

For Your Information

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), on which we serve, extends its warmest wishes to the world's 1.6 billion Muslims, nearly a quarter of its population, at the advent of Ramadan, the most holy month in the Islamic calendar.

From North and South America to Europe, and Africa and Australia to Asia, including the Middle East, Ramadan reminds Muslims of the soulful ties that bind them together. For Muslims, it is a month to strengthen faith in God and reaffirm love and reliance upon Him and His Word as revealed through the message of the Prophet Muhammad. The month also is an opportunity for Muslims to fulfill God's commandment to fast from sunrise to sunset (2:185), an act that joins Muslims together as equals. It is also far more. Whether reciting the Qur'an, offering prayers, performing charity, or sharing in the nightly Iftar dinner, Ramadan is a month for self-reflection and atonement. It also is a time for Muslims to come closer to God, scripture, family, friends, and neighbors, while gaining a deeper understanding and empathy for those who are less fortunate.

Given all that is happening in today's world, Ramadan provides an especially important inflection point this year. In this time of reflection, we are particularly disturbed that Muslims and non-Muslims alike continue to have their right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion violated by governments, religious extremists, and sometimes even their misguided neighbors.

As USCIRF Commissioners, we serve an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission that monitors these violations around the world and makes recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress. We promote and defend international standards of religious freedom and advocate equally for all, regardless of creed. Both the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and the

[International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) declare that countries must uphold principles of religious freedom, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom to change one's religion or belief; and the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief peacefully. Many countries do not adhere to these principles -- although they are signatories to international agreements -- leading to the oppression and harassment of, and violence against, those who believe and those who do not believe. As Commissioners, we continue to urge the U.S. government to hold countries accountable for violating international standards of human rights and religious freedom.

During this holy month of Ramadan, we trust that all Muslims will reflect on how this freedom relates to their devotion to God as well as to the Qur'anic injunction: "Let there be no coercion in religion" (2:256). Thus, faith can bolster the inalienable right to religious freedom for those of different religions and beliefs. It is our hope that in this holy month, Muslims will remember that God imparted to this world people of great diversity, including diversity in religions and beliefs. As the Qur'an states repeatedly, "Had God so willed, He could have made [all human beings] a single people..." (42:8). Furthermore, He created differences among us not to divide us but to have us learn from one another (49:13).

It is also our hope during Ramadan that non-Muslims will take this opportunity to get to know better their Muslim neighbors and friends, and break bread with them at an evening Iftar. Only through friendship and dialogue can we discard oppressive stereotypes and build communal

bonds.

Finally, it is our hope that all of us remember that the respect and freedom, including religious freedom, which we seek for ourselves are only as possible, protected, and meaningful as the freedoms we allow for others and help them achieve.

Ramadan Kareem!

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