

TANYERI ERDEMIR: Good morning. My name is Tugba Tanyeri Erdemir, and I am the coordinator of ADL's Task Force on Middle East Minorities. Welcome to the panel co-hosted by FDD and ADL's Task Force on Middle East Minorities entitled, *From Pastor Andrew Brunson to Osman Kavala: Rethinking Prisoners of Conscience in Turkey and Beyond*, which is part of the virtual side events of the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom or Belief, hosted this year virtually by the Government of Poland.

Please be aware that this call is being recorded. After we hear from our speakers, there will be an opportunity for Q&A. If you'd like to ask a question at any time during the call, simply open the chat box on the bottom of the Zoom program and type in your question.

At this time, I would like to introduce ADL's Senior Vice President for International Affairs and Director of ADL's Task Force on Middle East Minorities, Sharon Nazarian.

NAZARIAN: Thank you, Tugba, and thank you to all of you joining us on this important panel. Since its establishment in 1913, ADL has been a strong voice with the mission of stopping the defamation of Jewish people, and to secure just and fair treatment of all. Following this founding mission, ADL launched its Task Force on Middle East Minorities in 2018, with a mission of educating, advocating, and elevating the issues challenging these important and all too often overlooked communities across the Middle East, including religious, ethnic, sexual, and gender minorities, and other groups who face governmental and societal repression and discrimination. FDD is a Washington, D.C.-based nonpartisan research institute focused on national security and foreign policy. For more information, we welcome you to go on FDD's and ADL's websites, fdd.org and adl.org. We're happy to partner with Foundation for Defense of Democracies in presenting this important panel to all of you today.

Our panel, titled *From Pastor Andrew Brunson to Osman Kavala: Rethinking Prisoners of Conscience in Turkey and Beyond*, will explore the common patterns in the cases of these courageous individuals, Brunson and Kavala, and provide policy recommendations on how to ensure prisoners of conscience, particularly those persecuted for their support of religious minorities in Turkey and elsewhere, make sure that they receive the international attention and assistance they deserve. The event is being hosted on the virtual sidelines of the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom or Belief, hosted virtually by the Government of Poland.

Let me introduce our distinguished panelists today. Pastor Andrew Brunson, former prisoner of conscience in Turkey. Aykan Erdemir, Senior Director of FDD's Turkey Program and former member of the Turkish Parliament, and a member of the ADL's Task Force on Minorities. Farahnaz Ispahani, Senior Fellow at the Religious Freedom Institute, Global Fellow at the Wilson Center, and former member of the Pakistan Parliament, and a member of the ADL Task Force on Minorities. And finally, Elizabeth Prodromou, Visiting Associate Professor at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, and former USCIRF Vice Chair and Commissioner. Welcome to you all.

As we all know, the American Pastor Andrew Brunson, targeted for his faith leadership, spent two years in a Turkish prison on fabricated charges of terrorism, coup plotting, and military espionage. Prominent Turkish philanthropist Osman Kavala, an ardent supporter of Turkey's ethnic and religious minorities and their heritage, has been similarly targeted and kept in prison for over three years, where he continues to be held captive. As Turkey's minorities are increasingly scapegoated and become targets of hate crimes, the work that people like Osman Kavala do is more important than ever. These two cases highlight the plight of Turkey's vulnerable minorities and those who advocate for them. Although Pastor Brunson was recognized as a prisoner of conscience, Kavala hasn't received the same attention.

With today's panel, we want to draw attention to the state persecution of individuals who advocate for religious minorities and defend pluralism in majority-Muslim countries.

With that, we will go to our panelists. And Andrew, perhaps we'll start with you. The American as well as the global public knows you as Pastor Brunson, as a political hostage in Turkey. In your memoir, *God's Hostage*, you state that the Turkish government kept you in jail, not only as a bargaining chip to extract concessions from Washington, but also because of your faith and faith leadership. Can you tell us how you became the highest-profile prisoner of conscience in Turkey's history? You could tell us a little bit about your story and how you view it today in hindsight.

BRUNSON: I think the Turkish government wanted to make an example of someone, and they chose me. The goal, I think, was to encourage foreign religious workers in Turkey to self-deport, that they would be intimidated by this and simply leave the country, and also to intimidate Turkish Christians in general, but especially Turkish church leaders. I think that was a motivation.

The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that I was held by the Turkish government because of my nationality, as you mentioned, to use me as a bargaining chip to get concessions from the U.S. government, but also specifically because of my faith. I was glad that they came to that determination, because one of the main accusations against me, and this came out in my indictment, in my court case, was that I was involved in Christianization, and that this somehow was intended to destabilize Turkey and divide it, which was not at all our goal.

You asked, why did I become so high profile? I think it's because many people began to pray for me. I was not an important person that so many people should advocate for me or think about me, but many Christians began to pray for me, not only in the United States, but in many other countries as well. The United States government was very involved in my case, but there were other governments, as well, in other countries that were involved. So, I think what happened in the States is that because so many people were praying for me, they contacted their senators and their congressmen who, in turn, put pressure on the State Department. Also, the Trump administration placed an unusual emphasis on religious freedom, and because of this, they brought up my case at high levels many times. That's how it became so high profile. Then, of course, the Turkish government helped in this by holding me for so long, by the accusations they made against me, and by their propaganda campaign.

NAZARIAN: Thank you. Thank you, Andrew, for that. Aykan, perhaps we turn to you next. You're one of the first analysts to warn about Turkey's emerging hostage diplomacy, as we call it, in the aftermath of the country's 2016 failed coup attempt, and the increasing scapegoating of Christians and Jews as part of the state-sanctioned propaganda. What made Andrew a target, in your view? And can you tell us a little bit about Osman Kavala's story and explain what keeps Osman Kavala in prison today? And what unites them and others as prisoners of conscience?

ERDEMIR: Thank you, Sharon, for having me, and thank you, all the panelists and our audience. In the immediate aftermath of Turkey's 2016 failed coup attempt, I saw an alarming rise in hate speech and scapegoating targeting Turkey's religious minorities, but particularly Christians, Jews, and Alevis, so I immediately started writing policy briefs and op-eds drawing attention to this worrying trend. When Andrew was first detained, it was no surprise to me because I was expecting such acts of state-sanctioned, what I call, acts of hate, against religious minorities, because we have already seen Turkish authorities denying visas, entry, or residence permits to Christian faith workers, as well as deportations.

When we saw this pattern move beyond Andrew, I co-authored a detailed report with former U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Eric Edelman for the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, where we exposed the Turkish government's policy

of hostage diplomacy. Andrew was the highest profile of these hostages, but there were 50 other Western nationals who were kept on similarly ludicrous charges as bargaining chips. These were all nationals or permanent residents or employees of Turkey's NATO member allies. It was really perverse that Ankara was using them as hostages for bargaining chips.

What makes Andrew, therefore, a target is, first and foremost, his faith leadership, his Christian identity, but at the same time, also his nationality, him being an American. Anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism was also part of this.

When we come to Osman Kavala, I call him a secular saint. He belongs to Turkey's secular Muslim community, but he is also at the forefront of defending ethnic and religious pluralism in Turkey. He has supported minority rights wholeheartedly. He's Turkey's leading philanthropist, who really dedicated his time, effort, and entire wealth to supporting initiatives to defend religious minorities, to document, restore, protect, and disseminate their religious and cultural heritage. But more importantly, he has been a tireless person working for reconciliation. If you think about Turkish-Armenian reconciliation, if you think about Turkish-Kurdish reconciliation, Osman Kavala has always been the key benefactor, the key driving force.

When Osman Kavala ended up in jail on similarly bogus charges, on fabricated charges of terrorism and espionage, I thought he was a repeat of what Pastor Andrew Brunson went through. In fact, President Erdogan himself targeted both Andrew and Osman Kavala in quite similar ways, smearing them as terrorists, but also claiming that Osman Kavala was a terror financier on behalf of a Jewish cabal that aim to divide and destabilize nations. These are some of the same tropes we see in government-funded or sanctioned media outlets about conspiracies involving Christians and Jews and other minorities in Turkey.

Overall, let me conclude by saying that although Andrew Brunson and Osman Kavala come from different backgrounds, what made them enemies of the current Turkish government is the key role they have played as symbols of Turkey's ethnic and religious pluralism, and the work they have done on behalf of and for Turkey's vulnerable ethnic and religious minorities.

NAZARIAN: Thank you, Aykan. Very, very important context that you've added for us.

Elizabeth, perhaps I'll turn to you next. We just heard from Aykan that Osman Kavala is a remarkable advocate for pluralism within Turkey, not only promoting the rights and freedoms of Turkey's minorities, but also a reminder of the pluralism within Turkey's Muslim majority. As a former USCIRF vice chair and a scholar of religion and politics, how do you see the unique role Osman Kavala has played in improving the lives, not only of Turkey's vulnerable minorities, but also the Turkish society at large?

PRODROMOU: Thank you. Thank you, Sharon, and also thank you to ADL and also FDD for organizing this panel, and in particular to you and Aykan and Tugba for bringing us together.

I think Osman Kavala has foregrounded something we oftentimes overlook, which is that pluralism cuts both horizontally and vertically, as I would say. We tend, in the case of Turkey, but more generally I think, to think about religious and cultural pluralism across community lines, so a kind of horizontal pluralism, but I think that the plight of Osman Kavala has really helped to foreground the fact that there's also vertical pluralism, pluralism within communities, including within majoritarian communities. And there's oftentimes a reflexivity between that vertical pluralism and the horizontal pluralism.

We see in the case of Turkey, I think, efforts to silence Kavala has obviously been an effort by the government to send a message across faith lines and across ethnic and cultural lines, but it's also a clear message about silencing dissent and diversity, and therefore constraining pluralism of voices within the Sunni-majority community, and an effort to present an essentialized static image of uniformity where the Sunni-majority community is supposedly a monolithic bloc that's marching in lockstep with these processes of religious homogenization that we have seen over the last two decades, and frankly, the last nine decades, when it comes to religious diversity in Turkey.

I think the other piece on pluralism that's very important that Osman Kavala's sacrifice has helped to amplify is intersectionality because we begin to see how pluralism within majority and minority communities in religious and cultural terms is also related to other issues, of economic opportunity, of equality before the law when it comes to judicial process, things that we oftentimes overlook when we focus simply on the question of religious freedom or cultural diversity.

There are two other brief points too. I think Osman Kavala's plight has highlighted the links between religious freedom and cultural pluralism on the one hand and democratic civil and political liberties on the other. In this way, again, I think he's made it very clear that a healthy, robust democracy requires a civil society that gives pride of place to pluralism and diversity, and certainly equality before the law. In fact, for vulnerable religious minorities in Turkey, the experience has been quite the opposite, with a kind of separate and unequal status almost akin to Jim Crow laws in the United States.

Then, finally, I think with the pluralism point that both Andrew and Aykan have made it very clear that human security, and that means, again, protection of and support for pluralism, human security and hard security, or strategic security, cannot be disaggregated, because we have seen with Pastor Brunson's detention and then also with the protracted detention of Osman Kavala that there's been a precipitous degrading of the human security conditions in Turkey, and that has been correlated directly with Turkey's foreign policy of rejecting rule of law and rejecting international law and violating the sovereignty of so many of its neighbors, from Syria to the ongoing occupation in Cyprus to provocations vis-a-vis Greece and the Eastern Med, and we could go on and on. So, the pluralism logic helps to highlight human security and its connections to hard security, and how those are inextricably linked.

NAZARIAN: Thank you, Elizabeth. Very, very insightful comments. I appreciate that.

Farahnaz, turning to you, obviously we've been discussing so far, the context of Turkey, but this is equally relevant for similar debates around vulnerable minorities in Iran, elsewhere in the Middle East and beyond. You yourself have been a brave defender of pluralism and minorities in Pakistan and received similar pressure, just like Kavala. Could you reflect on the role such outspoken advocates play in majority-Muslim countries and the consequences they face, and you have faced yourself?

ISPAHANI: Thank you, Sharon. I think the focus this session has brought, a spotlight on Mr. Kavala, is extremely important. State persecution of individuals who belong to the majority population who are advocating for religious minorities and defending pluralism in the majority-Muslim countries are today at greater risk than they have been for years. Now, why is this significant? This is significant because when members of the majority population start to speak up, especially someone like Mr. Kavala, who is someone who is well-off, a philanthropist, someone who understands the cultural significance of keeping these communities in Turkey and how they add to the richness, the steep persecution of people like him shows today how nervous these regimes are.

As I think has been explained extensively by all the speakers before me, today this is very relevant in the Middle East and North Africa, and also as far flung as Indonesia in the Far East and Pakistan on the easternmost flank of the Middle East. The case of Osman Kavala shows how members of the Muslim majority in the region are the people who can make most of the difference in the fight to treat all religious minorities as equal citizens with the same laws and protections afforded to them as their Muslim brothers and sisters.

However, when you see that the strength of the majority in a Muslim-majority country, it is usually with the Muslims. They can influence national policy in a way that the religious minorities can only do with the help of people like Osman Kavala or the help of the international community or specific Western countries. So, when you have a Muslim standing up for their minority compatriots and ending up receiving the same bad treatment, you know that the regime is very nervous, because it shows that there is something from within the society, within the majority, that is starting to object to what has for centuries been the persecution of all minorities in these countries, including Christians and Jews and Bahá'ís, and the list goes on and on.

I would say today that the number of Muslim prisoners of conscience, particularly women, has risen alarmingly in both Iran and Saudi Arabia. With COVID rampant in these prisons, it is a death sentence to continue to imprison them. Egypt and many other regional countries are not different in this respect.

If you take it one step further, you see Muslim advocates of minority rights not just jailed, but even murdered for defending a person accused of blasphemy, as two of my colleagues were in Pakistan. The late Governor Salman Taseer was killed by his own bodyguard for merely standing up for an unlettered, illiterate Christian woman called Asia Bibi. He was accused of blasphemy for merely supporting her right to be heard, and he was gunned down in cold blood. Another colleague and friend of mine, Federal Minister Shahbaz Clement Bhatti, who was my colleague in Parliament, was also murdered because he was questioning Pakistan's pernicious blasphemy laws.

I have to say that this is what Osman Kavala, in a way, shows. The fact that he has not been adopted as an international prisoner of conscience, that there are many Muslims being killed today for standing up for the rights of their fellow citizens who may have different faiths but who they consider equal citizens of their nations, and very often they may be killed, they may be jailed, but they become footnotes in history. Because there aren't foreign powers or outside in gales of people who are willing to stand up for them.

So, I think the one positive aspect I can think of in this situation, and you'd asked us to speak in policy terms, was that they are positive indications that the Biden presidency in the U.S will focus far more on human rights violations than the Trump presidency did. And the sanctions threat of aid cuts, withholding arm deals, are all stakes that can possibly be used by a Biden presidency. So, I leave it there and I turn it over to you, Sharon.

NAZARIAN: Thank you. Thank you, Farahnaz, so much for giving us kind of that broader perspective. I'm going to turn back to Andrew and back to Turkey. In your book, *God's Hostage*, you emphasize that one of your greatest fears in prison was to be forgotten. I also know that how much you appreciated prison visits, including those by USCIRF Commissioners. In September 2018, USCIRF Commissioner Kristina Arriaga adopted you as a prisoner of conscience.

Tell us a little bit about, especially in light of what Farahnaz has just shared, what it means for prisoners of conscience like you, and hopefully Osman Kavala, to become aware of this global recognition and advocacy efforts.

BRUNSON: So, I can tell you what it meant for me. I had an overwhelming feeling of isolation in prison. Meeting with family members is very restricted and I could meet with my lawyer once a week for one hour. And that meeting with the lawyer's very tightly controlled, there are guards listening, in everything is recorded. And the truth is that a lawyer can do very little for me. The entire justice system is really serving the purposes of one man. And this leads to a sense not only of isolation, but of hopelessness, that there was nothing I could do to truly defend myself. I was not actually allowed to present a full defense at my trial. I wasn't allowed to present exculpatory evidence and all, but one of my witnesses was disqualified by the judges.

So, I knew I was innocent. The judges knew I was innocent, but we all knew that the judges would give whatever verdict they were ordered to give.

I knew that I needed outside help. I needed people of influence to intervene on my behalf, but it can be very difficult to get the attention of those people. So that was one fear that those who could advocate for me, who could use their influence for me would not do so. And a following fear – following on from this was that even if they did so for a time, if they did advocate for me and to try to help me, they would turn their attention away from me to a new crisis that were sure to arise.

So that was one of the fears, that I would be forgotten. And there would be no one with influence who would try to intervene for me. And I don't think I'll ever forget when Kristina Arriaga and Sandra Jolley, two USCIRF commissioners visited me in a maximum-security prison in Turkey.

I was afraid that the U.S. Government would believe the false accusations made against me and basically abandon me, or would determine that the price to put continued pressure on Turkey and the pressure that put on the relationship would not be – that they just make a decision to leave me there. And not try to get me out.

But Kristina looked me in the eye and she said, "Of course you're innocent. We don't believe these things that are being said about you." And she said she would fight for me, and she did. Now, I did not know if I would ever be released from prison in Turkey, but knowing that there were people fighting for me, that I had not been forgotten, encouraged me to keep going and not to give into despair.

I want to mention one more thing. It was very frustrating for me to hear Turkish government officials talk publicly about my case, and they made all kinds of false accusations about me and they were using the Turkish media and the propaganda campaign against me. And even as they manipulated the court system, they would insist publicly that the courts were independent and that to advocate, to even ask for my release, was an insult to the Turkish Court System.

So, I, myself could not challenge this false narrative. My voice was silenced, even as Kavala, his voice is silenced. He cannot speak up from prison. And so, I was very grateful to those who spoke in my place, who defended me publicly, who made clear that they did not accept the false narrative about me. And it was very important to me that truth come out, even though it did not make an immediate difference in my detention.

So, I expect that Mr. Kavala shares this sense of frustration about a false narrative and appreciates that there are people here today, I think of Aykan, especially who is challenging the false narrative about him. And I expect that this sits as an encouragement to him.

NAZARIAN: I agree with you wholeheartedly, Andrew. Elizabeth, Osman Kavala is really not a faith leader, and so that sets him apart from many other prisoners of conscience currently adopted by USCIRF where religious freedom and minority issues intersect with freedom of speech, media freedoms, and cultural heritage rights. There's a need for human rights bodies to develop a more nuanced understanding, I think we recognize that.

How should USCIRF, or other similar institutions, in your view, approach the Kavala case? As a former USCIRF Vice Chair, what would you recommend current commissioners do to take into consideration vis-a-vis Osman Kavala's case? Elizabeth?

PRODROMOU: In fact, of course, Osman Kavala is not a faith leader, but as we said earlier, the intersection between religious freedom, freedom of conscience, belief on religion on the one hand and other foundational human rights, civil and political rights, it's inextricable.

So, I think for USCIRF, it's important for them, moving forward, to do everything possible to amplify and educate people on those linkages, and also to, therefore, adopt someone like Osman Kavala as a prisoner of conscience by USCIRF.

But I think taking a step back before that, I think it's absolutely essential for USCIRF and other international human rights bodies, but also U.S. Government agencies, to stop consuming and reproducing the state narratives that have been their knowledge production efforts, that have constructed Turkey in a way that has allowed for Pastor Brunson to be imprisoned, that allows for Osman Kavala to be imprisoned, and that allows for the kinds of violence against Shahbaz Bhatti and Salman Taseer that was mentioned.

And here, I would say that this is a particularly important inflection point. We're moving from the Trump administration to a Biden administration. And I think it's important for the incoming administration, which we all anticipate will foreground human rights issues, to also recognize that religious freedom issues need to be foregrounded as well. And, to see that religious freedom and human rights are part and parcel of the same. And not to see religious freedom questions as partisan issues. These are universal human rights issues.

And in that regard, Osman Kavala becomes a kind of connector between religious freedom and democratic human rights. So, reject this narrative that if – this is only the condition of Osman Kavala or Pastor Brunson's imprisonment is only a function of the current government in Turkey. Alas, this has been the condition of vulnerable religious minorities in Turkey since the establishment of the Republic.

And here, I would go to something even more specific. Again, this is a conceptual issue that has policy implications. That imprisonment is not only being in prison, in fact, Turkey's vulnerable religious minorities and ethnic minorities, and whether we're talking about the Ecumenical Patriarch and Greek Orthodox Christians or Syriac and Armenian Orthodox Christians, or Alawites who are considered non-conforming Muslims. The fact of the matter is that – or Jews, all of those communities are in fact hostage communities. They are vulnerable communities. And in that regard, they are imprisoned because their speech is limited each day, because they have to calculate in particular, their leaders, how anything they say can be used for retribution against their community members. Aykan has used this really compelling phrase about performative spectacles that are imposed on religious community leaders. Everything from forcing them to sign letters saying that religious freedom conditions are excellent in Turkey to supporting Turkey's invasion of Northern Syria.

The fact of the matter is that, we need to think a little bit more nimbly about imprisonment. There is the formal imprisonment, and then there's the actual experiential existential imprisonment. And for those religious minorities, but also for human rights activists like Osman Kavala, their formal imprisonment gives a window into the broader metaphorical, but daily existential imprisonment that is part of the corrosion of democracy, in what I would characterize today, as Turkey, as a totalitarian, increasingly Stalinesque regime, with a party state and a charismatic leader who is the wellspring of the only and all truth, and when he speaks all of society must accept and agree to that. Otherwise, they pay penalties. Being imprisoned, being disappeared, facing protracted detention without trial, having violence and threats made against their family members. This is the unfortunate reality today in Turkey. So, for the USCIRF, taking that kind of whole of human rights, religious freedom analysis approach, I think is crucial.

And that leads me to some very specific policy suggestions. One, adopt Osman Kavala as a prisoner of conscience by USCIRF and explain why that's the case, because if it's done for Kavala, it can be done for so many other people that Farahnaz has highlighted, and that all of us know well.

Number two, designate Turkey a country of particular concern. Since 2012 when I served on the commission until that final year, we designated Turkey a CPC. Turkey is a perpetrator of systematic and egregious violations of freedom of conscience, belief or religion. And here again, violations are not only violence. Violence happens in so many other ways. So, whether it's through threats and intimidation, silencing of free speech, or whether the destruction and appropriation of religious and cultural heritage. These are systematic and they are egregious. So designate Turkey as CPC and the State Department should accept that designation.

And then finally, link these human security concerns to hard security concerns when it comes to policy. And there it's well overdue to impose Magnitsky sanctions yet again, human rights sanctions on Turkey. As we know, that was really the tipping point for Pastor Brunson's release. They should be – they're required in fact – by U.S. Law to be imposed. Unfortunately, the president has not done so, and also impose CAATSA sanctions on Turkey for its violation under the law by purchasing a Russian S-400 missile defense system.

I think that we have seen that incentives and tariffs have been interpreted as weakness and appeasement by Ankara. And so, Pastor Brunson's imprisonment and Osman Kavala's ongoing imprisonment and detention, are the result of a government emboldened by decades of appeasing a state which has not respected the rights of all of its citizens as equal before the law.

And again, the religious minority communities are simply a reflection of the broader condition of the majority community. Whether you're a religious believer or non-believer, the fact of the matter is that religious freedom violations have been in metric for the steady decline from a hybrid regime, to an authoritarian regime to today, a totalitarian regime in Turkey.

And Turkey is a NATO member state and an EU Candidate Country. So, making a turn on Turkey and helping Turkish dissidents and activists and citizens who reject all of what is happening, to move in a different direction, is good for Turkey, it's good for the EU, it's good for NATO and it's good for any other country that's watching to see. So, Turkey is paradigmatic in so many ways, and this is an inflection point with a shift in the U.S. administration. And I hope that we'll see different things. Thank you.

NAZARIAN: Thank you Elizabeth, and specifically for the policy recommendations that we hope that the transition team and the Biden administration are listening.

Farahnaz, turning to you now. There are numerous pro-secular Muslims who are at the forefront of minority rights and religious pluralism issues in majority Muslim countries. We see them advocating for Christians, for Jews and for Bahá'í, Yazidis, Hindus, Atheists, and others. What would you advise western advocacy institutions, in engaging with individuals who have demonstrated utmost moral courage to stand with persecuted minorities?

ISPAHANI: You know, this is a very dangerous area because in Pakistan, like I was, accused of being a CIA agent, a Zionist agent, a traitor to Pakistan, et cetera, which riles up people who then tried to target you, to kill you.

So, it's a very difficult balancing act. You do want the support from Western institutions. You do need them to amplify the voices you are trying to amplify yourself. But on the other hand, that stigma sticks. Once they put that stigma on you, you end up in exile. Basically, for example, in Pakistan, there're no jails. After Benazir Bhutto was assassinated, there have no longer been any jails, people disappear. You have bloggers, for example, who are writing about secular things and atheism, and the fact that all people of all faiths or none should be equal. They're being tortured in jails, which are equipped for hardened militants, Islamist militants.

So, these states operate in more and more terrifying ways, silencing voices. So, I think it's a very delicate balance. All of us do need the West and other countries who believe in human rights to give that support. But perhaps give it to human rights organizations in those countries, not individuals, because that makes that one person a target. And I think that's what we're seeing with Osman Kavala, and we've got to carry on and just try and have a little hope now that maybe things are going to start to turn around, at least in the West to focus more on these issues.

NAZARIAN: So, Farahnaz, just to follow up, do you think designating Kavala as a prisoner of conscience, could that actually hurt his case? Or what are your thoughts?

ISPAHANI: I think where he is right now.

NAZARIAN: He needs recognition.

ISPAHANI: He needs all the support of all of us. He needs a concerted effort. He needs organizations like ADL to be working with Human Rights Watch and across the world, because the chorus has to be very, very loud. And, I think as Elizabeth said, the sticks have to be apparent. Like you can't be in NATO and completely disregard the values of other NATO countries.

So, I think we are at this point, but I think it would be very, very important because, you see a lot of people like Prime Minister Imran Khan in Pakistan, and other people like Erdogan et cetera, who keep talking about Islamophobia at the moment you try and focus on what's happening to religious minorities in those countries or people who stand up for them. They start bringing up this major conspiracy of Islamophobia, brought by the Zionists to West to discredit the countries and their religion and their profit. And so, there is always that. So, we have to be very clear on how not to let them deflect us, you know from our path.

NAZARIAN: Yep. So Aykan turning to you, you were a former Turkish lawmaker. Talk to us about what kind of pressure will work on this Turkish government? What would the impact be of Osman Kavala being titled the prisoner of conscience? Really, what is it that it's going to take to make a President Erdogan and Ankara actually react in this specific case? And broadly speaking.

ERDEMIR: Yes, both in the United States and in the European Union there has always been a debate about, “What is the best strategy to deal with such cases of persecution? What is in the best interests of the hostages and the victims?”

For the sake of simplicity, let’s say there are two alternative strategies. One is appeasement, one is pushback. One is keeping a low profile, one is raising the profile, elevating the issue. So, I would argue that with the notable exception of Pastor Brunson, appeasement has been the preferred method on both sides of the Atlantic. Both in Washington and in Brussels.

And therefore, Pastor Brunson offers an interesting test case, which we normally don’t get. So, recognition as a prisoner of conscience, global Magnitsky sanctions, very high profile in the media particularly toward the end, led to his release. Shaming and media attention did work miracles.

But, let’s compare Pastor Brunson to another group of hostages. These are the three foreign service nationals. These are the Turkish citizens working at U.S. consulates in Turkey who had been framed in similar ways on terrorism charges.

Now for the most part, Washington’s strategy has been to keep a low profile. With the exception of a short-term visa freeze, there were only back channel talks, hoping that such a soft ball approach to Ankara would lead to their release. Sadly, all three have been convicted on trumped up terrorism charges. And two of them remain in Turkish prisons serving five and seven year prison terms, respectively. So, it seems the softball approach and appeasement does not work.

So, I would say the same also goes for Osman Kavala. It’s really important that I think USCIRF adopts Osman Kavala as a prisoner of conscience. It’s also important even introducing the talk of global Magnitsky sanctions, just as it was the case with Pastor Andrew Brunson. I think the incoming administration; the Biden administration should emphasize that human rights – and including freedom of religion or belief – will be central to U.S. foreign and security policy. And Washington will not look the other way as such abuses do take place.

Let me conclude by going back to Pastor Brunson’s book, *God’s Hostage*, he’s too humble to self-promote, but I will be doing some shameless promotion, *God’s Hostage: A True Story of Persecution, Imprisonment and Perseverance*. And I would also strongly recommend the audio version from Andrew’s own voice, which has a chilling effect. It literally takes you back to the prison cell. And this is not only a great book for readers of faith books, but also if you’re interested in a prison ethnography like a nonfiction book about conditions through the dungeons of the Turkish justice system, this is a great book. And again, the book emphasizes greatly that the greatest fear is to be forgotten. And in fact, I didn’t learn this from the book. I learned this for the first time from USCIRF commissioners, Sandra Jolley and Kristina Arriaga. When they were back, they told me. We were working hard to raise Andrew’s profile. And they told me that his biggest fear is to be forgotten.

So, I was writing numerous op-eds and policy briefs. I was speaking on multiple platforms in the Congress, at universities, at advocacy organizations, but that forced me to do more. I thought, okay, if Andrew’s biggest fear is to be forgotten, we just have to make sure that his profile is elevated across all domains and spectrums.

And one quick reference here is, it’s always difficult to find space in mainstream media outlets for such cases. So that is a particular challenge. And I know one of our attendees today in the audience is from the *World Watch Monitor*, Julia Bicknell. I just want to thank her and her journalist colleagues because, when mainstream media outlets failed

to cover Pastor Brunson's case in detail, they would be a go-to resource. So, there were only a handful of outlets that regularly reported on the details of the case. And that's made a big difference because then I could elevate those details in mainstream outlets as I publish reports, policy briefs, and op-eds.

So, overall I would strongly recommend that we have a concerted effort, both on the U.S. side and on the EU side and, on the government side, as well as on the USCIRF side, to recognize Osman Kavala as a prisoner of conscience, to elevate his case and to build the kind of coalition across faiths, across the political spectrum, across nations, that ultimately freed pastor Brunson, because Osman Kavala as a secular saint is really the symbol of Turkey's pluralism, multi-faith coexistence, and the promise of a life where there is not only room for the Muslim majority in Turkey, but also for Turkey's ancient Christian and Jewish communities, as well as for Turkey's secular Muslims and atheists and agnostics.

So, thank you again, Sharon, for hosting all of us together today, because I think all of us combined give the strong message better than any one piece we can write or present elsewhere.

NAZARIAN: And as Elizabeth said, Aykan, really thanks to you for your decades of work in this space and making sure that people like Andrew and Osman are not forgotten. So really thank you for that.

Let's end with hope. Let's hope that our panel today will draw further attention to the suffering of Osman Kavala and others who have shown moral courage for standing with the vulnerable minorities in the Middle East. We also hope that USCIRF will hear us today, and one of the commissioners will adopt Osman Kavala as a prisoner of conscience.

We've heard from Andrew what it means not to be forgotten, as Aykan just said. And we've heard from others that such pressure has the potential to change policy. As we bring this Ministerial to Advance International Religious Freedom virtual side event to conclusion, let's reiterate our hopes for a Middle East where pluralism reigns supreme and minorities enjoy the same rights and freedoms as others. At this point, I'd like to turn to questions from the audience. Sean or Tugba, I'll turn it back to you please.

TANYERI ERDEMIR: Thank you, Sharon. As a reminder, if you'd like to ask a question, simply open the chat box on the bottom of the Zoom program and type in your question.

NAZARIAN: All right. So, shall I Tugba, go ahead and take the first question that I see?

TANYERI ERDEMIR: Yes, of course.

NAZARIAN: Okay, good. Our first question is from Ayla Jean Yackley, I apologize if I mispronounced your names.

Dozens of Mr. Brunson's Protestant brethren are struggling to obtain the required documentation to reside in Turkey to work for their churches or to be with their families. Does Mr. Brunson believe it important for them to remain here despite the risks, and if so, why? And what can the U.S. government do to assist their cases? Andrew?

BRUNSON: That's a good question. Obviously, I would love to see them be able to remain in Turkey. There have been accelerated rate of deportations, and I think that was brought up at a USCIRF meeting a year ago, but I don't think the Turkish government – I think there needs to be a more robust approach to these things.

NAZARIAN: Anyone else? Elizabeth? Or Aykan? Go ahead.

ERDEMIR: Sharon? Yes. I just want to draw attention to how egregious this violation has become. Just in 2019, and until now in 2020, 50 Protestant faith leaders, church workers, and their family members have been targeted as national security threats, which then led to either their deportation, denial of residence permits or visas.

Now, you might be wondering why are there so many foreign national Protestant faith workers in Turkey? Why shouldn't Turkish nationals, Turkish citizen pastors, be serving Turkish Protestants? But this is an important reminder, a grim reminder, that Turkey's Protestants, just like many other Christian denominations have no opportunity to train their clergy, train their faith leaders. In fact, the Greek Orthodox community has no access to the Halki seminary, which has been shuttered by the Turkish government for decades, so cannot even train its members of clergy.

So, this systematic policy of deportation, it ultimately aims at destroying these communities, meaning leaving them without faith leaders. And let me end with the most brutal example of this. Just recently, a Turkish citizen pastor had his American wife denied an extension of residence permit. So, this was a systematic attempt to force them into a decision. If you want to serve in Turkey, continue to serve in Turkey, you have to be separated from your wife and kids. But if you want to remain as a family, then you have to leave your very own country, to serve as a faith leader to your very own religious brethren.

So, this is, I think the cruelest of policies, of forcing Turkey's minorities and their faith leaders out. And I think there definitely needs to be a greater attention in the U.S. as well as in the European Union.

NAZARIAN: Elizabeth?

PRODROMOU: I would like to add as well, again, I think Pastor Brunson's experience and the condition of the Protestant community is instructive, and it also speaks to the issue of fearing, of being forgotten. I think it's very important to speak candidly. And that is that the indigenous Christian communities of Turkey have been forgotten. They were forgotten for the last nine decades in Turkey since the founding of the republic. And so, what is happening now is a way to remember them and remember everyone moving forward.

The issues of work visas are ones that I know quite well for the Greek Orthodox community and the ecumenical patriarchate, have long been a tool that has been deployed by the Turkish state to make it impossible for that community to minister, not only to its own community, but to offer service in the public space.

So, this is not new. And I think that's very important for us to emphasize. And we may be hearing and seeing more about it now, and that's good, but we should realize that it's a long pattern.

I would also say the same thing for the breakup of families. And Aykan, again, has I think, compellingly shown how work visas are used for that issue, and residency permits are used for that issue, but that's also been used through the property rights regime that has been used to target the countries religious minorities, and to appropriate their properties, limit them from even earlier in the history of the country from participating in certain professional spaces. And that has made it economically impossible for those communities to sustain themselves. So, it's either produced the breakup of families, as some have gone abroad to try to make money there and then send remittances backward, or has meant the wholesale departure. And with that departure has meant the erasure of those families and little by little, those communities, because their properties are seized by the state because there are limits on inheritance rights when it comes to non-Sunnis in Turkey.

So, this is part of a very large basket of policies that is not new. And again, I think it's important to recognize that the fear of forgotten is one that sadly enough, for many of the countries, minority communities, they have experienced until now. And so, thank you for Andrew Brunson for your survival and your bravery and your courage, and for speaking about the importance of remembering and to everyone who's trying to do the same.

BRUNSON: A German friend of mine who worked in a church in Turkey was deported. He talked to foreign ministry in Germany and asked that they protest this and try to help them remain in Turkey. And what he was told is there are many German businesses involved in Turkey, and of course, Turkey sends many Turkish citizens to Germany and they receive religious visas, and they're the ones who they're supported – receive their salaries from the Turkish state and are given religious visas in Germany. But there's no idea of reciprocity. And what he was told is that the German Foreign Ministry does not want to do anything that would offend the Turkish government. And of course, it doesn't seem that the Turkish government is too concerned about offending other governments. It's a one-way street.

NAZARIAN: Yeah, I would also add, I think the German government is very concerned about its own Turkish-German citizens, and how they would also react. So, it's also a domestic issue, I think, for the German government.

All right, I'll move on to the next question we received from Julia Bicknell, and this is to you, Andrew. "How much of a difference do you think that detailed reporting made to the campaign to get you off made? How much importance is news reporting in cases like yours? And do you have any recommendations as to how we can continue to fund this as it does not come cheap to reporters in the courtroom all the time?"

BRUNSON: In my case, I think it was really government pressure on Turkey that led to my release. Significant pressure, especially the imposition of sanctions and of tariffs, which affected the Turkish economy. I think without that, I would not have been released.

What effect reporting had on that, it was personally satisfying to me to have details come out, I think of the "Lord of the Rings" movies, and you have this very small band of people fighting against a massive hoard. And these are impossible odds and there's no way they can win, but they fight anyway, not because they expect to win, but because it's the right thing to do. And I think when we're advocating for prisoners of conscience, I think it can seem very impossible. What can one do to move the Turkish government, especially if governments themselves are not willing to pressure? It seems like an impossible thing, but we put the truth out there because it's truth and it's important to put it out there and have those statements. And it was satisfying to me when truth came out. And I think that others who have been imprisoned during communist regimes, for example, even to be mentioned so that they were not forgotten, so that it was declared as an injustice, was something that was very encouraging to them.

NAZARIAN: Did you want to jump in? Aykan, go ahead please Aykan.

ERDEMIR: Just a very quick follow-up because we have two of the journalists who have been very instrumental in this. One is of course Julia, and the other one is Mindy Belz, the Editor in Chief of the *World Magazine*, who is also with us today.

Early on in Andrew's case, I would argue during the first year, it was very difficult for people like me to publish detailed pieces on Andrew in mainstream media outlets, because only when his profile was raised later on, once he became a matter of bilateral relations and sanctions, there was space for Andrew's case. So, during those difficult first

months of the year, it was thanks to journalists like Julia Bicknell, that there was detailed reporting. It was thanks to editors like Mindy Belz, there was not only reporting, but there was also space.

So, when I co-authored a piece exposing all the ludicrous accusations in the indictment against Andrew, it was the *World Magazine* that opened its pages to us, whereas most other mainstream outlets did not assume it to be newsworthy.

So, I think yes, part of our efforts today is all about government policy and USCIRF adoption as a prisoner of conscience, but we also need to think about the media landscape, meaning how can we make mainstream media outlets more attentive to human rights abuses, particularly when they include freedom of religion or belief issues and minority rights issues. So, that I think remains a challenge that we also need to work altogether about.

ISPAHANI: I'll just jump in there to say one thing, Aykan, that in the United States specifically, most journalists are incredibly uncomfortable dealing with religion at all. And this has been one of the issues that I think that we need to work on, is make them understand that religious persecution and the freedom to come and teach and speak of your own faith, are things that are very much part of the human rights rubric, which they are incredibly – the journalists are incredibly comfortable giving front page news to.

So, this is something, this is almost a re-education process that we have to start, that outside of those journals that cover faith and cover religion, that's where we need to break through to the bigger news institutions, including television and podcasts and newspapers and online. But young people I knew who are now the journalists who are doing a lot of the writing are so uncomfortable with religion in a lot of ways. That taught me so in this last election, there's a divide right down the middle. So that's really where I think we need to redefine religious persecution and things like this as human rights issue like all others.

NAZARIAN: Thank you Farahnaz. I think that's a very, very important point. Next question is for Elizabeth. "Could you please elaborate USCIRF and cultural heritage as part of religious freedom and human rights violations," there is, I guess, one more, "Delineation of how does USCIRF designate these things?"

PRODROMOU: I think USCIRF has moved in the direction of looking at cultural heritage. And I think it's important to move very actively in that direction of understanding cultural heritage as a part of the overall human rights assessment. And this gets back to the media and how the media covers or not issues related to cultural and religious heritage on religious freedom. And I think Farahnaz was so eloquent in underscoring that the media needs to mainstream its coverage of religious freedom and, in this case, cultural heritage issues. And certainly, in terms of the U.S. media not fall into the trap, again, of thinking that covering religious freedom issues is somehow a partisan choice. This is a universal human rights issue. It's a human security issue, and frankly it's a hard security and geopolitics issue. And to recognize how those things are all connected to something that, I think, is important for the media. With regard to cultural heritage and here, again, being remembered or forgotten, it's almost five decades now since the partition of Cyprus.

President Erdogan made a recent visit to the Turkish occupied Cyprus, where he declared that Turkey no longer would support a bi-zonal bi-communal federal solution, but wants a two-state solution on Cyprus. And he also made a trip to Varosha, which is part of the "ghost town" as it's called of Famagusta, for a picnic while he was there. And why do I say this? Because Turkish occupied Cyprus is an example of forgetting and looking away from the systematic cultural destruction, a destruction of cultural heritage of Christian and Jewish communities in the occupied north by Turkey. And

the international media has rarely written about this. And the ability to perpetrate that kind of destruction of cultural heritage, turning, sacred sites into military installations, military pillboxes, public latrines, casinos, stables for animals, desecrating cemeteries, this is the kind of cultural heritage destruction that emboldens governments that don't respect international law and human rights.

And so, it's part of the violation of religious freedom because you're literally erasing and destroying the sacred spaces in which communities can worship and participate and remember. And alas, that has a spillover effect because we've seen some of that now in the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and the ceasefire there has given control over large portions of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan. And there had been already targeting by Azeri forces and some alleged support from Turkey of Armenian cultural sites, historic treasures, like the Holy Savior Cathedral in Shusha, and it's questionable what will happen then to those cultural heritage sites there.

And I go as far afield as Cyprus and Nagorno-Karabakh to take us then back to Turkey because, the perpetration of destruction of cultural heritage inside Turkey leads to the same kind of actions in conditions of combat, in which Turkey may be directly or indirectly involved. And for something very simple – the Chora church decision in November of 2019 and its renouncement and implementation now in Turkey, the Hagia Sophia decision – these are just the latest in a series of cultural heritage violations that are targeted at religious minority communities, but for Turkey's citizens writ large, erase large parts of a history, that is a history that's rich with pluralism, and that can undergird democracy and inclusion in Turkey.

NAZARIAN: Thank you, Elizabeth, for that. Next question is to you, Aykan, this viewer asks that, "You spoke about the Jewish people. Do you think that Israeli tourists, in Turkey, may become a target of arrest because of the bad relationship between President Erdogan and Prime Minister Netanyahu?" Maybe this is kind of a broader Israel-Turkey relations question, kind of geopolitics of the Middle East. If you want to take that, Aykan?

ERDEMIR: Sure. I think Turkish-Israeli relations remain one of the most interesting aspects of the broader relations in the Middle East. Because, despite political tensions, despite, at this point, the lack of ambassadors, we also continue to see extremely strong people-to-people ties and business-to-business ties, because there is a history that the Erdogan government cannot erase. Turkey was the first majority Muslim country to recognize Israel. And Turkey until recently, has had extremely close security, intel and diplomatic ties with Israel. In fact, to this very day, at least until the pandemic, Turkish Airlines has been the second most popular airline flying out of Tel Aviv. So there has been numerous Israeli tourists in Turkey, and I think there will continue to be Israeli tourists in Turkey. Yes, at times there has been security concerns, particularly when we have had state sanctioned anti-Semitic propaganda on either pro-government or state-run outlets.

For example, I exposed one such historical drama. Turkey's most expensive blockbuster, funded by the Turkish government, broadcasted on state TV, TRT, which was a revisionist drama that basically blamed all the problems of the late Ottoman Empire on a Judeo-Christian conspiracy. Now such dramas as we have also documented, led, not only to hate speech online and in other media outlets, but also threats of violence. And during that time, there was at least one attack targeting an Israeli tourist group. But in general, I would argue that Turkey remains relatively safe and the greater risk happens to be, and I'm saddened to share this, for Turkey's indigenous Jewish community.

We see an alarming exodus, especially of Turkey's younger Jewish individuals, as they seek better opportunities for education and their career abroad. And this is having a decimating effect on this long-term community. Because we're not just talking about the Sephardic community that settled after 1492, but we're also talking about the

Romaniote community. Turkey has had Jewish presence and heritage for over two millennia. And it's really sad today to see that security concerns, systematic discrimination, and prejudice is forcing Turkey's very own Jewish citizens out of the country. So, I would say that I'm more concerned about Turkey's Jewish citizens, more so than Israeli tourists who visit Turkey.

NAZARIAN: Thank you, Aykan, for that. Next question comes from Mindy Belz. This is either for Elizabeth or Aykan. "Perhaps you could speak about Turkey's aggression in Northeastern Syria and the Nagorno-Karabakh. Is it part and parcel of the clamp inside Turkey on freedom of conscience or is this hard security, more about securing borders shoring up alliances? We'd like to know if you see a connection and how we might view it?" Aykan, since you're on, do you want to take that first? And then, Elizabeth, obviously.

ERDEMIR: Okay. So again, this is a very complex issue because there are multiple dynamics at work here. On the one hand, we have to recognize that the current Turkish government has no opportunities to deliver when it comes to economic policy or when it comes to COVID-19 policy. So, the only thing the government can deliver is victory in overseas battles. So, we see increasing deployment, of not only the Turkish military, but more importantly, Syrian jihadist proxies, not only in Syria, also in Libya, and latest in Nagorno-Karabakh. So that's a key development that provides some level of legitimacy to the Turkish government. Since overseas military campaigns always lead to a rally around the flag effect. But of course, beyond this domestic purpose, this also serves a broader Islamic agenda. It's a combination of nationalism and Islamism, that is building these proxy networks, increasing the Turkish government's sphere of influence and its Islamic proxies really matter.

And one big drawback is almost always this reflects badly on Turkey's very own vulnerable religious minorities. So, when we see a conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Turkey's indigenous Armenians are being harassed, are being targeted, become victims of hate crimes. When we see, let's say a Turkish-Israeli conflict or any other flare up in the Eastern Mediterranean, we see Turkey's very own indigenous Jews and Greek Orthodox citizens being targeted, become victims of hate crimes. So, this cuts both ways. But overall, I would argue that these alarming foreign and security policy developments are extremely concerning for us who watch vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities closely.

PRODROMOU: Just to offer a footnote, I think, yeah, Aykan's point that, Erdogan's foreign policy adventurism is probably more a reflection of his own sense of increasing isolation and weakness, domestically, because of the economy that continues to be in free fall and so many other things, and with COVID in particular. But nonetheless, I think there's a pattern here of a quite purposeful activity that began well before the economy fully tanked and we entered a global pandemic. Because even under the former foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu whose famous, "No problems with neighbors," slogan really amounted to, no problems with neighbors whose borders we intend to revise and as long as they accept that, then we will have no problems. And the kind of foreign policy revisionism that amounts to rogue state behaviors, and we see it in Northern Syria with a two-stage invasion first in Northwestern Syria, and then in Northeastern Syria. The ongoing occupation in northern Cyprus, the adventurism in Libya, and now, in Nagorno-Karabakh.

We see Turkey violating with impunity, the borders of its neighbors, as part of this, as Aykan said, this kind of neo-Ottoman foreign policy. And maps that have been produced by the Turkish foreign ministry that include, as part of Turkish territory, all of the Greek Thrace on the Greek Aegean Islands, parts of Iraq, parts of Syria. I mean, these are maps produced by the state's foreign ministry. So, I think it's important to recognize that it's likely that we will see increasing adventurism, maybe coming certainly from this position of domestic isolation and weakness, but that will produce more adventurism rather than less. And that adventurism has also meant that vulnerable communities, ethnic

and religious communities, that pushback are subjected to the same policies outside of Turkey that they have faced inside of Turkey. And this is happening without violence as well.

I mean, Erdogan was very explicit when he declared that he would work to mobilize the Milli Görüş cells, all of groups all over Western Europe. And we saw in the aftermath of the most recent Charlie Hebdo events, that there were attacks, efforts to attack, and there were intimidations against Armenian citizens in Germany by Milli Görüş members. So, this is happening both through nonviolent and violent means. And I think that's the intersection of domestic policies that for the most part, now, need no longer rely on violence because communities that are vulnerable are so small, at least in terms of religious communities. It's different for the Kurds, large ethnic community, and then using violence abroad. So, I think we'll see more as Erdogan's sense of isolation and vulnerability itself grows.

NAZARIAN: I just wanted to follow that with you regarding kind of placing Erdogan into context of these populist leaders who are using hyper nationalism as a mechanism of kind of getting more support and how that impacts actually vulnerable communities within those countries. How would you frame kind of Erdogan in that way? And what would be your assessment of kind of what he's doing, how it's impacting vulnerable communities, as a populist kind of hyper nationalist leader?

ISPAHANI: Well, more and more today, we're seeing elected authoritarian, populist leaders. And as Hillary Clinton, I think, once famously said, "Democracy is not just the act of voting. That's just the start." But in all of these countries now you see in Iran, there's a fig leaf to some democratic election and you see that now in Turkey. And you see this in many, many parts, not just to the Muslim world, but generally, this populist authoritarian. And Erdogan it's very, very interesting from my recent time in the country of my birth, but the popularity of Erdogan, as the man shaking his fist at Israel and America and at – They talk about the Crusades, the new Crusades that are coming, that there's going to be a standoff between the Christians and the Muslims. This is what today, all over the Muslim world, Arab, non-Arab, all over, they're talking about a new Crusade.

And some are saying, "Iran will lead the Muslims." And some are saying, "Erdogan is going to be the leader of that new movement." And there's a lot of messianic, with when Qasem Soleimani was killed, et cetera. He was one of the big proponents of the Mahdi coming back and all of this. And so, Iran is using its own ways in its roots with Shias and Turkey and Erdogan are doing the same. And in Turkey, in particular, these soap operas Aykan was talking about, have been dubbed in 20 to 30 languages, and they're the most watched. So, they're using family, what is family time of watching television as the time to plant all of these seeds of hatred towards the other. And this whole fight resurrecting the idea of this new fight and winning back that empire.

So, to me, especially now with the UAE and Bahrain and Israel, but this new relationship, this is giving countries like Turkey and Iran a lot more fire in their bellies and they're using it, obviously. The Jews in their countries are seen as Israeli agents. Christians in their countries are seen as agents of any Christian countries. So, I mean, to me, this is one of the most frightening times we are going into.

NAZARIAN: Thank you, Farahnaz. Next question is coming from Lauren Homer. And I believe this is for Elizabeth. "You aptly noted the concern that the incoming Biden administration may not, 'Foreground the issue of religious freedom.' What arguments do the panelists think will be most convincing to the Biden transition team on why religious freedom is central to democracy and other human rights?" I guess this is for everybody. Whoever wants to go first. I think this is a very great question to possibly end on.

PRODROMOU: Can I start just to clarify something? Yeah. I didn't say that, "I don't think that they will foreground." But one thing I do think is that, we can anticipate that there will be a rediscovery of human rights and human rights will be moved to the center of the foreign policy agenda. However, my concern is, that because religious freedom, at least domestically in the U.S., has been so politicized as a partisan issue, that there's a danger that religious freedom falls out of the robust conversation and policy efforts. I don't think that will happen, but I think it's important to stress it should not happen. And I think that we have measurable evidence, whether we are looking at the, the condition of minorities, religious minorities in Turkey, whether we're looking at the condition of Uighur Muslims in China, where we're talking about a communist regime, whether we're looking at the condition of Muslims in Myanmar. I mean, take your community, your minority community, one country's majority as another country's minority.

I think there's so much measurable evidence to show that where we have weak human rights regimes and violations of religious freedom, which are oftentimes the signal for other violations of human rights, that we have very weak and unstable, overall security regimes. And so, I think this administration will likely understand the connections between hard security and geopolitics on the one hand and human rights and religious freedom and the other. And I think it's important to emphasize those linkages, so that the human rights and religious freedom communities and the security and development communities don't work in silos, but work in a kind of whole-of-policy approach. Because I think that's the reality on the ground.

ISPAHANI: I think you're right. And I also think that we really, because of what's been happening in the United States with the Supreme Court, but so many of the issues, we really need to make the break by using the term international religious freedom or the protection of religious minorities or some other phrasing. Because religious freedom, you bring up that term and people just immediately look at it as some kind of very extreme point of view and not as a human rights point of view. Those of us who work in these fields are familiar with those things. But if we want to reach the mainstream media, if we want to reach people within Biden's transition team, especially the younger people who have really, really, really stayed very angry over the selection. I think we need to be very clear about, do we need new language, a new framing, instead of using religious freedom? Or how do we go about it? Because I do believe that the rebranding of sorts for the same issues, may be what's needed.

NAZARIAN: That's very interesting Farahnaz. Andrew, what would be your advice to this incoming administration, given your very important experience?

BRUNSON: I would like the U.S. to take a more robust approach – the U.S. government to take a more robust approach to these issues and especially on religious freedom. I think that religious freedom, if you look at that, that it underlies a lot of the other human rights or freedom issues. And where you do not have religious freedom, then you tend to not have the other rights present. So, to me, it's a very important one. I would like the U.S. to take a stronger stance on these. And the truth is that the U.S. and Europe have a lot of leverage, if they're willing to use it. But they usually are not willing to.

NAZARIAN: Aykan, you have the last word.

ERDEMIR: Thank you, Sharon. So, let me take us all back to 2009. When Barack Obama took office, his first foreign visit and address was to Turkey. And I was present, together with Tugba, at the Turkish parliament, where he addressed the parliament. We were back then academics. We were there in our capacity as academics and also human rights advocates. And this time around, the Biden transition team could, I think, build on that experience. Because back in 2009, Obama saw Erdogan as a moderate Muslim Democrat and Erdogan's Turkey as a role model. So, I sometimes

joke about it. President-elect Biden is two terms wiser than that, because now we know, Erdogan is neither a moderate Muslim Democrat, nor can he be a role model for any other Muslim majority polity. But Biden's new start can again, be with Turkey. Turkey could again be a role model, but in a different way. This time around Osman Kavala, could by recognizing him as a prisoner of conscience, elevating his case, and through him, elevating millions, if not hundreds of millions of Muslims who are deeply committed to democracy, human rights, separation of mosque and church, and more importantly, coexistence with other faith communities. I think that could be the strong message that combines human rights, on the one hand, and religious freedoms on the other hand. Because one great lesson we as Turkish citizens learned over these decades is that, secularism or what Turks refer to as the laïcité is neither just freedom for religion, nor just freedom from religion. It is freedom for and from religion.

And that is also the case for human rights and religious freedoms. Meaning, only when we combine both, I think that we can have the kind of robust policy that Andrew just referred to, get into action and deliver results. And I can't think of any better individual, any better symbol than Osman Kavala to really enshrine that idea of democracy, pluralism, coexistence, as someone who brings the world of religious freedom and minority rights with the world of secularism and human rights together. So, I hope our panel will reach beyond today's audience. It will make a change for Osman Kavala and through him for all the millions of ethnic and religious and gender minorities who are suffering under similar pressure.

NAZARIAN: Well, with that, I want to thank each and every one of our panelists. Thank you for your thoughtful analysis, for your policy recommendations, for your offering the reframing the issues and how to move ahead and look ahead into having impact in these very, very important subject. So, thank you. I will pass it back to Tugba. Thank you all.

TANYERI ERDEMIR: At this time, our panel is finished. I'd like to thank our ADL and FDD colleagues who worked very hard to organize this event, Erin Blumenthal, Abigail Barnes, and Sean Kagan in particular. And thank you all for joining us and have a great day. Thank you.

ISPAHANI: Thank you.

PRODROMOU: Thank you.