



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

### **Discrimination and Persecution Against Muslims Worldwide**

**Thursday, June 30, 2022**

**10:00 – 11:30 a.m.**

**Virtual via Cisco WebEx**

#### **As prepared for delivery**

Good morning to everyone and thank you for joining us today for this Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on discrimination and persecution against Muslims worldwide.

I extend a special welcome to Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, a member of the Commission's Executive Committee, who is joining Co-Chair Smith and myself on the dais today.

We are happy that we were able to schedule this hearing during the same week as the 2022 nongovernmental International Religious Freedom Summit that is concluding today. This is the second year that the Human Rights Commission has coordinated a hearing on religious freedom to coincide with the Summit.

These days there are not many issues that unite Democrats and Republicans, but the importance of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is one of them.

In the United States, the First Amendment to the Constitution protects that right, first, by enshrining the separation of church and state, and second, by also guaranteeing the rights to freedom of expression and assembly that are necessary if people are to be able to exercise their faith.

Internationally, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is recognized in Article 18 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), which the United States helped write,

and in Article 18 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), to which the United States is a state party.

Both these instruments also prohibit discrimination based on religion. Article 27 of the Covenant is very explicit:

“In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.”

In short, the right of religious minorities to practice their faith is meant to be protected.

But we all know that in reality governments often trample on the rights of religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities.

By the way, those three categories – religion, ethnicity, language – often overlap.

Since its founding in 2008, this Commission has focused attention on many situations in which the rights of minorities have been grievously violated. Often the minorities have been Muslims: the Uyghurs in China, Rohingya in Burma, Muslims in India.

I cannot emphasize strongly enough that the two situations in the world today that the U.S. government considers to be ongoing genocides are the actions of the Chinese authorities against the Uyghurs and the Burmese state against the Rohingya.

It is not always the case that those repressing Muslims are non-Muslims. The Commission has also examined situations where the power of the state is exercised on behalf of a particular expression of Islam at the expense of others. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, and Bahrain all come to mind. We should not be surprised that a 2020 Pew report found “a strong association between authoritarianism and government restrictions on religion.”

We have also seen how global efforts to combat terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11 have led to stigmatization against Muslims, including in Europe and here at home. That bias has found its way into laws and policies, such as the French laws that discriminate against Muslim dress.

The Russian government’s two wars in Chechnya killed thousands of Muslims. More than half of the political prisoners in Russia today have been persecuted at least in part due to their faith.

In this hearing we are taking a global view. Our purposes are, first, to highlight that Muslims, in all their diversity, are widely subject to government harassment and restrictions.

They are at risk or already are victims of some of the most grievous human rights violations being committed as we speak.

Second, we are here to think creatively about how best to defend the fundamental human rights of Muslims.

We must continue to document and condemn grave violations of the rights of Muslims. The United States government has important tools in hand for this purpose, including the State Department's annual report on international religious freedom and the excellent work done by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

In addition, we should be thinking creatively about how to pursue accountability in any and all appropriate jurisdictions, a topic our witnesses will address.

We should also continue to develop and strengthen approaches that change the incentives for repressive states and other stakeholders.

One example is the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act that went into effect this week. I want to thank Co-Chair Smith for his leadership on this and so many other human rights issues. The Act makes sure that goods produced with forced labor in Xinjiang cannot enter the U.S. market. It gives the private sector a stake in standing up for Uyghurs' rights and increases the costs of repression to the Chinese government. I was proud to work with my colleagues on this bill and I hope it brings change.

It is also past time to reconsider the military-led counter-terrorism policies that too often seem to have contributed to human rights violations against Muslim populations. As we emphasized in a [Commission hearing last fall](#), both research and experience demonstrate that effective counter-terrorism strategies place human rights and rule of law at their center. That is not where we are today.

I look forward to this hearing and to listening to what the witnesses have to say, their thoughts and recommendations on these and other aspects.

I turn now to Co-Chair Smith for his opening remarks.