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Chairman Graham, Ranking Member Leahy, and Members of the Sub-Committee,

I am honored to have this opportunity to appear before you today. This is my first hearing since arriving at the State Department in January, and it could not come at a more critical time. Thank you for taking the time so early in your calendar to elevate the critical importance of religious freedom and its links to the serious security challenges we face. Religious freedom has always been a bipartisan concern, and this committee has always been ready to assist in highlighting its continuing relevance to foreign policy.

Around the world, we see, as President Obama said at the National Prayer Breakfast, how religion is “twisted and distorted, used as a wedge – or, worse, sometimes used as a weapon.” We see how the repression of religious freedom is a cynical tool in the hands of the powerful, sowing conflict and violence among people of different faiths, employed sometimes out of sheer group hatred seeking to repress or eliminate those differing beliefs and practices, but often for the subjugation of political opposition and the control of the politically weak. Our work is to advance the protection of those who suffer such repression, whether by governments, such as North Korea, Uzbekistan, or Saudi Arabia, or by non-governmental actors, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or Da’esh), Boko Haram, or militant Buddhist groups in Burma.

Around the globe, we are working with governments and religious and civil society actors to build tolerance, reconcile fractured communities, and empower members of minority groups to better advocate for their rights and interests. Since long before my arrival, the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF) has been actively promoting religious freedom and challenging repression of religious freedom around the world. Today, we have a staff of 20 and annually approximately five percent of DRL’s Human Rights and Democracy Fund resources (approximately \$3.5 million) are dedicated to support religious

freedom programs currently operating in 16 countries. In fact, DRL has recently vetted five new programs using FY 2014 funds worth \$3.5 million that will begin operations in the coming months. Since I began this job two months ago, the attacks in Paris and Copenhagen; the destruction of Baga, Nigeria by Boko Haram; the capture and displacement of Assyrian Christians by Da'esh in northeastern Syria; and many other incidents that may not have made the front pages have only reinforced for me that the promotion of religious freedom is absolutely essential for security, stability, countering violent extremism, and conflict resolution both here and abroad. Ensuring respect for basic freedoms, and religious freedom in particular, is not just a moral and ethical mandate, but a national security imperative. Without religious freedom, there can be no real democracy and no lasting security.

When I last testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during my confirmation hearings, I made clear that the fate and well-being of minority and oppressed majority religious communities in the Near East would be among my most urgent priorities. Accordingly, I recently returned from a trip to Iraq, which highlighted just how complex and interrelated questions of religious identity, protection of rights regardless of belief, and security can be – not just for a particular group, but for an entire nation. Politics, laws, and government practices for years have encouraged divisions between people according to their religious identity.

The discrimination and abuses faced by Shia Muslims under Saddam Hussein and by Sunni Muslims over the last few years have fueled resentment and divisions in Iraqi society that have undermined the government's position vis-à-vis Da'esh. We see now the result. In extremist-controlled areas in Syria and Iraq, all those not ascribing to the extremists' brand of Sunni Muslim ideology—including Shia Muslims, Alawites, Christians, Ismailis, Druze, and others—have faced mass killings, rape, forced conversion at gunpoint, kidnappings and other atrocities. Some of the world's most ancient religious communities have been displaced and enslaved. Non-combatants are targets. All of this has served to confirm once again the importance of the protection of human rights in the fight against ISIL, al-Nusra, and all forms of violent extremism.

And what did Iraqis from vulnerable religious groups ask for in our meetings? The removal of Da'esh and assurances of security so that they could return to their homes, of course. But also resources and policies to fight intolerance and discrimination like removing religious identity from ID cards and help in raising awareness about other faiths among religious leaders.

Countering the rise of intolerance has become my top priority because we know that religious repression both drives conflict and fuels the grievances that in turn drive violent extremist recruitment. Violent extremism thrives in the absence of good governance and of rights – including freedom of religion – that democratic, open, and inclusive governments can preserve and secure. As President Obama said at the recent White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, “When governments oppress their people, deny human rights, stifle dissent, or marginalize ethnic and religious groups, or favor certain religious groups over others, it sows the seeds of extremism and violence. It makes those communities more vulnerable to recruitment. Terrorist groups claim that change can only come through violence. And if peaceful change is impossible, that plays into extremist propaganda.” That’s why we are working to counter the messages of hate that violent extremists carry, to alleviate or prevent the social and political repression that give those messages the false perception of legitimacy, and to protect those most vulnerable to extremist attacks and recruitment.

For years, members of my staff have routinely met and maintained contact with members of Syria and Iraq’s religious communities, including Christians and Yezidis. When ISIL invaded Ninewah in June and Sinjar in early August, IRF officers became a unique and critical pipeline between the Departments of State and Defense and the victims of ISIL’s atrocities in real time. That work, which continues, has been essential to ensuring better protection for these communities as well as to ensure humanitarian aid reaches those who need it most. We have been able to gather a great deal of detailed information, coming to us from the rich network of diaspora and advocacy groups that have done incredible work over the years to highlight the needs of Christians, Yezidis, and others in the Middle East. We have developed direct links with key nodes to our military’s anti-ISIL effort and used those connections to assist in ensuring that the security conditions of vulnerable populations are understood and, wherever possible, addressed. We’re also facilitating access to the highest levels of our government for representatives

of these communities. My team and our many partners across the interagency have also worked in other ways to support the victims of ISIL's predations, including the 5,000 or more Yezidis whom we estimate remain as ISIL captives. Among other things, we have supplied medical care and counseling services for escaped captives, many of whom are victims of sexual violence.

Most recently, we have been consumed by the horrific attacks against Assyrian Christians in northeast Syria. On the morning of February 23, ISIL launched an offensive against a string of predominantly Assyrian villages along one side of the Khabour River northwest of Hasakah city. An estimated 3,000 to 5,000 people were displaced, and upwards of 370 were taken captive. Assyrian fighters, with the help of Kurdish fighters and others, repelled the attackers from advancing on the villages on the other side of the river and are still holding the line there. A week after the initial attack, 23 captives were released, but we remain very concerned for those who are still in captivity, and we are again making our lines of communication accessible to affected communities as we monitor these developments with ongoing attention. A number of our humanitarian partners on the ground are currently providing assistance to those displaced by these attacks.

But the Middle East is not the only region where religious freedom is threatened. In recent years around the globe, millions of Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and others representing a range of faiths have been forced from their homes on account of their religious beliefs. Out of fear or by force, entire neighborhoods are emptying of residents. Communities are disappearing from their traditional and historic homes and dispersing across the map. In conflict zones, in particular, this mass displacement has become a pernicious norm. For such communities to persevere, and they must, the governments and people of the countries in which they live must commit themselves to inclusive governance, to ensuring minority communities enjoy the same rights and privileges as their fellow citizens, with the security they require. When historical communities are driven out of their ancestral homelands, their entire countries are deprived of the rich histories and cultures of tolerance that diversity brings. And the world is a lesser place.

Sadly, intolerance and discrimination against individuals on account of their beliefs transcend borders – it is confined to no region. People of all faiths – and people of no faith at all – are vulnerable. Just two weeks ago, the Pew Research Center

released its latest global religious freedom report affirming once again that, “more than three-quarters of the world’s people – 77 percent – live in nations where religious restrictions of some kind...are either high or very high.” As Secretary Kerry observed at my swearing in, “Our generation prides itself on its modernity, and yet we are still grappling with rivalries that have their roots in the distant past.”

But my role is not only to address such acute crises such as those I’ve described – though we will never turn away from one. We also must take the long view. Behind each crisis are months, years, and even decades of poor governance, human rights violations, discriminatory laws, neglect, and inter-group tensions. So we are also deeply engaged in the indispensable work of changing the landscape for religious freedom in places where it is needed most. These long term efforts are where we hope to see benefits in years to come.

You cannot have freedom of religion if you are not free to express religious views with which others might differ or even find anathema. You cannot follow the dictates of your religious conscience if you can be punished for choosing the religion that best reflects your conscience. Yet blasphemy and apostasy laws are growing alarmingly common all over the world. In places like, Indonesia, Poland, Ireland, Russia and Turkey, a conviction for blasphemy, “insult to religion,” “insult to the religious feelings of believers,” or similar charges carries penalties of steep fines or incarceration. And in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Iran, such “crimes” carry the death penalty.

These and similar laws and policies carry real consequences. Among the other issues we work on, none is perhaps more personal, more deeply affecting than what we do to ensure that prisoners of conscience and belief – those detained and imprisoned because of their religious affiliations and commitments or lack thereof – are given a voice and a chance for freedom. Raif Badawi is a young Saudi Arabian blogger and activist for reform. Originally charged with apostasy, Badawi was convicted after months of court proceedings of the lesser charge of “insulting Islam” and sentenced to 1,000 lashes and 10 years in prison. His crime was simply speaking his mind about his country, his government, and his religion.

Meanwhile, Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-American Christian pastor, remains jailed in Iran after more than two and a half years. The President met with Pastor

Abedini's wife, Naghmeh, in January, and, less than two weeks ago, I met with her and with Pastor Abedini's mother. Although this hearing is focused on religious freedom, I want to note that the United States remains deeply committed to the need for freedom for the four American citizens detained or missing in Iran – Saeed Abedini, Amir Hekmati, Jason Rezaian, and Robert Levinson. Our top officials are directly engaging with top Iranian officials on this and we have engaged our international partners to advocate on their behalf. Beyond Pastor Abedini, of course, we remain deeply concerned about religious freedom broadly in Iran, for all Iranians of all religions – recognized and unrecognized – including Sunnis. The execution rate for Sunnis is the highest among any group in Iran.

International advocacy for religious freedom can work. Last year, those efforts led to the release of Meriam Ibrahim Ishag, a Christian woman convicted of apostasy in Sudan. This is why we cannot stay silent. Meriam's case also exemplifies the reinforcing efforts between government and civil society. Religious leaders across the globe campaigned along with us for Meriam's release. Prior to joining the State Department, I was part of a coalition of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish leaders who lobbied the Sudanese ambassador to the United States and the foreign minister on her behalf.

We continue to demand the release of all prisoners of belief and conscience. For twenty years, three Jehovah's Witnesses, Paulos Eyassu, Negede Teklemariam, and Isaac Mogos, have been imprisoned by the Eritrean government for refusing to participate in military service. They have never been charged or convicted, but remain jailed for following their religious conscience. In the DPRK countless individuals are detained in the country's notorious political prison camp system, where human rights abuses are systematic and widespread, for engaging religious activity. In some instances, repatriated refugees are detained in labor camps for simply having contact with religious groups.

In some countries, the very real threat of terrorism is used as a pretext by many authoritarian, and even some democratic, governments to constrain human rights and religious freedom out of fear, sometimes unwittingly helping to foster the very violent extremism they mean to counter by alienating entire segments of the population. What many governments don't seem to fully grasp is that laws and regulations that criminalize or inhibit peaceful religious activities on the pretext of

preventing “extremism” simply substantiate extremist narratives about bad governance and discrimination, providing grievances that violent extremists can use to radicalize and recruit from vulnerable communities.

In multilateral fora, at events such as the recent Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Summit, in our bilateral diplomacy, and through our programming, we are working to convince governments such as those in Burma, Central Asia, Egypt, Africa, that countering violent extremism can, over the long term, only be effective in open and diverse societies that allow dissent and protect the rights of members of minority groups, preserve the rule of law and view civil society as a credible partner. As ever, the worth of a government can often be best judged by how it treats and protects those who are most vulnerable. Religious freedom, as well as the broader spectrum of human rights, remains a priority not as a matter of principle, but also because it makes for a more secure world.

Not all restrictions on religious freedom are justified as countering terrorism. Some are just about control. To address over-burdensome regulatory schemes that inhibit religious freedom now and over the long term, my office is assessing their global reach and variability. We intend to formulate diplomatic and policy guidance, as well as targeted and effective programming to develop best practices and reduce overregulation of religious communities.

Societal intolerance – grown, often, from the seeds of governmental neglect, sectarianism, and favoritism – is an issue we continue to work on from a variety of angles, including programming. The attack on Charlie Hebdo took place on the very day I started work as Ambassador-at-Large, followed two days later by the anti-Semitic terror attack on a kosher market in Paris, and the February 14 shooting at a synagogue in downtown Copenhagen. They underscore the fact that, in addition to facing increasing societal anti-Semitism, some Jewish communities are now actively targeted by violent extremists. This past month, the Pew survey affirmed what we have found in our work – that anti-Semitism is rising across the globe. Not only are individual lives at stake, but the viability of some Jewish communities in Europe is threatened as members come to believe they are no longer welcome in their own countries.

Increasingly, Muslim communities in Europe are also facing a hostile climate. They are seen as outsiders – and in many cases this is, once again, a result of poor policies and planning as well as social discrimination. Many Muslims, like Jews, are afraid to report attacks and discrimination to the authorities where they live. With anti-Muslim hate crimes on the rise in parts of Europe, we have urged greater outreach to Muslim groups through projects such as OSCE expert meetings on combating hate crimes against Muslim communities. And in our programming efforts, we have piloted bilateral training programs (using experts from State, DOJ and DHS) to work with police in other countries on how to effectively address, reduce, and respond to hate crimes.

My office, and I personally, remain deeply committed to vigorously fulfilling our mandate under the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Act and working closely with the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. The threats to religious freedom and the resources required to meet that threat are more than one person or one office can do alone. Promoting international religious freedom requires a whole-of-government approach, and I am pleased to say that I have found many willing partners since joining the Administration and have the honor of serving a President who is a true leader on this critically important issue. I deeply appreciate Congress' support for international religious freedom and look forward to continuing to work with you. I look forward to your questions.