

**Testimony before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom**  
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Chair Maenza, Deputy Chair Turkel, and Distinguished Commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the important topic of women promoting international religious freedom, particularly today as we celebrate International Women's Day. I would also like to recognize and thank the Commission for your dedicated efforts to support people around the world in their free expression of religious belief and to call attention to those persecuted for their beliefs, whatever they may be. The Commission's reports and advocacy work inform and make the efforts of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) stronger and more effective.

My name is Rita Stephan and I am the Regional Coordinator for Religious and Ethnic Minorities in the Middle East Bureau with USAID, where I oversee a team dedicated to supporting religious and ethnic minority communities in the region. Prior to this, I worked at the Department of State, directing the Middle East Partnership Initiative, or MEPI.

USAID Administrator Samantha Power underscored the Agency's commitment to international religious freedom in her remarks at last year's International Religious Freedom Summit when she said, "The fight for international religious freedom is not just a reflection of who we are as Americans, but of strategic national interest to the United States and a key foreign policy objective....We know that when countries promote religious freedom and protect religious minorities, democracy is more stable, communities are more likely to develop equitably and prosper, the rights of women and girls are more likely to be protected, and overall quality of life improves."

Our work in the Middle East reflects the unique and powerful role of women in advocating for and advancing religious freedom, for themselves and for their communities. It brings into focus the interconnectivity between the free exercise of one's religion, and the rights of women. Our work also brings the reverse into focus: that when these rights are restricted or worse, when citizens are persecuted for their religious or ethnic affiliation, women often bear a disproportionate impact.

The strategic goal of USAID's Middle East Bureau's religious and ethnic minority, or REM, team is to promote equal representation, protection, and opportunities for marginalized religious, racial, and ethnic communities. We do this by:

- Advancing freedom of religion or belief as a fundamental human right;
- Increasing understanding within and across communities to combat exclusion, violence, and atrocities;
- Promoting laws, policies, and cultural norms that provide equal protection to diverse communities;

- Expanding equal access to economic and educational opportunities.
- Finally, and consistently with USAID's existing policies and directives, we integrate gender equality as a cross-cutting issue for all REM policies and programs.

And so throughout all of our efforts, we have been committed to supporting women in their role as advocates and agents of religious freedom. Our work on this issue in the Middle East North Africa region includes activities in Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Yemen, Tunisia, Morocco and Iraq. Our work is focused on recovery, inclusion, dialogue, advocacy efforts and strengthening laws, policies and regulations. Programs ensure that women within their component communities also have a leadership role and a voice in decisions that impact them. In short, we focus on what we call the 'enabling environment' for women from REM communities to be in charge of their own agency.

We address the enabling environment through a variety of activities. For example, a new project in Morocco is focused on the *mellahs* - former Jewish neighborhoods that are now inhabited by a Muslim-majority population who experience a variety of socio-economic problems, making the inhabitants a somewhat stigmatized minority in the general population. Women in the *mellahs* especially lack opportunities to advance economically. The activity is dual-tracked: teachers provide women training in artisanal skills, while also instructing them in Jewish history and traditions, including the Holocaust in the region.

More frequently our work is focused in conflict or post-conflict settings. In Yemen, the Advancing Tolerance in MENA activity is focused on members of the historically marginalized *Muhamasheen* community, with a particular lens on supporting women in these communities to advocate for their rights and social inclusion.

I'll tell you the story of Zahra. Zahra is a member of the *Muhamasheen*, who was forced to leave her hometown because of the ongoing armed conflict and moved to Aden with her family. As a young girl, Zahra faced immense pressure from her family and community to conform to local gender norms, by dropping out of school and remaining at home and being married to an older man. However, this did not prevent her from pursuing her education. In fact, she was able to complete a degree in education while raising eight children. Zahra is currently a leader in the internally displaced (IDP) community in the South, and an activist for education and women's rights. She has mentored younger girls and supported their efforts to seek an education. Women in her community now go to her for wisdom and guidance for their problems and have expressed to her how grateful they are for her leadership. Zahra's determination set an example for many others, leading to her place as a trusted leader in her community.

You may also be aware of USAID's work in northern Iraq after the defeat of ISIS, and specifically with women who are part of religious and ethnic communities.

Over the past five years, USAID and the Department of State have provided more than \$500 million in assistance to REM communities in northern Iraq as they recover from the atrocities committed by ISIS. Just a few examples from Iraq: USAID has provided capacity development training to 31 civil society and faith-based organizations so that they can better meet the needs of their constituents. More than 34,000 individuals have received access to health services,

including mental health and psychosocial support; 28,431 homes and communities have been rehabilitated; and thousands of individuals have received legal and negotiation services as they work to rebuild their lives. The outcomes of this assistance demonstrate that when you focus on recovery and inclusive growth along with soft skill development you strengthen the post conflict social cohesion.

This is clearly evident in USAID's work in the Ninewa Plain. Take the case of a project with the Catholic University of Erbil that supports women and minorities from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, particularly IDPs, to integrate economically to build a sustainable community in Northern Iraq. The program provided targeted skills building focused on language and computer skills training in two centers in Erbil and Al Qosh/Teleskuf.

Zuhat Udi is one of the participants from the program, who used the training to strengthen her knowledge of business management and English in hopes of some day opening her own nonprofit organization. She said, "Now, I am ready to work improving the reality of my community.....to help women and other vulnerable communities find job opportunities and rebuild their lives after persecution."

Another example is from an organization called the Jiyan Foundation. Sana was born in Sinjar, Iraq. She belongs to the Yazidi ethnic and religious community. She was 15 years old when ISIS attacked her city, killing hundreds of Yazidis in August 2014. Seeing first-hand how violence comes from ignorance, Sana sought an opportunity to combat public prejudice with Jiyan Foundation's Youth Network for Peace and Dialogue. In the Youth Network Sana, now 23, found a safe place to speak freely of her experiences, realize her own prejudices, and learn perspectives of young people from different religions and backgrounds. Through these engagements Sana joined the Youth Network's activities to rebuild Sinjar with small community projects. "All religions call for love and peace, we need to emphasize both points in our country to build a peaceful life." says Sana.

Zahra, Sana, and Zuhat show us that whether providing support for trauma recovery, skills building and education, or economic empowerment opportunities, it is essential that we support the 'enabling environment' so that we move women from being victims to women in charge of their destiny, as agents of change, and advocates on behalf of their religious and ethnic communities.

Finally, I would like to recognize the Commission's 2017 special report, "Women and Religious Freedom: Synergies and Opportunities," which brought into focus a comprehensive review of women and religious freedom as a joint topic. The report provides a terrific lens through which we at USAID can view our work with women REM communities. The Commission's subsequent 2018 "Policy Focus on Women and Religious Freedom" invites us to explore ways in which we can work together to shore up a groundswell of support for women as advocates for religious freedom.

I'll close with one more example from the region: Eight years ago, Ferial was a young woman who masqueraded as an old lady with a curved back so that she would not be subject to rape or sexual harassment by ISIS, as she sheltered in her home for 20 days while the city was under

siege. Since that time, Ferial has participated in services from the USAID-supported Sanad Community Center, which provides counseling for women who suffered tremendous horrors during the ISIS occupation, including displacement, isolation, and other traumas of war. Now a woman in her mid-twenties, talking about her experience at the Sanad Center, Ferial said, “I was suffering silently and alone, but now I feel more confidence with myself as a woman and learned to look at myself as a strong, not a weak woman, Now I am well and alive and I want to encourage other women that life is worth living.”

Chair Maenza, Deputy Chair Turkel, Commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to share our work at USAID and to explore ways in which we can advance our joint objectives. I look forward to your questions.