

**Statement of Ambassador Rashad Hussain
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U.S. Department of State**

**Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Oversight and Accountability**

“Money is Policy, Part II: Analyzing Select State Department Grant Awards”

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Good morning, Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Crow, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. I have had the honor of serving as US Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom since 2022, continuing our country’s proud tradition of working on a bipartisan basis to protect religious freedom for everyone, everywhere. During my prior time in government, I led an effort to protect Christians and other religious minorities living in Muslim-majority countries, leading to the landmark Marrakesh Declaration in 2016. This work followed our efforts on an important effort to counter blasphemy laws that often target religious minorities. I have also worked closely with past US envoys and current US Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt and Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff on countering Antisemitism around the world, including by taking delegations of imams to the Holocaust sites to combat Holocaust denial. I am proud that these efforts were recognized in the endorsements from a diverse range of individuals and groups, including my predecessors Sam Brownback, David Saperstein, American Jewish Committee, Anti-Defamation League, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, American Baptist Churches, Open Doors USA, and the President of the National Council of Churches.

IRF’s mandate was established by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, passed by an overwhelming bipartisan majority, and our policies and general processes have remained consistent across the past five administrations.

The thrust of IRF’s work falls into three broad categories: exposing, countering, and preventing religious freedom violations. First, our work to expose religious freedom violation is focused on our international report that documents religious freedom violations in every country in the world. These reports are read by

governments and civil society around the world. [In an April indictment of two individuals for “opening and operating an illegal overseas police station” used to target Falun Gong practitioners and other members of the Chinese community on U.S. soil, the DOJ specifically cited the 2021 IRF China Report, noting that “the [Chinese Communist Party] maintains an extralegal, party-run security apparatus to eliminate the Falun Gong movement.” Second, our work to counter religious freedom violations is focused on using our diplomatic and program tools to assist people who have been, or are at risk of being, persecuted for their beliefs. And, third, efforts to prevent persecution – the abusive laws and policies that foster environments where discrimination, harassment, and violence take place.

We work on individual cases of repression and we’re never off the clock, often getting notified in the late hours of the night of individuals who have been arrested or wrongly detained. We realize that every minute we wait to jump into action can cost someone his or her life.

We do this work whenever and wherever it is needed. Last year, we worked extensively with the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church, or “Mayflower Church,” to protect its members’ right to freedom of religion or belief in the face of relentless pressure from the Chinese Communist Party, even after they fled China. On April 7, I was overjoyed to welcome members of this church to the United States, where they celebrated Easter at a Texas church service in safety.

Most recently, my office supported the long-negotiated September 5 Nicaraguan political prisoner release. The 135 political prisoners included approximately 60 survivors of religious persecution, including 13 individuals from this group who were affiliated with the Texas-based evangelical organization Mountain Gateway. And we continue other substantial efforts to protect people of all faiths in places such as Burma, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Nigeria, and Saudi Arabia.

My office’s programming is authorized by the Foreign Assistance Act and annual appropriations acts [among other relevant statutes]. IRF manages grants and cooperative agreements primarily with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups, although we also work with international organizations in certain circumstances. IRF has a global mandate that covers individuals from every religion or belief as well as those who do not have a religious faith.

In recent years, IRF programs have focused on countering discrimination and abuses targeting members of faith communities around the world, including religious persecution in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere. IRF has worked closely with other offices across the Department to address the dangerous rise in antisemitism; to counter genocides and crimes against humanity impacting members of religious minority populations (including Yezidi, Christians, Rohingya, and Uyghurs) and to combat hatred directed at particular religious communities. Additionally, IRF programs support activities such as documenting abuses against members of vulnerable communities; promoting greater mutual respect and tolerance for all in a society (e.g. through educational efforts or media); promoting accountability for perpetrators and justice for victims of religious freedom abuses; providing legal assistance and other tangible support to individuals who have been tortured, arrested, or detained on account of their beliefs— non-beliefs; and supporting efforts by members of marginalized communities to build up their rights advocacy skills and collaborate with others facing similar restrictions or exclusion to increase the likelihood that such advocacy will bring sufficient pressure to bear in their respective societies to mitigate or end such abuses.

In light of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, the State Department does not fund any programs with the aim of promoting or advancing specific religious ideologies, beliefs, or non-beliefs. Religious-freedom programs provide tools and support to those facing persecution, abuses, harassment, discrimination, and violence on account of their religion, beliefs, or non-beliefs. IRF follows a procurement process for its foreign assistance programs that abides by federal rules and regulations as outlined in 2 CFR 200. Except in very few, narrowly defined instances, programs are solicited through open, public calls for proposals, and grants are awarded following extensive internal merit-based review that involves panelists from both within the State Department and interagency.

IRF's single largest program, by far, is the global emergency assistance fund, which began in 2011. Since 2020, this fund has helped more than 4,000 individuals in every region of the world and across every religious background escape abuse, harassment, jail, and even death on account of their beliefs.

I thank the members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to discuss IRF's critical work through our grants and programs.