Testimony for the Record

Submitted to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

for the Hearing

"Worldwide Persecution of Christians: Responding to New Challenges"

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Chairman Smith, Chairman McGovern and Members of the Commission – thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing and for your efforts to draw attention to the plight of Christians persecuted on account of their faith around the world. I also would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to thank both co-chairs for their tireless efforts over many years not only to raise awareness through hearings like this, but also to pass transformative legislation that has defended the human rights and religious liberty of individuals around the world.

I serve as the Vice President of Advocacy and Policy for World Relief, which is the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals. World Relief's mission is to boldly engage the world's greatest crises in partnership with the church. We began more than eighty years ago in response to the displacement crisis in Europe after World War II. Caring for the persecuted has been a central focus of our work for decades, including partnering with both the U.S. government and with thousands of local churches to resettle more than 300,000 refugees since 1979 as a part of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.

Religious persecution is on the rise globally. That affects individuals of many different faiths, and at World Relief – as Christians who believe that God has made every human being in his image with inherent dignity – we are deeply committed to advocating for religious liberty for all people, not just fellow Christians, consistent with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[1] But the number of Christians alone who face religious persecution is staggering. According to Open Doors US, 388 million Christians

[1] Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

face high levels of persecution and discrimination on account of their faith, accounting for roughly one out of every seven Christians globally.[2]

When persecution becomes sufficiently acute, some are forced to flee. In their most recent report, Open Doors reported that 224,129 Christians had to leave their homes to escape persecution just in the prior year.[3]

To find safety, some flee not just their homes but their countries, crossing borders to become refugees. Refugees are defined under both U.S. law and international treaty as individuals outside of their country of nationality who are unable or unwilling to return because of a well-founded fear of persecution related to their race, religion, political opinion, national origin or membership in a particular social group.[4]

The United States has long offered refuge and religious liberty to refugees who have fled religious persecution. President Trump rightly declared to the UN in 2019 that "America will always be a voice for victims of religious persecution everywhere. No matter where you go," he said, addressing victims of religious persecution, "you have a place in the United States of America."[5]

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program has been a primary way that the United States government has kept this commitment. Last year, leaders of prominent Christian organizations such as the Family Research Council, Focus on the Family and the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention called the resettlement

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[2] Open Doors US, "World Watch List 2026," https://cdn.sanity.io/files/c61knduu/production/20d3834dd5886178eb82fad4811f2a3ec3d3bb9a.pdf, p. 4.
[3] Ibid, p. 5.
[4] Refugee Act of 1980, https://www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/senate-bill/643/text; see also the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, https://www.unhcr.org/media/1951-refugee-convention-and-1967-protocol-relating-status-refugees.
[5] Remarks by President Trump at the United Nations Event on Religious Liberty, New York, New York, September 23, 2019, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-united-nations-event-religious-freedom-new-york-ny/.

program “One of the most essential tools the United States has historically used to uphold religious freedom.”[6]

Indeed, in 2019, President Trump actually became the first president whose annual Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions categorically prioritized for resettlement “refugees who have been persecuted or have a well-founded fear of persecution on account of religion,” including religious minorities from Iran and the former Soviet Union who qualified under the Lautenberg and Specter Amendments.[7]

In the current administration, however, through an abrupt reversal of past commitments, refugees fleeing religious persecution have been completely shut out from resettlement in the U.S. World Relief has partnered with Open Doors US to produce several “State of the Golden Door” reports, tracking the number of Christian refugees resettled from the fifty countries where Christians face the most severe persecution.[8] In Fiscal Year 2026, the findings were stark: for the first time on record, zero Christian refugees were resettled to the United States from any of these countries. Not just a few, zero. That’s down from 29,478 Christian refugees resettled from the top fifty countries in fiscal year 2024.

Other religious minorities from countries with a record of religious persecution, including Jews, Zoroastrians, Ahmadiyya and Rohingya Muslims and various others have also been completely shut out.

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[6] Letter to President Donald Trump and Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem, May 2, 2026, https://worldrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/FINAL-Letter-to-Admin-Afghan-Christians-May-2-2025-1.pdf.

[7] Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2020, November 1, 2019, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-determination-refugee-admissions-fiscal-year-2020/.

[8] World Relief and Open Doors US, “State of the Golden Door,” September 2026, www.worldrelief.org/goldendoor.

That's because refugee resettlement was suspended entirely in January 2025[9] and has since reopened only with a narrow exception for individuals from South Africa,[10] a country without any significant concerns related to religious persecution.[11] By excluding refugees from the rest of the world, the U.S. has slammed the door on those fleeing persecution on account of their faith.

A few weeks ago, President Trump signed the Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for fiscal year 2027, which once again provides only for individuals from South Africa. Christians and others who have fled religious persecution remain excluded – unless the president changes course or Congress requires him to do so.

I urge the Commission to encourage President Trump to reopen the refugee resettlement program to persecuted Christians and others persecuted on account of their religious beliefs, prioritizing them as he did in his first administration.

I'd also ask Congress to reauthorize the Lautenberg and Specter amendments, which have long enjoyed broad bipartisan support. At present, there are at least 14,000 Iranian Christians and other religious minorities who were in the process of resettlement through the Lautenberg program who have been stranded by the resettlement program's sole focus on South Africans.[12]

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[9] "Realigining the United States Refugee Admissions Program," January 20, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/realigning-the-united-states-refugee-admissions-program/.

[10] Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2027, September 25, 2026, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/10/02/2026-20318/presidential-determination-on-refugee-admissions-for-fiscal-year-2027.

[11] South Africa ranks lower than the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and various other countries in the Pew Research Center's assessments of governmental restrictions on religion (https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/12/18/restrictions-in-the-25-most-populous-countries-in-2022/) and it does not appear on the Open Doors World Watch List for Christian persecution or the U.S. State Department's or the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's lists of Countries of Particular Concern for religious liberty violations.

[12] HIAS, "Trump Administration Ends Resettlement Pathway for Persecuted Iranian Religious Minorities," February 3, 2026, https://hias.org/statements/trump-administration-ends-refugee-pathway-persecuted-iranian-religious-minorities/.

Congress could also require the administration by statute to include a priority for those persecuted on account of their religion, with a particular focus on individuals from Countries of Particular Concern as identified by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom such as Burma, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Nigeria, China and Eritrea.[13]

Thank you again for this invitation as well as for your concern and advocacy for persecuted Christians and others facing religious persecution. I am happy to take any questions.

[13] U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) and Special Watch List (SWL) – USCIRF 2026 Report," https://www.uscirf.gov/countries.