



## **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**

### **Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

**Tony Perkins, USCIRF Chair:**

Good afternoon and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom’s hearing on “Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites.” I would like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us today to offer their expertise and recommendations, and Senator Coons and his office for providing this room for us.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad, using international standards to do so, and makes policy recommendations to Congress, the President, and the Secretary of State. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this hearing.

Houses of worship and other religious sites should be sanctuaries where worshippers feel safe to practice their faith. Under international law, the ability of religious communities to establish and maintain houses of worship is an essential element of the freedom of religion or belief, as this fundamental freedom includes the right to manifest religion or belief through worship in a community with others. To protect this right, states must ensure that religious places, sites, shrines, and

other symbols are fully respected and protected, including when vulnerable to desecration or destruction.

Despite the protection afforded under international law, violent attacks on houses of worship are increasingly occurring globally, turning these sacred and peaceful spaces into unimaginable sites of bloodshed. Recently, massacres directed at worshippers in Sri Lanka, New Zealand, and just two weeks ago in Germany, made global headlines. Similar attacks directed at houses of worship have occurred across the world in countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso.

The attack on the synagogue in Halle, Germany during Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, is another sobering example of the reemergence of anti-Semitism around the world. The gunman chose to attack on Yom Kippur knowing that the number of people in the building would be higher than usual. He repeatedly shot at the door's lock and set off an explosive device, but thankfully was unable to breach the building due to enhanced security measures that the synagogue recently installed.

In addition to houses of worship, different types of buildings and properties that are significant to religious communities, such as cemeteries, monasteries, or community centers, are also targeted. Gravestones of Jewish people have been defaced with swastikas. Buddhist educational centers have been bulldozed. Crosses torched. No faith is immune from this violence.

Attacks on houses of worship are reprehensible, as they aim to destroy the place of worship precisely for its religious significance, cause harm to a unique religious group, and instill fear in those that worship there. The devastating impacts of these attacks extend far beyond those directly affected by the violence, sending shockwaves through faith communities who fear that their own congregation may be the next target.

Today, we are focusing on identifying how the United States and international community can respond to this global uptick in violence targeting houses of worship to ensure the safety of those gathering to worship. Specifically, we will evaluate efforts to ensure that houses of worships are hard, not soft, targets.

USCIRF in its 2019 Annual Report recommended that the U.S. government implement 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. We will explore the implementation of this recommendation, along with highlighting other U.S. programs, intergovernmental initiatives,

interfaith efforts, and related policy recommendations that aim to protect the peacefulness of holy places.

I will now turn to my colleague, Vice Chair Gayle Manchin, to further explain the array of threats facing houses of worship.

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