

## Promoting Religious Freedom During the Campaign Against Terrorism": Amy Hawthorne Oral Testimony

November 27, 2001 MS. HAWTHORNE: Thank you. Thank you for the opportunity to speak before this distinguished panel. To win the war against terrorism the U.S. Government will need to pursue with equal vigor the short-term imperative of weeding out terrorist groups and their international support networks and the longer-term objective of advancing a positive vision for the peoples of the Arab world that provides an alternative to terrorist destructive ideology. Both efforts are essential. Focusing on the former at the expense of the latter will almost surely prove self defeating. Specifically, this means that the United States will need to shed its reluctance to engage local leaders on the highly sensitive issues of political reform, rule of law and spread of democratic values. The widening of religious freedom must be a cornerstone of this effort. This is not only a humanitarian objective, it is essential to the promotion of U.S. interests in a stable, productive and peaceful Middle East. Of course, tolerance and freedom to worship can never be imposed from the outside. Ultimately, as is true with democratic development more broadly, responsibility versus social, political and cultural change rests with the leaders and citizens of local countries. U.S. efforts can affect local processes only at the margins. We must always respect national sensitivities. An improvement in socioeconomic conditions is critical. Nonetheless, the U.S. has a critical diplomatic role to play. Indeed to stand any chance of success, any conceivable effort to promote religious freedom must have America in a leading role. In the period since September 11th, there has been no clear change in U.S. policy toward the promotion of human rights and religious freedom, more specifically, as regards the Arab world. There are, however, factors influencing an evolution in policy. The most important development is perhaps the most obvious. Osama bin Laden's message of intolerance and violence toward non-Muslims and Muslims alike has placed the issue of religious freedom and tolerance on center stage in the Arab world, and it has given a voice to some of the more reactionary instincts in the Middle East with a message that threatens the region's religious minorities, its millions of moderate Muslim believers, and its citizens as well, who while personally pious, do not wish to live under a strict religious regime. At the same time there's compelling evidence that some regional states may wish to take advantage of America's preoccupation with rooting out terrorism to target religious opponents or perceived opponents with the net effect of a worsening of democratic values, including religious freedom, precisely at the time when they're already under siege from bin Laden sympathizers. Yet some traditional U.S. allies like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as well as in a country like Sudan which wants to improve ties with Washington, regimes may feel emboldened to launch security dragnets with the stated goal of clamping down on terrorists. If not pursued carefully, religious freedom and tolerance may be an early casualty of these efforts. Moderate Muslim figures and local human rights groups who work to bring public scrutiny to religious freedom issues might also suffer from narrowed political space after September 11th. A third development since September 11th is the unprecedented level of interest among the American public in internal political conditions in the Arab world including the repercussions of religious extremism. Bolder U.S. initiatives to promote humanistic values, especially those of religious tolerance and moderation, may be particularly welcome at this time by many Americans. Taken together, the need, motive and opportunity are all present for an enhanced U.S. effort to advance American values of tolerance, religious freedom and human rights, and more generally, democracy. Recognizing the urgency of security cooperation from local governments, it is not too early for the United States to articulate and sustain a bolder approach toward these key issues. Indeed, waiting for the right moment may mean waiting forever. Within the region the state of religious freedom still ranges from fragile to nonexistent, though there are a few hopeful signs. Immediately after September 11th the region, for a variety of reasons, experienced intensified anti-American feelings, with many appearing to endorse directly or tacitly bin Laden's call. Anecdotal reports suggest that this popular reaction may now be subsiding in some quarters, and among some religious and political figures, a fragile counter-trend, still in its infancy, may be developing, reflected in intra-Muslim soul searching about how to combat extremism and intolerance. This is a very positive development that the U.S. should support. In general though one cannot argue that the climate for tolerance and religious freedom has improved in the wake of September 11th. The same problems, an inadequate legal protections, inadequate enforcement of existing laws, and inadequate educational systems that contribute to popular intolerance, persist. Within that region, the United States should pay particularly close attention to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Sudan, because these are the countries that have serious religious freedom problems, and at the same time are countries whose intelligence or security cooperation the U.S. is now seeking in the campaign against terrorism. Regarding Saudi Arabia: until September 11th the Saudis' dismal record on religious freedom issues, including an apparent appeal of extremist ideologies among some segments of Saudi religious leaders and the populace, a discrimination against the Kingdom's Shi'a minority and a total absence of religious freedom for millions of foreign workers, was viewed, at best, as an issue of humanitarian concern to the U.S. After September 11th, those are issues of national security. In Egypt, after years in which issues of religious tolerance were addressed sporadically with the Egyptian Government, Washington must now pursue a more consistent dialog at high levels. Recent improvement in policies toward Copts should definitely be recognized, but the U.S., on all issues, must be willing to speak up more loudly and more firmly than in the past. Key issues include the potential for exploiting the war on terror, to persecute non-extremist Muslims, continuing anti-Semitism in government-backed media, and Coptic issues, especially relating to the retrial of the al-Kosheh case. Regarding Sudan, no country better exemplifies the need to avoid compromising long-term goals of religious freedom for the sake of potential short-term benefits in security and intelligence cooperation. Indeed, Sudan is a test case for how religious tolerance objectives will fare in the war on terror. The U.S. should evaluate Khartoum's recent progress in terrorism on its own merits. Yet the U.S. should also not take steps that would prematurely reward Khartoum before progress in critical issues such as religious freedom has been registered. The most important

policy tool the U.S. can deploy to promote religious freedom in the Middle East is sustained political engagement at high, sometimes the highest, levels. Such engagement will be most meaningful if it's conceived of as part of a broader policy of democracy promotion that projects U.S. values and expresses the priority the U.S. places on tolerance and free expression. Encouraging the expansion of political space and the creation of genuine avenues for political participation will help create space also for moderate Muslim leaders to express their views. The invigorated public diplomacy campaign now underway will be critical to reinforcing and broadening these themes.

Some are reluctant to pressure our Arab friends on human rights issues, particularly one as sensitive as religious freedom, lest it exacerbate instability that many believe is lurking beneath the surface in these societies. This would be an incorrect analysis. These regimes' absorptive capacity for U.S. engagement on issues of religious tolerance and an overall democracy agenda is far greater than is widely believed. Given how unassuming any U.S. pro-democracy effort is likely to be anyway, Washington should not fear that it will be risking instability in these countries by pursuing such an agenda. In the case of Arab governments, especially Saudi Arabia and Egypt, with whom the U.S. has especially close relationships, indeed some religious freedom issues may be best addressed privately. Yet judicious public criticism is crucial at times; what the U.S. Government says publicly matters a great deal. Governments will most likely always resent it and publicly reject it, but it does make a difference. Indeed, our voice carries far more weight than we realize. When the United States commends good performance and criticizes bad behavior, people in the region listen and take note. And when the United States turns a blind eye to the excesses of its friends in the pursuit of, quote, "strategic interests", people in the region listen and take note too. In our public diplomacy, we must always remember that the most appropriate U.S. role is not to try to explain what Islam is to Middle Easterners; that is the responsibility and task of Muslims themselves. But the task for the United States is to project American values in our foreign policy to help Middle Easterners to make better choices about how best to order their own societies. Thank you.