



Advancing Religious Freedom Through U.S. Foreign Assistance: A Discussion with USAID Acting Administrator John Barsa

TRANSCRIPT

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- John Barsa, *USAID Acting Administrator*

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A video of the event is available: <https://www.hudson.org/events/1878-advancing-religious-freedom-through-u-s-foreign-assistance-a-discussion-with-usaid-acting-administrator-john-barsa-102020>

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Nina Shea:

Hello. Happy International Religious Freedom Day, and welcome to the Hudson Institute. I am extremely delighted that we are going to be having a fireside chat with the Acting Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, and it's really one of the largest providers of humanitarian assistance in the world today.

So, religious freedom is America's first freedom. It's the first clause of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, and it's fitting that advancing religious freedom globally is now a moral and a national security priority for the United States. We will be having fireside chats, without the fire, of course, but I can promise our conversation with the acting administrator, John Barsa, is going to be an interesting and informative discussion.

It's been a long journey. In 1977, the State Department started the Bureau on Democracy Rights and Labor, D-R-L, to advance the democratic freedoms worldwide, including religious freedom. The U.S. had pledged to do this when it signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. DRL, as the bureau is called, had a mandate to take up a religious freedom, along with the other basic rights, but in reality, religious freedom was always the forgotten stepchild of the human rights movement internationally. Some even thought religious freedom was neither universal nor unalienable.

A group of us who worked in the issue and were devoted to it were incensed by this point of view, and so, in the late '90s, in 1996, we formed a broad-based movement to push for the International Religious Freedom Act. Congressman Frank Wolf from Virginia at that time was really the impetus in Congress for that, and the act passed with near unanimous support. It was veto-proof, it was signed by President Clinton 22 years ago today, October 27th, 1998, hence today is International Religious Freedom Day.

The act institutionalized religious freedom in the U.S. government with annual reports, an office on religious freedom, ambassador-at-large on religious freedom; the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created under the act, and I had the privilege of serving as the commissioner for 13 years, as an appointee of the House of Representatives. It also mandated identifying by the U.S. government, the State Department, the shortlist of the world's worst persecutors.

However, there were important achievements. Some people were released from prison under religious persecution conditions, but the policy in general still lagged, and this was very apparent to me, and to the world, really, when ISIS attacked northern Iraq in 2014. It was declared a genocide by the State Department by Secretary Kerry at the time, but there were no policies to aid these survivors. So, neither U.S. air nor UN aid were able to reach the Yazidi and Christian communities of northern Iraq for several years, even though they were identified as the victims of religious genocide by ISIS.

In 2017, this began to change. Vice President Pence vowed to change this, and declared religious freedom a priority in a speech he gave. Two months later, religious freedom was identified in the National Security Strategy as a priority, and that it would become a priority to protect religious minorities. The National Security Strategy Report cited attacks on religious minorities, specifically in the Middle East, and USAID began aid to help these minorities a year later in 2018.

Finally, on June 2nd, 2020, President Trump issued an executive order to advance religious freedom as a moral and national security priority for all the relevant agencies, not just USAID, and not just in the Middle East, but globally. Also, religious freedom was going to be a priority for all communities, not just minorities, so this is a very significant step. It is more than symbolic, more than just words, and today, we're going to hear from a man who has a very pivotal position as the head of USAID, John Barsa.

Mr. Barsa, Administrator Barsa became acting secretary in April of this year. He was, prior to that, assistant administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean bureau at USAID. He had held many senior posts in the Department of Homeland Security, where he was responsible for emergency relief, and he, himself, is a son of refugees from Cuba. So, Administrator Barsa, thank you very much. We're honored to have you here at Hudson, and I look forward to your talk.

We will be hearing from Administrator Barsa in a few opening remarks, and then we'll get into a discussion. Thank you.

John Barsa:

Thank you so very much for inviting me to join you all today. As noted, today marks the 22nd anniversary of the signing of the International Religious Freedom Act, an act that has served as a cornerstone for U.S. foreign policy to advance and protect religious freedom.

Before I come in, I would like to really thank the Hudson Institute for your consistent attention and leadership on the issue of religious freedom. Religious freedom, as noted before, is really America's first freedom, from which all other freedoms flow. Religious freedom is not only a God-given right, but an American value enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. I am fortunate and blessed by God to lead an agency that is promoting religious freedom in our work every day.

Defending and promoting religious freedom is a top priority for the Trump administration, and one that we at USAID take very seriously, and it is one that is very personal to me. As mentioned, yes, I am the son of a refugee. My mother fled Cuba in the early '60s, soon after the Communist Revolution, when the assaults on freedom, including religious freedom were starting to take place. And as many of us are painfully aware, the Cuban Communist Party to this day opposes any efforts by individual Cubans to have any god other than the Cuban Communist Party.

USAID has been at the forefront of providing much-needed support, whether through humanitarian relief to communities, reeling from violent conflict, or development assistance to people who are discriminated against and systematically oppressed. Since 2018, the U.S. has invested more than 400 million dollars in northern Iraq to rehabilitate critical infrastructure, such as schools, health clinics, and power stations. We've done this so that residents who fled the genocidal violence of this so-called Islamic State can return to their ancestral homes.

We've partnered with faith-based organizations like Samaritan's Purse, Catholic relief services in Yazda, to carry out this important work. To maximize USAID's donor coordination and ability to achieve holistic results in the most afflicted areas in northern Iraq, we signed memoranda of understanding with the governments of Hungary and Poland, and with the Knights of Columbus. We focus on these entities in particular because of their on-the-ground presence and expertise. These partnerships allow us to coordinate our assistance to ensure the return and recovery of communities of faith.

They help our impact reach even farther. For example, the government of Hungary has been very active on the ground in Iraq through their program, Hungary Helps. Hungary Helps works with religious and community leadership to provide assistance to those in need and to help them rebuild. We are grateful for the partnership of the government of Hungary and their important contribution.

Our new partnerships initiative is making it easier to work with USAID. Through this new partnership initiative, or NPI, we're working directly with local Iraqi organizations, including many faith-based organizations for the first time in over 20 years. Our nation's commitment to religious freedom was

most recently reaffirmed by President Trump's executive order to advance international religious freedom. The executive order directs the State Department and USAID to expand our existing efforts and realign foreign aid to better reflect individual countries' circumstances when it comes to international religious freedom.

The order further directs us to train our foreign service officers on the importance of incorporating religious freedom into all of our agency programs. The need for an executive order on international religious freedom has never been more timely and important. It reaffirms our strong commitment to push back against violations of religious freedom across the globe, and it makes a distinct connection between the protection of religious freedom and America's national interest and security.

For example, consider the atrocities taking place in China against people of faith. Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities are detained in re-education camps, and the Chinese Communist Party is working to erase both their faith and their traditions. China's Christian communities face persecution, as well. The Chinese Communist Party, or CCP, is demolishing churches, banning the Bible, and paying bounties for unregistered house churches. The CCP is revealing its true character as it uses every tool of authoritarianism to crack down on the free progress of religion in China.

Our efforts to respond to religious persecution represent more than a policy. They represent a principle on which our nation was founded, and when it comes to international development efforts, the U.S. government is the largest donor. Because of these values and this influence, American can and must hold international bodies such as the United Nations accountable. When they are failing to track and respond to violations of religious freedom, we have a duty and obligation to speak up. When member states persecute their own religious communities, we must demand accountability.

Around the world, USAID will continue to work with partners who demonstrate a commitment to building democratic and inclusive societies. We will promote open markets free of corruption and discrimination. We will champion access to healthcare and education for all, and we all do all of this with the goal of building the kind of self-reliance that will enable our partner countries to move beyond the need for assistance.

However, none of those goals are possible if a nation's leader demands their citizens abandon their most deeply held beliefs. None of these benefits are possible when people of conscience see their lives ruined or taken away because of the faith that they practice. There can be no sustained development when houses of worship are destroyed or believers are herded into internment camps. There can be no hope of a brighter future or a self-reliance when an entire nation is dominated by tyrants enforcing their own version of the truth.

In closing, I am reminded of a story about the Dalai Lama. As a young boy, he kept a model of Statue of Liberty on his bedside table, or so I'm told. On his first visit to the United States, he went to see the Statue in person, and that this prophet of our time saw home and inspiration in America's greatest symbol of freedom should not surprise us; if anything, it should inspire us and remind us of who we are and what we stand for.

Nations are judged on their principles and values. We in the United States will remain committed to being a bastion of freedom and a beacon of hope to those who have suffered for remaining true to their faith. From China and Iraq to Nigeria and Burma, America will continually fight for religious communities to have a voice in their country. Thank you so very much for being with us today. I look forward to any question in our continued dialogue, although I do wish there was an actual fireplace, but other than that, I do look forward to the rest of this engagement. Thank you so much.

Nina Shea:

[inaudible 00:14:39] what it can do and what it's all about. Even I, who have been in Washington for decades and work in international... can you hear me?

I've been in Washington for many decades and only have... really, I have much to learn about USAID. I'm starting to learn about it. It came to my attention front and center in the battle to get aid for displaced persons in the Middle East, but it has many different divisions. Those who are aware of it, if they are aware of it, think of it as a relief agency that distributes humanitarian aid in times of emergencies. But considering its size and importance and a pivotal place as an arm of U.S. foreign policy, can you describe a little bit more about the scope of its activities?

John Barsa:

Absolutely. Certainly, since I've taken the reins of the acting administrator since April, this has been the time that the COVID pandemic has really hit us hard, so it has certainly challenged us a little bit in terms of marketing getting out the work we've done. I'm grateful to stand upon the shoulders of Mark Green and other previous administrators who have come before me, but certainly the need to let the American people know of what we do holistically and where we fit it? It's always there, so we can always do more on the marketing side.

But while people may not know of USAID directly, they know of our work tangentially or historically. When you look at the roots of USAID, I mean, these roots go back to the Marshall Plan, right after World War II, where American generosity helped Europe get back to its feet in the context of the Cold War. What we had was the Soviet Union, at that point in time, trying to take advantage of societies which were fragile politically and economically, and the United States, through the generosity of the Marshall Plan, helped Europe stand on its feet economically and politically so they can better defend themselves against hostile entities that wished to take away their own freedom.

So, that core American belief of how it is in our national security interest to have free trade among free people, to have our allies strong and robust, able to withstand the machinations of other countries who do not have their best interests in heart... that runs through the history of USAID. USAID was formally stood up in 1961. The historical context of this was... Cuba coming up in conversation... Cuba had just fallen into the Soviet sphere of influence; so, it was a recognition by the United States Congress and President John F. Kennedy that we needed to put a focus on the soft power aspects of what we do.

So, State Department does diplomacy, Department of Defense does what they do; what we do at USAID is we, in the national security interests of the United States, help better the human condition. What a wonderful job to have! What a wonderful agency to lead. We're responsible for that.

So, since 1961 and the formal establishment of USAID, not only do we have programs that respond to humanitarian assistance in terms of a volcano, hurricane, or a man-made disaster like we're seeing in Venezuela, but we also help countries build themselves up economically so they can stand for themselves, and basically go along what we consider their journey to self-reliance.

Nina Shea:

Is your aid going to governments and civilian organizations that are international organizations, or just the latter?

John Barsa:

The vast majority of our aid, 95% or higher, does not go to governments. Only in rare instances does it do so. Our aid goes to international organizations and NGOs, and we can expand on our... I mentioned our new partnerships initiative, or NPI; I can certainly expand on that.

Nina Shea:

Yeah, what is the new partnership initiative? Tell us, because I think that this is an area where Americans across the country should be aware of, and could play a role, perhaps, in identifying new partners or becoming partners themselves.

John Barsa:

Well, thank you, and this is a particular interest into religious freedom, as well. Certainly, prior to 2017, what USAID was used to doing, it was used to working with the same large multi-national organizations, same large international organizations over and over and over.

So, there was a realization by the Trump administration that this may not be the best way to go, that diversifying the base of people we work with may have better benefits. Starting under the leadership of President Trump and Vice President Pence, I forget the name of the order we signed, but we were able to start reassessing how we did business. So, prior to 2018, we just worked for large international organizations; we started diversifying in terms of who we worked with.

And so, with the new partnership initiative, it's something we piloted in 2019. What that is was the idea that instead of working with these large homogenous international organizations, if we're dealing with specific problems in communities such as religious freedom, it makes more sense to work with the religious community itself, those affected by the problem, those closest to the community who have a better understanding.

Nina Shea:

So for example, in Iraq, after the Trump administration took the reins, it started understanding that our aid was not reaching the minority communities, the religious minorities, the Yazidis and the Christians who had survived ISIS genocide. We were pumping a lot of money into Iraq at that time for humanitarian aid, but it wasn't reaching these communities. Our aid at that time was going through the UN for the most part, and so people didn't understand it was coming from us. It wasn't reaching the most needy, the survivors of genocide; what could be more heinous than genocide as a human rights violation?

So, tell us about how USAID, and it was really in the tip of the spear on this effort... tell us how you did this.

John Barsa:

I mean, well, you're getting to the point as to why I'm so proud to serve in this administration and to lead USAID, because under the Trump administration, we want to be results-oriented, so we didn't want to just hand money to some large organization and say, "Well, it checked the box. Okay, we gave money for that without looking at the results." Clearly, we knew we could have better results, so that's why we had the new partnership initiative.

So, instead of thinking the same way we've been doing for decades, by partnering with the local communities on the ground in Iraq and Syria, we were able to get aid effectively to help those who have been persecuted by ISIS, to help the Yazidis and Christians directly by working with faith-based organizations. There's nothing in the United States Constitution that prohibits us from working with faith-based organizations. We have to treat all religions equally, but we can still work with those communities that have been affected. Certainly, people can use USAID money to proselytize, but of course we can help the communities who have been challenged directly.

So, the new partnership initiative was, again, effort by this administration to be more effective in results, to help those who have been victims of persecution.

Nina Shea:

Well, to be clear, USAID has provided funds to something like the Catholic Relief Services in the past, which is a faith-based organization, but what you're talking about are local community, religious community organizations, as well as other civic society institutions that would receive direct aid. And in Iraq, what I saw was, on the list of UN programs that were achieved during this period of 2014 to 2018... were just really not that impactful, frankly. We were building canopies over City Hall in some of these villages in Nineveh with our money... actually, the UN was doing it... and Iran was putting in Khomeini schools in the same village.

John Barsa:

And that's exactly it. Let's be clear. We have a huge, long history of working with Catholic Relief Services, Samaritan's Purse, and we still work with the UN, so we are honored that the World Food Program led by former Governor Beasley won the Nobel Peace Prize. USAID, the United States, is the largest donor to the World Food Program, so we do work with organizations in the UN when we're coming up to large projects, infrastructure projects, in terms of large sewer constructions or building utilities.

We do continue to work with Samaritan's Purse and Catholic Relief Services and any other organizations like that, but what we've done is we have opened up the aperture, and now because we're able to work with those small local groups who understand the challenges, we have our full arsenal of different tools available to us to address the problems as needed. Is it a large infrastructure problem that necessitates a large international body? Is it humanitarian relief, where Catholic Relief Services could be the perfect partner? Or is it something small, helping a local village?

So, we're very proud that now we have a full, complete menu of options when we look to address any problem.

Nina Shea:

I guess, in Iraq and, to some extent, northern Syria, there were the local community organizations that helped guide you in what the real needs were of the people to keep them there, to sustain them and to keep them in their communities so that they would not become refugees or displaced. They could leave those camps and come home.

There's also someone that I've come to know and admire from USAID, Max Primorac, who was sent there by an administrator, Mark Green, and Vice President Pence back in 2018, and was able to troubleshoot those situations to unblock the aid.

John Barsa:

Absolutely right. USAID isn't the government entity in charge of looking at cloning technologies, but certainly, if I could clone Max, I'd love to.

Nina Shea:

[crosstalk 00:26:03]

John Barsa:

Yeah, so Max was there at the onset when we were piloting to new partnership initiatives, so he had a key role in working with these communities. A lot of the lessons learned from Max's presence there are things we've incorporated in terms of all our programming.

I mentioned one of the requirements of the executive order is that we have training for all our foreign service officers in terms of how to incorporate religious freedom in terms of all USAID programming. A lot of the course work that these foreign service officers are learning from has been informed by Max's activities.

So, we had to bring Max back from the field; so, we have Max here in D.C., where he has a huge role in all of our programming here at USAID. But that's exactly it. What we had is we had a presence on the ground who respected and understood that to best assist in the effort of religious freedom necessitated direct interaction at the tactical, on-the-ground level.

So, we are getting what Max learned, the best practices that Max established, and we're doing it across the board, all over the world.

Nina Shea:

I'm delighted to hear that. I know it was a very effective program, and I have found also that training is so sorely needed for foreign service, in general. People don't know how to talk about religious freedom abroad. They're somewhat uncomfortable about it. They think of it as American, and like I said before, it's not universal, not unalienable rights. They need help in learning how to talk about this.

In fact, back in those dark days of right after ISIS, USAID workers would say that it was against the First Amendment to give aid to religious communities.

John Barsa:

Yeah, and by the grace of God, I don't even have a JD, but I think some of these things are self-evident. I mean, I think some of these arguments are preposterous, and it goes into some of the training. If you take some of the hesitancy to its logical conclusion, you'd be saying, "Well, we couldn't have helped a disaffected Jewish community after the Holocaust and World War II." It's absolutely ridiculous.

Nina Shea:

It is ridiculous, and I remember saying, "Well, if you can't help the Christians and the Yazidis," they're the very people who were impacted by genocide, which our government officially recognized.

John Barsa:

Part of our training has actually been run by attorneys, and it reminds people what the Constitution allows, and it allows... USAID funds cannot be used for proselytizing, but we can easily help out disaffected communities. You mentioned previously I worked for the Department of Homeland Security; in that capacity, I've responded to many disasters throughout the United States. I worked Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, and at all stages, FEMA regularly works with communities of faith in local U.S. communities in providing relief.

FEMA will give assistance to a church, and the church won't just feed those members of their congregation, they'll feed anybody who comes by who has the need. We certainly have cultural reticence in some quarters, again, which astounds me, but we're working to remedy that. The executive order helps that, the trainings we're doing for all the foreign service officers. So, we're turning the corner. We're trying to change some of that.

Nina Shea:

That is very good news. You've talked about the new partnership initiative. What about atrocity prevention and early warnings? What is that all about? That is a category of your funding, and it's something that you take on in various places. It was relevant in Iraq; it's probably relevant in a number of places now. Nigeria is one place I can think of right off the top of my head where we may be seeing early warning signs that something very big is happening in northern Nigeria, where thousands have been killed, including minority religions, and Christians and Muslims that do not want to go along with Boko Haram and some of the other terror groups.

What can you do? What are you doing in a place like Nigeria?

John Barsa:

Okay, so regarding atrocity prevention, our work in atrocity prevention can be categorized in three different streams of effort: prevention, response and recovery. On the face of it, that may sound rather silly, in terms of... you're doing prevention. How is prevention, response and recovery?

Prevention is our efforts to track data, gather data, to keep any atrocity from occurring. Response and recovery... those kind of efforts are to keep things from getting worse. Part of our atrocity prevention is to keep atrocities from occurring with any number of USAID programmings, but when it does occur, how do we provide immediate relief? How do we keep it from getting out of scale?

We're a member of the White House Task Force on Atrocity Prevention. The White House chairs it, and rightfully so, because it should be an interagency problem. Part of atrocity prevention isn't just USAID programming, it's the acts of diplomacy where State Department is necessary to come in and work with other host governments to enlist their assistance to ensure that either atrocities don't ever happen, or they stop... I mean, mitigator, we help to affect the communities recover.

Nina Shea:

Again, it's so important, the lesson I took from Iraq was that once we send in the military, we're very good about stopping the persecutors, but then we turned our back in 2014, '15, '16, '17 on the victims and left them to their own devices; so, the follow-through, the protection is very important in prevention, but to do the follow-through is important.

John Barsa:

That kind of gets to what we were talking about, about the historic role of USAID. DOD does what DOD does best. State Department engages in diplomacy. USAID, in terms of our longterm... people-to-people programs. Again, our aid for the mass majority, does not go to governments. Our aid goes directly to people. What we are doing is we're helping societies strengthen themselves.

So, our aid... going in, there's certainly after an effect... is how do you help those who have been persecuted recover, get back their jobs? How do you recover their lives, their houses, access to clean water? On the front end, we're trying to work with those voices of tolerance who allow the freedom of religion, who basically respect this God-given right to worship your own god however you see fit.

So, we are usually there for the longterm, standing shoulder to shoulder with the affected communities. So, DOD does what it does, State Department does what it does; we have a completely different role, and I couldn't be more proud to lead these efforts.

Nina Shea:

In addition to Nigeria, I'm thinking of the Rohingya Muslims, who were pushed out of their country in Burma, Myanmar.

John Barsa:

Right.

Nina Shea:

You mentioned the Uyghars earlier. Is USAID involved in humanitarian assistance or other efforts at this point? I know that probably stayed as more directly involved with trying to resolve these and putting sanctions, but-

John Barsa:

But that's okay, we all have the role. Yes, as we were saying before, our responses are tailored to the challenge at hand. So, certainly, within Nigeria, in the northeast, we're seeing heavy recruitment by Boko Haram, so we're working in those communities to deal with that specific challenge.

We have different programming in the north central parts of Nigeria, as well, working with any number of organizations. Certainly, the plight of the Rohingya, so State Department is currently, of course, talking to the government of Burma. We are working with the affected communities, helping the disaffected populations, and trying to help those voices of tolerance get to the microphone, get to be able to speak up and try to change the culture and society so discrimination against the Rohingya can never take place.

And certainly within China, the scale of it is, well, something that I think we all hoped we'd never see in our lifetimes.

Nina Shea:

Yeah, one to two million in concentration camps.

John Barsa:

Who would have thought in this day and age?

Nina Shea:

Then there's the new revelations about forced labor in textile factories, sterilizations... I mean, it really is looking more and more like a genocide.

John Barsa:

I feel terrible. I had the issue of The Economist from like two weeks ago where it actually had on the cover a discussion about the Uyghurs. I see this as a victory because, certainly, within the closed society like China, our ability to help the affected populations is limited, so one of the things, certainly, we're trying to do is expand the knowledge base in terms of letting people know what's actually taking place.

Nina Shea:

Raising awareness.

John Barsa:

Raising awareness. Again, back to the role of the State Department, engaging in diplomacy with international organizations, but certainly we're doing what we can to help raise awareness and work with those Uyghurs who were able to flee the system and help them recover.

Nina Shea:

One of the things that I've observed is that in these spots where... the hot spots of the world, where people are living in fear for their lives and leave their homes, leave everything behind or are stripped of it all, and journalists can't get in. You can't even document what is happening in these places, and therefore raising awareness, providing data, bringing people out, telling stories... it's extremely important, and I think there's a great value in just shining the spotlight on these places and shaming the governments, the name and shame aspect of all this. So, I think it's very important.

John Barsa:

Oh, absolutely. I don't know if shame always works, but-

Nina Shea:

It doesn't usually work by itself, but if you don't-

John Barsa:

Not in and of itself, but it's a good baseline. It's a good baseline. As a civilized world, we cannot turn our blind eye to horrors like what's going on with the Uyghur. History doesn't repeat itself, but it certainly rhymes, so we see totalitarian regimes do tend to do the same kind of things.

I mentioned currently in Cuba, the Cuban Communist Party is trying to ensure that no individual Cuban has any god other than the Cuban Communist Party itself. We're seeing it with the Chinese Communist Party.

Nina Shea:

We're seeing it in China, too.

John Barsa:

Again, so I think one of the themes are, these repressive states are trying to keep a collective conscience from coming together and realizing that this is not their fate, that God did not intend them to live in chains.

Nina Shea:

Yeah, that's so important, that these people within those countries understand what's going on to others around them. They often don't know. I was on a phone call with a legislator from Nigeria earlier this summer, and she said that her mother was not aware... her mother, who was a churchgoer in the south of Nigeria, was not aware that Christian pastors were being beheaded in northern Nigeria. They didn't know about it from their own press or their own government.

John Barsa:

And of course, their own press, their own government, they don't want that publicized. For those of us of faith, from any faith, this deeply personal relationship we have with God fills us with hope and acknowledgment of God's love for us and our ability to live to our true human potential. So many authoritarian regimes do not want that. They don't want their people, their citizens to feel that. They just want blind obedience to their totalitarian regime.

Nina Shea:

And they don't want individual human dignity, for sure.

John Barsa:

No, at all. So, to the extent, in terms of my pride in leading an organization that's leading the way on religious freedom, being part of an administration... and in a country that holds these values so dear, I truly feel blessed myself. I'm extremely proud of the work USAID is doing along these fronts.

Nina Shea:

Well, you mentioned Cuba. There have been hot spots arising in Latin America. Nicaragua was a place that I visited many times in the beginning of my career when it was under Sandinista dictatorship, and we thought that we solved that with elections, and Daniel Ortega is still there in the head of the government. Can you talk about what is going on... your hot spots, your concerns for Latin America?

John Barsa:

Well, I have hot spots all over the world, unfortunately. I had a full head of hair before I started at USAID. No, but certainly Nicaragua.

So, the Catholic Church in Nicaragua has the temerity to stand up for the human rights of its parishioners, and Ortega regime's response to the Catholic Church saying that their flock has human rights? Well, the Ortega regime is allowing churches to be burned and people to be prosecuted, again,

because the Church has the temerity to say that individuals have God-given human rights and they deserve to be treated better. It's abhorrent, and again, the first step is for the United States and the international community to not turn a blind eye, to call things as the way they are.

And so, we certainly call on all our international partners to do such that. There's an old Cuban saying that says (foreign language), which basically translates to, "Tell me who you hang out with and I'll tell you who you are." It's not a coincidence that many of these authoritarian regimes stand up and defend each other. Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, Iran, China... they all kind of have a united front in defending oppression.

Nina Shea:

I think there's a saying in English. Birds of a feather flock together.

John Barsa:

Yeah, it's a version of that. It's the Cuban version of that. That's exactly it.

Nina Shea:

So, Nicaragua is back on the list. Certainly, Venezuela must be very much... you're following that.

John Barsa:

Absolutely. Certainly, we're following the crisis of Venezuela. Again, the Maduro regime in Venezuela, which is basically supported by the Cuban intelligence services, and the Iranians and other hostile powers, is certainly, absolute complete total disregard for human rights... and again, another prop I could have brought here was a recent book binder, a 400 page report by the United Nations documenting human rights abuses in Venezuela; not just religious freedom, but any freedom. They arrest people arbitrarily and throwing them out of windows, out of tall buildings, and they say, "Well, he committed suicide." Documented instances-

Nina Shea:

What can USAID do for those people, or for the victims of these regimes? We don't have close relationships, to say the least, with Venezuela or Nicaragua.

John Barsa:

Without going into specifics of any countries, what USAID do in terms of our programming in close societies, we certainly do our best to support voices of democracy and freedom outside, and to the best we can, inside, and certainly, in humanitarian response, as well.

What we've seen in terms of Venezuela... it's the largest displacement of human beings in the history of the Western Hemisphere, and it's affected neighboring countries, as well.

Nina Shea:

It's destabilizing.

John Barsa:

Well, it's destabilizing, but again, it's lack of religious freedom, it's lack of personal freedom. It's lack of any kind of freedom which would enable an individual to think or to come to the realization that they didn't have to live under this oppressive regime.

Nina Shea:

I can think of a number of other places, and it seems like a lot of countries where we are not close allies of are having tremendous problems, and it's no accident; they're mismanaged, there's corruption, there's terror. A place that springs to mind, of course, is Lebanon and Armenia... those situations. We don't have close ties to these countries. We do have some ties. I want to congratulate USAID for coming to Lebanon's help right after the harbor blast back in August, the port explosion, with some humanitarian aid at that time.

I've been hearing from Bishop Gregory Mansour up in Brooklyn and the diaspora leader here, the great Lebanese-American Marc Malek, and others, that there's still enormous needs in Lebanon. There's a lot of houses around that port area that have lost their exterior walls, if not collapsed entirely. Is there something that USAID can do at this point, or is doing at this point?

John Barsa:

Certainly, when you say our relationship isn't really close, let's put a little asterisk on that one. We've had programming in Lebanon for decades, so our friendship, our bonds with the Lebanese people is absolutely there. We're very proud of the work we're doing to assist the people of Lebanon. Now, and again, I'll leave it to the State Department to comment on the relationship with the Hezbollah-controlled government, but I'll leave that to State, but certainly, USAID's work with Lebanese people has been going on for decades, and our bonds of friendship with the Lebanese people are strong.

I was very proud to have been able to represent the United States as being the first senior official to go to Beirut after the blast. I was there about a week after the blast occurred, and I saw firsthand the devastation there. Now, certainly, before the blast, there have been massive economic mismanagement by the current regime. So, a lot of the suffering that has taking place is-

Nina Shea:

It preceded that.

John Barsa:

Oh, absolutely.

Nina Shea:

Hyper-inflation, indebtedness.

John Barsa:

Absolutely. Again, I'll leave it to State Department to comment on the Hezbollah-controlled government, but certainly, one of the things that was heartening to me when I landed in Beirut was many of the organizations we work with, many of them religious-based, were able to pivot what they were doing to

address humanitarian needs. I saw Muslim groups, I saw Christian groups; I saw Druse groups basically turning and offering immediate humanitarian assistance to other Lebanese, regardless of their own faith. That was very heartening, the fact that we were working with them. It was an empowering message, it was a message of hope about the Lebanese people pulling together.

Certainly, we pledged 15 million dollars in humanitarian assistance, and we're monitoring the situation closely in terms of what the needs are. We are working closely with the World Food Program. I was on the ground with David Beasley with the World Food Program to some feeding centers. We were assessing the operability of the ports, so we're monitoring the situation very closely.

Nina Shea:

Yeah, I think that's important. Lebanon has been a safe haven for many refugee groups throughout the years, century. Christians have gone there from the Armenian genocide, and from Iraq and Syria.

John Barsa:

It was my first time in Beirut, and it was so wonderful to see this proud multi-cultural, multi-religious community, and again, it was one of the most heartwarming things to see how all of the community, regardless of faith, coming together to provide humanitarian assistance to the community, regardless of the faith of the people who were in need.

Nina Shea:

I'm glad you make that distinction between the government and the people, because they, themselves, have made that distinction. You talk about pluralism; you saw that in the streets a year ago that went on for months, with people from all the faith communities together saying that they all must go, "Our corrupt politicians all must go."

John Barsa:

You saw it on the streets in Beirut. I think there was a picture of me in The Washington Post of me shoveling glass into the back of a pick-up truck. When we were on the streets, I saw so many different organizations, young people, cleaning up. I didn't see anybody from the government cleaning up, but I saw all these other groups, religious and non-religious, NGOs, out on the faith, cleaning up Beirut, sweeping up glass, and I was proud to be a part of that and help the cleanup effort.

Nina Shea:

Well, thank you for that. I saw in the press yesterday that the State Department may have stalled its consideration of emergency housing aid and shelter aid, and I hope that it reconsiders that, because it's important to keep those people there and to give them hope, and to give them ability to continue there to make the change that's needed.

Northern Syria was another area where I knew that USAID is giving aid for livelihoods and for food aid, and that is certainly a country where we don't have ties at this point. We've been trying to stay out of a war there, but it's very much a client state of Iran at this point, and it makes us difficult, but I think that USAID continues its aid programs.

John Barsa:

Yeah, absolutely. As I was mentioning before, we work with different organizations, dependent on the situation. So in places like Syria or Yemen, we work with the United Nations' World Food Program to help get humanitarian assistance there. It may be U.S. support or U.S.-branded food, but it may be under the auspices of the World Food Program of the UN, they're able to cross borders and go into conflict zones and help get that aid to those people who are in dire need.

So, yes, certainly northern Syria is an area of concern. Yemen is an area of great concern. But those are great examples as to how our generous humanitarian response is tailored to the situation. We'll work with whatever organization makes the most sense to help us get the aid to where it's needed most, and again, over 95 percent of the time, that is not working with other governments.

Nina Shea:

And so, we may rely more on UN programs or World Food programs at some of those places?

John Barsa:

It is in the U.S. national interest to ensure that U.S. generosity and humanitarian aid gets to those who need it most. So, we at USAID will look for the most efficient way to get that aid to the people who need it most. When it makes sense to work with the World Food Program or any other UN organization, such as UNICEF, we'll work through them. When it makes sense to do something else, we will do something else.

Nina Shea:

The reoccurring complaint I hear sometimes is that the U.S. doesn't give aid, when in fact, we do give aid, but we're giving it through these large organizations and international organizations, and no one knows it's coming from us. In fact, it's coming from the U.S. taxpayer who supports USAID funding.

John Barsa:

Well, that's certainly something we're working on in terms of increasing branding. I think, as Americans, we should be proud. The United States is the most generous country in the history of the planet, so little things like branding, making sure USAID logo or a flag is on our food, I think, is important. Again, part of what I was talking about before in terms of USAID being the soft power projection of the United States government? Well, that works best when people know we're there. Can you imagine the Marshall Plan occurring without anybody knowing where the aid came from?

Nina Shea:

Yeah, it's legendary.

John Barsa:

Or the Berlin airlift when we were dropping in food. I mean, should we have gone and camouflaged aircraft so nobody knew where the aid was coming from? No! We are proud to be Americans giving the aid, and we wanted the world to know, so continually... I mean, we think that we should be getting credit when we're giving assistance. We don't want to do it anonymously. We should be proud of what

we do and the world should know when we give aid, so that's something we're always working to improve upon.

Nina Shea:

Well, I hope this interview also helps people understand more about USAID. How has this executive order of June 2nd for advancing religious freedom really changed the work that you're doing? Tell us about the anti-discrimination or anything that you want to talk about tonight.

John Barsa:

Well, it's been wonderful in the fact it's given a greater focus. So, while we have been doing disparate programs, it allowed us to bring these programs together holistically and look at the challenge holistically. It's given a greater focus in terms of what we're doing, and it explicitly set a baseline of 50 million dollars. So, again, that's not a ceiling, that's a base... and it gave us the requirement to train all of our foreign service officers.

So what the executive order did wasn't so much do new things, but just to give a greater focus and put it in a concrete, discreet measurable hole. It has been wonderful in terms of building awareness, not just within USAID, but in the national and international community. We have an administration that has explicitly listed this as a priority, so it has been incredible in terms of not just the focus internally, but the attention that executive order has brought internationally to the importance of protecting religious freedom for this administration.

Nina Shea:

One of the requirements of that order is for you to develop planning around the world on religious freedom, so have you started that, and have you done-

John Barsa:

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely, but that's part of what we were talking about, the advanced focus. We have what we call CDCSs, and I forget what the acronym stands for, but these country development plans for each country where USAID works, we have a plan. Now, because of this executive order, with the strength of this executive order, we're being very explicit to the work force... thou shalt include religious freedom in your developments. If it's not an issue in your country, great, wonderful for you. If it is an issue, let's address it in a formal, systemetized manner.

So, yes, we're currently in the process of incorporating religious freedom training... again, not just a training with a foreign service officers, but in all of our development plans in every country in which we operate.

Nina Shea:

Well, we're running close to the hour, and I wanted to see if there... we've talked about Middle East, Africa, Latin America, China. Is there any place else that we have not addressed that you'd like to talk about?

John Barsa:

I'd like to step back and, again, thank you and the Hudson Institute for what you do, because I think one of the most important things for anybody in the political sphere or any part in the public sphere is the realization that members of the community back them and understand. I think the worst we could do as citizens or societies is to turn a blind eye to injustice or suffering. So, it is a pre-requisite that we need to call things out for what they are, so we can demand of our leaders a call to action and the ability to do something.

The worst sin of them all is to pretend that no sin is occurring. If something is going on in the world, we need to call it out, and I salute you personally and the Hudson Institute for all your work around this effort. Thank you so much for all you do. God bless you, and please keep doing it.

Nina Shea:

Well, thank you, and thank you for coming to Hudson. We'll keep you in our thoughts and prayers for your important work. It's very critical to billions of people around the globe, so thank you so much for coming, and thank you all for coming, and thank you for... if you're virtual, for tuning in. So, this is the end of our program.

John Barsa:

Thank you so much.