United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

Testimony by Chair Nury Turkel
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

Hearing on

Discrimination and Persecution Against Muslims Worldwide

Before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Thursday, June 30, 2022 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 noon

Thank you, Co-Chair McGovern, Co-Chair Smith, Rep. Omar, and members of the Commission for holding this timely hearing on the persecution of Muslims and for inviting the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, to testify.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government body that is dedicated to promoting the universal right to freedom of religion or belief around the world. USCIRF seeks to defend religious freedom internationally for people of all faiths, and of none. Throughout the year, we monitor religious freedom conditions abroad and make policy recommendations to the President, Department of State, and Congress.

With the State Department's determinations last year that the Burmese and Chinese governments' atrocities against Muslim majority groups constitute genocide and crimes against humanity, and with anti-Muslim hatred continuing to manifest itself around the world in various ways, this hearing could not be more pressing.

The Chinese government's systematic policies to forcibly assimilate Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims and to eradicate their distinct ethno-religious identities are now well-documented. The government has arbitrarily incarcerated millions of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslims in concentration camps, prisons, and forced labor camps for a variety of religiously related reasons. Former detainees and witnesses reported physical and psychological torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, forced labor, and forced sterilization and abortion while in custody. Moreover, authorities have separated as many as 880,000 Muslim children from their parents and destroyed or desecrated important religious and cultural sites throughout northwest China.

In 2017, the Burmese military perpetrated mass killings and rapes against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, forcing over 745,000 people to flee to Bangladesh within days. Each year since 2017, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya continue to flee due to ongoing violence against them.

Across Europe, anti-Muslim bias exists through laws, discrimination in public institutions, prejudice in the immigration process, online harassment, and violent attacks. In France, for example, a 2021 law targeting so-called "Islamist separatism," strengthened state oversight of mosques and other Islamic organizations. The government now has the power to close houses of worship and dissolve religious organizations without a court order if any members are accused of "provoking violence or inciting hatred." In addition, religious organizations must obtain a government permit every five years and are subject to an annual audit if they receive foreign funding. Critics of the new law say that it gives the government too much power over civic and religious groups and unfairly targets Islam in a country where Muslims have faced decades of discrimination, hate crimes, and marginalization. In Austria, a government map showing the locations of more than 600 mosques and Muslim associations in the country, ostensibly to fight political Islam, raised concerns of fostering ill-will toward Muslim groups and endangering their safety. Muslim women in Germany continued to be denied job opportunities because they wear headscarves.

Elsewhere, state repression undermines the rights of Muslims who dissent from the government's prescribed version of Islam. In Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Shi'a Muslims continue to face ongoing and systematic government discrimination in areas of employment, political representation, and freedom of expression. Sunni

Muslims in Iran face discrimination, arrest, and sentencing on spurious charges. In Pakistan, Ahmadiyya Muslims continue to face severe government persecution for their beliefs and self-identification as Muslims. In 2021 alone, the Ahmadiyya community in the country reported 49 police cases for reasons of faith as well as the desecrations of 121 Ahmadiyya graves and 15 places of worship by mobs often assisted by authorities.

Governments also repress Muslims through the use of purposefully vague "extremism" laws that target people who peacefully practice their faith outside of government-approved institutions. These methods are used around the world but particularly in Russia and Central Asian states such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. I recently returned from a USCIRF delegation to Uzbekistan where we heard how peaceful Muslims continue to be detained, imprisoned, or harassed simply for practicing their faith independently, including for possessing religious literature, teaching their faith to the next generation, or praying with others outside of government approved spaces.

In addition to government persecution, nonstate actors in many regions around the world prevent individuals and groups from living out their faith, or their conviction to have no faith at all. These terrorist groups, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya, the Houthis in Yemen, and multiple ISIS affiliate groups in several different regions, violently target anyone who does not conform

to their extremist ideology, including any other interpretation of Islam. In fact, these groups often operate in Muslim majority areas, killing, injuring, and kidnapping Muslims for practicing their faith and their values according to their conscience.

Lastly, I would like to propose some policy recommendations to help stem the tide of rising violence and discrimination against the global Muslim community. The U.S. refugee resettlement program should prioritize those individuals and groups who are most vulnerable, including Muslim victims of the most egregious forms of religious persecution such as Uyghurs from China, Rohingya from Burma, Ahmadis from Pakistan, and Hazara Shi'a from Afghanistan. In fact, Congress could create by law a Priority 2, or P-2, designation for members of religious minority groups at extreme risk of persecution by the Taliban. This alone would go a long way toward supporting Muslims persecuted in this particular context in Afghanistan.

Also, the State Department has applied waivers on four CPC-designated countries that heavily persecute Muslims: Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. This essentially releases the U.S. government from taking legislatively mandated punitive actions as a result of the CPC designation. To address this, Congress should urge the administration to review U.S. policy toward

these countries and to make appropriate policy changes to demonstrate meaningful consequences and encourage positive change.

It should be clear from what I have shared that the persecution of Muslims is not sporadic or random. It involves both systematic and egregious repression and the violent targeting of members of this diverse faith community in a range of countries across the world, much as Christians, Jews, and others are targeted in many places globally. As advocates of international religious freedom of diverse faiths and beliefs, and of none, we must refrain from discussions about which group is most persecuted and instead work on behalf of each other to ensure that members of all religious communities, including Muslims, can live and worship as they see fit. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to your questions.