119th CONGRESS
1st Session

Printed for the use of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

From Persecution to Protection: Strategies to Defend Freedom of Religion

JULY 16, 2025

**Briefing of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

Washington: 2025

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ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Helsinki process, formally titled the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, traces its origin to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in Finland on August 1, 1975, by the leaders of 33 European countries, the United States and Canada. As of January 1, 1995, the Helsinki process was renamed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE].

The membership of the OSCE has expanded to 57 participating States, reflecting the breakup of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

The OSCE Secretariat is in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of the participating States' permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations. Periodic consultations are held among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government.

Although the OSCE continues to engage in standard setting in the fields of military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Organization is primarily focused on initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States. The Organization deploys numerous missions and field activities located in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The website of the OSCE is: <www.osce.org>.

ABOUT THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, is an independent U.S. Government commission created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance by the participating States with their OSCE commitments, with a particular emphasis on human rights.

The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair rotate between the Senate and House every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates relevant information to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports that reflect the views of Members of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing details about the activities of the Helsinki process and developments in OSCE participating States.

The Commission also contributes to the formulation and execution of U.S. policy regarding the OSCE, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from participating States. The website of the Commission is: <www.csce.gov>.

From Persecution to Protection: Strategies to Defend Freedom of Religion

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Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Washington, DC

The briefing was held from 1:59 p.m. to 3:09 p.m., Room 1324, Longworth House Office Building, Bakhti Nishanov, Senior Policy Advisor, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Mr. PARKER: Welcome, everybody. We will get started like to, yes, extend a warm welcome on behalf of Chairman Roger Wicker and the entire Commission for joining us this afternoon for a talk with one of our former colleagues, Knox Thames, on a matter that is really one that, you know, the Commission is known for really highlighting the importance of the moral dimension of foreign affairs. The Commission has been doing that for almost 50 years. You know, some of the matters that I think our commissioners have had the most success on, and really kind of developed—brand is maybe not the right word—but a legacy, if you will, on religious freedom, first and foremost.

Back in the 1970's, immediately after the creation of the Commission, one of the human rights matters of the day was the freedom of Jewish refuseniks in the Soviet Union to—their protest started as just a matter of being able to bake matzah for Passover, and ended with really the rallying cry, "let my people go." The Commission worked throughout the 1980's on family reunification, helped stand up institutions like the Commission on International Religious Freedom, helped—you know, our commissioners were lead drafters in things like the IRFA Act, and also, of course, trafficking in persons, Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, human rights sanctions.

Before turning it over to our—my colleague, Bhakti, who covers religious freedom now with the Commission, I would like to just say a few words about my friend, my former colleague, and a mentor, Knox Thames. I started at the Commission in 2006, which is 19 years ago, and I was a—I thought I was there to be a Russia area studies guy. I was setting up my desk that first week, and Knox was about the business—he had seen a story of a human rights—or, you know, a dissident in Turkmenistan, which, in those days, and still sadly today, is really one of the most authoritarian countries in the world.

This was the days of Saparmurat Niyazov, who proclaimed himself the head of—the father of the Turkmen, president for life, renamed the days of the week, and the months

of the year. This individual had written a letter, just, I think, asking for permission to hold a political meeting, and for that, he was arrested and sent to a psychiatric hospital. Of course, it is a real dark legacy in the Soviet Union of the sort of misuse and abuse of psychiatric hospitals to punish dissent. Knox had discovered his case and decided that he would whip up a letter and had our interns walking up and down the hallways, and gathered, I think, you know, well over 50 signatories.

I was kind of watching this my first week there. I came in a couple of days later and opened up the computer to the news that this gentleman had been released, and I have this—I pulled the piece up today when I was just preparing here. I will just quote two passages of it. Durdykuliev—or I get the same treatment Members of Congress get when you try to pronounce these names—also is thanking those that he credits for helping obtain his release, particularly 54 members of the U.S. Congress who sent a letter to President Niyazov earlier this month calling for his release. "I want, through your radio, to say thank you very much to international organizations and the U.S. Congress," Durdykuliev said, "And also the many people who sent telegrams, postcards, letters to me—40 or 50 of them showed them to me once. But they are still kept by the head of the psychiatric hospital. I want to thank them."

We have heard—oh, and this is Knox's good work. We have heard over and over from friends, you know, you get to know in this business, who have become political prisoners, of how important it is that they are remembered in letters, and you are seeing it there. That was a real—you know, a real moment for me and my own career, and a lesson that the Commission is a lot more than just a repository of regional expertise, which it is, or thematic expertise, which, of course, we have, but that we are called to be advocates.

Knox—just a word, Knox's impressive bio is out there, and I hope you have had a chance to pick that up, as well as—as well as a recent, I think, excerpt from your book. Also, a tribute to our first—to Knox's predecessor, the Commission's first counsel for international religious freedom, Karen Lord. That is also out there, and I commend it to your reading. I just want to read Knox's tribute here, because I think just as I looked to Knox, and help set me on the straight and narrow and the ways of human rights advocacy, from an area studies guy, Karen, I think, really had—really clearly made a made a mark on Knox, and was one of the first people who, you know, really helped put this—put religious freedom on the U.S. foreign affairs agenda.

"Karen Lord is the reason I became involved in international religious freedom advocacy almost 20 years ago. As far as I am aware, she was the first civil servant to work full-time on international religious freedom issues for a U.S. Government agency. She was a forerunner to all the various offices and positions that exist today, both within the U.S. Government and within the OSCE. While in law school, I was connected to her through mutual friends who knew I was attending the same D.C. law school she attended some years before. She encouraged me to apply for an internship at the Helsinki Commission to work with her, which was my first exposure to these issues. Almost 20 years later, I have committed my career to this work that she pioneered." Knox Thames.

I just thank you, Knox. I appreciate the opportunity myself, just as I was, you know, kind of getting up this morning and taking the Metro in to go back and sample a little bit of the rich legacy. Thanks to you and Karen, and the work of our commissioners on a bipartisan, bicameral basis, to kind of place this matter, you know, before heads of State, before top policymakers, and an opportunity for us, even at the Commission now,

to refocus our efforts, and to rededicate ourselves to this just cause. With that, thank you, Knox. Over to you, Bhakti.

Mr. NISHANOV: Kyle, thank you—thank you so much. Kyle Parker is chief of staff at the Commission. Thank you so much for the introduction. My introduction will—because Kyle covered some of the—some of the things that I would want to talk about—I was at a barbecue this weekend, and I was talking—by the way, there was no pool party. That is a public service announcement: Do not go to July barbecues without pools, and we were there. We are talking about work, and one of my friends said, "So what are you working on these days"? I said, well, you know, next week I am going to have a hearing—a briefing on religious freedom, and she laughed. She said, "Is this some sort of historical overview of things"? I mean, what is going on?

If you live in contemporary America, if you are the average American—obviously, this group is not because, you know, you are here today to talk about this and hear about this—that is what you think. You think that religious persecution is something that happened decades, centuries ago, and it does not have an impact on the day-to-day lives of—of people across the world today, and it is absolutely not true.

The best data we have says that 380 million Christians face persecution on a daily basis, and this is the best data we have. Obviously, this is Christians alone, and we are talking about other groups as well: Muslims, Jewish people, and Druze. What we see in Syria, what we saw in Syria, is horror and ugliness. We have a number of Jehovah's Witnesses here whose members in Russia face daily persecution—who, because of their beliefs, are thrown in jail, and are there, and they face torture. They face harsh treatment. It is a reality for millions across the world. This is why we are having this briefing today, because we want to talk about this, and we do not want to forget about the people who are suffering on a daily basis.

This is not confined—obviously, people know about—you know, people might hear something about—they know about North Korea, they know about Russia, they know about Xinjiang in China, but it is not just limited to those states. Even democracies are susceptible to this—places like India, for example, where minorities face daily persecution, where their lives are at stake literally for their beliefs.

Freedom of religion is a core American value. We are talking about it not just because it has a core American value, but because it really is the stabilizer. It is the thing—the foundation upon which every other thing is built. In the first Trump administration, I am going to read here, there was—it was set as a global priority. It was an American priority for global security, and we called it—the Trump administration called it the foundation of a healthy, democratic world. It is a foundation. It is the first—in 2019, there was a Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, and that is what—[comes on mic]—was said. I do apologize; I am so loud that I did not know if my microphone was on or not.

The reason why we are doing it today, a few—6 months into this administration, more than that, where does religious freedom—where does this agenda stand? What is going on in the world? What are the strategies that we can employ that are successful, that have not been successful, that we can use to advance this cause? There is no one better—I mean, if you have been to one of these briefings, you always know there are multiple witnesses. On this topic, we only have one, because he is the architect of contemporary architecture for defending religious freedom. Knox, Kyle talked about him, but I am just going to read off a couple of things.

He was a special advisor for religious minorities at the State Department under both Presidents Obama and Trump. He worked at USCIRF. It is a Commission on International Religious Freedom, and he is now a senior fellow at Pepperdine and a senior visiting expert at U.S. Institute for Peace. He has an amazing book that, if you care about this topic, if you think about it, you should definitely look it up. It is called "Ending Persecution: Charting the Path to Global Religious Freedom."

Today, we want to open this up with your presentation. Then I have a couple of questions that I am generally interested in. He is—the man is a legend, so I do have questions. Then, what we are going to do we are going to open it up to the audience, and there is a microphone. I would encourage you, whatever questions you might have, please come up, ask those questions, because this is the opportunity to do that, so, anyway, please, Knox.

Mr. THAMES: Well, thank you so much. Thank you, Kyle and Bhakti, for that very generous introduction. Just sort of the bottom line up front for what I want to focus on today is the United States is uniquely positioned among countries around the world to be a force for good, to defend the rights of people to believe whatever they want, to defend those who are persecuted for their beliefs in ways that no other country can. It is in our interest to do this because countries that respect religious freedom are more stable, more peaceful, more prosperous, and less likely to be at war with themselves or their neighbors. It reflects our values that religious freedom is a core part of the American story, the American experience. We do—we represent ourselves better when we incorporate this into our foreign policy.

I will be, just in my brief overview remarks, hitting some of the highlights from my book that Bhakti referenced, "Ending Persecution." I will talk about the four different types of persecution and four things that the United States can do. I think, knowing we have got Hill staffers here, there are some really unique opportunities that you can do with your bosses to be a voice yourself, and also challenge the United States to carry this forward.

You know, religious freedom—religion is a global—is a global trend. The Pew Research Center has some fabulous statistics that say that roughly 85 percent of the world believes in God or a higher power, believes in something beyond themselves that gives their life purpose, meaning, and direction. At the same time, they found consistently that roughly two out of three people on Earth live in environments that restrict the free practice of faith. Two out of three people live in environments where they are susceptible to persecution. They are not actively being persecuted, but if they challenge the status quo, if they want to change lanes, if they want to question the way that they are traveling, or if they want to get on a completely different highway, they face prosecution by their government or persecution by their neighbors, or both.

You take these very high levels of religiosity combined with high levels of restrictions on the free practice of faith, and this is a recipe for instability and human rights and suffering on a massive, massive scale. Based on my 20 years of work in different U.S. Government positions, including at the Helsinki Commission, where I cut my teeth with Kyle many years ago, I tried to break down what exactly religious persecution is, because these numbers are so gigantic that they sort of overwhelm the senses. Also, being in policy positions to develop effective responses, we need to know what we are talking about, so I identified four types of persecution.

The first is authoritarian persecution. This is where a country, a government, uses the powers of the State to punish or penalize a religious group for what they believe or because they are a competitor in the marketplace of ideas. The second type of persecution is extremist persecution. This is sort of the opposite. This is where nonState actors, people in the community, form mobs to violently assault others because they are afraid or they disagree with their religious beliefs. The third form is persecution in a democracy. This is where a large religious community can use its size to transform its beliefs through the ballot box, so that it can actually be policed by police, which can lead to persecution, and then the last form is terrorism. This is ISIS, Boko Haram, where individuals are willing to use extreme violence to force their ideology over an entire society.

In the book, I have chapters on each of these, and I have country examples based on my experience, so, for example, authoritarian. I look at Burma and China, and the genocides that our government has identified against the Rohingya or the Uyghurs and talk about efforts that we undertook to try to get them to change their ways. For extremism, I look at the Republic of Georgia, talking about experiences I had when I was here at the Commission, as well as Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, a country I have visited more than any other. I spent with Pakistan looking at, for example, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, or the plight of Asia Bibi, who was a Christian mother sentenced to death for alleged blasphemous activities, and what we tried to do in response.

For democracy, I look at the world's largest, India. A country I am very concerned about, about how this rising Hindu chauvinism, Hindu nationalism has actually led to the repeated election of Narendra Modi and his party in states across that vast country, with dire implications for Indian Muslims, Indian Christians, and others. Then, with terrorism, I look at Afghanistan and Iraq. In particular, Iraq, where I was involved in trying to encourage religious minorities that had experienced the ISIS onslaught to go back to their ancestral homelands, where they felt safe and they felt like they had a future.

Understanding the problem is so crucial, especially for you all if you are advising your boss, if you are working on a committee, or if you are an NGO trying to represent your co-religionists, to understand the challenge. I think it is very important that we use terminology precisely. I have seen time and time again that when well-meaning groups call everything persecution, then it dilutes the word. It harms those who are suffering violence, and it—frankly, it hurts your own credibility. When we talk about persecution, we have to—it is about violence, combined with a lack of any accountability.

I mean, here in the United States, bad things can happen to people because a crazy person has some religious animus. There is a justice system that will hold them to account, so we would not say there is persecution here when something bad happens. In so much—in so many parts of the broken world, there is no accountability, and so things can happen with impunity. It is that combination of violence and impunity that I think constitutes a situation of religious persecution. That is how we should use that term.

Then I will start to wrap up what we can do. In the book, I talk about the four Cs—coalitions, consistency, callouts, and consequences. First, coalitions. You know, working to advance freedom of religion or belief for everybody everywhere, building alliances right, left, and center, with people of all faiths and none. Of course, here domestically, religious liberty is a hotly contested political issue, but when we are talking about this extreme violence, it is millions and millions of people risking their lives daily for just doing things that we take for granted. That is something that we should all agree is wrong. Building

coalitions that span the secular and religious, that span liberal and conservative, can be powerful in raising attention to policymakers who can make a difference.

On consistency, we make sure we talk about religious freedom with friends and foes alike. I mean, it is really easy to single out Iran—and we should, because of their persecution against Baha'is and Christians, and others—but administration after administration, regardless of party, Saudi Arabia, the mute button is usually hit. If we are—if we are serious about this, we need to raise it with friends and foes. Not out of animus, but because we actually care, because we know that this is going to be in their long-term interests.

With those come callouts. The unique ability of the United States, both the State Department, the Religious Freedom Commission, but also individual Members of Congress, to highlight abuses can get the attention of governments, and we can see people released. I mean, the example that Kyle gave of this sign-on letter. It was not a terribly heavy lift. It took a couple of weeks of organizing, and we were able to get someone out of jail and change his life for the better. That is a great use of staff time. That is an even better use of intern time, to leverage the influence of your bosses for good, to advance these issues, and to help individuals.

Now, callouts can only go so far. I think shining a light is important, so combined with that, we have to get to the last C, consequences. I truly believe if the United States says religious freedom matters, then it really needs to matter in how we conduct our foreign policy. Otherwise, we are killing our credibility. If we go far enough to say we are concerned about what is happening in country X, and they do not change their ways, and we do nothing different, then why would they listen to us? They can start to tune us out, and so it is important that we find those points of leverage that we have to restructure the incentives of the powers that be to do something different that they would not otherwise want to do.

I talk about in the book what we were able to do with Uzbekistan. It had been designated as a country of particular concern for 15 years or so. When President Mirziyoyev came in and wanted to turn the page, we saw an opportunity to present a sort of carrots and sticks, the red pill, the blue pill. There are two different ways you can go here—continue to lock up thousands of Muslims, continue to keep churches deregistered, or you can start to liberalize, and we will take you off the list, we will welcome you back into the family of nations. They chose that option. Now, Uzbekistan is not where we really want them to be completely, but they are a heck of a lot further along than they were because the United States was able to credibly tell some hard truths and back it up with the threat of consequential action.

Just in wrap-up, I think we have a unique opportunity here in Washington, DC. to leverage all our different nodes of influence to be that voice for the voiceless. I mean, there are literally millions of people every day that risk so much, really risk their lives, just to pray how they want, to share their beliefs with others, to educate their children. I know, and I have seen that when the United States speaks up for those people, we can move the needle in ways that no other country can, and Congress is an important voice in that. I think there are some things we can talk about in the Q&A about what we can do together. Thank you for this opportunity.

Mr. NISHANOV: Ladies and gentlemen, this is why we invited this gentleman to speak today. You can see why. I would say you are the only person who made enemies with

both India and Pakistan, or there are others too. I appreciate this consistency. If you are going to be critical of a foe, then you have to be willing to do that with a friend as well.

QUESTION: I think just the first question out of the gate is, how do you—I mean, the most difficult one—how do you do that with friends? I mean, India is a huge democracy, incredibly important, especially in this world of competition with China and whatnot. How do we convey the importance?

Then there are going to be consequences, right? I think that is the—that is the part that I think is most difficult. It is one thing just to raise it, but to say, hey, if you do not do this, there could be—what are some of the strategies that you could discuss?

Mr. THAMES: India is the country I am most concerned about because it has been one where there has been a general sort of Washington consensus that Delhi is our counterweight to Beijing, because they are a democracy. Policy level—policymakers at a high level seem unwilling to sort of scratch below the surface of that statement and look at the broader trends across that country, underneath the current leadership, and how there is a significant drift away from shared values. That—I mean, India is a wonderful country. It is incredibly diverse. It is the birthplace of the Buddha, of Hinduism, and of Jainism. Christianity was brought there by St. Thomas himself, one of the 12 disciples of Christ. Islam has been there for centuries, Baha'ism, and Amidism-incredible diversity.

This political narrative that it is a Hindu country for Hindus has led to a sort of metastasizing, narrow perspective of what it means to be India, with devastating impacts on the Muslim community, on the Christian community, that Narendra Modi seems unwilling to address.

I think, as a friend of India, as a country that shares this foundational belief in democracy and the rule of law, having a frank conversation about where they are going is important. It does not mean we are slapping sanctions on them, but there are tools like the special watch list that Congress gave the State Department, as a way to signal we are concerned where things are going. India, I think, should be on that list.

That would get the attention of policymakers in Delhi. That can change the conversation. When I was at the Religious Freedom Commission, then-President Obama was going to India. We made an effort to get a letter to him, urging him to raise religious freedom conditions in India. On his very last day, when he was speaking at the Siri Fort before students, he actually talked about it. I heard from Indian religious minorities that improved the climate for at least a year—just an American president saying this was important to him. What we need to realize is that India needs us more than we need them. We are the superpowers. They are the one that has China on their border.

For us to come up as sort of supplicants, that we are so desperate to have this relationship, we will ignore all the bad things that are happening, I think, kind of puts an imbalance in the relationship that is unhelpful and unhealthy.

I think being honest, representing our values, and it is up to them to decide whether they want to come toward these shared values or if they are going on a different path. They are a free country, and they can do that then. Then, there will be consequences for how this relationship will look.

Mr. NISHANOV: Yes. Knox, one of the other questions that I had is, I think we—people who are in this foreign policy space, know some of the hot spots. What are the countries or places—does not have to be—that you think are underreported, that people are not talking about, that we as folks on a Hill should be paying attention to? Or maybe

getting ahead a little bit of that trend to sort of—not to react to violence, like we saw in Myanmar, but maybe get ahead of it and prevent something. What are some of the—some of the places that you can think of? If not, we can—we can go back to it, but—

Mr. THAMES: I think it is not so much a place. It is a topic. You know, migration is front and center of every major industrial power these days. I think there is a lack of appreciation for the role of religious persecution in forcing people to hit the road.

You know, if you are worried that you are going to be murdered when you go to church or mosque, or your children are going to be kidnapped and forcibly converted, you know, I would run for my life. I would take my family and go wherever I could.

Addressing the drivers of persecution can address one of the drivers of this migration phenomenon that we see impacting every country in the world. I think that element is overlooked, the human rights/religious freedom component of the migration challenge. If we can look beyond what is happening at our borders, we have to, of course, focus on that. What are the push factors, and try to address them, that can also help stem the flow that has been such a problem?

Mr. NISHANOV: Yes. The last question for me, and then I am going to open up to the audience—please feel free to come up and ask.

QUESTION: One of the other things that I have been pondering, wondering, is how technology and surveillance, contemporary, how—what kind of impact does it have on religious freedom? Obviously, some obvious examples are, you know, Xinjiang, China, but is it happening in other places? Are there some of the things that we need to be thinking about now? There is obviously enthusiasm about AI and everything else, but does it have an impact? I would assume, just like it does in everything else in life. What kind of specific impact, or what—kind of what is the best way to think about it, technology of surveillance?

Mr. THAMES: Yes. On the technology side, I think it is this question of how social media platforms and texting platforms are used. The responsibility of these corporations is to govern, manage, and moderate their sites. I mean, I have seen examples of where in Sri Lanka, Facebook platforms were used where hate groups would put stuff in Sinhala that no one knew how to read, wherever Facebook minders were located, that led to attacks on a Muslim village, and deaths. I think there needs to be a conversation with these corporations about how their platforms are used, because they are often—you know, WhatsApp groups, another great example in Pakistan, where mobs will be formed over allegations of blasphemy, and people will die. Bringing corporations into the conversation with the government about their responsibilities, I just—I do not think we can let them say, you know, we just put it out there, it is none of our business. Well, if people are being assaulted because of your tools, then we need to have a conversation about what that looks like.

On the AI side, I think this machine learning, this spreading of the Chinese technological web to other countries, is really alarming. I think this sort of bipartisan consensus that Chinese tech should be suspect is smart. Then, how do we work with these governments when they say, well, this Huawei stuff is really cheap? We need at least 3G, if not 5G. How do we partner with them to give them another tool that is not going to be used for oppression? That quickly spiderwebs into broader issues, but there is a religious freedom and human rights component to that conversation.

Mr. NISHANOV: Excellent. Thank you. Anyone? Please. Ray, if you—just so we can record—do you mind coming up to the microphone right there?

QUESTION: Ray Celeste, with Congressman Dr. Murphy.

It has been brought to Congressman Dr. Murphy's attention that—in Ukraine that they have adopted legislation that will ban the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which Ukraine's—as you probably know, sir—the largest Christian denomination, and this is called Law 3894. It will terminate the legal identity and property rights of the church and outlaw its religious activities.

Would you care to comment on this situation?

Mr. THAMES: As I understand the way the law is written, we are ending the sort of 9-month grace period since its passage for churches and religious groups to disaffiliate with the Moscow patriarch-affiliated Ukrainian Orthodox Church. When I looked at the law, I thought—while I did not think it was necessary, that they had other tools on the books to address these real concerns of Russian agents wearing religious garb doing nefarious activities inside the borders of Ukraine. I think the structure is one that does have a series of checks. There will be judicial review. There will be evaluations, so it is not like they are kicked out immediately. There is an opportunity for a rule of law process to occur.

I think we are at the point now where we will see how this plays out. This is where those who consider themselves friends of Ukraine can have those conversations and say, look, we are concerned. We, of course, do not want Russian KGB agents, FSB agents dressed up like priests running around and sharing targeting information. There are millions of your fellow citizens who belong to this church. We need to find a way to accommodate their beliefs and ability to worship as they feel led. I think, you know, Ukraine is this incredibly unique situation of where you do have, you know, active hostilities going on. The Russian Orthodox Church, based in Moscow, is dominated by Vladimir Putin, and we cannot ignore that fact.

How that plays out at the parish level is incredibly complicated, and I worry that as that information gets sort of passed along all the way over here, it gets diluted or misinterpreted. It is like a bad game on the telephone. We just have to be very careful that we are getting accurate information, now that this grace period has ended, and see how it plays out.

Mr. NISHANOV: Anyone else? Any questions? Please.

QUESTION: Okay. I believe this is on. Awesome. [LAUGHS.] My name is J.P. I am with the Helsinki Commission for the summer, actually.

In some of the same veins as the questions you have already, I am curious how you would approach this question of a phenomenon that I think is well-observed in the post-Soviet space, in the long shadow of imperial and ideological collapse. Of states like Armenia, for example, coming into conflict with State churches, which they believe to be operating as agents of foreign influence, or as agents that are hostile to democratic development, or Westward alignment. With this in mind, and bearing in mind especially these legitimate concerns, how would you propose that these states address the legacy of empire and of communism in a way that respects the rights and dignities of religious organizations and religious institutions, which do have longstanding histories in those countries, or are brand new?

Mr. THAMES: Yes. It is a great question. I think there are, you know, a couple different elements to that. You know, one is in the former Soviet space, just the revival of religious life after the imposed atheism. You know, as bad as Russia is right now on religious freedom issues, it is a heck of a lot better than it was during the Soviet period. That is not saying much, but it is still true. You know, that the interest of these—the Soviet republics as they became nations to establish their identity with faith is a huge component of that. It makes sense that it wanted to elevate, favor, and help reestablish the traditional Orthodox Church, the traditional Islamic faith.

The challenge has been from a human rights and religious freedom perspective; if it is, they are only allowed to have one faith. You know, international standards, OSCE standards do not prohibit the establishment of an official church or official faith, as long as other faiths are not penalized or criminalized for also existing. You can sort of compare United Kingdom, King Charles is the head of the Church of England. There is great religiosity, great religious diversity in that OSCE member, compared against, you know, like, Saudi Arabia, where there is only one form of Islam allowed to be practiced, and all others are banned, and, of course, there is no church.

Creating that legal environment where—that allows groups to register and have a legal identity is important. I think this is one of the unique things about the OSCE region is that you have a lot of different registration systems that have been established that can either—that are supposed to enhance the free practice of faith, but are often applied in such a way to limit it. The OSCE has some really fabulous, groundbreaking standards on that, and analysis on that, through the panel of experts.

You have everything from, like, Slovakia, which requires—if you want to—if you want to form a new church, if you wanted to form a new religious community, you need to get signatures from 50,000 other people. That is discriminatory. It is not persecution, but it is discriminatory. It sets, you know, winners and losers. Or Hungary, you need to have two-thirds of the parliament vote to approve the establishment of a new faith community. Or you look at former Central Asia, there it is much—the numbers are lower, but there are all these sorts of opt-out clauses that make it virtually impossible for new Muslim groups, or non-Muslim groups, to establish.

I think those are the challenges in this sort of post-colonial, post-Soviet space of establishing firm protections for religious freedom. Well, actually, they are established. Seeing them applied and lived out on the ground.

Thank you.

I am just going to stand right here to help people with the mic if they have got questions.

Mr. NISHANOV: Please.

QUESTION: Hello. My name is Stepan. I intern for Congressman Joe Wilson.

I have a—and I am from Ukraine. During the Russo-Ukrainian war crimes that Russia committed in Ukraine, we saw specific targeting of Ukrainian Catholics and Ukrainian Evangelical communities. Professors like Timothy Snyder and Eugene Finkel said it constitutes the genocide of the Ukrainian nation. I am wondering what would be, you know, the clear ways to communicate to the broader American audience about, you know, the war crimes and persecutions of religious minorities in the occupied territory by Russia in Ukraine? You know, to prove what you started, was that a matter of religious

freedom is something not historic but a contemporary problem that people in Europe struggle with?

Thank you.

Mr. THAMES: I had the great privilege to meet with a group of Ukrainian Protestant pastors who happened to be in town the day that President Zelensky met President Trump in the Oval Office. It was just happenstance. They talked about, like, what is happening in the occupied territories, and when these pastors are taken—and "taken to the basement" was sort of the euphemism for being disappeared and murdered. They were here to tell that story, both to their fellow Baptists, Adventists, and Pentecostals—which I think is important, that this, at the relational level, gets out to the broader American public so that they can then share it with their Members of Congress.

I think there is also an important opportunity with the State Department having its annual report on International Religious Freedom coming out, and then the designations on countries of particular concern. Will Russia be maintained as a CPC? Will the justifications include what is happening in the occupied territories? That is another way to signal, both to Vladimir Putin but also the broader world, that this is part of the Russkiy Mir effort to erase Ukraine by killing, literally destroying, these examples of a different type of Christianity than what they would prefer to see.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much for your comment. Rachel.

QUESTION: Hi. I am Rachel Bauman. I am a policy advisor at the Helsinki Commission.

I agree with you that the terminology that we use around religious persecution is very important, and that we should not waste heavy words like "persecution" on, you know, things that are not violence plus impunity. My question is broader. What should we do about things that fall below that threshold? What kinds of things are there that are sort of in that in-between space? What should we call them? How should we address them?

Mr. THAMES: Yes. Well, I think this is where, you know, especially for colleagues at the Helsinki Commission, you have these, like I was saying, very elaborate OSCE standards on freedom of religion or belief that are way more developed than what you see at the United Nations level. They go beyond it, and every country, theoretically, you know, has a political commitment to these. When you get to an issue of, like, registration, it was interesting. The previous U.N. special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief made this really interesting statement that it is registration systems that lead to the greatest number of religious freedom violations globally.

It is not exciting. It is not, you know, news—headline breaking. It is the sort of daily grind that we are going to use sort of lawfare to prevent you from having a status as a faith community. Then everything else you want to do, that is recognized by international law, we are saying, is criminal or illegal. This is where I think the Commission, where staffers can have that sort of smaller conversation with embassies here, through your members writing letters to heads of State, saying we have heard about community X being deregistered or being denied registration. Your law does not comport with OSCE standards or United Nations standards, and we urge you to amend the law, register the group.

From my time here, I saw that work. It did not work all the time, but it often worked. Because, especially in the small and medium-sized countries, if they get a letter

from Members of Congress, it carries some weight. That will get the attention in a way that, you know, a small, struggling NGO religious community cannot, so you can be a force multiplier by developing those relationships. This is where I would encourage the advocacy community to really work with Hill staff and Commission staff to, like, give really tight information—the who, what, where, when, and why, a two-pager front and back, with a very clean policy ask.

Be sure your facts are right. I mean, you referenced our friends from the Jehovah's Witnesses. My first book, which is sort of a handbook on how to do religious freedom advocacy, was inspired by my time at the Commission because the Jehovah's Witnesses do a fabulous job of just giving you really tight information that is actionable that they have experienced and seen. I learned to trust that. My fellow Baptists would give me a 20-page, single-page document, written in Russian, which I do not read, and say: Please help. I wanted to help, but I did not.

The more you can make it easier for these very busy staffers, very busy Members of Congress, very busy policy analysts, to understand the issue and give them a route forward, you are going to see gains. I would encourage you, of course, to focus on the violent persecution, because it is life and death. There is this level below that is still problematic, the discrimination, the limitations, that I think are worthy of attention. You all have the ability in your position to have that in a way that few others can.

Mr. NISHANOV: Any other questions? If not, Knox, I am just going to go ahead and ask this one question. It is wonky, totally. I will admit it. Oh, there is a question. There is a question. I am sorry. Please go ahead. It is better than my wonky question, please. [LAUGHTER.]

QUESTION: Okay. Hi. My name is Catie. I am with Representative Deluzio's office, from Pennsylvania's 17th District. I am also a fellow with J Street, if you are familiar at all.

I was just curious about your U.S.-Israel foreign policy, and if you—because Israel has a lot of religious minorities within the State, and then also within Gaza and the West Bank. Do you see that from a—like, do you see any, like, situations arising there through a religious persecution angle? Or, like, things with Gaza and humanitarian aid? Like, is there any, I guess, framework you have for looking at those situations?

Mr. THAMES: Yes. When I was at the State Department, in my last job, I visited Israel twice, and there is sort of—there is sort of two categories. Sort of inside the 1967 borders of Israel. There are issues of—there are religious freedom issues along discrimination, limitation, registration questions that feel very—the things I was encountering when I was at Helsinki Commission, sort of European challenges of minority groups not being accepted by the community, and then having legal problems, so there is that challenge. Then you get into the West Bank and Gaza, and that is just another whole thing.

Religion is, of course, part of the conflict. It is not everything, but it is certainly there. I have never viewed it as a religious freedom challenge, so it has not been something that I have actively engaged on. It was more on the other side of the line where I had focused.

Thank you.

QUESTION: I also have a second question. For us, I know you kind of just asked this, but, like, is there any current, like, things circulating that we can get our bosses to sign on? Like, how can we be in the know with that stuff?

Mr. THAMES: One of the things—this is something I have been starting to study—is what is happening in the Western Hemisphere, actually. You know, we have been blessed in that in our hemisphere, there are no Chinas, there are no Burmas, no Saudi Arabias. There is generally religious freedom, with the exceptions of Cuba, Nicaragua, and, increasingly, Venezuela. This new—this emerging challenge is also the impact of criminal networks and cartels on religious communities. Where pastors and priests are, like, the voice of their community, they are a source of hope and goodness, and cartels hate that.

We see pastors and church workers increasingly attacked, disappearing. Working with the International Religious Freedom Roundtable, we are working on a letter to the president of Colombia because there were recently seven church workers who were disappeared by a FARC splinter group, and murdered. There is something the Colombian government can do. They had this—it is complicated—but they had a system that listed protected groups, and religious leaders, and religious communities were listed. Two years ago, that was removed, and so they are no longer eligible for State protection.

We think that the murder of these church workers, and another Catholic priest just disappeared, is the sad hook to go back to the president and say, you need to fix this. You should at least add them back to this list of protected groups. Not sure it will save these poor people, but it might save others. That is something where congressional voices are really, really helpful.

QUESTION: What is that called?

Mr. THAMES: It is the—I can—if you give me a card later, I can send it to you.

Okay, thanks.

Yes, thank you.

QUESTION: Hi. Nathan Worcester, reporter with The Epoch Times.

I am wondering—and this is very much in the headlines with the bombing in Syria by Israel in the name of the Druze religious minority. We also had the recent church bombing on June 22d, the Alawite persecution in Syria. It seems to me that the predicate for a lot of U.S. and Western policy on Syria under Assad was religious persecution. At this point, things are obviously changing, but how would you assess religious freedom in Syria now, as compared to under the previous regime?

Mr. THAMES: Well, there is the previous regime before and during the civil war. Before the Civil War, issues of religious freedom did not really come up very much. After the civil war, when the whole country was falling apart, as State control withered, you saw that these jihadi groups, these terrorist groups were victimizing Christians, Alawites, Druze. Now, with the new leadership, I think this is—or it is an open question about where Syria is going to go on these issues.

I think the new constitution will have wording talking about, you know, historic communities have the right to freedom of worship. There is no way it is going to have any reference to full religious freedom standards, about freedom to have any faith, or none, or change faith. There is no way that will be included, just based on the background of al-Sharaa and his coterie of followers.

You have that legal process that is going to unfold. What does that mean? We have already seen problematic changes to textbooks that are removing images of women who do not wear a scarf, removing references to non-Sunni religious groups that are part of Syria's history. That is not going in the right direction. Then you have the violence. You

have—your example, you also had the violence in Latakia against the Alawite community that was just astounding. Then you also have the autonomous region in the northeast, which is run by a Kurdish affiliation, with Christians and Yazidis. There is a long way before Syria returns to any type of normalcy.

I think this is where the U.S., working with our allies, needs to have a conditional response, that is, yes, we want Syria to return to the family of nations, and Syrians to be able to go home to a place where they can have dignity, respect, and human rights. If you are going to become a place of radicalism, violence, and victimization of minorities, then we are not going to reward you for that by—and so having some type of snapback function to the sanctions that the president reduced, I think would be wise. Because I am deeply concerned about where the new government is going and what they can even do.

Thank you.

Mr. NISHANOV: Please.

QUESTION: Okay. Hi. I am Mia Nash [sp]. I am working here as a Girl Scout congressional aide.

I was just wondering, with your time in the State Department, did you notice any departments, or organizations, or groups that you think—inside the State Department or outside—that you think are particularly suited to deal with this issue, and to raise more advocacy for it, and to carry out your four Cs?

Mr. THAMES: One of the encouraging things—I mean, there is the challenge of persecution that is not going away anytime soon. In the 20 years—almost 25 years now, I have been in this space, we are seeing sort of new efforts to build these coalitions. There is the International Religious Freedom Roundtable, which brings groups together of all faiths and none. They could not agree theologically on the time of day, but they—but they believe in human dignity, and that people should not be discriminated against, or certainly hurt, for what they believe. They are acting together in that. That is a good news story.

There is also now the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion and Belief. This is something the staff here, your bosses, should get involved in, IPPFoRB.org. It is a network of elected officials in parliaments around the world committed to religious freedom for everybody. Again, right, left, and center. Different backgrounds, beliefs, and regions. Again, you know, maybe would not agree on tax policy, but agree on human dignity and the rights of people to have freedom of conscience. That is a good news story.

Then, what I was—there is also now the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, of countries—that is now over 40, including the United States—that is trying to bring governments together around this shared belief in human dignity and religious freedom, so these are positive things. These are the coalitions.

Now, the challenge is leveraging the coalitions to action. I have been involved in creating all three of these over the years. You know, the NGO's, they are the—they are the—they are the engine, right? They have got the energy, the time. They are connected most closely to the groups, so you want to get that information, try to harness that energy. Congressmen, members of parliament, they are the ones who can then take that and act on their own, but also challenge their governments to do more. Then, governments move the slowest, but they also have the power.

Having all three of these groups working together can hopefully start to produce gains that we have not seen. Then that sort of the last part is the faith leaders. If you get faith leaders talking about religious freedom for everyone, even if they—you know, while you hold your own truths very closely, and you wish others would hold them too, you recognize that it is a fundamental human right just to pursue truth as your conscious leads. If you have faith leaders enunciating that, that is the game changer. That is the part we have not seen yet consistently. Because their voice can carry so much further than governments or elected officials. If we can get all four legs of this advocacy stool engaged and at a high level, then I think we can really start to help people in durable, lasting ways.

Thank you.

Mr. NISHANOV: Excellent. Thank you. Anyone else? Any other questions? If at any point you want to—we have another 10 minutes or so. Let me ask you one question, and then I know, I think, Kyle, I think you might want to—I think you had some questions too. I had a wonky question. I had a childish question. I will go for the childish one. If you were U.S. president, what are the top two or three things that you would do immediately? You talked about the U.S. being the leader, U.S. being the power—really the global power when it comes to religious freedom. What are the top two, three things you would do immediately to advance this agenda?

Mr. THAMES: Kyle Parker would either be Ambassador to Russia or secretary of State. I would let you pick, so you know.

Mr. PARKER: No, I want to be an ambassador to Ukraine.

Mr. THAMES: Ambassador Ukraine, Okay. There we go.[LAUGHS.] What would I do? I think it is just this making sure that our values are informing our interests, that we—to separate the two, if we only pursue what we understand to be our interests, those change. Those are not lasting. Those are not eternal. We will be swinging left and right between administrations, between presidents. Making sure our values are intertwined in how we are conducting our foreign policy will lead to a more stable foreign policy.

We will be able to drive things consistently longer. That can start to see our country use, you know, these incredible blessings of prosperity and liberty that we have to see other countries also benefit from that. That is in our interest, because then they will not be the drivers of terrorism, or extremism, or migration. I would just try to reiterate that and embed that as a core part of our foreign policy, so the Secretary of State who worked for me would know it is not—there is not a human rights Ambassador or religious freedom Ambassador. That is your job.

Mr. NISHANOV: Yes. Excellent.

Thank you.

QUESTION: Kyle, I think you might? If anyone else—no one-has any questions, I know, Kyle, you do.

Mr. PARKER: Knox, I appreciate your very practical focus here. I have always struggled on the practical side of things. I would like to engage perhaps some of the—some of your—the more theoretical or philosophical parts of your expertise here. I think some of these are related. Some of these are not related. The one I think that is not related, we will just throw out there first, antisemitism. When you were at the Commission, you also worked extensively on antisemitism. I tend to view antisemitism not—I do not see antisemitism as predominantly a problem of religious freedom. It seems to me that it gets

into other things. It is the world's oldest conspiracy theory, but clearly, being Jewish is a faith. How do you see it? What part of antisemitism resides in the religious freedom realm, and what part might not?

Mr. THAMES: I think if—you know, if—

Mr. PARKER: Is there—is there any practical effect in the way we combat it?

Mr. THAMES: Yes, yes. You know, how it connects to religious freedom is if, because of antisemitism being expressed in the community—either through violence or slurs, or graffiti—that can hinder or limit the ability of Jews to practice their faith, to feel like they can go to synagogue, to wear the yarmulke. There are clear implications of religious freedom when there is antisemitism in the community. I agree that it is a—it is an interconnected, related, but also unique, because of the drivers behind it. It is this ancient, ancient disease that dates back to millennia, but there are, yes, absolute intersections with religious freedom issues.

Mr. PARKER: Interesting. Great, great points. I think this is probably one of the reasons that, at least in the OSCE context with the special reps, the United States has consistently emphasized the importance of retaining a special rep on antisemitism, and not folding it into Islamophobia, discrimination against Christians, and other things.

You know, another question I have—and, again, I am not sure that there is a whole lot of practical consequence, but I might—you know, am I correct in seeing and understanding—you know, religious freedom, to me, seems to be the most intimate of freedoms. It seems to be the most fundamental freedom. It seems to be a freedom from which other freedoms are given birth.

I—you know, I feel like it is no accident that it resides in the First Amendment, right? When I was thinking about that the other day, I was like, well, geez, I had to—they did not think of this when they just wrote the Constitution? They actually had to amend it.

How fundamental could it be? You say, well, it is also kind of there in the preamble, and it colors the whole—the whole founding. You know, I look at it as—you know, and I think it is clear when you look at it as freedom of religion, thought, conscience, and belief. That if we are not free in this space here, right, the cranial orbit or whatever, that—one first thinks here and then decides to act externally in terms of freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and all these other things. Would you agree with that?

Mr. THAMES: I mean, I have referred to it—religious freedom as the soul of the human rights regime.

Mr. PARKER: The soul of the human rights regime.

Mr. THAMES: Because everything comes from it. Like, why do you want to have the right to assemble? Well, there is—

Mr. PARKER: The human rights government, not the regime.

Mr. THAMES: Well, the human rights system.

Mr. PARKER: I am kidding. [LAUGHS.]

Mr. THAMES: Oh. Like, do you want to assemble? What is motivating you? Why do you want to have free speech? Why do you want to have freedom of movement? Like, there are things that you believe that are motivating you that are—that are protected by Article 18 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and Vienna Concluding Document in the OSCE context, and so it

is the soul of the system. If you do not have religious freedom, then the things that animate the reasons people want these other rights are missing.

Mr. PARKER: I like that, the soul of the human rights regime. Never heard it before, and we will use it now, and give credit where credit is due, so we go through different political moments, right? We are going through one now that is different from where we were last year, right? Things wax and wane, and it seems like—and I have seen in my couple of decades in the human rights world, where certain freedoms or certain causes tend to be elevated or more favored, and others kind of less emphasized. I am of the belief that one can advance the good, wherever the good is to be found, without infringing on any other good. Hopefully advancing that good, if one—if it generally is good and you are advancing it, benefits others—benefits other rights.

Do you see a knock-on effect with saying, hey, you know, we are going to spend a lot of time—this new—our new administration has certainly spoken about religious freedom, has raised it in international fora. Would you—am I correct in thinking that progress in the realm of religious freedom will benefit a whole host of other fundamental freedoms?

Mr. THAMES: You know, we like to talk about religious freedom, the canary in the coal mine for the broader health of a human rights environment, because it is a multifaceted human right. It is unique among other human rights that have been enunciated in that for religious freedom to be fully protected and respected, by definition, other rights have to be respected as well. If you think about if you go to church, mosque, synagogue, or temple on your holy day, all the rights that have to be exercised.

Of course, you have freedom of belief. You go to the place of worship. You have freedom of worship. There is also going to be a desire to have freedom of speech to deliver the message, freedom of expression to wear distinctive religious dress, and freedom of movement to get to the place. Then there is a question of property rights and incorporation, so that the religious community can have legal standing, legal personality to own property. Property rights become incorporated in this, so it is when religious—when you get religious freedom right, by definition, these other rights are being enjoyed as well. When religious freedom is limited, then by definition, something along this list is being—is unhealthy. It is a helpful barometer for the overall health of a human rights environment in a country of interest.

Mr. PARKER: My final—thank you. Thank you for that. My final question is perhaps closer to home. When we were—and it relates to religion in the public square. When we were scoping out this briefing, we were looking at various framings and what we would focus on, and of course, you began the focus on, you know, persecution, and let us use our terminology correctly. Let us, you know, prioritize, you know, if somebody's getting killed or tortured, we need to address that before we can address other problems that I think perhaps reside in liberal democracies where religious freedom is concerned.

On the one hand, you look at the spectrum of autocracy, authoritarianism, and you have got places where, you know, state-enforced atheism, like North Korea, right? Or you have Iran, right, a theocracy—one particular religion, one particular interpretation. Then you have some illiberal democracies as you move across the continuum, where one might say that religion, religious freedom, is either reduced or instrumentalized, or perhaps certain groups favored, certain State functions co-opted. Then you get over to the other side of the spectrum, liberal democracies—maybe very liberal democracies. Certain parts of Europe.

You know, I am—I just called up the story from February, following the vice president's speech at Munich: "J.D. Vance Decried [as] Extremist Over Attack on U.K. Abortion Clinic Safe Zones," right? His remarks here, right, he says at the Munich Security Conference, that the U.K. had placed the basic liberties of religious Britons in the crosshairs, citing the prosecution of Adam Smith Connor, a physiotherapist and Army veteran. Vance said he had been charged with the heinous crime, standing 50 meters from an abortion clinic and silently praying for three minutes, not obstructing anyone, not interacting with anyone, just silently praying on his own.

I guess my question here is, you also remind me that OSCE commitments can be read with profit. I am thinking of, I think, the Toledo Guiding Principles, which I thought were rather ingenious in the sense that they solved, for me, the problem of saying, "We are not asking you to respect someone else's religion, right"? You might be a believer and say, I do not—or a nonbeliever—I do not respect that. I think it is superstitious nonsense. Or I do not respect your religion, I think it is heretical. Or it is—or it begets violence, but I can respect your human freedom, right? Your freedom to believe it.

I am just wondering what your thoughts are, where you have liberal democracies, which, in some sense, where religion has become a cultural artifact, where it has been reduced to a Christmas market, right? Or a parade, or something—you know, again, more ethnic churches, things that are less guiding and have less practical effect in the public square. You are free to be religious, as long as your religion has no practical effect in the public square. In these situations, is the ask that religion merely be tolerated in the public square? Should it be welcomed in the public square? I mean, I believe it should be welcomed. I actually believe it is essential to a vibrant public square. I am wondering what we can say, and sort of, by way of commitment, how this is addressed, you go from tolerated to welcome to essential?

Mr. THAMES: Yes, that is—I think that is the question that Western Europe is grappling with now, as sort of the traditional Christian communities have become more and more secular, and participation in Christian religious life has, you know, sometimes dwindled to serve a Christmas and Easter exercise, while you have these new communities that are predominantly Muslim that are devout, and that do hold the faith closely. There is this tension of how do you manage that? They are struggling with it.

To prepare for this briefing, I was reading through the reports of the U.N. special rapporteur on religious freedom, because she has two reports, one on Sweden and one on Hungary. They addressed some of these questions. She had this great phrase where she talked about, I think it was in Sweden, that they have an impoverished understanding of freedom of religion or belief because they see it as, like, inherently private. The international standards are clear that, you know, you are asking, can it be in the public square where—well, it is wherever people are. If they are in the public square, they can bring their faith, they can talk about their faith, they can share their faith, and they can change their faith. That is bedrock international human rights law and OSCE commitments.

At a certain level, it is a societal question where people do not know how to deal with it. You know, tolerance—you know, tolerating something has a negative vibe, but in a lot of countries around the world, if we can get to toleration, that is a win. I think it is a question in Europe, sort of post-religious Europe, how do we help revive an understanding that faith actors can be a social good? They are a social good, and the benefits they bring. Yes, there will be issues that there will be disagreement about, but that is what a democratic society creates space for. You cannot exclude them based on their religious beliefs,

because then that is a religious freedom violation, so it is going to be an ongoing conversation. I would recommend those two reports to everyone to see how she is grappling with this very question.

Mr. PARKER: Okay. I appreciate that, Knox.

Do you have any concluding remarks?

Mr. THAMES: Well, thank you. It is a great honor to come back to the Commission after so many years and remember the ways that this body has been so important in advancing human rights, religious freedom, and speaking up for those who do not have a voice across the OSCE region. Your work with Mr. Magnitsky and that effort, I think, is another testament to the legacy of the Commission and its leadership and its members, and we should just be—you know, always find ways to recommit ourselves to this. The forces of oppression do not sleep. If we are committed to human rights, if we are committed to religious freedom, we cannot either. That is hard, but we have got to find ways to challenge our own government, challenge ourselves, challenge our elected leaders to carry this unique American commitment forward in every venue and every way possible. Thank you for this opportunity to talk about these things.

Mr. PARKER: Well, thank you, Knox. Your commitment is inspiring. I have no doubt that it will—it will galvanize our focus going forward on this particular—this soul of the human rights regime. Really, really appreciate your eloquence and remarks today.

I thank you all. It was—it was great to have a robust question and answer period. Sometimes you kind of—you give the talk and then there are one or two questions. I think we really had a good exchange today, appreciate you all for coming. This will become part of a permanent U.S. Government transcript. The remarks are online. They will be printed, so you can find that at CSCE.gov, and yes.

Thank you all. With that, we are adjourned.

Mr. NISHANOV: Thank you so much, Knox. Join me in a round of applause. [Applause.]

Mr. PARKER: Oh. I am remiss. I should recognize Bhakti. Thank you, Bhakti, for moderating the panel.

[Whereupon, at 3:09 p.m., the briefing ended.]

The United States Helsinki Commission, an independent federal agency, by law monitors and encourages progress in implementing provisions of the Helsinki Accords.

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