

Beyond Legislation: Transnational Strategies for Countering Religious Persecution

Opening Remarks by Clifford D. May

Featuring a conversation with David Anderson, Farahnaz Ispahani, and Sharon Nazarian. Moderated by Aykan Erdemir.

MAY: Well, good afternoon. I'm Cliff May. I am the Founder and President of FDD. And a warm welcome to everyone in the room and everyone watching. Thanks for joining us today for this conversation, *Beyond Legislation: Transnational Strategies for Countering Religious Persecution*. We're pleased to host this event alongside the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief during their important ministerial taking place this week.

Today's program is one of many from FDD's Turkey program. We're proud to have support and guidance on this project from a distinguished board of advisors. For more information or to sign up for the latest analysis from our Turkey program, or for all of our programs' various areas of focus, just visit our website FDD.org, FDD.org.

We're glad to be joined today by diplomats and religious leaders from around the globe, representatives of the executive branch, including the Department of State and the Pentagon, experts from the policy community, and several domestic and international media outlets.

For guests new to us today, I want to share a bit about FDD. We're a nonpartisan policy institute founded just after the attacks of September 11, 2001. We are, I believe, a reliable source of timely research, analysis, and policy options for Congress, the administration, the media, and the wider national security community. We're glad to share our research and analysis with allied governments, but we take no foreign government or foreign corporate funding.

In addition to the folks here at FDD's headquarters, I'd like to welcome those tuning in over live stream. We invite all of you to join in the conversation, which we'll be live tweeting, @FDD.

At this time, we also would like to ask you to please silence your cell phones. I'm going to test your patience just a little bit by providing a bit of context.

I spent a couple of years as a commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. I wish I could say that we at USCIRF, the U.S. government, the broader International Religious Freedom or IRF, IRF community, have made substantial progress. But I think that's not the case.

In theory, everyone everywhere has a right to freedom of religion or belief. Indeed, that's said to be a universal right. In truth, it's not. It's certainly not believed by those who rule China, Iran, North Korea, Russia, Pakistan, or other countries designated by USCIRF as countries of particular concern, the diplomatic euphemism for regimes that most egregiously violate religious freedom, including by means of torture, imprisonment, and other forms of severe punishment.

I've long subscribed to the view that the right to believe, or disbelieve, as one chooses, as one's conscience dictates is the most fundamental of freedoms. So long as rulers persecute those they rule for what amount to thought crimes, all other rights, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, representative government, will remain out of reach.

Last week, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo launched a bipartisan commission on unalienable rights. It was immediately attacked by what one might call the human rights establishment for having too many religious scholars among its members. One of the critics quoted in *The New Yorker* called the commission "a thinly veiled religious fundamentalists panel that aims to cut back the human rights of people all over the world". I did note that this commission was launched last week.

I think this is a profoundly misguided view, and I'm going to attempt to explain that at more length in my *Washington Times* column this week. One objective truth that I hope we can all agree on: freedom is preferable to tyranny, not for dictators perhaps but for the rest of us.

I'll go further and say that regimes not progressing, however slowly and incrementally, away from tyranny and toward greater liberty should be disdained and disfavored by Americans and other free peoples. Our relations with them should be constrained. Am I being judgmental? Absolutely, and I make no apologies for that.

Now let me one more time unapologetically welcome you and then turn the mic over to my friend and colleague, our moderator, Aykan Erdemir, who is a Senior Fellow here at FDD and a former member of the Turkish Parliament. As an outspoken defender of pluralism, minority rights, and religious freedoms in the Middle East, Aykan has been at the forefront of the struggle against religious persecution, against hate crimes and hate speech in Turkey. He is a founding member of the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief. So with that, Aykan, thank you and over to you.

ERDEMIR: Thank you, Cliff. Thank you all for coming. It really means a lot to us that you're here because this is one of the eight side events during the second annual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in D.C. This is one of the maybe hundred side event panels in D.C. There's fierce competition for audience, so it's great to welcome you all here.

It's also a particular pleasure to be moderating this panel of all panels because they are three colleagues whose work I admire, with whom my path has crossed again and again. It really is a great, great privilege and honor to host you all at FDD and this joint panel with the IPPFoRB.

Just as a reminder, since the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief, in its longer form, will take the entirety of the panel, we'll simply refer to it as the IPPFoRB. So that's the acronym. Let me very quickly go over the bios of the distinguished panelists. We can't do justice, so I'll just give you the highlights.

Farahnaz Ispahani served as a member of Parliament in Pakistan and media advisor to the President of Pakistan from 2008 to 2012. She's currently a Senior Fellow on the South and

Southeast Asia Action Team at the Religious Freedom Institute and a Global Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.

David Anderson is a Member of Parliament in Canada. He was first elected in 2000 and subsequently re-elected five times. He currently serves as Shadow Cabinet Secretary for Human Rights and Religious Freedom. He has hosted Parliamentary Forums on Religious Freedom and also worked to pass Motion 382, which unanimously declared the Parliament of Canada's support for religious freedom around the world. He's a founding member of the IPPFoRB and the current chair.

The last but not the least, Sharon Nazarian is Senior Vice President of International Affairs at the Anti-Defamation League, while heading ADL's work fighting anti-Semitism and racial hatred globally, including overseeing ADL's Israel office. She's also the mind and heart behind the ADL's new Task Force on Middle East Minorities. Welcome again.

Without further ado, let me start with you, Farahnaz. You are unique, especially concerning today's topic, because you have multiple hats. You have the hat of a former legislator and you have the hat of both a prolific scholar as well as an advocate.

With your multiple hats, could we ask you to reflect on the work you did in Pakistan at the national legislature, but also the work that took you beyond Pakistan, beyond sectarian borders, and beyond faith borders? When it comes to pushing back against religious persecution, when it comes to defending religious freedom, what have been some of your challenges and what have been some of your inspirations as a lawmaker?

ISPAHANI: I would say, going back to Pakistan, with the restoration of democracy with the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto really changed my life, which is such a cliché. But I think, like a lot of educated Pakistanis, we don't really live in the real world, the real world of what, as a member of Parliament, you see because you have constituencies, you travel all over the country, and you meet people from the majority, but you also meet people from the minority, specifically minority religious groups. So there was a change in my thought process.

There was also the silence, the total silence, in Pakistan's Parliament about events that took place affecting religious minorities. It went from Shia Muslims being taken off the bus at the side of the road by the Taliban, and their IDs were checked to ensure they were Shias, and being gunned down, and the Sunni passengers being put back on the bus. It didn't merit 30 seconds on the floor of the House.

Then we go into what is even far more depressing, because Shia Muslims have some numbers. They are about 20% of the country. And they're still considered Muslims. But if you look at the Ahmadiyya Muslims, who have been struck off as being non-Muslim, or the Christians and the Hindus, Jews, long fled from Pakistan very early, in the 1940s, 1950s, most of them.

You start to see, number one, the silence. Then the second part of it is legislation, how from the constitution of Pakistan to laws like the blasphemy laws, which are the worst

blasphemy laws in the world, they carry a death penalty, all of these things were sort of central to what happened with a young Christian farm worker called Asia Bibi.

That happened during my term in Parliament. I saw two of my very good friends, the Muslim governor of Punjab, Salmaan Taseer, who tried to take up the case of Asia Bibi, and my friend Shahbaz Clement Bhatti, who was a minister for religious affairs and who was a Christian. Both were gunned down, massacred, murdered; Shahbaz outside his house with no witnesses and Salmaan by his own bodyguard. The other bodyguards stood in a row and held their guns while one murdered him.

What happened to Mumtaz Qadri? Okay, he went to jail. Our government managed to get him the death penalty, et cetera. But what happened after that? That murderer Mumtaz Qadri has had an Islamic Sufi shrine built in his memory.

People go and pray to him as a saint. That is Pakistan. When my husband and I had to flee, I wrote a book on Pakistan's religious minorities. After that, I started really understanding, yeah, I did not like religious advocacy, where people only talk about their own communities.

That's not where the world is now. For me, a persecuted Christian in the Middle East is as worthy of my voice or time or money. A Jew in France today, a Muslim anywhere of any sect. That's why I think when we're talking about transnational strategies, your topic today, why it's so important, we have to get out of our little cubby holes and really develop something transnational because I feel we're in trouble.

ERDEMIR: David, you're certainly one of those individuals who have gotten out of that neat hole. In fact, your own political and intellectual journey also took you to Pakistan. Maybe starting from those experiences as well, could you give us the journey that the IPPFoRB took, from very humble beginnings where we met at the University of Oxford in 2014, maybe a handful of lawmakers, and now you work with 300 legislators from 70 countries? Could you tell us the humble beginnings and where IPPFoRB has come today?

ANDERSON: Thank you. I want to thank the FDD for allowing me to speak to you today. In 2010, I was looking around for something that would be of some consequence to people in interest. As I looked around our Parliament, there were a number of people who were working on things like human trafficking and some of the justice issues. Irwin Cotler was covering human rights issues. A couple of my colleagues in my party were as well. I realized nobody was doing anything on religious freedom in Canada, and I thought there must be a niche here for someone to begin to highlight some of the issues around religious freedom.

I started off just by hosting a forum on the Parliament Hill called the First Annual. It was optimistic. First Annual Parliamentary Forum on Religious Freedom. And so we brought together seven of the different religious groups to talk about their history of persecution and pressure that they had faced. We also brought a family in who had a personal testimony about a crisis that they had gone through.

In February of 2011, I was invited to a meeting on Parliament Hill and went to it. I met a very unobtrusive gentleman from Pakistan. It was Shahbaz Bhatti, who had come to Canada to visit. I know that he was offered the opportunity to actually stay in Canada, but as a minister, he said, "I have a responsibility back to my people. I need to go back to Pakistan." It was three weeks after that that he was shot just outside of his home.

For me, that was a bit of a fundamental challenge, I think, when I realized this is the price that people around the world are willing to pay for this issue while I sit in the Parliament in Ottawa without a threat basically to me in any sense of the word. So we began to work on a number of issues, and I did a couple more forums or whatever. The motion that was mentioned a little bit earlier, we brought forward to the House. We were able to get that passed as well.

But in summer of 2014, there was an invitation for a number of us to go to Oxford to a conference on religious freedom. When we got there, the all-party group of Britain, I think, had been part of it. The United States commission was part of the invitation. Brigham Young University, I think, was part of that as well.

And so we sat down. There were about eight or 10 of us who were legislators who were at this conference. We just started talking about is there something that we can do for parliamentarians around the globe that would strengthen their resolve to deal with this issue? We started talking, we could set up an organization, we could do a number of different things. There was a decision to try to set up a network that would support parliamentarians interested in this issue.

In November, we met back in Oslo, courtesy of my friend Abid Raja, who's now the Deputy Speaker of the Norwegian Parliament. His invitation came back, and we signed on to what was called the Oslo Charter, which is basically a declaration that we support Article 18 of the United Nations' declaration. Aykan was at both of those meetings and part of that. Then we moved forward from there.

It's been a bit of a surprise to us, I think, how quickly this has evolved. We had a partners in various places. We had a meeting in New York in 2015 that attracted about 75 or 80 parliamentarians from around the world. Later, we had a meeting in Berlin in partnership with KAS. It brought about 90 parliamentarians from around the world. IPPFoRB has just caught on, I think, in people's minds as something that they could use to help them.

Now we're not an organization. All we are is a network. We have some funding primarily from the Norwegian government right now. We're on a three-year funding cycle. We have enough funding to do a bit of training, a little bit of travel, a little bit of encouragement of people.

But what we've been doing is encouraging parliamentarians who were interested in this issue to set up their own local FoRB groups. We don't dictate to anybody from outside. We are a group of people with extremely different backgrounds, political interests, social interests. There is religious faith interest. It's just whoever's interested in Article 18 and supporting the three principles that are found there, we will work with.

We've been able to do that. We now have, as was mentioned, about 300 members around the globe from about 70 different countries. We have a number of national groups that have been set up, a number of regional groups that are set up as well, Southeast Asia, South Africa right now, and Southern Africa. We've had a Latin American group that's been very active.

Some of us were allowed to go into Myanmar actually before the really big trouble started. We've been in Nepal a couple of times, encouraging them to come up with better legislation. They had a constitution that put in place a secular constitution. They're enabling legislation, then began to pull back some of those freedoms.

Those are the kinds of things that we're doing. We're not dictating to anyone. We like these national or regional group set up. If they come to us and say, "Can you give us some help and support and some training?" then we try to do that and to work with them and encouraging this principle of religious freedom that is so critical around the world. I'll stop there.

ERDEMIR: Thank you, David. Sharon, three of us, we have either the current of former legislator hats. But no one in this group has had more interaction with lawmakers around the world. I've had the honor of working with you at ADL's Task Force on Middle East Minorities, and I know what your schedule is like. You're traveling the world, meeting members of national parliaments, meeting supranational parliaments. Could you reflect on your very own experience of interacting with legislators around the world in defending religious freedom and pushing back against persecution, hate, and bigotry?

NAZARIAN: Thank you. First of all, I also want to thank FDD for holding this very important panel, in my view. I want to thank IPPFoRB for bringing such an important forum today, badly needed in the world that we're in today. I also want to really thank Aykan. You really exemplify an example of what you've discussed is needed in the world today. Your work, I commended. Thank you for bringing us together today. I'm really happy to be here.

My personal story is also relevant here. I'm Iranian born, Iranian American of Jewish faith. My family was personally impacted by the 1979 revolution in Iran, and that's what brought us to America today.

I joined ADL about two years ago. For those of you not familiar, ADL is an institution. It's over a hundred years old. It's a Jewish American institution that was created to first fight the defamation against Jewish people and, at the same time, understand that we need to secure justice and fair treatment for all. From very early on, our founders understood that unless we connect the protection of all vulnerable groups, the Jews around the world can also not be secure.

We are very much a U.S.-centric organization. We have 25 field offices in the U.S.. We immerse in communities across America. My work and my team's work is really bringing some of those best practices around the globe to the international community.

Now a big part of what we do is advocacy and, in addition to education, in terms of trainings and bringing some of our know-how to both schools and youth, but as well as law

enforcement and others. That kind of advocacy brings me to the offices of legislators around the world. That's what, Aykan, you were referring to.

I come with a huge menu of issues that ADL stands for and wants to elevate at every moment. The task force that you sit on, that we just launched last year, focusing on protection of minorities in the Middle East. Religious, ethnic, gender, sexual minorities around the Middle East is something that is really a reflection of what ADL is doing today.

Some of the best practices that we bring, and we can actually bring to legislators, is our experience with hate crime laws that we started here in the U.S. in the late 1970s. As a Jewish organization, we started tabulating, collecting data about incidents against Jews in the U.S., so anti-Semitic incidents.

From that experience, when we saw the numbers were showing us, wow, this is a real problem, we started a draft of the first hate crime legislation in America and we began to do that state-by-state. Today we can tell you that 45 states have now have state-level hate crime legislation.

I bring some of that know-how that ADL's acquired over the decades to legislators around the world and try to share some of those best practices and say, "Here's what we've done in America. Here's what we've learned. How could this be helpful to you and your communities? How could you work with your own law enforcement in making sure that hate crime is acknowledged, recognized?"

Of course, we know that legislation is not the end all and be all. Change has to happen in society through education, through some of the other tools we have. But definitely engaging with legislators is a very important part of what we do. I take that as a personal mission to do so. I'm happy to discuss more, but I'll come back to it if you need more details on that as well.

ERDEMIR: In fact, allow me to highlight some of the work you do –

NAZARIAN: Sure, sure.

ERDEMIR: – because when I was a lawmaker in the Turkish Parliament, ADL's global survey on anti-Semitism was one of the resources I used. It showed, to my shock that, on the average, Turkey was more anti-Semitic than Iran.

On Rosh Hashanah, I had a press conference at the Turkish Parliament, holding a mirror to my co-citizens, telling them, "Did you know that we are more anti-Semitic than Iran, the Islamic Republic of Iran?" So then I had the motion to set up the first ad hoc committee on anti-Semitism in Turkey, which, of course, didn't materialize, given Erdogan always has rock solid majorities. But at least it's now on the record. At least there were those of us who recognized we had a problem, which is always the first step. So thanks to ADL for raising that.

NAZARIAN: If I may, one more point is that legislators also sometimes can be part of the problem.

ISPAHANI: Oh yes.

NAZARIAN: That's where my focus is today in Europe, especially in the UK and the Labour Party. When you see a mainstream political party basically hijacked by the extreme factions of that party, bringing in not only anti-capitalist, anti-western ideology but immersed in it is anti-Semitic ideology –

ISPAHANI: Very much so.

NAZARIAN: – that they continue to say, "We're not anti-Semitic," but, yes, they are. I mean legislators could also be really a big part of the problem, and I think Farahnaz also referred to that, and David. We have to look at the tool on how we can use it best. Legislators can be part of the solution, but also part of the problem.

ERDEMIR: Exactly. Farahnaz, back to you. Since you have those multiple hats, I think you're in a unique position to help us, you know, because in the audience, we have advocacy organizations, representatives of faith communities, we have diplomatic corps, we have media.

With your insights into both worlds, as a former lawmaker, what would advise advocacy organizations and faith communities in reaching out to parliaments, in working with parliamentarians? Also, with your Religious Freedom Institute and Wilson Center hats, what would you also recommend to lawmakers, to your former colleagues? How should they work with advocacy organizations, faith communities? How can we make this bridge stronger?

ISPAHANI: I'm going to answer this indirectly in a way. I feel today, and from what the title of the talk is today, *Beyond Legislation*, because, as you very rightly pointed out, many lawmakers today and many political parties are the problem. Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan won the election by saying over and over again that he was for the blasphemy laws and he would never allow them to be changed. Now that's an elected parliamentarian plus prime minister. I would talk about when you go beyond legislation, right, you have your faith-based groups and you have legislators and lawmakers as well.

But what I've seen here is basically whether it's the United States or whether it is a country in Europe, whether it's a country in the Middle East, freedom of religion and belief is not central to policymaking anywhere. That has to change basically. You have to recognize that issue.

At this moment, it's those faith-based NGOs and individuals who are really carrying the torch in a really big way. Events that are taking place today are reported in a way as being an event. Even if a lawmaker addresses them on the floor or a faith-based organization takes it up, it is recorded as a number, an event, right?

The first attack on the Jewish cemetery in France was reported as an event. No, it is much more than that. We should have seen it as a process, not an event. I think what we need to do right now is that we have to stop looking at these things as individual acts of persecution.

I gave you the example of France. In Pakistan, basically over 70 years. It started somewhere. These things kept being reported as events. Lawmakers we got away with so many things, but there was an event. The USCIRF report, State Department report, excellent reports, no teeth.

Today, to create a transnational movement where it's agreed within participating countries that, okay, what? You know what, Turkey? Your legislators are not going to get visas to come to the United States, to Western Europe, to Canada, to Australia, to whichever country, Israel, whichever country it is. We have to have teeth. Juries and judges who are committing people on blasphemy crimes, fake blasphemy crimes, no visas.

I mean I'm just giving you an example, but this is all doable. But instead of the U.S. doing something or your organization doing something, there has to be this transnational network. That's why I thought this topic was so brilliant –

ERDEMIR: Thank you.

ISPAHANI: – because what's coming now all over the world, we have forgotten the Holocaust, we have forgotten genocides, we have forgotten many, many things. We need to stop looking at them at our community. This happened to our community. No more grievance-based. It should be, okay, it happened to you, it happened to you, it happened to you, we see these signs, how do we move forward?

ERDEMIR: Thank you, Farahnaz, for reminding our title, Beyond Legislation, because we have seen with our own eyes.

ISPAHANI: Do you see the legislator, though? I'm standing on the floor of the house right now. There's the emotion.

NAZARIAN: Bravo.

ISPAHANI: Sorry.

ERDEMIR: But we have seen in the U.S. how using some of the very tools you have just offered make a change. I'm sure people who follow FDD's work know about the case of Pastor Andrew Brunson, a North Carolina pastor, who was held on ludicrous charges for two years in Turkey. He was held without an indictment for 17 months. He was accused of being a spy, he was accused of carrying out the coup, he was accused of bombing one of the prison buses, all sorts of ludicrous charges. After 17 months, guess when Turkey released him? When Global Magnitsky sanctions against two Turkish ministers were issued.

Within two months, Pastor Andrew Brunson was on a plane out of Turkey. So it seems where laws failed, where maybe advocacy organizations failed, a policy beyond legislation –

ISPAHANI: Right, absolutely.

ERDEMIR: – a policy with teeth, as you say, made a difference.

ISPAHANI: That's a great example.

ERDEMIR: On that point, let me turn to David, who is still in Parliament. Maybe two issues, but feel free to go in, of course, in other directions as well. One is IPPFoRB's own work has been facilitated by this range of advocacy organizations and faith communities. This was not just a number of legislators coming together and moving forward. Maybe you would agree with me if I said that if we didn't have all these nameless heroes behind IPPFoRB, all these advocacy organizations and faith communities, it wouldn't have made it this far.

Second, also going back to our title, Beyond Legislation, and building on Farahnaz's comments, IPPFoRB has also done a lot of work that's beyond legislation, the letters, the visits. IPPFoRB has done work which was unimaginable, either through national parliaments or through international interstate organizations. Could you also share some of those with us?

ANDERSON: That's a lot for a couple of minutes.

ERDEMIR: Yes, but I have full confidence in your –

ISPAHANI: Yeah, we all do.

ERDEMIR: – articulate nature.

ANDERSON: I would actually like to start, I guess, with focusing on legislators because I believe that what you have said is true. But I also know that one or two committed legislators in any legislature can make a huge difference. We do have a unique role to play, and I've been aware of that as long as I have the privilege to serve in this position, but we are the ones who set much of, if you want to call it, the atmosphere in a country in terms of approach towards legislation, approach towards the judiciary, approach towards communication.

If we can find those one or two people who are committed to a cause, and in our situation, it's the notion of religious freedom in Article 18, we have found that they can make a tremendous difference. Typically, they also pay a tremendous price.

My friend, Aykan, for his bravery, is now in this country, but estranged from his own country. My friend Abid Raja in Norway lives with, fairly regularly, being threatened with death by a number of people around him. I have other colleagues who have lost their jobs as parliamentarians because they took up this issue, and there were groups who organized against them to try to make sure that they were not high enough on that list to be able to be successful.

But we have things like the Magnitsky Act, which was typically taken by a small group of parliamentarians in legislatures and in advance. Those are the kinds of things that we can move forward and then give us the possibility of doing what we have talked about here as well. In context of that, the work that IPPFoRB has done has been it dependent on people coming into

partnership with us and supporting us. That was one of the things that I was going to bring forward here.

If you would like to have a role, there is a role for you, and that is in finding those legislators who are interested in this issue and taking them up and offering to support them and providing them with the kind of encouragement that they need to continue to show bravery on this front.

For those of us who live in Canada and the United States, for the most part, this is not an issue where we are threatened, but there are many places around the world where people are threatened. We also have a Prisoners of Conscience Program. The United States commission started that. We have taken that up and are trying to encourage our members to participate in that, so that people are not forgotten just because they have been arrested on usually trumped up charges of some sort or other.

We have out of our office have tried to take up the cause of the Baha'i in Iran and others. We have advocacy letters, which have been surprisingly valuable for us. When you get letters that are being sent out from 15 or 20 countries, going to the embassies in each of those countries, those ambassadors have to report back. We found out that that's been much more effective than having 15 or 20 people write to one embassy.

We've been able to, as I mentioned earlier, go into Myanmar and Nepal with some fact-finding missions and trying to encourage those people who are there to set up FoRB groups, and then to be able to support them from outside their countries. We have done country-specific reports trying to point out the various aspects or issues or problems around religious freedom specific to them.

We do have a parliamentary toolkit that's been produced in conjunction with Christian Solidarity Worldwide for people who are interested, legislators who are interested, in this issue as well. These national and regional groups that I talked about a little bit earlier, we need your support. We need you to back up those people who are interested and say, "We've got some resources here. We've got some partnerships." For those of us who are working on this issue, it's not like we're overwhelmed by people who want to participate on this issue.

We're looking for allies and people who will join with us and, ever more so, those people who are in situations where they're being strongly persecuted. I think I'll stop there. We can certainly come back to this. Our focus is narrow, on Article 18 and legislators, but we do not do that without a strong support base from the ground and people who will back us up and give the encouragement and strength that legislators need to do their jobs.

ERDEMIR: Thank you. Sharon, when it comes to being an ally and when it comes to being a resource, I think the work you do, the work ADL does is quite unmatched. You have been the driving force and the inspiration and the resource behind a number of legislation, a number of administrative steps in the U.S. as well as around the world. When it comes to bridge-building, I think you set the gold standard.

NAZARIAN: Thank you.

ERDEMIR: I would like to encourage you to share with us some of those concrete projects, some of those concrete initiatives. If you have time also, it would be great to hear more about the Task Force on Middle East Minorities itself, which is a bridge-building attempt, a coalition-building attempt.

NAZARIAN: Thank you, Aykan. I appreciate that. I agree. I think what I've learned from my short time in ADL is that coalition-building, bridge-building, and being allies, allyship, is critical if you want to move the needle. I think both David and Farahnaz's points speak to that.

To give you some concrete examples, because we have only five minutes left, I really want to delve into our task force, because that really epitomizes what ADL's really good at. The task force I reference is a Task Force on Middle East Minorities. As I mentioned, it's really to advocate for faith communities, religious, ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities.

It started with a real focus on Iran, given the needs of the Baha'i, the Jewish, Christian, Armenian minorities in Iran. But we've now expanded it to broader Middle East. Aykan, we're really thrilled that you are on there talking about what's going on in Turkey. The Coptic issues are raised through one of our experts on Egypt, we have others talking about Syria, and so on and so forth.

This task force shows that by bringing together advocates, experts, scholars who really intimately know those communities that they're advocating for under the umbrella of ADL, that we, together, as a diverse group can go to any forum, whether it's legislators or otherwise, or it's governments or it's educators or it's other NGOs, to really bring together thematic issues that cross the whole region when it comes to religious freedom, ethnic rights, gender rights, and LGBT rights.

We have two of our task force members here, Ali Nader and Marjan Greenblatt, both Iran activists, human right activists. They speak with credibility that ADL cannot, because we're not on the ground in Iran. But they, through their expert work, cannot only create allyship and credibility for the work we're doing, they also create bridges with other scholars and other experts from the region like yourself.

When we speak at any forum, again that force becomes that much more powerful. We're elevating issues that most average people don't know about. A lot of our goal is to elevate these issues to the public, so not only advocating with legislators and others but also really informing the general public about some of the challenges in these countries.

We feel, at ADL, we have the brand and we have the credibility of a hundred years of advocacy, but also bringing attention to these issues that are very particular, and our task force members really speak to that with authenticity and credibility.

The work we've done in the U.S., we're really building upon that. As I mentioned, when it comes to our audits that really measure and create data-driven information, when we're putting

things on our social media feed, it is talking about facts. It's about facts on the ground and what are the things that we all of us have to be aware of. Communities right now, with this task force, specifically in the Middle East, are really trying to get our attention to a need to be elevated.

Otherwise, through being in the community, in the U.S., we feel that we're also a resource for people within those communities to come to us and bring their grievances. Then we can elevate those as well. It's really a feedback mechanism, and that gives us the credibility to stand in front of lawmakers and say, "We know what we're talking about because we're coming from these communities ourselves."

It's been a learning experience, but the task force elevates our work to an international realm, bringing it to the Middle East. In fact, with Myanmar and other communities as well, we feel that ADL needs to speak up on behalf of those communities as well, as well as Uyghurs now in China. That's another issue that we're looking at and we want to elevate. The more credibility we have, the better we can advocate for some of these issues.

ERDEMIR: We're getting the sign that we need to move on to the Q&A. But before we do that, let me do my magic lightning round and where we will get a one-sentence answer from each one of our panelists. I'll begin with Farahnaz. If you had a magic wand, what would you change in lawmakers or in advocacy organizations to improve things? Just one sentence. What would you change?

ISPAHANI: If I had a magic wand, I would – I can't see anything much about that lawmakers, but advocacy organizations, stop thinking as a Christian evangelical organization or a Jewish organization or a Muslim organization. Really, you guys, the time is here. This is time for all of us to really unite, those of us who understand these issues, and there are not many of us.

We really need to work together. People who have the money, bring your money. People who have the expertise, bring your expertise. People who have the scholarship, bring that. People who have a global stage, whether it is nationally in Canada or internationally like you it's – You know what? We're powerful. There are not many of us, but there's a lot of power. It can be done. This is transnational I'm telling you here today. That was more than one sentence.

ERDEMIR: That was a long Pakistani sentence. Very elaborate. David, if you had a magic wand?

ANDERSON: I would have every person understand that they are a person of faith, that they believe in things of which they don't know, that every person has a perspective on where they've come from, who they are right now, and where it is that they're going. Perhaps if we all had that, we'd have more patience and tolerance for other people's perspectives.

ERDEMIR: Thank you. Sharon?

NAZARIAN: I think I would build on both Farahnaz's and David's to say that we are all interconnected and that it takes all of us to come together, so that coalition-building, bridge-building, allyship. If we don't speak up for one another, we are all doomed as well. To know the

interconnectivity of each of us, as faith groups and others that we need to speak up for one another. That is the way to really move the needle.

ERDEMIR: Great. Thank you all. Now let me turn to the members of our audience for Q&A. Please introduce yourself. Please let us know which members of the panel you're addressing your question to. More importantly, please pose a question. No need to be shy. Yes, please? Yeah?

BOUZO: Hi. Thank you so much for this insight. My name's Hayvi Bouzo. I'm the Bureau Chief of Orient TV. My question is for both Sharon and Farahnaz. It's basically I mean what we've been hearing is that Muslim countries are the countries that we have more persecution against minority groups.

Farahnaz, you mentioned how there could be policies to actually punish lawmakers and legislators who are allowing this and changing these laws. Sharon, you're working on the Middle East, which is a very hot spot for all of this big problem that is continuing to face the world.

What do you recommend on doing in implementing these policies to pressure governments in that region, in these Muslim countries, or force them or pressure them to actually change these laws and get punishment to those who do not? Thank you.

NAZARIAN: I'm happy to go first. I'll give you two concrete examples. In the Middle East, we can look at Qatar versus Bahrain. I really believe, and I think ADL and all of us who are political scientists, understand that carrots and sticks are both needed. When ADL looks at the work and the messaging that's coming out, legislation coming out, of Qatar today through its television network, Al Jazeera, through some of its other treatment of minorities, we know at ADL that we have to call it out. We will name and shame all we have to. We will not play nice to governments that are very much the mouthpiece of hate towards their religious minorities. That is something that ADL takes very seriously and we will continue to do so.

The other side of it is an example of a country like Bahrain. Bahrain has, this year and last, taken very important historic steps to not only acknowledge the protection of these religious minorities, and the Jewish community has taken very brave steps towards Israel. We as ADL feel it's very important for us to commend it, to welcome it, to give them credit for it, and to work with them and enable them to do better.

I think – we feel like we have to do both, and depends on what the needs are. Calling things out when they're needed, putting really responsibility, the onus on regimes that are spreading hate, that are oppressing their own minorities. On the other side, when governments are doing well, are taking brave steps, even if it's for their own interest, it doesn't matter. Even better if it's in their national interest to be good to their minorities, to the region that they live in, to the neighborhoods that they're in. All the better. Commend it, welcome it, give them credit. I just want to use two very practical – I hope that answers your question a bit.

ISPAHANI: What I'd like to say too is there is no real system right now, right, even in the United States. We saw just a few days ago the United Nations, the letter by China's

persecution of the Uyghur Muslims. Not a single Muslim majority country signed it, I'm ashamed to say. Not one.

Now when you come to the United States' part of it, whether it's the U.S. Congress or the U.S. government, if a country is a U.S. ally, for example, Saudi Arabia with its Shia population and other religious minority populations, whether it's Egypt with the Coptic Christians, there are many relations the United States has, and with the U.N. structure, many countries that are then represented, and there is no downside for them.

How can the U.S. say, "You are our most allied ally," but you do these things which goes against the universal declaration of human rights? You absolutely go against what exists in the U.S. constitution in terms of faith. But because of trade, because of aide, because of money, the United States will ignore our core values.

Both at the U.N. and at the U.S. stage, as I said, whether this is the Congress or whether this is the government, we are failing our own people and we are failing our sisters and brothers all over the world. I would say we need to really focus on U.S. Congress and we really need to work on the White House.

The last thing I'll say on this is I find the problem with the right on this is just selective. "Are you my kind of faith-based community in America?" The problem with the left is they're so uncomfortable with talking about faith at all, really understanding religious persecution as a core human rights issue. That also has to be handled.

NAZARIAN: Absolutely. Absolutely, you're right.

ERDEMIR: Yes, please?

SABATIER: Good afternoon. I'm LouAnn Sabatier with 21Wilberforce. To your point, the U.S. Congress, tomorrow we release the third annual International Religious Freedom Congressional Scorecard. My question first is to the representative from ADL. Only once did I hear the panel really kind of nod a little bit to the public. There is power in the grassroots. When you mentioned Turkey, only the Magnitsky Act came when the grassroots went to their congressmen, and the faith groups and everyone cried out. That's when Congress stood up. They went for months before they – So, the power of the grassroots.

What we find is the grassroots, they don't know. They have no literacy. And so, across 200 civil society groups, even the U.S., I do have a question here, is that we don't communicate to our grassroots. We have great parliamentarians, we have great advocates, but our people are saying, "What can we do?" They're so frustrated. How do you get your grassroots engaged when they cry out?

We have seen Congress will respond, governments will respond. The power of the public is an important coalition group that we find, and I spent 40 years as a communicator, they're overlooked. We're not tapping into our own networks.

One last thing, only in the United States, in 1998, that the International Religious Freedom Act become enacted when all the groups, Amnesty, Human Rights, came with the evangelicals, came with the Catholic bishops. Only then did we start some leadership. We've got our own example. We just need to magnify that. How do you do it at ADL?

NAZARIAN: I think that continues to be a challenge. We obviously use social media in the best way we can. That's become huge tool for us. We've really leaned into getting our messaging out through social media. Our communications department is growing as we speak. We try to really show publicly to as many groups as possible that we're bringing value.

It has to be a two-way communication. We have to show that we're listening and we're bringing in their issues, but we're also feeding back, this feeding back mechanism of what are our insights, what are our best practices. Because we have our 25 offices, that really is our platform into communities, into the hearts of the cities in the US, where these issues are showing, manifesting themselves.

We are parts of communities when it comes to issues with law enforcement, when it comes to religious issues, when it comes to ethnic communities that are within the hearts of our American cities. I'll give you an example.

We signed an agreement with a Mexican foreign ministry that ADL did last year and a half ago. It just kind of comes out of our faith issues, but this is just to show you how minorities can have an impact. The Mexican foreign minister tells ADL that because off the language and discourse in this country about migrants coming in from Mexico, Mexican nationals were experiencing extreme hate crimes against them because of their identity. They have nowhere to go because they were afraid to go to the police.

They were turning to the Mexican consulates and going to them for legal advice, for protection. The foreign minister of Mexico ask ADL to provide trainings to all their consular staff across the US on what is a hate crime, what are the legal steps they can take, what is the designation of a hate crime even.

For the last two years, that's what we've done. We have gone across America. They have 50 consulates, Mexicans do, in the U.S. and trained all their staff on what is a hate crime and what are the legal ramifications that any citizen or otherwise, it doesn't matter what their legal standing is, has against hate crimes that are perpetrated against them.

This is an example with somebody that came from the grassroots to us, was elevated to the government, they came back to us, and then we're able to go back to our communities. Right now we just actually announced a national campaign, information campaign, about the rights of nationals of any country who have hate crimes perpetrated against them and what steps they can take. Again, we're bringing that information back to the community. I agree with you. It is not easy, but we have to do it, and you're absolutely right.

ERDEMIR: David, do you want to add something?

ANDERSON: Quickly, for those of us who are elected, of course, the electorate is critical, or we don't have our job. But to flip that around, I've told people who come to me to lobby me, "Come with a narrow focus. Come with one or two things. Don't come to me 10 different groups with 10 different things because that lets me ignore you completely and focus on the people who are really focused and have an idea of specifically what they want."

You're talking about successes. Those typically come when people get organized, they get together, and they come to legislators with one ask and say, "We need this done."

Yes, and stay on it until you get it. Then go on to your next thing. You want to do the rifle shot, not the shotgun shot, where everything's up in the air and I don't have to do anything for you. That would just be my advice. I've watched it time and again; it works. Focus, get what you want, go on to the next thing then.

ERDEMIR: Ed?

BROWN: Hi, my name is Ed Brown. I work for the Stefanus Alliance International. We are a Norwegian Christian organization focused on promoting freedom of religion or belief for everyone. We also have FoRB literacy as one of our focus points.

Question has to do with contextually in international norms. Sometimes it's a challenge using the international language in certain contexts. How do you meet those needs and could you can provide some positive examples around the world, initiatives, policies that are proven effective? Thank you.

ISPAHANI: I think you should –

NAZARIAN: Aykan has examples of that too in Turkey. Go ahead, please.

ERDEMIR: Dave, go ahead.

ISPAHANI: Either of you.

ANDERSON: Well, just quickly on this. Ed, of course, was our coordinator for IPPFoRB for a couple of years, so he knows it as well as we know him well. But I think in terms of what we're trying to do at IPPFoRB is we want local, national, regional groups to set up so they have their language, they have their issues. Then we will try to give them the support that they need from their perspective.

I think that's far better than us coming with, "I've got a Canadian perspective here on what you need to do in your country. I'm going to tell you how to do it," because it doesn't work well. But if we can come and say, "Look, if we can give you some training on the principles of FoRB, if we can give you some training for new MPs, how legislation may work in your parliament, on how you can initiate advocacy letters," those kinds of things, then we can get them involved. They'd get a better understanding of the issue. As they get a more complete

understanding, they become more effective members of parliament or legislators and can move ahead on that.

Our goal is not to direct them. Our goal is to actually assist them and see if we can get them to get some results in their part of the world. Then we can all celebrate that.

ERDEMIR: Let me reflect on the issue of hate crimes. One of my key issues in the Turkish parliament was to legislate a comprehensive hate crimes bill, in a country that lacked it. Before my time in parliament, I have worked with advocacy organizations with academia to put together a coalition in support of hate crimes bill in Turkey. There was a lot of that know-how transfer, how to transfer national and international law into Turkey and into Turkish.

Now one great lesson we learned along the way is I was working with the coalition for hate crimes in Turkey, multi-faith, from different ethnic backgrounds, gender organizations, labor unions, youth organizations, and it was a learning process. It's what one might call localization, how you translate international norms into a local parlance.

In the Turkish case, what was a great learning experience for me was all these vulnerable communities, targets of hate crimes, after a year of deliberations said that, "We want a hate crimes bill, but we do not want a hate speech bill." I was quite surprised. I said, "But you have been smeared, you have been targeted every day by state-run or pro-government media, and you don't want a hate speech bill?"

They told me, "We live in a country where there's severe restrictions on freedom of speech. If we have a hate speech bill, we're afraid the government will use it to further restrict hate speech." They said, "We're okay with a hate crimes bill. That's just about hate crimes against life, property, religious establishments, whatsoever, but no hate speech bill." Guess what? They were right –

NAZARIAN: They're right.

ERDEMIR: – because my hate crimes bill was butchered in parliament through Erdogan's majority. It turned into a quasi-blasphemy bill, which to us all a learning opportunity that localization, adaptation of international norms to nation state settings, always takes, I think, a lot of care, a lot of prudence, and at the same time I guess a bit of luck to move forward.

NAZARIAN: Absolutely. Absolutely.

ERDEMIR: We have a colleague over here. Yes, please?

SAHI: Hi. Oh, sorry. Thank you. Hi. I have a question for you. My name is Ajit Sahi, and I represent a Muslim organization. It's called Indian American Muslim Council. We do advocacy capacity-building and campaigning on issues of religious minorities in India.

In recent years, especially in the last few weeks, we've seen a mushrooming of violence against Muslims especially. We are a strange country because we have a minority which totals

200 million. I don't think there's any country in the west anywhere that has even half that population, apart from, of course, United States.

We as a Muslim organization – and I'm not Muslim, I'm a Hindu working for that organization. We explicitly condemn anti-Semitism and we speak against it. But it's important for organizations such as yourself, which is very, very skilled and very reputed globally, for you to come forward and condemn what is happening.

Yesterday, members of India's ruling political party, they had a meeting in New Delhi, the capital of India, where they said Muslims are breeding and proliferating in India and we need to bring a forced family planning law in them. That should ring a bell for ADL, certainly.

NAZARIAN: Absolutely.

SAHI: Yes. Muslims have been told they can't pray, they should not grow their beards, they should not wear skull caps. They should not have their names. They should take Hindu names. Would ADL, an organization like ADL, consider coming out and speaking out against such bigotry in India? Because India is the world's second most populated country. If India falls, trust me, it's going to have a domino impact all over the world, the likes of which we haven't even seen in the Middle East. Thank you so much.

NAZARIAN: Thank you for that question. Absolutely. Please, I would like to connect you with our D.C.-based colleague here. We would like to know about it. Any of you who have issues within your own communities that you think ADL should know about, please come to us. We rely on our partners to know about what's going on. That is an issue that, once we look into it, we'll be happy to elevate and advocate for.

It is also imperative for us as a Jewish organization that we speak up on behalf of all faiths. It is very important. In Iran, when we speak about our task force, my Iran colleagues speak on behalf of Sunnis in Iran that are being oppressed as we speak today.

You lose credibility if you pick and choose. I think, to Farahnaz's point, you cannot only speak to your own personal interest. We'll be happy to. Please make sure that at the end we'll come together, and I'll get your credentials. We can talk about that. Without that, you have no credibility.

At ADL, we feel very strongly to speak up on behalf of any sort of discrimination against Muslims. We've done it in this country against the Muslim ban. I mean we have a lot of voices on this, but internationally as well. Thank you for raising that.

ERDEMIR: Would you like to reflect on this, or maybe what you do with Asian parliamentarians as well?

ISPAHANI: Absolutely. I have started working on India now. I'm looking at South Asia now. My next book is going to be dealing with religious persecution and laws, et cetera, in South

Asia. What you are describing about in India is absolutely true, but also heartbreaking, because India was that secular country where people of all faiths celebrated and practice their faith.

SAHI: Muslims are being lynched every week in India.

ISPAHANI: Yes, but also people of no faith at all were also free to have no faith in India.

NAZARIAN: Yes

ISPAHANI: Now the Muslims, of course, number one. Muslims in India number the same amount of Muslims in Pakistan, 200 million. But Christian community also. I know there are many partnerships now, because you have to be the big brother with more population taking care of Christians from India, which I know that a lot of your groups are.

SAHI: We work together with a Christian groups in the United States a lot.

ISPAHANI: Right. But it's very, very, very painful. And now, you see Sri Lanka, you see that whole region.

NAZARIAN: If I may just add one point. I mean really what we have to be very aware of is really populism. I think this is the political phenomenon that we have to be aware of.

ISPAHANI: Yes, absolutely.

NAZARIAN: A lot of what we're all describing happening in India, happening in Europe, happening in Latin America, in Brazil, you see it as well, happening throughout Middle East is this notion of populist leaders bringing extreme views, putting their finger exactly on the sensitivities of their populations, on the anxieties that populations are feeling, and pushing it really hard and then turning that into xenophobia.

It's really about populism and what political leaders today are utilizing as very dangerous political moves to try to manipulate, gain favor. What's happening in India you're describing is really a reflection of what's happening to Indian society in general.

ISPAHANI: But this is the world's biggest democracy we're talking about.

SAHI: So what you said about India. A lot of my Muslim friends say, "We are a minority." I say, "My friend, there's no greater minority than me because in my family, I'm from a Hindu family in India. Today, for the first time in my life, I find nobody in my family supports me." Something strange is happening. I'm being called a self-hating Hindu.

NAZARIAN: Wow!

SAHI: Okay. That's what's happening.

ANDERSON: I just want to raise a point, though.

ERDEMIR: Sure, sure.

ANDERSON: I don't think that much of this problem is coming from the ground up. I think it's found in leadership. When you talk about populism, we want to support democratic principles and people having their say. What we need are leaders who are committed to eternal principles of equality. That's what we need to be demanding-

ISPAHANI: Absolutely.

ANDERSON: Not that people have less say, but that they have understanding what it is they're talking about and leaders who will listen and hold those values permanently.

ERDEMIR: David, I know you would understand me if I cut this short –

ANDERSON: Yes.

ERDEMIR: – because now you have to run to the national press con, because you will be kicking off an event.

ANDERSON: Thank you.

ERDEMIR: My colleagues at the Religious Freedom Institute will be really angry if I don't let him go. But thank you very much to our panelists.

NAZARIAN: Thank you.

ERDEMIR: Thank you very much for our engaged audience.

ISPAHANI: Thank you.

ANDERSON: Say hi if we see you around.