

## For Your Information

December 6, 2012| By [Katrina Lantos Swett](#) and [M. Zuhdi Jasser](#)

The following op-ed appeared in the [Pittsburgh Post-Gazette](#) on December 6, 2012.

Starting on Saturday evening, Dec. 8, Jews in Pittsburgh and across the world will be lighting Hanukkah menorahs, invoking a story that, while rooted in Jewish history, inspires all who treasure liberty.

It's the story of the successful rebellion of ancient Israel's Maccabees against Antiochus -- Syria's Greek tyrant who sacked Jerusalem and banned Judaism, threatening practitioners with death -- and the rededication of their temple after their victory. It's the first act of a stark drama spanning more than 20 centuries, during which Jews have been relentlessly persecuted for their faith but have miraculously survived. And it mirrors the struggle of people everywhere to practice their beliefs -- often at the risk of their lives -- in dignity and freedom.

To this day, many governments still initiate or permit conduct which targets Jews and fosters

anti-Semitism. In Iran, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and other leaders deny the Holocaust, state-run media broadcast anti-Semitic messages and hateful cartoons depict demonic images of Jews. The same is true of state-controlled media elsewhere in the region, where anti-Semitism persists in most educational systems, including in Egypt.

Outside of the Middle East, in post-Soviet Russia, "skinhead" groups commit violent acts of anti-Semitism in the name of Russian nationalism. In Belarus, the government has failed to investigate, identify or punish the vandals of Jewish memorials, cemeteries and other property.

As the daughter of Holocaust survivors from Hungary and as the Muslim-American son of parents from Syria, we were shocked when Martin Gyongyosi, a leader of Hungary's third-strongest political party, recently urged the government to create a list of Jews who pose a "national security risk."

In Western Europe, certain Jewish religious practices have been singled out for restriction. Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland ban kosher slaughter, and authorities and political forces within Germany, Norway and other European nations have tried to ban religious circumcision.

Wherever Jews see their religious freedom violated, so do others. Fully 75 percent of the world's people live in countries that perpetrate or tolerate significant violations, according to a

Pew Research study released last August.

Violations range from clothing restrictions to imprisonment, torture and even murder. Violators include China, which suppresses Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, Falun Gong, the Protestant house church movement and Catholics who resist government control over their affairs. Members of nearly every religious group -- from Baha'is in Iran and Coptic Christians in Egypt to Muslims in Russia -- suffer persecution somewhere in the world. Pakistan's blasphemy law victimizes Muslims and non-Muslims alike, while its anti-Ahmadi provisions criminalize that peaceful faith, creating a culture of violence which permeates the country. North Korea and Eritrea continue the severe abuse of their people's religious freedom.

At the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, on which we serve, we monitor such conditions abroad and make recommendations to the president, secretary of state and members of Congress on how to respond. We annually issue a report that highlights violators, including the world's worst abusers.

In standing for religious freedom, we honor not just an American right, but a universal human right to which nations have assented. Governments across the globe have endorsed both the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

As the menorah's light pierces the darkness, we are reminded that the light of freedom burns

brightly in people's hearts, even when confronted by the darkest tyranny. As Jews celebrate the Festival of Lights and recall the rededication of the temple, it is time for people everywhere to rededicate themselves to freedom, including freedom of conscience and religion.

Katrina Lantos Swett is chair and M. Zuhi Jasser is a commissioner of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom ([www.uscirf.gov](http://www.uscirf.gov)).

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner please contact Samantha Schnitzer at [sschnitzer@uscirf.gov](mailto:sschnitzer@uscirf.gov) or (202) 786-0613.