



Written Testimony

Dr. Mohamed Elsanousi

Executive Director, Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers

Commissioner, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

Before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

On the

“U.S. Presidency of the G 20 – An Opportunity to Champion Human Rights”

Thursday, March 5, 2026, at 2:00 p.m.

Chairman Smith, Chairman McGovern, and Honorable Members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission:

Thank you for your kind invitation to testify today. I deeply appreciate the Commission’s steadfast commitment to advancing human rights and religious freedom for everyone, everywhere, all the time.

I am testifying today in my personal capacity and not as a commissioner on the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

This hearing comes at a pivotal moment. As our nation prepares to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence this July, we are reminded that religious freedom stands among the foundational rights envisioned by our founders. When drafting the Declaration and later enshrining protections in the First Amendment, they recognized religious liberty not merely as a private privilege, but as a fundamental human right. Thomas Jefferson himself drew from diverse sacred texts—including both the Bible and the Holy Quran—to underscore that religious freedom is consistent with the deepest moral commitments of humanity.

A central feature of our country’s longstanding policy to advance religious freedom is the broad bipartisan agreement on its priority, at home and abroad. This reflects the appreciation that freedom is correlated with other social goods: political stability, economic development, social harmony, and national security. It is important to stress that there is broad bipartisan agreement on the value of advancing this freedom globally.

I welcome the focus of this hearing. Religious communities make vital contributions to a wide range of national and global priorities. They are central to health care delivery, education, disaster response, poverty alleviation, economic opportunity, social cohesion, and even energy security. Surveys underscore that religious actors are among societies’ most trusted

institutions. It is important to recognize that every major policy challenge has a religious dimension.

Religious experience and the core values embodied in all issues for public policy and programs clearly belong at the policy tables. I question, however, the recommendation that some other speakers have made that one particular group, the “R20,” should be given official status for promoting religious freedom during 2026, when the U.S. will be hosting the G20.

For its part, the G20 Interfaith Forum Association (often referred to simply as “IF20”) has long been the major interfaith voice in the G20 process. Over the past twelve years, the IF20 has brought practical experience and the teachings of a broad range of religious communities into conversation with global political, economic, academic, and other leaders engaged in the G20 process. IF20 has collaborated closely with Vatican leaders, ministers of religious affairs and other religious diplomats and structures, and key civil society institutions. IF20 participants have included thoughtful and influential Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, and Hindu leaders, as well as representatives of other faiths; this has included a variety of traditional and indigenous groups. The IF20 has been treated as a key G20 stakeholder recognized by several G20 host countries, including Germany (2017), Argentina (2018), Japan (2019), Saudi Arabia (2020), Italy (2021), Brazil (2024), and South Africa (2025). India decided against working with religious groups in 2023, but even during that year, the IF20 was able to hold two events raising religion-related issues with significant policy impact in India. Thus, the IF20 has been the standard bearer for G20 religious issues in virtually all recent years, except for 2022.

Sessions focused on religious liberty and freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) have been included in every IF20 Forum since 2017 (Germany, Argentina, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Italy, UAE, Brazil, and South Africa), with two or more related sessions in most years. Moreover, inclusiveness of broad religious experience and drawing on the findings of interfaith dialogue have been hallmarks of IF20 meetings each year. Since 2014, IF20 events have been attended by prominent religious leaders from over 24 countries, including five Roman Catholic Cardinals, the Ecumenical Patriarch (Constantinople), several Chief Rabbis, prominent Archbishops from different denominations, five Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, leaders of various protestant denominations, Baha’i leaders, Muslim leaders from a wide range of countries in different world regions, Hindu and Buddhists leaders, and so forth.

Prominent government leaders have participated in IF20 events every year since 2014. These have included the Vice President of Argentina, current or former Prime Ministers Australia, of Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, Sri Lanka, and the United Kingdom, and Presidents of Italy and Slovenia, as well as heads of a variety of Ministries from an array of countries. The mix of prominent religious, governmental, and other leaders has made the IF20 a particularly effective forum for addressing key G20 policy issues.

The IF20 has made concrete recommendations with respect to G20 priority concerns, including poverty, global debt issues, hunger, education, public health, human trafficking and modern forms of slavery, challenges for children, women’s roles, disaster relief, rainforest issues, and many others. The focus on leading priorities tends to shift from year to year in keeping with host country agendas as well as the leading concerns of religious communities. The IF20 has been increasingly effective in helping to shape priorities as articulated in final G20 communiqués. For example, IF20 recommendations at the G20 Social Summit in Brazil included a recommendation that “G20 leaders should commit at their November 2024 Rio de Janeiro Summit to a revitalized multi-stakeholder approach to action on human trafficking that draws on diverse perspectives and capabilities of different participants.” This recommendation was picked up in the final communique in Brazil from G20 Leaders. The IF20 similarly supported Brazil’s general call for action to address the global food crisis, which led to formation of a global alliance involving over 100 countries and both public and private

institutions. In light of Brazil's location, the IF20 noted the importance of shining "a spotlight on the imperative of protecting rainforests as a priority for climate action." In South Africa, the IF20 led delivery of recommendations of formal engagement groups and other stakeholders at the G20 Social Summit there. Probably even more significant is the role that the IF20 has played in bringing operation-level leaders from various expert policy groups and religious groups out of their silos and into effective coordination on major issues of common concern with action-level government leaders.

The continuing work of the IF20 brings the ancient and modern wisdom and direct experience of religious communities, at very local and very global levels, to policy circles, in ways that are both practical and prophetic. It has an impressive 12 year track record of continuing engagement, analysis, and advocacy for attention to the world's most vulnerable communities. It draws on a rich global network of religiously inspired initiatives that focus on the world's most critical challenges, starting with peace and social harmony and support for those who are most vulnerable, including especially children. The topics that the IF20 has addressed include global financial architecture, pandemic preparedness, quality health services, education, anti-corruption, clean water, maternal health, and human trafficking, in addition to paying regular attention to religious engagement and freedom of religion or belief. The IF20 has made regular, policy sensitive, and concrete recommendations in the overall G20 process. For example, the IF20 made positive recommendations regarding food security, trafficking, and rainforests in Brazil (2024) and led delivery of recommendations from formal engagement groups and other stakeholders at the G20 Social Summit in South Africa.

The significance of making these points about the IF20 is not to call for formal endorsement of any one group dealing with religious liberty and religious engagement, but to emphasize that one group should not be given unique standing. There is room within the G20 process for different groups to make meaningful contributions to the overall G20 process. Even more, there is value in taking an inclusive and pluralistic approach that can contribute to enhanced ideas for implementing governmental priorities. Certainly, there is room for a plurality of voices, and the United States should be an ideal home for such pluralistic inputs.

At the same time, the G20 framework needs to be seen in the context of broader international institutions. Since its founding in 1999, the G20 has been primarily geared toward economic coordination. There are many basic topics it has not addressed. Religious freedom has typically not been a major focus of the G20, although extensive empirical evidence demonstrates strong correlation between protection of religious freedom and promotion of numerous social goods such as those promoted by the G20. Over the past decade, G20 objectives have often included aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals. In such areas, the G20 appropriately takes religious engagement and freedom of religion into account, even when this is not a G20 priority.

For that reason, I recommend that the U.S. Department of State take the lead in engaging religious actors, with due attention to ensuring an inclusive approach, building upon the practical collaboration it has built since 1998 with a wide range of faith communities. And specifically, as we approach both the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the upcoming G20 Summit being hosted this year by the U.S., it would be fitting for the U.S. Department of State—working in collaboration with the White House Faith Office and other relevant government offices—to organize a high-level event that emphasizes religious freedom as a pillar of democratic governance and economic flourishing. It could take the lead in engaging with religious actors in an inclusive manner, building upon the practical collaboration faith communities such as that sustained by the IF20 and others over the past decade.

Such an initiative should and need not endorse any group. Rather, it should build on the successful strategic religious engagement seen during several previous administrations,

including the first Trump administration—an approach that sought inclusive collaboration with diverse religious communities worldwide, ensuring that no one was left behind. Separate initiatives by different groups can be encouraged, without giving special endorsement to any of the many groups working on religious freedom and religious engagement in the United States. For example, the IF20 is already planning a policy forum at Georgetown University on May 26. Four review papers will highlight diverse religious contributions to 2026 G20 topics, including those announced thus far by the U.S. Presidency. The review papers and discussion at the Washington Conference will focus on ways that religious values and practices relate to and can add to the critical topic areas, aiming to highlight service of the common good. They will reflect and draw on the ongoing work of the wide range of faith and interreligious networks and alliances engaged in humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding work. Based on the policy work at the Washington meeting, a larger IF20 Forum will be held from October 15-17 in Salt Lake City, Utah, on themes identified during the policy review process, with some additional themes identified by Forum participants. Additional priority themes such as the food crisis, health issues (including mental health), education, children's issues, religion and economic progress, care for creation, and so forth, may be added to the agenda. Religious freedom and its role in contributing to other social goals will be an underlying theme.

There may well be similar initiatives from other groups, or others may wish to join the separate efforts planned by the IF20 and the R20. These initiatives can be encouraged in an inclusive and pluralistic way characteristic of religious freedom and religious engagement in the United States.

I strongly support elevating the positive contributions of religious communities within the G20 process. The focus should be on both the general G20 agenda and on issues that are priorities for religious communities. But that recognition must be broad and substantive. Religious communities contribute to economic prosperity and social harmony; they are on the front lines of combating human trafficking, preparing for and responding to disasters, and countering the violent extremism that fuels conflict. They are renowned as peacemakers and, still more, peace builders. Their experience and reach—with members representing the large majority of the world's population—make them indispensable partners across virtually all policy domains.

The United States has a strong record in promoting freedom of religion and religious engagement through a comprehensive legislative framework and through strong diplomatic efforts, extending back before the turn of the century. However, as we seek to lift religious freedom internationally and strengthen our strategic religious engagement, we must also acknowledge institutional setbacks in our own policy implementation.

The State Department has yet to release the 2024 International Religious Freedom (IRF) Report, now nearly a year overdue. This is not a minor bureaucratic lapse. The IRF Report is the official U.S. government account of religious freedom conditions abroad and forms the basis for annual designations of Countries of Particular Concern. As of this testimony, those designations have not been updated. The prior designations have effectively lapsed. Aside from the unique presidential designation of Nigeria, there are currently no active designations of egregious violators—none for China, none for Iran, none for North Korea. This is not simply a policy adjustment; it represents a failure to utilize the tools Congress has enacted.

Institutionally, further concerns remain. An Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom has not been appointed, raising questions under the International Religious Freedom Act. Whether a Special Advisor on International Religious Freedom on the National Security Council will be named, as contemplated by law, remains unclear. The Office of International Religious Freedom has been downgraded within the State Department's structure, and staffing has reportedly been reduced. Remarkably, the 2025 National Security Strategy contains no substantive reference to international religious freedom.

If we are serious about advancing religious freedom globally, we must fully utilize the mechanisms Congress has established and restore institutional strength to this cause.

Finally, our national interest requires broad and thoughtful collaboration with the Muslim world. Much (though by no means all) persecution of Christian communities and other religious minorities occurs in majority-Muslim contexts. The spread of Islamophobia, Antisemitism and the persecution and discrimination of Muslim in countries such Myanmar, China and India should be of significant concern to proponents of religious freedom and religious tolerance everywhere. Further, significant persecution of Christian communities and other religious minorities occurs by individuals and entities that invoke a violent interpretation of Islam which the majority of Muslims reject. The Muslim world, however, is not monolithic, and there are diverse expressions of Muslim leadership, scholarship, and reform that need to be taken into account.

We should recognize and support significant declarations that affirm religious coexistence and minority protections. The Marrakesh Declaration, issued by the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace, and the Makkah Declaration issued by the Muslim World League, are important examples. These and similar initiatives emphasize the positive, moderate, and pluralistic traditions within Islam and affirm principles of citizenship and religious dignity.

Engaging with these voices strengthens both religious freedom and regional stability. I think, for example, on the people of Iran who have been striving for such freedom and stability for decades. My thoughts and prayers are with all those in Iran and around the world persecuted for their faith.

As we approach our nation's 250th anniversary, we have an opportunity to renew our founding commitment. Religious freedom is not only an American constitutional principle; it is a universal human right. It contributes to economic prosperity, social harmony, and peace. It requires institutional seriousness at home and principled engagement abroad.

Thank you for your leadership, and commitment to advance human rights, and I look forward to your questions.