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The Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act

Chairman Chris Smith (NJ-04)
Mark-Up Hearing of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights, and International Organizations
on HR 1150, "The Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act"
April 15, 2015

Fifteen years ago, Congress had the foresight to make the advancing of religious freedom a U.S. foreign policy priority. It wasn't easy to pass the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. I led hearings on that bill, and, frankly, it was a tough sell. There were people in the Administration and Congress who opposed the bill. But there was a broad coalition that came together to support the bill—bipartisan, ecumenical and inclusive of foreign policy experts—that made the difference.

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 was authored by Frank Wolf. It is largely because of his efforts that international religious freedom is taken seriously as a foreign policy issue.

But Frank, though prophetic, was not omniscient. The bill we passed fifteen years ago needs to be updated to match the new challenges of the 21st century. That is what we are doing with this bill—the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2015. We honor the author of the landmark International Religious Freedom Act by upgrading the tools, training, and resources used by the Administration to advance this fundamental freedom.

The need to advance religious freedom globally is more important now than ever before. From Beijing to Burma, Nigeria to Syria, and to Pakistan and beyond, the need to protect religious minorities, mitigate sectarian violence, end government restrictions and counter radicalism and extremism are critical priorities for US foreign policy.

We see daily headlines of beheadings, kidnapping, mob attacks and arrests carried out by ISIS, al Shabaab, Boko Haram, or other groups. Ugly incidents of anti-Semitism are also increasing globally, even in supposedly tolerant Europe. According to the Pew Research Foundation, governmental restrictions on the freedom of religion are at a seven year high.

A robust religious freedom diplomacy is necessary to advance our nation's interest in the stability, security, and economic development of countries we engage with around the globe. Research shows that where there is more religious freedom, there is more economic freedom, more women's empowerment, more political stability. Countries that protect religious minorities find greater levels of social harmony, a healthy civil society, and economic prosperity.

Spreading respect for religious freedom is the ultimate weapon against terrorism and societal violence, preemptively undermining religious extremism.

History has also shown that when the U.S. makes religious freedom a priority in bilateral relations, conditions change without harm to security interests or economic cooperation. In addition, countless numbers of religious freedom advocates have benefited from US religious freedom diplomacy—finding freedom, lesser jail sentences, or an end to torture. That fact alone should prick our consciences to act.

The Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act will upgrade the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to better address a growing religious persecution globally and help the Administration and the State Department to better respond to violent extremism globally.

This bill will improve U.S. religious freedom diplomacy efforts globally; better train and equip diplomats to counter extremism; address anti-Semitism and religious persecution, and mitigate sectarian conflict. The bill does this by:

Giving the Administration and the State Department new political tools and enhancing the position of the Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom.

Creating a "tier system" for International Religious Freedom reports on countries of particular concern and a special watch list—similar to the tier system used in the Trafficking in Persons Report.

Requiring annual designations and actions on countries with severe religious freedom abuses.

Allowing the President to designate "violent non-state actors" as severe violators of international religious freedom and giving him the authority to sanction individuals responsible for committing those violations.

Expanding diplomatic training, counter-terrorism coordination, and foreign assistance efforts to advance religious freedom.

The bill also reauthorizes the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) until 2021 with the same language passed unanimously last year in the House. Despite strong bipartisan support in the House for USCIRF's reauthorization, it got bogged down in the Senate before finally being reauthorized in legislation signed by the President.

USCIRF is a valuable and independent source of information and policy recommendations. We hope to avoid unnecessary complications and last minute negotiations with our much slower Senate colleagues this year by sending a bill to them much earlier.

Finally, I want to thank Rep. Anna Eshoo for being an original co-sponsor of this bill. Her advocacy on behalf of religious minorities in the Middle East is important and critical work. Ancient Christian communities, and adherents of other esteemed faiths such as the Yazidis, are being decimated by ISIS. I value her partnership on this legislation, and admire her commitment to the cause of all those oppressed for the beliefs they hold.