

We've seen musical instruments burnt in piles and just collected and set fire to. On radio and TV, music is not allowed. Images of sentient beings are also not permitted.

So there's a broader closing in of any kind of space, any kind of civic space, and that itself is the heart of any society. The fabric, very fabric, of any society is being slowly unraveled.

On sanctions, the U.N. sanctions focus mainly on travel bans, travel sanctions. Some say that the list ought to be reviewed and updated. The Taliban have been asking for the sanctions to be removed all together.

There are some exceptions that are allowed. Some of the Taliban leadership who are sanctioned have been able to travel on a case by case basis if an exception has been granted after application.

It's not so much my field, but I would urge caution until, and this is a point I make frequently, until there are concrete, verified, measureable and verified improvements in the human rights situation, in particular for women and girls.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: We are a little bit tight on time. Commissioner Mahmood, one last question perhaps.

COMMISSIONER MAHMOOD: Yes. Thank you so much for such an informative talk.

I have a different angle of question, and my question goes toward Mr. Bennett since you have such a vast knowledge and experience and your work, have written so much about this.

We have seen that not only religious freedom but basic fundamental human rights have been deteriorating in Afghanistan to the worst level. Nothing has worked, and especially after the fall and rise of Taliban, it has gone much



worse. At this point, not only minorities but even normal Afghans are under oppression and oppression and complete ban of saying anything they want to.

I believe that we can work to change and bring religious freedom and human rights awareness by three different ways. One is our power, which we show, and that card was lost when we left Afghanistan and Taliban became the victor.

Second is use money and give them some lucrative offers in the form of aid or some progress, which is basically nonexistent.

Number three, we find people, locals, who are likeminded and want to help us, and in social programs for those people. In the last two months, that has gone to actually zero.

We are basically, we are not doing much investment there, but still there were some programs being given, and now we are, people who are given temporary visa status, they will be in jeopardy in America.

Over 200,000 people who are waiting to come over here, they're basically at this time

scrapped. The morale—I talk to people locally over there because I have some contacts in Pakistan and Afghanistan, they are in a huge regretful situation that what they did, they actually believe their future, basically they are living better off when everything was same going on.

My question to you is, is it more appropriate to work on the Taliban right now for this religious freedom and human rights, and we need to work over here and bring some strategy when we can have some negotiation power and we can have in Afghanistan and get some peoples, especially, obviously are very passionate about women and girls' life. Obviously, everybody's life is very important. To make some difference because if we keep on waiting on this thing, I see many communities that are religious sects, the Sikhs, Ahmadi, or Hazara, they will be extinct. They will be gone.

But even the life of normal Afghans will be so much backward that it might take decades and maybe even centuries to come back.

So has there been any thought that there's an organized way to push U.S., U.N., and other partners, and other leaders? I think Japan has started working with Taliban. They had a big delegation, when you're talking about travel bans, they are able to travel better when they have interests.

They cannot come to the United States or the United Nations, but anything else they can do. So I'm sorry, my questions are long, but it's just a lot of different things.

Thank you.

MR. BENNETT: Thank you, Commissioner Mahmood.

I guess what I'm going to say is all of the above. I've been touting something that I call the all-tools approach, that there is no silver bullet. There's no panacea. No one policy or action is going to fix this.

You know, some people say there are no good options in Afghanistan right now. There's only working on the least bad options, and those

tend to be about mitigation.

I don't fully agree with that. I don't think there's very many good options, but neither do I think that in the U.S. or in other parts of the international community, we are harnessing the leverage and the tools that do exist.

I mentioned accountability tools earlier, but I also do strongly believe that cutting aid and whether it's for humanitarian purposes or for supporting the many vital groups working in civil society, who are providing underground education and are giving some hope to millions of Afghans, I just think that is going to turn the hope into despair.

We are already seeing increases in depression, increases in suicide, and I think that it's very important that we work together, we have clear messages, we use all the tools, be they financial, legal, educational, or whatever, and do support those who are pushing and are standing up for their human rights, and the women have been in the leadership of that movement.

Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: At this time, I need to bring this, this panel, to a close.

I want to especially thank our two witnesses, Ms. Amiri, Mr. Bennett. Thank you so much for your testimony today. I really appreciate it. USCIRF really appreciates it.

So at this time, could I ask those on the second panel to turn on their videos, and if I could begin by recognizing Metra Mehran to begin your testimony?

Ms. Mehran.

MS. MEHRAN: Thank you so much.

I think the host needs to allow me to turn my video on.

CHAIR SCHNECK: I think that she might, yes.

MS. MEHRAN: Okay. Because it says unable to start video because the host has stopped it.

Okay. Yeah. I start my video now.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you.

MS. MEHRAN: Okay. Perfect.

Thank you so much.

Thank you, Chair Schneck, Vice Chair Soloveichik, Commissioner Mahmood, my co-panelists, and our respected audience.

Today I'm speaking on behalf of Amnesty International and our more than ten million members, activists, and supporters around the world.

I'm humbled to be present today. My statement is also supported by my personal capacity as a woman from Afghanistan currently in exile.

As I speak here today, we are also observing the holy month of Ramadan, a time of fasting, prayer, reflection, and community.

However, in Afghanistan, women are barred from entering mosques and even reciting the holy Quran in the presence of other women. Their voices have been criminalized as a source of sin and temptation.

The core values of Ramadan are being stripped away from women under the Taliban's draconian laws and systematic discrimination and

oppression.

Since their takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban have been enforcing decrees that systematically violate all freedoms, including the freedom of religion or belief, for all people in Afghanistan.

The Taliban claim that they enforce Sharia based on Sunni sect and Hanafi jurisprudence. However, in practice, their version primarily derives from the Deobandi strand, which also incorporates tribal and militarized elements influenced by the Taliban's extremist ideology.

This interpretation is shaped by Taliban leaders, mullahs, and muftis, who have issued many edicts and decrees, either in written or oral form, without a standardized legal process, as they deem necessary since August 2021 and before.

The Taliban have replaced hundreds of imams with those approved by their regime, in mosques, in schools, and madrasas, ensuring that their religious teachings align with their strict interpretation of Islam.

As part of this, the Taliban have issued more than 190 decrees, including ones specifically aimed at curtailing freedom of religion, primarily targeting religious minorities and women's rights. They are preventing women and girls from exercising their right to education, employment, freedom of movement, freedom of speech, access to aid and health care, protest, and the practice of religious and cultural activities, such as attending mosques or participating in sports.

The Ministry for Vice and Virtue, notorious for its arbitrary and inconsistent policies, violently enforces these restrictions and decrees across the country.

And it all comes with compounded and disproportionate impacts on religious minorities, particularly the Hazaras, who mostly follow the Shi'a branch of Islam, as well as women and girls in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is a diverse country with various religious groups, including a Shi'a Muslim population, as well as Hindus, Sikhs, Sufis,



Ahmadis, Buddhists, and Christians, Baha'is.

Non-Muslim communities, such as Hindus and Sikhs, have largely fled the country, with only a small number remaining.

International Christian Concern has stated, "The Taliban are working to completely erase Christianity or any religious minority from the country."

The Taliban do not acknowledge many Muslim sects, such as Ahmadis, as part of the Muslim faith, and in the past their members have been subject to persecution.

Meanwhile, the small non-Muslim population in Afghanistan continues to live under constant threat of persecution, often practicing their beliefs in secret or going into hiding to avoid detection.

The Shi'a community, particularly the Hazaras, has been subjected to systematic and targeted attacks. Their schools, mosques, reading ceremonies, hospitals, and transports have frequently been bombed and violently attacked,

resulting in significant casualties and injuries.

Some of the deadliest attacks have been claimed by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province, ISIS's division operating mainly in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In addition to the violent attacks by armed groups, the Taliban have severely restricted Shi'a religious practices and freedoms in the country.

For example, the Taliban have introduced restrictions for observing Muharram, a sacred period mainly commemorated by Shi'a Muslims across Afghanistan.

Similarly, the Taliban forced Hazara residents in Daikundi Province to break their Ramadan fast early, according to Sunni timetable.

In Balkh Province, they mandated that the Shi'a community observe Eid-al-Fitr based on Sunni jurisprudence, dictated by the Taliban leaders.

Furthermore, the teaching of Shi'a jurisprudence has been banned from the education system. Additionally, in Balkh Province, the

Taliban have been reported officially prohibiting marriages between Shi'a and Sunni.

Since the Taliban's return, Amnesty International and the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, have documented and reported multiple incidents of extrajudicial killings, torture, and forced eviction of ethnic Hazaras, as well as the seizure of their lands and homes in several provinces.

For instance, Amnesty International has documented a series of targeted attacks and extrajudicial killings of Shi'a Hazaras, including a June 26, 2022 incident in which the Taliban detained and unlawfully executed four men during a night raid.

One of the bodies showed signs of torture, and a woman and a 12-year-old girl were also killed during the operation.

Similar attacks were recorded in Ghazni Province and in Daykundi Province by Amnesty International.

The U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch have documented the targeted attacks against Shi'a Hazaras and other religious minorities and stated that the systematic attacks on the Hazara Shi'a community may amount to crimes against humanity.

Meantime, women's lives are not only defined by the Taliban's extremist religious interpretation, but they have also been deprived of the right to practice their faith freely.

In October 2024, the Taliban's Vice and Virtue Minister, Khalid Hanafi, declared that it was prohibited for a grown woman, and I quote, "it is prohibited for a grown woman to recite Quranic verses or perform recitations in front of another grown woman."

He further stated that even phrases central to Islamic faith, such as "takbir," Allahu Akbar, and "subhanallah," were forbidden. And that women were not allowed to lead the call to prayer.

According to Hanafi, there is certainly no

permission for singing by women either. These severe restrictions directly challenge women's ability to express their faith and autonomy.

Beyond these restrictions on religious expression, the Taliban has also banned women from attending mosques in certain regions. Just last week, reports indicated that the Taliban expelled women from mosques in Kandahar and Herat provinces.

Since the start of Ramadan, the Taliban has prevented women from attending Tarawih prayers by standing at mosque entrances and blocking their access.

In addition to these multiple violations, the Taliban have also systematically dismantled all existing laws, policies and institutions designed to provide access to justice, leaving the people of Afghanistan without means to seek justice in face of all these atrocities.

People who wish to practice their faith, convert to a new religion, or even renounce their faith all together are accused of crime. These individuals are often subjected to extrajudicial

executions, torture, and other forms of ill treatment, including public flogging and stoning.

Amnesty International urges you to use the United States government's influence to advocate for the protection of religious freedom in Afghanistan amid the Taliban's systematic and institutionalized oppression.

First, the U.S. and international partners should ensure that protections for freedom of religion or belief are a core part of the diplomatic discussions with the Taliban.

Publicly and clearly condemning ongoing violations by both the Taliban and ISIS-K reinforces accountability.

Second, the U.S. State Department should maintain designation of the Taliban as an Entity of Particular Concern, due to grave violations of religious freedoms.

This designation should guide U.S. policy in holding the Taliban accountable for its actions against religious minorities.

Third, mitigate unintended consequences of

new policies here in the United States. Ensure that new executive actions restricting travel to the United States and cuts to U.S. foreign assistance do not hinder life-saving support and relocation efforts for religious minorities who are the target of Taliban's persecution.

Address the compounded impact of these policies, especially on women and other vulnerable groups.

Strengthen international monitoring and pressure. Support U.N. and human rights organization efforts to monitor and report on human rights violations and encourage other governments to collectively pressure the Taliban to uphold human rights, particularly for religious minorities, women and girls.

And, lastly, recognize the link between religious freedom and security: the religious freedom of other sects of Islam in Afghanistan, which are attacked by Taliban and also ISIS-K and further oppressed by the Taliban systematic cooperation and the government system based on

discrimination, is closely tied to overall security and the presence of ISIS-K in Afghanistan and in the region.

Thank you so much.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Ms. Mehran.

I'm aware that we have only about 40 minutes left in the hearing. So I encourage the remaining witnesses to keep their remarks as brief as possible.

I'd like to turn now to Fereshta Abbasi who represents Human Rights Watch. Ms. Abbasi.

MS. ABBASI: Thank you for giving me an opportunity to present this testimony on the critical issue of religious freedom in Afghanistan.

The human rights of religious minorities and others who do not conform to the interpretation of Islam prescribed by the Taliban are under serious threat.

The Taliban follow an ultraconservative Sunni interpretation of Islam. Yet, approximately ten to 15 percent of Afghans are Shi'a, and there are a significant number of Sufis, small numbers of



Ahmadis, and some Hindus and Sikhs.

The Taliban have not stated that Shi'a or Sufi practices are forbidden. However, they do not consider Ahmadis to be Muslims, and in the past, they have persecuted some of their leaders.

Most of Afghanistan's population of non-Muslims also live under threat of persecution, in particular, Bahai, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and Christians, who practice their faith secretly or have gone into hiding.

An unknown number of Afghans consider themselves agnostic or atheist or otherwise do not practice Islam or any other religion.

Taliban authorities view anyone who has left Islam as having committed apostasy, a crime they believe should be punished by death.

The Taliban are also failing to protect Afghanistan's religious minorities from violence. The Islamic State of Khorasan Province, ISKP, the armed extremist group that is the Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan, has continually attacked Shi'a, Sufi, and non-Muslims in Afghanistan.

The ISKP has repeatedly carried out more than 20 suicide bombings and other armed attacks against Shi'a communities since 2021, in particular targeting ethnic Hazaras, which has resulted in killing and injuring thousands of people.

The Hazara people are not only discriminated against on the basis of their religious beliefs but also face ethnic persecution. They have faced discrimination and abuse by successive Afghan governments for over a century.

We cannot overstate how horrendous these attacks have been. ISKP claimed responsibility for killing 14 men in Daikundi Province, a predominantly Hazara area, on September 12, 2024, the latest attack on the Hazara community in Afghanistan.

On April 29, 2024, a gunman opened fire on worshippers inside the Shi'a Sahib-u-Zaman Mosque in Guzara district, Herat province, killing six people.

On January 6, 2024, ISKP claimed responsibility for an attack on a passenger bus in

the Dasht-e Barchi area, a predominantly Hazara neighborhood in Kabul, that killed at least five people and wounded 20.

The Taliban have condemned ISKP attacks and provided some families of victims with minor financial payments.

The authorities have also vowed to protect vulnerable groups from attacks in the future, but there are few signs that authorities are taking active or significant steps to do so.

Reports from Afghanistan indicate that Christians and other religious minorities who are suspected of converting from Islam face threats of violence, forced conversion, and imprisonment.

These religious minorities often operate in secret, living in constant fear of being outed and subject to brutal punishments.

They are denied the freedom to gather, worship or express their beliefs openly.

The Taliban's interpretation of Sharia and the new rules and policies they have announced cannot be found in any other Islamic country.

Almost all of their rules severely restrict Afghans' fundamental human rights.

This is the situation that Afghans are enduring today under the Taliban rule. The entire population is being forced to live according to ultraconservative interpretations of one branch of a single religion.

Afghanistan is a nightmare for religious freedom and other fundamental human rights.

Furthermore, the Taliban's refusal to recognize Afghanistan's religious diversity and their decision to limit the practice of faith to a single state-sanctioned version of Sunni Islam run counter to the rights to thought, conscience, belief and religion.

These policies contribute to an atmosphere of fear, exclusion, and intolerance.

The U.S. government, which has made serious missteps in Afghanistan over the past 20 years, can nevertheless make important contributions to human rights, particularly the rights of religious minorities.

The U.S. should take immediate and sustained action to hold the Taliban accountable for their violations and ensure that religious freedom is restored for all Afghans, regardless of their faith.

Religious minorities and those who diverge from the Taliban's strict interpretation of Islam live under constant threat of persecution, violence, and death.

And here are my recommendations:

Encourage the international community to press the Taliban to uphold its obligations under international human rights law, including religious freedom, and ensure access to justice for victims of religious persecution.

Sanctions, including travel bans, should target high-ranking Taliban officials who are responsible for persecuting religious minorities and enforcing laws that curtail religious freedom.

Applying Global Magnitsky sanctions to individuals within ISIS/ISKP who are responsible for attacks against the Hazara and other minority

communities.

Provide asylum and resettlement opportunities for individuals at serious risk of persecution due to their religion, particularly those from religious minority groups.

Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Ms. Abbasi.

I turn now to Joseph Azam with the Afghan-American Foundation. Mr. Azam.

MR. AZAM: Thank you.

I'm looking at my testimony to make sure I'm detailed and being as brief as possible. Bear with me.

Thank you, Commissioner, Commissioners, and fellow panelists.

My name is Joseph Azam. I'm with the Afghan-American Foundation, a non-profit here in the U.S. focused on advocacy and research relating to our diaspora here.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify of the dire state of religious freedom in Afghanistan, and it's an honor to be among so many

distinguished colleagues and friends.

The folks who have gone before me have really covered very well the situation in Afghanistan so I'll try to be brief about that and then maybe turn to recommendations, specifically around policy.

Since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, it has become one of the most repressive countries in the world for religious minorities.

The Taliban's strict and exclusionary interpretation of Sharia law leaves no room for religious diversity, and as a result, individuals from minority faiths, including Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is, Christians, Shi'a Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, and others, but also those who practice Sunni Islam are left to live in constant fear and unable to really practice their faith.

Reports of forced conversions, targeted killings, torture, the closing of places of worship, complete erasure of non-Sunni Islamic and non-Muslim religious practices or public life

paints a really grim picture of the reality on the ground.

The Taliban, as has been described by my colleagues, has systematically dismantled previous efforts for decades to create a more pluralistic society in Afghanistan.

The limited religious freedoms that once existed there have been entirely rolled back. Under the Taliban's governance, as you all well know, any deviation from their strict interpretation of Islam is met with harsh punishment, even death.

Individuals who express beliefs beyond and outside of what the Taliban consider appropriate in their orthodoxy are frequently detained, tortured, executed extrajudicially, and certainly not allowed to be a part of public life or civic life in Afghanistan.

Apostasy and blasphemy laws are wielded as tools of repression, leaving no room for dissent or diversity.

Many Afghans now, as we've heard today,



are practicing their faith in secret or at least in isolation. Conversion from Islam is punishable by death making it nearly impossible for Afghan Christians and others to live openly.

And there are reports from underground Christian communities that we've heard that believe, that they are hiding, constantly changing locations, and looking to avoid detection still.

The few remaining members, and there may not even be any at this point, of historic religious communities, such as the Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan, have been forced to flee or are looking to flee, and there's a real risk that Afghanistan will soon be devoid of any religious diversity.

I think one of the interesting things you've heard from my colleagues today is the nexus between religious persecution and gender apartheid.

I think that's important to hit on and to make sure that we all continue to talk about. The persecution of religious minorities in Afghanistan is inextricably linked to the Taliban's broader

system of gender apartheid and oppression of women.

Women and girls from religious minority backgrounds are uniquely vulnerable, facing both faith-based and gender-based oppression.

Under Taliban rule, women already face immense restrictions on their freedom, barred from education, barred from primary, yeah, primary school, prohibited from working in most sectors, and required to adhere to strict codes of dress and conduct.

Women in religious minority communities, the dangers are even more acute. Reports indicate that young girls from Sikh and Christian families have been abducted, forcibly converted and married to Taliban members.

These women were stripped not only of their religious identity but also their autonomy and dignity.

The Taliban's legal system, which denies women basic rights, offers no recourse for victims of forced marriage, rape or abduction.

In many cases, families who attempt to

reclaim their daughters are threatened or attacked.

Additionally, religious minority women are disproportionately affected by the Taliban policies that restrict movement. This is true of all Afghan women and girls.

Because they lack the male guardians required to accompany them in public, many are effectively imprisoned in their homes. The cases where they attempt to flee, they're often denied access, and certainly in the current political climate, their avenues to leave the country are few and far between.

So I wanted to make sure that we don't lose sight of this intersection of gender and faith in Afghanistan's oppressive system because it is compounding the suffering that so many are undergoing right now.

And without our intervention and our guidance and our efforts, these abuses will continue unabated leading to the complete erasure of religious minorities in Afghanistan and further tearing of the fabric of society there.

Now I also wanted to make sure to cover the broader implications of the broader impact of this persecution.

The persecution of religious minorities in Afghanistan does not exist in isolation. It has broad implications for regional stability, for human rights, and global security.

A state that systematically oppresses religious minorities and women fosters an environment of intolerance that can serve as a breeding ground for extremism. The Taliban's harboring of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS-K further exacerbates these concerns.

These groups have launched attacks against Shi'a Muslims, particularly in the Hazara community, as well as Sufi Muslims and other minority sects.

If left unchecked, this persecution could have a destabilizing effect far beyond Afghanistan's borders.

Furthermore, we should not lose sight of the fact that Afghanistan's treatment of religious

minorities sends a message to other authoritarian and extremist regimes around the world.

If we do not act, if we do not stand with the people of Afghanistan, it sets a dangerous precedent that religious persecution can occur anywhere with impunity.

In terms of recommendations going forward, my colleagues have covered many of those areas so I wanted to offer a handful as well for you to consider and hopefully share.

Given the alarming realities that I described, I would urge you to encourage among our leaders and your peers and colleagues to take decisive action to support religious freedom in Afghanistan and the Afghan people, specifically, in five areas.

First, prioritizing persecuting religious minorities for refugee resettlement. As you all know, with the onset of this new administration, there have been significant impediments and really a total freeze on refugee resettlement.

But truly, the U.S. should be leading and

streamlining pathways for Afghans, including those from religious minorities, to be able to reach safety and security and have pathways to a lot of them to escape the country.

We should be encouraging Congress to support increased funding actually for organizations that assist with evacuations and that help expedite these pathways so that the U.S. can help prevent further loss of life and further oppression for these high-risk communities.

Secondly, there should be targeted accountability. We should be urging our government to impose consequences on the Taliban, including sanctions on individuals who are responsible for religious persecution and work with international partners to hold them accountable.

The Magnitsky Act has been an effective tool targeting human rights abusers in other countries, such as Myanmar, and we should consider applying some more measures on Afghanistan that would increase pressure on the Taliban.

Third, leveraging diplomatic pressure on

regional partners. We should really be working with countries that have sway over the Taliban, including Pakistan, Qatar, and others, to press for basic protections for religious minorities.

We should be encouraging any engagement with the Taliban to be conditioned on measurable improvements in human rights, including religious freedom.

Similar approaches have been taken in other governments, including Sudan, in the past, proving that pressure can work.

Certainly, I would encourage continued support for USCIRF and the State Department to monitor the situation in Afghanistan. It's been mentioned that Afghanistan is a Country of Particular Concern, and the Taliban have been flagged similarly, and that should continue.

There should be continued documentation of human rights abuses. These will be essential for future accountability, much like we've seen in Myanmar, because history will not look well upon those who did not look to help Afghans.

And finally, the importance of humanitarian assistance. Any humanitarian aid provided to Afghanistan must be carefully monitored to ensure that it reaches all vulnerable populations, including religious minorities.

Aid programs should be designed to prevent the Taliban from interfering with them and discriminating how they're distributed, and much like efforts we've seen in Syria and elsewhere, we should really be thinking about trusted local partners rather than relying on government controlled channels.

Finally, the U.S. has a moral and strategic interest—I wanted to make sure to restate that—in ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a completely monolithic and repressive state.

Protecting religious freedom is not just about individual rights. It's about the stability and future of the region and the country. The Taliban's systemic campaign against religious minorities, against women, is not a violation of



fundamental human rights alone, but it's a harbinger of greater extremism and insecurity in the region.

We have the power to take meaningful action. I appreciate your time in this forum for us to discuss this topic. And I welcome your questions.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Mr. Azam.

Finally, I'd like to invite Kate Clark from the Afghanistan Analyst Network to speak. Ms. Clark.

MS. CLARK: Thank you very much.

I realize time is a constraint so please assume I'm thanking everyone, and I'll try and stick to my six minutes that I've been given.

So what an interesting panel we've had. The two panels have looked at wide-ranging ways in which the Islamic Emirate government in Afghanistan is oppressing not only minorities but also the general population in terms of religious freedom.

I want to step back a bit. I thought it would be interesting to look at why that is rather

than just the what.

The Emirate sees its raison d'etre as establishing an Islamic system of government. They feel that they defeated the superpower, America. They consider that the defeat of the other superpower, the Soviet Union, was also down to Afghans fighting in the name of Islam.

So that is where they come to the table. They feel that they are rolling through divine grace, that they have a divine mandate for what they do.

It is an authoritarian, I think, I would say a would-be totalitarian. They don't have the power yet that a totalitarian state has, but that's what they would like.

It's an authoritarian state that's aligned to very quite minority values when it comes to Afghans. They inherited a state that was functioning with a good bureaucracy, ability to raise finance. They controlled the whole territory.

This is very different from any other

state that's come to power in Afghanistan over the last 40 years. They have both the ideology to try and control Afghans, to try and institute this divinely mandated state, as they see it, and the means to do that because of the way that power changed hands in 2021.

The makeup of the states is you have the Amir at the top, Amir Hibatullah Akhundzada, who calls himself the commander of the faithful. All power is in his hands—executive, legislative, and judicial.

He is the final arbiter on the interpretation of Sharia law. He's the final arbiter on things like, you know, whether someone gets a death sentence. He rules by decree.

One of the characteristics of the Taliban is an ideology of obedience to the amir. They see that as their religious duty, which means that even within that very narrow group of men, mullahs, largely Pashtun, largely from the south, pretty well, you know, 99 percent Sunni from the Deobandi school, there is not even there there's much room

for discussion or complaint.

You get occasional whispers from senior Afghans within the Taliban of upset, for example, on the girls' education, but no senior Afghan in the regime has taken a step towards anything practical in trying to disturb the status quo.

And the amir is on the ultra-conservative wing of Afghan Islam. He's a rural Pashtun mullah. He's rarely been outside the country.

And we see, even from other Taliban, we see much more progressive views on things like girls' education. Many Taliban who were in exile saw that the world didn't fall apart if your daughters went to school. They were living in places like Quetta in Pakistan or Karachi or the Gulf where girls' education was normal.

The officials, many of them were not only sending their girls to school but to university. So there is diversity within there, but it comes up against this deeply authoritarian streak.

And the way that it's being implemented is through particularly the police, the bit of the

government that is aimed at implementing morality, promotion of or promulgation of virtue and prevention of vice.

They have what are called "enforcers" so there is, there is a policy of the state that is deemed to have the duty, the unchecked powers, the ability to give punishments without recourse to courts, which can go to beating, to detentions, on Afghans' private lives.

And I think this is key. It's not just the religious minorities have a whole heap of problems, but the general population is being policed.

So, for example, we've just done some research on how Afghan men feel about the restrictions on women and girls. And they are, even the most conservative, the supporters of the Taliban, are in anguish about the ban on girls' education.

Or, for example, you know, Afghans who have all, you know, the women in their family have always kept purdah, when they go outside, they wear

a burqa. They don't go out generally without a male relative.

But they absolutely do not agree with the Taliban police questioning them about who the woman that they are in the car with, their wife, taking the wives off for independent questioning, which is complete dishonor for Afghans, both men and women.

And we found that women were often not going out because they didn't want to be questioned by officials. So they were self-policing because of this threat to them.

So the other thing I wanted to say, I think this is deeply un-Afghan, this, this interference by the state in people's private lives.

Mostly in Afghanistan, decisions are made at the family level or the community level. Do we want our girls to go to school? You know, how do I feel about working? How does my husband feel about me working outside the home in paid work?

How I dress? These are family issues that nothing to do with the state. And this is a new

way; I would say it's unprecedented. Other governments have tried. We've had, you know, deeply authoritarian religious conservatives in power before, but they haven't been able to really impose their views.

The other thing I would just stress at the end of this. America does have form here. And one of the reasons why the Taliban are so very adamant about not wanting what they see as foreign interference in domestic affairs is the record of the last 20 years.

And remember for them, they suffered. They and people in the, particularly in the Pashtun southern heartland, they suffered mass arbitrary arrests, torture. I mean you can go and look at the Senate reports on the use of torture by the CIA, also by the U.S. military, also by the Republican forces that were supported by all of the foreign armies, including my own.

So they see that they, there was a war on Islam. That's how they conceive the last 20 years. That makes it almost impossible for them to, for

any outside government, and that includes Muslim governments that are actually quite close to them in the Gulf in terms of somehow they're more conservative than the general round of Muslims in the country.

They don't like, they don't respond to what they see as either carrots or sticks. This has been absolutely clear from the beginning.

Offers of money, for example, reopening girls schools did not work. In the end, the amir said we are not going to have them open. And I would just like to echo what can be done. I think this, you know, trying to convince the Taliban or coerce them or threaten them doesn't work.

Change will come from inside if it comes at all, but for people to work inside, including very, very, very brave people, documenting human rights abuses, documenting abuses against women, giving, I don't know, legal aid to women, monitoring prisons, feeding documentary evidence back to human rights defenders in exile, Afghan independent media, it needs support.



It needs money basically, and one of the problems with Donald, President Trump's stop-work order to USAID is that those are some of the groups that are being funded along with last year it was 40 percent of the civilian aid was coming from USAID, which is obviously a disaster if that's cut for the humanitarian effort.

But, in particular, these particular groups, they need funding that is predictable. It's not, as other panelists have said, it's not big scale, but it is absolutely crucial, and it is one of the things that I think the amir will welcome if these groups are unfunded and can't operate.

Back to you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Ms. Clark.

I'd like to thank all of the panelists. This has been extraordinary testimony this morning, and I appreciate it.

I received a note from the staff at USCIRF that we've been granted an extra five minutes so if you can hang on for an additional five minutes in

our schedule today, that would be great.

At this time, I'd like to turn questioning of the witnesses to Vice Chair Soloveichik.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you very much, Chair Schneck.

I'd like to just follow up on the testimonies of Mr. Azam and Ms. Clark, and really follow up on my own question related to sanctions.

Mr. Azam, you mentioned the Global Magnitsky Act as a possible tool, and Ms. Clark seemed to be in contrast, reflected that the Taliban response, carrots nor sticks, and so I'm interested, Mr. Azam, for your view on how the Global Magnitsky Act can be used and what change it can bring about?

And then after that perhaps, Ms. Clark, we can have some thoughts from you as well.

MR. AZAM: Thank you. Thank you, Vice Chair.

I think Ms. Clark is a friend and is the one whose work I always read. So I think, I don't know if we differ so much in so much as we're

encouraging perhaps an all-sort-of-friends' approach.

Sanctions, generally speaking, have been incredibly damaging in many ways to Afghanistan in ways that people don't actually understand.

One, it really creates an atmosphere of distrust with the international community, and, two, obviously there are economic impacts.

But there is an opportunity to rethink how that's done and to really focus on individuals. That's been something that a lot of us have been trying to push for, specifically when it comes to the freedom of movement.

For example, the Taliban, their ability to exercise their authority outside of the country, their ability to be given platforms outside of the country, and given, I would say, standing. That's really important to them.

Perhaps Kate would agree, but I think there are ways where targeted actions like that could be really impactful and effective, and the fact that they have not been yet to me is not a

reason to abandon them frankly.

Now, I think there is a broader piece of work to be done around educating the private sector, for example, banks, for example, about the difference between those types of sanctions and those types of restrictions, and the types of sanctions people imagine exist for countries like North Korea, for example, or Cuba.

I think there's a lot of education that we could do so that the private sector and civil society is able to continue its work. But to the extent the international community has the ability to exercise any kind of consequence or impose any kind of consequence on individual Taliban members, speaking personally, I think that's a real valuable tool and also a real valuable signal, that there is a level of intolerance for what they are doing.

Whether or not it ends up impacting their behavior immediately, it's still something that's communicated to them.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you very much.

Ms. Clark.

MS. CLARK: Yeah, I'd have to agree with Joseph. It's really difficult, and I don't envy anyone who has to make choices on this.

On the one hand, you have a government that is, came to power through military might. It doesn't represent its own people. It has instituted intolerant and authoritarian rule, and it doesn't respond to either the, you know, the demands or the criticism of its neighbors or the region or internationally.

So you've got, you've got a government that, you know, basically would rather Afghans starve than let girls go to school. I think that's the basic contention.

At the same time, you've got a population that did not choose that government, and it was a country heavily reliant on aid that got almost completely taken away when the Taliban came to power. That's what sanctions meant.

And for the American sanctions that are now, you know, very quickly there was a series of

waivers introduced. So most things should be legal, but they're not because you've got problems with banking, international banks doing business with Afghanistan.

So I think there's two choices for countries. Up till now there has been this sort of strange—what can I say—desire to keep Afghans from worse economic crisis and hunger, but at the same time not help the Afghan government, the Taliban government.

So you've got aid that goes through the NGOs, the U.N. It sort of works, but it doesn't, it means that the economy doesn't flourish.

The Taliban are in power. They are able to, I mean at the moment, they are devoting half of their revenues to paying government, soldiers in the army. So there's that. There's that.

Aid sort of helps keep them in power and it helps Afghans from starving, if that makes sense.

The sanctions both keep Afghanistan poor, and they also send a strong signal to the Taliban

that its rule is not normal.

So you've got a whole different lot of factors fighting each other basically. It's not a brilliant, it's not a brilliant situation, but it's difficult to say what would be better without harming Afghans.

I'd agree with Joseph that the travel ban has to stay in place and should really be implemented. You know, it's not right that Taliban leaders have freedom of movement when other Afghans don't.

Sorry. That was a really complicated, a really long answer and probably wasn't very helpful.

VICE CHAIR SOLOVEICHIK: Thank you. Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Commissioner Mahmood.

COMMISSIONER MAHMOOD: Thank you so much. Thank you for your really informative statements.

My question is, we spent about over a trillion dollars was spent about 20 years, over two decades, in Afghanistan. We had military. We had

NGOs. We have every sort of thing there.

And we couldn't make a darn difference. We are more repressive today than what we were about 30 years ago. We have more restrictions than they are more—your statement was, Ms. Clark, was so right, and you were just really reading my mind on that thing, that how things are done.

We got to think about different ways where we can go because just getting back on this thing, if your 20-year war, if your all kind of bombs and all kinds of ammunition and everything could not change them, Talibans don't have an interest to travel to America or Germany and London.

They really don't have bank balances here. They don't have bank accounts. They don't do any business. And putting in a travel ban, I mean I'm not against that, but putting in a travel ban is not going to make any difference. They are very happy where they are.

We need to find a way where we can engage them more, bring more Muslim scholars there, have more dialogue, bring up something. They're not



going to give all the women all the freedom in one day.

But little by little, some relief for those women, some knowledge they can learn, but we need to figure out some more options, some more ways, more innovative, more we have dialogue. That might be more helpful than just spending all this power and everything, and they are still there.

And as you said in your statement, they feel so special. They think that over the last hundred years, they have beaten every biggest force, the British empire, the Americans, and Americans with the whole world together.

Why they would be worried about somebody, just threatening them you cannot travel, I will not give you this, they're surviving, they're living.

So we, we, and I don't expect that you would have an answer, but somebody has to think about what are other better ways or what are other innovative ways where we can get in there because the problem is not Afghanistan?

My other friends, Metra and Ms. Abbasi,

would know, the Taliban [?] is desperately moving to Pakistan.

And just last one week, five Muftis were killed, and mosques in Pakistan are being demolished because there are so many minority communities in [?], and that is all effect of Talibans, and they are fighting an active war.

So there should be some emergent, urgent, innovative, right ways. If you have anything in mind, tell me. Otherwise, I think just my comment and my question that there have got to be some new ways to deal with that.

Thank you.

Ms. Clark, have you ever thought about this?

MS. CLARK: Yes, I, I mean the problem is you've had really—I would say Tom West—your, I want to say is a special envoy on Afghanistan and Pakistan? Also, Rina.

Many countries have tried to thoughtfully engage with the Taliban to try and get an amelioration of policies, and it hasn't worked.

And this is why I say that I do think, I think what's happening inside the country is important.

And that fund—that critical funding to people who were doing work on the inside and their allies on the outside, particularly Afghan groups, but also, you know, some of the big human rights groups as well, I think it's absolutely critical.

And to, you know, the emirate is not going to be there forever. That's the other thing. So I think one of the other things that diplomats should be doing is talking to a whole range of Afghans, not assuming that whether or not they engage with the Taliban, it's going to make a difference.

But also not assuming they're going to be there forever, and that the change, I don't think, personally, I don't think this government is sustainable because they're so exclusionary, and they're so sort of contradictory to the norms of Afghan behavior and culture.

So, you know, there will be a time when change will come so one of the other things is not putting all the eggs of what to do about

Afghanistan or how to deal with Afghanistan in the Taliban basket. Over.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Ms. Clark.

I want to recognize we have about eight minutes left, and both Ms. Mehran and Ms. Abbasi want to make comments in response to Commissioner Mahmood's question.

So, Ms. Mehran, I think you were the first.

MS. MEHRAN: Thank you.

I think I find it very difficult to agree with Commissioner Mahmood in terms of the premises of his comment or his questions because seeing Afghanistan only as a Taliban or seeing the solution for Afghanistan only engagement with the Taliban, and also it would be in denial of, I think, the very diverse, ethnic, linguistic and religious dynamics of Afghanistan to see the Taliban as the only one.

They're very diverse. Afghanistan is not only like any other country, the Taliban sustain in the long run, and we see that solution. Plus I

think it's not fair to say nothing has changed in Afghanistan and see the diverse group of people inside the country as the Taliban.

Before the Taliban, millions of girls were going to school, hundreds of women were going to work, and so the change is there. But imposing, it was the U.S. government that made a deal in Doha with the Taliban, without our presence, when they signed the agreement.

Intra-Afghan dialogue hasn't been started, and they left them with huge ammunitions and military power that they are now threatening and have terrorist people in imposing their restrictions.

So I think it's not fair to be like Afghanistan is Taliban, and solution is engaging with them or how we can come up with a, you know, with a new way to change the Taliban, to change Afghanistan.

That's not true, and I think as a person, as a woman from Afghanistan, and it's not also fair to make the Taliban as big to be like they topple

the British Empire, they did the Russians. They didn't.

It was the people of Afghanistan and different groups who fought against different people, you know, groups intervened in Afghanistan first, and it was the U.S. government who created the Taliban to, during the Cold War and then just left them as an extremist group that we had to then, then do the fight.

So I think, I think, I disagree with the commissioner on the premises of that question, first.

And the second one is I want, I want as in this discussion to speak the agency of the people of Afghanistan, the women of Afghanistan, the diverse ethnic and linguistic diversity of Afghanistan and see them as equal human beings who are all not extremists, and I think those are the opposition, those are the groups that working with them and allowing them and respecting their agency is therefore a peaceful and sustainable approach in the long run for my country.

Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Ms. Mehran.

Ms. Abbasi.

MS. ABBASI: Thank you so much.

I mean just adding also to the fact that saying that, I mean lots of U.S. has invested in Afghanistan. I mean millions and billions of money in the past 20 years, heavy military presence.

I also think that it might be the time for the international community, especially the U.S., to also rethink of the missteps that they took in Afghanistan. I'm not going to go into the details of what exactly has happened, but I also don't think that it's fair to blame Afghans for what happened in the past 20 years in the country.

And I mean on the recommendations for them, one of the things that could be done, and I believe one of the things that we haven't tried yet, is holding them accountable for what they are doing.

So for, we only have requested applications of a response to talk to Taliban

leader, and they remain the only court and the only accountable mechanism where Afghanistan is identifying perpetrators at the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

The Afghan civil society is calling for establishment of an additional independent accountability mechanism complementary to the Special Rapporteur, Richard Bennett's mandate.

And I believe that that's one of the tools that we could then use in the past four years, and we should be using, and it is time for the international community to send a strong message to the Taliban that if they don't want to reverse the fundamental rights of Afghans in the country, then they would be held accountable for these violations.

Thank you.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Ms. Abbasi.

Mr. Azam, we have about two minutes for you, sir.

MR. AZAM: Yeah, no. I appreciate Commissioner Mahmood's question, but also it occurs



to me that there is no better evidence of the progress of Afghanistan than Metra Mehran and Fereshta Abbasi.

And I think that it's really important for us to examine these views that we hold and how sometimes we are unable to process evidence right before our eyes. And this is not a criticism, but it's a theme that's occurred.

And in terms of one final comment on the democracy in Afghanistan, I note that in this country, and I'm an asylee here. I came on asylum many decades ago.

We gained our independence in 1776, and we had segregation until 1954. And so the arc of democracy is also something we should appreciate, and so the expectation that Afghanistan would reach its peak in a matter of two or three decades I think is unreasonable.

What's really upsetting and unfortunate in this conversation is that it was positioned to do that because of folks like [?] and Metra Mehran and other leaders of the country. And so I think our

focus should really be on how to pick up where we left off in 2021 and to support the people of Afghanistan and their agency to the extent possible while they fight for their own freedom and for their own futures.

CHAIR SCHNECK: Thank you, Mr. Azam.

If I could just make a comment in closing. I want to recognize that this has been a rich and thoughtful and thought provoking serious two panels this morning, and I, on behalf of USCIRF, I wanted to recognize just how important we value your testimony and your recommendations.

With everyone, I hope that perhaps some glimmer of progress might come from conversations like these. So thank you to the witnesses very much for being here today.

With that, our time has ended. I thank the audience for their attention to these matters. This hearing is officially adjourned. Thank you.

MS. CLARK: Thank you very much.

[Whereupon, at 12:04 p.m. ET, the hearing was adjourned.]