



# UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET

December 2024

## KEY IRF-RELATED POSITIONS

Stephen Schneck  
*Chair*

Eric Ueland  
*Vice Chair*

### Commissioners

Mohamed Elsanousi

Maureen Ferguson

Susie Gelman

Vicky Hartzler

Asif Mahmood

Meir Soloveichik

Erin D. Singshinsuk  
*Executive Director*

### USCIRF's Mission

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

### Overview

The president of the United States is responsible for nearly 4,000 political appointments throughout the federal government, including approximately 1,200 that require Senate confirmation. Some of these positions are responsible for U.S. policies designed to protect and promote freedom of religion or belief internationally.

This factsheet provides an overview of the key political appointments within the U.S. government that are most relevant to international religious freedom (IRF). The primary IRF positions that the president appoints derive from the [International Religious Freedom Act of 1998](#) (IRFA): the Ambassador-at-Large for IRF at the U.S. Department of State, the Special Adviser for IRF on the National Security Council (NSC) staff, and three of the nine Commissioners of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

In addition, several current State Department special envoy or coordinator positions are particularly relevant to advancing IRF. Those positions are the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues, and the Special Coordinator on Tibetan Issues.

Key IRF Political Appointments	Timeline for President-Elect Donald J. Trump Appointments
Ambassador-at-Large for IRF	Shall be appointed upon taking office. Requires Senate confirmation.
Special Adviser for IRF on the NSC	May be appointed upon taking office.
Three USCIRF Commissioners	One shall be appointed in May 2025. Two additional shall be appointed in May 2026.
Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism	Shall be appointed upon taking office. Requires Senate confirmation.
Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues	Shall be appointed upon taking office. Requires Senate confirmation.
Special Coordinator on Tibetan Issues	Shall be appointed upon taking office.

This factsheet does not list every political appointment involved in U.S. IRF efforts. For example, the State Department has presidential appointees who manage cross-cutting human rights portfolios, including the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor; the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Criminal Justice; and the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. In addition, special envoys or representatives for specific countries, regions, or conflicts also engage in issues related to IRF, as do various offices within the U.S. Agency for International Development,

U.S. Department of the Treasury, U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of Justice, and U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Finally, U.S. ambassadors regularly raise the administration's concerns regarding religious freedom conditions with host governments in countries around the globe.

## Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom

In 1998, Congress passed IRFA to make protecting and promoting religious freedom abroad a higher priority in U.S. foreign policy (see [USCIRF factsheet](#)). To accomplish this objective, the legislation created the [Office of International Religious Freedom](#) (IRF Office) and the Ambassador-at-Large for IRF position within the State Department. The IRF Office is mandated to produce an [Annual Report on International Religious Freedom](#), among other duties. The Ambassador-at-Large for IRF is mandated to serve as the principal adviser to the president and the secretary of state regarding religious freedom issues abroad. He or she oversees the IRF Office and leads State Department efforts to protect and promote freedom of religion or belief internationally. The Ambassador-at-Large for IRF also delivers public remarks, travels abroad to meet with foreign dignitaries, and meets with civil society organizations and other religious freedom advocates. The appointee requires Senate confirmation.

The position has been held by [Robert Seiple](#) (1999–2000), [John Hanford](#) (2002–2009), [Suzan Johnson Cook](#) (2011–2013), [David Saperstein](#) (2015–2017), [Samuel D. Brownback](#) (2018–2021), and [Rashad Hussain](#) (2022–present).

## National Security Council Special Adviser on International Religious Freedom

IRFA called for the appointment of a Special Adviser to the President on International Religious Freedom within the NSC staff. Successive administrations failed to appoint a Special Adviser; instead, a NSC staffer has often covered religious freedom within a broader portfolio. In 2016, the [Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016](#) amended IRFA and reiterated that the Special Adviser position is intended to assist the Ambassador-at-Large for IRF in coordinating religious freedom policies and strategies in the executive branch.

In February 2020, then President Donald J. Trump appointed [Sarah E. Makin-Acciani](#) to the position, making her the first and only person to serve in the role full-time. However, the Special Adviser position has remained unfilled since the conclusion of President Trump's first term in office.

## U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

IRFA also established USCIRF as an independent legislative branch agency. USCIRF's mandate has four key elements:

1. The annual and ongoing review of the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom abroad;
2. Making policy recommendations to the president, the secretary of state, and Congress with respect to matters involving international religious freedom;
3. Compiling lists of persons it determines to be imprisoned, detained, disappeared, placed under house arrest, tortured, or subject to forced renunciations of faith for their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy by the government of a foreign country or a nonstate actor it recommends for either country of particular concern (CPC) or entity of particular concern (EPC) designation under IRFA; and
4. Tracking the U.S. government's implementation of its recommendations and reviewing, to the extent practicable, their effectiveness in advancing religious freedom internationally.

Nine Commissioners guide USCIRF's work. The president appoints three Commissioners, and House and Senate leadership of both parties appoint the remaining six. Additionally, the Ambassador-at-Large for IRF serves as a nonvoting ex officio member.

## IRF-Related Special Envoys and Representatives

Presidents and secretaries of state have used special representatives to focus attention and diplomatic resources on high-priority issues. The senior status of these representatives provides them with greater access to senior foreign officials and news media. Three special representatives are particularly important to advancing IRF, as follows.

### 1. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism

In 2004, Congress passed the [Global Antisemitism Review Act](#), which created the position of [Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism](#). The purpose of the position is to monitor and combat acts of antisemitism and antisemitic incitement that occur in foreign countries. The Special Envoy also provides input on global antisemitism for the annual State Department reports on Human Rights Practices and International Religious Freedom. Although the secretary of state initially appointed the

Special Envoy, the 2021 [Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism Act](#) made the role a presidential appointment, requiring Senate confirmation, and elevated the position to ambassador level.

The Special Envoy position has been held by [Gregg Rickman](#) (2006–2009), [Hannah Rosenthal](#) (2009–2012), [Ira Forman](#) (2013–2017), [Elan Carr](#) (2019–2021), and [Deborah Lipstadt](#) (2022–present).

## 2. Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues

In 2004, Congress passed the [North Korean Human Rights Act](#), which created the position of Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues. The purpose of the position is to “coordinate and promote efforts to improve respect for the fundamental human rights of the people of North Korea.” The appointee requires Senate confirmation. Although some provisions in the North Korea Human Rights Act expired in 2022, the president’s obligation to appoint a Special Envoy remains in effect. The Special Envoy position has been held by [Robert King](#) (2009–2017) and [Julie Turner](#) (2023–present).

At the time of publication, the House of Representatives had passed the [North Korea Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2023](#) while the Senate had not. If passed and signed into law before the 118th Congress ends in January 2025, the legislation would reauthorize all expired provisions in the North Korea Human Rights Act through 2028. Among the provisions that would be extended is a requirement that the Special Envoy submit to Congress a report on the work she or he has done to fulfill the Special Envoy’s mandate. If the legislation is not passed and signed into law before the 118th Congress ends, the reauthorization will need to be reintroduced and passed in the 119th Congress.

## 3. Special Coordinator on Tibetan Issues

The William J. Clinton and George W. Bush administrations each appointed a Special Coordinator on Tibetan Issues to reflect the U.S. government’s concern with the Chinese government’s ongoing abuses against Tibetan Buddhists. The [Tibetan Policy Act of 2002](#) made this appointment mandatory. The position’s mandate includes coordinating U.S. policies and projects related to Tibet and working to promote a substantive dialogue between His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government. In December 2020, then President Trump signed the [Tibetan Policy and Support Act](#) into law. The legislation instructed the Special Coordinator to seek to establish international coalitions to oppose any attempt by the Chinese government to interfere in the reincarnation or succession process of Tibetan Buddhist lamas. The

law also requires the secretary of state to ensure that the Office of the Special Coordinator has sufficient staff to carry out its responsibilities. In July 2024, President Biden signed the [Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act](#). The act provides that the Special Coordinator shall work with relevant State Department bureaus to combat Chinese government disinformation about the history, people, and institutions of Tibet, including the Dalai Lama. The individuals appointed to this position have served concurrently in other positions in the State Department.

The Special Coordinator position has been held by [Paula Dobriansky](#) (2001–2009), [Maria Otero](#) (2009–2013), [Sarah Sewall](#) (2014–2017), [Robert Destro](#) (2020–2021), and [Uzra Zeya](#) (2021–present).

## Conclusion

Religious freedom is not only a [universal human right](#); it is a foundation of peaceful, stable societies. Countries with dismal religious freedom records present some of the greatest national security challenges to the United States and the world. Despite the importance of this issue to U.S. foreign policy, the position of Ambassador-at-Large for IRF and Commissioner vacancies on USCIRF have gone unfilled for a year or more into the new administration during past presidential transitions. USCIRF therefore urges incoming President Trump to promptly appoint—and the Senate to quickly confirm—a well-qualified, experienced individual to be Ambassador-at-Large for IRF and to make timely appointments to USCIRF. Additionally, USCIRF encourages the incoming administration to swiftly appoint a Special Adviser for International Religious Freedom as a full-time position on the NSC staff.

In terms of other positions, eliminating, “double-hatting,” or leaving vacant positions such as those mentioned in this factsheet could undermine the U.S. government’s important efforts to promote religious freedom abroad. Religious freedom issues are complicated and sensitive, and progress requires sustained, high-level engagement.

USCIRF urges the new administration to give priority to special envoys and representatives whose missions might otherwise not receive sufficient attention from the State Department’s regional or functional bureaus in their absence. In addition, all such positions should be provided with the financial resources and staff required to fulfill their mandate.



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

### Professional Staff

---

**Michael Ardovino**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Susan Bishai**  
*Senior Policy Analyst*

**Mollie Blum**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Guillermo Cantor**  
*Director of Research and Policy*

**Elizabeth K. Cassidy**  
*Senior Strategic Advisor*

**Mingzhi Chen**  
*Supervisory Policy Advisor*

**Sema Hasan**  
*Senior Policy Analyst*

**Thomas Kraemer**  
*Chief Administrative Officer*

**Veronica McCarthy**  
*Public Affairs Specialist*

**Hilary Miller**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Nora Morton**  
*Operations Specialist*

**Dylan Schexnaydre**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Katherine Todd**  
*Policy Analyst*

**Scott Weiner**  
*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Luke Wilson**  
*International Legal Specialist*

**Kurt Werthmuller**  
*Deputy Director of Research and Policy*

**Nathan Wineinger**  
*Chief of Public Affairs*

**Jean Wu**  
*Policy Analyst*

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.