

Remarks by Ambassador Sam Brownback
USCIRF Hearing on Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites
Wednesday, October 23, 2019
3:00 – 4:30PM
106 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Good afternoon and thank you for having me. I am honored to be here with my colleagues on the Commission. I am grateful for your defense of religious freedom every day. And appreciate you having this important hearing on protecting houses of worship and holy sites.

This is a timely hearing.

There is an ongoing, worldwide crisis where diversity is under assault, where governments and non-state actors attack individuals and communities because of their beliefs. And oftentimes those same actors systematically work to destroy symbols of those cultures and faiths.

As the State Department's Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, I am constantly pressing governments to stop persecuting religious groups they deem a threat to their rule, such as China targeting Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians. In addition, I am focused on how terrorists and other non-state actors – including but not limited to ISIS, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Boko Haram – have been among the worst abusers of religious minority communities in recent years. Terrorist violence against religious minorities threatens people of all faiths and none: Muslims and Buddhists, Christians and Jews, Yezidis and Baha'is, Hindus and Sikhs, converts and those holding no beliefs at all.

In China, the government has pushed thousands of Tibetan monks and nuns out of their homes and bulldozed their monasteries. In 2017, the Chinese government evicted approximately 9,000 monks and nuns from the Larung Gar [pron: Lah-RUNG GAR] Institute of Tibetan Buddhism and demolished an estimated 4,000 residences there. The same year, authorities destroyed at least 2,000 residences and evicted approximately 2,500 monks and nuns at Yachen Gar [pron: YAH-chin GAR] Institute of Tibetan Buddhism. We are also deeply concerned by press reports and satellite imagery analysis that found in just two years, dozens of Uighur cemeteries and mosques have been destroyed in Xinjiang. Satellite images show evidence of lost cemeteries and demolished sacred sites in China's northwestern region of Xinjiang.

In the face of these challenges, the United States is responding both in principle and action, working vigorously to help advance the right of all people, worldwide, to practice their faith.

Secretary Pompeo convened two Ministerial summits to engage the international community about how to promote and protect religious freedom for all. This year's Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom reaffirmed international commitments to promote religious freedom and urged progress towards concrete outcomes that can produce durable, positive change.

A broad range of stakeholders, including over 100 governments and international organizations, and more than 1,000 members of civil society organizations, including religious leaders, attended. At the end of this year's Ministerial, we released a statement on protecting places of worship, and I was glad to see more than 45 countries sign it with as a full endorsement.

But we are doing more than just issuing statements. We are also convening regional actors to discuss challenges and opportunities related to protecting religious sites.

Earlier this month, I launched with our Moroccan partners the first regional conference on protecting cultural heritage of religious communities in Rabat. This conference, co-sponsored by the State Department and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Morocco, brought together government officials, religious leaders, heritage experts, and NGO activists to discuss tangible ways to restore cultural and religious sites. Why? Because they are important to our shared history; critical for building respect among diverse communities; and essential to cultivating peace.

Finally, I want to mention the historic event on religious freedom hosted by President Trump at the United Nations in September.

This was the first ever head-of-state level event at the UN focused on religious freedom.

At the event, President Trump announced an additional \$25 million to protect religious freedom and religious sites and relics. These new funds will be used to prevent the intentional destruction of religious sites and relics, and we are hopeful it will contribute to meaningful restoration of key cultural heritage sites and places of worship around the world.

We were honored that Secretary General of the United Nations, Secretary Guterres participated in the event. We are grateful for his commitment to religious freedom, and welcome the initiative of the UN's Alliance of Civilizations. Thank you to **His Excellency Miguel Moratinos** [*Mor-uh-teen-os*] for joining us today to talk about that important work.

We envision this new funding helping rebuild areas that have been attacked and damaged by foes of religious freedom. We hope that these funds will also be used to help communities learn best practices to protecting people of faith as they worship. And we also hope that by doing so, we can usher in a new time of respect for people of all faiths, all over the world. We know that restoring and protecting these sites can even stimulate the local economy for growth.

CONCLUSION

One of my favorite moments at the Ministerial last July was our opening event – we heard testimony from three representatives of religious communities who had recently been attacked. We heard accounts from a survivor of a mosque attack in New Zealand; the Rabbi from the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh; and from an advocate of Christian communities in Sri Lanka, following the horrendous Easter bombings there last April.

The overwhelming feeling of that opening segment was not sadness – but hope. And today even amidst the challenges, we should have hope that we can help these communities, encourage their faith, and even help build them back up.

Imagine what we could do... imagine if we restore the Tomb of Jonah in northern Iraq. That action would state to terrorists all over the world: *you are bend on destruction...but we will rebuild.*

I have been in dilapidated churches, run down during the Soviet era. Their restoration would also be the restoration of souls.

I have seen pictures of religious buildings in occupied territory used as hay barns. Humanity will be better off if they are restored and protected.

Thank you.