



Conversation with USCIRF: The President's Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom

Opening Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Gayle Manchin, USCIRF Chair:

Thank you, Dwight. Acting Administrator Barsa, thank you for taking the time to join us. We're really looking forward to today's conversation.

As previously mentioned, USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan advisory body, mandated to make policy recommendations to the U.S. government on matters of international religious freedom. Some of you listening today might be familiar with our Annual Report, released by May 1 each year, which covers our findings and recommendations on the countries that we find to be the worst religious freedom violators globally. In addition, we issue publications throughout the year on a variety of countries and issues related to international religious freedom. We have a Religious Prisoners of Conscience project, through which Commissioners advocate on behalf of specific individuals imprisoned because of their religious

beliefs, identity, or advocacy. We also maintain a public database of victims of specific religious freedom violations.

As part of USCIRF’s mandate, we monitor and assess the U.S. government’s implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. IRFA is the 1998 law that established USCIRF. It also established the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom, or IRF Office, currently led by Ambassador-at-Large Sam Brownback. IRFA makes clear that promoting freedom of religion or belief abroad should be a key foreign policy priority of the United States. Over the years, however, USCIRF has seen that some administrations have implemented IRFA more vigorously than others.

Over the past five years, U.S. international religious freedom efforts have been on an increasingly positive trajectory. Starting in 2015, under the leadership of then Ambassador-at-Large David Saperstein—who was USCIRF’s first Chair from 1999 to 2000—the State Department’s IRF Office heightened its diplomatic efforts, reinvigorated the “country of particular concern” process, and expanded programs and training on religious freedom. In late 2016, Congress passed and then President Barack Obama signed the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, enacting important updates to IRFA’s provisions, including requiring the designation of “entities of particular concern”. And since 2017, the Trump Administration has made international religious freedom one of its highest priorities, a point stressed repeatedly by senior officials, including Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and Ambassador Brownback.

The Trump Administration has hosted two Ministerials to Advance Religious Freedom and President Trump presided over a side event on religious freedom

during the United Nations General Assembly session last year. It launched a new International Religious Freedom Alliance earlier this year and, for the first time ever, President Trump appointed a staffer on the National Security Council to focus solely on international religious freedom, fulfilling a longtime USCIRF recommendation. Most recently, in June, the President issued the Executive Order that we're discussing today.

In addition, since 2017, USAID has placed a heightened emphasis on humanitarian aid for religious groups targeted for persecution or genocide, particularly in Iraq. It has expanded its local partnerships with faith-based groups. And it has prioritized programs to promote religious freedom, tolerance, and pluralism in a number of countries. We look forward to hearing more from Acting Administrator Barsa about some of these programs.

Another area I would like to discuss today, since my professional background is as an educator, is USAID's efforts to combat religious intolerance and promote religious tolerance in education systems. USCIRF has long urged both the State Department and USAID to sponsor programs to assist countries to develop school textbooks, curricula, and teacher training materials that accurately portray religious groups and do not contain hateful language or incite violence. Studies of school textbooks done by USCIRF over the years, as well as by NGOs, have identified a number of countries where such programs are urgently needed, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, Turkey, and Lebanon.

Let me now turn the floor over to Vice Chair Perkins, who will say a few words about the Executive Order.