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Opening Statement

Rep. John F. Tierney, Ranking Member

Subcommittee on National Security

Hearing on "Protecting International Religious Freedom."

September 18, 2014

Thank you, Mr. Chairman for holding this very timely hearing.

Religious freedom has been a core American value since the founding of our nation. In 1998, Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act with wide bipartisan support in order to enshrine this fundamental right in U.S. foreign policy and protect vulnerable religious communities around the world. The Act created the Office for International Religious Freedom in the State Department, headed by an Ambassador-at-Large, and the independent, bipartisan U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The State Department's most recent International Religious Freedom Report found that in 2013, "the world witnessed the largest displacement of religious communities in recent memory." Combating religious extremism and preserving this vital human right will help promote stability in key regions of the world.

The questions before this hearing ought to be, has Congress authorized the right powers to the President, and have we created the right process for determining the use of those powers to confront effectively the challenges to international religious freedom?

The current crises around the world highlight the importance of this question. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or ISIL, has been waging a campaign of terror in Iraq and Syria. In addition to their barbaric beheadings of American journalists, senseless killings, and systematic rape of women and children, ISIL's brutal tactics have also been aimed at wiping out religious minorities from their historic homelands. Christians, Yezidis, Shia Muslims, and other religious communities have been subjected to mass evictions, forced conversions upon the threat of death, and being burned or buried alive.

Last week, in a televised speech on ISIL, President Obama pledged to quote, “continue to provide humanitarian assistance to innocent civilians who have been displaced by this terrorist organization. This includes Sunni and Shia Muslims who are at grave risk, as well as tens of thousands of Christians and other religious minorities.”

The Administration has already taken some significant steps. Last month, thousands of Yezidis were stranded on Mount Sinjar without food or water and facing imminent death. The U.S. responded to this humanitarian crisis with airdrops that allowed thousands of Yezidis to evacuate the mountain. Last week, President Obama also met with eight Eastern Christian leaders at the White House to discuss the plight of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East.

I commend the Administration for these preliminary actions. However, as the President noted, it will take time to destroy ISIL so the Administration must actively sustain its efforts to protect religious minorities in the region from ISIL’s heinous acts.

Violations of religious freedom are by no means unique to the Middle East. In Burma, as Dr. Lantos Swett stated in her written testimony, the Rohingya Muslim Community has quote, “experienced systemic, large scale and egregious abuses of human rights.” Dr. Lantos Swett also notes Pakistan’s chronic and deadly sectarian violence targeting mostly Shia Muslims, and Pakistan’s repressive blasphemy laws.

With so many difficult international challenges, Congress must put the right tools at the disposal of the President. I believe we can do better. I look forward to hearing from our distinguished panel of experts and Under Secretary Sewall on how Congress can strengthen the International Religious Freedom Act.

Lastly, I would like to express my support for Rabbi David Saperstein’s nomination as the next Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. Rabbi Saperstein has sterling credentials for the post, having been an original and forceful advocate for the International Religious Freedom Act who also served as the first Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Rabbi Saperstein’s confirmation hearing was earlier this week so I urge the Senate to swiftly confirm him without any more delay, since his services are needed more than ever.

With that, I yield back the balance of my time.

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