It is an honor to be on a panel with Rabbi Marc Gaupin, Imam Mohamad Magid, and Chris Seiple. In the four of us sitting before you today, you see a model of interfaith cooperation in the quest for religious liberty. As you have heard from Rabbi Gaupin and Imam Magid, we have reached many of the same conclusions based on our work here in the United States and abroad. What’s now clear is that if we are to succeed in our efforts to protect religious freedom both at home and abroad, we must not only work together, we must be seen to be working together.

As strange as it might sound to the many practitioners of Realpolitik here in Washington and in capitals throughout the Western world, the religious liberty branch of human rights law is the only lens that provides both the terminology and the analytical tools we need to help us to get a handle on the carnage that has been occurring at the hands of the so-called “Islamic State of Syria and the Levant” (ISIS/ISIL) or (Da’esh, داعش). In order to deal with Da’esh and with the state, business, and individual sponsors of terrorism who are supporting them, we must call things by their proper names. I therefore wish to thank Rabbi Gaupin for his reminder that “things are not as they seem.”

Let me begin by putting the issues we face into context: Today, I am releasing a statement by Mr. Sherwan Mu’awiya, on behalf of the religious leaders of Iraq’s Izidi community. It was released at a meeting of Iraqi religious leaders in Istanbul on August 29, and will be entered into the Congressional Record. English and
Arabic versions of the Statement will be available on the table outside this room.

Please allow me to quote from the second-last paragraph:

We appeal to you, our respected audience, to support our [Iraqi] government and to enhance its ability to repulse these terrorist groups, who started [their terror] on our land today, and probably may move tomorrow to another land outside ours. We should unite in condemning the acts of terrorists and denounce their crimes against the Izidis, and against the Iraqis at large, as crimes of genocide. All members of these groups must be brought to justice in international courts and be charged and tried as war criminals.

Let us now consider some of the most recent victims of these terrorists:

1. The Izidis, whose forced evacuation and siege on Mount Sinjar, was witnessed by the entire world, which watched helplessly in horror.

2. Shia Muslims in Syria and Iraq, who have been singled out and murdered because they are Shiites. As good an example as any of religiously-motivated genocide can be seen in the videos of the mass murder of young, Shiite, Iraqi Air Force cadets, who were killed because they are Shiites.

3. Christians throughout the Middle East and North Africa

4. Sunni Muslims who will not join these terrorists.

5. Innocent citizens and soldiers who have been – and will be – murdered on the streets of their hometowns and military bases by self-proclaimed jihadis, who believe that it is “just” to kill in the name of God.

6. Young school girls in Nigeria kidnapped by Boko Haram and sold as sex slaves.

7. Thousands of Americans killed on 9/11 when extremists, claiming to act in the name of God, flew four fully-loaded planes to the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania.

What, I ask you, is the difference between publicly beheading an innocent person “in the name of God”, machine-gunning Shia eighteen and nineteen-year olds because they are Shia, and using a passenger jet as a missile? I submit to you that there is no difference whatsoever.
It is time that we begin, in a systematic way, to “connect the dots” between the criminal activities just listed and the state, private, and business “sponsors of terrorism” who perpetrate and support them. Let me repeat: It is time that we reject distinctions between state and non-state sponsors of terrorism. All of those who support the killing of innocents are criminals. If the evidence (or the money trail) points a little too close to those whom we count as “allies’, we must follow it where it leads.

It is also time that we stop taking sides in religious disputes that we neither understand, and in which we have no business meddling. There are no “moderate” religious extremists. Nor do we have any business meddling in political and religious disputes between Sunni and Shia Muslims. If we are really advocates for religious liberty, we must advocate for the freedom of all.

**UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM**

The immediate problem is terminology. Just listen to the public statements from Members of Congress and Senators, Secretary Kerry, and others in positions of authority: The United States Government is not certain how to deal with – or even how to classify – *ISIL/Da’esh*. It is time for some moral clarity here. Let me draw some clear lines for your consideration:

1. *ISIL/Da’esh, Al Nusra, Al-Qaeda*, and all of their variants are criminals who murder, who rape, who hold slaves, who steal vast sums in money, gold, and oil, and who engage in the drug trade

2. *ISIL/Da’esh, Al Nusra, Al-Qaeda*, and all of their variants are religious extremists whose almost mystical view of Islam is a perversion of all that is
sacred to Muslims. They are rightly condemned as “apostates” (*takfiri,* Arabic تكفيري) by the Izidis and believing Muslims who believe that murder of innocents cannot be justified under any Scripture: “People of the Book! ... have no ground to stand upon unless [you] stand fast by the Law the Gospel and all the revelation that has come to you from your Lord.” (Qur’an 5:67-69)

3. ISIL/Da’esh, Al Nusra, Al-Qaeda, and all of their variants are political ideologues who aspires to take control of the levers of political power in the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, and throughout the world.

News reports, by contrast, report that that the United States, Britain, France, and other nations are viewing *Da’esh* as a “thing” or as an “organization”. It is true that *Da’esh* is an organized criminal conspiracy that is armed with heavy weapons and that is commanded by professional military officers.

It is also far more than that.

From my twelve (12) years of dialogue with senior members of the Iranian political, academic, and clerical leadership, I have learned that to view *Da’esh* through an “organizational” model is to miss the larger picture.

In the view of Iranian religious and governmental leaders, Islamic extremism – in all its forms – is an ideologically-driven movement based on an idealistic – almost mystical – vision of the teachings of Islam.

- Religious extremism knows neither geopolitical nor religious boundaries: There are Saudi, Nigerian, Iranian, Turkish, Iraqi, American, British and religious extremists of many other nationalities.

- Religious extremists come from both the Sunni and Shia traditions of Islam, as well as other less-familiar variants of that tradition. Religious extremism justifying the murder of innocents is also found in the Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and other religious traditions.

- It is a big mistake to confuse the demands of national and regional communities for independence or national self-determination with the aspirations of religious extremism.

- Iran’s differences with the United States relate to the two countries’ deep, mutual distrust of one another – a distrust fueled by low-level kinetic and high-level economic warfare between the two countries since 1979.

  a. Iran is already fighting *Da’esh* for its own reasons: to protect the Shia communities in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon and Shia holy places there. Iran might be willing to join a public coalition with the U.S. if the P5+1 negotiations result in a mutually-beneficial agreement.
b. In a private meeting I attended in Tehran on May 26, a senior Iranian official made the following points:

- “The major powers have no sense of history, or of their place in it. They do not think strategically. Their focus is the protection of their immediate interests, with no sense of the long term.”

- The tensions in the region appear to be based in religion, but the reality is that they arise from interests “somewhere else” who exploit existing religious differences for their own political, economic, and geostrategic reasons.

- America’s lack of strategic vision “is why the outcomes you obtain are often the opposite of what you intended.” (He mentioned the Taliban and Khalizad’s outreach to “terrorists” in Iraq as specific examples.) It is no accident that the vast majority of ordinary citizens in the Middle East believe that the United States has armed and encouraged ISIS/Da’esh.

c. The Iranian analysis of the nature of ISIS/Da’esh was also the view of the Iraqi religious leaders with whom I met in Istanbul over the last weekend in August. Included in that group were senior religious leaders from the Christian, Sunni, Shia, and Turkoman communities from all of the regions of Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region.

- In their view, a strategy to defeat ISIS/Da’esh must include a “visible” coalition of religious leaders and others who will work together publicly to go after the extremists by targeting every facet of their operations from “top to bottom”: military, financial, religious, recruiting, and ideological.

What do I propose?

1. We must, first and foremost, ensure that we recognize the global nature of the threat to religious liberty.

2. We must form public coalitions in which Religious leaders and advocates work together to define the nature of the threat, and to demand that the government see religious freedom advocates as part of the solution -- rather than part of the problem.

3. We must ask Congress to demand that religious groups be included in the US government's efforts to combat these murderers:

   a. Congress must create and fund a faith-based effort to track and prosecute everyone engaged in this criminal conspiracy.
b. Congress must create and fund faith-based efforts to reach into the religious communities and religiously-motivated political leadership of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia -- including, especially Iran, whose leaders have been warning us about religious extremism for at least five years.

i. Congress has authorized and funded efforts to create curricula on the Koran in Pakistani madrasahs. These efforts should be expanded.

ii. Congress should declare in terms that the state and federal courts will understand that America’s national security requires that our students understand the languages, cultures, and religions of the regions of the world in which we have a vital interest. If it is really unconstitutional for American students to study primary religious texts like the Quran, the Bible and other religious texts\(^1\), our failure to comprehend the world as it is – rather than as we would have it be – will be our own fault.

4. And finally, we must urge our friends and allies in the many American religious communities who are devoted to religious liberty at home and abroad to come together publicly with their counterparts in the Muslim world, for, as Benjamin Franklin said so famously at the signing of the Declaration of Independence: “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.”