



## **Rising FoRB Violations Against Muslims Abroad**

*Opening remarks as prepared for delivery*

### **USCIRF Chair Vicky Hartzler**

Good morning. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing will come to order. I'm USCIRF Chair Vicky Hartzler and I am delighted to welcome you to this morning's hearing.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. legislative branch agency created by the 1998 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 hearing.

We are glad to welcome recorded remarks this morning from Congressman French Hill of Arkansas. We appreciate Congressman Hill's participation and leadership on international religious freedom issues.

*Video Remarks*

Thank you Congressman Hill for your remarks on this important topic.

On Friday, February 6<sup>th</sup>, Muslims just outside Islamabad, Pakistan gathered - as they did each week - to pray. Prayer is a fundamental manifestation of religious freedom, serving as an essential intimate link between an individual's belief and practice. As these worshippers entered the mosque to pray, the sharp crack of gunfire rang out, echoing off the walls of the prayer hall. Moments later, an explosion. Smoke and debris filled the air. Then shouts of panic. In the aftermath of the attack, for which the Islamic State claimed responsibility, thirty-two Muslim worshippers were killed and over 160 injured. The suicide bombing was Islamabad's deadliest attack in eighteen years.

But Muslims do not suffer attacks at the hands of terrorist organizations alone. On February 1<sup>st</sup> of this year, a mob gathered in a small village in India. Armed with sticks, bricks, stones, and kerosene bottles, a violent crowd vandalized six houses and set vehicles on fire. The group injured seven police officers trying to protect

twenty village residents targeted by the mob solely for their Muslim faith.

Unfortunately, this was not the first such attack. For years, mobs in India have targeted Muslim individuals, houses, businesses, and houses of worship. Even more concerning, India's government, which professes Hindu nationalism, has been complicit in targeting Muslims. This includes the alarming recent arrest of 12 Muslim men in Uttar Pradesh simply for praying inside a private home.

Alarmingly, governments themselves are directly responsible for attacks on Muslims. Last September, Muslim worshippers at nine mosques in and around Paris, France arrived for early morning prayer. Approaching the mosque entrance, they were shocked to find a gruesome sight: decapitated pig's heads drenched in blood. Serbian and French investigators later revealed that the Serbian nationals who had placed the pig's heads did not act independently, but rather "at the behest of a foreign intelligence service." Their investigation strongly indicated the involvement of Russian intelligence. This plot was meant not only to strike fear among Muslims who were simply practicing their faith but to also undermine democratic stability and sow social division.

Confronting these attacks matter because an attack on one group's religious freedom is an attack on us all. Last month, for example, a British man pled guilty

in court to the rape of a woman he believed was Muslim, but who was actually Sikh. The man followed her from a bus stop into her home and raped the woman, all while shouting profanity and insults based on the misperception that she was Muslim. As the judge in the case noted, “a stranger who breaks into a woman's house, who commits these offences and does so expressing hostility to her on the basis of her presumed religion is a dangerous person.”

In addition, U.S. action on this important matter has significant U.S. national security implications. The Trump administration has built historic bilateral and multilateral relations with Muslim-majority governments, particularly those in the Middle East. Reiterating to these governments that universal FoRB protections apply to Muslims as well, will further strengthen these ties, advance U.S. strategic interests, and hold accountable governments in the region that restrict FoRB for Muslim minority communities.

Today’s hearing lays out the nature of restrictions on FoRB for Muslims and will help crystallize policy recommendations that advance FoRB for Muslims and all people. With that, I would like to now turn the floor over to USCIRF Vice Chair Asif Mahmood.

## **USCIRF Vice Chair Asif Mahmood**

Thank you Chair Hartzler. I would like to welcome everyone to today's hearing and thank our witnesses for being here.

Anti-Muslim hatred threatens FoRB for those of the Islamic faith and for others as well. Confronting anti-Muslim hatred is therefore a matter of concern for all people. USCIRF has been tracking key trends in this regard, which I will share with you this morning.

First, governments often use blasphemy laws to restrict FoRB for Muslims. Such laws often target Muslim dissidents or those whose religious views differ from official state imposed interpretations. In Afghanistan just last year, the Taliban sentenced to death Abdul Alim Khamoosh for blasphemy over allegations related to nonviolent religious speech. In Nigeria, four Muslims are in prison for blasphemy including two facing a death sentence. And in Pakistan, the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan party has incited violent mobs targeting Ahmadiyya Muslims and others under the guise of enforcing that country's blasphemy law. Such laws restrict FoRB and prevent Muslims from expressing religious beliefs protected under international law.

Second, attacks on Muslims often target women in particular. Muslim women face harassment and assault simply for wearing a hijab, in accordance with their faith practice. In the Netherlands this past January, police opened an investigation into a

video of a police officer in Utrecht beating two Muslim women wearing the hijab with a baton and kicking them. Government attempts to restrict or ban the hijab are also pervasive and a restriction on FoRB, particularly in Europe. Last year, governments extended such bans in France, Denmark, Portugal, and politicians floated similar bans in Italy and Sweden, in addition to Australia and Canada.

Third, Muslims abroad face a pervasive environment of hostility that risks restricting FoRB. Governments are obligated to address this hostility. In February, two women in India graffitied “this road is not for Muslims” on the side of the Uttarakhand-Delhi highway. Last month, a Muslim candidate for city council in Birmingham, UK who also wears the hijab reported comments on her campaign’s social media account including “filthy Muslim” and “This woman wants to get hurt. She is begging for it.” Governments have indeed responded in some cases. For example, In March, Australia’s Senate censured a member who asked in an interview, “how can you tell me there are good Muslims?” This is particularly true as legitimate debates over population movement and the future of national identities become poisoned with stereotypes, misinformation, and hatred toward individual Muslims on the basis of their faith.

In light of recent attacks on Muslims, these examples are not idle speech. Last year, a woman in Ajax, Canada, attacked a Muslim woman wearing a hijab at a library, shouted profanities, and attempted to set her hijab on fire. Last July, a man stabbed to death 26-year-old Rahma Ayat, a Muslim Algerian nursing student in Hannover, Germany, after months of harassment about her hijab.

This hatred is not only harmful to FoRB but a national security threat as well.

Governments that ignore the isolation and marginalization of anti-Muslim hatred open the door to recruitment by groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. These organizations use anti-Muslim hatred to radicalize recruits by telling them that such hatred is proof that Muslims cannot thrive in open and democratic societies.

When governments defend FoRB for Muslims, they are therefore not only defending universal freedom but also going aggressively on the offense against those who invoke religion to justify violence.

Support for FoRB is a proud American tradition with a long history of bipartisan support. Religious freedom has not only universal appeal but is a foundational American value. As an American, I am proud to stand for the freedom of every individual to teach, practice, worship, and observe the tenets of their faith.

Confronting anti-Muslim hatred is part and parcel of these important efforts to ensure FoRB for all people. I look forward to hearing how the United States can best support these efforts abroad.

I now turn the floor back to Chair Hartzler.

**USCIRF Chair Vicky Hartzler**

Thank you, Vice Chair Mahmood.

We'll now turn to our witnesses, who I will introduce now.

**Farid Hafez** is a Senior Research Fellow with the Bridge Initiative at Georgetown University, and Associate Teaching Professor of International Relations at the College of William & Mary.

**Abdassamad El Yazidi** is Chairman of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany.

**Jewher Ilham** is the Forced Labor Project Manager of the Worker Rights Consortium, representing the organization on the steering committee of the Coalition to end Forced Labor in the Uyghur Region.

**Arselan Suleiman** is a partner working on international litigation and arbitration at Foley Hoag LLP and represented The Gambia in its lawsuit against Myanmar for the Rohingya genocide. He is also former Acting U.S. Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

**Tariq Jamil** is an Islamic Scholar from Pakistan who has been named one of the 500 most influential Muslims by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic

Thought. His testimony will be read in English by Vice Chair Asif Mahmood.

Mr. Hafez, you may begin your testimony.