

Testimony before the
Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International
Organizations Subcommittee

Of the House Foreign Affairs Committee

On

The Global Religious Freedom Crisis & Its Challenge to U.S. Foreign Policy

By

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Thank you to Chairman Smith and members of the Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee for holding today's hearing on "The Global Religious Freedom Crisis and Its Challenge to U.S. Foreign Policy." I am Dr. M Zuhdi Jasser, President of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy (AIFD) based in Phoenix, Arizona. I am here today as a former Commissioner of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and I am testifying today as a private citizen. I was a member of USCIRF when the 2016 Annual Report was issued. This testimony is informed by my personal travel on behalf of USCIRF to Burma, Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia.

I especially welcome this opportunity to highlight the importance of promoting freedom of religion or belief in U.S. foreign policy and make recommendations on ways the United States can more effectively promote this vital human right. This hearing is especially timely given that there is a global religious freedom crisis and a negative trajectory for religious freedom in countries that top the U.S. foreign policy agenda. This is evident from the media's top headlines and its coverage of issues including genocide in Syria and Iraq; the role of religion in humanitarian crises worldwide, including the forced displacement of the largest number of people since World War II; and the plight of prisoners of conscience detained for expressing their right to religious freedom or advocating on the behalf of this freedom in countries such as China, Sudan, and Vietnam.

Why Religious Freedom Matters

Freedom of religion or belief is a broad, inclusive right that embraces the full range of thought, belief, and behavior. It means the right of all human beings to think as they please, believe or not believe as their conscience leads, and live out their beliefs openly, peacefully, and without fear. No government, group, or individual has the right to compel others to act against their conscience or restrain them from answering its call. Religious freedom applies to the holders of all religious beliefs and extends to those who reject religious beliefs altogether, and was overwhelmingly adopted in 1948 in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as in subsequent international agreements.

Religious freedom matters. Eighty-four percent of the world's population identifies with a specific religious group. And yet, according to the most recent Pew study, more than three-quarters of the world's population live in countries in which religion is restricted significantly, either by the government or societal actors. Religion also can fuel dangerous conflicts between groups or individuals who hold different beliefs. In both instances, our nation and its diplomats cannot have productive dialogues and satisfactory relations or outcomes if we ignore, downplay, or dismiss religion's pivotal role.

A number of studies also have shown that, in countries that honor and protect this right, religious freedom generally is associated with vibrant political democracy, rising economic and social well-being, and diminished tension and violence. In contrast, nations that trample on religious freedom are more likely to be mired in poverty and insecurity, war and terror, and violent, radical extremism. This instability directly bears not only on the well-being of those societies, but the security of the United States and overall global stability.

Religious freedom thus merits a seat at the table with economic and security concerns as the U.S. and other nations conduct their affairs. These concerns are tied together in the real world. Effectively promoting religious freedom by fostering respect for human rights while promoting stability and ultimately national security can help U.S. foreign policy makers achieve crucial goals. Several of the tools that would help promote this precious right can be found in the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), the 1998 law which Members of Congress, led by former Representative Frank Wolf (R-VA) and Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ), strongly supported with the goal of making religious freedom a core factor in U.S. foreign policy.

Among its provisions, IRFA established consequences for the worst violators of the freedom of religion or belief. The law requires the President – who has delegated this power to the Secretary of State – to designate annually “countries of particular concern,” or CPCs, and take action designed to encourage improvements in those countries. CPCs are defined as countries whose governments either engage in or tolerate “particularly severe” violations of religious freedom. A menu of possible actions is available, ranging from negotiating a bilateral agreement, to imposing sanctions, to taking a “commensurate action,” to issuing a waiver. While a CPC designation remains in effect until removed, actions tied to a CPC designation expire after two years, if not renewed.

IRFA did not limit violations to government actions. It recognized that religious freedom violations also can occur through government inaction against abuses by private actors. The 1998 statute does not, however, adequately address one of the 21st century’s major challenges to freedom of religion or belief: the actions of non-state actors in failing or failed states. In many of the most pressing situations today, transnational or local organizations are the egregious persecutors and governments either are incapable of addressing the violations or non-existent. In these situations, allowing the United States to designate the non-state actors perpetrating particularly severe violators of religious freedom would broaden the U.S. government’s ability to engage the actual drivers of persecution. I commend Representative Smith for including such a provision in H.R. 1150, the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act.

Along with an annual CPC process, the IRFA toolbox provides many options for diplomatic action. U.S. diplomatic engagement cannot and should not solely rely on naming CPCs, but rather use a concert of action including: diplomatic engagement; consultations about possible CPC action; CPC designations; binding agreement negotiations; presidential actions; and/or a waiver for the narrowest of circumstances. Past practice provides only a few examples of these tools being used together to bring about change in a country of concern. CPC designations should be made and an annual CPC designation process should be the center of all IRF-related work, driving and energizing other areas of U.S. diplomacy, but should not be the sum total of all activity.

Recommendations on CPC Designations: USCIRF recommends that the State Department:

- Use all of IRFA’s tools, including annual CPC designations, in a continuity of action;
- Ensure that the CPC list expands and contracts as conditions warrant;

- Wherever possible, when Presidential Actions or commensurate actions are taken as a consequence of CPC designations, undertake specific efforts to emphasize the importance of religious freedom to the United States, and in particular avoid “double-hatted” sanctions; and
- Limit the use of waivers to a set period of time and subject them to review for renewal.

USCIRF recommends that Congress:

- Take steps through legislative action to require the State Department to make annual CPC designations, should the State Department fail to do so;
- Hold annual oversight hearings on IRFA implementation in the House and Senate;
- Expand the CPC classification to allow for the designation of countries where particularly severe violations of religious freedom are occurring but a government does not exist or does not control its territory; and
- Expand the CPC classification to allow the naming of non-state actors who are perpetrating particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Country Examples

Religious freedom remains under serious assault across much of the world, including in countries that top the U.S. foreign policy agenda. The tools IRFA provides need to be used, and used more effectively, especially in the countries noted below which are particularly instructive of the role that religious freedom should play in guiding U.S. foreign policy.

Burma

In 2015, peaceful elections ended more than 50 years of military-controlled government in Burma, yet the new government faces a myriad of human rights challenges. Throughout the year, Burma’s government and non-state actors continued to violate religious freedom; these violations became a defining element of the campaign season. The abuses were particularly severe for Rohingya Muslims; whose persecution became even more apparent when the magnitude of their flight from Burma captured international media attention. Instead of protecting those most in need, like the Rohingya, Burma’s government intensified its actions isolating and marginalizing vulnerable groups, leaving hundreds of thousands internally displaced and without basic necessities. The government allowed expressions of hatred and intolerance toward religious and ethnic minorities to continue unchecked and shepherded the passage into law of four discriminatory “race and religion bills.” USCIRF continues to recommend in 2016 that Burma be designated as a CPC. The State Department has designated Burma a CPC since 1999. USCIRF has recommended CPC status for Burma since the Commission first made CPC recommendations in 2000.

Recommendations for the U.S. Government: The new NLD government will have many priorities, and it will be essential for the United States and others to consistently reinforce the importance of religious freedom and related human rights. Along with the U.S. maintaining the CPC designation, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Enter into a binding agreement with the Burmese government, as defined in section 405(c) of IRFA, committing the government to end violence and the policies of discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities;
- Use the term Rohingya, both publicly and privately, which respects the right of the Rohingya Muslim community to identify as they choose;
- Encourage legal and legislative reform that strengthens protections for religious and ethnic minorities, including citizenship for the Rohingya population, and support rule of law training for government, judicial, and law enforcement officials;
- Continue to use the leverage of the “specially designated nationals” list with respect to individuals who have participated in human rights and religious freedom abuses; and
- Renew for another year the designation under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act based on the ongoing nature of intercommunal violence and humanitarian crises throughout Burma. [The IEEPA specifies how blacklisted companies and individuals should be dealt with; Burma is so designated in order “to deal with the unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States constituted by the actions and policies of the Government of Burma.”]

Egypt

Against a backdrop of deteriorating human rights conditions, the Egyptian government has taken positive steps to address some religious freedom concerns, including intolerance in religious curricula and extremism in religious discourse. President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi also continued to make public statements encouraging religious tolerance and moderation. Furthermore, there were notably fewer sectarian attacks against Christians and other religious minorities. However, other past large-scale sectarian incidents have not been prosecuted, which continued to foster a climate of impunity. In addition, the longstanding discriminatory and repressive laws and policies that restrict religious freedom remain in place. During the past year, there was an increase in Egyptian courts prosecuting, convicting, and imprisoning Egyptian citizens for blasphemy and related charges. USCIRF in 2016 thus recommended for the sixth year in a row that Egypt be designated a CPC. Previously, Egypt was on USCIRF’s Watch List from 2002 to 2010. USCIRF will continue to monitor the situation closely to determine if positive developments warrant a change in Egypt’s status during the year ahead.

Recommendations for the U.S. government: The success of Egypt’s transition hinges on full respect for the rule of law and compliance with international human rights standards, including freedom of religion or belief. The U.S. government should:

- Ensure that a portion of U.S. military assistance is used to help police implement an effective plan for dedicated protection for religious minority communities and their places of worship;
- Provide direct support to human rights and other civil society or non-governmental organizations to advance freedom of religion or belief for all Egyptians;

- Press the Egyptian government to undertake immediate reforms to improve religious freedom conditions, including: repealing decrees banning religious minority faiths, including the Baha'i and Jehovah's Witness faiths; removing religion from official identity documents; and passing laws consistent with Article 53 (creating an anti-discrimination body) and Article 235 (regulating the construction and renovation of churches) of the constitution; and
- More actively press the Egyptian government to prosecute perpetrators of sectarian violence through the judicial system and urge the Egyptian government to repeal or revise Article 98(f) of the Penal Code, which criminalizes blasphemy.

Indonesia

Incidents of discrimination against religious minorities and attacks on religious properties, typically isolated incidents localized in certain provinces, continue to occur. Radical groups perpetrate many of these attacks and influence local government officials' responses. These groups target non-Muslims, such as Christians, and non-Sunni Muslims whose practice falls outside what the groups deem acceptable. Encouragingly, President Joko Widodo, Religious Affairs Minister Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, and other government officials in 2015 regularly condemned religious-based violence. While such statements contrast starkly with the previous administration's support for radical groups, longstanding policies and practices that motivate and provide cover for radical groups' actions against religious communities remain and continue to mar Indonesia's prospects for genuine religious freedom. Indonesia has been on Tier 2, formerly USCIRF's Watch List, since 2003.

Recommendations for the U.S. Government: The U.S. government should:

- Urge the Indonesian government to overturn the 2008 Joint Ministerial Decree on the Ahmadiyya community and provincial bans on its religious practice; amend or repeal Article 156(a) of the Penal Code and release anyone sentenced for "deviancy," "denigrating religion," or "blasphemy;" and amend the 2006 Joint Regulation on Houses of Worship to allow religious communities to build and maintain places of worship free from discrimination and threats;
- Create specific bilateral working groups as part of the Comprehensive Partnership meetings with Indonesia to discuss human rights, religious freedom, and rule of law issues and establish concrete measures to address these issues;
- Raise publicly and privately with Indonesian officials the need to protect Indonesia's tradition of religious tolerance and pluralism by investigating, arresting, and prosecuting individuals or groups who discriminate or commit acts of violence against religious communities; and
- Help to train Indonesian police and counter-terrorism officials, at all levels, to better address sectarian conflict, religion-related violence, and terrorism, through practices consistent with international human rights standards.

Iran

Religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate over the past year, particularly for religious minorities, especially Baha'is, Christian converts, and Sunni Muslims. Sufi Muslims and

dissenting Shi'a Muslims also faced harassment, arrests, and imprisonment. Since President Hassan Rouhani was elected president in 2013, the number of individuals from religious minority communities who are in prison because of their beliefs has increased, despite the government releasing some prisoners during the reporting period, including Iranian-American pastor Saeed Abedini. The government of Iran continues to engage in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused. Since 1999, the State Department has designated Iran a CPC. USCIRF again recommended in 2016 that Iran be designated a CPC. USCIRF has recommended CPC status for Iran since the Commission first made CPC recommendations in 2000.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy: The U.S. government should:

- Notwithstanding the nuclear deal, ensure that violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights are part of multilateral or bilateral discussions with the Iranian government whenever possible, and continue to work closely with European and other allies to apply pressure through a combination of advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions;
- Continue to speak out publicly and frequently at the highest levels about the severe religious freedom abuses in Iran, press for and work to secure the release of all prisoners of conscience, and highlight the need for the international community to hold authorities accountable in specific cases; and
- Continue to identify Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, freeze those individuals' assets, and bar their entry into the United States, as delineated under the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010 (CISADA).

Iraq

Iraq's religious freedom climate continued to deteriorate in 2015, especially in areas under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). ISIL targets anyone who does not espouse its extremist Islamist ideology, but minority religious and ethnic communities, including the Christian, Yazidi, Shi'a, Turkmen, and Shabak communities, are especially vulnerable. In 2015, USCIRF concluded that ISIL was committing genocide against these groups, and crimes against humanity against these and other groups. While ISIL was the most egregious perpetrator of human rights and religious freedom violations, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), recognized by Prime Minister al-Abadi in September 2015 as officially part of the Iraqi state, have continued to commit systematic attacks against Sunni Muslim civilians, exacerbating sectarian tensions. Although al-Abadi attempted to bring the PMF into the fold of government-sanctioned armed groups through this maneuver, so far it has remained clear that the group – which technically reports to the Ministry of Interior – exercises a significant amount of autonomy and espouses strong pro-Shi'a leanings, mostly to the exclusion of Iraq's Sunni population. However, because the PMF is one of the most effective groups in fighting ISIL, the Iraqi government has not curtailed their activities or prosecuted those who have perpetrated violent attacks.

Millions of Iraqis are now refugees or are internally displaced due to ISIL's actions and the government's inability to protect religious communities. Based on violations perpetrated primarily by ISIL, but also due to the Iraqi government's toleration of attacks by security forces and the PMF, in 2016 USCIRF again recommended that the U.S. government designate Iraq as a CPC. The State Department never has designated Post-Saddam Iraq a CPC.

Recommendations for the U.S. government. The U.S. government should:

- Call for or support a referral by the UN Security Council to the International Criminal Court to investigate ISIL violations in Iraq and Syria against religious and ethnic minorities, following the models used in Sudan and Libya, or encourage the Iraqi government to accept ICC jurisdiction to investigate ISIL violations in Iraq after June 2014;
- Encourage the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL to work to develop measures to protect and assist the region's most vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities, including by increasing immediate humanitarian aid, prioritizing the resettlement to third countries of the most vulnerable, and providing longer-term support in host countries for those who hope to return to their homes post-conflict;
- Urge the Iraqi government to continue to prosecute and hold to account Shi'a militias for abuses of non-combatant Sunni Muslims or other religious minorities, and investigate and prosecute perpetrators when violations occur;
- Focus U.S. programming in Iraq on promoting religious freedom and tolerance and ensure that marginalized communities benefit from U.S. and international development assistance.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Include in the Fiscal Year 2017 Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Bill, or in another appropriate vehicle, a provision that would in the future permit the U.S. government to appropriate or allocate funds for in-kind assistance to genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes cases at the ICC on a case-by-case basis and when in the national interest to provide such assistance.

Nigeria

Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria continue to be troubling. While the Nigerian military successfully recaptured territory from, and arrested members of, Boko Haram, the terrorist group returned to asymmetrical warfare, including suicide bombings of mosques and other civilian targets. It reportedly also forced Christians to convert and Muslims to adhere to its extreme interpretation of Islam. Boko Haram violence and recurring clashes between Muslim herders and Christian farmers continue to impact negatively religious freedom and interfaith relations in the country. The Nigerian federal government fails to implement effective strategies to prevent or stop terrorism and sectarian violence and does not bring to justice those responsible for such violence, thus fostering a climate of impunity. Additionally, because of the Nigerian military's excessive use of force against a Shi'a Muslim group in Kaduna in December 2015, hundreds were killed, worsening the government's relations and societal tensions with that minority community.

Nigeria's population of almost 180 million people is equally divided between Muslims and Christians. Religious identity frequently falls along regional, ethnic, political, and socio-economic lines and provides flashpoints for violence. In 2016, USCIRF again recommended that the State Department designate Nigeria as a CPC. USCIRF has recommended the CPC designation since 2009. Nigeria had been on USCIRF's Watch List since 2002.

Recommendations to the U.S. government. The U.S. government should:

- Seek to enter into a binding agreement with the Nigerian government, as defined in section 405(c) of IRFA, and be prepared to provide financial and technical support to help the Nigerian government undertake reforms to address policies leading to violations of religious freedom, including but not limited to the following:
 - Professionalize and train specialized police and joint security units to respond to sectarian violence and acts of terrorism;
 - Conduct professional and thorough investigations of and prosecutions for future incidents of sectarian violence and terrorism;
 - Develop effective conflict-prevention and early-warning mechanisms at the local, state, and federal levels; and
 - Develop a system whereby security officers accused of excessive use of force and other human rights abuses are investigated and held accountable.
- Hold a joint session of the U.S.-Nigeria Bi-National Commission working groups on good governance and security to address issues of Nigeria's recurrent sectarian violence and failure to prosecute perpetrators; and
- Encourage the Nigerian government to increase funding and implement initiatives for development assistance, counter radicalization, and conflict mitigation in northeast Nigeria.

Pakistan

The Pakistani government in 2015 continued to perpetrate and tolerate systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations. Religiously-discriminatory constitutional provisions and legislation, such as the country's blasphemy law and anti-Ahmadiyya laws, violate international standards of the freedom of religion or belief and result in prosecutions and imprisonments. The actions of non-state actors, including U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations such as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban), continue to threaten all Pakistanis and the country's security. Religious minority communities, including Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslims, Christians, and Hindus, experience chronic sectarian and religiously-motivated violence from both terrorist organizations and individuals. The government's failure to adequately protect likely targets of such violence or prosecute perpetrators has created a deep-rooted climate of impunity. Discriminatory content against minorities in provincial textbooks remains a significant concern, as are reports of forced conversions and marriages of Christian and Hindu girls and women. USCIRF recommends in 2016 that Pakistan be designated a CPC. USCIRF has recommended CPC status for Pakistan since 2002.

Recommendations for the U.S. Government: USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Designate Pakistan as a CPC, and as a consequence of that designation, work to reach a binding agreement with the Pakistani government on steps to address the systematic, egregious, and ongoing violations of religious freedom; accompany such an agreement with funding for related capacity building through State Department and USAID mechanisms;
- Press the Pakistani government to implement its Supreme Court’s decision to create a special police force to protect religious groups from violence and actively prosecute perpetrators;
- Include discussions on religious freedom in U.S.-Pakistan dialogues or create a special track of bilateral engagement on government efforts to promote interfaith harmony;
- Encourage the government of Pakistan to launch a public information campaign about the historic role played by religious minorities in the country, their contributions to Pakistani society, and their equal rights and protections, and use the tools of U.S. public diplomacy to highlight similar themes; and
- Continue to call for the repeal of the blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws; until that can be accomplished, urge the Pakistani government to make blasphemy a bailable offense; add and enforce penalties for false accusations; and review all cases of individuals charged with blasphemy in order to release those subjected to abusive charges.

Saudi Arabia

Despite some improvement in religious freedom, Saudi Arabia remains uniquely repressive in the extent to which it restricts the public expression of any religion other than Islam, and a number of high profile cases during the past year demonstrated the government’s disregard for religious freedom. The government privileges its own interpretation of Sunni Islam over all other interpretations and prohibits any non-Muslim public places of worship in the country. It continues to prosecute, imprison, and flog individuals for dissent, apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery, and a 2014 law classifying blasphemy and advocating atheism as terrorism has been used to prosecute human rights defenders and others. Authorities also continue to repress and discriminate against dissident clerics and members of the Shi’a community who criticize the government and call for equal rights. Based on these violations of religious freedom, USCIRF again recommended in 2016 that Saudi Arabia be designated as a CPC. Although the State Department has designated Saudi Arabia a CPC since 2004, an indefinite waiver on taking any action in consequence of the CPC designation has been in place since 2006.

Recommendations for the U.S. government: The U.S. government should:

- Continue to designate Saudi Arabia a CPC, no longer issue a waiver, and press the Saudi government to take concrete action towards completing reforms confirmed in July 2006 in U.S.-Saudi bilateral discussions; provide a detailed report on progress and lack of progress on each of the areas of concern;

- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the immediate release of Raif Badawi, his counsel Waleed Abu al-Khair, and other prisoners of conscience, and press the Saudi government to end state prosecution of individuals charged with apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery;
- Press the Saudi government to ensure equal rights and protection under the law for Shi'a Muslim citizens and remove the classification of advocating atheism and blasphemy as terrorist acts in its 2014 terrorism law; and
- Press the Saudi government to publicly denounce the use around the world of older versions of Saudi textbooks and other materials that promote hatred and intolerance.

Syria

Syria's religious communities largely are deprived of religious freedom due to the actions of President Bashar al-Assad's regime, elements of the armed opposition, and U.S.-designated terrorist groups, particularly the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The Syrian crisis has evolved into a largely sectarian conflict. The al-Assad regime continues to target Arab Sunni Muslim civilians and other individuals or groups that oppose it, including through indiscriminate bombings, sieges, starvation, and the use of chemical weapons. ISIL targets the regime and its supporters, religious minorities, and any Muslims opposing its violent version of Islamist ideology. Syrian and international groups alike have documented attacks on places of worship, kidnappings and killings of religious leaders, and public beheadings and mass murders of anyone who does not submit to ISIL's control and authority. Due to the collective actions of the Bashar al-Assad regime, elements of the armed opposition, and U.S.-designated terrorist groups, USCIRF again recommended that Syria be designated as a CPC in 2016, as it has recommended since 2014.

Recommendations for the U.S. government: In addition to continuing to seek an end to the Syrian conflict, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should designate Syria a CPC and should:

- Urge the UN Security Council and its member states to rigorously implement and comply with ratified resolutions, including UN Security Council resolutions 2118 (elimination of Syrian chemical weapons), 2139 (calling for humanitarian access into besieged areas and an end to barrel bombs), 2165 (approving humanitarian access across conflict lines), 2209 (calling for an end to the use of chlorine bombs), and 2254 (ceasefire and road map for peace in Syria);
- Continue to call for an International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation into crimes committed by both ISIL and the al-Assad regime, following the models used in Sudan and Libya;
- Encourage the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL to work to develop measures to protect and assist the region's most vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities, including by increasing immediate humanitarian aid, prioritizing the resettlement to third countries of the most vulnerable, and providing longer-term support in host countries for those who hope to return to their homes post-conflict;

- Commit to a goal of resettling 100,000 Syrian refugees to the United States, subject to proper vetting and a prioritization based on vulnerability, in order to aid those Syrians in the greatest peril, demonstrate U.S. leadership in efforts to address this extraordinary humanitarian crisis, and show support for governments in the Middle East and Europe that are hosting millions of Syrian refugees; and
- Allocate sufficient resources to the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies that conduct the rigorous individualized vetting of refugees being considered for resettlement to allow them to expeditiously process applications and thoroughly conduct background checks, in order to facilitate resettlement without compromising U.S. national security.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Include in the Fiscal Year 2017 Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Bill, or in another appropriate vehicle, a provision that would permit the U.S. government to appropriate or allocate funds for in-kind assistance to genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes cases at the ICC on a case-by-case basis and when in the national interest to provide such assistance.

Conclusion

We continue to face an enormously challenging landscape for freedom of religion or belief abroad. By improving our use of existing tools and creating new tools for a rapidly changing environment, we can see constructive change. Most importantly, we must renew our resolve to integrate this fundamental freedom more fully into the foreign policy of our nation, we can bring genuine progress to those beyond our shores who yearn for freedom.