

Statement of Rashad Hussain, Ambassador-at-Large for
International Religious Freedom
“The Dire State of Religious Freedom Around the World”
House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Global Health, Global
Human Rights, and International Organizations
July 18, 2023, 10:30 a.m.

Good morning, Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Wild, and Members of the subcommittee. It has been an honor to serve as Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom for the last 18 months and it is a privilege to appear before you today to talk about my work and the work of the Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF). I am grateful to President Biden, Vice President Harris, and Secretary Blinken for continuing to place their trust in me to pursue this work on behalf of the American people. I am also grateful for the long-standing bipartisan collaboration on protecting religious freedom globally. I want to thank Chairman Smith for your decades-long sincere commitment to standing up for those

persecuted on account of their faith – and for your strong collaboration with our office.

Ever since Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act 25 years ago, we have had ongoing and consistent engagement, advocacy, and support from both Republicans and Democrats. This cooperation is crucial not only to support the work of the office I now lead – it also sends a message to both oppressors and the oppressed that no matter which party has the majority in Congress or holds the White House, we stand united as Americans for the sake of those who suffer due to their religion or beliefs.

I have now spent 15 years as a public servant working in all three branches of government under Democratic and Republican administrations, upholding our constitution, including as an attorney and a diplomat. Collaborating with civil society from across the political spectrum to protect the right of freedom of religion or belief around the world continues to be among the most rewarding work of my life.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the original signing of the International Religious Freedom Act (the IRFA); 25 years of protecting a human right that is fundamental to the history of the United States, integral to our national identity and governance as expressed in the First Amendment, and a core component of our foreign policy. In the IRF office, I lead a team dedicated to this work – to protecting and supporting the right of all individuals around the world to exercise their freedom of religion or belief, change their faith as they choose, express their religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance, or practice no faith at all. I continue to work closely with my predecessors, Ambassador Sam Brownback and Ambassador David Saperstein, and I believe it sends a powerful signal around the world that the United States has been represented by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Americans in our efforts to promote religious freedom.

Using the resources Congress has allocated to us, we work towards this goal in three related ways to expose, counter, and prevent restrictions on the human right of religious freedom.

First, we seek to shape a foreign policy that protects U.S. interests and security by engaging civil society and faith communities and addressing laws and policies that impact religious freedom around the world. We work closely with civil society, diaspora communities, leaders in our government and foreign governments, and multilateral institutions, including on educational and prevention efforts.

We work on individual cases of repression. We train foreign and civil service officers and locally employed staff. Throughout this work, we also focus on the most complicated issues at the crossroads of religious freedom and national security and assess how we can strategically engage religious actors to advance our foreign policy objectives.

We do this work wherever and whenever it is needed. This year, the International Religious Freedom Office worked extensively with the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church, or “Mayflower Church,” to protect its members’ right to freedom of religion or belief in the face of relentless pressure from the

Chinese Communist Party, even after they fled China. On April 7, as the result of our efforts in the IRF Office, and broader Department efforts in coordination with Congress, other U.S. government agencies, and NGOs, members of this church arrived in the United States and celebrated Easter at a Texas church service in safety. On May 16, following an IRF-coordinated diplomatic and social media pressure campaign with civil society, UN, and USCIRF partners, we welcomed the release of Shamil Khakimov, an ailing Jehovah's Witness wrongfully imprisoned in Tajikistan. And we have been deeply involved in working to address the Ortega-Murillo regime's increasing repression of Christians and churches in Nicaragua. Over the last year, the IRF Office has collaborated with other offices and U.S. diplomats in Nicaragua to press the government on the deteriorating human rights situation. On February 9, when the United States welcomed 222 individuals who had been imprisoned by the Government of Nicaragua for exercising their human rights and endured lengthy unjust

detentions, our staff were on hand when they landed in the United States and provided interpretation and support.

Second, we cast a light on persecution around the world with our IRF Reports, globally recognized as the gold standard on reporting on religious freedom.

Civil society, academics, managers of statistical databases, such as the Pew Research Center's religion reports and Penn State's Association of Religion Data Archives, foreign governments, Congress, and foreign parliamentarians, and individuals all over the world look to the Reports for concrete, comprehensive information found nowhere else. If anyone ever wonders whether the religious persecution of any group in any part of the world escapes our attention, the answer is in the country-by-country analysis in our Reports. For the United States Government, and for the Office of International Religious Freedom, the Reports are our starting point for policy efforts that span the entire year and beyond.

The Reports help us build coalitions, increase awareness, and inform action and advocacy internationally. They provide a

baseline for understanding whether and how conditions are getting better or worse in particular places, whether past engagement has proven effective or should be recalibrated, and whether the case of a particular individual or community has been resolved or requires further attention. The Reports are also a multiplier, enabling U.S. diplomats, UN experts, other multilateral officials, and envoys of influential countries to advocate for the right to freedom of religion or belief more effectively.

Sometimes, others deploy the IRF Reports in particularly critical ways. In April, the FBI arrested two individuals “in connection with opening and operating an illegal overseas police station” in Manhattan, which targeted Falun Gong practitioners and other members of the Chinese community on U.S. soil. In building its case, the FBI’s indictment specifically cited the 2021 IRF China Report, noting that “‘the [Chinese Communist Party] maintains an extralegal, party-run security apparatus to eliminate the Falun Gong movement,’ using methods ranging from harassment to imprisonment.”

Third, we provide information and expertise on the status of international religious freedom and related policy to the Secretary as he makes the determination of which countries and entities meet the threshold to be designated Countries of Particular Concern (CPC), Special Watch List countries (SWL), or Entities of Particular Concern. Under the IRF Act, the Secretary also takes recommendations from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and other sources into consideration when making the Administration's formal designations. While at times the Department may differ in its designations from USCIRF's recommendations, we deeply appreciate the Commission's work to elevate the importance of promoting and advancing international religious freedom for all as a key objective of American foreign policy. In 2022, the Secretary designated Burma, the People's Republic of China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, the DPRK, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan as Countries of Particular Concern for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. He also designated Algeria, the

Central African Republic, Comoros, and Vietnam as Special Watch List countries and al-Shabab, Boko Haram, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Houthis, ISIS-Greater Sahara, ISIS-West Africa, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, the Taliban, and the Wagner Group based on its actions in the Central African Republic as Entities of Particular Concern.

Later this year, when we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the IRFA and its impact, we will also be celebrating the legacy of our country's conviction that everyone should be free to follow the religion they choose. Our own experience, our own example, is what compels us to advocate for the rights of the marginalized, vulnerable, and underrepresented peoples the world over.

As we do this work of advocating for people around the world, we are sometimes asked – “Who are YOU as the United States or as Americans to speak to other countries about their human rights conditions and to get involved in their internal matters?” I believe we are uniquely situated to stand up for religious freedom around the world for a number of reasons.

We are ourselves a country founded on religious freedom and by individuals fleeing religious persecution. They felt so strongly about this fundamental freedom that they enshrined it in the First Amendment in our constitution's Bill of Rights.

And we are a country of immigrants – people come here from all around the world and demand that their elected representatives and government officials promote our values in their homelands – they would have it no other way. So, who are we to stand up for religious freedom around the world? In many ways we are representatives of the rest of the world, gathered here in the United States. And we don't walk away from discussing our efforts to form a perfect union here in the United States.

We are motivated by their unshakable commitment to the idea that saving even one person – or improving even one life – is well worth our effort. And we continue to follow that conviction with the same uncompromising determination Congress showed in passing the law in 1998 and we will be sure to include Congress in that celebration. I thank

you again for your attention and guidance and for allowing me to speak with you today.