



January 14, 2021

The Honorable Joe Biden
President-Elect of the United States
Washington, DC 20006

Dear Mr. President-Elect:

We write as an informal group of organizations and individuals, who are scholars, religious and secular leaders, human rights advocates, and practitioners to urge you to prioritize U.S. leadership in the area of international religious freedom. We ask that your administration affirm and strengthen the governmental structure created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) and the Frank R. Wolf IRFA of 2016. We also ask that you nominate a qualified Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and appoint others to key IRF posts as soon as possible.

We are participants in the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Roundtable, which is a multi-faith, inclusive model that has proven it is possible to engage cooperatively and constructively across deep religious and policy differences and to increase mutual understanding, respect, trust, and reliance through joint advocacy actions. Central to our efforts is our non-sectarian, non-partisan approach that identifies problems around the world and builds upon common ground and multi-faith consensus to develop joint initiatives.

Founded in 2010, we have actively supported the international religious freedom initiatives of both the Obama and Trump administrations working closely with successive Ambassadors at Large: Suzan Johnson Cook, David Saperstein, and Sam Brownback. We have also worked with members of Congress on both sides of the aisle and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom and have actively engaged in assisting various executive branch bodies, such as Treasury and USAID, in developing policies responsive to IRF issues. Participants in the IRF Roundtable are currently working to replicate our inclusive model and operationalize a global network of roundtables. ***There are currently 31 religious freedom roundtables and partners in the global network.***

We look forward to working closely with your administration to continue this work that has led to foreign policy wins, including:

- A multi-government campaign that resulted in the release of more than 2,000 prisoners of conscience around the world.

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- Increased international awareness and pressure on China due to its campaigns against religious/ethnic minorities and efforts to “Sinicize” all religions.
- Interventions in Syria and Iraq to stop genocidal attacks and war crimes against religious minorities.
- Roadmaps to reform and major legal and policy advances in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Sudan.
- The launch of the Abrahamic Faiths Initiative, a dialogue led and organized by religious leaders of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, working together to emphasize the peaceful expression of faith and the renunciation of violence.
- The establishment of the [International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religions or Belief](#) (IPPFoRB).
- The creation of the [International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance](#) with 32 like-minded member states.

While we hold an extremely broad diversity of theological views and political positions, we all agree on the importance of international religious freedom. It strengthens cultures and provides the foundation for stable democracies and their components, including civil society, social harmony, and economic prosperity. As such, it is also an effective counter-terrorism weapon, key to US national security interests, as it pre-emptively undermines religious extremism. 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.

Such conclusions are increasingly bolstered by empirical research. Dr. Brian Grim, a noted expert on society and religion, found a strong correlation between government restrictions on religion and religiously-motivated violence.¹ Further, an exhaustive study by academics from Harvard, Notre Dame, and Georgetown found “that religious communities are most likely to support democracy, peace and freedom for other faiths, and least likely to take up the gun or form dictatorships, when governments allow them freedom to worship, practice and express their faiths freely and when religious communities in turn renounce their claims to permanent offices or positions of policy-making authority.”²

The current state of international religious freedom, however, is one of deepening crisis—government restrictions on religion rose to a record high in 2018, while religion-related social hostilities fell slightly but remained near peak levels, according to Pew Research Center’s [11th annual study of restrictions on religion](#).³

¹ Brian Grim, “The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century.” (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

² Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott and Timothy Samuel Shah, “God’s Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics.” (New York: Norton, 2011), p. 18.

³ [Government restrictions on religion around the world reached new record in 2018](#), Pew Research Center.

Further, situations such as the Rohingya genocide in Burma, mass imprisonment and exploitation of Uyghurs and other faith groups by the Chinese government, ISIS genocide against Yazidis and Christians in Syria and Iraq, religious conflicts and violence in Nigeria, and the spike in terrorist attacks in many parts of Africa only underscore the importance and urgency of expanding and strengthening U.S. international religious freedom policy, engagement, and leadership.

As you recently wrote in [The Christian Post](#), “every person on earth is equal in rights and dignity... It is the same creed that is at the core of our American experiment and written into our founding documents – that we are all created equal and endowed by our creator with inalienable rights... We have to strive harder to come together, and to love our neighbors as ourselves... We must again become a nation that defends the inherent dignity of every human, upholds the blessings of liberty, and provides a haven for those fleeing violence or persecution.”

As you emphasized, we need new approaches to defend and advance religious freedom and we encourage your administration to work on these issues through cooperative engagement with a focus on human dignity and pluralism.

We encourage your administration to work with us in the global movement that is building around religious freedom; to consolidate and expand recent improvements in the US IRF infrastructure, strengthen U.S. IRF policy, and make a major contribution to international justice and stability, fundamental human rights, economic growth, and U.S. national security.

To those ends we respectfully recommend the following actions:

- **Ensure Key IRF Offices & Positions are Filled**
 - **State Department:** Stress the mission and vital role of the IRF Office throughout the U.S. government. Advance IRF as a whole-of-government effort in coordination with USCIRF, USAID, Treasury, DoD, and other agencies.
 - **IRF Ambassador:** Appoint a highly qualified Ambassador in the first 100 days of your administration (someone with visibility and rank, who can engage at high levels both domestically and abroad). We urge you to allow the current IRF Ambassador, Sam Brownback, to serve until your appointment to this office is confirmed so this important post does not remain vacant (as we urged the prior administration to retain former Ambassador David Saperstein.)
 - **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF):** Appoint Commissioners on a timely basis, including the first White House appointment by May 14, 2021. Engage with USCIRF as a valuable resource on FoRB information and policy recommendations to advance religious freedom.
 - **Senior Advisor for IRF on the National Security Council:** Appoint a Senior Advisor for IRF on the National Security Council, who serves as the head of the interagency efforts on IRF, in the first 100 days of your administration.

- **Advance Multilateral Engagement on Religious Freedom**
 - **Annual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom:** Support and participate in this annual global gathering of governments, faith communities, and civil society. While the U.S. hosted the first two events in 2018 and 2019, Poland hosted the third in 2020 and Brazil has agreed to host the fourth in 2021.
 - **International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance:** Strengthen and expand the now 32-member multi-lateral Alliance and ensure cooperative engagement and coordination of actions with the Global Network of Religious Freedom Roundtables and the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- **Fortify Religious Freedom Frameworks**
 - **National Security Strategy of the United States:** Expand and strengthen the human dignity and religious freedom sections in the National Security Strategy.
 - **Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom:** Expand and implement the plans to prioritize IRF in the planning and implementation of U.S. foreign policy and in the foreign assistance programs of the State Department and USAID.
- **Empower Civil Society Action**
 - **Weekly IRF Roundtable Meetings:** We hope your Senior Advisor for IRF and your Ambassador-at-Large for IRF and their staffs will continue the tradition of regularly participating in our weekly IRF RT meetings along with USCIRF and Congressional representatives. Prior to COVID-19, our in-person meetings were attracting an average of 150 representatives of all faiths and none. Since COVID-19, we have continued to meet virtually every Tuesday and the meeting has become increasingly global in nature. More than 900 people from more than 50 countries, with a wide range of faiths and beliefs, have participated in these meetings.
 - **Annual National Summit on IRF:** Consider supporting and participating in an annual national IRF summit in collaboration with the IRF Roundtable and civil society.

By implementing these recommendations and working with IRF civil society advocates and the growing IRF global movement, you will strengthen your planned foreign policy initiatives to build strong bilateral and multilateral partnerships, advance global security in the fight against persecution, religious extremism and terrorism, and send a clear message in support of the inherent dignity of every human being.

We stand ready to serve as a civil society partner and resource to help your administration build on the more than two decades of bipartisan tradition of supporting IRF and advance this universal freedom to the next level.

Respectfully,

Greg Mitchell
Chair
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Advocates International

ARBP (ADIP) Anatolian Religions and Beliefs Platform

Assyrian Aid Society of America

Bitter Winter

Boat People SOS - Religious Freedom Project

Campaign for Uyghurs

Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine)

Center for Pluralism

Center for Studies on New Religions

China Aid Association

Christian Medical & Dental Associations

Church of Scientology National Affairs Office

Churches for Middle East Peace

Citizen Power Initiatives for China

Coalition to Abolish Modern-day Slavery in Asia

Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience

Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam

Coptic Solidarity

Council for Christian Colleges & Universities

CSW UK

CSW USA

Faith & Liberty

First Freedoms

Free Burma Rangers

Free Yezidi Foundation

Hamilton Library and Constitution Center

Hindu American Foundation

Human Rights Without Frontiers

Indian American Muslim Council

International Campaign for the Rohingya

International Christian Concern

International Christian Response USA

International Human Rights Advocates

International Human Rights Committee

International Observatory of Human Rights of Refugees

International Organization to Preserve Human Rights

International Society for Krishna Consciousness

Jubilee Campaign USA

Justice for All

Khartoum Sudan International Religious Freedom Roundtable

Law and Liberty International

Legalise Apostasy

Leimena Institute

Minaret Foundation

Muslims for Progressive Values

National Association of Evangelicals

No Business With Genocide

Observatory for Freedom of Religion and Conscience (Spain)

Outreach Aid to the Americas

Religious Freedom Coalition

Roads of Success

Syrian Christians for Peace

United for Reform Judaism

United Macedonian Diaspora

Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union

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Uyghur American Association

Uyghur Human Rights Project

Vietnam Coalition Against Torture

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