

**U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing
Governance in Nigeria: Foundation for Securing Freedom of Religion or Belief
May 5, 2025**

Written Testimony by Samah A. Norquist

Chairman Stephen Schneck, Commissioner Maureen Ferguson of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing. It's an honor to be here and it's an incredible honor for me to testify today alongside the architect and prime mover of defending international religious freedom, Congressman Frank Wolf.

My testimony today will focus on policy recommendations for the administration and congress to address religious freedom violations.

When the Founding Fathers wrote the U.S. Constitution, individual liberty was their North Star to create an everlasting true path for America's peace stability and prosperity. It was the only path.

Religious freedom was the one individual liberty that all the Founding Fathers uncompromised on to protect the citizens from government interference or prosecution. The belief in natural rights is clearly reflected in the Declaration of Independence – *“all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”* It was vital to protect our freedoms from any control or infringement from the government and when the Bill of Rights was ratified in 1791, religious freedom was the first right that the Founding Fathers wanted to protect.

The understanding of the significance of religion by America's Founders extended beyond America. In his Notes on the State of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson wrote *“Difference of opinion is advantageous in religion... Let us reflect that [the world] is inhabited by a thousand millions of people. That these profess probably a thousand different systems of religion. That ours is but one of that thousand.”*

American lawmakers continued to emphasize the vital role that faiths play in people's lives and the impact on their societies.

In 1998, congress passed **H.R. 2431, the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA)**. Congressman Frank Wolf, a republican, introduced the legislation and galvanized bi-partisan support, of both republicans and democrats. President Bill Clinton signed the bill into law in 1998.

Advancing and protecting religious freedom around the world became the law of the land bringing it into the United States's foreign policy.

In 2015, congressman Chris Smith, a republican, introduced **H.R. 1150, The Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act** to once again underscore the United States commitment to the protection and advancement of international religious liberty. It also provides more effective tools to amplify America's response to religious persecution and discrimination globally through diplomacy, foreign assistance and presidential actions. President Barak Obama signed the bill into law in 2016.

Religious freedom is on the retreat across the globe. Discrimination, harassment, repression and, of course, persecution against communities of faith are on the rise worldwide. Believers of nearly all faiths including Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Yazidis, and Bahais have been targeted by a state or a non-state actor.

Both republican and democrat administrations included language on the protection of international religious freedom in their national security strategy.

However, it was during the first Trump administration that religious liberty became a central pillar of U.S. foreign policy. The 2017 National Security Strategy recognized religious freedom as integral to U.S. national security, acknowledging that protecting religious minorities helps prevent instability and extremism.

At the 2019 United Nations General Assembly, President Trump reaffirmed his commitment, "Protecting religious freedom is one of my highest priorities." This bold vision for American foreign policy demonstrated the centrality of the international religious freedom to our national interest.

During the first Trump term, I served as the chief advisor to the USAID Administrator for international religious freedom. Under effective political leadership, we were able to expand USAID's partnerships with faith-based and local organizations to provide direct assistance to victims of religious persecution as well as creating and implementing new assistance programs and funding to help communities of faith that were discriminated against or marginalized.

When President Trump signed the Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act (H.R. 390) in 2018, USAID led efforts through the Genocide Recovery and Persecution Response (GRPR) initiative to assist persecuted Christian and Yazidi communities in northern Iraq.

In 2018, President Trump signed H.R. 1918 – the Nicaragua Human Rights and Anticorruption Act. USAID partnered with the International Republican Institute (IRI) to focus on the Nicaraguan government repression against religious leaders.

It is worth noting that one year ago, in May 2024, Secretary Marco Rubio spoke at an IRI event honoring exiled Catholic Bishop Rolando Álvarez for his advocacy for religious freedom in Nicaragua.

It is unclear to me that Secretary Rubio knew that IRI's work on religious freedom in Nicaragua was funded by USAID.

Most significantly, in December 2020, the Trump Administration recognized Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern due to the brutality of religious freedom violations against Christians by groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West African Province (ISWAP) and the government's failure to stop the targeted attacks on Christians and churches and protect these communities.

However, the Biden Administration reversed the designation and removed Nigeria from the CPC list.

When we speak of atrocities committed in Nigeria, we often hear either that it's a farmer-herder conflict over land and food resources or it's a religious conflict in which Islamic terrorist groups commit atrocities to the Christian communities. Whatever the interpretation of the nature of the conflict, the results are the same. Vulnerable and mainly Christian communities are being attacked, killed, kidnapped and raped and the government is ignoring the brutality of the conflict and failed to arrest those who perpetrators and bring them to justice.

Nigeria has the largest population in Africa and Christians make 50% of the Nigerian population. The United States has trade relations and security cooperation with Nigeria. With that in mind and from a national security perspective, the increase in violence and attacks in Nigeria indicates the growth of militant and extremist groups' presence and power without serious and immediate efforts by the Nigerian government to stop these groups.

The USAID mission in Nigeria provided foreign assistance humanitarian assistance to help those who are displaced in IDP camps because of the violence and the militant attacks as well as assistance programs in education, health and governance. But, without real pressure from the U.S. government to end the attacks on religious communities, particularly the Christians, these communities will continue to be persecuted. The world witnessed the genocide committed by similar extremist groups in Syria and Iraq not too long ago against Yazidis, Christians, and other minority groups and impact of that genocide on the stability and security in the region.

I worked directly with the White House and Congress to streamline policy and funding. Given USAID's programmatic nature in the field, this targeted approach yielded effective programs aligning with the president's directive, showcasing America's support and generosity globally.

Despite the political support and the availability of funds to execute programs, I constantly faced obstacles from within the State Department both in Washington, DC and in the field. U.S. ambassadors often blocked initiatives to implement the administration's policies. Policies set by the President of the United States and reaffirmed by the Secretary of States were ignored if those policies conflicted with their views or the host governments preferences.

Unfortunately, U.S. Ambassadors hindered efforts to support persecuted communities and undercut broader foreign policy objectives.

During my tenure, four ambassadors in key countries obstructed USAID programs promoting religious freedom including in Nigeria. The Ambassador blocked the implementation of

programs designed by the USAID mission to work directly with local faith communities shortly before the end of the first Trump term.

USAID mission directors worked under the authorities of the Chief of Missions – the Ambassadors. This meant that even if a mission director in cooperation with USAID Washington designated USAID funds, designed programs and came up the procurement mechanisms for implementing USAID programs to help victims of religious violence, the Ambassador vetoed the work to be implemented.

Conflicts among regional and functional bureaus within the State Department on who decides and controls what made it impossible for the State department to provide effective assistance and programs promoting religious freedom.

As the chief coordinator for International Religious Freedom, I witnessed how USAID's independence in delivering foreign assistance was critical to advancing religious freedom.

Contrary to the Department of State, the collaboration of USAID's political leadership of regional and functional bureaus along with USAID's civil servants and foreign service officers were instrumental in executing the President's policy on advancing international religious freedom. This was particularly true with the Africa Bureau and USAID's mission in Nigeria.

What is clear, however, that those who actively ended USAID's mission and autonomy also killed President Trump's Executive Order 13926 on religious freedom, signed in June 2020. The executive order mandated that USAID, and the State Department prioritize religious freedom in their programs. They were the same people who eliminated USAID's comprehensive plan to implement President Trump's EO and injecting protecting international religious freedom in the bloodstream of America's foreign policy.

With the dismantling of USAID and integrating it into the State Department, it is unclear how policies to help victims of religious violence become tangible programs and assistance on the ground. The State Department lacks the expertise and the structure to implement development and / or humanitarian programs.

America's leadership on advancing religious freedom on the world stage and on the grounds working with vulnerable communities is instrumental. America's absence allows adversaries like China to move into strategic countries such as Nigeria. China's presence and influence is expanding in Africa, the Middle East and in Latin America.

Former USAID Administrator, Mark Green, my former boss often said, ***“China does not do development, China does predatory lending.”***

The centrality of international religious freedom to the United States's foreign policy during the first Trump Administration was unprecedented. On January 19, 2021, one day before the end of his first term, the Trump Administration designated the brutal actions and abuses committed by

the People's Republic of China (PRC) under the control of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as genocide against the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Region in Western China.