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# **‘The Global Crisis of Religious Freedom & Its Challenge to U.S. Foreign Policy’**

*Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,  
Global Human Rights and Int’l Organizations*  
*Rep. Chris Smith, Chairman*  
*October 27, 2015*

The world is experiencing a crisis of international religious freedom that poses a direct challenge to U.S. interests in the Middle East, Central and East Asia, Russia, China, and sub-Saharan Africa. In large parts of the world, this fundamental freedom is constantly and brutally under siege. The worldwide erosion of respect for this fundamental freedom is the cause of widespread human suffering, grave injustices, refugee flows, and significant threats to peace and stability.

This Congress has heard the cries of Iraqi and Syrian Christians who face the threat of extinction, slavery, and death. We have heard about the plight of Rohingya Muslims, who face attacks and such unimaginable discrimination from hard-line Buddhist groups that many chose slavery elsewhere than life in Burma. We have heard about the persecution faced by Chinese Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, Uyghur Muslims, and Falun Gong at the hands of a Communist Party suspicious of organized religion. And, many of us on this subcommittee have seen firsthand the religious dividing lines of sub-Saharan Africa that are the cause of so much death and destruction.

In a world where some people are willing to kill and die for their faith, where anti-Semitism persists even in the most tolerant of places, and where authoritarian governments view strong religious faith as a potential threat to their legitimacy, it is more important than ever that the U.S. engage in robust religious freedom diplomacy. One that uses all the tools available in the landmark International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. One that is integrated in our national security policies, public diplomacy, and economic development strategies.

The stakes are too high and the suffering too great to downplay or sideline religious freedom as a priority of U.S. foreign policy. But unfortunately, that is precisely what we often hear from religious groups globally or from NGOs working on the issue.

This criticism does not discount the wonderful work done by our men and women at the State Department and the efforts of Ambassador Saperstein himself. They do important and substantive work, but it seems too often that the issue is marginalized and isolated from issues of national security or economic development—even though we know from academic research that countries with the highest levels of religious freedom experience more prosperity and less terrorism.

Religious persecution has catastrophic consequences for religious communities and for individual victims. But it also undermines the national security of the United States. Without religious freedom, aspiring democracies will continue to face instability. Sustained economic growth will be more difficult to achieve. Obstructions will remain to the advancement of the rights of women and girls. And, perhaps most urgent of all, religious terrorism will continue to be nourished and exported.

The global religious freedom crisis will not disappear anytime soon. According to the non-partisan Pew Research Center, more than 80% of the world's population says that religious practice is "very important" to them and one-third of the world's countries have "high" or "very high" restrictions on religious faith and practice. Pew estimates that 75% of the world's populations live in countries where severe religious persecution occurs regularly.

Religion is everywhere an important part of social, political and economic life. We cannot ignore or wish it away, nor should we try. This is the reality and we need strategies to address it.

The U.S. has a foundational history of protecting religious freedom and legislation that made religious freedom promotion a priority of U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. must lead in the effort to create contexts where people can live with their deepest differences and where government's understand that protection of religious freedom not only fulfils international obligations, but is in their economic and security interests.

It has been almost 17 years since the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Religious freedom diplomacy has developed under three administrations of both parties. Unfortunately, the grim global realities demonstrate that our nation has had little effect on the rise of persecution and the decline of religious freedom.

It is worth asking why. It is worth asking not only what the State Department is doing, but what can be done better? Are new tools or new ideas needed to help U.S. religious freedom diplomacy address one of the great crises of the 21st century? Does the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 need to be upgraded to reflect 21st century realities

That is why I introduced the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2015 (HR 1150). This legislation, named after the author of the original IRFA Act, my good friend former Congressman Frank Wolf, would, among other things, strengthen the role of the Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom and the IRF office at State and give more tools to the Administration to address the crisis we face. The bill is roundly endorsed and supported by a broad, diverse array of religious freedom, civil society and diaspora organizations. They acknowledge what too many policymakers and administrations, Republican and Democrat alike, have been unable to appreciate—America's first freedom ought to be infused, at every possible level, into our foreign policy.

Upgrading and strengthening U.S. international religious freedom policy—and further integrating it into U.S. foreign policy and national security strategy—will send the clear message that the U.S. will fight for the inherent dignity of every human being and against the global problem of persecution, religious extremism, and terrorism. In doing so, we can advance the best of our values while protecting vital national interests.