

Congressional Testimony

“International Freedom of Religion or Belief and Current U.S. Policies”

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Western Hemisphere Subcommittee

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Chairman Smith, Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Jacobs, Ranking Member Castro, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittees. It is a privilege to be here to testify on these important matters.

My testimony addresses two things. First, I offer a top-line overview of the situation for freedom of religion or belief around the world. And, second, I offer an assessment of our government's current efforts on behalf of the millions around the world persecuted for their beliefs. My conclusion is that this critical freedom is facing an historical crisis and that our government is falling short in its commitment to protect and promote this freedom as outlined by the International Religious Freedom Act.

While I was twice-appointed by President Biden to the U. S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and served as the Commission's chair in 2024 and 2025, I want to emphasize that I am testifying today in my private capacity. I am not speaking on behalf of or representing the Commission.

Overview of the Status of Freedom of Religion or Belief Around the World

Freedom of religion or belief is in crisis in the contemporary world. Whether measured structurally in culture, institutions, and laws or in the sheer number of incidents – persecution is increasing across the globe. Ancient religious prejudices like antisemitism are again growing and new prejudices are emerging. The crisis does not stem from a single source but from the convergence of political, social, and ideological pressures that undermine both individual conscience and collective religious practice.

I. The Authoritarian Threat to Freedom of Religion or Belief

One element in the current crisis for freedom of religion or belief, perhaps the most critical element, is the rise of authoritarianism. Liberal democracy (understood as based on popular sovereignty, individual rights, rule of law, and constitutional government) is a friend to freedom of religion; authoritarianism is its enemy. As we witness an historical moment of rising authoritarianism around the globe, democracy is retreating and rights of faith and belief are increasingly under threat.

A. Secular Authoritarianism's Threat to Freedom of Religion or Belief

Secular authoritarian states view independent religious or belief communities as potential rivals to political authority. As a result, they may impose registration requirements, surveillance, restrictions on worship, or outright bans on groups deemed "unofficial" or "extremist." Such measures are often justified in the name of national security, social harmony, or counterterrorism, but in practice they criminalize peaceful belief and expression. State control over religion also

extends to attempts to shape theology, leadership, and acceptable doctrine, hollowing out genuine religious freedom.

As you have heard from the testimony of Ms. Drexel, China is an example of the secular authoritarian threat to freedom of religion. From its brutal repression of Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and faiths such as the Falun Gong and Christian house churches to its sinicization of Roman Catholicism and Islam, the Chinese regime seeks to eliminate or control religion out of fear that religions might contest with the Communist Party in matters of conscience or moral authority. Other extreme examples of such secular authoritarianism include North Korea, Cuba, and Nicaragua, but elements of this type of threat are evident as well in Vietnam and Central Asia.

B. Religious Nationalism's Threat

Religious nationalism deserves special attention relative to authoritarianism, since it often seen accompanying emerging authoritarian movements.

In some cases, developing authoritarian states employ religious nationalism to mobilize popular support or to marginalize potential political opponents. Russia's use of the Orthodox Church makes clear how such religious nationalism can result in the persecution, repression, or discrimination of religious and other minorities. Arguably, the most egregious example of religious nationalism used in this fashion is Burma, where the regime draws on Buddhist nationalism to justify its genocide of Rohingya Muslims and its ongoing attacks on Christian communities.

Religious nationalism need not be directly deployed by the state itself. Laws and policies may formally protect freedom of belief while informally privileging a majority religion through education systems, public symbolism, or citizenship rules. Minorities may face discrimination, mob violence, forced conversion, or social exclusion, with weak accountability for perpetrators. In these contexts, freedom of religion or belief is eroded not only by the state but by societal actors who enforce conformity through pressure or violence. India and Pakistan are examples.

C. Religious Authoritarianism

Religious authoritarianism poses a different threat to freedom of religion or belief. Where Religious nationalism deploys religion for political ends; religious authoritarianism is the reverse. In religious authoritarianism (or theocracy) a specific religion is the final authority and the state is used as the instrument to enforce that authority. Other faiths or beliefs are repressed and marginalized. Iran and Afghanistan evidence how brutal such regimes can be in their denial of freedom of religion or belief.

II. The Danger to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Failing States and Conflict Zones

Beyond the role that rising authoritarianism plays in the crisis, freedom of religion or belief may also be endangered in regions of great societal insecurity. Religious and belief minorities are

often victimized when states are incapable of maintaining the social and political order due to war, insurgency, displacement, enduring natural catastrophes, and large-scale unrest.

Failed or failing states are often sites of such insecurity. Ethnic cleansing, genocide, or mass migration can result. Failed or failing states can also be locations for the emergence or fostering of militarized groups – insurgent, ethnic, or religious – that can pose a threat to freedom of religion. Banditry and organized crime also target religious communities in such circumstances. Once displaced, these communities frequently lack legal protection and face new forms of discrimination whether in internal displacement sites or host countries.

Nigeria, Syria, and Sudan are current examples of such conditions threatening freedom of religion or belief. Both Nigeria and Syria are experiencing high levels of societal insecurity and their respective governments have been unable to halt widespread violence against communities of faith. Both have what were previously designated as Entities of Particular Concern operating within their borders. Sudan’s civil war has involved targeted attacks on religious communities by both contesting forces within the country.

Assessment of Current US Policy for International Freedom of Religion or Belief

Together, the dangers posed by rising authoritarianism and failing states outline a global crisis of freedom of religion or belief: one marked by shrinking civic space for the exercise of individual faith and belief, intolerance of religious diversity, instrumentalization of belief for political ends, and atrophy of international commitments for the rights of conscience, faith, and belief. Addressing this crisis requires not only strengthening international legal safeguards and international cooperation, but also a sustained commitment to human rights, democracy, pluralism, rule of law, humanitarianism, and respect for conscience as a foundational human freedom.

I believe the International Religious Freedom Act, as envisioned by its champions like Senators Don Nickles, Joseph Lieberman, Arlen Specter and my former colleague Congressman Frank Wolf was created to engage our nation’s government toward this end, and I have been proud to have been in service to that vision for the last four years.

The final question before us is then to ask: how well is the United States government doing in promoting and protecting these essential rights given this crisis?

If we are to take the International Religious Freedom Act as our measure then the United States is not doing enough. Despite its stated commitment to defend religious freedom globally, the reality is that our government has been long on rhetoric and short on substance, consistency, and effectiveness. Indeed, no administration has fully risen to the level of engagement for freedom of religion or belief imagined by the framers of the IRF Act.

Let me here raise six concerns with our current administration policies.

First, religious freedom has been subordinated to a transactional, America-first foreign policy. The administration has emphasized bilateral deals, security cooperation, and economic leverage over values-based diplomacy and real international engagement. All too often we see governments with poor records on freedom of religion or belief facing limited pressure when they are viewed as strategic partners. Sanctions, public condemnations, and sustained diplomatic engagement on religious freedom have been applied selectively, weakening the perception that freedom of religion or belief is a principled priority rather than a negotiable interest.

Second, institutional support for advancing religious freedom has been uneven. While senior officials continue to reference international religious freedom in speeches, the issue has not consistently translated into coordinated action across the State Department, National Security Council, and foreign assistance agencies. Where religious freedom mechanisms exist, they have often lacked sufficient authority, staffing, or integration into broader foreign policy decision-making. This gap between symbolic commitment and bureaucratic follow-through limits real-world impact.

Third, promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief around the world depends significantly on what has been too often dismissed as “nation-building.” This is the hard, necessary but slow work of programming (both bilateral and multinational) that encourages the development of civil society, promotes the rule of law and effective judicial systems, holds nations accountable for the protection of all human rights, reduces corruption, encourages democracy, and builds respect across diverse faith communities.

Many programs funded by USAID and the Department of State, as well as some aspects of the work of the U.S. Institute for Peace and even some programming of Voice of America that were engaged in this kind of nation-building were victims of the DOGE cuts. Cuts in support to UNHCR and IOM seem poised not only to sharpen humanitarian disasters but to undermine protections for minority religious refugee groups. Moreover, the recent reorganization of the State Department appears to have downgraded the prominence of its Office for International Religious Freedom within the Department’s organizational structure and its staffing has been reduced.

In variance with the IRF Act it appears the administration will not name an Ambassador for International Religious Freedom. While I welcome the appointment of former Congressman Walker as Principal Advisor for Global Religious Freedom, without the title of Ambassador the authority of his office is unclear. Likewise, it is unclear at this time if Principal Advisor Walker will also serve as the Special Advisor for International Religious Freedom on the National Security Council as outlined by the IRF Act and, if not, then when will this Special Advisor be named?

Fourth, as of this writing, the State Department has still not released the 2024 IRF Report, now nearly a year overdue. Ostensibly, the 2025 IRF Report should be released in May, but will it? And, as of this writing, the State Department has still not made its designations of Countries of

Particular Concern, Special Watch List, or Entities of Particular Concern. President Biden's 2023 designations were to have lapsed at the end of 2025. Apparently, Nigeria, thanks to its unique designation by President Trump, is the only country in the world currently designated as a Country of Particular Concern and there are no designated Special Watch List countries or Entities of Particular Concern. This is very concerning at a time when countries like China and Iran are engaged in ever more repressive actions against people of faith.

Fifth, the administration's approach has tended to conflate religious freedom with the interests of particular religious constituencies, especially Christians. Although Christians face severe persecution in many regions, what appears to be an overly narrow framing risks marginalizing other threatened groups, including Muslims, Jews, Hindus, atheists, and smaller belief communities. Freedom of religion or belief cannot be construed to mean only a subset of approved religions. International religious freedom, as defined in human rights law, is universal; selective advocacy undermines both effectiveness and legitimacy.

Finally, the administration has relied on high-profile events (such as a one-off Tomahawk strike on Nigeria) and social media declarations rather than sustained, country-specific strategies. Religious freedom violations are deeply embedded in legal systems, security practices, and social norms; addressing them requires long-term engagement, multilateral coordination, and careful diplomacy. Early efforts seem to have prioritized visibility over durability.

Conclusion

The prescient vision of the framers of the IRF Act recognized the responsibility of the United States to lead the international community in promoting and protecting the foundational right that is freedom of religion or belief. Today that right is in crisis around the world. Millions are deprived of this right. Millions are persecuted for what they believe or what faith they practice. Given the current crisis, the United States must not retreat but instead must deepen its commitment to defend freedom of religion or belief around the globe.