

25TH

ANNIVERSARY
of the International Religious Freedom Act

One Hundred Fifth Congress
of the
United States of America

AT THE SECOND SESSION

*Begun and held at the City of Washington on Tuesday,
the twenty-seventh day of January, one thousand nine hundred and ninety-eight*

An Act

To express United States foreign policy with respect to, and to strengthen United States advocacy on behalf of, individuals persecuted in foreign countries on account of religion; to authorize United States actions in response to violations of religious freedom in foreign countries; to establish an Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom within the Department of State, a Commission on International Religious Freedom, and a Special Adviser on International Religious Freedom within the National Security Council; and for other purposes.

*Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of
the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE; TABLE OF CONTENTS.

(a) SHORT TITLE.— This Act may be cited as the “International Religious Freedom Act of 1998”.

1948

1998

2018

2023

USCIRF'S MISSION

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

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WHO WE ARE

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) that monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad.

USCIRF uses international standards to monitor violations of freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and Congressional leaders of both political parties. The Commission's work is supported by a professional, nonpartisan staff. USCIRF is separate from the State Department, although the Department's Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom is a non-voting, ex officio Commissioner.

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Inherent in religious freedom is the right to believe or not believe as one's conscience leads, and live out one's beliefs openly, peacefully, and without fear. Freedom of religion or belief is an expansive right that includes the freedoms of thought, conscience, expression, association, and assembly. While religious freedom is America's first freedom, it also is a core human right international law and treaty recognize; a necessary component of U.S. foreign policy and America's commitment to defending democracy and freedom globally; and a vital element of national security, critical to ensuring a more peaceful, prosperous, and stable world.

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USCIRF

Above left: Former Senator Nickels and former Rep. Frank Wolf at USCIRF 25th Anniversary Event
Above right: USCIRF meeting with U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield and U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain

INTRODUCTION

In the world of software engineering, development teams conduct meetings at the end of a project to determine what worked and what needs improvement. The meetings are called retrospectives and provide a forum for team members to reflect on important collaborative aspects of the project — process, effectiveness, mistakes, satisfaction, and quality. The end-goal of a well-conducted retrospective is clearer vision for the future and, hopefully, a plan for building better software.

This publication is a retrospective of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), landmark legislation signed into law in the fall of 1998 that has been a driver of considerable human rights initiatives during the past 25 years. In it, participants reflect on more than two decades of collaborative efforts to integrate international religious freedom (IRF) with U.S. foreign policy. It is a historical memory of the process of creating a law whose aim was to promote and protect religious freedom for all people, in all nations, of all faiths or no faith at all.

This retrospective includes candid conversations and observations about the effectiveness of the IRF Act — what has worked and what has fallen short, the mistakes and the milestones. It includes the voices of IRF participants who helped craft, implement, measure and refine IRFA. The intended end-goal, of course, is a clearer vision for the future and how to advance and strengthen the principles of the IRF Act in a world of growing persecution based on religion and beliefs.

Often, software development teams discover an unintended consequence from conducting retrospectives. The act of intentional reflection and thoughtful critique frequently leads to a renewed sense of team spirit, a refreshed camaraderie. It is the hope, then, that this IRFA retrospective also will inspire and reinforce a spirit of solidarity and motivation among those who seek to foster a full embrace of the respect for human dignity and freedom of conscience.

The *25th Anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act: A Retrospective* includes content from its precursor, which was published in 2018. Work began on this updated *Retrospective* in August 2023.

The research entailed reviewing legislation, policy, books, white papers, research reports and articles about international religious freedom published since the original *Retrospective*, between 2018 and 2023. When appropriate, hyperlinks are included to provide more information for readers of the digital PDF version.

The team followed its initial examination by conducting qualitative research through in-depth interviews with individuals working in government, academia, and non-governmental organizations. Asking open-ended questions evoked responses that were meaningful to those interviewed and allowed the flexibility to probe initial responses. Collecting information on stakeholder personal experiences and perspectives provided information about the human side of the issue, which at times revealed contradictory beliefs and opinions.

Our recruitment strategy and sample size were informed by materials read and referrals from stakeholders. For this updated version of the *Retrospective*, a total of 54 out of 60 attempted interviews were conducted. When added to the original count, the total number of completed interviews surpassed 109. Using informed consent for data collection, all interviews were conducted “on the record.” The complete interview list appears in the Resources section.

The authors have worked diligently to ensure that all information in this report is accurate as of the time of publication. We thank all the individuals who agreed to be interviewed for this project. Additionally, we thank Judith Golub for her contributions to this report.

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PRELUDE

Twenty-five years ago, members of Congress made a deliberate and unanimous choice to stand as beacons for the most fundamental of all human rights. Passage of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in 1998 sought to underscore America’s centuries-old commitment to the freedom of religion or belief and codify its importance within U.S. foreign policy.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

– U.S. Constitution, First Amendment

As most scholars and casual observers would agree, religious freedom is foundational to the American character, as articulated in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. Yet, despite the intrinsic value ascribed domestically to this first freedom, it is important to recognize that the design and approval of IRFA, which focuses on religious freedom abroad, was neither instant nor certain. Rather, IRFA has been (and remains) a journey.

Broader studies have been made as to the importance of religious freedom in shaping American sensibilities about culture and international relations. This account will focus instead on the unique historical context of IRFA — the domestic and international forces at play, the crafting and compromises of legislation, implementation of and changes to the act, and milestones achieved in the quarter century since its enactment. To begin, then, requires a brief look at what came before, a short examination of a few watershed moments of the 20th century.

The modern-day international religious freedom movement can be traced back to December 1948 with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Serving at the newly formed United Nations, former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt spearheaded the campaign to craft an international document aimed at preventing future human rights atrocities, such as the grand-scale abuses of the First and Second World Wars. Echoes of her husband’s earlier Four Freedoms speech (freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from fear, and freedom from want) are evident in the final language of the UDHR. Article 18 focuses narrowly on the guarantee of freedom of religion or belief.



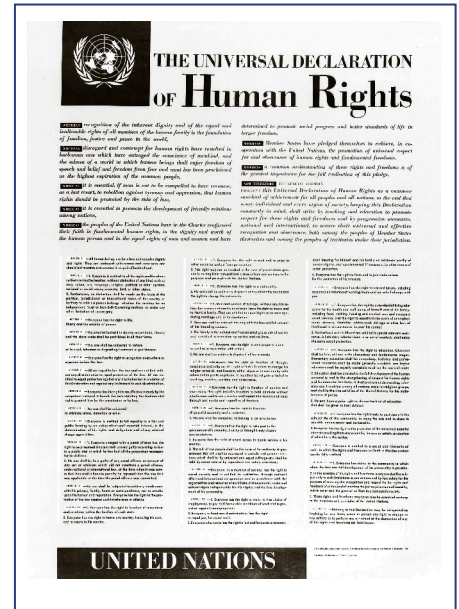
1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Adopted December 10

While not legally binding, 48-member nations at the UN General Assembly approved this international declaration, which has animated the international religious freedom conversation for 75 years. UDHR language has been embedded in numerous international treaties, national constitutions and laws and serves as a standard by which to measure the preservation or deprivation of basic human rights.

The significance of the UDHR as a unifying and transformative statement for the international community, particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War, cannot be overstated. Yet from the start, its curative properties have remained limited.

As the Cold War settled in during the second half of the 20th century, human rights violations and religious persecution persisted, particularly in Eastern Europe where communism held a firm grip. New initiatives and mechanisms to mitigate the suffering intensifying in Soviet bloc countries were needed. One such instrument, adopted by the United States in 1975, was the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, a powerful tool that established a linkage between U.S. foreign policy and human rights.

At the time, the Soviet Union was restricting the emigration of many of its citizens — mostly Jews, but also evangelical Christians, Catholics, and other religious minorities. The Jackson-Vanik Amendment prohibited the U.S. President from extending most-favored-nation (MFN) trade status to any non-market economy that denied its citizens the right to emigrate or imposed more than a nominal tax on emigration or exit visas. Basically, the message from the United States was: if you want to enjoy the benefits of trade with us, start by treating your own people well.



“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

– UDHR, Article 18



1975 Jackson-Vanik Amendment
The Trade Act of 1974 includes this provision establishing a linkage between U.S. foreign policy and human rights, particularly as related to the Soviet Jewry Movement. (January 3)

PRELUDE

The Jackson-Vanik Amendment fortified human rights as a priority within U.S. foreign policy and would remain an active lever for the next seven administrations. Another significant development of 1975 came at the conclusion of the first Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), held in Helsinki, Finland. The CSCE addressed questions of European security and cooperation in three critical areas, or “baskets”: political and military issues; economics; and human rights, cultural cooperation, and freedom of the press.

The diplomatic agreement — known as the Helsinki Final Act — that resulted between Soviet bloc countries and western nations participating in the CSCE was not originally pursued as a human rights initiative. In fact, many critics argued that negotiations with the Soviets would contribute to even greater, systemic human rights abuses throughout Eastern Europe. Over time, however, the Helsinki Final Act would prove to be a potent remedy to some of the most widespread humanitarian abuses within the Soviet Union and would hasten the demise of the Soviet regime.

“The participating States will respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.”

– Helsinki Final Act, Principle VII

Like Jackson-Vanik, the Helsinki Final Act linked trade and foreign policy with human rights. In exchange for agreements by the United States and other western nations on security and economic concerns, the Soviet leadership had to agree to honor the “third basket,” which focused specifically on human rights issues, including matters of religious freedom. In the years that followed, the United States firmly held the Soviets accountable to their basket-three promises.

Jackson-Vanik and the Helsinki Final Act helped fuel other human rights initiatives aimed at the dark corners of the Soviet bloc countries, such as Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the Baltics. Most notably, the international Soviet Jewry Movement in support of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union gained traction after 1975 and reached its zenith during the Reagan administration. Many scholars point to the campaign as a model of how to build a successful grassroots movement. Indeed, many of its participants would become active in or provide inspiration for the IRFA movement in the decades to follow.

1975 Helsinki Final Act

Signed by 35 nations at the height of the Cold War, the Helsinki Final Act addressed a variety of vital political, military, economic, and human rights issues.



PRELUDE

Yet, even as the Soviet Union collapsed and human rights and religious freedom were blossoming throughout Eastern Europe, they were withering in places like China, North Korea, Vietnam, and South Sudan.

More troubling, by the early 1990s, much of the conversation had begun to drift away from religious freedom — the emphasis instead placed squarely on the more generic issue of human rights, which often was viewed through a secular lens. Indeed, there was widespread belief that modernity would bring about secularization and religion would matter less, particularly in the realm of foreign policy. So, while economic and national security concerns remained at the forefront, the religious freedom dimension became increasingly marginalized.

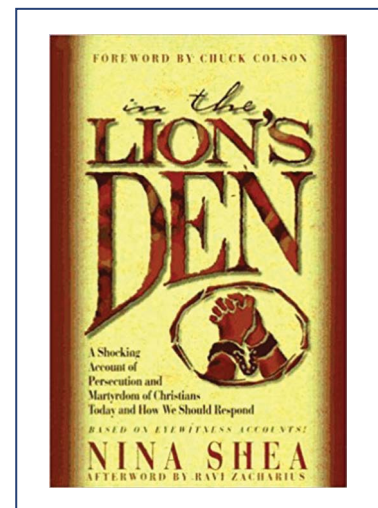
Something needed to be done to ensure that the interests of persecuted people and America's profound commitment to religious freedom were firmly integrated into foreign policy discussions. To do so would require a deliberate Congressional focus and legislative response — and a catalyst.

“While religious freedom issues tend to be overlooked by policy makers in the West, religion is playing an increasingly greater role in world events.”

– Author, analyst and advocate Nina Shea, from her book, *In the Lion's Den*.

“Andrei Sakharov, Scoop Jackson, and Ronald Reagan...they created the policy of linkage: That international relations and human rights must be linked. That how a government treats its own people cannot be separated from how that government could be expected to treat other countries.”

– Natan Sharansky, human rights activist and former Soviet dissident



1983 Congressional Human Rights Caucus

The precursor of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission is founded by Representatives Tom Lantos and John Edward Porter

LEAD-UP TO IRFA

In the final decade of the 20th century, international headlines were fraught with horrific stories of ethnic cleansing, religious persecution, and catastrophic humanitarian crises. In Africa, some 800,000 Tutsis and Hutu moderates were butchered in Rwanda between April and July 1994. The following July, Bosnian Serb forces massacred 7,000 Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina. An additional 20,000 civilians were displaced.



FAITH MCDONNELL

Early IRF advocates (left to right): former Rep. Ben Gilman (R-NY), Rep. Joe Pitts (R-PA), Rep. Ed Royce (R-CA), and Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-CO) join Sen. Sam Brownback (R-KS) at podium

Meanwhile, ongoing civil strife in Sudan bore all the hallmarks of genocide against the Christian and traditional faiths in the south: famine, enslavement of women and children, two million killed, and another five million displaced or driven into refugee status. In China, reports were beginning to emerge of Catholic bishops and Protestant pastors imprisoned for decades because of their faith, as well as the Chinese government's continued brutal suppression of Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism.

Against this backdrop, and despite a creeping ambivalence about the significance of religion in world affairs, a stalwart few recognized religion could be a positive force for change. Even more, they understood religion was, in fact, an intricate and necessary force in the world that would need to play a central role in U.S. foreign policy. They understood that the protection of religious freedom requires a degree of societal maturity,

an embrace of pluralism and tolerance. For when societies in the public square are able to acknowledge diverse faith traditions with equality, they are on the path to building a functional, peaceful and prosperous society.

1994 End of apartheid in South Africa
(April 27)

1994 Rwanda Genocide
(April – July)

LEAD-UP TO IRFA

During the 1990s, Congressional champions emerged and tirelessly pressed their colleagues on matters of religious freedom. Among them, Tony Hall (D-OH), Tom Lantos (D-CA), Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), Joe Pitts (R-PA), John Edward Porter (R-IL), Chris Smith (R-NJ), Tom Tancredo (R-CO), and Frank Wolf (R-VA) in the House, and Sam Brownback (R-KS), Dan Coats (R-IN), Joseph Lieberman (D-CT), Don Nickles (R-OK), and Arlen Specter (R-PA) in the Senate, each torchbearers for those who faced religious persecution.

Likewise, congressional staffers like Alexandra Arriaga, Laura Bryant, Karin Finkler, John Hanford, Ann Huiskes, Karen Lord, Sharon Payt, and Dorothy Taft were devoted to the advancement of religious freedom, quietly navigating and creating legislative levers to bolster religious freedom initiatives. In the private sector, scholars, human rights activists, and faith-based leaders added their voices. Leading the charge were figures like international human rights lawyer Nina Shea, human rights advocate Michael Horowitz, author Paul Marshall, and a cadre of evangelical leaders, including Don Argue, Richard Cizik, Chuck Colson, and Richard Land.

Despite the determined work of these early advocates, by the mid-1990s a cohesive and consistent vision of how to integrate religious freedom into U.S. foreign policy still had not been fully developed, though a deeper understanding of the potency and potential of such a vision was emerging. Then in 1996, a spark flickered, igniting what some would describe as the early glow of an international religious freedom movement.



Former Sen. Arlen Specter (R-PA)

1995 Srebrenica Genocide
(July)

LEAD-UP TO IRFA



REV. (DR.) RICH CIZIK

Rev. (Dr.) Rich Cizik, Dr. Don Argue, and President Bill Clinton meet in the White House prior to January 1996 summit held at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C.

The catalyst was a January 1996 summit on global religious persecution, held at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. Organized by Michael Horowitz and Nina Shea, the gathering would inspire a chain of events that created a new sense of urgency around the topic of religious freedom. Following the summit, the National Association of Evangelicals issued a Statement of Conscience on behalf of its more than 42,000 member congregations, pledging to end its “silence in the face of the suffering of all those persecuted for their religious faith.”

The following month, in February 1996, the International Operations and Human Rights Subcommittee of the House International Relations Committee, under the leadership of Representative Chris Smith, conducted a landmark hearing on the persecution of Christians. Congress held other hearings on religious persecution as well. The subcommittee, again under Representative Smith’s leadership, held a hearing on the worldwide persecution of Jews. A year prior, the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the Helsinki Commission), also under the chairmanship of Representative Smith, held a hearing on genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

“Religious liberty is not a privilege to be granted or denied by an all-powerful State, but a God-given human right. Indeed, religious liberty is the bedrock principle that animates our republic and defines us as a people...it is our responsibility, and that of the government that represents us, to do everything we can to secure the blessings of religious liberty to all those suffering from religious persecution.”

– National Association of Evangelicals, Statement of Conscience

1996 Religious Persecution Summit
Washington Mayflower Hotel (January)

LEAD-UP TO IRFA

Following these hearings on Christians and Jews, Congress adopted resolutions on the persecution of Baha'is in Iran ([H. Con. Res. 102](#)). By September 1996, the House and Senate also would pass measures ([H. Res. 515](#), introduced by Representative Frank Wolf and [S. Con Res. 71](#), introduced by Senator Don Nickles) in support of Christians worldwide. These measures called upon then President Clinton to strengthen U.S. policies to combat religious persecution, including creation of a special advisory committee for religious liberty abroad or appointing a White House special advisor on religious persecution.



The testimonies presented during the hearings of 1996 revealed a pattern of oppression against the world's religious groups. In addition to the congressional resolutions, these same hearings inspired a requirement (included in a [Managers Statement to the 1997 Omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act](#)) that the State Department report on U.S. policies "designed to reduce and eliminate today's mounting persecution of Christians throughout the world." Secretary of State Madeleine Albright would release that report in July 1997, complete with a catalog of U.S. policies in support of international religious freedom.

Finally, in November 1996, the World Evangelical Alliance would launch the first-ever International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.

Moving forward, the focus would not be limited to Christian persecution. By the end of 1996, the small faith-based coalition that had gathered at the Mayflower Hotel in the beginning of the year had broadened. Different religious groups — evangelicals, Catholics, Jews, Baha'is, Tibetan Buddhists, Sikhs — began to coalesce around the singular belief that religious freedom was a universal human right and any faith persecuted was a threat to all faiths.

"The House of Representatives encourages the President to take organizational steps to strengthen United States policies to combat religious persecution, including the creation of a special advisory committee for religious liberty abroad which has an appropriate mandate and adequate staff or to consider the appointment of a White House special advisor on religious persecution."

- H. Res. 515

1996 H. Res. 515 and S. Con. Res. 71

Resolutions pass in the House and the Senate regarding religious persecution and persecution of Christians worldwide (September)

1996 First-ever International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church

(November)

LEAD-UP TO IRFA



ALEXANDRA ARRIAGA

Former Executive Director Alexandra Arriaga, Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor John Shattuck, and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright

As the conversation grew louder and more crowded, recognition also grew that more substantive legislation would be required — a stated policy of why freedom of religion was such an important and fundamental human right.

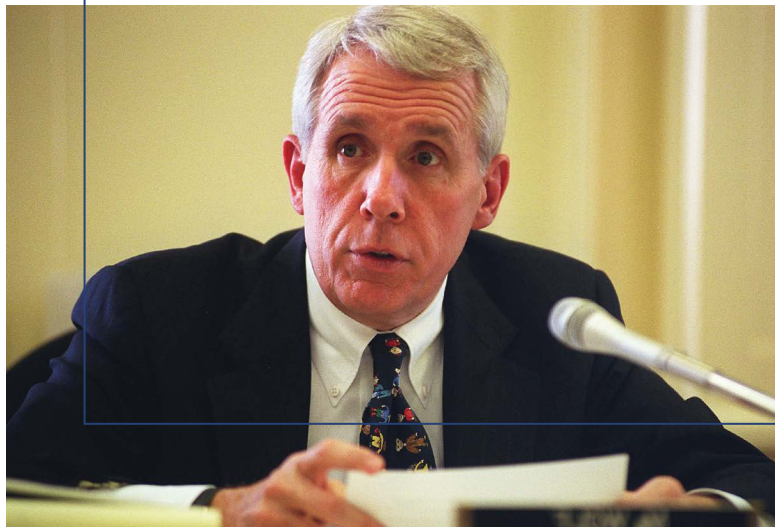
Consensus also began to build in support of a more robust role on the part of the executive branch, namely the State Department. For months, former Congressional staffer Alexandra Arriaga, who was by then serving as a senior advisor at the State Department but also monitoring the hearings on the Hill, had been quietly lobbying her superiors to elevate and integrate international religious freedom as a stand-alone human rights issue.

The Clinton administration responded in November 1996 with the creation of the Secretary of State's Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad. Warren Christopher formed the Advisory Committee in his final days as Secretary of State. Members of the Advisory Committee would roll up their sleeves in the new year with Alexandra Arriaga serving as Executive Director, advising the new Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and her Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor John Shattuck with respect to issues of religious freedom, intolerance, and reconciliation abroad.

As 1996 drew to a close, the nascent international religious freedom movement had developed important momentum, though it remained a disjointed effort at best. Grassroots activism had ignited a fire, but gaining meaningful legislative traction would require leadership (and cooperation) at many levels — on Capitol Hill, at the State Department, and in the Oval Office. To advance the next step would take a trailblazer.

1996 Secretary of State's Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad
Established

It would be overly simplistic to credit a lone individual as the force behind the IRFA movement. As already mentioned, there were many visionary leaders along the way who shared a deep longing and heartfelt commitment to securing religious freedom and protecting the persecuted. In the months between January 1997 and October 1998 when the International Religious Freedom Act was signed into law, the list of advocates contributing to the effort remained relatively small, but they were determined: some elected officials, congressional aides, human rights advocates, faith-based groups of all stripes, State Department officials, and a handful of non-governmental organizations.



SCOTT J. FERRELL/CONGRESSIONAL QUARTERLY / ALAMY

Former Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA)

If there were a trailblazer, however, many would point to then Representative Frank Wolf. He is widely recognized as the “godfather” of IRFA and continues to carry the message to the present day. His was the first bill introduced in Congress that sought to integrate religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy. It would not be the last. Nor, in key ways, would the final version resemble the initial legislation he put forth. Still, Wolf’s bill was the first and set the stage, and there begins the conversation.

The Freedom from Religious Persecution Act

When he took office in 1981, then Representative Frank Wolf had little intention of becoming the voice of religious freedom in the U.S. Congress; he was more interested in local transportation issues than international human rights. Then, in 1984, fellow Representative Tony Hall invited him on a humanitarian tour of Ethiopia, which at the time was experiencing a deadly famine. The trip changed Wolf’s life, and

the following year he joined Representatives Hall and Chris Smith on another humanitarian tour, this time to Communist Romania. At the time, the Romanian people were under the control of the brutal Ceausescu regime. Wolf and company met with families of jailed dissidents. Desperate wives and parents slipped them secret notes begging for relief from the repressive government. It was an emotional experience for Wolf, and upon his return to the U.S., he co-sponsored [legislation](#) with Hall and Smith to strip Romania of its Most Favored Nation status. Then there were many trips to the Soviet Gulag, Communist China, and

Sudan. Wolf's encounters with repressed and persecuted individuals, many of them harassed, imprisoned, and even tortured because of their faith, imbued a fiery sense of purpose in the Virginia statesman.

In May 1997, Wolf introduced [H.R. 1685](#), the Freedom from Religious Persecution Act, with its Senate counterpart ([S. 772](#)) introduced concurrently by Senator Arlen Specter. The Wolf-Specter bill would create an Office of Religious Persecution Monitoring, complete with a mechanism to impose sanctions on countries identified as engaging in a pattern of persecution. That spring and summer, after holding hearings on H.R. 1685, Representative Wolf revised the bill then reintroduced it with some modifications as [H.R. 2431](#) in September 1997.

Pivotal to the crafting of the language of H.R. 2431 was Michael Horowitz, the human rights activist who might be described alternately as a firebrand or impassioned maverick. Drawing on the lessons of the Soviet Jewry movement during the Cold War, Horowitz, a Jew himself, took up the cause of persecuted Christians abroad before the issue appeared on the radars of most U.S. church leaders. New York Times

The New York Times

Persecuting The Christians

By A. M. ROSENTHAL FEB. 11, 1997

Some columns can be postponed for more important topics, some put off until they seem newsier and many dropped because they do not flesh out. But some have to be written as soon as information is collected, no matter how late.

This column is late, not because so much has been written about the subject and everybody knows, but for exactly the opposite reason.

A few journalists have written about the persecution of Christians in Communist or religious dictatorships. A few legislators have risen to protest. A few clergymen and their religious organizations try to arouse congregations.

1997 Secretary of State's Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad
Opening session convenes February 13

1997 H.R. 1685 Introduced
Rep. Frank R. Wolf introduces first version of the "Freedom from Religious Persecution Act of 1997" on May 20

IRFA AND THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

editor [A.M. Rosenthal](#) would label Horowitz as the person “who screamed me awake, as he has so many Christians.”

Early on, Horowitz pressed for a Christians-only focus to the bill. Wolf took a wider approach in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — religious freedom is an inalienable right for all people, of all faiths or no faith at all. From the time it was first introduced, H.R. 2431 would be inclusive. The bill referenced many religious groups including Catholic and protestant Christians in Communist countries, such as Cuba, Laos, China, North Korea and Vietnam; non-Muslims and religious converts from Islam in Islamic countries; the Baha’is in Iran, Buddhist monks and other Tibetans in Tibet, and Muslims in Sudan.

Still, the view that the Wolf-Specter bill did not sufficiently address non-Christian persecution, that it was a Christian issue only, remained a chief concern among critics. The Clinton administration, in particular, was sensitive to the optics that legislating religious freedom might elevate Christianity over Islam. The Christians-only impression (which some characterized as cultural imperialism) would factor heavily in committee debates and closed-door sessions. For some, this perception lingers even today.

The influence of Horowitz also can be detected in the focus of H.R. 2431. While religious freedom provided the framework for the bill, the emphasis was placed on persecution, specifically defined as abduction, killing, imprisonment, forced mass resettlement, rape, or crucifixion or other forms of torture. Penalties for countries identified as engaging in these behaviors would be immediate sanctions and other punitive measures, as defined in Section 7 of the bill. With few waivers, countries determined to be engaged in religious persecution would be subject to prohibition of exports. No U.S. assistance would be provided and the United States would seek to deny multilateral assistance from the International Monetary Fund or other development funds. And persecution-facilitating products would be prohibited from being exported to countries found to have committed religious persecution.



FAITH MCDONNELL

Michael Horowitz at rally

I wrote to Mission Boards encouraging them to speak out, and I started to get responses. I believed it was a leadership issue and people could begin to care. If all you do is ask people to pray, there becomes a compassion fatigue. I told them they had to obtain meaningful achievable goals.”

– Michael Horowitz, advocate

1997 H.R. 2431 Introduced

Rep. Frank R. Wolf introduces revised version of “Freedom from Religious Persecution Act of 1997” on September 8

“It would be helpful if we can continue to work together to make sure that messages do not sound partisan and are based on principle. The worst thing that can happen to religious liberty is for people to think that it is not for everyone.”

– Melissa Rogers, White House Office of the Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships Executive Director

The Wolf-Specter bill also would expand U.S. immigration policy, proposing that, “any alien who can credibly claim membership in a persecuted community found to be subject to...religious persecution... shall be considered to have a credible fear of persecution.” Critics argued that such broad language could lead to a spike in the number of refugees who would qualify for being admitted to the United States, as individuals who were merely a member of a persecuted group (though not persecuted themselves) would be eligible.

As originally written, the Office of Religious Persecution Monitoring outlined in the Wolf-Specter bill would be created within the Executive Office of the President, who would appoint a Director who would need Senate confirmation. As described, the Director was to have broad responsibilities and authority, including determining the countries that had engaged in religious persecution, the responsible entities within those countries, and designating sanctions. The bill included provisions for robust annual reporting on countries or regions engaged in religious persecution, and also called for training of immigration officers on religious persecution, as well as chiefs of mission on religious freedom. Finally, an entire section of the bill was dedicated to sanctions specifically aimed at Sudan — a section that ultimately would be removed.

Secretary of State’s Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad

As the Wolf-Specter bill was taking shape in the House, the Department of State was carving out its own position in the religious freedom conversation. After months of intense planning and in close coordination with the White House and the National Security Council, the Secretary of State’s Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad convened its first meeting on February 13, 1997.

Assistant Secretary of State John Shattuck chaired the Advisory Committee, which included 20 leaders and scholars of the world’s

IRFA AND THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

major religious traditions and was charged with collecting and assessing information on global persecution and the promotion of religious freedom. The Advisory Committee was assigned two principal tasks:

1. Call attention to problems of religious persecution and other violations of religious freedom and religious intolerance abroad and advise on how to end them; and
2. Provide information on how to bring about reconciliation in areas of conflict (especially conflicts where religion is a factor) and promote respect for human rights so that religious freedom could be fully enjoyed.



ALEXANDRA ARRIAGA

Members of the Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad

Diplomacy would be the Advisory Committee's watchword. Yet in his remarks at the committee's opening session, Shattuck offered a broad approach, saying, "We use both quiet diplomacy and public condemnation. We engage in frequent, bilateral dialogue with other countries on these issues. We conduct monitoring and intervention in the cases of individuals who are victims of specific forms of persecution."

It was an open secret that the State Department was not keen on having Congress impose religious freedom mandates and policies on its agenda. The proposed Wolf-Specter bill was met with particular aggravation, perceived by many within the Department and the Administration as Congress encroaching on its turf. For that reason, skeptics viewed the Advisory Committee, and the State Department's subsequent creation of the Office of International Religious Freedom, as a smoke-and-mirrors tactic meant to get in front of legislation that would, in their view, impose unwanted policies and demands on the Department.

IRFA AND THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

Undeterred, the Advisory Committee pressed forward with its task. It would produce two lengthy reports during its tenure, the first of which was an Interim Report issued in January 1998, months before the International Religious Freedom Act would be passed and signed into law. The [Interim Report](#) offered several recommendations to promote freedom of religion and belief as a priority objective of U.S. foreign policy, including the creation of the new IRF office.

Once the State Department had set up a dedicated religious freedom office, the focus became how best to structure it. Then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright assigned that task to the Advisory Committee's executive director, Alexandra Arriaga. Arriaga tapped the president of World Vision, U.S., Dr. Robert Seiple, to head the new office as Senior Advisor for International Religious Freedom. Seiple would have dotted-line accountability to the Secretary of State. Thomas Farr later would serve as the founding Director.

In addition to the IRF Office, the Advisory Committee made several other recommendations in its Interim Report of 1998, which were then incorporated into the broader IRFA deliberations on Capitol Hill. It was suggested, for example, that the State Department routinely raise cases of individuals imprisoned for their religious beliefs. Human rights training for Foreign Service Officers was encouraged, as was more robust reporting of religious freedom conditions by U.S. embassies and the State Department as part of its annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.

The International Religious Freedom Act

Even as H.R. 2431 was winding its way through multiple committees in the House, and the Advisory Committee was collecting information for its assessment and recommendations, a handful of elected officials and staffers on the Senate side were considering different language and, indeed, a different strategy.



SCOTT J. FERRELL/CONGRESSIONAL QUARTERLY

Former Sen. Don Nickles (R-OK)

1998 S. 1868 Introduced

Sen. Don Nickles introduces International Religious Freedom Act on March 26

1998 H.R. 2431 Passes House

House passes H.R. 2431 with the Brady amendment on May 14

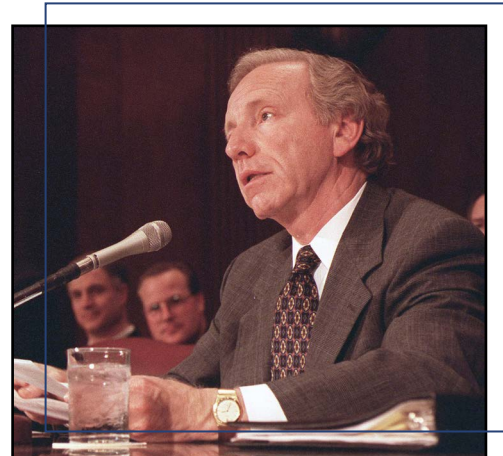
IRFA AND THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

John Hanford, who had specialized in religious freedom issues for decades as a staffer with Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN), was the chief architect of S. 1868, which was introduced by Senator Don Nickles and Senator Joseph Lieberman on March 26, 1998. Unlike the Wolf-Specter bill, which placed heavy emphasis on defending against egregious persecution through punitive measures, the thrust of the Senate bill was the promotion and protection of religious freedom through calibrated diplomacy. To the casual observer, the difference was subtle, but for the stakeholders who would debate the two strategies, the distinction was great.

While the House and the Senate bills shared some similar provisions, namely institutionalized reporting, a mandated annual review, and training for foreign service and immigration officials, the Senate bill introduced some important distinctions. Titled the International Religious Freedom Act, S. 1868 listed three chief aims:

1. To express U.S. foreign policy with respect to, and to strengthen U.S. advocacy on behalf of, individuals persecuted for their faith worldwide;
2. To authorize U.S. actions in response to religious persecution worldwide; and
3. To establish an Ambassador at Large on International Religious Freedom within the Department of State, a Commission on International Religious Persecution, and a Special Advisor on International Religious Freedom within the National Security Council.

While arguably every member of Congress was prepared to back legislation in support of religious freedom, many on the Hill were not convinced about the more assertive approach outlined in the Wolf-Specter bill. Critics described the proposed sanctions scheme as a draconian, “one size fits all” solution that left little room for promoting positive and lasting change. Instead of automatic sanctions, S. 1868 would put at the President’s fingertips a graduating (and discretionary) range of actions and sanctions to use against countries identified as engaging in or tolerating religious persecution.



SCOTT J. FERRELL/CONGRESSIONAL QUARTERLY

| Former Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-CT)

“In writing IRFA, we were interested in accomplishing three strategic goals. We wanted to anchor religious freedom promotion within international legal standards of religious freedom, as well as the broader framework of human liberty; embed it within the U.S. national security infrastructure; and then integrate it into America’s overall national security strategy and policy.”

– Dr. William Inboden, former congressional staffer involved in drafting IRFA language

Another concern some raised about the Wolf-Specter bill was its granting of power and decision-making authority to a mid-level White House official who could, in effect, supersede higher-level foreign policy decisions. Instead of a director-level position within the Executive Office, S. 1868 recommended the creation of an Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom to advise the President and the Secretary of State on matters of religious freedom abroad. The

bill also called for the creation of a bipartisan, independent commission to “consider the facts and circumstances of religious persecution” and “make appropriate policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.”

Finally, some definitions included in S. 1868 differed from those in the Wolf-Specter bill. Whereas Wolf-Specter defined religious persecution as “widespread and ongoing persecution of persons because of their membership in or affiliation with a religion or religious denomination,” S. 1868 harkened back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and defined religious persecution as “any violation of the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion” from its Article 18. Proponents believed that this more exacting definition offered a

lower threshold for classifying offenders. Some believed that if religious freedom were fortified abroad, fewer people would have cause to seek safe haven in the U.S. from religious persecution.

One Hundred Fifth Congress of the United States of America

AT THE SECOND SESSION

*Begun and held at the City of Washington on Tuesday,
the twenty-seventh day of January, one thousand nine hundred and ninety-eight*

An Act

To express United States foreign policy with respect to, and to strengthen United States advocacy on behalf of, individuals persecuted in foreign countries on account of religion; to authorize United States actions in response to violations of religious freedom in foreign countries; to establish an Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom within the Department of State, a Commission on International Religious Freedom, and a Special Adviser on International Religious Freedom within the National Security Council; and for other purposes.

*Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of
the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE; TABLE OF CONTENTS.

(a) SHORT TITLE.— This Act may be cited as the “International Religious Freedom Act of 1998”.

H.R. 2431 VERSUS S. 1868

WOLF-SPECTER (H.R. 2431)	NICKLES-LIEBERMAN (S. 1868)
<p>Freedom from Religious Persecution Act</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasis on stopping persecution 	<p>International Religious Freedom Act</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasis on promoting religious freedom
<p>Office of Persecution Monitoring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housed within the Executive Office Headed by a Director, appointed by the President with consent of the Senate 	<p>Office of International Religious Freedom</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housed within the Department of State Headed by the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, appointed by the President with consent of the Senate
<p>Reporting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual Report to Congress – generated by the Director 	<p>Reporting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual Report on Religious Persecution submitted to Congress – generated by the Ambassador at Large
<p>Sanctions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Automatic sanctions imposed against countries found to be involved in religious persecution Director determines when and against whom sanctions apply President may waive sanctions with explanation 	<p>Sanctions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Range of actions available to the President in response to countries found to be involved in religious persecution Decisions informed by Annual Report on Religious Persecution and in consultation with the Ambassador at Large
<p>Training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training on religious persecution for immigration officers and foreign service Chiefs of Mission 	<p>Training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training on religious freedom for foreign service officers
<p>Religious Persecution Definition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Broad definition Applies to membership in or affiliation with a religion or religious group 	<p>Religious Persecution Definition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Narrow definition Aligned with UDHR Article 18
<p>Immigration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Modifies existing U.S. Immigration policy 	<p>Commission on International Religious Persecution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-partisan, independent commission Tasked with policy review and recommendations in response to religious persecution
<p>Sanctions against Sudan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comprehensive definitions and actions in response to specific religious persecution activity in Sudan 	<p>National Security Council</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appointment of a Special Advisor on Religious Persecution within the National Security Council

In the Trenches

As any serious student of civics can attest, the legislative process is rarely simple or straightforward. Often it is a messy conglomeration of debate, argument, negotiation, compromise, and the occasional slight of hand. Passage of the IRFA legislation was no exception.



NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

President Clinton signs the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) into law in 1993

From the start, the Wolf-Specter bill met with stiff resistance and criticism on several fronts: the Clinton administration and the State Department, business and trade groups, even the National Council of Churches bristled at the scope and nature of the bill. Among the primary complaints: the bill was creating a hierarchy of human rights; it created the appearance of favoring Christians over other religious groups; and the prescribed penalties would do more harm than good.

From an institutional standpoint, resistance from the White House was to be expected, as most administrations do not like to be told how

to structure their federal agencies. More important, the culture at the State Department for decades had been rooted in secularization theory, which held that as the world became more modern it would also become more secular, and religion would play a lesser role. That theory started to give way during the Clinton administration, which was also the era of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) domestically, which then President Clinton signed into law. By the late 1990s, world events at that time underscored the certainty that religion was a growing force in the world, and by extension, religion needed to play an important role in U.S. foreign policy.

Still, there was concern that codifying religious freedom abroad — whether as prescribed by Wolf-Specter or Nickles-Lieberman — would lead to an artificial hierarchy of human rights. In testimony before

the House International Relations Committee, Assistant Secretary of State John Shattuck argued that the creation of a hierarchy that set religious freedom above other rights would severely undermine the long-standing U.S. policy of ensuring that all human rights are equally protected.

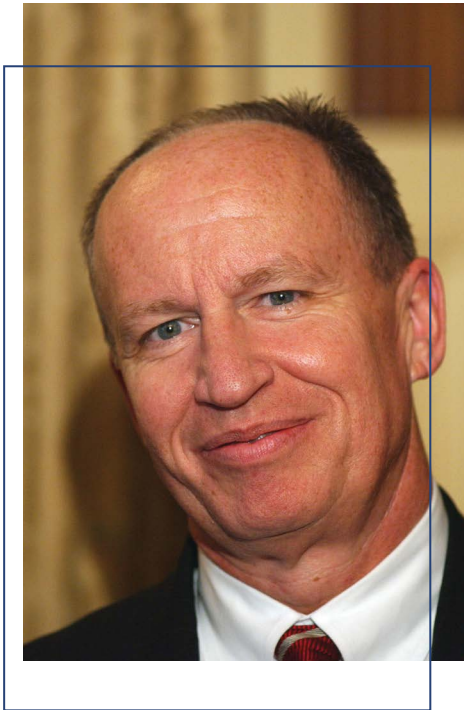
In the end, the State Department concluded that legislation was inevitable, but its best version would focus on international religious freedom in the broader context of human rights and not take the form of a blunt instrument. On the issue of sanctions, the diplomatic ranks wanted more than a single tool in the toolbox.

Certain religious groups, including the National Council of Churches and groups who had done missionary work abroad, shared this view. They were concerned that immediate and wholesale sanctions could put persecuted people at even greater risk. They feared penalized states would blame persecuted communities, thus ratcheting up violence against the very groups the legislation was designed to aid. This contingent warned of the need to consult with people on the ground to discern what measures made sense for protecting the persecuted and for bringing about changes.

Concerns about sanctions also factored heavily in the opposition to Wolf-Specter from the business and pro-trade corner. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and trade groups like USA Engage were particularly resistant to the bill's provisions that prohibited the export of items perceived as facilitating persecution. The bill was seen as an attempt at "trade sanctions." As argued by Robert P. O'Quinn, policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation, the bill's sanctions "could undermine U.S. security, harm the U.S. economy, and needlessly constrain the economic freedom of Americans — and, in the process, be of little if any effect in advancing religious liberty abroad." This faction also firmly opposed the section of Wolf-Specter that was dedicated to sanctions against Sudan.

"Frank Wolf led the fight in a very principled way. And alongside him were really quite an array of liberals, conservatives, and moderates because religious freedom really touches a nerve that goes beyond political ideology."

– Former Senator Joseph Lieberman



SCOTT J. FERRELL/CONGRESSIONAL QUARTERLY

Former Rep. Kevin Brady (R-TX)

Proponents of Wolf-Specter pushed back at critics. They argued that strong and immediate sanctions and withdrawal of non-humanitarian assistance were the teeth of the bill — the assurance for holding accountable those nations guilty of egregious religious persecution. If left to State Department reporting and the President’s discretion, many in the Wolf-Specter camp believed the sanctions trigger would rarely, if ever, be pulled and persecution would continue.

The concern was not without merit. In what was thought to be an off-the-record comment at a private meeting with evangelical leaders, then President Clinton suggested that the Wolf-Specter bill would cause State Department officials to “fudge the facts” when reporting about religious persecution to avoid conflicts with other diplomatic efforts. The remark contributed to suspicions about the administration’s commitment to religious freedom and the integrity of its reporting apparatus.

While the Advisory Committee continued its efforts and H.R. 2431 slowly moved its way through committee hearings and markups, the authors of the competing S. 1868 conducted their own quiet lobbying.

By May 1998, several revisions had been made to Wolf-Specter, and on May 14, the bill went before the full House for consideration. During the course of debate, three amendments were proposed and approved. H. Amdt.630, offered by Representative Kevin Brady (R-TX), would establish, among other provisions, a five-member U.S. Commission on International Religious Persecution. Creation of the Commission was meant to address concerns about accountability within the administration as to the implementation of sanctions and monitoring of sanctions effectiveness. The Brady amendment also would establish a published list of religious prisoners and provide for the creation of a religious freedom Internet site and expanded international broadcasting.

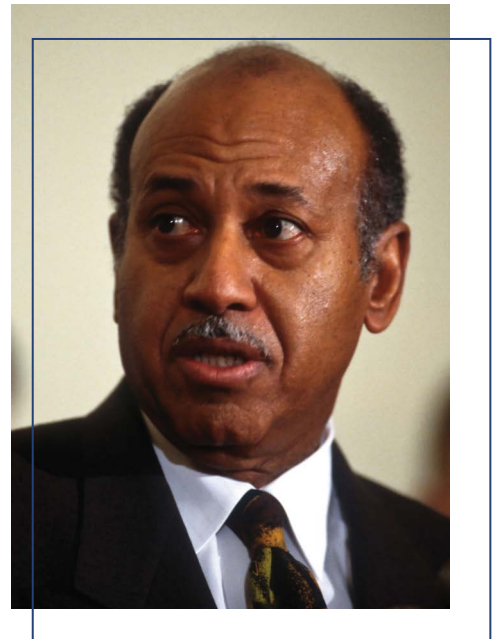
IRFA AND THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

A second amendment, H. Amdt.631, offered by Representative Alcee Hastings (D-FL), would expand the responsibilities of the Director of the Office of Religious Persecution Monitoring. Specifically, the amendment would permit the Director, in consultation with the Secretary of State, to make policy recommendations to the President for prioritizing the promotion and development of legal and cultural protections of religious freedom in U.S. development programs, cultural and educational exchanges, and international broadcasting programs. The Hastings amendment also called for the creation of an awards program for meritorious service by foreign service officers in the promotion of human rights, including the right to religious freedom.

Finally, H. Amdt.632, offered by Representative Tom Campbell (R-CA), would revise a key aspect of the bill's section on Sudan. In a nod to business and trade concerns, the Campbell amendment would permit the president to waive any of the sanctions against the government of Sudan included in the bill if it was determined that the national security interest of the United States justified such a waiver.

After months of hearings, debates, revisions and amendments, the House passed H.R. 2431 by a vote of 375 to 41. The final bill would establish a Director of the Office of Religious Persecution Monitoring within the State Department. Among other things, the Director would be responsible for monitoring religious persecution and issuing an annual report assessing religious persecution abroad. The legislation would prohibit aid to states that carry out persecution and would prohibit export of goods likely to be used to continue persecution.

H.R. 2431 was sent over to the Senate where it would receive a fourth and final amendment five months later.



RICHARD ELLIS / ALAMY

Former Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-FL)



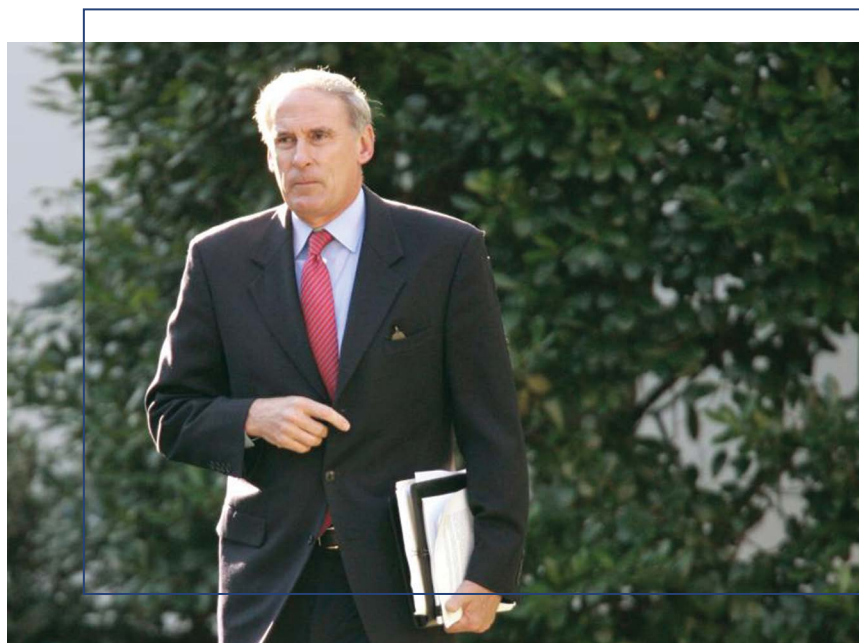
Getting to the Vote

It has been said that legislation will never be perfect, and it will almost always involve compromise. The IRFA legislation underscores this maxim.

The companion bill to H.R. 2431 (S. 772 introduced by Senator Arlen Specter) never moved in the Senate. It was read twice and referred to committee where it was left to die. The Nickles-Lieberman bill, on the other hand, quickly gained traction. There was a distinct rivalry between the Wolf-Specter and Nickles-Lieberman camps: while they shared a common goal, they each had different strategies and exhibited little cooperation during the hashing out of details. Instead of cooperation and concession, there was rancor and resentment.

In October 1998, with just days remaining in the 105th Congress, the Senate finally took up H.R. 2431. There would be no time for normal procedures of debate between the Senate and the House before the close of session. In a stunning move, Senator Nickles introduced an amendment to H.R. 2431 in the nature of a substitute — SP. 3789 would, in essence, replace H.R. 2431 in its entirety with S. 1868, the Nickles-Lieberman bill. On October 9, the Senate approved the substitute 98-0.

Many believed that, despite the unanimous vote to approve, with no last-minute opportunity to conference between the House and Senate, the religious freedom legislation was dead. But after the



JASON REED, REUTERS

Former Sen. Dan Coats (R-IN)

1998 S. Amdt.3789 Passes Senate

On October 8, Sen. Nickles amends H.R. 2431, substituting the language of S. 1868 for H.R. 2431. Senate passed the amended bill 98-0

IRFA AND THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

Senate bill's passage, Senator Dan Coats picked up the phone and called Representative Wolf. There were just two options left: Wolf could accept the Senate substitute for his own, hard-fought version, or he could let the legislation die all together.

"I had this decision," says Wolf, looking back. "Do I take 40 percent of a loaf? I knew opposition to religious freedom legislation was building and if they killed it then, it would never pass. I took the 40 percent loaf."

And so, on October 10, 1998, the House suspended the rules, agreed to the Senate substitute, and passed it without objection. The bill then was sent to then President Clinton for his signature. On October 27, without fanfare or an official signing ceremony, the President signed the bill, and the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 became Public Law 105-292.

Surely, many hands contributed to the passage of IRFA, though many would argue it was the trailblazer Frank Wolf who got the job done in the end. However flawed or incomplete the legislation may be, that IRFA passed unanimously in both the House and Senate is a powerful testament to the deep convictions many members of Congress hold about religious freedom, the first freedom.

"Promoting religious freedom is a tough thing to do...we don't know how bad things would be now if we didn't have [IRFA], but I think it's clearly an uphill battle. I think what we're seeing in the world is that democratization is not proceeding. Authoritarianism is on the rise. Human rights are not being respected, much less guaranteed in most of the world, and that includes religious freedom."

– Clifford May, former USCIRF Commissioner



CLIFFORD MAY

1998 Amended H.R. 2431 Passes House
House passes Senate version of H.R. 2431 under consent calendar on October 10

1998 IRFA Signed into Law
President Clinton signs IRFA into law on October 27

“I tremble to think where we would be without IRFA, without USCIRF, without an Ambassador at Large...it really would have just disappeared into the landscape.”

– Katrina Lantos Swett, former USCIRF Chair



USCIRF

SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 established the framework to elevate religious freedom as a priority within U.S. foreign policy. Key features included:

Department of State Activities

- Creation of the Office on International Religious Freedom
- Creation of the position of Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom
- Annual reporting — to include “countries of particular concern” or CPC designations
- Establishment of a religious freedom Internet site
- Training for foreign service officers
- Creation of the independent, bipartisan U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

National Security Council

- Creation of a Special Advisor on International Religious Freedom

Presidential Actions

- Targeted responses to violations of religious freedom abroad
- Strengthening of existing law
- Promotion of Religious Freedom – through development assistance and international broadcasting, international exchanges and foreign-service awards
- Reform of refugee, asylum, and consular matters

1999

Clinton Administration

Robert A. Seiple

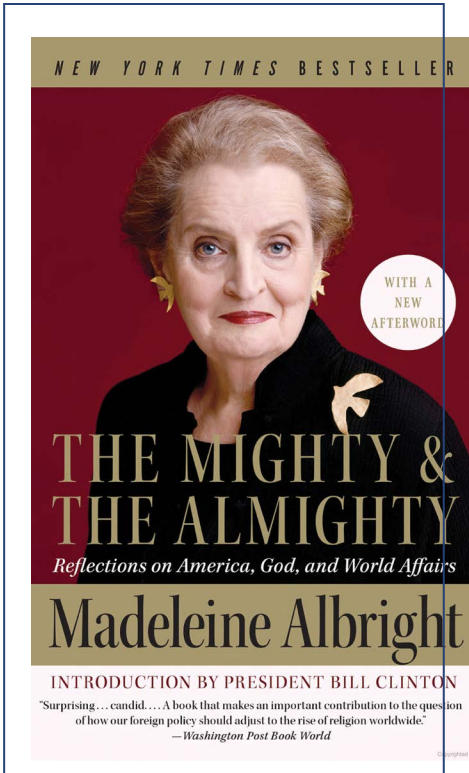
Sworn in as first-ever Ambassador at Large for International religious freedom, May 5

P.L. 105-292

In passing the International Religious Freedom Act, Congress provided the President with a range of discretionary actions, including sanctions, for dealing with countries identified as engaging in or tolerating religious persecution. The law also authorizes the President to take commensurate actions and make binding agreements, as well as grant waivers if they would further the purposes of the Act or are in the national interest of the United States.

An abridged list of available actions includes:

1. A private demarche
2. An official public demarche
3. A public condemnation
4. A public condemnation within one or more multilateral fora
5. The delay or cancellation of one or more scientific exchanges
6. The delay or cancellation of one or more cultural exchanges
7. The denial of one or more working, official, or state visits
8. The delay or cancellation of one or more working, official, or state visits
9. The withdrawal, limitation, or suspension of U.S. development assistance in accordance with the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961
10. Directing the Export-Import Bank of the United States and overseas development banks not to approve the issuance of guarantees, insurance, extensions of credit, or participations in the extension of credit with respect to the specific government, agency, instrumentality, or official found or determined by the President to be responsible for violations
11. The withdrawal, limitation, or suspension of U.S. security assistance in accordance with the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961
12. Directing the U.S. executive directors of international financial institutions to oppose and vote against loans primarily benefiting the specific foreign government, agency, instrumentality, or official found or determined by the President to be responsible for violations
13. Ordering the heads of the appropriate U.S. agencies not to issue specific licenses, and not to grant any other specific authority, to export any goods or technology to the specific foreign government, agency, instrumentality, or official found or determined by the President to be responsible for violations
14. Prohibiting any U.S. financial institution from making loans or providing credits totaling more than \$10 million in any 12-month period to the specific foreign government, agency, instrumentality, or official found or determined by the President to be responsible for violations
15. Prohibiting the U.S. government from procuring, or entering into any contract for the procurement of, any goods or services from the foreign government, entities, or officials found or determined by the President to be responsible for violations



HARPERCOLLINS

Once IRFA passed and was signed into law, the task shifted to implementing its provisions by creating, within the existing foreign policy apparatus, a religious freedom infrastructure with designated functions and activities. From a practical standpoint, these actions would include sorting out personnel and operations details, recalibrating reporting structures, and establishing new processes and procedures. On a theoretical level, it would require an adjustment in thinking — a heavy lift by some accounts, including that of the Secretary of State’s.

In her 2006 book, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs*, Madeleine Albright reflected on the worldview shared by many within the diplomatic corps about religion and its place in foreign policy during the transitional, post-IRFA era at the State Department: “Religion...was above and beyond reason; it evoked the deepest passions; and historically, it was the cause of much bloodshed. Diplomats in my era were taught not to invite trouble, and no subject seemed more inherently treacherous than religion.”

Indeed, for decades the State Department had been steeped in a tradition undergirded by secularization theory and the belief that, in the march toward enlightenment and modernity, religion had lost much of its social and cultural significance. Thomas F. Farr, who would become the first-ever Director of the Office on International Religious Freedom, described the foreign policy establishment at the time as having a reticence “about addressing the religious factors in other cultures and indeed in seeing culture as an expression of religion at all.” IRFA represented a sea change, one that was both applauded and resisted.

As intended, IRFA demanded that religion be taken seriously, not merely on the margins of foreign policy, but in a fully integrated, whole-of-government approach. As applied, it would take many years and several administrations before the implementation of the law would begin to approach its original intent.

IRFA also established the Office of International Religious Freedom within the State Department, to be headed by the Ambassador at Large

1999

Clinton Administration

USCIRF convenes inaugural meeting

June 23 USCIRF Commissioners 1999-2000

Rabbi David Saperstein (Chair); Michael K. Young (Vice Chair); The Honorable Elliot Abrams; Leila Al-Marayati, M.D.; The Honorable John R. Bolton; Firuz Kazemzadeh; Cardinal Theodore McCarrick; Nina Shea; Charles Z. Smith; Ambassador Robert A. Seiple (*Ex-Officio Member*)

IRFA IN THE FIRST DECADE

for International Religious Freedom. By the time IRFA was enacted, a precursor to the IRF office already had been formed via the Secretary of State's Advisory Committee. As noted, Thomas Farr was tapped to be director of that office, and Dr. Robert Seiple, the former president of World Vision, became the first-ever IRF Ambassador.

The law clearly stipulated that the Ambassador was to have autonomy within the constructs of the State Department, direct access to the Secretary of State, and was to serve as a principal advisor to the President and Secretary on matters of religious freedom abroad. From the start, these authorities were clipped. The IRF office, with its small budget and negligible staff, was relegated to what some have wryly referred to as a broom closet within the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. A clear line to the Secretary was never firmly established during either the Clinton or the George W. Bush administrations. Instead of reporting directly to the Secretary of State, Ambassador Seiple reported to the assistant secretary, as did Seiple's successor, John Hanford, for the better part of his tenure.



RELIGIOUS FREEDOM INSTITUTE

Dr. Thomas Farr was the founding Director of the Office on International Religious Freedom

Such attitudes within the State Department, upon the arrival of the IRF Ambassador and the IRFA mandate, reinforced criticisms about the Department that had prompted the enactment of IRFA in the first place. Early IRFA advocates believed the Department did not give proper attention to religious freedom and religious persecution issues. The new law was meant to remedy what was perceived as a lack of interest in or concern for these matters. Drafters of the legislation included what they believed would be an important safety net, a watchdog to ensure that IRFA would not be buried and silenced beneath the bureaucracy of the State Department. That assurance came in the form of an independent commission — the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

1999

Clinton Administration

Rabbi David Saperstein

Elected first-ever Chair of USCIRF, June 23

1999

Clinton Administration

U.S. Dept. of State issues first Annual Report on International Religious Freedom

September

VOICES

PRACTICAL MATTERS

Before the important work of the new commission could begin, a few practical matters required attention. Elliott Abrams, who was one of the original USCIRF Commissioners, reflected on setting up operations for the brand new entity:

“You’ve got a Congressional bill creating a commission, right? It’s law. Now what? You want space for an office. You want to hire a staff. The legislation permits this, but none of us knew how to do it. So there we were, and one of us said, ‘I’ve got an office. There’s a conference table. Why doesn’t everybody come over?’ So the first meetings of the Commission were held around that conference table with a speaker phone in the middle of the table.”



ROBERT CLAY / ALAMY

Former USCIRF Commissioner Elliott Abrams

IRFA IN THE FIRST DECADE

USCIRF would be comprised of nine members, three appointed by the President and six appointed by the House and Senate leadership. The IRF Ambassador, though originally intended as a full member, would serve *ex officio* as a nonvoting member of the Commission. The general role of what was meant to be a temporary commission was to review the State Department's annual human rights report and the new Annual Report on International Religious Freedom and its Executive Summary mandated by IRFA, and to make policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State and Congress on international religious freedom. Critics, however, saw USCIRF as an unnecessary and unwanted watchdog agency that would add another layer of complexity to an already difficult topic while depleting scarce resources.

Both USCIRF and the State Department office, for example, were required to prepare annual reports, with USCIRF, unlike the State Department, mandated to make recommendations for U.S. policy — in addition to the human rights report the State Department already issued each year. Though cumbersome, the annual reporting process with the State Department's designation of countries of particular concern (CPCs) would prove to be a powerful tool for holding bad actors accountable and elevating the plight of the persecuted. It would also fuel the ongoing internal debate as to the best strategy for promoting and securing religious freedom abroad: carrots (quiet diplomacy) versus sticks (naming and shaming).

As anticipated, USCIRF and the IRF office did not always arrive at the same conclusions. Nor were they uniformly confident about each other's motives. As each worked to carve out and identify its role within the IRFA mandate, a certain level of tension emerged between the Commission and the IRF office that, by some accounts, persists two decades later, albeit to a lesser degree. That tension contributed to an underlying disconnect between the IRF office and the very department (the State Department) largely responsible for crafting and deploying U.S. foreign policy.

"I think it takes watchdogs to just make sure we keep raising our voices. If we relax for a few minutes, it's gone and we have to work again really hard to get it back."

– Faith McDonnell, religious freedom advocate

"Most nations don't want bad publicity. More often than not, a very public naming of governments and non-government entities is the right strategy, but in any particular case, you have to exercise judgment. And you are not always going to get that right. There are times when we hit too hard, but sometimes the opposite is true."

– Dr. Robert P. George, former USCIRF Chairman

2000

Clinton Administration

USCIRF issues first annual report

May 1

2001

Bush Administration

9/11 Terrorist attacks

VOICES

SEA CHANGE



PEWFORUM.ORG

Former Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom
Bob Seiple

The Country of Particular Concern, or CPC designation, was an IRFA linchpin. Henceforth, countries found to be engaged in religious persecution would be identified as CPCs and subject to an array of punitive actions by the United States. In the beginning, the State Department would have preferred to ignore the CPC label — it was confrontational, and it complicated diplomacy.

Ambassador Robert A. Seiple tells the story of changing hearts and minds, beginning with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright:

“A real turning point for the legislation came at the end of the first year in 1999, when we wanted to designate China as a CPC. Nobody

wanted to touch this, including Secretary Albright.”

Ambassador Seiple had visited many of the countries identified as candidates for CPC designation. On the ground in China, he observed the regime’s abuses first hand and quickly concluded that Chinese officials had little interest in changing their own policies. The problem was, the Clinton administration had invested considerable energy in cultivating a relationship with China. A CPC designation would be detrimental to that effort. All the same, Seiple pressed the matter with Albright.

“She felt she was being pressured by me.” So Seiple pulled back while Albright traveled to Asia, but a seed had been planted. “She went off to a conference with Asian counterparts, and the Chinese insulted her. She came back and decided to go through with the CPC designation. When that was announced, folks on the Hill were amazed and our office gained a great deal of credibility.”

Seiple would plant more seeds in his two-year tenure as Ambassador. Some would take root more quickly than others. He believes a willingness to listen and respect, not merely tolerate, remains a worthy aim: “Toleration is for someone we don’t care for. Respect is a much better platform to grab onto.”

VOICES

REPORT OR LIFELINE?

The State Department's annual Religious Freedom report (which is informed in part by USCIRF's annual report) has become a diplomacy mainstay. Rabbi David Saperstein, who served as the first-ever USCIRF Chairman and later as IRF Ambassador, describes the report's influence:

"This report has had a powerful impact on countries across the globe. First, there is an impact on minority communities facing discrimination or harassment, who really didn't think anyone in the world knew or cared about them and feel supported and encouraged that their story is being told. Second, is the impact on the State Department because every embassy now has a political officer or researcher who tracks religious issues that might otherwise be ignored or missed, thus building relations between the embassy and oppressed communities. And third, other countries are using our report as a template for their own diplomacy."



USCIRF

Traveling as a USCIRF commissioner, Saperstein met with many disenfranchised people who often expressed a sense of abandonment by the international community. But when the United States began collecting religious data, suddenly those people felt connected. For many, the report is their lifeline. Embassy staff are engaged with the minority religious communities, they ask what is going on, what the needs are and how the embassy might help. One respondent told Saperstein,

Former Ambassador David Saperstein and Elliott Abrams when they were USCIRF Commissioners (former Commissioner Nina Shea in background)

"We never had anyone like that before, and now when we run into problems there's somebody in the embassy that we're able to talk to. That means an awful lot to us to have someone we know is going to be sensitive to our concerns and advocate for us."

IRFA IN THE FIRST DECADE



USCIRF

“Some people take the approach that if we just yell and scream enough, religious persecution problems will be solved. I’ve rarely seen this approach work. Patterns of religious persecution are usually deeply entrenched in a nation’s culture, history, and politics...the goal must be to advance freedom, and that often happens only after extensive efforts to build relationships and persuade foreign officials to adopt a change in mindset and policy.”

– John Hanford, former Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom

Despite early wrangling over form and function, however, the Commission and the IRF office made important headway using their newfound tools to inject religious freedom into the foreign policy conversation at the State Department. Ambassadors Seiple and Hanford used the CPC designation and accountability measures provided by IRFA to begin chipping away at abuses in places like China, Vietnam, Laos, Uzbekistan, and Saudi Arabia, even as they set about changing hearts and minds at the State Department. Of course, the challenge then and now is the nature of diplomacy — often the successes and measures taken behind the scenes remain quietly tucked away, lest overt attention to the process undermine incremental movement forward.

The changes made in those early years were particularly noteworthy considering the electoral events at home that would usher in a new administration, and the devastating geopolitical events that would follow. Within IRFA’s first five years, as officials wrestled with the details of implementation, America was blindsided by the 9/11 terrorist attacks and involved in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. U.S. foreign policy was forever altered, and national security became a paramount concern. Like it or not, factoring religious freedom into the calculus would take on greater urgency for the nation’s top diplomats. Yet, there was still resistance.

When terrorists flew airplanes into the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and an open field in Pennsylvania in September 2001, it is notable that the United States had no sitting Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. Ambassador Seiple had stepped down a year prior, and though President Bush had been in office since January, he had not yet nominated a replacement. Indeed, it would be another eight months, May 2002, before John Hanford was sworn in as the second IRF Ambassador.

During the Bush administration, elevating the religious freedom mandate within the State Department remained a challenge, with some IRF officials reporting that they felt quarantined from the broader policy discussions. Even so, Ambassador Hanford succeeded in growing the IRF staff, increasing the IRF budget, and most significantly securing a much-needed direct line of report to the Secretary of State. President Bush himself demonstrated a fundamental interest in promoting

2002

Bush Administration

John V. Hanford III

Sworn in as second Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, May 2

IRFA IN THE FIRST DECADE

international religious freedom. On more than one occasion he welcomed Chinese dissidents to the White House, for example, and in 2004 he approved a CPC designation for Saudi Arabia, a controversial decision that reinforced the credibility of IRFA. Likewise, his 2006 National Security Strategy included robust language in support of religious freedom.

Indeed, President Bush inspired a new wave of homegrown activism in the public square. After IRFA was signed into law, many of the original advocates moved on to other issues and causes like human trafficking. Interest in religious freedom as a movement began to wane just when consistent involvement was needed most. Following the 2000 election, a newfound enthusiasm arose as many faith-based communities and civil society organizations mobilized grassroots efforts to fight injustice in places like Sudan, China, North Korea, Vietnam, and the Middle East. The epicenter for much of this activity was Bush's hometown of Midland, Texas.

As the first 10 years of IRFA came to a close, the Ambassador, the IRF office, and USCIRF had found their footing on a practical level. Personnel and fiscal details had been sorted out; processes and procedures were in place; even the early confusion attached to the reporting mandates had been largely resolved. Likewise, the Commission and IRF office had found a delicate rhythm, and the Ambassador had created some traction within the State Department. The annual religious freedom reporting provided by USCIRF and the IRF office was entrenched and viewed by many as the most important (albeit imperfect) legacy to date of the IRFA mandate.

The next decade would bring a new set of challenges and victories for IRFA — two new administrations, the spread of violent extremism and subsequent humanitarian crises, extended vacancies within the Ambassador's office, funding and reauthorization battles for USCIRF, new tools, and a new law that strengthened and updated IRFA. Still, the need remained for an attitude adjustment to realize a whole-of-government approach and meaningful integration of religious freedom into the U.S. foreign policy apparatus.

“Our ‘enemy’ at Foggy Bottom...was not so much hostility to our mission as indifference to, or confusion about, the policy value of religious freedom.”

– Thomas F. Farr writing in *World of Faith and Freedom*



USCIRF

Former USCIRF Commissioners Nina Shea, Elizabeth Prodromou, Dr. Preeta Bansal and Michael Cromartie with Rebiya Kadeer, political activist for the Uyghurs at a 2005 press conference

2002

Bush Administration

Sudan Peace Act Signed into Law

October

2008

Bush Administration

Tom Lantos Human Rights

Commission established, September 24

VOICES

MIGHTY MIDLAND



FAITH MCDONNELL

At the signing into law of the Sudan Peace Act in 2002 are (left to right) Brad Phillips of Persecution Project Foundation, Faith McDonnell of IRD, James Tonkowich of BreakPoint, Deborah Fikes of Midland and President George W. Bush

In the heart of the dry and dusty West Texas oil fields rests the city of Midland. For most outsiders, Midland is best known as the childhood home of former President George W. Bush and former First Lady Laura Bush. At the turn of the millennium, however, the quiet, industrious town halfway between Fort Worth and El Paso set off a firestorm of activism. Deborah Fikes was the unassuming teacher, wife and mother who lit the spark.

After Bush was elected president, he made frequent references to Midland. "If you really want to understand me," he would tell reporters. "Go back to my roots."

And they did. Reporters flooded Midland, and Fikes recognized an opportunity: "Churches in Midland had one of the most unique opportunities to plug in at a high level, she says. "If they got involved, they would have the ear of the President and could make a difference."

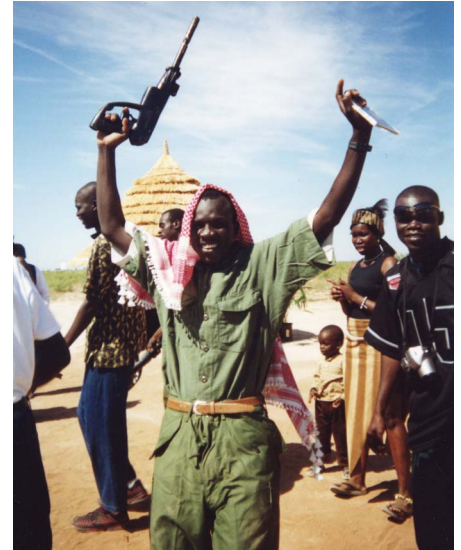
For Fikes, the obvious issue was to elevate the plight of believers persecuted for their faith. For years she had been reading literature from the Voice of the Martyrs. She prayed and wrote letters to Congress on behalf of the persecuted but felt frustrated that she couldn't do more — until a Texas favorite son entered the

White House. “I did not have a grand plan,” says Fikes, who simply wanted to leverage the sudden media attention and newfound access to the President of the United States. “I wanted the pastors to raise the issue of the persecuted church and get their congregations involved.”

She approached the Midland Ministerial Alliance (MMA), a loose network of area churches, to play host to the 2001 International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (IDOP). The flagship event drew more than 40 local churches and hundreds of participants and got the attention of national leadership in Washington, D.C.

Midland became an epicenter for church mobilization — a practical response to religious persecution and civil rights abuses around the world. Its citizen ambassadors helped push the Sudan Peace Act through Congress in 2002, helped fund a center in Thailand for women and children at risk for sexual exploitation, and continue to support countless churches, schools and other projects in places like Sudan, North Korea, and China where persecution is extreme. Many ministries working on the frontlines of religious persecution have made Midland home base, including ChinaAid and Watch and Pray International.

For 25 years, Midland’s mighty faith community has rolled up its sleeves to combat religious persecution and influence U.S. foreign policy, not from the halls of Congress, but from the pews and the public square. As one observer noted about Midland, “God used a lot of normal people” to do extraordinary work. And as Deborah Fikes would earnestly note, this work has been important not just for Christians, but for all religious faiths and freedoms. As such, the arid oil-patch town of Midland has proven to be fertile ground for some of the most important and far-reaching applications of the policies and outreach inspired by the International Religious Freedom Act.



FAITH MCDONNELL

Above and below: (Midland 2001) Mock Sudan village hut and mock Sudan village simulation of armed attack



FAITH MCDONNELL



USCIRF

Reverend Suzan Johnson Cook,
Ambassador at Large for International
Religious Freedom

“When I took office, some Ambassadors told me that you get two or three deliverables. For me, it was bringing women, faith leaders and multinational NGOs to the table.”

– Rev. Suzan Johnson Cook, former
Ambassador at Large for International
Religious Freedom

The second decade of IRFA began against a backdrop of profound international conflicts, many with religious underpinnings. In Nigeria, the terrorist group Boko Haram launched its bloody military campaign to create an Islamic state. Syria was on the verge of a civil war that would result in one of the worst humanitarian crises of the 21st century. Ancient Christian, Yazidi and Shia religious minorities would come to suffer genocidal targeting in Iraq. Throughout the Middle East and North Africa, conditions were ripening for a wave of demonstrations, riots, and civil wars that would come to be known as the Arab Spring. In the shadows, Al-Qaeda and other terrorist cells were conspiring. ISIS had not yet emerged.

In the United States, new administrations would impact the State Department and the IRF office, including extended vacancies in the office of the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom at a time when religious extremism and persecution around the world were both virulent and destabilizing. With President Barack Obama sworn into office in 2009, Ambassador John Hanford – who had served nearly seven years as the senior religious freedom diplomat for the United States, departed. It would be a full 27 months before President Obama nominated, and Congress approved, a replacement, Rev. Suzan Johnson Cook. To critics, the lag in securing Ambassador Cook’s appointment was an indication that the administration did not prioritize IRF policy.

Despite energy and devotion for the job, Cook’s appointment was met with skepticism by some because her background included few foreign policy credentials and she was new to Washington. Prior to her nomination, she had been Associate Dean and Officer at Harvard University School of Divinity, founder and senior pastor of the Bronx Christian Fellowship Baptist Church in New York, and founder of Wisdom Women Worldwide Center, a global organization for female faith leaders.

Although short on funds and staff, Cook worked to build on the contributions of her predecessors. Early on, she held listening meetings

2011
Obama Administration

Dr. Suzan Johnson Cook
Sworn in as Ambassador at Large
for International Religious Freedom, May 16

IRFA IN THE SECOND DECADE

and 12 to 14 roundtables monthly with various groups. From that effort, the Religious Leaders Roundtable was formed. Cook resigned her position after two years to return to the private sector.

It would be another nine months before the President nominated Rabbi David Saperstein, who had been named by Newsweek in 2009 as the most influential rabbi in America. Saperstein's impressive credentials and long-time involvement in religious freedom advocacy was widely respected. Besides serving as the first-ever Chair of USCIRF, he was director and counsel of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and an adjunct professor at Georgetown University Law Center. Congress confirmed his appointment in December 2014, and Saperstein was sworn in the following month as the fourth Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom.

Even as the administration made its adjustments, USCIRF was fielding its own personnel challenges as the new decade of IRFA began. By many accounts, the commissioners were not getting along. Some long-term members became entrenched in interests at the expense of other projects and priorities. In 2009, USCIRF was hit with a lawsuit from a former analyst alleging religious bias. And criticism was levied at the Commission for an overall lackluster performance. The rancor had many in Congress wondering if USCIRF had served its purpose and should be shut down.

In fact, as provided by IRFA, the Commission originally was authorized to exist for four years, with reauthorization at Congress' discretion. By 2011, some questioned the Commission's impact, and some Members of Congress sought to use reauthorization to try to achieve victories on unrelated issues. Reauthorization was in jeopardy. But many in the religious freedom community — legislators, advocates, and former commissioners — came to USCIRF's defense. After a fierce debate,



USCIRF

Former USCIRF Commissioners Clifford May, Dr. John Ruskay, Dr. Daniel Mark and Rev. Thomas Reese with Greg Mitchell, co-chair of the IRF Roundtable

2012

Obama Administration

Magnitsky Act

Signed into law, December 14

IRFA IN THE SECOND DECADE

“Our job is to defend religious freedom and any belief, right? I hope commissioners will stay focused on international religious freedom issues...and not mix our personal faith, belief systems with our work. That’s a tough one, but we need to remind ourselves about that.”

– Former USCIRF Chair Dr. Tenzin Dorjee

Congress reauthorized USCIRF for an additional three years but trimmed the budget from \$4 million to \$3 million and imposed term limits on commissioners to bring in fresh ideas and perspectives.

Another challenging reauthorization debate ensued in 2015. While much of the confidence in USCIRF and its mission had been restored, the process was not smooth. At the end, Congress reauthorized the agency for four more years and even increased annual funding to \$3.5 million, but required the Commission to implement a new strategic planning process that would focus on areas including issue prioritization and changes in the Annual Report.

During the Obama administration, the Ambassador position again was quietly downgraded in terms of direct access to the Secretary of State, although Ambassador Saperstein cultivated a close relationship with then-Secretary of State John Kerry. The IRF office staff was reduced and underfunded in this era, though after 2014 it began receiving funding increases from Congress, along with other issues related to religious freedom abroad. In August 2013, Secretary of State Kerry added a new layer to the bureaucracy at the State Department with the creation of the Office of Religion and Global Affairs, headed by Shaun Casey. Its purpose was to analyze the role of religion in the world of diplomacy.

Also, important new tools and expansive research were changing the religious freedom landscape. Research provided a much broader, global understanding of IRF challenges, and new tools provided the means to respond with greater impact.

In 2012, for example, President Obama would sign into law the Magnitsky Act (P.L. 112-208) in response to the human rights abuses that led to the death of a Russian lawyer who had exposed a \$230 million tax fraud linked to the Kremlin. The Act originally sanctioned 18 Russian officials and businessmen. It also repealed the application to Russia and Moldova of the decades-old Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which denied them permanent normal trade relations with the United States based on their restrictions on emigration.

2013

Obama Administration

Dr. Suzan Johnson Cook

Resigns as Ambassador, October 16

Then President Obama also signed into law in 2016 The Global Magnitsky Act (P.L. 114-328), which extended the scope of the Magnitsky Act to apply to human rights abuses perpetrated worldwide. The new Global Magnitsky Act gave the U.S. government authority to sanction offenders anywhere in the world by freezing assets, banning use of the U.S. banking system, and imposing a visa ban to keep offenders from entering the country.

Additional tools were made available with the passage of the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016 (H.R. 1150), which then President Obama signed into law in 2016 (P.L. 114-281). The Act strengthened and updated the original IRFA, creating a more muscular framework to “improve the ability of the U.S. to advance religious freedom globally through enhanced diplomacy, training, counterterrorism, and foreign assistance efforts, and through stronger and more flexible political responses to religious freedom violations and violent extremism worldwide.”

Among other provisions, the new Act mandates that the State Department designate non-state actors as entities of particular concern (EPCs). A companion to the countries of particular concern (CPC) designation, the law provides that the Secretary of State work with Congress and USCIRF to create new political, financial and diplomatic tools to address the severe violations of religious freedom committed by non-state actors, such as ISIS and Boko Haram.

The Act emphasizes the strategic value of IRF and its position within the



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Newly sworn in Ambassador at Large David Saperstein delivers remarks during a ceremony in his honor at the U.S. Department of State in Washington, D.C., on February 20, 2015

2015

Obama Administration

Rabbi David Saperstein

Sworn in as Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, January 6

IRFA IN THE SECOND DECADE



BAYLORISR.ORG

“We now have all this data and really objective, verifiable information... scholars can use that in very sophisticated, statistical ways to show the relationship between high levels of restrictions on religion and violence.”

– Allen Hertzke, Ph.D., Department of Political Science, University of Oklahoma

broader foreign policy apparatus. It mandates that the IRF Ambassador report directly to the Secretary of State and establishes a minimum number of full-time staff members for the IRF office. The Act further mandates that the State Department establish and maintain a “designated persons list” of individuals who violate religious freedom.

USCIRF, too, is mandated under the Act to make public a list of persons it determines are imprisoned or detained, forcibly disappeared, been placed under house arrest, been tortured, or subjected to forced renunciations for their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy by the governments of countries USCIRF recommends for designation as CPCs or nonstate actors USCIRF recommends for designation as EPCs. Religious freedom training for all Foreign Service Officers is also required, as is the development of curriculum for this training.

Research also contributed to the international religious freedom conversation during the second decade of IRFA. IRFA’s enactment inspired a body of valuable research that provided the empirical data which analysts, government officials, and activists sought to support what they already knew and observed on the ground: that there is a strong correlation between the robust protection of religious freedom and a host of desirable social and other goods.

Many institutes, think tanks, and academics started collecting information and developing democracy and freedom scores, civil liberties scores, or terrorism databases. But it was Brian Grim of Pew Research Center and Roger Finke, a professor of sociology and religious studies at Penn State, who were in the vanguard of religious freedom research. They developed a methodology to examine government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion.

Grim and Finke’s research took a holistic, global approach. The results were sobering but informative. As they describe in their book, *The Price of Freedom Denied*: “Michael Horowitz led an unlikely alliance in revealing religious persecution around the globe. But as the awareness

2015

Obama Administration

Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act (H.R. 1150)

Introduced in the House, February 27

of persecution became greater, explanations for the occurrence of violent religious persecution and conflict remained scarce.” In other words, awareness is a necessary first step, but it is insufficient when trying to understand the factors associated with persecution and conflict, let alone for alleviating and preventing abuse. It is not enough to merely react and point to persecution; the underlying causes need to be identified and addressed as well.

To that end, Grim and Fink determined that “ensuring religious freedoms for all serves to defuse the potential volatility of religious plurality,” and “to the extent that governments deny religious freedoms, violent religious persecution and conflict will increase.”

Research thus affirms the success of efforts to expose persecution, but also reveals that more needs to be done. To that point, The Pew Research Center’s analysis of religious restrictions and hostilities for 2016 found that 83% of the global population lived in countries with high or very high religious restrictions, mostly targeting religious minorities. The numbers left many observers dismayed. How, after nearly 20 years of IRFA, could the numbers be so dismal? The focus, if Grim and Finke are correct, needs to shift from simply an awareness of persecution to the exploration and understanding of the underlying causes for persecution.

Even Thomas Farr, the former Director of the Office of International Religious Freedom, questioned the efficacy of post-IRFA policies toward religious persecution. In testimony before the House Committee

“You measure impact comparatively and on a country by country basis. In terms of failure in impacting a dramatic decline in persecution, I am not sure that was an accurate measure. It’s not helpful in thinking about IRF efficacy to expect a simplistic cause-effect analysis, which is what critics charge when they say that IRFA passed but persecution is on the rise. What’s important is to consider the symbolic significance, as well as to evaluate the measurable impacts and, of course, to make adjustments, so that the impact of IRFA is as full and positive as possible.”

– Dr. Elizabeth H. Prodromou, former USCIRF Vice-Chair

2015

Obama Administration

Knox Thames

appointed Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia, September 28

2016

Obama Administration

U.S. declares ISIS committed genocide

against Yazidis, Christians, and Shi’a Muslims in Iraq, March 17

IRFA IN THE SECOND DECADE



USCIRF

Former USCIRF Vice Chair Sandra Jolley introducing the 2017 USCIRF International Religious Freedom report

on Oversight and Government Reform – Subcommittee on National Security in June 2013, he offered a sobering assessment of the degree to which religious persecution has been abated or religious freedom increased worldwide as a result of IRFA.

In its [2018 annual report](#), USCIRF acknowledged the downward trend, saying it “often intersected with authoritarian practices characterized by hostility toward dissent, pluralism, independent media, and active civil society, or took place under the guise of protecting national security or countering terrorism.” Still, in the view of many, the study points to reasons for

optimism. In releasing the report, then USCIRF Chair Daniel Mark said, “The importance of this foundational right is appreciated more now than ever, and egregious violations are less likely to go unnoticed.”

When the first substantive research was introduced, many in the religious freedom advocacy community were paying attention and doubled down on their efforts. The IRF Roundtable in Washington, D.C., for example, was born of a desire to respond to research and stem the tide of persecution and abuse. Quickly, the IRF Roundtable became the premier space for practical policy discussions and coordination among civil society, government, and multilateral organizations. By 2018, it had attracted representatives from 250 organizations and launched nearly 100 multi-faith initiatives on behalf of persecuted communities. The NGO community as a whole had grown from a handful of groups in the late 1990s to hundreds of organizations.

2016
Obama Administration

Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act signed into law by President Obama, December 16

2016
Obama Administration

Global Magnitsky Act signed into law, December 23

VOICES

MOVING THE NEEDLE



USCIRF

Former USCIRF Commissioners
Zuhdi Jasser, Robert George and
Katrina Lantos Swett

Research provides important empirical data that strengthens the work and outreach of religious freedom advocates like Katrina Lantos Swett. The President of the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice and former USCIRF Chair, Lantos Swett knows that research lends credibility to the often

emotional conversation of religious persecution and helps to promote religious freedom.

“Societies that do a good job protecting religious freedom tend to have lower levels of social tension, lower levels of extremism, and higher economic outcomes. Women tend to have a higher socioeconomic status in societies where conscience rights are robustly protected.

“In some ways, that’s almost counterintuitive. I think people might have thought historically, ‘Well, free religious practice is somehow associated with fewer rights for women,’ but evidence is just the contrary. In countries where you have strong religious freedom protections, women are more empowered. Freedom of religion and belief really can become a pretty significant tool in the empowerment of women.”

WOMEN AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM SYNERGIES AND OPPORTUNITIES



USCIRF

VOICES

ADVOCATES GET BUSY

Greg Mitchell is the co-founder of the IRF Roundtable, an informal network of religious freedom advocates that meets regularly to discuss IRF issues, share ideas and propose joint advocacy actions. When the statistics showed religious persecution on the rise, Mitchell got busy.

“Pew started doing research and started finding a rising tide of restrictions on religion,” says Mitchell. It was ten years after IRFA had been enacted, and Mitchell recognized that IRFA and government are only part of the solution. “Even with IRFA, even with an ambassador and USCIRF, you can’t just rely on the U.S. government to solve all these problems. People have now realized that this is going to be a constant struggle. Vigilance, that’s what religious freedom requires. You’re going to have to work at it all the time.”

“When we first started the Roundtable, we only had one purpose, and that was to engage the U.S. government and get it to do more to advance international religious freedom, to do what the people expected they would be doing since IRFA passed.”

The IRF Roundtable continues to advocate and advise on policies regarding international religious freedom around the world

and even in the United States. It is a safe space where NGOs, individuals and government officials from all faiths, or no faith at all, can work together for freedom of religion or belief globally. As of 2023, the network has attracted representatives from 800 international organizations, launched more than 200 multi-faith initiatives and served as a model for other IRF Roundtables around the world.



STATE.GOV/DRL/IRF

Greg Mitchell and the IRF Roundtable

VOICES

PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE PROJECT



USCIRF

Former USCIRF Commissioner Clifford May at press conference in April 2017 to launch the Prisoners of Conscience project

*In April 2017, USCIRF launched its Prisoners of Conscience Project to shine the light on individuals imprisoned around the world for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. Commissioners selected prisoners and advocated on their behalf. Former Commissioner Clifford May adopted Raif Badawi, a Saudi Arabian blogger, activist, and creator of the website *Free Saudi Liberals*, which encouraged debate on religious and political matters.*

Charged with “setting up a website that undermines general security,” “ridiculing Islamic religious figures,” and “going beyond the realm of obedience,” Badawi was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes. Speaking about his support of Badawi,

Commissioner May said, “In some cases [advocacy] may have helped win release earlier than otherwise would have been the case. In other instances, I think it’s important that those who are imprisoned know that somebody cares about them.”

“I recently had the opportunity to support Raif Badawi with the Ambassador from Saudi Arabia. I don’t think that’s going to get his release anytime soon, but at least he knows that there are people who care about him in the U.S. The fact that he and others are imprisoned is an obstacle to the better relations that I think the Saudis seek with the U.S. at this point.”

Commissioner May’s prediction was correct. Several more years would pass before the Saudi government finally released Badawi on March 11, 2022. Yet, after receiving 50 lashes and completing his 10-year prison sentence, the human rights activist is forbidden to travel outside the country or express himself freely online or in the media until 2032. Badawi’s case underscores the need for ongoing international advocacy on behalf of individuals denied their basic freedoms based on the violation of the freedom of religion or belief.

By the end of IRFA’s second decade, a new energy was brewing within the IRF community. Then President Donald Trump selected Kansas Governor Sam Brownback as his nominee for Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, a choice that drew some partisan grumbling but was acknowledged by many as an astute and timely pick.

IRFA IN THE SECOND DECADE

Brownback was lauded as a principled and authoritative voice for international religious freedom. While in the Senate, he spoke out against atrocities committed against many religious minorities abroad. He worked to end the North-South war in Sudan, then subsequently pushed for passage of the Darfur Peace and Accountability Act of 2005; sponsored a resolution condemning persecution of the Baha'i minority in Iran; and was instrumental in the enactment of IRFA.

The Senate narrowly confirmed Brownback as the fifth IRF Ambassador in January 2018, with then Vice President Mike Pence casting the tiebreaking vote in his role as president of the Senate. At the time, many believed the combination of Brownback and Pence, in concert with Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State and former USCIRF commissioner John Bolton as National Security Advisor, would elevate the cause of international religious freedom and create unprecedented opportunities to further advance religious freedom abroad. And in many substantive ways, they did.

In one such demonstration, the Trump administration would be the first (and only) to appoint a Special Advisor on International Religious Freedom to the National Security Council. Both IRFA and the subsequent Frank R. Wolf Act called for the creation of the position. After more than two decades, that mandate was fulfilled with the appointment of Sarah Makin, who had been working with faith communities and religious minorities in Iraq as a member of the Vice President's staff.

The Trump administration also incorporated meaningful religious freedom language into its 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), setting apart the promotion of religious freedom as a priority action within the overall NSS: "The United States also remains committed to supporting and advancing religious freedom — America's first freedom. ...We will advocate on behalf of religious freedom and threatened minorities. ...We will place a priority on protecting these groups and will continue working with regional partners to protect minority communities from attacks and to preserve their cultural heritage."



STATE.GOV

"Religious freedom is a fundamental right of every human no matter where they live, who they are, or what they believe. It is the right to do with your own soul what you choose without interference of any government or group."

– Ambassador Sam Brownback

2017

Trump Administration

National Security Strategy identifies protection of religious freedom and religious minorities a priority, December

2018

Trump Administration

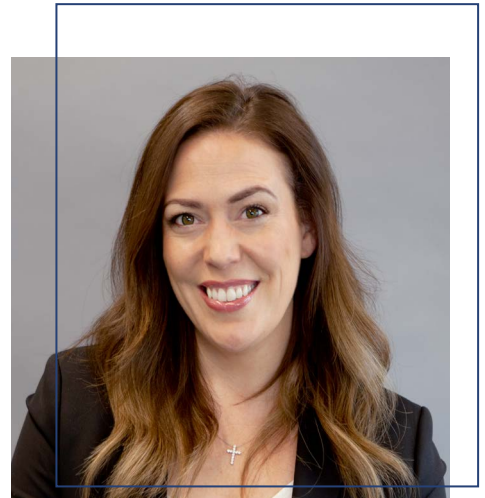
Sam Brownback sworn in as Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, February 1

In the 20th anniversary year of IRFA, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo hosted the first-ever Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, a three-day summit attended by ministerial-level officials from more than 80 nations, as well as hundreds of religious leaders, NGO representatives, civil society organizations, and human rights advocates. The goal: reaffirm the international commitment to promote religious freedom and identify concrete initiatives to raise religious freedom as a global priority.

In convening the Ministerial, U.S. leadership sought to put its “first freedom” in first position. Time was spent listening to survivors of persecution and the family members of those who did not survive — a reminder that persecution has a face, and religious freedom is a beating heart. In this way, the Ministerial helped galvanize the global IRF community, providing an important platform to discuss trends and solutions to the world’s most difficult religious freedom challenges.

With eyes to the future, the international participants discussed concrete steps to take for the collective protection and promotion of religious freedom. Secretary Pompeo issued the Potomac Declaration and the Potomac Plan of Action at the conclusion of the Ministerial, promising that the U.S. would “work with others around the world to help those under attack for their beliefs, and that we expect leaders around the world to make it their priority as well.” In addition, three thematic statements on global trends undermining religious freedom were issued at the Ministerial: blasphemy and apostasy laws, counterterrorism as a false pretext for religious freedom repression, and violations by non-state actors. Three country statements — on Burma, China, and Iran — were introduced as well.

The first Ministerial was followed by a second, larger Ministerial in 2019, hosted by the United States. Reflecting on the momentum created by these convenings, Secretary Pompeo noted, “We gathered leaders from across the world — lay leaders, faith practitioners, scholars, pastors, priests, clerics. These were often politically influential people



AMBER BURKHEAD, PROLIFIC

Sarah Makin, former Deputy Assistant to the President for NSC

2018

Trump Administration

Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, hosted by the U.S. Department of State, July 24 to 26 – Potomac Declaration and Potomac Action Plan are introduced

IRFA IN THE SECOND DECADE



STATE.GOV

2019 State Dept Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom

even though few of them were elected officials. The chance for us to come together around a common understanding of religious freedom gave the United States the capacity to influence and shape human dignity inside their countries in a way that no policy conference ever could.”

As the IRF Act moved into its third decade, the Ministerial meetings were representative of a growing awareness and embrace of religious freedom advocacy around the globe. The conversations and connections begun at these gatherings would prove to be either a launching pad or an accelerator for many important initiatives that would give new momentum to the IRF movement. An energized effort would be important as the geopolitical landscape began to shift rapidly.

“The United States of America stands for religious freedom yesterday, today, and always. We do this because it is right. But we also do this because religious freedom is in the interest of the peace and security of the world.”

– Vice President Mike Pence

2018 *Trump Administration*

Trump Administration Deploys Global Magnitsky Act
in response to Turkey's refusal release American Pastor Andrew Brunson (August)

VOICES

IRFA LEVERAGE FREES A PASTOR



PATRICK ROBERTSON/BAKER PUBLISHING

Pastor Andrew Brunson

Sanctions are one of the many discretionary actions available to the President under the IRF Act. In addition, the Global Magnitsky Act is a robust tool that allows the U.S. government to sanction offenders identified as engaging in serious human rights abuses. For Pastor Andrew Brunson, this lever would prove to be his Get Out of Jail card.

For more than 20 years, the unassuming Brunson and his wife Norine had faithfully worked as Christian missionaries in Turkey, establishing churches, training believers, and aiding refugees. Their work in the Muslim-majority country had been challenging, but fruitful, and the couple had a heart for the Turkish people. They had recently applied for permanent resident status when a failed coup

against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan rattled the country in the summer of 2016 and forever changed the Brunson's lives.

That October, Brunson was suddenly detained, imprisoned and falsely charged with espionage and terrorism by the Turkish government for a role he did not play in the coup attempt. Months later, the charge of "Christianization" would be added to his list of criminal offenses. For nearly two years, Brunson languished in prison. U.S. State Department officials, members of Congress, and USCIRF mounted an aggressive pressure campaign to secure Brunson's release. And though the IRFA mandate does not often involve American citizens, per se, IRF Ambassador Sam

Brownback and a handful of USCIRF Commissioners traveled to Turkey to appeal on his behalf.

When Turkey — a U.S. NATO ally — offered only a partial reprieve by releasing Brunson to house arrest, then President Trump deployed the full weight of the Global Magnitsky Act to sanction two Turkish officials. The move sent a signal and set in motion other economic pressures that ultimately resulted in the release of Brunson on October 12, 2018.

Brunson admits his awareness of the IRF Act prior to his incarceration was peripheral at best. Now, it's top of mind. "The U.S. and Western Europe are really the ones driving religious freedom. It's not a high value in most countries, but the United States and Europe have pushed this as a human right. They have modeled it and encouraged other countries. If there has been progress on religious persecution in other countries, often it was because of that pressure." But Brunson cautions that that influence is fragile. "I think religious freedom is starting to come under pressure in the West," he warns. "If we're not giving it the same importance at home, I don't think people are going to listen to us abroad.



IRF SUMMIT

Peter Burns speaking at 2022 IRF Summit

M

any observers would agree that widespread global activity and events associated with freedom of religion or belief have moved at a rapid pace between 2019 and 2023, a pivotal five-year span approaching the 25th anniversary of IRFA. On the positive side of the ledger are initiatives like the birth of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA), the continuation of the IRF Ministerial, the launch of the International Religious Freedom Summit, the formation of multiple IRF Roundtables around the world, the negotiation of the Abraham Accords Declaration, and the long-awaited declarations of genocide against the Uyghurs and Rohingya.

Peter Burns, Executive Director of the IRF Summit and former Special Assistant at the U.S. State Department has observed, “The IRF movement is getting better. It’s learning. It’s getting stronger and learning how to play in the international space.” USCIRF, he says, has “come of age and woken up to its own ability” in the past five years, though he believes Congress has not necessarily matched that trajectory. “Even though there’s more activity driven by really effective advocacy, the actual Congressional engagement remains pretty tepid.”

In fact, many would agree that a whole-of-government approach to IRF, as prescribed by IRFA, has remained elusive. Frequent, sometimes contentious debates concerning funding and reauthorizing USCIRF also have had a chilling effect on some important initiatives, with the Commission forced to focus on its very existence, rather than on substantive concerns.

Unfortunately, bad actors in countries like Burma, China, India, Iran, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan have often undermined progress. Juxtaposed with the positive milestones has been an alarming rise in authoritarianism, accompanied by an increase in persecution worldwide of religious minorities and dissenting members of majority communities. As one observer noted: “Civil

2018

Trump Administration

Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act

adopted by Congress, Dec. 11

society space is closing. The rule of law is not as respected as it was, and democracy is not growing as we all hoped it would.”

Even so, great strides have been made to elevate freedom of religion or belief around the world and, against this volatile backdrop, IRFA has remained a touchstone. The Act has provided not only a framework for U.S. foreign policy, but also a roadmap for other nations, non-governmental organizations, faith-based groups and civil society.

Hopeful Milestones

In the fall of 2019, then President Trump became the first U.S. President in history to convene a meeting at the United Nations General Assembly focused solely on the issue of international religious freedom. “That was a tremendous opportunity to educate diplomats and heads of state,” says Nury Turkel, a Commissioner of USCIRF and himself a former asylum seeker and US-educated Uyghur lawyer. “I was delighted to see the President, Vice President, Secretary of State and victims of religious persecution sitting alongside the UN Secretary General discussing religious freedom, showing our seriousness.”

A few months earlier, the U.S. State Department had convened the second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom. Participation far surpassed that of the original convening, with more than 1,000 civil society and religious leaders and more than 100 foreign delegations in attendance.

An important outgrowth of the Ministerials was the formation of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) by then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. The Alliance is a network of like-minded countries (42 as of this writing) fully committed to advancing freedom of religion or belief around the world.

Critical to the mission of the Alliance has been the creation of individual working groups to tackle tough issues, among them atrocity prevention, education, protecting religious and cultural heritage, and gender. The group has activated a religious prisoners of conscience program. And



UNITED NATIONS

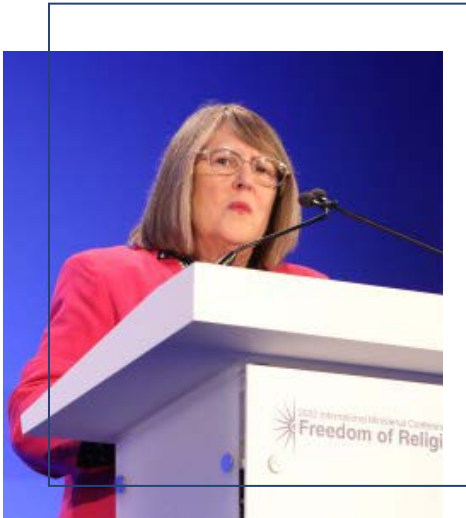
António Guterres, UN Secretary General at 2019 UN Global Meeting to Protect Religious Freedom

2019

Trump Administration

Second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom,
hosted by the U.S. Department of State, July 16-18

IRFA TURNS 25



FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH &
DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Fiona Bruce, UK PM's Special Envoy
for Freedom of Religion or Belief;
Chair, IRFBA

A 2020 Executive Order issued by then President Trump adopted several longstanding USCIRF recommendations, including increased foreign assistance related to IRF promotion, development of an overall strategy for promoting religious freedom abroad, and creation of country-specific action plans. Since then, the State Department has dedicated \$50 million annually to IRF-related programming.

it has assembled a global, 40-member Council of Experts comprised of academics, civil society leaders, heads of international NGOs, and former governmental envoys.

Under the leadership of Fiona Bruce MP, the UK Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, the UK government hosted the International Ministerial Conference on the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief in London in 2022. Given COVID protocols, this conference was the first in-person international ministerial since those hosted by the United States in 2018 and 2019, and followed a virtual ministerial hosted by Poland in 2020. (At the time of this writing, IRFBA helped coordinate the fifth Ministerial, which was held in November 2023 in Prague on the topic of *Freedom of Religion or Belief under Authoritarian Regimes*.)

Beyond IRFBA and the continuation of the IRF Ministerials, global collaboration has been a hallmark of the five years leading up to IRFA's 25th anniversary. Countries around the world have looked to the U.S. model in structuring their own responses to international religious freedom. For example, just a dozen years after Greg Mitchell co-founded the IRF Roundtable in Washington, D.C. more than 25 nations have established their own IRF Roundtables and several more are in various stages of development.

Even as the global community has embraced new ways to understand and promote freedom of religion or belief, the United States has worked to provide relief and safe harbor for many of the world's most persecuted individuals. Since taking office in 2021, President Joe Biden has increased the United States' annual refugee resettlement ceiling nearly tenfold — from the record-low cap of 15,000 established by his predecessor to 125,000, a level more consistent with America's long tradition of welcome and at pace with USCIRF recommendations.

2021 also marked the first year of the International Religious Freedom Summit. The now annual civil society conference seeks to create

2020
Trump Administration

**First-ever Senior Director
for IRF on the NSC staff**
appointed by President Trump, Feb. 4

2020
Trump Administration **International Religious Freedom or Belief
Alliance (IRFBA) launched, Feb. 5**



STATE.GOV

coalitions of organizations that are working together to advance international religious freedom, raise public awareness about IRF issues, and increase the political strength of the IRF movement.

First IRFBA dinner at 2019 IRF Ministerial

“In addition to the growing civil society movement, we’ve never had more special rapporteurs, special envoys and ambassadors for countering restrictions on religious freedom as we do today,” says Rashad Hussain, who was confirmed as the sixth Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom in December 2021.

Both President Trump and President Biden nominated their IRF Ambassadors promptly compared to the long delays in earlier years, but Hussain’s nomination by President Biden and his near unanimous and bipartisan confirmation by Congress marked yet another important milestone. Hussain is the first Muslim American to serve as the top IRF

2020

Trump Administration

World Health Organization

declares COVID-19 a pandemic, Mar 11

VOICES

LONGING FOR HOME — THE ETHNIC CLEANSING OF ROHINGYA MUSLIMS

Rohingya Muslims have called Burma home for centuries, but it is a home where they are despised, disenfranchised, and tormented by their fellow countrymen. Since the early 1990s, more than 1 million desperate Rohingya have left their home to escape unspeakable violence and human rights abuses.

Many now live far from their ancestral home in congested refugee camps in countries like Thailand, Indonesia and Nepal. Most have found refuge in neighboring Bangladesh, where their presence causes a simmering tension with local communities. More than half of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are women and children.

"I have seen lots of difficult things, but there is nothing like the experience of going to an IDP camp in Burma," says Mark Green, former Administrator of USAID. In one visit, he met a

young father who was desperate for answers. "He told me that all of his children were born in that camp. He could not leave without written permission, which he had never gotten. He said there were health facilities but no doctors, classrooms but no teachers, and the only food he had was what the U.S. had provided."

The father's next words still haunt Green. "He looked at me and said, 'My question is, what do I tell my son?' That just shattered me. Food assistance is crucial. Medical assistance is crucial. But we also have to find ways to have settings

for people in which they can be human, where they have the space to express their humanity."

For the Rohingya Muslims living in Buddhist-majority Burma, little is left that resembles humanity. It began with the cancelation in the early 1960s of Rohingya-language programming on the state-run broadcasting service. Next, Rohingya were segregated into IDP camps in Rakhine State and made to register with the government. By 1982, the nation's revised citizenship law effectively excluded Rohingya from citizenship and denied them full political rights. Then, in wave after violent wave, military leaders orchestrated arson, rapes and mass killings of its Rohingya population.

In 2017 the United States withdrew military assistance from Burma. The UN and International Criminal Court (ICC) in turn called for investigations of the violence perpetrated against the Rohingyas. Finally, in March 2022 Secretary of State Antony Blinken concluded that Rohingyas were the victims of genocide and crimes against humanity committed by members of the Burmese military.



REUTERS/MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN



REUTERS/MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN

In remarks announcing the formal declaration of genocide, Secretary Blinken noted that the destruction of Rohingya—in whole or in part—was the clear intent behind the mass atrocities in Burma: “That intent has been corroborated by the accounts of soldiers who took part in the operation and later defected, such as one who said he was told by his commanding officer to, ‘shoot at every sight of a person,’ burn villages, rape and kill women, orders that he and his unit carried out.”

Secretary Blinken concluded his remarks echoing the hope for humanity that motivates former Administrator Green and the global cadre of human rights and

international religious freedom advocates: “Despite all they have endured, despite decades of being told they do not belong, two out of three Rohingya refugees still want to be able to return home to Burma one day — as long as they can do it safely, with dignity, with human rights, which is not possible now. And so, with today’s determination, the United States reaffirms its broader commitment to accompany Rohingya on this path out of genocide — toward truth, toward accountability, toward a home that will welcome them as equal members, that will respect their human rights and dignity, alongside that of all people in Burma.”

The Rohingya leaving their homeland for safety

official in the U.S. government, emblematic of the all-inclusive intention of IRFA and the many initiatives and policies that have flowed from it. The last three Ambassadors-at-Large have been Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, a fact that Hussain believes “sends a really powerful signal to the world about who we are as a country and what our priorities are.”

Shortly after Hussain had settled into his new role as chief IRF diplomat for the United States, Secretary of State Antony Blinken made a sobering declaration about atrocities perpetrated against the Rohingya, a mostly Muslim minority ethnic group in Myanmar: “I have determined that members of the Burmese military committed genocide and crimes against humanity against Rohingya. Today’s determination . . . tells Rohingya, and victims in particular, that the United States government recognizes the gravity of the atrocities committed against them. And it affirms Rohingya’s human rights and dignity, something the Burmese military has tried to destroy.”



STATE.GOV

Rashad Hussain, Ambassador at Large for IRF

Just 14 months earlier, in his final act before a new administration stepped into the White House, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a similar declaration of genocide, this one in support of the Uyghur community: “While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has always exhibited a profound hostility to all people of faith, we have watched with growing alarm the Party’s increasingly repressive treatment of the Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minority groups.” He added, “I have determined that . . . the People’s Republic of China (PRC), under the direction and control of the CCP, has committed genocide against the predominately Muslim Uyghurs and other members of ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang. We will not remain silent.”

Though the declarations were welcome and appropriate measures — hopeful milestones by most accounts — they also pointed to a disheartening reality: despite all of the movement forward to prevent such atrocities, genocide and religious persecution have not only continued, they have increased. Even as important and hopeful milestones were being accomplished, harmful activity was still happening.

And in 2020, these tragedies were aggravated further by an unexpected foe.

2020

Trump Administration

President Trump signs Executive Order 13926
on Advancing International Religious Freedom, June 2

VOICES

ALL EYES ON THE UYGHUR PEOPLE

Chinese authorities have been using political repression, economic marginalization, curbs on religious practice, demographic engineering, and sinicization to target Uyghurs for years. By U.S. government estimates, the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has systematically interned between 800,000 and 2 million Uyghurs since 2017. The statistics point to the most extensive internment campaign since the Second World War and underscore the PRC's intention to eradicate Uyghur people's ethnoreligious identity.



LISA ROSS

“All who believe in the principle of ‘never again’ after the horror of the Nazi extermination camps and Stalin’s gulag must speak up against China’s grotesque use of brainwashing, prisons and torture.”

– Editorial Board, Washington Post (2018)

Reports of abuse are abundant and include a deliberate effort to curb Uyghur religious practices. To that end, the government has destroyed more than 100 mosques; punished Uyghurs for reading the Quran, praying, and participating

in religious activities; and banned Islamic weddings, burials and high holy days. Religious pilgrims also are punished for performing Hajj. The PRC even forbids giving infants Muslim names.

As Uyghur academics, religious scholars, businessmen, and other influential members of society have been “disappeared,” so has the vibrant Uyghur culture. Chinese authorities have incentivized (and often forced) inter-ethnic marriages; demolished Uyghur homes and neighborhoods; curtailed the use of the Uyghur language; and forcibly removed Uyghur children from their families and placed them in state-run

[Human Rights Watch](#) reports over half a million people in Xinjiang have been persecuted in a vast expansion of the numbers of Uyghurs held in prisons. The [New York Times](#) tells the story of one of those interned — Rahile Dawut, one of the first Uyghur women to earn a Ph.D. A professor at Xinjiang University, Dawut founded a folklore institute and documented religious and cultural traditions of the Uyghurs. In 2017, she disappeared at the height of her career and was later learned to have been sentenced to life in prison on charges of endangering national security.

boarding schools, pre-schools and orphanages where Mandarin is almost exclusively used — all in a bid to erase Uyghur customs and traditions.



ABCNEWS.COM

Uyghurs holding photos of missing relatives

“As a country party to the Genocide Convention, we have a moral obligation and a treaty obligation to call it out, stop it and punish [it].”

– USCIRF Commissioner Nury Turkel

Chinese authorities use state-of-the-art surveillance technology to intensify the persecution of Uyghurs with cameras that illuminate many streets in Xinjiang. Iris scanners and wi-fi sniffers monitor the movement of everyone from students and storekeepers to government workers and artists. No Uyghur goes undetected.

As evidence about the scale and nature of this extrajudicial detention campaign has emerged, the PRC government repeatedly has

shifted its narrative, from silence at first, to denial, then attempts to frame the camps as “vocational training centers.” Likewise, Chinese authorities have sought to whitewash the human rights violations they are committing against Uyghurs by opening up the region to tourism and international business investment, as well as agricultural and industrial activities.

Human rights advocates and organizations that focus on

genocide and genocide prevention are not fooled. They have worked tirelessly for years to document abuses, raise awareness, and advocate for laws and sanctions against the PRC government and members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) reports that, between October 2019 and March 2022, the United States has used the Global Magnitsky Act and other measures to impose nearly 120 punitive sanctions, as well as import, export and investment bans.

Congress has passed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020 (S.3744), the Resolution Condemning the Ongoing Genocide Against Uyghurs (H.Res.317), and the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (H.R.6256).

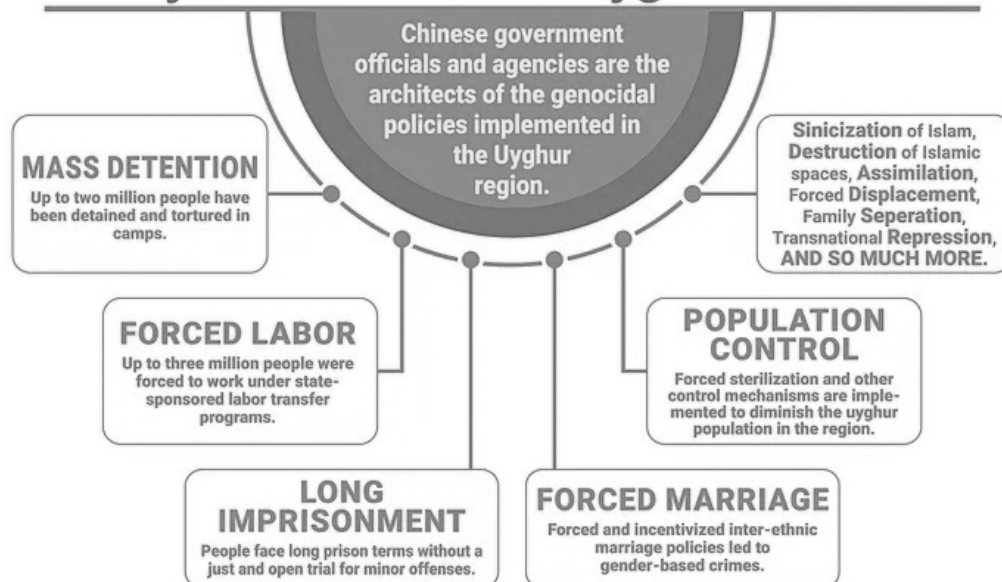
All of these efforts must continue. “Policy wins always present moments of hope for diaspora communities, but for those of us that are actually working in the policy space, we’re always looking ahead to implementation and what’s the next thing that happens,” says Julie Milsap, Government Relations Manager for UHRP. “We know the realities of implementing policies — even if it’s ugly or messy, work is happening. It’s going to move forward. I’d rather have that messy chaos than silence.”

Mess or no mess, USCIRF Commissioner Nury Turkel believes the U.S. has a duty to address head on the Uyghur genocide. “As a country party to the Genocide Convention, we have a moral obligation and a treaty obligation

to call it out, stop it and punish [it],” he says. He notes that China is the world’s second largest economy, a leader in the technology space, and America’s second largest trading partner. As such, Turkel contends U.S. competitiveness in emerging technologies, robotics, AI, and synthetic biology are all linked to the ongoing Uyghur genocide.

By his measure, It is disingenuous to claim democracy and human rights is at the center of the U.S. foreign policy agenda while not doing enough to stop this genocide. “How does the rest of the world look at us when we say something and do not follow our own words? This is not only a Uyghur struggle. This is a civilization struggle. This is a struggle for the American people. This is about who we are as a country, and this is about our future.”

Policy Architecture of Uyghur Genocide





RELIGIOUSFREEDOM.IN.UA

IRF Roundtable Ukraine

A Pandemic and Many Perilous Patterns

In early 2020, rumors began circulating of a possible outbreak of the deadly Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) virus in China. By March of that year, after more than 118,000 cases in 114 countries and upwards of 4,200 deaths, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. The crisis did more than create a global public health panic; human rights also were strained in profound ways.

In a speech before the Council of Europe in December 2020, Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatović remarked that the pandemic had “provided many governments with an ideal pretext to exploit fears and crackdown on dissent, restrict people’s rights and pass emergency legislation that risked long-term consequences.” Freedom of assembly restrictions, though helpful in containing the aggressive spread of COVID, impacted in-person religious worship and also undercut the ability of civil society to aid and advocate for the most vulnerable communities.

From a logistical standpoint, COVID disrupted the forward momentum of many international religious freedom efforts. In-person IRF Roundtables were postponed. The third Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief, planned and hosted by Poland, was scaled back and convened in a fully digital format. And the all-important, on-the-ground visits by USCIRF Commissioners and staff to countries with problematic policies and initiatives were curtailed.

The interruptions created by COVID were compounded by contentious U.S. elections in 2020, the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban following the withdrawal of U.S. armed forces in 2021, and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022. During this period of global tumult, troubling developments around the world have signaled the potential for long-term and pervasive threats to global IRF efforts.

2020

Trump Administration

Abraham Accords signed by Israel,

UAE and Bahrain and Morocco, Sep 15

2021

Trump Administration

United States government declares

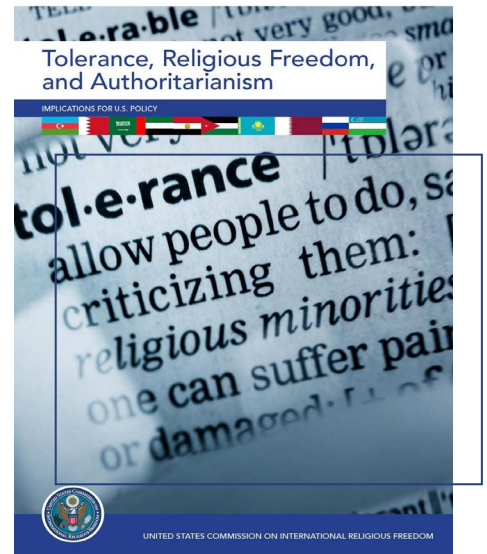
PRC and CCP committed genocide against Uyghur Muslims, Jan 19

Topping the list of alarming patterns has been a steady increase of authoritarianism in some regions that poses a danger to global freedom. As reported by Freedom House in its 2022 *Freedom of the World* report, “Authoritarian regimes have become more effective at co-opting or circumventing the norms and institutions meant to support basic liberties and at providing aid to others who wish to do the same.” In some areas, the move away from democratic structures and norms and the growing restrictions on human rights imposed by dictatorial regimes has magnified the erosion of freedoms for religious minorities and other vulnerable communities.

Religious freedom is in the crosshairs of many authoritarian states whose aim is to repress religion as a means of safeguarding and asserting power. In its 2022 report *Tolerance, Religious Freedom, and Authoritarianism*, USCIRF reports that “authoritarian states’ concern in surveilling, regulating, and controlling the activities of religious groups and individuals stems from the wider effort to forestall the emergence of an independent civil society that might threaten a regime’s hold on power.”

A disturbing example of the long arm of authoritarianism in the modern age is China’s use of technology to censor and control members of faith communities, including Tibetan Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners, Catholic bishops, Christian house churches, and Muslim Uyghurs. In many important ways, technology has provided quality-of-life benefits to struggling groups. But ***the abuse of technology by menacing regimes and other bad actors represents a second perilous pattern threatening the freedom of religion or belief.***

For years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has monitored and restricted internet use and social media activity of its citizens for nefarious purposes. Now, with the aid of artificial intelligence (AI), the CCP has added facial and gait recognition to its arsenal, and has developed sophisticated data collections systems that make it possible to capture everything from cell phone data to genetic sampling.



USCIRF

“We are seeing restrictions that are part of a broader trend of democratic backsliding around the world, but the movement to protect international religious freedom is growing and has never been stronger.”

– Rashad Hussain, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom

2021

Biden Administration

United States Congress adopted the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, Dec. 23

“Artificial intelligence is a serious sea change. If not managed appropriately, it will have a detrimental impact on freedom in general, and religious freedom in particular.”

– Frederick A. Davie, USCIRF Vice Chair

“China is no longer a rising threat; it is a risen threat,” says Katrina Lantos Swett, former USCIRF Chair and President/CEO of the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice. “Without ethical and moral restraints, I worry about China potentially weaponizing AI.” Indeed, many observers share that concern, believing China aims to export the technology to other authoritarian regimes, who will use it to monitor, imprison or otherwise restrict the freedoms of their citizens.

The nefarious use of technology is by no means limited to bad actors in China. In recent years, Hindu nationalists have used social media to stoke mob violence on the streets of India, resulting in a surge of attacks on members of minority Muslim and Christian groups. Equally troubling is the Indian government’s proclivity for shutting down the internet, blocking specific websites, or encouraging social media platforms to block content under the guise of quelling violence and curbing disinformation. In many regions of India, such as Manipur and Kashmir, millions of residents have gone months without access to mobile internet, social media websites, or Wi-Fi hotspots, essentially severing the means of modern communication and crippling economic livelihoods in these areas.

Violent nonstate actors also have tapped into the darker side of technology. Notorious groups such as Islamic State (IS), al-Shabab, and Boko Haram use the internet, social media platforms, and messaging apps to recruit, spread disinformation and propaganda, and manipulate public opinion.

Technology is a double-edged sword. The same innovations that can be used for harmful purposes have also been a boon for many at-risk communities. Social media, for example, has been used to incite violence against religious minorities but also to connect and mobilize those same groups. How to leverage technology for good, while also addressing online harms that lead to violent behaviors offline, has been one of the most urgent topics of study and discussion within the IRF community in the years leading up to 25th anniversary of the IRF Act.

2022

Biden Administration

Rashad Hussain sworn in as IRF Ambassador

Jan 24

Regrettably, in far too many instances, the conversation has moved too slowly to help prevent persecution and the mass atrocities that IRFA was designed to preempt. ***For all the promises of “never again,” genocide remains a scourge — a deadly and destructive pattern that has been accelerated in part by technology, but also perpetuated due to ignorance.***

“What most people don’t understand about genocide is that it is not just mass killing,” says Gregory Stanton, Founding President and Chairman of Genocide Watch. “It is also creating conditions of life intended to destroy a group such as by starvation, causing serious bodily or mental harm, preventing births, and kidnapping children.” Stanton firmly asserts that genocide is a process, not an event. “It develops in 10 nonlinear predictable stages that lead up to these acts of genocide. Each stage in the process is preventable. But the US and UN use statistical models for prediction that don’t effectively combat each stage in the process.”

Most people, for example, would recognize the systematic murder of 9,000 Rohingya Muslims as genocide. Fewer might understand the term also encompasses atrocities like mass rape, burnings and drownings, children forcibly taken from their families and indoctrinated, and the forced displacement of nearly a million people from their homes.

After 25 years, IRFA has produced hopeful milestones and illuminated perilous patterns. It has been an important framework with which to integrate religious freedom into U.S. foreign policy, as well as a pathway for other nations to embark on their own journeys to preserve and protect freedom of religion or belief. Opinions are mixed as to its effectiveness. Most would agree that IRFA has been at least partially successful, but much work remains.

What has been constructed is important. What comes next is essential.



WIKIPEDIA

Wai Wai Nu

“If the Rohingya had been empowered, they would have been able to counter some of the false narrative. We didn’t have enough people or technology to directly inform the world what was going on.”

– Wai Wai Nu, advocate and genocide survivor

2022

Biden Administration

United States government declares

Burmese military committed genocide against Rohingya, Mar 21

2022

Biden Administration

United States Congress

adopted the Burma Act, Dec. 23

TEN STAGES OF GENOCIDE

The 10 Stages of Genocide is a processual model designed by Dr. Gregory Stanton that aims to demonstrate how the crime of genocide is committed. It is a helpful tool for understanding the mechanics of past genocides, as well as providing early warning signs that can be used to prevent future genocides and other mass atrocity crimes.

Stage 1: Classification

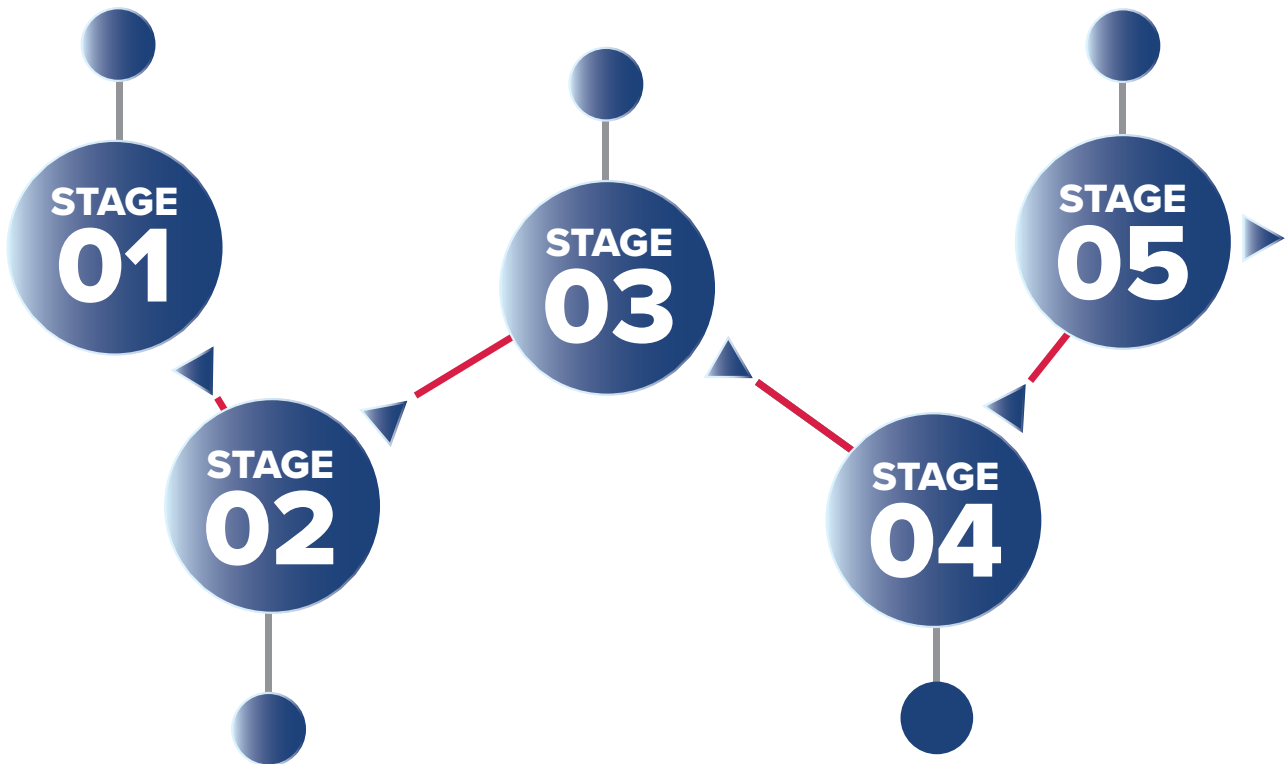
All cultures have categories to distinguish people into “us and them” by ethnicity, race, religion, or nationality: German and Jew, Hutu and Tutsi. Bipolar societies that lack mixed categories, such as Rwanda and Burundi, are the most likely to have genocide.

Stage 3: Discrimination

A dominant group uses law, custom, and political power to deny the rights of other groups. The powerless group may not be accorded full civil rights, voting rights, or even citizenship.

Stage 5: Organization

Genocide is always organized, usually by the state, often using militias to provide deniability of state responsibility. Sometimes organization is informal (Hindu mobs led by local RSS militants) or decentralized (terrorist groups).



Stage 2: Symbolization

We give names or other symbols to the classifications. We name people “Jews” or “Roma,” or distinguish them by colors or dress; and apply the symbols to members of groups. Classification and symbolization are universally human and do not necessarily result in genocide unless they lead to dehumanization.

Stage 4: Dehumanization

One group denies the humanity of the other group. Members of it are equated with animals, vermin, insects or diseases.

Stage 6: Polarization

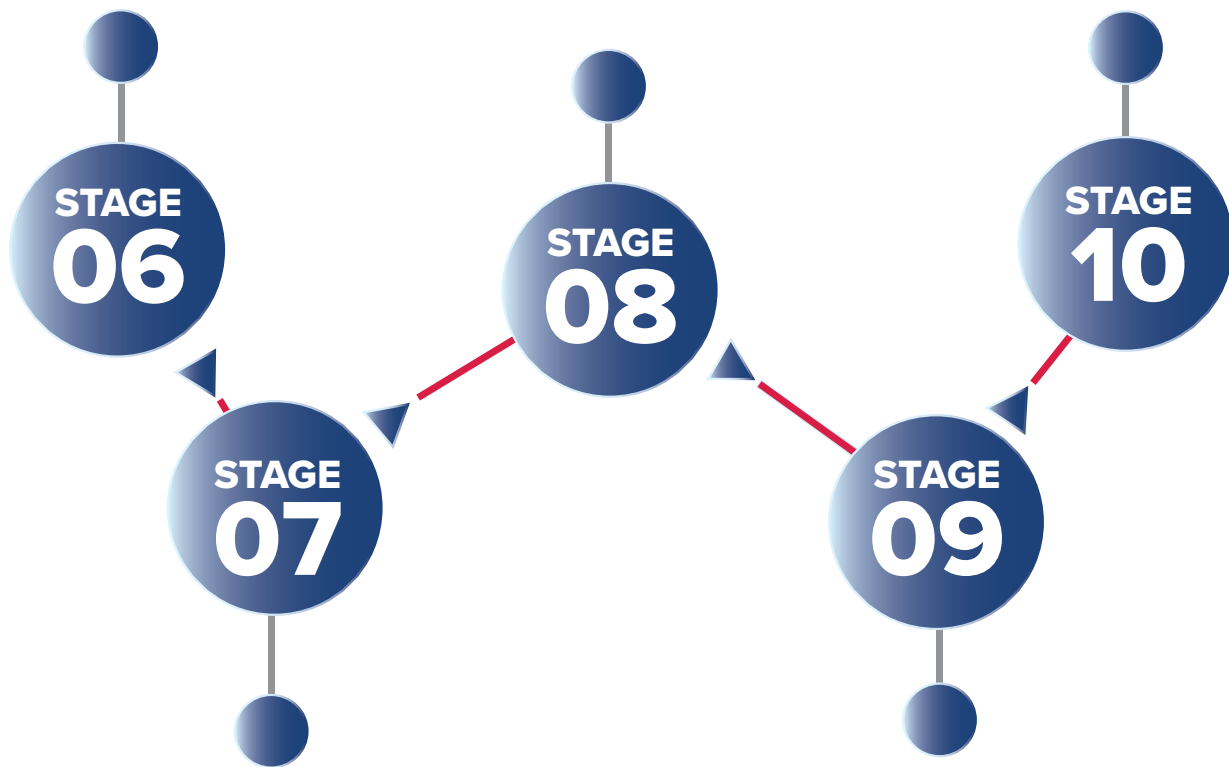
Extremists drive the groups apart. Hate groups broadcast polarizing propaganda. Laws may forbid intermarriage or social interaction.

Stage 8: Persecution

Victims are identified and separated out because of their national, ethnic, racial, or religious identity. The victim group's most basic human rights are systematically violated through extrajudicial killings, torture, and forced displacement. Death lists are drawn up.

Stage 10: Denial

Denial is the final stage that lasts throughout and always follows genocide. It is among the surest indicators of further genocidal massacres.



Stage 7: Preparation

National or perpetrator group leaders plan the “Final Solution” to the Jewish, Armenian, Tutsi, or other targeted group “question.” They often use euphemisms to cloak their intentions, such as referring to their goals as “ethnic cleansing,” “purification,” or “counterterrorism.”

Stage 9: Extermination

Extermination begins and quickly becomes the mass killing legally called “genocide.” It is “extermination” to the killers because they do not believe their victims to be fully human.

O

ver the past 25 years, IRFA and its progeny, the Frank R. Wolf Act, have energized the policy conversation and made progress toward elevating religious freedom as an essential and worthy component of international relations.

IRFA and its proponents have reinforced the urgent need for attentive and meaningful solutions to the full spectrum of violations of freedom of religion or belief — from harassment and marginalization to discrimination, imprisonment and death. Still, as one observer has noted, in every generation and with each new era, “we cannot afford to “take our foot off the gas.”

“People have to move forward and set down their own desire to stay in their silos. We need to share information, friendships, and relationships. We want to be cooperative for the betterment of mankind.”

– David Curry, USCIRF Commissioner

In the present moment, there are unique challenges and concerns. Conversations with members of the IRF community underscore some important observations about IRFA and the current international religious freedom landscape:

- 1) Despite years of effort and measurable momentum, international religious freedom has not yet achieved its full potential within the foreign policy apparatus of the U.S. government as a high-value topic and tool. Likewise, the use of waiver authority by every administration since IRFA’s adoption to spare some CPC-designated countries from any consequences has served to dilute its efficacy.
- 2) The emphasis within international religious freedom advocacy has broadened. In addition to studying the causes of the violations of freedom of religion or belief, using naming-and-shaming tactics, and relying on sanctions as foremost policy tools, today’s IRF advocates recognize the added value of working together to empower and equip local populations with the tools needed to counter and prevent violations in their communities.
- 3) The structures of democracy are eroding in many parts of the world as authoritarianism has gained traction, a geopolitical trend that has led to greater pressures on religious minorities and dissenting members of majority communities and an increase in reports of violations of religious freedom.

WHEN THE SACRED PLACES ARE ASSAULTED

Physical harms to humans that result from religious freedom abuses are an obvious source of concern and outrage for IRF advocates and human rights defenders. A more subtle (but no less sinister) violation of religious freedom is the assault on the sacred places—cemeteries, houses of worship, and other holy sites—believers hold dear.

Protecting the rights of all people to assemble for worship also requires protecting the places where worship takes place. When those places are defaced, demolished or restricted, religious freedom is diminished. A rise in attacks on holy sites is an important barometer of growing religious intolerance, one that officials ignore at their own peril. In 2019, for example, swastikas and other Nazi symbols and antisemitic slogans were spray-painted on roughly 80 gravestones in a Jewish cemetery in France—activity that preceded a steady resurgence

in antisemitism there and throughout Europe. In 2023, rioters burned and destroyed the historic El Hamma synagogue in Tunisia.

Russian officials forcibly installed surveillance cameras in a mosque under the auspices of improved security, but worshippers fear being recorded during prayers. In Pakistan, Ahmadi Muslims are forbidden to call their houses of worship mosques. Those who do can be imprisoned. The law has provoked attacks against Ahmadiyya houses of worship, such as the 100-year-old Sialkot mosque destroyed by a mob in 2018.

USCIRF consistently upholds the understanding that places of worship are an essential element of the manifestation of the right to freedom of religion or belief.



“What gives me pause, especially when we think about freedom of religion or belief issues, is the rise of authoritarianism. Democracy is on its heels.”

– Adam Phillips, former Executive Director, Local, Faith and Transformative Partnership Hubs, USAID

100-year-old Sialkot mosque destroyed by a mob in 2018

DAWNNEWSTV

- 4) Technology is moving at warp speed, but governments have limited agility to keep pace with technologies that pose grave threats to at-risk religious minorities and dissenting members of majority communities. And some governments themselves harness technology to produce these threats.

Clearly, today's IRF landscape looks different than it did 25 years ago. Even the nomenclature has expanded, from international religious freedom to freedom of religion or belief. The questions have changed as well. For years, IRF advocates have studied and tracked data to understand what these violations look like, where and when they are likely to occur, who is most at risk and why. This is a strong legacy. To move that work forward, perhaps the important question now is how? How does the IRF community address the harms and hostilities in all their forms in the context of the current terrain?

How, for example, do we affirm IRFA with today's team of U.S. foreign policy professionals? If our global society provides for greater access to information and advocacy tools, how do we collaborate to make those resources more readily available and useful to local communities and to government? If we are walking through an era of fragile democracies and emboldened autocrats, how do we step in to ease the pressure on at-risk communities? And how do we use technology as a force multiplier for freedom of religion or belief instead of falling prey to its malicious applications?

IRFA on the Homefront

The International Religious Freedom Act is worthy of celebration for the important mechanisms it created: the IRF Ambassador, a dedicated IRF office within the State Department, USCIRF, and robust reporting and accountability measures. However, while much of IRFA has been accepted by many policymakers and incorporated into some structures of government, aspects of IRFA have not.

As previously noted, the IRF Act recommended the creation of an IRF Special Adviser position at the National Security Council (NSC), a role that remains vacant. In the 25-year history of the IRF Act, just one person was appointed who served briefly in this role. Even then, "it was hard to convince some people that we needed to fill the role at NSC," according to Sarah Makin, who was appointed as a Deputy Assistant to the President, serving on the NSC as the President's adviser on international religious freedom. Once in that position, she often sensed her contributions were not taken seriously and attributes these attitudes to what she describes as a "general allergy" among civil servants, State Department officials, and foreign service officers to anything that has to do with religion.

“If we look at national security purely through the lens of economic trade, military and technological aspect, we are missing the value of concern, which is who we are,” notes USCIRF Commissioner Nury Turkel. “By not filling this position, we are missing the potential positive role that this position can play.”

Fellow USCIRF Commissioner Eric Ueland agrees. “I continue to find it regrettable that the position at the NSC has remained unfilled. More importantly, I’ve yet to run across a set of norms or principles or standards that the U.S. government has adopted about international religious freedom beyond what we created by statute. We need to consider how to set that anchor deep in the water.”

These comments underscore a common observation about IRFA: while it has been structurally integrated to some degree, there is room to better incorporate IRFA into the ethos of the foreign policy establishment. International religious freedom has been described by some as a “boutique foreign policy issue” but not a mainstream concern that translates into top-level talking points or strategy. This sideline position often leads to missed opportunities.

“I’ve never quite understood how you can think you know a population of people without understanding their deeply held religious beliefs. Then you really only know half the person,” says Makin, who notes that many conflicts around the world have been rooted in religion.

For policymakers, the tyranny of the urgent often drives decision making. It is sometimes easier and quicker (even essential) to address short-term policy concerns. In his role as Director of the IRF office and Principal Deputy to U.S. Ambassador At Large for IRF, Dan Nadel believes that building durable partnerships with foreign countries requires the United States to be concerned with how members of societies in those countries are being treated. At the same time, he is sensitive to what he characterizes as the long-game/short-game dichotomy.

“Those of us in the IRF office are the long-term vision folks,” says Nadel. “We are talking about the health of societies over generations. A lot of our counterparts and colleagues around the State Department or Ambassadors at embassies, their focus is on the one or two-year trajectory of the relationship.” There are different incentives “when you’re thinking short-term about what you need to have happen over the course of a single presidential administration versus how to guarantee the health of the society over the next 20 or 30 years so that they are a truly long-term partner for the U.S.”



STATE.GOV

Dan Nadel
Director of the IRF office and Principal
Deputy to U.S. Ambassador at Large
for IRF

“When I go to a foreign country and meet with embassy staff, they know about USCIRF. They know how important our work is ... there is a level of sensitivity and attention to these issues.”

– Stephen Schneck, USCIRF Commissioner

The strength of IRFA moving forward may rest on how to help policymakers understand the intrinsic and necessary value of IRF as a means of addressing both immediate and long-term concerns and helping to provide effective solutions.

Likewise, the moment may be right to revisit one of the earliest conversations about the discretionary actions (see Tools in the Toolbox on page 29) that IRFA provides the President. Original versions of the IRFA legislation included robust language about sanctions that ultimately was tempered to provide the President with a range of actions against countries designated as Countries of Particular Concern (CPC). A chief criticism among many modern observers is that when sanctions are imposed, they often are pre-existing and that for some countries the State Department has a pattern of waiving the requirement to impose any action, effectively undermining U.S. religious freedom diplomacy. At any given time, many CPCs have some sanctions imposed but those are typically associated with other human rights violations as well. At the time of this writing, the State Department had granted waivers to four CPC-designated countries: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

“The Executive Branch is addicted to waiving sanctions against Countries of Particular Concern,” says Nathaniel Hurd, Northern Director and Senior Fellow for Public Policy at Religious Foundation Institute. “It will be impossible to definitively judge IRFA’s effectiveness until presidents act against CPCs as Congress intended.”

Any reframing of the IRFA conversation would apply to the Oval Office, federal agencies, and Congress as well. The direction of religious freedom advocacy is not a consistent through line from administration to administration and from Congress to Congress. Different administrations prioritize IRF differently and with varying degrees of intensity. In Congress only a handful of champions actively and consistently engage in religious freedom issues. As one USCIRF staffer noted, “maybe a quarter of Congress is even aware of USCIRF and its mission.” The staffer laments that while some Congressional staff reach

“USCIRF deserves a lot more practical support from Congress. The mandate is clear — IRFA was written by Congress, paid for by Congress. It’s our responsibility to reconnect with Congress.”

—Rabbi Abraham Cooper, USCIRF Chair

out for information and resources, many don't remain on staff for long, so the education process is constant.

Still, by most accounts, USCIRF is in a good place after 25 years. Over time, the Commissioners and staff have fine-tuned operations, traveled to numerous countries to examine religious freedom conditions, produced world-class research and publications, hosted countless hearings, and produced an annual report on the state of religious freedom abroad.

USCIRF's life-changing Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project has been particularly effective in securing the release of several high-profile prisoners around the world, including Nguyen Bac Truyen, a Hoa Hao Buddhist, religious freedom advocate, and human rights defender whom the Vietnamese authorities had imprisoned for more than six years. USCIRF helped secure Truyen's release in the fall of 2023 after years of advocacy. As USCIRF Executive Director Erin Singhsinsuk notes, Truyen's case is just one of many examples.

"IRFA reinforces USCIRF's advocacy for religious prisoners of conscience who are languishing in prison merely because of their religion or belief." She adds, "Without IRFA, governments would be able to get away with convincing religious prisoners of conscience that no one cares about them. Nothing could be further from the truth."

Likewise, the Victims List mandated by the Frank Wolf Act of 2016 is bearing fruit. As one USCIRF staff member noted, "There are actual people who have come forward to say thank you to the State Department and Congress and USCIRF for mentioning their case. This initiative does help actual individuals and family members who have been affected."

And of course, USCIRF's independent annual report remains a bellwether for identifying IRF trends and vulnerabilities around the globe. The annual report is one of USCIRF's most impactful tools for providing thoughtful analysis and customized recommendations to the U.S. government to address specific areas of concern. In recent years, for example, USCIRF has recommended re-designating China



FACEBOOK: KIM PHUONG BUI

Nguyen Bac Truyen, a Hoa Hao Buddhist

as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom or belief. Beyond CPC designation, however, USCIRF recommended other measures, including continued sanctions, collaboration with like-minded countries to hold the PRC accountable for violations, and support of legislation to counter Chinese Communist Party lobbying efforts and its malign influence in the United States.

“Many of the bad actors, particularly China, have lobbyists. I’m appreciative that USCIRF is united in its recommendation to Congress to ban lobbying for China.”

– Frank Wolf, USCIRF Commissioner

Despite the scope of USCIRF’s work and measurable results, certain issues remain challenging. Many believe that USCIRF should receive more funding to enable it to increase the volume of its voice internationally. And the reauthorization process remains a thorny issue.

“The fact that the Commission, with a budget so small, faces this perennial fight every couple of years is ludicrous,” says Johnnie Moore, a former USCIRF Commissioner and the current President of JDA Worldwide. “The Commission expends an enormous amount of energy every couple of years trying to satisfy Congress. There’s an opportunity cost to that. That’s energy that’s not being put towards advocacy or holding violators accountable.”

IRFA’s Impact Abroad

If the first 25 years of the IRF Act has been about building a framework to combat the violations of freedom of religion or belief, then the next chapter might best be described as building bridges. Thanks to the pioneering work of dedicated lawmakers, advocates and survivors, the IRF community today is sizeable and strong. But to some degree, it is also scattered, which is both a strength – because of the different perspectives that can be shared – and a challenge – because efforts can sometimes be fragmented. Connecting the many IRF actors and initiatives may be one of the most important goals in the years ahead. The question again is, how?

Surprisingly, despite its disruptive and deadly legacy, the COVID pandemic had one positive impact on IRF advocacy: it expedited the embrace of digital communication and collaboration. For example,

instead of suspending the regular IRF Roundtable meetings during the pandemic, the IRF Secretariat moved to an online digital format. Attendance has swelled and more people have a platform for engagement. Quite by accident, the pandemic and technology together created space for a growing number of IRF advocates.

Increased participation and communication between groups has meant more personalized storytelling, more consistent data collection about incidents of abuse, and a new appreciation for localized solutions. The global leadership exists, and the infrastructure is in place in some instances and evolving in others. Now, many would agree the next phase of IRF advocacy is trending toward a grassroots effort that is both animated by and supportive of civil society.

For former USCIRF Chair and IRF Secretariat President Nadine Maenza and other like-minded advocates, civil society is the all-important bridge between government and the grassroots. “While at USCIRF, I learned the importance of government, but mostly I learned the importance of civil society,” she says. “When I saw real change happening, real improvements in religious freedom conditions, it was because civil society was on the ground doing real work.”

Frequently, the most effective civil society actors come from a faith-based tradition and are members of groups that often reach into corners of the world that nobody else can. Often times the most trusted voices in a community are its faith leaders.

“There is a big movement within broader humanitarian and development spaces towards the localization of assistance,” says Jeremy Barker, Director, Middle East Action Team, Religious Freedom Institute. “Many of the most effective organizations working in communities around the world are faith-based at some level because most of the places around the world are faith-based and have a huge percentage of people who identify with a religious community. If you want to invest in local support structures, look at who’s already there and work with them.”

This bottom-up approach is precisely what the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is doing with its first-ever Strategic Religious Engagement policy. Envisioned several years ago and launched in the fall of 2023, [Building Bridges in Development](#) represents a seismic strategic shift that will inform policy and programming for years, even decades, to come. The program is based on seven principles: Belonging, Respect, Integrity, Dignity, Growth, Equity and Sustainability. While USAID does not directly fall under the purview of IRFA — but receives policy guidance from the State Department — the IRF Office is an enthusiastic participant in this new initiative.



IRF SUMMIT 2022

Nadine Maenza
IRF Secretariat President



RELIGIOUS FREEDOM INSTITUTE

Jeremy Barker testifies before Congress

“The [policy] principles offer a foundation upon which USAID staff can build partnerships with religious communities and faith-based organizations,” says Adam Phillips, the former Executive Director of Local, Faith and Transformative Partnership Hubs at USAID. He likens the initiative to PEPFAR, the program introduced by the Bush administration 20 years ago that enlisted local imams, nuns, and priests to support HIV/AIDS prevention. Phillips adds, “The beauty about working with faith-based organizations and religious leaders is that they’re not just concerned about one thing. They’re looking for opportunities to seek transformation in their communities. Faith-based leaders are critical to the process because these are folks that are going to be there no matter what. They’re committed to their communities.”

At the community level, violations of the freedom of religion or belief are more than statistics. At the community level, these violations are personal. They have a face. And that face reminds us that human dignity is the core value of IRF advocacy.

“Religious freedom matters deeply because it is connected to the human dignity of every person.”

– Jeremy P. Barker, Director, Middle East Action Team, Religious Freedom Institute

The Power of Advocacy

IRF advocacy is hard work and persistence is critical to success. Today’s IRF advocates are eager to elevate that core value through positive storytelling. “Traditional advocacy alone is not enough,” says Greg Mitchell, chair of the IRF Roundtable. “While negative reporting and raising awareness of violations is always needed, it is not enough to change behaviors. We have to start focusing more on solutions and positive reporting of progress being made. Let’s start telling the stories of the people who are doing this amazing work on the ground to build religious freedom and much more, like economic empowerment.”

People like Pari Ibrahim, founder of the Free Yezidi Foundation (FYF). Ibrahim has been working tirelessly to empower women and survivors of the 2014 genocide against the Yezidi people by ISIS. FYF’s Enterprise and Training Center has helped scores of Yezidi women move forward by providing them with the education and work skills they need to support their families financially. Ibrahim credits



Pari Ibrahim, Founder
Free Yezidi Foundation

LI MUZI/XINHUA/ALAMY LIVE NEWS

greater awareness and accessibility of funding for these life-changing opportunities. “This is really important for a community that has been oppressed,” says Ibrahim. “Now all of a sudden, there’s education. There’s a framework for how Yazidis could fit into the society in Iraq if things improve in the future.”

There are many stories to be told about the innovative ways advocates are finding practical ways to support at-risk communities. How those stories are told, matters. “One of the things that fuels this kind of challenge is what gets reported and how,” notes Mariah Mercer, Deputy to the IRF Ambassador at Large. “As a former journalist, I can tell you that people click through bad news much faster than good news. That’s just reality.” She believes the right approach is to tell stories in a way that “doesn’t inflame tensions and describes the problem objectively so that it can be solved or best understood. They can move people to act and empathize with that.”

To that end, the IRF Office is working with groups who train journalists around the world to recognize instances when the freedom of religion or belief is violated, as well as the consequences of those actions.

“We can’t stop innovating. We can’t stop asking questions. We can’t stop pushing our institutions to do better.”

– Dan Nadel, Director and Principal Deputy to U.S. Ambassador at Large for IRF

VOICES

PERSISTENCE PAYS



RANDEL EVERETT

Mayflower Church members arrive at airport in Texas

For nearly four years, members of the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church of China wandered in search of a safe refuge, a place to call home and to worship according to their most deeply held beliefs. Over Easter weekend 2023, their search ended in gratitude and relief.

The Backstory: More than 60 members of the church (nicknamed the Mayflower Church in reference to the pilgrims who sought religious freedom from the Church of England in 1620) fled their homes in southern China between 2019 and 2020. The Chinese government does not recognize the Mayflower congregation as legal and had been intimidating the pastor and members for years.

The group decided to flee and first sought asylum in neighboring South Korea. After months of unsuccessful attempts, and what many members described as harassment from Chinese officials, the group traveled en masse to Thailand. There, they hoped to secure refugee status from the United Nations refugee agency. The government of Thailand issued the congregants 15-day tourist visas — a stopgap measure at best. Meanwhile, they continued to reach out to the UN, the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Embassy, and other friendly governments, as well as international aid groups, trying to find safe harbor.

The Collaboration: The Mayflower Church was in good company in their quest. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees

(UNHCR) the number of asylum-seekers from China escalated between 2012 and 2020, from 15,362 to nearly 108,000. The fact that the group was attempting asylum as a unit instead of as individuals made their situation far more precarious.

As the clock ticked, church members holed up in Bangkok grew increasingly anxious about the prospect of deportation back to China and the near certainty of prison. Behind the scenes, a coalition of churches, NGOs, U.S. and Thai government officials, and groups like Freedom Seekers International, 21Wilberforce, and ChinaAid were working feverishly to broker a solution. The answer came with a knock at the door in the middle of the night.

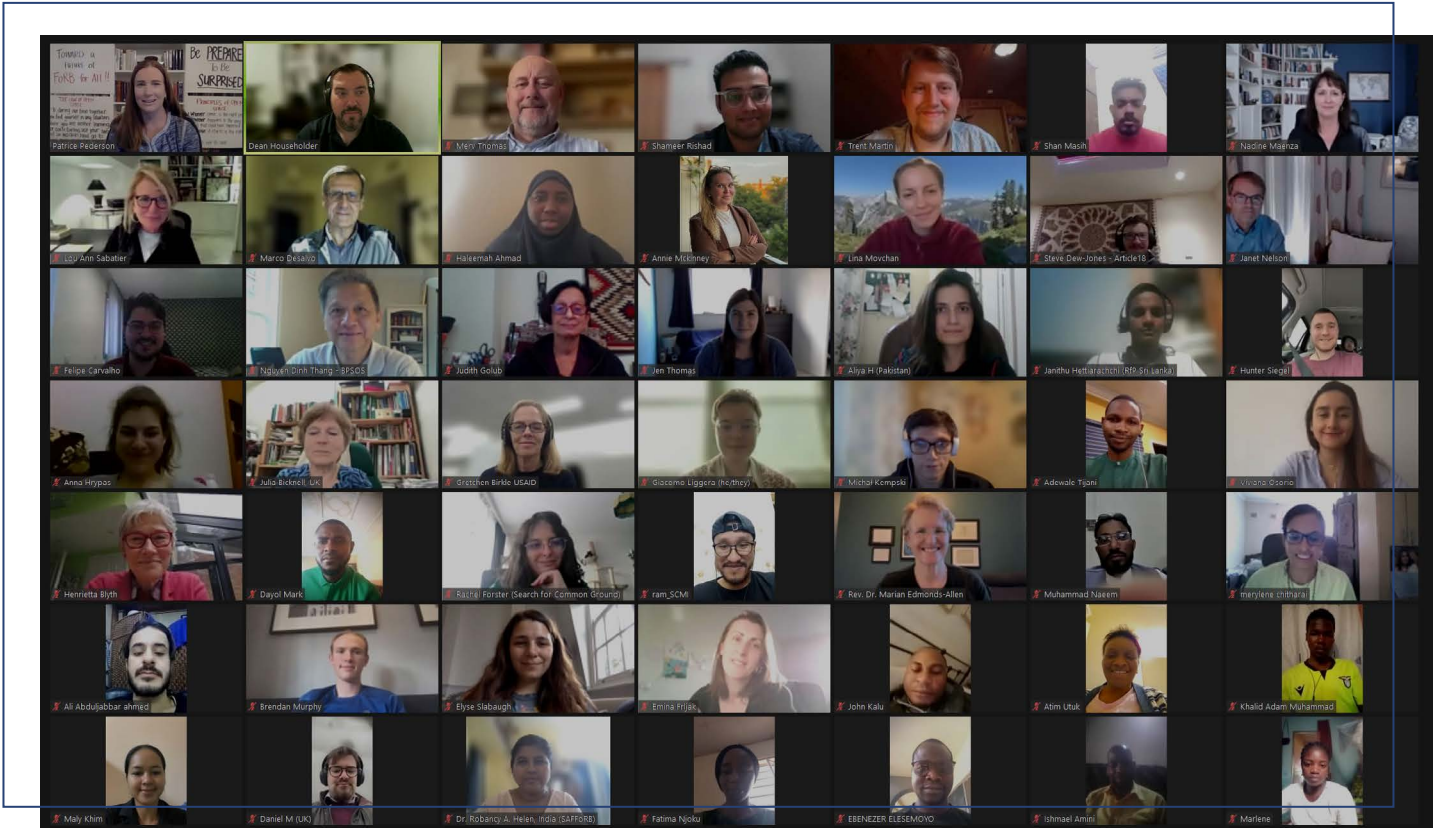
The Big Finish: Shortly after two American advocates had arrived in Thailand to offer church members encouragement and assistance, the government of Thailand staged an immigration raid. The Mayflower church members — and the two Americans — were detained overnight. At a deportation hearing the next morning, the adult church members were each fined for visa violations. When the group was escorted back to buses, they

thought they were heading back to their hotel rooms. Instead, they were transported to immigration detention centers. They feared deportation was imminent.

And apparently so did the U.S. State Department. Having met the required imminent threat threshold, the entire congregation of the Mayflower Church was granted humanitarian parole status in the U.S. Among those welcoming the group when they landed in Dallas, Texas a few days later was Rashad Hussain, U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. Also present was Bob Fu, President of ChinaAid.

After decades of speaking out for at-risk individuals, Fu has a clear-eyed view of IRF advocacy. “The IRF Act is historic, impactful, and it will continue to make a difference,” he says. “We have a lot of work ahead, given the worsening religious persecution landscape.” Still, as he reflects on the journey of the Mayflower Church, he is hopeful: “We persevere. We persist. I encourage others in this field not to lose focus, not to be discouraged, because things can be done. It can happen.”

IRF MOVING FORWARD



DEAN HOUSEHOLDER

Global Youth Summit 2023

In the marketplace, as well, there are opportunities and benefits to building out the space where religion or belief is welcome. “The IRF Act originally approached international religious freedom mostly as a government and societal issue, which was correct framing,” notes Brian Grim, Founder and Executive Director of the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation. “But the economic consequences of restrictions on religion are significant as well.” Grim helps major corporations build faith-friendly workplaces by embracing religion as part of their broader diversity policies.

Another opportunity is tapping into the promise of some of the younger IRF advocates, efforts being undertaken by leaders like Dr. Nguyen Thang of BPSOS, Judy Golub of Religion News Foundation, Hulda Fahmi of Jubilee Campaign, Anna Sineva with Church of Scientology, and Trent Martin of 21Wilberforce. These advocates have helped shape a new lane within the IRF movement, including side programming at the Ministerials, tracks at the IRF Summit, special trainings, and advocacy campaigns to engage young people on the issue.

An example of innovation is the [Global Youth Summit for Freedom of Religion or Belief](#) in collaboration with the IFRB Alliance, Search for Common Ground, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the FoRB Learning Platform, and BPSOS. This convening was launched in the fall of 2023 and spearheaded by Patrice Pederson, President of First Freedom

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Foundation, a nonprofit that works to incubate, accelerate and facilitate innovation in the community of global FoRB advocates.

The Global Youth Summit was a participant-led Open Space format in which FoRB mentors paired with up-and-coming advocates from around the world in a quest to transfer institutional wisdom to a new and tech-savvy generation. “It was a very different kind of conference,” says Pederson. “Open Space means there are no pre-planned agendas and no speakers. The participants self-select into groups according to their own interests.” The goals were to diversify the skill set attending to FoRB needs, build connections between seasoned advocates and creative newcomers, and support and sustain the IRF movement into the future.



USCIRF

USCIRF hosted the launch presentation of a global study on women and FoRB

Some advocates may be skeptical of this new approach, but IRFBA Chair Fiona Bruce thinks it's the cutting edge that's needed. “If you aim at nothing, you'll hit it,” she says, acknowledging her aim is focused. “We have to inspire the next generation of FoRB ambassadors to be trailblazers. FoRB is not a side issue. We need to mainstream it, and if we can encourage the next generation, I call this the ultimate upstream prevention work.”

Another example of upstream work is recognizing the unique ways that women are impacted by religious freedom abuses and the critical influence they have in advocating for freedom of religion or belief.

“I think there's not enough engagement of women in the [IRF] movement. They are impacted by many kinds of violations, whether in countries where religion has been imposed on them or where they are deprived of the practice of religion.”

– Mohamed Magid, USCIRF Commissioner

Reports published since 2018 by [USCIRF](#), [Open Doors International](#), [Stefanus Alliance](#) and [FoRB Women's Alliance](#), all reveal that women and girls face compound persecution because of not only their religion or belief, but also gender inequality, political and economic stressors, and cultural norms that often masquerade as religious dicta. Further, women play a vital yet often overlooked role in promoting freedom of religion or belief and advocating for the rights of religious minorities. In Iran, for example, women and girls have bravely defied the Islamic Republic's compulsory veiling laws and led a groundswell of anti-government demonstrations. The protests

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were sparked by the 2022 death of Mahsa Amini while in custody following her arrest for opposing mandatory hijab. What started with chants of “Women, Life, Freedom,” quickly turned into a widespread uprising and the most serious internal challenge to the Ayatollah and Muslim clerics in the regime’s nearly five decades.

As noted during a 2022 USCIRF hearing: Women’s Roles in Advancing International Religious Freedom: From Malaysia, where women fight for the right to interpret Islamic text through a gender-inclusive lens, to Sudan, where women played an integral role in ending an authoritarian regime that placed significant restrictions on religious practice and discourse, women’s approaches to advancing religious freedom globally are varied and diverse. They include advocating for the repeal of blasphemy laws, fighting discrimination against religious minorities, combatting anti-Semitism and fighting bans on education, employment, and freedom of movement.



STATE.GOV

The U.S. Dept. of State partners with faith-based actors on shared goals

With the IRF Act as its foundation, bridge building and grassroots advocacy may be a natural progression in the work ahead to promote freedom of religion or belief. But in the current geopolitical climate, the task will not be easy, and the strategy creates a notable tension.

“We need to engage strategically on religion and with faith-based organizations,” says international development expert Gretchen Birkle. “But we cannot let that limit our ability to call out governments, which is the central purpose — that is, to ensure

that dissidents, political prisoners, religious prisoners, actions and governments are called to account.”

As well, many observers would concede that the linkage between certain governments and religious groups has led to increased oppression and restrictions. Conversely, there are many places where religious communities have been among the first to push back against elements that would restrict freedoms. Looking forward, perhaps the more important question, as posed by former Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and long-time human rights advocate Rabbi David Saperstein, is this: “How do we strengthen the most positive

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inclinations of religion and the most pluralistic expressions of religion?”

There are many examples of faith communities — secure in their own beliefs but also respectful of others — that are working together to create a better, freer and more just society. How might these efforts be scaled as part of the IRF community’s contribution to the broader conversation and work underway to reinvigorate democratic values and counter authoritarian influences?



IRF SUMMIT

Leading human rights advocate and UCLA Law professor Amjad Khan offers yet another nuanced consideration — how to address and secure freedoms within faith communities. “I worry that there’s not a lot of focus on accountability with respect to international religious freedom,” says Khan. “The reality is a lot of the atrocities that groups face is intra-faith not inter-faith. In the Muslim world, for example, you have 73 different kinds of Muslims. Some of these groups are persecuted, in part, because they’re not even accepted as Muslims by other Muslims. They’re being persecuted by the majority, and those issues are not really talked about.”

Amjad Khan, Co-Chair of IRF Summit
Congressional Advocacy Day

How to hold onto incremental steps forward also remains a challenge. In many regions, such as Sudan, backsliding is a cause for real concern. Between 1999 and 2018, Sudan was designated by the U.S. Secretary of State as a country of particular concern (CPC) due to its systemic violations of religious freedom. Freedom of religion or belief was expected to improve after the downfall of the al-Bashir regime in April 2019. That hope seemed plausible in September 2020 when Sudan’s Transitional Council announced the separation of religion and state. The group also pledged to abolish all laws that violate fundamental human rights, including the apostasy law, which prohibited conversion from Islam to another religion.

Then, in October 2021, the army ousted the civilian Transnational Council in a coup and the forward progress came to a halt. As noted by USCIRF in its 2023 report on the [Sahel region of Africa](#): “After the fall of the Bashir government, the transitional government granted Muslim and Christian groups some important freedoms, earning praise and support from the U.S. government. However, the outbreak of new conflict in April 2023 within the state security apparatus has severely diminished any possibility of safe, open religious practice in Sudan.”

A final thought germane to the conversation is the role of technology. Here the lines are blurred: is it a force for good or an instrument of malevolence?

On the plus side, people are connected like never before thanks to social media and messaging apps. They can tell stories and build common understanding.

“Religious Freedom touches people deeply. It is something people care about because it means so much to them personally — across faiths. I would love if more church communities would adopt or engage with someone who is Hindu or Muslim or Baha’i to begin to lessen our differences and recognize the beliefs we share.”

– Alexandra Arriaga, former State Department Senior Advisor

Wai Wai Nu is the Founder and Executive Director of the Women Peace Network. For seven years she was a political prisoner in Burma. In 2015 she created a social campaign called “My Friend” to promote tolerance and non-discrimination in her home country. “It was so powerful,” she says. “Thousands of young people from different universities joined us to promote relationships between friends from diverse backgrounds and showcase the reminder that we can be friends or coexist regardless of our religion or backgrounds. The advantage of technology gives me hope.”

Nu also concedes that social media has a dark side as a platform to promote prejudice and hate. It’s not just social media. Governments and non-state actors are using artificial intelligence for increasingly sinister purposes. Technology in general is changing faster than policymakers can keep up. As noted by Freedom House in its *Freedom on the Net 2023* report, “AI can serve as an amplifier of digital repression, making censorship, surveillance, and the creation and spread of disinformation easier, faster, cheaper, and more effective.”

“The predominance of these tools to monitor, stalk and ultimately extinguish individuals from the common square is incredibly dangerous, and that’s even before they begin to be used as monitoring, surveillance and ultimately imprisoning tools against groups and individuals,” says USCIRF Commissioner Eric Ueland. “The significant ignorance of many of the technology companies or technology-using companies to the abuses already underway of the great innovations they’ve pioneered and the potentiality of even worse abuse down the line is very worrisome.”

The challenge for IRF advocates is not to stop the march of technology but to ask the question how best to leverage it for the benefit of at-risk communities.

In the years ahead, the IRF movement faces an enormously challenging landscape. Many continue to step forward to accept the challenge because they understand that freedom of religion or belief is a foundational human right that is key to individual and community well-being and regional and global security and stability; that millions

IRF MOVING FORWARD

care about it; understanding its power, some governments fear and oppress it, while other governments support it; and that many prisoners of conscience languish in detention because of their religious beliefs, actions, or identity, or their religious freedom advocacy.

The inclusion of international freedom of religion or belief into the broader foreign policy conversation for the past quarter century has been a hard-fought and noble pursuit. The work is not complete, at home or abroad; nor can the U.S. government drive this issue forward alone. It is, however, an endeavor worthy of steadfast and concerted effort — for this generation and those that follow.

For the past quarter century, the IRF Act has ensured freedom of religion or belief as a core value within American foreign policy. Regrettably, the global landscape for freedom of religion or belief remains tense and problematic; new challenges arise constantly and old ones persist. The devastation caused by religious persecution and oppression has been widespread, and we must be clear-eyed about the ongoing obstacles moving forward. Though the United States should not and cannot tackle this challenge alone, it must continue to uphold the spirit of the IRF Act and lead internationally in the promotion of freedom of religion or belief abroad.

Religions for Peace



RELIGIONS FOR PEACE

AMBASSADORS AT LARGE



Ambassador Seiple (1999 – 2000)

Robert A. Seiple was the Ambassador at Large from 1999 to 2000. In December 1986, he was named president of World Vision International, where he served from 1987 to 1998. He founded the Institute for Global Engagement in 2000 and previously served as the athletic director and Vice President for Development at Brown University from 1975 to 1979, and President of Eastern University and Palmer Theological Seminary from 1983 to 1987. Ambassador Seiple received an AB degree in American Literature from Brown University in 1965. During 1966 – 1969, he served in the U.S. Marine Corps, attaining the rank of Captain.



Ambassador Hanford (2002 – 2009)

John V. Hanford III was Ambassador at Large from 2002 to 2009. Previously, he served under Senator Richard Lugar for 14 years in the first full-time US government position dedicated to international religious freedom, mobilizing individual and Congress-wide interventions on persecution issues and oppressive policies around the world. As an architect of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, he led the team that conceptualized and wrote the Act and co-led, with Senator Don Nickles' office, negotiations for its passage. Ambassador Hanford earned an M.Div. from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and a BA in Economics from UNC at Chapel Hill, on a Morehead Scholarship.



Ambassador Cook (2011 – 2013)

Suzan Johnson Cook served as the Ambassador at Large from April 2011 to October 2013. She currently is the Leader and Chief Inspiration Officer, Pro Voice/ Pro Voz Movement for Women and CEO & Owner/ Professional Speaker, Charisma Speakers. The Rev. Dr. Cook served in 1993 on the White House Domestic Policy Council, and with U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros as a consultant on Faith Initiatives from 1994 to 1997. In 1996, she became the founder and senior pastor of the Bronx Fellowship Christian Church, serving until 2010. In 1990, Mayor David Dinkins appointed her as the first woman chaplain to the New York City Police Department. In 1983, she was appointed pastor of the Mariner's Temple Baptist Church in Manhattan. She received her B.S. degree from Emerson College, her M.A. degree in education from Columbia University, her M.Div. degree from Union Theological Seminary and her D.Min. Degree from Ohio's United Theological Seminary.

AMBASSADORS AT LARGE



Ambassador Saperstein (2014 – 2017)

Rabbi David Saperstein served as the Ambassador at Large from December 2014 until January 2017. He serves on the board of numerous national organizations. Also an attorney, he taught seminars on Church –State law and Jewish Law for 35 years at Georgetown University Law Center. He previously served for four-decades as Director and Counsel at the Religious Action Center (RAC). In 1999, Rabbi Saperstein

was elected the first Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). In 2009, President Obama appointed him to the first White House Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. He received a BA from Cornell University, an MHL from Hebrew Union College, and a JD from American University College of Law.



Ambassador Brownback (2018 – 2021)

Sam Brownback was sworn in as Ambassador at Large on February 1, 2018. Ambassador Brownback served as Governor of Kansas from 2011 to 2018, a U.S. Senator (1996-2011), and a member of the U.S. House of Representatives (1995-1996) from Kansas. He also served as Kansas Secretary of Agriculture (1986-1993) and was a White House Fellow in the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (1990-1991). Prior to

his public service, Ambassador Brownback was an attorney in Kansas and taught agricultural law at Kansas State University, co-authoring two books on the subject. He earned a B.S. from Kansas State University and a J.D. from the University of Kansas.



Ambassador Rashad Hussain (2022 – Present)

Rashad Hussain was sworn in as Ambassador at Large on January 24, 2022. Prior to this appointment, Hussain was Director at the National Security Council's Partnerships and Global Engagement Directorate. From 2015 to 2021, he served as Senior Counsel at the Department of Justice's National Security Division. President Obama appointed Hussain to serve as his Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), U.S. Special Envoy

for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, and Deputy Associate White House Counsel. Hussain worked on the House Judiciary Committee, served as a judicial law clerk to the Honorable Damon Keith on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, and was an associate counsel to the Obama-Biden Transition Project. He received his J.D. from Yale Law School and Master's degrees in Public Administration and Arabic and Islamic Studies from Harvard University. Hussain holds Bachelor's degrees in Political Science and Philosophy from UNC – Chapel Hill.

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS



Dr. Khaled M. Abou El Fadl, Commissioner 2003-2007.

Elliott Abrams, Commissioner 1999-2001, 2012-2014, Chair 2000-2001.

Dr. Azizah Al-Hibri, Commissioner 2011-2013.

Dr. Laila Al-Marayati, Commissioner 1999-2001.

Dr. Don Argue, Commissioner 2007-2012, Vice Chair 2010-2011 and 2011-2012.

Anurima Bhargava, Commissioner 2018-2022, Vice Chair 2020-2021, Chair May 2021-June 2021.

Kristina Arriaga de Bucholz, Commissioner 2016-to 2019. Vice Chair, 2017- 2018, 2018.

Preeta Bansal, Commissioner 2003-2009, Chair 2004-2005, Vice Chair 2007-2008.

Gary L. Bauer, Commissioner 2018-2021.

John R. Bolton, Commissioner 1999-2001.

Ambassador Sam Brownback, Ex-Officio member of the Commission during time served as the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, 2018-2021.

Dr. James W. Carr, Commissioner 2020-2022.

Patti Chang, Commissioner 2003-2004.

Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, Commissioner 2003-2007.

Ambassador Suzan Johnson Cook, Ex-Officio member of the Commission during time served as the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, 2011-2014.

Rabbi Abraham Cooper, Commissioner 2022-2024, Vice Chair 2022-2023, Chair 2023-2024.

Michael Cromartie, Deceased. Commissioner 2004-2010.

David Curry, Commissioner 2022-2024.

Frederick A. Davie, Commissioner 2020-2024, Vice Chair 2023-2024.

Dr. Tenzin Dorjee, Commissioner 2016-2018, Chair 2018.

Imam Talal Y. Eid, Commissioner 2007-2011.

Felice D. Gaer, Chair 2002-2003, 2006-2007, 2008-2009, Vice Chair 2003-2004, 2004-2005, 2005-2006, Executive Committee 2001-2002.

Sam Gejdenson, Commissioner 2012-2014.

Susie Gelman, Commissioner 2023-2025.

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS

Dr. Robert P. George, Commissioner 2012-2016, Chair 2012-2014, 2015-2016, Vice Chair 2014-2015.

Mary Ann Glendon, Commissioner 2012-2016, Vice Chair 2012-2013.

Ambassador John V. Hanford III, Ex-Officio member of the Commission during time served as the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, 2003-2009.

M. Zuhi Jasser, MD, Commissioner 2012-2016, Vice Chair 2013-2014, 2015-2016.

Sandra Jolley, Commissioner 2016-2018, Vice Chair 2017-2018.

Firuz Kazemzadeh, Deceased. Commissioner 1999-2003, Vice Chair 2001-2002.

Khizr Khan, Commissioner 2021-2022.

Dr. Andy Khawaja, Commissioner 2018-2019.

Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, Commissioner 2019-2020, 2021-2023.

Dr. Richard P. Land, Commissioner 2001-2004, 2005-2012, Vice Chair 2007-2008.

Leonard Leo, Commissioner 2007-2012, Chair 2009-2012.

Nadine Maenza, Commissioner in 2018-2022, Vice Chair 2019-2020, Chair 2021-2022.

Mohamed Magid, Commissioner 2022-2024.

2023 USCIRF Commissioners with Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi (D-CA)



USCIRF

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS

Gayle Manchin, Commissioner 2018-2021. Vice Chair in 2018-2020 and Chair 2020-2021.

Dr. Daniel Mark, Commissioner, 2014-2018. Vice Chair, 2016-2017, Chair 2017-2018.

Clifford D. May, Commissioner 2016-2018.

Theodore McCarrick, Commissioner 1999-2001.

Rev. Johnnie Moore, Commissioner 2018-2021.

Most Reverend William Francis Murphy, Commissioner 2001-2003.

Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou, Commissioner 2004-2012, Vice Chair 2006-2012

Tony Perkins, Commissioner 2018-2022, Chair 2019-2020, Vice Chair 2020-2021.

Most Reverend Ricardo Ramirez, Commissioner 2003-2007.

Reverend Thomas J. Reese, Commissioner 2014-2018, Chair 2016-2017.

Hannah Rosenthal, Commissioner 2014-2016.

Dr. John Ruskay, Commissioner 2016-2018.

Leila Nadya Sadat, Commissioner 2001-2003.

Rabbi David Saperstein, Ex Officio member of the Commission during time served as Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, 2015-2017.

Stephen Schneck, Commissioner 2022-2024.

Eric P. Schwartz, Commissioner 2013- 2016, Vice-Chair 2015-2016.

Ambassador Robert Seiple, Ex-Officio member of the Commission during time served as the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, 1999-2000.

Pastor Reverend Dr. William J. Shaw, Commissioner 2010-2014, Vice Chair 2012-2013.

Nina Shea, Commissioner 1999-2012, Vice Chair 2003-2007.

Justice Charles Z. Smith, Deceased. Commissioner 1999-2001.

Ambassador Charles R. Stith, Commissioner 2001-2003.

Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, Commissioner 2012- 2016, Chair 2012-2013, 2014-2015.

Dr. Shirin Raziuddin Tahir-Kheli, Commissioner 2001-2003.

Nury Turkel, Commissioner 2020-2024, Vice Chair 2021-2022, Chair 2022-2023.

USCIRF COMMISSIONERS



USCIRF Commissioners 2020

USCIRF

Ted Van Der Meid, Deceased. Commissioner 2010-2012.

Eric Ueland, Commissioner 2022-2024.

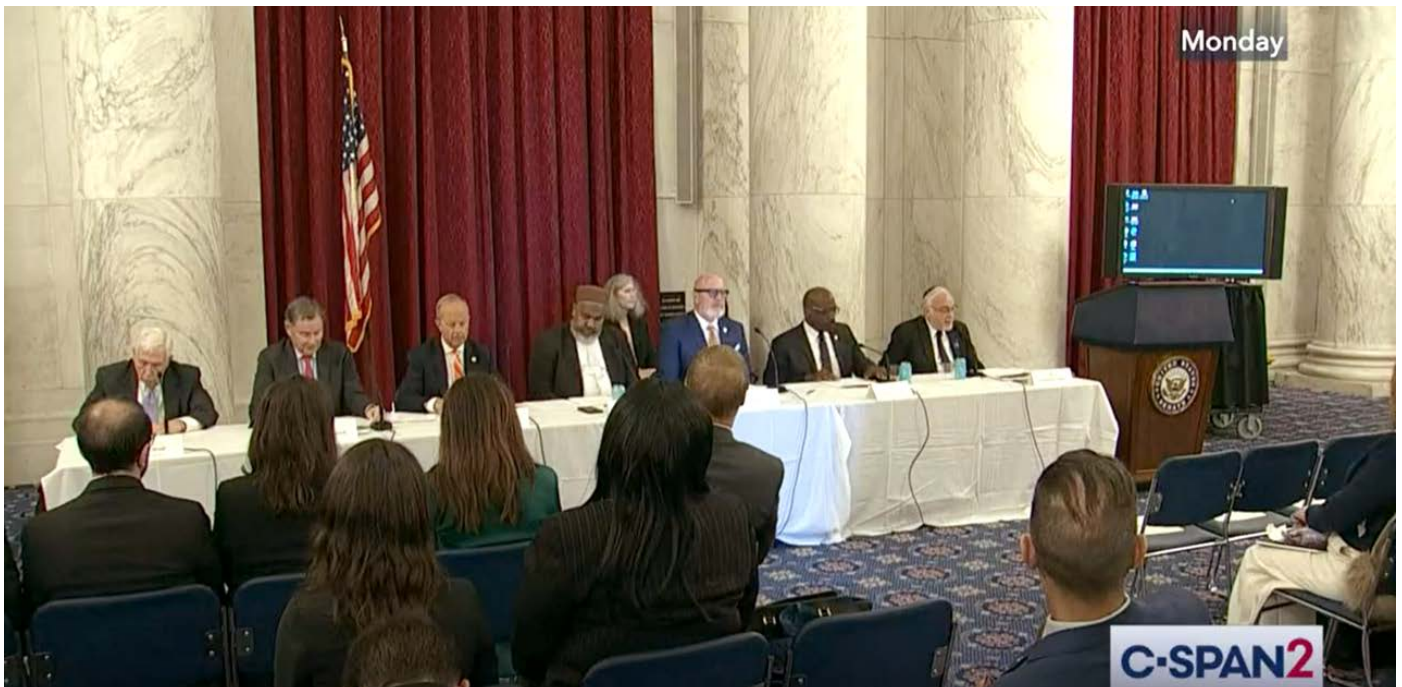
Ambassador Jackie Wolcott, Commissioner 2016-2018.

Frank Wolf, Commissioner 2022-2024.

Michael K. Young, Commissioner 1999- 2003, Chair 2001-2002, Vice Chair 1999-2000.

James Joseph Zogby, Commissioner 2013- 2017. Vice Chair 2014-2015.

2023 Commissioners at USCIRF event on Capitol Hill commemorating the 25th Anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act



C-SPAN

RESOURCES

INTERVIEW LIST FOR 20TH IRF ACT RETROSPECTIVE

Abrams	Elliott Abrams Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies, Council on Foreign Relations; Assistant Secretary of State for Inter- American Affairs, Department of State 1985- 1989; USCIRF Commissioner 1999- 2001, 2012-2014	Brownback	Ambassador Sam Brownback Ambassador at Large for IRF 2018-2021; Governor of Kansas 2014-2018; United States Senator 1996-2011
Anderson	Elyse Bauer Anderson Staff Director, Congressional Executive Commission on China; Foreign Policy Director for former Representative Frank Wolf 2002-2015	Cassidy	Elizabeth Cassidy USCIRF Director of International Law & Policy 2007-Present
Argue	Don Argue Former President of the National Association of Evangelicals 1992- 1998; Former President of Northwest University 1998 -2007, Chancellor 2007- 2013; USCIRF Commissioner 2007- 2012	Cizik	Rev. (Dr.) Rich Cizik President, New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good; (=Vice President for Governmental Affairs, National Association of Evangelicals 1980-2008
Arriaga	Alex Arriaga Managing Partner, Strategy for Humanity; Executive Director, First Advisory Committee for Religious Freedom Abroad	Cook	Ambassador Suzan Johnson Cook Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom 2011-2013
Arriaga	Kristina Arriaga USCIRF Commissioner 2017-2019; Becket 1995-2017, Executive Director 2010- 2017	Dorjee	Dr. Tenzin Dorjee Associate Professor, Dept. of Human Communication Studies California State University, Fullerton; USCIRF Commissioner 2016-2020
Bansal	Dr. Preeta Bansal HSBC General Counsel; USCIRF Commissioner 2003-2009	Farr	Dr. Tom Farr President, Religious Freedom Institute; Director, Office of International Religious Freedom, U.S. State Department 1999- 2003
Bashir	Dwight Bashir Director of Research, USCIRF, 2002- 2022; Advisor, Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad, U.S. Department of State, 1997-1999	Fikes	Deborah Fikes Director Intergovernmental Relations/ Public Engagement/ World Evangelical Alliance; Coordinator for International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church 2001/ Midland, Texas; Director for Human Rights Advocacy and Spokesperson for the Midland Ministerial Alliance 2002- 2008
Beuttler	Dr. Fred Beuttler Associate Dean, Graham School, The University of Chicago; Associate University Historian, University of Illinois at Chicago 1998-2005; Deputy Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, May 2005-December 2010	Forte	David Forte Professor of Law, Cleveland State University; Visiting Scholar, Liberty Fund, Inc. 1998-1999; Senior Fellow, Center for the Study of Religion and the Constitution, The Witherspoon Institute 2008- 2009

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INTERVIEW LIST FOR 20TH IRF ACT RETROSPECTIVE

George	Dr. Robert George McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence, Princeton University; USCIRF Commissioner 2012-2016	Horowitz	Michael Horowitz Director, Religious Liberty Project, Hudson Institute 1994-Present
Golub	Judith Golub Board of Directors/Managers Religion News Foundation & Religion News Service; USCIRF Director of Congressional Affairs 2009-2017	Huiskes	Ann Huiskes Chair at Columbia-Willamette Chapter of Women of Vision/World Vision; Senior Legislative Assistant, Representative Frank Wolf (R-VA) 1992- 1999
Gombis	Al Gombis, Esq. Department of State foreign affairs officer; Team Lead for the Middle East and North Africa in the Office of International Religious Freedom 2006- 2011; House Foreign Affairs staffer 2011- 2013	Jasser	M. Zuhdi Jasser President and Founder, American Islamic Forum for Democracy; USCIRF Commissioner 2012-2016
Grim	Dr. Brian Grim President, Religious Freedom and Business Foundation; Director of Cross National Data, Senior Researcher in Religion & World Affairs, Pew Research Center 2006-2014; Boston Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs 2008- Present	Jolley	Sandra Jolly, USCIRF Commissioner 2016-2018
Hanford	John Hanford Former Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom 2002- 2009; IRF expert on staff Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN) 1987-2001	Land	Dr. Richard Land President of Southern Evangelical Seminary; USCIRF Commissioner 2001- 2004, 2006-2012
Hanford	Laura (Byrant) Hanford Congressional Aide to Representative Bob Clement (D-TN)	Leo	Leonard Leo Executive Vice President, The Federalist Society; USCIRF Commissioner 2007- 2012
Hertzke	Dr. Allen Hertzke David Ross Boyd Professor and Faculty Fellow in Religious Freedom for the Institute for the American Constitutional Heritage; Founding director of Oklahoma University Religious Studies Program	Lieberman	Former Senator Joe Lieberman National Co-chairman, No Label; United States Senator (D-CT) 2007-2013
Homer	Lauren B. Homer, Attorney At Law, Homer International Law PLLC; President/Founder, Law and Liberty Trust International 1990-Present	Long	Larry Long, Sr, Pastor, Fellowship Community Church, Midland, Texas; President, Midland Ministerial Alliance 2001-2017
		Mark	Dr. Daniel Mark Asst. Professor of Political Science, Villanova University; USCIRF Commissioner 2014-2018
		Marshall	Paul Marshall Senior Fellow, Center of Religious Freedom, Hudson Institute; Senior Fellow, Freedom House 1998-2007
		May	Clifford May Founder & President, Foundation for Defense of Democracies; USCIRF Commissioner 2016-2018

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INTERVIEW LIST FOR 20TH IRF ACT RETROSPECTIVE

McDonnell	Faith McDonnell Director, International Religious Liberty Program and Church Alliance for A New Sudan, Institute on Religion and Democracy		President and Director, Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, Office of Public Engagement [OPE], Executive Office of the President [EOP] 2021 – Present
Mitchell	Greg Mitchell President, The Mitchell Company; Chief of Staff, Representative James Rogan 1997-2000	Ruskay	Dr. John Ruskay Executive Vice President emeritus of UJA-Federation of New York and a senior partner of JRB Consulting Services; USCIRF Commissioner 2016-2018)
Payt	Sharon Payt, J.D. Executive Director, 21Wilberforce; Senate staff, international human rights 1997-2002	Saperstein	Ambassador David Saperstein Director Emeritus, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and Senior Advisor to the URJ for Policy and Strategy; USCIRF Commissioner 1999-2001; Ambassador at Large for IRF 2015-2017
Prodromou	Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou Visiting Associate Professor of Conflict Resolution, The Fletcher School, Tufts University; USCIRF Commissioner 2004-2012	Seiple	Ambassador Bob Seiple Former President, World Vision; Ambassador at Large for IRF 1999-2000
Rees	Ambassador Joseph Rees Writer, Advocate, and Former United States Ambassador to East Timor; Staff Director and Chief Counsel, House Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights 1995-2001; Chief Council, Committee on International Relations 2001-2002	Seiple	Chris Seiple CEO, The Sagestone Group; President 2003-2015 & President Emeritus 2015-2016, Institute for Global Engagement
Reese	Fr. Thomas J. Reese Columnist, Religion News Service; USCIRF Commissioner 2014-2018	Shea	Nina Shea Director, Center for Religious Freedom, Hudson Institute; USCIRF Commissioner 1999-2012; Director of the Center for Religious Freedom at Freedom House 1996-2006
Rogers	Melissa Rogers Non-residence senior fellow in Governance Studies, Brookings Institution; Executive Director of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2000-2003; Visiting Professor/Director of the Center for Religion and Public Affairs at Wake Forest University Divinity School 2004-2012; Special Assistant to the President and Executive Director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships 2013 -2017; Member, United States Holocaust Memorial Council, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum [USHMM] 2017- 2021; Special Assistant to the	Smith	Congressman Chris Smith Member of Congress (R-NJ) 1981-Present
		Swett	Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett President, Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice; USCIRF Commissioner 2012-2016
		Taft	Dorothy Taft Executive Director, The Market Project; Chief of Staff/Deputy Chief of Staff, U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe 1995-2007

RESOURCES

INTERVIEW LIST FOR 20TH IRF ACT RETROSPECTIVE

Thames	Knox Thames Senior Fellow, Pepperdine University; Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia 2015-2020; USCIRF Director of Policy and Research 2009-2015
Young	Michael Young President, Texas A&M; USCIRF Commissioner 1999-2005
Wolcott	Ambassador Jackie Wolcott Board of Governors, International Atomic Energy and Representative Vienna office 2018-2021; USCIRF Commissioner 2016- 2018; Executive Director 2010-2015
Wolf	Former Congressman Frank Wolf Distinguished Senior Fellow, 21Wilberforce Member of Congress (R-VA) 1981-2015; USCIRF Commissioner, 2022-2024
Zogby	Dr. Jim Zogby Founder and President, Arab American Institute; USCIRF Commissioner 2013- 2017

RESOURCES

INTERVIEW LIST FOR 25TH IRF ACT RETROSPECTIVE

Ashbahian	Danielle Ashbahian Chief of Public Affairs, USCIRF		Commissioner 2022-2024, Vice Chair 2022-2023, Chair 2023-2024
Babun	Teo Babun President & CEO, Outreach Aid to the Americas	Curry	David Curry President and CEO of Global Christian Relief; USCIRF Commissioner 2022-2024
Barker	Jeremy P. Barker Director, Middle East Action Team, Religious Freedom Institute	Davie	Frederick A. Davie Senior Strategic Advisor to the President at Union Theological Seminary; USCIRF Commissioner 2020-2024, Vice Chair 2023-2024
Bhargava	Anurima Bhargava Founder and Director at Anthem of US; producer of documentary films; advisor for Unbound Philanthropy; USCIRF Commissioner 2018-2022, Vice Chair 2020-2021, Chair May 2021-June 2021	Enada	Stephen Enada Executive Director, International Committee on Nigeria
Birkle	Gretchen Birkle International Development Expert	Fu	Bob Fu President, ChinaAid
Brownback	Sam Brownback Co-chair of the International Religious Freedom Summit; Senior Fellow at Global Christian Relief; former Ambassador at Large for IRF	Green	Mark Green Former Administrator, USAID; President & CEO, Wilson Center
Bruce	Fiona Bruce UK PM's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Chair, IRFBA	Grim	Brian Grim Founder and Executive Director, Religious Freedom and Business Foundation
Brunson	Andrew Brunson Special Advisor for Religious Freedom, Family Research Council	Henne	Peter Henne Professor, University of Vermont; author
Burns	Peter Burns IRF Summit Executive Director	Hill	Representative French Hill U.S. Congress (R-AR)
Carr	James W. Carr President & Chairman of Highland Home Holdings; USCIRF Commissioner 2020-2022	Hussain	Ambassador Rashad Hussain US Ambassador at Large for IRF; American attorney, diplomat, and professor
Clark	Elizabeth Clark Associate Director at International Center for Law and Religion Studies, Brigham Young University School of Law	Ibrahim	Pari Ibrahim Executive Director, Free Yezidi Foundation
Cooper	Rabbi Abraham Cooper Associate Dean and Director of Global Social Action Agenda for the Simon Wiesenthal Center; USCIRF	Ispahani	Farahnaz Ispahani Author; former member of Pakistan Parliament; Senior Fellow, South and Southeast Asia & Middle East Action Teams at Religious Freedom Institute; Co-founder, FoRB Women's Alliance

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INTERVIEW LIST FOR 25TH IRF ACT RETROSPECTIVE

Khan	Amjad Khan Partner at Brown Neri Smith & Khan LLP; Adjunct Professor at UCLA Law	Miller	Hilary Miller Researcher, USCIRF
Khan	Khizr Khan Founder of Constitution Literacy and National Unity Center; USCIRF Commissioner 2021-2022	Milsap	Julie Milsap Government Relations Manager, Uyghur Human Rights Project
Maenza	Nadine Maenza President of International Religious Freedom Secretariat; Global Fellow at the Wilson Center Middle East Program; USCIRF Commissioner in 2018-2022, Vice Chair 2019-2020, Chair 2021-2022	Mitchell	Greg Mitchell Co-chair of the IRF Roundtable; Founder, The Mitchell Firm & IRF Secretariat
Magid	Imam Mohamed Magid Executive Religious Director of All Dulles Area Muslim Society Center; Chairman of International Interfaith Peace Corps; Muslim Jewish Council member; Co- President of Religions for Peace; Co- Founder of the Multi-faith Neighbors Network; USCIRF Commissioner 2022- 2024	Moore	Johnnie Moore President of JDA Worldwide; founder and CEO of the KAIROS Company; USCIRF Commissioner 2018-2021
Makin	Sarah E. Makin VP and head of PR, JDA Worldwide; former Deputy Assistant to the President; National Security Council Official; Senior Advisor to President of the United States and Vice President of the United Sates	Nadel	Dan Nadel Director and Principal Deputy to US Ambassador at Large for IRF, U.S. Department of State
Manchin	Gayle Manchin Federal co-chair of the Appalachian Region Commission; First Lady of West Virginia; former President and member of West Virginia State Board of Education; USCIRF Commissioner 2018- 2021, Vice Chair in 2018-2020 and Chair 2020-2021	Norquist	Samah Norquist Former Public Policy Fellow at the Wilson Center; Former Chief Advisor to the Administrator for IRF at USAID
Martin	Trent Martin Advocacy & Training Coordinator, 21Wilberforce	Nu	Wai Wai Nu Senior Human Rights Research Fellow, UC Berkeley School of Law; Founder and Executive Director, Women Peace Network
Mercer	Mariah Mercer Deputy to the IRF Ambassador and Deputy Director, U.S. Department of State	Omar	Representative Ilhan Omar U.S. Congress (D-MN)
		Pederson	Patrice Pederson President, First Freedom Foundation; Principal, Smart Social Impact
		Perkins	Tony Perkins President of the Family Research Council; former representative in the Louisiana state legislature; USCIRF Commissioner 2018-2022, Chair 2019- 2020, Vice Chair 2020-2021
		Philips	Adam Philips Former Exec. Dir., Local, Faith and Transformative Partnership Hubs, USAID

RESOURCES

INTERVIEW LIST FOR 25TH IRF ACT RETROSPECTIVE

Pompeo	Mike Pompeo Former U.S. Secretary of State; former Director of the CIA, Distinguished Fellow at the Hudson Institute	Wilson	Luke Wilson Researcher, USCIRF
Schneck	Steven Schneck Retired professor, department chair and dean at Catholic University of America; USCIRF Commissioner 2022-2024	Wolf	Frank Wolf U.S. House of Representatives (R-VA, 1981-2015); Wilson Chair in Religious Freedom at Baylor University 2015-2016; Senior Distinguished Fellow at 21Wilberforce 2015-2018; USCIRF Commissioner 2022-2024
Singshinsuk	Erin D. Singshinsuk Executive Director, USCIRF		
Stanton	Gregory Stanton Founding President and Chairman of Genocide Watch; Founder and Chair, Alliance Against Genocide		
Stanton	Kimberly Stanton Democratic Staff Director at Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, U.S. House of Representatives		
Swett	Katrina Lantos Swett President and CEO of the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice; American Foreign Policy professor at Tufts University; USCIRF Commissioner 2012- 2016, Chair 2012-2013, 2014-2015		
Thang	Nguyen Thang Executive Director, Boat People SOS		
Turkel	Nury Turkel Chair of Uyghur Human Rights Project and former president of Uyghur American Association; Senior fellow for foreign policy and national security issues at the Hudson Institute; USCIRF Commissioner 2020-2024, Vice Chair 2021-2022, Chair 2022-2023		
Udin	Zack Udin Former researcher, USCIRF		
Ueland	Eric Ueland Visiting Fellow at the Heritage Foundation; a Public Advisor for the Paragon Health Institute; Board of Advisors for the Center for Constitutional Liberty at Benedictine College; USCIRF Commissioner 2022-2024		

RESOURCES

LEGISLATION / POLICY

- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18](#)
- [International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, Article 18](#)
- [Jackson-Vanik Amendment to the Trade Act of 1974](#)
- [Helsinki Final Act, Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1975](#)
- [Interim and Final Reports of the Secretary of State’s Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad, 1997 and 1998](#)
- [P.L. 105-292 — “International Religious Freedom Act of 1998”](#)
- [H.R. 2431 “International Religious Freedom Act of 1998”](#)
- [S. 1868 — “International Religious Freedom Act of 1998”](#)
- [H.R. 1150 / P.L. 114-281 — “Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act”](#)
- [National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017](#)
- [S. 1158 — “Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2018”](#)
- [Executive Order 13926 of June 2, 2020, Advancing International Religious Freedom](#)
- [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Annual Reports](#)
- [U.S. Department of State International Religious Freedom Reports](#)
- [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#)

This listing highlights foundational legislation and policy. For information on specific IRF legislation visit IRFscorecard.org.

RESOURCES

ARTICLES / WHITE PAPERS

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Allen D. Hertzke, "The Clinton Presidency and the Pivotal Era of Religious Freedom," *Religious Freedom Institute*, July 7, 2016.

Asma Afsaruddin, "Making the Case for Religious Freedom Within the Islamic Tradition," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2008): 57-60.

Brian J. Grim, "Religious Freedom: Good for What Ails Us?" *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2008): 3-7.

Daniel Philpott, "In Search of the Twin Tolerations," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2008): 9-12.

Dennis R. Hoover and Thomas F. Farr, "Introduction: IRFA, Ten Years On," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2008): 1.

Jason Klocek and Scott Bledsoe, "Global Trends and Challenges to Protecting and Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief," *United States Institute of Peace*, June 2022.

Jeffrey Haynes, "Religion and a Human Rights Culture in America," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2008): 73-82.

José Casanova, "Balancing Religious Freedom and Cultural Preservation," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2008): 13-15.

Judd Birdsall, "Understanding and Standing with the Persecuted," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2008): 83-84.

Keith Pavlischek, "The Diarchy of Religious Freedom," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2008): 85-86.

Knox Thames and Peter Mandaville, "Maintaining International Religious Freedom as a Central Tenet of US National Security," *United States Institute of Peace*, October 2022.

Laura Bryant Hanford, "The International Religious Freedom Act: Sources, Policy, Influence," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 6, no. 2, (2008): 33-39.

Lee Marsden, "International Religious Freedom Promotion and U.S. Foreign Policy," *Religions* 11, no. 5 (2020): 1-18.

Liu Peng, "Religion as a Factor in Sino-U.S. Relations," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2008): 61-66.

Marie Juul Peterson and Katherine Marshall, "The International Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief: Sketching the Contours of a Common Framework," *The Danish Institute for Human Rights*, April 2019.

Melissa Rogers and E.J. Dionne, "A Time to Heal, A Time to Build," *Brookings Institution*, October 2020.

Monica Duffy Toft and M. Christian Green, "Progress on Freedom of Religion or Belief?: An Analysis of European and North American Government and Parliamentary Approaches," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 16, no. 4 (2018): 4-18.

Nina Shea, "The Origins and Legacy of the Movement to Fight Religious Persecution," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2008): 25-31.

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), "Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security: Policy Guidance," *OSCE Office for Democratic Institution and Human Rights* (2019).

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Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom:

This position was created in the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), P.L. 105-292. Appointed by the President and Senate-confirmed, the Ambassador is a principal adviser to the President and the Secretary of State on matters affecting religious freedom abroad and heads the Office of International Religious Freedom in the State Department. The Ambassador also serves ex officio on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:

IRFA requires the State Department to prepare and transmit to Congress an Annual Report on International Religious Freedom detailing the status of religious freedom in each foreign country, violations of religious freedom by foreign governments, and United States actions and policies in support of religious freedom. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) also issues an Annual Report.

Blasphemy: Blasphemy is the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God. Ninety-five of the world's 193 countries have blasphemy laws. Some governments justify these laws, which criminalize acts and expressions deemed contemptuous of sacred things, as necessary to promote religious harmony. In fact, they do the opposite: they restrict the freedoms of religion and expression, thereby violating two of the most hallowed human rights, and lead to abuses and the destabilization of societies.

Civil Society: Civil society refers to a wide array of organized and unorganized groups: community groups, non-governmental organizations [NGOs], labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations. When mobilized, civil society - sometimes called the "third sector" (after government and commerce) - has the power to influence the actions of elected officials and businesses. In addition to advocacy, civil society

provides humanitarian aid and development.

Country of Particular Concern (CPC): IRFA requires an annual review of the status of freedom of religion or belief worldwide and a country of particular concern (CPC) designation of those countries whose governments have "engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom" during the reporting period. (See definition below of "particularly severe violations of religious freedom.") The President's authority to designate CPCs has been delegated to the Secretary of State.

Demarche: A demarche is a formal diplomatic representation of one government's official position on a topic to another government or an international organization. In terms of IRFA, a private demarche or public demarche are among the many actions available to the President as a response to countries identified as engaging in or tolerating religious persecution.

Designated Persons List for Particularly Severe Violations of Religious Freedom: The Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act (P.L. 114-281) directs the Secretary of State, in coordination with the Ambassador at Large and in consultation with relevant government and nongovernment experts, to establish and maintain a list of foreign individuals to whom the consular post has denied a visa or who are subject to financial sanctions or other measures on grounds of particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The law also requires the Secretary to submit to Congress a report that contains the list and a description of the actions taken, and requires updates to the report every 180 days thereafter and as new information becomes available.

Diplomacy: Diplomacy is the profession, activity, or skill of managing international relations, including by a country's representatives abroad. It can also include the work of nongovernmental elements and international civil servants. Practices include dialogue, negotiation and other measures at

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summit meetings, international conferences, and parliamentary diplomacy.

DRL: The State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) is responsible for the U.S. government’s efforts to promote democracy, protect human rights and advance labor rights globally.

Entities of Particular Concern: The Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act (P.L. 114-281) requires the President to identify non-state actors engaged in particularly severe religious freedom abuses and designate them as entities of particular concern, or EPCs. To qualify as an EPC, a nonstate actor must also exercise significant political power and territorial control, be outside the control of a sovereign government, and often employ violence in pursuit of its objectives.

Ethnic Cleansing: Ethnic cleansing is the deliberate and systematic removal of an ethnic or religious group from a specific geographical area. The UN Security Council in 1994 confirmed a 1992 United Nations Report (Final Report of Experts Established Pursuant to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 780) that ethnic cleansing is a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.

FoRB: The right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, often referred to as ‘religious freedom’ or most commonly as ‘freedom of religion or belief’ (FoRB), is a fundamental and universal human right articulated in Article 18 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR) and other international human rights treaties.

Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act (P.L. 114-281): Recognizing the need to update the tools in IRFA to address violations of freedom of religion or belief, Congress introduced and passed P.L. 114-281, the Frank R. Wolf International

Religious Freedom Act. President Obama signed the law in December 2016. Among its provisions, the law required the State Department to name “Special Watch List” countries that engage in or tolerate severe violations of religious freedom but do not meet the CPC threshold; required the State Department to identify non-state actors that perpetrate particularly severe violations of religious freedom as “Entities of Particular Concern;” mandated religious freedom training for foreign service officers and made recommendations to the Secretary of State about the curriculum to be used; required the State Department to keep a Designated Persons List of individuals sanctioned for particularly severe violations of religious freedom; and required USCIRF to compile a prisoners list.

Freedom of Conscience: Freedom of conscience is the right to follow one’s own beliefs in matters of religion and morality. The UDHR underscores that religious freedom is a conscience right.

Genocide: The U.S. Department of Justice defines genocide as including violent attacks with the specific intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. An expanded definition of genocide per international law is found in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide.

Global Magnitsky Act (P.L. 114-328): The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act authorizes the President to impose U.S. entry and property sanctions against any foreign person or entity who: is responsible for extrajudicial killings, torture, or other gross violations of internationally recognized human rights committed against individuals in any foreign country seeking to expose illegal activity carried out by government officials, or to obtain, exercise, or promote human rights and freedoms; acted as an agent of or on behalf of a foreign person in such activities; is a government official or senior associate of such official responsible for, or complicit in, ordering or

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otherwise directing acts of significant corruption; or has materially assisted or provided financial, material, or technological support for, or goods or services in support of, such activities. In April 2022, President Biden signed into law P.L.117-110, which made this sanctions authority permanent.

Human Rights: Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, whatever their nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, language, or any other status. These rights, to which all are equally entitled without discrimination, are all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible and often are expressed and guaranteed in treaties, customary international law, general principles and other sources of international law. International human rights law obligates governments to act in certain ways or refrain from certain acts, in order to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms of individuals or groups. The principle of universality of human rights, first emphasized in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948, has been restated in many international human rights conventions, declarations, and resolutions.

Impunity: Impunity is the exemption from punishment or freedom from the injurious consequences of an action. The impunity provided by governments' failure to act has facilitated the rise of non-state actors and encouraged vigilante violence.

The International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (ICG-FoRB): The ICG-FoRB, established by Canada and the United States in 2015, is an international consortium of like-minded executive branches that works to enhance information sharing and cooperation between states committed to protecting and promoting the right to freedom of religion or belief.

The International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPP-FoRB): The IPP-FoRB, which was launched in 2014, is an informal

network of more than 130 parliamentarians and legislators from around the world committed to combating religious persecution and advancing freedom of religion or belief, as defined by Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration for Human Rights. All participating parliamentarians agree to the Charter's principles to advance religious freedom for all, including the right to believe or not believe, change faith, and share faith with others.

IRFA: President Clinton signed into law the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) (P.L. 105-292) in October 1998. IRFA sought to give the U.S. government the tools to address violations of freedom of religion or belief abroad. Among other provisions, IRFA stipulates that the President should designate as CPCs those countries that commit "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" violations of religious freedom, and provides a menu of actions that the U.S. government should take in consequence of this designation.

International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA): Launched in February 2020, the Alliance is a network of like-minded countries fully committed to advancing freedom of religion or belief around the world. Alliance members must fully commit to the Declaration of Principles. The Declaration is grounded in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration for Human Rights, which states everyone has freedom to believe or not believe, to change faith, to meet alone for prayer or corporately for worship. The Alliance is predicated on the idea that more must be done to protect members of religious minority groups and combat discrimination and persecution based on religion or belief. The Alliance brings together senior government representatives to discuss actions their nations can take together to promote respect for freedom of religion or belief and protect members of religious minority groups worldwide. As of fall 2023, 42 countries have joined the Alliance.

International Religious Freedom Roundtables: IRF Roundtables are informal groups of individuals

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from non-governmental organizations who gather regularly to discuss IRF issues on a non-attribution basis. They are safe spaces where participants gather, speak freely in sharing ideas and information, and propose joint advocacy actions to address specific IRF issues and problems. In response to various participant-led initiatives regarding the protection and promotion of freedom of religion, conscience, and belief abroad, all participants have the opportunity to self-select into coalitions of the willing. Currently, there are 25 IRF Roundtables operating around the world and 17 more in additional stages of launching.

The Marrakesh Declaration: In January 2016, Muslim scholars, politicians, activists, and interfaith clergy from around the world gathered in Marrakesh, Morocco, to address the rights of minorities living in Muslim-majority areas of the world. The conference resulted in the Marrakesh Declaration, a call to action grounded in the historic Charter of Medina, which was forged by Prophet Muhammad as a form of contractual citizenship to ensure equal treatment of all in a multicultural society. Those signing the Marrakesh Declaration affirmed that minority rights have a precedent in, and are essential to, Islamic law and tradition in accordance with international legal standards. They further called on politicians, scholars, artists, and others in Muslim-majority societies to advance the protection of minority rights based on equal citizenship through legal, political, and social processes, to ensure that minority communities, indigenous for centuries in the present-day Muslim world, can continue to flourish there.

Mass Atrocities: While there is no formal legal definition of mass atrocities, the consensus is that mass atrocities are large scale and systematic violence, deliberately inflicted against civilians. The legal categories most often associated with mass atrocities are genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. Ethnic cleansing also is considered a mass atrocity but does not have a legal codification. Also, the conceptual boundaries

between these terms can be unclear. Key to responding to mass atrocities is taking actions in countries in which early warning signs exist and nations use a full range of diplomatic and program interventions to mitigate risks stemming from atrocities.

Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom: The State Department hosted the first-ever Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom July 24-26, 2018. The Ministerial sought to reaffirm international commitments to promote religious freedom, convening a broad range of stakeholders, including foreign ministers, international organization representatives, religious leaders, and civil society representatives, to discuss challenges, identify concrete ways to combat religious persecution and discrimination, and ensure greater respect for religious freedom for all. Additional Ministerials to Advance Religious Freedom have been convened by the United States in July 2019, Poland in November 2020, the United Kingdom in July 2022 and the Czech Republic in November 2023.

National Security Council Adviser on International Religious Freedom: The National Security Council Adviser is the special adviser to the President called for in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA).

Non-Governmental Organization (NGO): NGOs are non-profit citizens' groups that function separately from governments to provide advocacy and assistance at the local, national and international levels. NGOs focus on a variety of social and political issues, such as human rights, religious freedom, and development.

Non-State Actors: The Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act (P.L. 114-281) defines a non-state actor as "a non-sovereign entity that exercises significant political power and territorial control; is outside the control of a sovereign government; and often employs violence in pursuit of its objectives."

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Office of International Religious Freedom: The Office of International Religious Freedom promotes universal respect for freedom of religion or belief for all as a core objective of U.S. foreign policy. The office monitors religiously motivated abuses, harassment, and discrimination worldwide, and recommends, develops, and implements policies and programs to address these concerns. The IRF Office sits directly below the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights.

Particularly Severe Violations of Religious

Freedom: As defined in IRFA, “particularly severe violations of religious freedom” are “systematic, ongoing, egregious” violations of religious freedom including torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; prolonged detention without charges; causing the disappearance of persons by the abduction or clandestine detention of those persons; or other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons. The Secretary of State’s determination that the government of a country has engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom is to the basis for a country being designated a CPC, “Country of Particular Concern.”

Persecution: Persecution is hostility and persistent mistreatment of a person or group of people based on ethnicity, political or religious beliefs, or a combination thereof. The impact of persecution can range from mild discrimination, marginalization and harassment to hostility, imprisonment, torture and even death.

Pew Report: Since 2009, Pew Research Center annually has issued a study on global restrictions on religion, measuring both government restrictions and social hostilities. The most recent study, released in November 2022 using data from 2020, found that the global median level of government restrictions imposed in the 198 countries and territories examined fell slightly from the prior year, but the global median level of social hostilities increased slightly.

Pluralism: Pluralism is the presence of people of different races, religious beliefs, and cultures within the same society, or the belief that this is a good thing.

Prisoners of Conscience: Prisoners of Conscience (POCs) are individuals who have been unjustly imprisoned for the peaceful exercise of their political, religious, or other conscientiously held beliefs, in violation of their fundamental human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and other international human rights instruments and standards.

Refugee: A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

Religious Freedom: Freedom of religion is the right of an individual to choose a religion (or no religion at all) in which to believe, and to practice and express that religion or belief without interference by the government or actors within society.

Religious Minorities: Religious minorities are members of religious groups that comprise a minority of the population within a country, state or region. In nations worldwide, they are the targets of harassment, discrimination and persecution because of their religious beliefs, affiliations, actions, and/or advocacy.

Sanctions: Sanctions are a tool that nations use to influence or punish other nations or non-state actors. While most sanctions are economic, they also may carry the threat of diplomatic or military consequences. Sanctions can be imposed unilaterally by one nation or multilaterally by a group of nations.

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Specially Designated Nationals List: As part of its enforcement efforts, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) publishes a list of individuals and companies owned, controlled by, or acting on behalf of targeted countries. The list also includes individuals, groups, and entities that are not country specific. Their assets are blocked and U.S. persons generally are prohibited from dealing with them.

Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Religion or Belief: The Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief is an independent expert appointed by the UN Human Rights Council. The mandate holder has been invited to identify existing and emerging obstacles to the enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief and present recommendations on ways and means to overcome such obstacles.

Special Watch List (SWL): Those countries whose governments are identified as having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom, but which do not meet the criteria to be designated as countries of particular concern, are instead included on the President's "Special Watch List." The new class of designation was added to IRFA with the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016 (P.L. 114-281). This authority was delegated to the Secretary of State.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR): The United Nations General Assembly adopted the UDHR on December 10, 1948. Drafted by representatives with different legal and cultural backgrounds from all regions of the world, it is the most universal human rights document in existence, delineating the thirty fundamental rights that form the basis for a democratic society.

USCIRF: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) was created under IRFA. USCIRF monitors the violations of religious freedom abroad, makes policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and

Congress, and tracks the implementation of those recommendations. USCIRF issues an annual report and other publications, holds hearings and other public events, is active in the media and on social media, and maintains a public list of victims of certain religious freedom violations. USCIRF's nine Commissioners are appointed by the President or congressional leaders from each political party and are supported by a nonpartisan professional staff of about 20.

U.S. Helsinki Commission: The U.S. Helsinki Commission, also known as the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), is an independent U.S. government agency created in 1975 to monitor and encourage compliance with the Helsinki Final Act and other Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) commitments. The CSCE seeks to promote human rights, military security, and economic cooperation in 57 countries in Europe, Eurasia, and North America. The Commission consists of nine members from the House of Representatives, nine members from the Senate, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense, and Commerce. The House and Senate share the positions of Chair and Co-Chair, which rotate every two years when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

AUTHORS

Erin Rodewald

Erin Rodewald is a freelance writer, editor and communications strategist based in Northern Virginia. Her topics include civil society, community engagement, faith and family, international religious freedom, and foreign policy. Rodewald is the author of the Writing for the Public Square blog and a contributing author and fellow with The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation and Culture.

With more than 35 years of communications experience, Rodewald has provided strategic public relations counsel for public affairs, business-to-business, and high-tech clients. She is the co-owner and strategic management partner of a global high-tech public relations firm. While serving as digital editor for 21Wilberforce, Rodewald was an original co-author of The 20th Anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act: A Retrospective.

Rodewald holds a Masters of Public Policy degree from Pepperdine University and a bachelor's degree in Communications from California State University, Fullerton. She volunteers her time as an ESOL teacher.

Lou Ann Sabatier

Ms. Sabatier has four decades of experience in publishing, marketing and communications. Early in her career Sabatier was in senior management for publishing operations in the U.S. and globally. Sabatier then pivoted to consulting to publishers and content creators. For 25 years she has led a global consulting consortium with 15 professionals experienced in multiple disciplines of publishing and communications.

With more than 200 assignments completed, clients include a list as diverse as World Vision/ Save the Children, the International Monetary Fund, the OECD, the Federal Reserve Bank, National Geographic, the U.S. Marine Corps, and the Chronicle of Higher Education. Sabatier served on the board of Magazine Training International (MTI) for five years and continues to provide training for MTI around the world.

Sabatier currently serves as the Director of Communications for 21Wilberforce where she oversees the website, newsletters, social media, collateral material, press and the International Religious Freedom Congressional Scorecard.

In 2021, she co-founded FoRB Women's Alliance, a global accelerator focused on informing and connecting individuals, organizations, faith communities and networks across regions countries and sectors working on issues relevant to women and FoRB.

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