

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ROUNDTABLE

Washington, D.C.

May 7, 2015

The Honorable Ed Royce
Chairman
The House Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Eliot Engel
Ranking Member
The House Committee on Foreign Affairs
B-360 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Royce and Ranking Member Engel,

We write as an informal group of organizations and individuals who are scholars, religious leaders, human rights advocates and practitioners to urge you to cosponsor and support swift passage of H.R. 1150, the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2015, which is sponsored by Representatives Chris Smith (R-NJ) and Anna Eshoo (D-CA).

While there is very little we agree on theologically, or politically, we all agree on the importance of religious freedom. The passage of H.R. 1150 is not only the right thing to do but it is in our vital self-interest to do so. Consider three compelling reasons.

First, religious freedom is perhaps the most personal and fundamental of all human rights, reflecting the very core and dignity of a human being. It strengthens culture and provides the foundation for a stable democracy and its components, including civil society, economic growth, and social harmony. Research has shown that where there is more religious freedom, there is more economic development, more women's empowerment, and more political stability.

As such, religious freedom is also the ultimate counter-terrorism weapon, preemptively undermining religious extremism. From Cyrus' Cylinder to Roger Williams' 1663 Colonial Charter, history and modern scholarship make it clear that where people are allowed to practice their faith freely, they are less likely to be alienated from the government, and more likely to be good citizens.

Third, the current state of international religious freedom is one of deepening crisis. According to the Pew Research Center's latest annual study on global restrictions on religion, 77% of the world's population lives in countries with a high or very high overall level of restrictions on religion in 2013, up from 76% in 2012 and 68% in 2007. If people continue to kill for their religion and die for their faith in a world where 84% of the planet's inhabitants believe in something greater than themselves, then we must work for the best of faith to defeat the worst of religion.

We must work to create a context where people can live with their deepest differences. The recent turmoil in Syria, Iraq and Ukraine—including the alarming spike in

incidents of violence and persecution of Christians, Muslim communities, and other religious minorities—offers the latest examples of what happens if we do not.

The attached summary of the bill provides further details, but the purpose of H.R. 1150 is to update the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) and improve the capacity of the U.S. government to advance religious freedom globally by:

- Giving the Administration and the State Department new political tools to better counter violent extremism and sectarian violence, growing anti-Semitism and restrictions on religious minorities (e.g., a “tier system” for IRF reports on countries of particular concern and a special watch list, annual actions on countries with severe IRF abuses, authority to sanction individuals responsible for committing severe violations of IRF or materially supporting terrorism or violent extremism, and the ability to designate non-state actors as part of the Country of Particular Concern list and a range of sanctions targeting individual members of such groups);
- Expanding diplomatic training, counter-terrorism coordination, and foreign assistance efforts; and,
- Reauthorizing the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) through 2021.

We deeply appreciate the recent appointment and confirmation of David Saperstein as U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, and we are extremely grateful for the renewed voice and leadership of USCIRF’s Commissioners, and for the expertise and diligence of the professional, nonpartisan staffs of the IRF Office and USCIRF. But we need to further strengthen these offices and their collective contribution to the building of sustainable religious freedom worldwide.

With the passage and implementation of H.R. 1150, a strengthened IRFA and a stronger IRF policy—as integrated into U.S. foreign policy and national security—the United States will send a clear and urgent message regarding the inherent dignity of every human being, as well as our common global security in the fight against persecution and religious extremism, and terrorism. Doing so is consistent with the best of our values, practically protecting our interests as a result. Please pass this bill as soon as possible.

Thank you.

Respectfully,

ORGANIZATIONS

21ST CENTURY WILBERFORCE INITIATIVE

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR VIETNAM

ADVOCATES INTERNATIONAL

AHMADIYYA MUSLIM COMMUNITY USA
AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION
ASSOCIATION OF CON DAU PARISHIONERS
BOAT PEOPLE SOS
CENTER FOR INQUIRY
CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY WORLDWIDE - UK
CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY NATIONAL AFFAIRS OFFICE
COPTIC SOLIDARITY
FEDERATION OF INDIAN AMERICAN CHRISTIAN ORGANIZATIONS OF NORTH AMERICA
FREEMUSLIM, CENTER FOR DE-RADICALIZATION AND EXTREME PREVENTION
HIAS
HOME SCHOOL LEGAL DEFENSE ASSOCIATION
HUMAN RIGHTS LAW FOUNDATION
INDIAN AMERICAN MUSLIM COUNCIL
INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT
INSTITUTE ON RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY
INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN
INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS LIBERTY ASSOCIATION
INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR KRISHNA CONSCIOUSNESS
INTERNATIONAL UYGHUR HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY FOUNDATION
JUBILEE CAMPAIGN USA
MISSION EURASIA

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF EVANGELICALS
NORTH AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LIBERTY ASSOCIATION
OPEN DOORS USA
PEACE CATALYST INTERNATIONAL
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX AUTONOMOUS CHURCH OF AMERICA
SHIA RIGHTS WATCH
TAHRIR INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY
UNITED MACEDONIAN DIASPORA
UYHGUR-AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
VENN INSTITUTE
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