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

*Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights, and International Organizations
Excerpts of remarks by Rep. Chris Smith
June 16, 2016*

I've chaired numerous hearings on religious freedom since 1996, starting with my first two—the Worldwide Persecution of Jews and the Persecution of Christians Worldwide—held in the same month.

Ever since, I have chaired dozens of hearings examining world-wide attacks on religious freedom. Tragically, especially in recent years, the situation has significantly deteriorated and begs a significant, expanded, and sustained response from the US and world community.

On April 26th, our subcommittee probed “What’s Next” after Secretary Kerry’s genocide designation. Our witnesses made excellent suggestions including Supreme Knight Carl Anderson, who proposed that we must:

- Increase aid and ensure that it actually reaches those in need,
- Support the long term survival in the region of these ancient indigenous religious and ethnic communities,
- Punish the perpetrators of genocide and crimes against humanity,
- Assist victims of genocide in attaining refugee status,
- Prepare now for the foreseeable human rights challenges as ISIS controlled territories is liberated by ensuring that Christians and other minorities have equal rights to decide futures.
- Promote the establishment of internationally agreed upon standards of human rights and religious freedom as conditions for humanitarian and military assistance.

I am confident that Ambassador Saperstein will provide insight and a roadmap for going forward. It is also a high honor to welcome outgoing chairman of the United States Commission

on International Religious Freedom Dr. Robert George as well as Dr. Zuhdi Jasser- two religious freedom leaders with exemplary records of service.

Religious liberty is called America's "first freedom" and one of our nation's founding ideals. It is the right to believe, or not believe, and to practice one's religion according to the dictates of one's own conscience.

This right is not only an American value, it is a universal principle. The right to religious freedom flows from the dignity of every human person and, as such, deserves to be protected everywhere and for everyone.

Sadly, in large parts of the world, this fundamental freedom is constantly and brutally under siege. The world is experiencing a crisis of 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 Burma, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, there are Muslim, Christian, and Hindu minorities facing systematic violence and discrimination. In China, Vietnam, and North Korea, independent religious practice is viewed as an unwanted competitor to the Communist state, leading to severe restrictions, arrests, and torture.

Governments are not the only ones repressing religious practice; non-state actors are a pernicious threat to religious liberty as well.

In the Middle East, terrorist groups like ISIS have been committing genocide in an attempt to exterminate ancient religious communities. This subcommittee's hearings, including most recently one last month with witnesses from civil society who focus on "The ISIS Genocide Declaration: What's Next?" have delved into the brutality of ISIS as it targets religious believers.

We must ensure that we are doing everything we can to help prevent genocide, mass atrocities, and war crimes against religious minorities in Iraq and Syria and to ensure perpetrators are held accountable. Today's hearing will provide more insights toward that goal.

This is also true in Africa where Boko Haram and al Shabaab are responsible for their own deadly persecutions. These non-state actors have created global instability through their murderous religious intolerance. If the U.S. does not have a comprehensive strategy to deal with these groups--genocide, killings, beheadings, and sexual violence targeting religious minorities will happen again and again.

It is no coincidence that the worst violators of religious freedom globally are often the biggest threats to our nation; they are those who wish to do Americans the most harm, and those who most want to tear down the pillars of tolerant and democratic societies.

Thus, the promotion of religious liberty is not some isolated human rights concern. It is a key component of our national security and will enhance the effectiveness of U.S. efforts to promote liberty around the world.

Eighteen years ago, Congress passed the landmark International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. That act made protection and promotion of religious freedom a priority of U.S. foreign policy.

Three different Administrations have developed religious freedom policy and three different Administrations have failed to check the overall rise of religion-related violence and the decline of religious freedom globally.

It is worth asking what we can do better. Are new tools or new ideas needed to help address this crisis? Does the IRF Act need to be upgraded to reflect 21st century realities? Where are the flashpoints of persecution that need additional attention and resources and how do we address them?

That is why I introduced the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act (HR 1150) along with Representative Anna Eshoo. The bill is named after former Congressman Frank Wolf, the primary author of the original IRF Act and a tireless champion of the poor and the persecuted.

HR 1150 strengthens the role played by the Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom within the State Department, gives the Ambassador more tools and the ability to better utilize existing resources. The bill will elevate the Ambassador's status, sending the signal inside the government bureaucracy that this policy is a priority. More importantly, it will demonstrate to victims of religious persecution that they will not be forgotten.

The bill also provides a way for the Administration to better coordinate IRF policy, as there is an ever expanding number of Special Envoys, Special Advisors, and Ambassadors that have overlapping mandates. U.S. diplomats also need better training to recognize and understand the issues they will face during their service abroad.

The bill gives the President new options to address the decimation visited on religious minorities by non-state actors and terrorist groups.

Finally, the bill recognizes the connection between the advancing of religious freedom globally and U.S. national security and economic interests.

The evidence has shown repeatedly that U.S. national security and economic interests are directly tied to establishing religious freedom. It can help stabilize growing democracies. It can help sustain economic freedom and enhance the equality of women. We ignore this evidence to our peril.

Religious freedom can act to undermine the religion-related violence perpetuated by nonstate actors. The tolerance and open dialogue embodied in religious freedom is the best antidote to extremism.

Diplomacy by itself will not stop terrorism, but coordinated with military and economic development efforts, it can help undermine the conditions that nurture groups like ISIL, Boko Haram, extremist Hinduism, or radical Buddhism.

HR 1150 passed the House unanimously with bipartisan input and consent. It is currently languishing in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The bill should be moved quickly to help address the worldwide crisis of religious freedom.

In a world where some people are willing to kill and die for their faith and where anti-Semitism persists even in the most tolerant of places, it is more important than ever for the U.S. to engage in a robust religious freedom diplomacy.

The enactment and faithful implementation of HR 1150 will send a clear and urgent message regarding the inherent dignity of every human being, as well as our common global security in the fight against religious persecution, extremism, and terrorism.