



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Briefing

Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security: New Policy Guidance from the OSCE

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Tony Perkins, USCIRF Chair:

Good morning and welcome to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) briefing on *Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security: New Policy Guidance from the OSCE*. Thank you very much to Senator Ted Cruz and his staff for reserving this room for us this morning.

I am Tony Perkins, the Chair of USCIRF. USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government body that monitors religious freedom worldwide, using international standards, and makes recommendations for U.S. policy to Congress, the Administration, and the State Department. USCIRF and the State Department's International Religious Freedom Office were created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

We are honored to hold today's briefing on the OSCE's recent policy guidance that explores the intersection of security and freedom of religion or belief. USCIRF provided support to the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in drafting this report, and we see it as an important policy tool that affirms religious freedom and security as mutually reinforcing objectives that must be advanced together.

I was particularly pleased to see that the policy guidance addresses the issue of security in relation to places of worship. It explains that places of worship are sometimes viewed by governments as environments for radicalization. In responding to any security concerns, states

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must respect the right of religious communities to manage and regulate places of worship. To this aim, the policy guidance presents important recommendations on approaching the screening, monitoring, and searching of places of workshop when responding to perceived threats to security, while still respecting the freedom of religion or belief.

USCIRF held a congressional hearing on protecting houses of worship and holy sites in October to highlight the global targeting of holy sites and discuss how to protect them. This hearing led to our recommendation that the U.S. government expand programs to train and equip local officials and communities to protect places of worship and other holy sites. These programs must ensure that local officials are equipped to conduct screening and monitoring in line with international standards, as presented in this report. We also recommended that the U.S. government support the UN Alliance of Civilization in the implementation of the UN Plan of Action to Safeguard Holy Sites. Last week, the International Alliance on Religious Freedom was launched, as “a network of likeminded countries committed to advancing freedom of religion or belief around the world.” We encourage this Alliance to work with the UN Alliance of Civilization to promote implementation of the Plan of Action in its member countries.

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