



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET

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KEY IRF-RELATED POSITIONS

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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.

Key U.S. Government Positions Related to International Religious Freedom

Overview

The president of the United States is responsible for nearly 4,000 [political appointments](#) throughout the federal government, including approximately 1,200 that require Senate confirmation. Some of these positions have responsibility for implementing U.S. policies designed to protect and promote religious freedom abroad.

This factsheet provides an overview of the key political appointments within the U.S. government that have the most relevance to international religious freedom (IRF). The primary IRF positions that the president appoints derive from the [International Religious Freedom Act of 1998](#) (IRFA): the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom at the State Department; the Special Adviser for International Religious Freedom on the National Security Council (NSC) staff; and three of the nine Commissioners of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). (The leaders of each political party in the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate appoint the other six USCIRF Commissioners.) In addition, various current or recent State Department special envoy and representative positions—created either by acts of Congress or by presidents or secretaries of state—are relevant to IRF promotion.

The factsheet does not, however, list every political appointment involved in U.S. IRF efforts. For example, the State Department has presidential appointees who manage cross-cutting human rights portfolios, including the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Criminal Justice, and the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. In addition, special envoys or representatives for specific countries, regions, or conflicts also may be involved in issues related to IRF. Finally, U.S. ambassadors regularly raise the administration's concerns regarding religious freedom conditions with host governments in countries around the globe.

Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom

In 1998, Congress passed IRFA in order to make the protection and promotion of religious freedom abroad a higher priority in U.S. foreign policy (see [USCIRF factsheet](#)). To institutionalize this key concern in the U.S. government bureaucracy,

IRFA created the Ambassador-at-Large position and the [Office of International Religious Freedom](#) (IRF Office) within the State Department, as well as USCIRF. Among its duties, the IRF Office is responsible for producing the [Annual Report on International Religious Freedom](#) mandated by IRFA, which is separate from the State Department's annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.

IRFA states that the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom “shall be a principal adviser to the President and the principal adviser to the Secretary of State regarding matters affecting religious freedom abroad.” He or she oversees the IRF Office and is responsible for coordinating the State Department's efforts to protect and promote freedom of religion or belief internationally. The Ambassador-at-Large gives public remarks about religious freedom, travels abroad to meet with foreign government officials, and meets with civil society groups and other religious freedom advocates. The Ambassador-at-Large position has been held by [Robert Seiple](#) (1999–2000), [John Hanford](#) (2002–2009), [Suzan Johnson Cook](#) (2011–2013), [David Saperstein](#) (2015–2017), and [Samuel D. Brownback](#) (2018–2021).

Previously, the IRF Office had been part of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL). However, after the [Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016](#) (Frank Wolf Act) amended IRFA to state that the Ambassador-at-Large “shall report directly to the Secretary of State,” the State Department in 2019 moved the IRF Office to fall under the Undersecretariat for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights (J), where it has greater access to senior State Department leadership.

National Security Council Special Adviser on International Religious Freedom

IRFA called for the appointment of a [Special Adviser](#) to the President on International Religious Freedom within the NSC staff, but for many years successive administrations did not create such a position. Instead, they had an NSC staffer cover religious freedom within a broader portfolio. In 2016, the Frank Wolf Act reiterated that the NSC position was intended to assist the Ambassador-at-Large to coordinate IRF policies and strategies throughout the executive branch. In February 2020, President Donald J. Trump appointed [Sarah E. Makin-Acciani](#) to the position, making her the first person to serve in the role full-time.

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

IRFA also established USCIRF as an independent legislative-branch agency. The president appoints three [Commissioners](#), and House and Senate leadership of both parties appoint six. Additionally, the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom serves as a non-voting ex officio member.

USCIRF's mandate has four primary elements: (a) the annual and ongoing review of the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom abroad; (b) the making of policy recommendations to the president, the secretary of state, and Congress with respect to matters involving international religious freedom; (c) compiling lists of persons it determines to be imprisoned, detained, disappeared, placed under house arrest, tortured, or subject to forced renunciations of faith for their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy by the government of a foreign country or a non-state actor it recommends for either country of particular concern (CPC) or entity of particular concern (EPC) designation under IRFA; and (d) tracking the U.S. government's implementation of its recommendations and reviewing, to the extent practicable, their effectiveness in advancing religious freedom internationally.

IRF-Related Special Envoys and Special Representatives

Presidents and secretaries of state have used special envoys and representatives to focus attention and diplomatic resources on high-priority issues. The senior status of these envoys can [provide](#) them with greater access to senior foreign officials and news media. However, some diplomats and politicians have [criticized](#) a heavy reliance on special envoys, arguing that it leads to confusion within the policymaking apparatus and that their functions should be integrated into the State Department's regional and functional bureaus.

In 2017, then Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson [announced](#) a reorganization of the State Department that eliminated or transferred 36 out of 66 then-existing special envoy, special representative, and independent ambassador-at-large positions. Those that were eliminated included several related to IRF issues, such as the [U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities](#) and the [U.S. Special Representative and Office on Religion and Global Affairs](#).

The following positions relevant to IRF remained after the reorganization:

Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism

In 2004, Congress passed the [Global Anti-Semitism Review Act](#), which created the position of [Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism](#). The purpose of the position is to monitor and combat acts of antisemitism and antisemitic incitement that occur in foreign countries, including by developing and implementing policies and projects to support these efforts. The Special Envoy also provides input on global antisemitism for the annual State Department reports on Human Rights Practices and International Religious Freedom. The Special Envoy position has been held by [Gregg Rickman](#) (2006–2009), [Hannah Rosenthal](#) (2009–2012), [Ira Forman](#) (2013–2017), and [Elan Carr](#) (2019–2021).

Under the Global Anti-Semitism Review Act, the Secretary of State appointed the Special Envoy. However, the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism Act, which passed the [House of Representatives](#) and the [Senate](#) in December 2020 and was [signed](#) by President Trump on January 13, 2021, made the role a presidential appointment, with Senate confirmation, and elevated the position to ambassador level.

Special Adviser for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia

In 2014, in the [Near East and South Central Asia Religious Freedom Act](#), Congress urged the president to appoint a Special Envoy to monitor conditions for religious minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia regions, promote their right to religious freedom, and combat intolerance, discrimination, and other abuses against them. In response to this legislation, in 2015 the State Department created a Special Adviser position, which [Knox Thames](#) held until 2019.

Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues

In 2004, Congress passed the [North Korean Human Rights Act](#)—most recently [reauthorized](#) in 2018—which created the position of [Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues](#). The purpose of the Special Envoy position is to “coordinate and promote efforts to improve respect for the fundamental human rights of the people of North Korea.”

In November 2009, then President Barack Obama appointed [Dr. Robert R. King](#) as the first person to hold the position full-time. After Secretary Tillerson’s 2017 reorganization, the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues was moved from the Office of the Secretary to the Undersecretariat for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, with the Undersecretary assuming the title and functions of the Special Envoy. Critics argued that the move [contradicts](#) the 2008 [reauthorization](#) of the North Korean Human Rights Act, which states that the envoy “should be a full-time position” with the rank of ambassador.

Special Coordinator on Tibetan Issues

Both the William J. Clinton and George W. Bush administrations had appointed a Special Coordinator on Tibetan Issues in order to reflect the U.S. government’s concern with the Chinese government’s ongoing abuses against Tibetan Buddhists. The [Tibetan Policy Act](#) of 2002 made this appointment mandatory. The Special Coordinator’s mandate includes coordinating U.S. policies and projects related to Tibet and working to promote a substantive dialogue between His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government. Some [Tibetan advocacy groups](#) had hoped that the Special Coordinator would be given ambassadorial rank, but the version of the bill that passed did not do so.

The individuals appointed to this position have served concurrently in other positions at the State Department. From 2014 to 2017, the Special Coordinator was [Dr. Sarah Sewall](#), who was also serving as Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights. In October 2020, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo [designated](#) Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Robert A. Destro to serve concurrently as the Special Coordinator on Tibetan Issues.

The [Tibetan Policy and Support Act](#), which was [passed](#) by both the House of Representatives and the Senate and signed by President Trump in December 2020, instructs the Special Coordinator to seek to establish international coalitions to oppose any attempt by the Chinese government to interfere in the reincarnation or succession process of Tibetan Buddhist lamas. In addition, the law requires the secretary of state to ensure that the Office of the Special Coordinator has sufficient staff to assist in carrying out its responsibilities.



Conclusion

Religious freedom is not only a universal human right, it is a foundation of peaceful, stable societies. Countries with dismal religious freedom records present some of the greatest national security challenges to the United States. Despite the importance of the issue to U.S. foreign policy, in past presidential transitions, the position of Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and Commissioner vacancies on USCIRF have gone unfilled for a year or more into a new administration. USCIRF urges incoming President Joseph R. Biden to promptly appoint, and the Senate to quickly confirm, a well-qualified, experienced individual to be Ambassador-at-Large for IRF, as well as make timely appointments to USCIRF. Additionally, USCIRF encourages the incoming administration to maintain the Special Adviser for International Religious Freedom as a full-time position on the NSC staff.

In terms of other positions, each new president and secretary of state arrives with their own priorities and preferences, and there are legitimate concerns about special envoys and representatives proliferating at the State Department. Nevertheless, eliminating or “double-hatting” positions such as those mentioned in this factsheet could undermine the U.S. government’s important efforts to promote religious freedom abroad. Religious freedom issues are complicated and sensitive, and progress requires sustained, high-level engagement. USCIRF urges the new administration to give priority to special envoys and representatives whose missions might otherwise not receive sufficient attention from the State Department’s regional or functional bureaus in their absence. In addition, all such positions should be provided with the financial resources and staff required to fulfill their mandate.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on threats to religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.