

Remarks by  
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House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia

November 19, 2009

Chairman Ackerman and members of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, it is an honor to be here today to discuss religious freedom conditions in the Middle East and to share what the Obama Administration is doing to encourage progress on religious freedom in the region.

I commend the work of the Subcommittee and I thank you for drawing attention to this important human right.

As you know, in October the State Department released its 2009 Report on International Religious Freedom. I would like to submit the Report's Introduction and Executive Summary for the record.

The Report's Introduction articulates this Administration's approach to international religious freedom. We seek a principled engagement with other nations on this issue—in a spirit of mutual interest and mutual respect. Religion is a global phenomenon and all nations, including the United States, wrestle with how best to accommodate their religious diversity. We are convinced that the freedom to profess, practice, and promote one's religion is a basic human right, a social good, a source of stability, and a key component of international security.

President Obama has strongly emphasized the importance of religious freedom several times throughout the past year. In his historic Cairo speech the President stated our belief that, "People in every country should be free to choose and live their faith based upon the persuasion of the mind and the heart and the soul. This tolerance is essential for religion to thrive."

We recognize that there are many significant challenges to religious freedom and tolerance in the Middle East and South Asia. Throughout the region religious minorities do not enjoy equal access to education, employment, healthcare, and legal recourse. In some places, blasphemy and apostasy laws inhibit the social contributions of minorities and exacerbate inter-religious tension. In many Muslim-majority countries, minority Muslim sects are marginalized and members of the majority sect are not free to challenge official religious opinions. I want to emphasize that religious freedom is not just a concern for religious minorities; majority communities need space to self-critique and adapt to changing conditions over time. Our Annual Report details our findings in each country, as well as what the U.S. Government has done to foster greater respect for religious diversity throughout the region.

Our embassies regularly discuss religious freedom issues with majority and minority faith communities, with relevant government officials, and with academics and members of the media and civil society.

The Department operates or funds several programs aimed at fostering pluralism in the region and we are exploring ways to increase our capacity to engage the region's faith leaders.

Religion plays a central role in the life of every country in the region. It is vital that the United States engage all religious groups and encourage governments to treat all individuals and groups equally and allow the necessary space for all groups to advance the common good.

With that I would be happy to take your questions.