

**Statement of
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Before the

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Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and
International Organizations**

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the critical issue of international religious freedom. As I have done several times before, I commend this committee for its focus and effective efforts on this universal human right, and thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your longstanding attention to international religious freedom violations, cases, and concerns. I have been very appreciative of the opportunity to work with you over the years to advance our shared goals of protecting individuals and advancing respect for religious freedom around the globe. Continued collaboration with this Committee is a source of great encouragement to me and my office.

One has only to read the headlines in recent weeks and months to know that the challenges to international religious freedom are daunting. First and foremost, we absolutely must address the horrific and brutal realities of Da'esh's activity in Iraq and Syria. In the months since Secretary Kerry's statement that in his judgement, Da'esh is responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing in areas it controls, we have significantly strengthened our efforts to ensure a viable future for members of impacted communities. Our military efforts to degrade and ultimately defeat Da'esh are not all that we are doing to support the vulnerable people of Iraq and Syria. We have contributed more than \$778 million to humanitarian assistance for vulnerable Iraqis in Iraq and in the region since October 2013. In addition, we have contributed more than \$5.1 billion in humanitarian assistance for vulnerable Syrians inside Syria since the start of the crisis and nearly \$650 million in non-humanitarian assistance to support the moderate Syrian civilian opposition, including provision of essential services in

areas liberated from the regime or extremists, in addition to development funding for Syria's neighbors.

Certainly, we must seek accountability for the heinous acts committed by the Da'esh terrorists. As Secretary Kerry has said, "The United States will strongly support efforts to collect, document, preserve, and analyze the evidence of atrocities, and we will do all we can to see that the perpetrators are held accountable." In liberated areas, we are funding the investigation and documentation of mass graves, and we are looking into ways to use satellite telemetry and geospatial analysis to identify potential atrocity sites that remain in areas under Da'esh control. With Iraqi and other international agencies, we urge transitional justice programs to be developed now before people begin to move back to communities to mitigate the potential for renewed sectarian violence. We are also actively working with the Government of Iraq to identify and return cultural and religious artifacts stolen and later sold by Da'esh to fund its activities.

We are also working with local communities to help them determine how they can preserve their religious and cultural heritage, including by preserving churches, shrines, synagogues, and mosques. One example: we are working in partnership with the Smithsonian Institution in northern Iraq to better understand the preservation needs of these affected communities to help their communities save the cultural, historic, and artistic heritage of religious minorities.

In July, we will convene in Washington a meeting of thirty governments to advance intergovernmental dialogue on ways to protect religious minorities in Iraq and Syria. During this meeting, we plan to identify current gaps in programming, discuss potential next steps, and strengthen global collaboration in our assistance to religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq and Syria.

The Secretary has announced the re-designation of nine Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs) for engaging in or tolerating "systematic, ongoing, [and] egregious" violations of religious freedom, and for the first time added Tajikistan to that list. I have testified earlier that we wanted to make the CPC process more robust. We would not limit ourselves to announcing these designations only around the report. We can add countries, whenever justified, even as we work assertively to develop action plans with existing CPC countries to help them take steps necessary to move off the CPC list.

During my 18 months as Ambassador at Large, I have traveled to nearly 20 countries, including three of the ten CPCs, and I intend to visit two more in July.

During my trips, I have met with countless government officials, parliamentarians, human rights activists, religious leaders, and believers from nearly all world religious traditions, along with skeptics and non-believers, including those seeking reform inside their religious traditions and those seeking reform within their governments – raising our concerns consistently along the way. What has stood out is the incredible irrepressible spirit of all the individuals who risk discrimination, imprisonment, and even death for simply seeking to live out their lives in accordance with their consciences. Given our own history as a nation founded and forged by those fleeing religious persecution, it is the least that we can do to stand shoulder to shoulder with these people and take up their fight for justice as our own.

It is particularly memorable to me that I was present in a crowded Sudanese courtroom in August 2015 to observe the release of two prominent prisoners of conscience, Pastor Yat Michael Ruot and Pastor Peter Yein Reith. For simply speaking about their faith, they had faced multiple charges – including blasphemy and promoting hatred among religious groups. They never should have been charged or imprisoned in the first place. And at least two other Christian pastors, Hassan Abdelrahim Taour and Kowa Shamal, are currently imprisoned facing similar charges related to their faith. In Sudan today, the continued presence of restrictive laws and the specter of heavy-handed government action against individuals of faith casts a pall over all religious life in the country. I mention Sudan because I had hoped this was a country that could come off the CPC list. But while receiving mixed signals from key government officials, we have yet to see the hoped-for improvements actualized. We must continue to press for reforms in all CPC countries, Sudan included.

Chairman Smith, I know of your keen interest in China, another CPC. In August 2015, we went to China to raise important concerns. We saw positive signs in some areas, with more unregistered churches allowed to function and more religious entities allowed to engage in providing social services. Yet, in other areas of the country, restrictions were far greater: repression of Tibetan Buddhists and Falun Gong continues unabated, restrictions on Uighur Muslims have increased, and Chinese officials have sought to politicize theology in state-sanctioned churches by compelling modifications of Christian teachings to conform to socialism. We were shocked when authorities detained human rights lawyer Zhang Kai and several other church leaders as they were preparing to meet with me. I was appreciative of Congressional calls for their release, and I note that there were also calls from others in the international community. Zhang Kai and the other church leaders were finally released, and though the campaign to destroy

crosses in Zhejiang Province appears to have stopped for the moment, others in China remain imprisoned for daring to stand up for their right to practice their religion. Pastor Bao Guohua, the leader of a government-sanctioned church, and his wife Xing Wenxiang, were each recently sentenced to more than 10 years in prison. We continue to call for their release and to press for reforms in China. During the most recent U.S.-China Strategic & Economic Dialogue, Secretary Kerry vigorously raised our concerns about growing restrictions on the exercise of freedoms of religion and expression – specifically those that target lawyers, religious adherents, and civil society leaders.

One potentially encouraging area is Vietnam. Since I was last here, we have also engaged extensively with Vietnamese authorities to bring about needed changes in their proposed draft law on religion and belief. As currently written, it appears that the draft legislation will continue to require religious groups to undergo an onerous and arbitrary registration and recognition process to operate legally. Even with such registration, I understand that groups must still obtain specific approval for almost all activities, including religious events, building renovations (beyond normal construction requirements), and the establishment of seminaries or religious classes. Currently, persons undertaking these activities without certain approvals have been subject to harassment, arrest, or detention.

In recent months, Vietnamese officials have indicated a willingness to receive domestic and international feedback on the draft law. There have been some revisions to the draft law that we view as positive steps. In some areas, there have been moves away from an approval-based system to a notification-based system. We urge them to make that the norm of their system. It provides the transparency that they think they need for their security without requiring approvals for everything. There are some indications that they may move to a system in which any failure by the government to respond to applications by the deadline stated in the law would constitute approval. Likewise, we urge the government of Vietnam to specifically allow unregistered religious organizations to worship in private settings, and to clarify that any facility, public or private, to which individuals have legal access can be considered a legal location to practice religion. We have raised these concerns at every opportunity, including during my two trips to Vietnam and during the Human Rights Dialogue in Washington in April. We will continue to press the Vietnamese government to uphold its international commitments and improve respect for religious freedom in law and practice.

We intend to expand the work of the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief, which we helped to launch last year with my Canadian counterpart, former Ambassador for Religious Freedom Andrew Bennett. The Contact Group met most recently here in Washington in late May. Representatives from sixteen countries and the European Union attended. The basic idea behind the Contact Group is that a network of like-minded countries that fully support an individual's right to freedom of religion or belief can coordinate our efforts to achieve much greater impact on the world than any one country acting alone. Already, Contact Group participants have together lobbied other governments to address abusive practices and help reform restrictive laws. Some have traveled together to gain greater insights into the state of religious freedom in particular places, and we have worked together at the UN General Assembly and UN Human Rights Council to highlight the challenges and opportunities. The Contact Group has also become a venue for us to share information about religious freedom promotion grants and projects we are implementing to avoid duplicating efforts.

With increased funding from Congress, we are significantly expanding our foreign assistance programs. Since the creation of the IRF office, we have devoted tens of millions of dollars to programs that contribute to the promotion of religious freedom. We support initiatives that:

- address root causes of intolerance in societies,
- counter negative portrayals of minorities in media,
- increase public awareness of religious freedom issues,
- encourage the establishment and vigorous protection of the right to religious freedom,
- train civil society and government officials on the importance of legal and policy protections for religious freedom, while building capacity to implement those legal and policy protections,
- strengthen the capacity of religious leaders to promote cooperation across religious and sectarian lines,
- empower religious minorities to participate in political processes,
- help combat religiously motivated discrimination and violence, and
- provide rapid and timely emergency assistance to scores of individual victims.

It is a deeply encouraging vote of confidence that Congress has appropriated additional funds in Fiscal Years 2015 and 2016. This will allow us to expand core religious freedom programs while starting new programs that will: strengthen rule

of law to protect and support the exercise of religious freedom; address issues of violent extremism in key countries such as Nigeria and Bangladesh; provide further emergency assistance to individuals mistreated for their beliefs; and help combat religious intolerance and advance freedom of expression and religion by helping countries live up to the goals of UN Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18. Our ongoing efforts to protect and promote freedom of religious belief and freedom of expression at the UN Human Rights Council are reinforced by global training programs undertaken by the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security which convey best practices in combating discrimination on the basis of religious belief.

We are working to ensure vigorous enforcement of a provision that makes inadmissible for visas those foreign government officials who have committed particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Over the past year, we have significantly expanded religious freedom training for Department of State officers and locally engaged staff at our overseas posts. More specifically, we have launched region-specific training sessions at Foreign Service Institute facilities around the world to help give our officers in the field a clearer understanding of what religious freedom entails, why it matters in the broader context of U.S. foreign policy, and how most effectively to promote these rights from an embassy or consulate. The first such training took place last September in Bangkok for staff from South and East Asia. Since then, we have offered three sessions at the Frankfurt training facility for staff at posts in Africa, the Middle East, and Europe and Central Asia. We conducted training for staff posted throughout the Western Hemisphere at the Department's Florida Regional Center in Fort Lauderdale. Through these combined efforts, the IRF office has provided regional-specific religious freedom training to nearly 130 Department staff, in addition to the annual four-day course at the Foreign Service Institute in Arlington. We also continue to offer the semi-annual four-day Religion and Foreign Policy course in conjunction with the Secretary's Office for Religion and Global Affairs at the Foreign Service Institute in Arlington.

Finally, Congressional funding is making it possible to expand the Office of International Religious Freedom. In addition to Special Advisor Knox Thames and myself, the office currently has 23 full-time staff, and we have plans to hire several more soon. This makes it possible to expand the scope of our work to better address not only our regional and country-specific work but to develop teams on urgent issues, such as: protecting religious minorities in the Middle East, the relationship between countering violent extremism and religious freedom,

combatting blasphemy and apostasy laws, and focusing on restrictive registration requirements. I am attaching a study on this latter issue that was commissioned this year.

I welcome any questions the Committee might have and again commend you on your passionate attention to religious freedom concerns across the globe.

You are a key partner in our work.