



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The First 25 Years: IRFA Accomplishments and Next Steps

Monday, October 23, 2023

3:00-5:00 pm ET

**Kennedy Caucus Room
325 Russell Senate Office Building**

REMARKS AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

Chair Abraham Cooper:

Good afternoon and welcome. My name is Abraham Cooper, and I am honored to serve as chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF. Thank you for joining us to mark the 25th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. I would like to extend a special thank you to Senator Chris Coons and his staff for reserving this room for us.

In October 1998, Congress passed and then President Bill Clinton signed IRFA, making the promotion of freedom of religion or belief abroad a higher priority in U.S. foreign policy. IRFA established USCIRF and the State Department's Ambassador at Large, currently Ambassador Rashad Hussain, and Office of International Religious Freedom. The law required monitoring and annual reporting on conditions and delineated consequences for the worst violators. It also incorporated religious freedom concerns into U.S. diplomacy, programs, training, and refugee and asylum policies.

Twenty-five years later, religious freedom issues are more integrated than ever before into U.S. foreign relations. We have seen the benefits of IRFA. Violations have been documented and exposed and violators sanctioned. Repressive governments have changed laws and policies, and they have released prisoners. Issues of international religious freedom, or IRF, now receive significant media and public attention.

Importantly, the United States no longer stands alone in recognizing the significance of freedom of religion or belief, or FoRB, for everyone, everywhere. Various countries and the European Union have created FoRB ambassador or special envoy positions. These and other countries have established an international contact group and alliance and have held regular IRF Ministerial conferences. Networks of parliamentarians and of non-governmental organizations focused on FoRB have also developed. USCIRF is proud to have been involved in the founding of both the international parliamentary network and the Washington D.C. based NGO roundtable and continues to actively engage with both.

USCIRF remains a unique entity in this space; no other country has a similar commission. USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan advisory body that monitors conditions abroad, based on international standards; evaluates U.S. policy; and makes independent policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress. USCIRF has nine Commissioners. Three are appointed by the President, three are appointed by the leadership of the Senate from each political

party, and three are appointed by the leadership of the House from each political party. USCIRF has a nonpartisan professional staff of about 20.

Commissioners are private-citizen volunteers. We come from different political parties, different faith and professional backgrounds, and different parts of the country. Yet we all agree on the importance of freedom of religion or belief for everyone, everywhere. We also agree on the need to shine a light on the severe abuses so many individuals—of all faiths and of none—suffer simply for exercising their fundamental right to religious freedom. We were among the first to call for recognizing China’s horrific persecution of Uyghurs as a genocide. We continue to call out Russia for its antisemitic rhetoric and Holocaust distortion in an effort to justify the country’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. And last week, we condemned the brutal terrorist onslaught by Hamas, whose antisemitic charter justifies violence against innocent Israelis. And we reiterated that invoking any religion to justify taking innocent lives has no place in any society.

Today, we are going to discuss IRFA’s importance, the accomplishments of its first quarter-century, and steps to take in the years to come. Our first speakers are two of the key Congressional sponsors of what became IRFA: Commissioner and former Representative Frank Wolf and former Senator Don Nickles. Former Senator Joseph Lieberman had planned to join us but had a last-minute change of schedule, so we have pre-recorded remarks from him instead. After that, we will have a panel discussion highlighting the importance of advocating for specific victims of religious freedom violations. And to conclude, Commissioners and staff will share their thoughts on IRFA’s and USCIRF’s impact and their suggestions for the future.

Before we start, I would like to thank the former USCIRF Commissioners I see in the audience here today.

I also want to thank Congress for its commitment to advancing international religious freedom and continued support of USCIRF. We expect members of Congress to stop by to offer their comments throughout the event, in addition to written and video remarks provided to us.

Let me now give the floor to USCIRF Vice Chair Fred Davie, who will outline some key IRFA and USCIRF accomplishments and then introduce the first panel. and I would be happy to take questions.