

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ROUNDTABLE

Washington, D.C.

September 9, 2015

The Honorable Bob Corker
Chairman, Senate Foreign Relations Committee
423 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Ben Cardin
Ranking Member, Senate Foreign Relations Committee
423 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Corker and Ranking Member Cardin,

We write as an informal group of organizations and individuals who are scholars, religious leaders, human rights advocates and practitioners to urge you to facilitate the swift passage of S. 1798, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Reauthorization Act of 2015. This bill was introduced and referred to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on July 16, 2015, and we are hopeful that it will pass the Senate, with bipartisan support, before USCIRF's current authorization expires on September 30, 2015.

While there is very little we agree on theologically, or politically, 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, economic growth, and social harmony. As such, it is also the ultimate counter-terrorism weapon, pre-emptively undermining religious extremism.

Religious freedom is a principle upon which our country was founded, and its promotion is a significant factor in U.S. national security and related global interests. As Secretary of State John Kerry recently stated, "Attacks on religious freedom are therefore both a moral and a strategic national security concern for the United States."

Since its inception in the landmark 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, USCIRF has been vital to elevating the promotion of religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy. For those who have worked most closely with the Commission it has been a consistent and reliable voice for people around the globe who desire nothing more than to peacefully worship and live out their faith according to the dictates of their conscience. USCIRF can be counted upon to give an unvarnished view of the state of religious freedom in any given country regardless of the complexities of the bilateral relationship between our respective governments.

Further, since USCIRF's reauthorization in 2011, we have greatly appreciated the renewed voice and leadership of USCIRF's Commissioners and the expertise and diligence of its professional, nonpartisan staff.

We believe S. 1798 strengthens USCIRF's mandate and the tools at its disposal, while providing a much-needed six-year authorization at a critical time when assaults on religious freedom around the world are systemic and growing. In fact, 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 live in countries with a high or very high overall level of restriction on religion in 2013, up from 76% in 2012 and 68% in 2007.

You may be aware that S. 1798 is not the only USCIRF reauthorization bill pending in the Senate. S. 1860, the Further Independence of Religion for Security and Tolerance Freedom Act of 2015, was also introduced last month. But we believe S. 1798 is better suited to advance freedom of religion or belief. While S. 1860 includes significant refugee-related provisions that many of us support, some of these provisions are part of an ongoing debate which is unlikely to be resolved prior to the rapidly-approaching expiration of USCIRF's current authorization. As such, we believe consideration of such provisions should be delinked from the current reauthorization process. Additionally, many of the USCIRF-related provisions in S. 1860 are deeply concerning and could potentially undermine USCIRF's vital work.

The most effective way to ensure the continuity of USCIRF's essential mandate to protect and promote religious freedom worldwide is for the Senate to pass, in a timely fashion, S. 1798.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to working with you to accomplish this purpose.

Respectfully,

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AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

AMERICANS FOR DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN BAHRAIN

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