

**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 other Members, thank you for this hearing to discuss international religious freedom. I am honored by this opportunity to appear before you today, on International Religious Freedom Day and the 17th anniversary of the signing of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRF Act). Mr. Chairman, you played a key role in the passage of that important law, and it was an honor to have had an opportunity to work with you during the drafting of the law.

The law has had a significant impact on the way religious freedom is viewed not only in the United States but around the world. Unfortunately, we still face daunting, alarming, and growing challenges. I look forward to working closely with this committee to protect religious minorities and to promote religious freedom, including through tools such as our annual Report.

During my tenure as Ambassador at Large, I've noticed certain enduring truths. In many countries, religious freedom flourishes. People are free to choose their faith, change their faith, speak about their faith to others, teach their faith to their children, dissent from religion, build places of worship, and worship alone or in fellowship with others.

In such societies, denominations and faith groups organize as they see fit. Interfaith cooperation flourishes. Religious communities contribute significantly to the social welfare and serve as a moral compass to their nations.

Yet in far too many countries people face daunting, alarming, and growing challenges because of their beliefs. In countries with proud traditions of multi-

faith cooperation where positive coexistence was once the norm, we have witnessed growing numbers of religious minorities being driven out of their historic homelands. And in too many countries, prisoners of conscience suffer cruel punishment for their religious beliefs and practices.

There are several key trends from this year's report that I'd like to highlight.

The abhorrent acts of terror committed by those who falsely claim the mantle of religion to justify their wanton destruction are the fastest growing challenge to religious freedom worldwide.

In Iraq and Syria, ISIL has sought to eliminate anyone assessed as deviating from its own violent and destructive interpretation of Islam. The group has displaced many hundreds of thousands from their homes based solely on their religion or opposition to ISIL's rule, be they Sunni or Shia, Christian or Yezidi, or any one of the many other ethno-religious groups for whom Iraq and Syria are home—Turkmen, Sabean Mandaean, Kaka'is, Shabak, and others. ~~be they Christians, Shia, Yezidis, Turkmen, Shabak, Mandeans, Kaka'is, or others.~~

ISIL's toxic ideology and violence threatens these groups' ability to live in the lands of their ancestors and their centuries old contributions to the rich heritage of what was once an incredibly diverse region. We have all seen the shocking reports about minorities being killed, kidnapped, enslaved, or forced to convert, and women and girls forced to marry ISIL soldiers or die. ISIL regularly presents dire ultimatums to those it perceives as "others": conversion, stiff taxes, forced displacement, or death.

The victims' stories are very troubling. I heard the story of an 18 year-old Yezidi woman from Mosul, whom ISIL fighters kidnapped and raped. She was then taken to Kocho, a village near Sinjar Mountain, where the fighters separated out the village's men and boys over twelve years old and, as she watched helplessly, lined them up next to shallow ditches and shot them all. After a time, she stopped calling. We do not know this poor woman's ultimate fate, but the same story has replayed itself countless times with other victims.

Similarly, Boko Haram has killed thousands in both indiscriminate violence and deliberate attacks on Christians and Muslims who oppose its radical ideology. It has subjected the peoples of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger to unspeakable acts of terror, sexual violence, abductions, and fatal attacks on places of worship.

We continue to see the negative impact of blasphemy and apostasy laws in countries including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan, as well as the impact from laws that purport to protect religious sentiments from offense. Such laws have been used in some countries as a pretext to justify violence in the name of religion, which can lead to false claims of blasphemy and create an atmosphere of impunity for those resorting to violence. The United States uniformly opposes blasphemy and apostasy laws, which are frequently used to oppress those whose religious beliefs happen to differ from the majority. Such laws are inconsistent with international human rights and fundamental freedoms, and we will continue to call for their universal repeal.

Repressive governments routinely subject their citizens to violence, detention, discrimination, and undue surveillance, for simply exercising their faith or identifying with a religious community. We see this dramatized by the plight of countless numbers of prisoners of conscience. We remain deeply committed to seeing such individuals freed everywhere in the world.

In my travels to Vietnam, I saw firsthand how religious groups are forced to undergo onerous and arbitrary registration processes to legally operate. As Vietnam considers amending its religion laws, we stand with the country's religious communities in calling for the easing of such restrictions and would look forward to any changes the government officials enact that would make it easier for people to practice their faith.

And in Burma, Ambassador Andrew Bennett, Canada's first Ambassador for Religious Freedom, and I spoke out forcefully together against a series of discriminatory laws restricting population control, interfaith marriage, religious conversion, and monogamy. We remain deeply concerned by the continued persecution of members of the Rohingya population. We have urged the government to provide full access to humanitarian organizations serving all the people of Rakhine State, to allow freedom of movement, security, and a nondiscriminatory path to citizenship for the Rohingya population, many of whom have lived in Burma for generations.

Many governments have also used the guise of confronting terrorism or violent extremism to justify repression of religious groups' nonviolent religious activities, or imposition of broad restrictions on religious life. Russia continues to use vaguely formulated anti-extremism laws to justify arrests, raids on homes and places of worship, and the confiscation or banning of religious literature. The Government of Tajikistan bans people under age of 18 from participating in any

public religious activities, supposedly on the ground that exposure to religion will lead youths to violence, and supports a 2004 religious decision prohibiting Hanafi Sunni women's worship in mosques. Chinese officials have increased controls on Uighur Muslims' peaceful religious expression and practice, including reported instances of banning beards and headscarves. Tibetan Buddhists faced government interference in the selection of reincarnate lamas, and monasteries faced increased government management and interference as part of measures to "combat separatism."

The situation in China remains complicated. During my visit in August, I found that despite widespread, continuing government abuses and restrictions, many places of worship were nonetheless full and flourishing. In areas of the country where the government's hand was lighter, faith-based social service and welfare agencies operating homeless shelters, orphanages, soup kitchens, made highly positive contributions to the wellbeing of their society.

But much more often, restrictive policies still stifled religious life. Members of unregistered religious and spiritual groups and their advocates, including the Falun Gong and house churches, continue to face harassment, detention, and imprisonment. This reality has only been exacerbated by the growing crackdown on human rights lawyers in China, including those seeking to work within China's legal system to enhance religious freedom. This includes Zhang Kai, a peaceful, respected, Christian human rights lawyer who was detained just prior to a scheduled meeting with me and whose whereabouts remain unknown.

Societal violence and discrimination continue shape the government's vital role in protecting religious freedom. Even though these are not actions facilitated by the government, governments must take appropriate action to ameliorate the conditions that lead to such violence and protect harassed minority communities. In Mexico, human rights defenders, including pastors, priests, and other religious leaders, often face great risk for their humanitarian work due to threats by organized criminals and narcotics-traffickers.

In Europe, many governments are struggling to cope with the aftermath of terror attacks such as those in France, Belgium, and Denmark, along with increased anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis and others have fled into Europe in the past few months. We urge governments to uphold their obligations to protect the human rights of refugees and migrants in their countries and take steps to prevent them from facing official harassment or discrimination on account of their religion.

Despite the many challenges, we also see governments and individuals working to improve their communities and societies. Following the February terror attacks in Copenhagen, thousands of people of different faiths gathered in Denmark and formed a human ring outside the synagogue where the murder occurred. In September of 2014, Kyrgyzstan's constitutional court ruled part of the country's problematic religion law unconstitutional, which we hope will ease registration requirements for minority religious groups and enable members to engage in peaceful religious activities more freely.

After years of growing religious tensions in Sri Lanka exacerbated by hardline ethnic Buddhist groups, a new government has taken office and staked out a much more tolerant view of religious diversity. Since that time, some of these tensions have noticeably eased. In Sudan, despite severe restrictions on religious freedom, three court rulings over the past 18 months represented steps in a positive direction, including the release of Meriam Ibrahim and the two Evangelical pastors.

We are deeply inspired by the work of countless religious communities, civil society groups, and individuals around the world who hold their governments accountable for international commitments to protect freedom of religious and belief. We dedicate our work to their struggle and continue to fight for a world in which every individual is free to live according to his or her conscience.

This remains the driving force behind our work. During my confirmation hearing late last year, I described several key goals that I would pursue during my time in office. Since that time, we have made progress on every one of those goals.

1. We have been working to build partnerships with other nations to advance religious freedom together, since these global challenges require a global response. Thanks to the good work of my Canadian friend Ambassador Bennett, we have forged the Inter-Governmental Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief, which brings together like-minded nations to devise strategies to promote and protect religious freedom for all, to look for areas of coordination and cooperation, and to develop reinforcing strategies and tactics. The parallel creation of a parliamentary network brings together legislators from around the world, from different political and religious backgrounds. These initiatives add to our tools for expanding this fundamental freedom to everyone.

2. We have strengthened our programmatic work. In an often overlooked but vital area of our work, through the *Human Rights and Democracy Fund* and other funding sources, the Department supports an ever wider range of programs that have a direct impact on international religious freedom. They counter intolerance, combat anti-Semitism, increase public awareness, train civil society and government officials, strengthen the capacity of religious leaders to promote interfaith cooperation, empower religious minorities to participate in political life, and help combat religiously motivated discrimination and violence.

Thanks to the IRF Act and our persistent efforts over the past 17 years, more and more like-minded countries are funding programs focused on religious freedom, reinforcing our work and helping us reach countries where they may have greater influence. The work of our partners and the synergy of other U.S. democracy and rule of law programs also have a multiplier effect on our ability to promote international religious freedom.

3. We have strengthened our focus on religious minority communities under siege. The Obama Administration has appointed Knox Thames as our Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia. We have spoken out frequently about what it would take to allow the minority communities displaced by violence in those regions to return home, and Special Advisor Thames is focusing on coordinating with government-wide efforts in this regard.

4. We are building our office's capacity to advance religious freedom worldwide. The Department of State has significantly increased the staffing of our office, allowing us to expand ongoing work and devote staff to thematic issues like the relationship between religious freedom and countering violent extremism, the negative effects of blasphemy and apostasy laws, and the intersection of women's equality and religious freedom. Our effort to integrate the advancement of religious freedom into the overall foreign policy was furthered through collaboration with Special Representative Shaun Casey and our Office of Religion and Global Affairs. This has helped us engage every segment of the State Department and integrate religious freedom into our nation's statecraft in areas ranging from counter-terrorism, conflict stability efforts, economic development, and human rights.

5. We have maintained close coordination with the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and continue to deepen our collaborative efforts.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, we continue to face daunting, alarming, and growing challenges to religious freedom around the world. To address these challenges, we are building new partnerships, investing in new programs, increasing our staff, and continuing to coordinate with USCIRF. We face this task with continued vigor and resolve to ensure that everyone has the right to live according to the dictates of their conscience.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.