



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

### USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY: **PLACES OF WORSHIP**

December 2019

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*Vice Chair*

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#### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

## Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites

On October 23, 2019, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a hearing in the U.S. Senate on [\*Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites\*](#) to discuss the global targeting of houses of worship and holy sites and how to protect them. The hearing, led by USCIRF's Chairman, [\*Tony Perkins\*](#), convened an [\*array of witnesses\*](#) that highlighted U.S. policies and programs, as well United Nations initiatives, that aim to stem the violent targeting of houses of worship and ensure that holy places remain safe havens and not places of violence and bloodshed.





The State Department's Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom [Sam Brownback](#) testified regarding the Administration's commitment to ensure the sanctuary of places of worship, and detailed U.S. government initiatives to respond to threats to religious freedom, including those directed at holy sites:

- The Department of State convened its second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in July 2019. At the end of the Ministerial, a [Statement on Protecting Places of Worship](#) was released that was endorsed by 45 countries.
- The State Department hosted its first regional conference on protecting cultural heritage of religious communities in Rabat, Morocco, in October 2019.
- President Trump [announced](#) that an additional \$25 million will be used to prevent the intentional destruction of religious sites and relics, and will be used to restore key cultural heritage sites and places of worship.



The High Representative of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, [H.E. Miguel Moratinos](#), explained how the United Nations is bringing the international community together to address this global problem, including the development of the [UN Plan of Action to Safeguard Holy Sites](#), launched in September 2019:

- The UN Plan of Action provides concrete recommendations to support countries in their efforts to ensure the safety of religious places and worshippers. These recommendations focus both on the prevention of violent attacks by identifying vulnerabilities and potential threats to religious sites, along with preparedness and response to attacks through analysis of potential threats and risk assessment.
- To implement the UN Plan of Action and foster mutual respect and understanding, the High Representative explained his office's work to develop a global communications campaign, shared an online map of religious sites, announced a global conference in 2020 to build political support, and outlined UN programs focused on the protection of religious sites from terrorism related threats.
- The High Representative appealed to the U.S. government to support the implementation of the plan and explore synergies between his office and the [International Religious Freedom Alliance](#).

[Hassan Abbas](#), Distinguished Professor of International Relations at Near East South Asia Strategic Studies Center, National Defense University, discussed the various contexts in which terrorists select places of worship as targets to better assess how to effectively prevent such attacks:

- The violent targeting of houses of worship is a global problem that encompasses almost all major religions. Houses of worship are soft targets that have significant symbolic value in terms of defining a community. They are targeted to make people feel insecure where they expect to be completely safe. Mr. Abbas further attributed the problem to “a serious lack of pluralism and growing intolerance about religious practices and rituals” that breeds prejudice in many parts of the world.
- To combat this violence, Mr. Abbas recommended that political leaders move immediately to denounce attacks and stand with victims in the wake of attacks, as was done in New Zealand following the Christchurch mosque attacks. He also recommended that government should foster interfaith and intra-faith dialogue to prevent incitement to violence and promote counter narratives to extremism.
- In ensuring that religious sites are not soft targets, Mr. Abbas stressed the need to offer specialized security training to the management of religious institutions, which requires building trust between religious communities and law enforcement. He recommended the development and dissemination of best practices for securing places of worship and encouraged close coordination between local law enforcement and management of faith-based centers.



Global Director for Religious Engagement at Search for Common Ground, [Sharon Rosen](#), addressed the importance of building mutual trust and reducing tensions around holy places:

- In consultation with religious leaders worldwide, Search for Common Ground developed the [Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites](#) that aims to improve the protection of holy sites and promote inter-religious reconciliation. The code is versatile and was designed to be implemented across faiths, cultures, and geography.
- Ms. Rosen stressed that security approaches alone cannot solve this problem, recommending that the U.S. government support holistic and multi-stakeholder approaches to safeguarding holy sites. As religious leaders are often best positioned to lead efforts to foster inter-group acceptance and collaboration, their engagement in addressing this problem is needed.
- She further called on the U.S. government to commit more resources to reducing the risk of attacks on holy sites, along with addressing chronic conflict and fragility that fuels violence and social tensions.



Chairman Perkins summed up the hearing by saying, “There is a recognition that this is an issue, and universal agreement that we have to protect houses of worship and religious sites. [We] need to communicate the need that exists globally, but ... the most important item is action, which is what USCIRF will focus on and has focused on in our recommendations to the U.S. government.... We need to act quickly because people are not only losing their lives, but communities are being frightened away from their sense of community that they find only in these houses of worship that they find by joining with people of like-minded faith.”

USCIRF recommends:

- The U.S. government continue and expand programs to train and equip local officials and communities to protect places of worship and other holy sites, especially in countries where such sites face a high risk of attack;
- The U.S. government support the development and dissemination of global best practices for the safeguarding of houses of worship and religious sites; and
- The U.S. government support the UN Alliance of Civilization in the implementation of the UN Plan of Action to Safeguard Holy Sites, including through engagement between the International Alliance on Religious Freedom to promote implementation in member countries.

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