

As a member of the House International Religious Freedom Caucus and the House Human Rights Commission, I wanted to commemorate the 12th anniversary (October 27) of the *International Religious Freedom Act*

, which passed with my support in 1998. This law proclaims that religious freedom is a fundamental human right and requires the publication of two annual reports exposing worldwide religious freedom violations and offering recommendations to U.S. policymakers for improving the situation in offending countries. Sadly, more than one-half of the world's population lives under regimes that severely restrict or prohibit religious freedom.

The International Religious Freedom Act established the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom at the Department of State to pressure other countries to protect this right. USCIRF's

[2010 report](#)

lists Burma, North Korea, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam as "countries of particular concern" (CPCs) and specifies actions the United States can take to hold these countries accountable. The Department of State's annual

[Report on International Religious Freedom](#)

analyzes the level of religious freedom protection in every

country, outlines current U.S. actions to address violators, and officially designates CPCs. Among the victims of religious persecution cited in the reports are Baha'is and Christians in Iran, Christians in Iraq, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, Falun Gong, and several Christian groups in China, Shiite Muslims in Saudi Arabia, and Jews in Venezuela.

The United States has consistently stood with people around the world who are oppressed because of their religious faith. Our nation has imposed limited economic sanctions on China, Iran, North Korea, and Burma pursuant to the *International Religious Freedom Act*. Perhaps more significant, we are committed to fighting religious persecution by publicly exposing violations and sharing our concerns with offending countries. To that end, I have joined fellow members of Congress in urging

[Afghanistan](#)

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[Iraq](#)

, and

[India](#)

to protect the freedom of religion. When Congress reconvenes in November I also plan to

cosponsor

[H. Res. 840](#)

, which exposes religious freedom violations in the Middle East. I will continue to support similar efforts to affirm the importance of religious freedom and hold offending countries accountable.

Unfortunately, the United Nations has failed to consistently recognize that true religious liberty not only protects religious beliefs, but also the right of individuals to *change their faith* without coercion and to peacefully

share their faith

without punishment. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) authorized countries to enact “limitations” on religious freedom if they are deemed necessary to “protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.” This ambiguous language has given fodder for many nations to pass blasphemy laws, prohibit peaceful proselytizing, and ban conversions due to alleged “security concerns.” Several of these countries claim that they protect the freedom of religion but are, in fact, among the world’s worst violators. Additionally, I recently expressed my

[opposition](#)

to a misguided UN “defamation of religion” resolution that would discourage mere discussion about religious faiths and provide international support to domestic blasphemy laws—the exact opposite message the United Nations should be sending.

The *International Religious Freedom Act* is an important tool in advancing the cause of protecting religious liberty worldwide. It is bringing transparency to religious persecution and helping to hold offending countries accountable. But convincing these countries to protect religious freedom will oftentimes require more than exposing wrongdoing; many countries will need to be persuaded that protecting this right is in their best interests. Accordingly, I believe President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton must aggressively tout the benefits of religious freedom to skeptical world leaders. They must make it a priority to convince them that protecting religious liberty will help unify citizens of diverse religious faiths and make their country more stable in the long run. Our nation must boldly carry this message.