

**Testimony of
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**Before the
Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security**

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Chairman DeSantis and Members of the Committee, thank you for holding this hearing to focus attention on international religious freedom, a cherished American value, a universal human right, and a Trump Administration foreign policy priority.

As you know, President Trump has nominated Governor Sam Brownback of Kansas to be the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a hearing on the nomination last week. Governor Brownback is the highest ranking government official ever to be nominated for this important post, and he brings great commitment and experience. He has co-authored two books on the subject, and as a Senator was a key sponsor of the *International Religious Freedom Act*. We could not ask for a more distinguished nominee.

President Trump has stated that the United States looks forward to a day when, “*people of all faiths, Christians and Muslims and Jewish and Hindu, can follow their hearts and worship according to their conscience.*” And Vice-President Pence has said, “*Since the founding of our nation, America has stood for the proposition that the right to believe and the right to act on one’s beliefs is the right of all peoples at all times....Under President Trump, America will continue to stand for religious freedom of all people, of all faiths, across the world.*”

In August, when Secretary Tillerson released the 2016 International Religious Freedom Report, he noted that almost twenty years after the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act “*conditions in many parts of the world are far from ideal.*” Secretary Tillerson said that we cannot ignore these conditions, and then emphasized that, “*ISIS is clearly responsible for genocide against Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims in areas it controls or has controlled. ISIS is also responsible for crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing directed at these same groups, and in some cases against Sunni Muslims, Kurds, and other minorities.*”

United States efforts to help members of minority religious communities are broad, and include our leadership of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. To date, Coalition-backed forces have liberated more than three quarters of the territory ISIS once controlled in Iraq, as well as about two thirds of the territory it once controlled in Syria. ISIS has not regained control of any of this territory due in part to the Coalition’s work to stabilize liberated communities.

Religious minorities face a critical moment and we understand the gravity of the situation, one in which Iraq’s historic diversity risks disappearing. Robust steps must be taken in the coming months so Iraq’s religious minority communities can provide for their own security. We continue to support the Iraqi government’s efforts to enhance local governance and establish local security

forces and to eventually incorporate these local forces into law enforcement agencies to meet local security requirements as Iraq transitions from major combat operations against ISIS.

We are committed to ensuring that stabilization projects in Iraq remain inclusive of all communities in need, including minorities ISIS targeted for genocide and who have historically experienced discrimination and marginalization. In Sinjar district, a predominantly Yezidi area, UNDP has completed the rehabilitation of the Sinuni Hospital and the primary health clinic, seven schools, and seven water wellheads and pumps, and has more projects planned for later this year. Additionally, the Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs and our Coalition partners support the removal of explosive remnants of war in areas liberated from ISIS control. In the historic Christian town of Bartallah, trained explosive ordnance disposal teams have cleared schools, medical facilities, and other key infrastructure. These efforts – and many more like them – are helping set the conditions for displaced persons to voluntarily return to their homes, but there remains much to do. We will continue to work with UNDP to ensure stabilization assistance reaches all liberated areas as quickly as possible, including minority communities in the Ninewa Plains.

The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor supports minority communities in Iraq through programs that empower minorities and civil society groups to advocate on issues that impact minority communities, such as key pieces of legislation. Additionally, programs seek to promote greater inclusiveness of minorities within Iraq society through reconciliation and stabilization efforts; more equitable and representative political participation; and access to services and governance structures. These programs engage the mainstream community as well as minority communities, recognizing that preservation of ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq cannot be sustained without support and understanding of their value within mainstream Iraqi society.

Another global concern is our work to reform discriminatory laws that deprive many of their ability to freely exercise their religious beliefs. The 2016 International Religious Freedom Report makes clear that many governments around the world use discriminatory laws to deny those within their borders freedom of religion or belief. For example, in Iran, Baha'is, Christians, and members of other religious minorities are targeted for their faith. Iran continues to sentence individuals to death under vague apostasy laws – 20 individuals were executed in 2016 on charges that included “waging war against God.” Members of the Baha'i community are in prison today simply for abiding by their beliefs.

In Saudi Arabia, we remain concerned about the state of religious freedom. The government does not recognize the right of non-Muslims to practice their religion in public and has applied criminal penalties, including prison sentences, lashings, and fines, for apostasy, atheism, blasphemy, and insulting the state's interpretation of Islam. Of particular concern are attacks targeting Shia Muslims, and the continued pattern of social prejudice and discrimination against them. We urge Saudi Arabia to embrace greater protection for religious freedom for all.

In Turkey, authorities continued to limit the human rights of members of some religious minority groups, and some communities continue to experience protracted property disputes. Non-Sunni Muslims, such as Alevi Muslims, do not receive the same governmental protections as those

enjoyed by recognized non-Muslim minorities and have faced discrimination and violence. Additionally, the United States continues to advocate for the release of Pastor Andrew Brunson, who has been imprisoned in Turkey, exactly one year as of October 7.

In Bahrain, the government continued to target Shia clerics, community members, and opposition politicians with questioning, detentions, and arrests. Members of the Shia community there continue to report ongoing discrimination in government employment, education, and the justice system. The Secretary of State, Ambassador and other senior officials have met with government officials to urge them to implement fully the Independent Commission of Inquiry's recommendations on the reconstruction of places of worship; to respect freedom of expression for clerics; to ensure Shia had equal access to employment and services; to pursue reconciliation between the government and Shia communities; and to further empower the human rights ombudsman to engage with the government in support of the right of prisoners to practice their religions.

In Burma, Muslims, Christians, and members of other religious minority communities continue to report physical abuse, arbitrary arrest, and detention on account of their religious beliefs by security forces in areas of violent conflict. Rohingya Muslims face particularly harsh treatment, including severe restrictions on freedom of movement and access to citizenship, and coercive population control measures, including forced abortion. In the last two months, we have seen horrific reports of security forces razing Rohingya villages and committing grave human rights violations against Rohingya men, women, and children. Roughly 509,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh, and more continue to arrive each day. Over half of Burma's Rohingya population has now been forcibly displaced.

In China, the government tortures, detains, and imprisons thousands for practicing their religious beliefs. The government has instituted harsh new policies restricting Uighur Muslims' and Tibetan Buddhists' religious expression and practice, detained unknown numbers of Uighurs and Tibetans for their religious beliefs, and demolished or appropriated centers of worship throughout the country. Members of unregistered Christian "house churches" face harassment, detention, and imprisonment for their unapproved religious activities, and for their refusal to join state-sanctioned churches. Falun Gong practitioners have also been singled out for harsh treatment and detention.

In Pakistan, more than two dozen people are on death row or serving a life imprisonment for blasphemy. Human rights organizations continue to express concerns regarding the marginalization of Ahmadiyya Muslims. We have urged the government to protect the human rights of members of religious minorities.

In Sudan the government arrests, detains, and intimidates clergy and church members. It denies frequently permits for the construction of new churches and is closing or demolishing certain existing ones. We have provided the Government of Sudan recommendations for how to concretely improve observance of religious freedom and urge them to take concrete steps to that end.

We appreciate this Committee for raising the connection between the state of international religious freedom worldwide and America's national security. While the moral imperative to promote religious freedom around the world is clear, our efforts to defend freedom of religion or belief for all people is directly in our national interest. When we look at all of the places in which religious freedom is denied around the globe, it is not difficult to conclude that left unattended these situations can become full blown security crises with effects far beyond their immediate neighborhoods. Mass migration caused by persecution or violence against individuals based on their religion can be destabilizing to both the countries of origin and resettlement, and resentment born of discrimination and persecution for one's faith can create a fertile ground for radicalization to violence and terrorist recruitment. By using our diplomacy to address these problems before they become security crises, we improve the security of our own country and that of our allies, and by doing so, work to relieve our taxpayers of the greater burdens stemming from full-fledged global crises.

In closing, I would note that Congress was wise in passing the *International Religious Freedom Act of 1998*, which calls for our government to “[Stand] for liberty and [stand] with the persecuted, to use and implement appropriate tools in the United States foreign policy apparatus, including diplomatic, political, commercial, charitable, educational, and cultural channels, to promote respect for religious freedom by all governments and peoples.” We appreciate that international religious freedom issues have always had strong bipartisan support, and we want to work closely with Congress to help persecuted religious minorities. Thank you, again, for holding this hearing to review the U.S. role in protecting international religious freedom.