

FRANK R. WOLF

10TH DISTRICT, VIRGINIA

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

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TRANSPORTATION-HUD

STATE AND FOREIGN OPERATIONS

CO-CHAIR—TOM LANTOS
HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

July 23, 2012

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The Honorable John Kerry
218 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

Dear Senator Kerry

Last summer the House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed bipartisan legislation (H.R.440) to create a special envoy at the State Department charged with focusing exclusively on the plight of religious minorities in the Middle East and South Central Asia, including Pakistan and Afghanistan. Senators Roy Blunt and Carl Levin introduced companion legislation, S. 1245. But nearly a year later, both this bill and the House-passed legislation have yet to be considered in the Senate.

I introduced the special envoy bill along with Democrat Congresswoman Anna Eshoo in January 2011 following a Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing during which we heard sobering testimony about the challenges facing religious minorities in Iraq and Egypt. These realities were all the more troubling given the historic roots of several faith communities in those two countries — amazingly many Iraqi Christians today still speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus.

The hearing pre-dated the so-called “Arab Spring.” But arguably, the dramatic changes in the region have only made these communities more vulnerable. As such, a special envoy has never been more needed.

I learned several months ago that Senator Jim Webb had a hold on the legislation. He has indicated that he is uncomfortable with the legislation moving forward absent a hearing by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I have no objection to such a hearing, and in fact would welcome it, but I am concerned that time is running out — both in terms of the legislative calendar for this year and in terms of the plight of these communities — among them the Coptic Christians, Baha’is, Chaldo-Assyrians, Ahmadis, small remaining Jewish population and countless other religious minorities throughout the Middle East and South Central Asia who face daily persecution, hardship, violence, instability and even death.

In a letter last Friday, Senator Webb mentioned that he had written you and requested a hearing on this legislation. I write to echo that request — and urge a hearing before the August recess to allow for floor consideration before a lame duck session after the election.

The Honorable John Kerry
July 23, 2012
Page 2

If I can provide you any additional information, or recommend potential witnesses, please do not hesitate to contact me or my foreign policy director Elyse Anderson at 202-225-5136 or elyse.anderson@mail.house.gov.

Also, for your reference, I have enclosed my recent correspondence on this legislation with Senator Webb. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,

Frank R. Wolf
Member of Congress

Cc: Senator Richard Lugar, Ranking Member, Senate Foreign Relations Committee
FRW:ea

GRATEFUL FOR YOUR HELP

Thank you

FRANK R. WOLF
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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

July 11, 2012

The Honorable James Webb
248 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

Dear Jim:

As you know, last summer the House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed bipartisan legislation (H.R.440) to create a special envoy at the State Department charged with focusing exclusively on the plight of religious minorities in the Middle East and South Central Asia, including Pakistan and Afghanistan. Senators Roy Blunt and Carl Levin introduced companion legislation, S. 1245. But nearly a year later, both this bill and the House-passed legislation are languishing in the Senate.

I introduced the special envoy bill along with Democrat Congresswoman Anna Eshoo, in January 2011 following a Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing during which we heard sobering testimony about the challenges facing religious minorities in Iraq and Egypt in particular. These realities were all the more troubling given the historic roots of the faith communities in those two countries — amazingly many Iraqi Christians today still speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus.

The hearing pre-dated the so-called “Arab Spring.” But arguably, the dramatic changes in the region have only made these communities more vulnerable. As such a special envoy has never been more needed.

I learned several months ago that you had a hold on the legislation, and were blocking it from moving forward. I cannot understand why. More importantly, I would venture that the Coptic Christians, Baha’is, Chaldo-Assyrians, Ahmadis, small remaining Jewish population and countless other religious minorities throughout the Middle East and South Central Asia who face daily persecution, hardship, violence, instability and even death would be hard-pressed to see your objection to this straight-forward, bipartisan legislation.

Will a special envoy guarantee these communities’ survival — and even flourishing — in the lands they have inhabited for centuries? I do not know. But I am certain, that to do nothing is not an option — lest on this administration’s and this Congress’ watch we witness a Middle East emptied of ancient faith communities, foremost among them the beleaguered Christian community.

FRANK R. WOLF
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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

July 18, 2012

The Honorable James Webb
248 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

Dear Jim,

I was deeply disappointed to read your comments Friday in *The Christian Post* regarding the bipartisan special envoy legislation. As you know, this legislation overwhelmingly passed the House last summer. While reasonable people can disagree as to the most effective approach to the undeniable challenges facing religious minorities in the Middle East and South Central Asia, I once again respectfully urge you to lift your hold and allow for a straight up or down vote by your colleagues on this legislation.

Consider the following regional realities:

- **Egypt:** The roughly 8 million Coptic Christians live in fear especially with the ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood and various Islamists elements. Witness and media reports indicate a dramatic increase in Coptic asylum cases in the U.S., consistent with the instability and outright violence which has plagued this ancient faith community, especially since the revolution. Some prominent Coptic Christians reportedly went so far as to boycott a meeting with Secretary Clinton during her recent trip to Egypt to protest perceived U.S. bias toward Islamists over secular and liberal factions, including the Copts.

According to the recently-released annual report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "Implementation of previous court rulings – related to granting official identity documents to Baha'is and changing religious affiliation on identity documents for converts to Christianity – has seen some progress but continues to lag, particularly for Baha'is. In addition, the government has not responded adequately to combat widespread and virulent anti-Semitism in the government-controlled media."

- **Iraq:** The once vibrant Christian community has been halved from 2003 to the present day. Thousands have fled the country, with many presently living in ghettos in neighboring countries, in the face of violence — violence which for years the State Department failed to recognize as targeted in nature, despite the disproportionate representation of Iraqi Christians and other minorities among the refugee population.

USCIRF also found in its annual report that, "Large percentages of the country's smallest religious minorities – which include Chaldo-Assyrian and other Christians, Sabean

Mandaeans, and Yazidis – have fled the country in recent years, threatening these ancient communities' very existence in Iraq.”

- **Iran:** Clearly the regime's oppression knows no bounds as evidenced by the brutal crackdown on the Green Revolution in 2009, but the government is especially hostile to religious minorities. An April 2012 *Voice of America* article on the extended imprisonment of seven Bah' ai leaders reported that after their arrest in 2008 these men and women were, “falsely convicted of espionage and propaganda against the Islamic Republic in August 2010... They are currently serving a prison sentence of twenty years.” The same article continued, “Although all religious minorities are subject to persecution in Iran, Baha'is are regarded as heretics by the Iranian regime, and are particularly targeted and repressed.”

Christians and converts from Islam are among the other groups that face the wrath of the regime. Consider the case of evangelical pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, a young father of two, currently in prison facing a possible death sentence on charges of apostasy. In fact resolutions have been introduced in both the House and Senate condemning the Iranian government for its treatment of Pastor Youcef.

- **Syria:** While a blood-bath unfolds in this country, and the administration seems unable to muster much more than empty rhetoric, the significant Christian population finds itself especially vulnerable. A June 28 op-ed in the *New York Times* opened with the following: “Earlier this month, reports came from the Syrian city of Qusayr of an ominous warning to the town's Christians: Either join the Sunni-led opposition against Bashar al-Assad or leave. Soon after, thousands of Christians fled the town... As the 15-month conflict rages with no end in sight, Syria's many minorities have come face to face with the emerging threat posed by radical Sunni Islamists. These elements have established themselves as a key factor in Syria's future, backed by immense political and economic support from the Arab world and indifference from the West.”
- **Pakistan:** A compelling July 16 op-ed penned by USCIRF chair Katrina Lantos Swett described in sobering detail the challenges faced by the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan. She wrote, “For more than a quarter century, Pakistan's government has barred the community from calling its own worship centers ‘mosques,’ publicly uttering the traditional Islamic greeting or quoting from the Qur'an... They are restricted from building houses of worship and holding public gatherings. And since they must register as non-Muslims to vote, Ahmadiyya who insist they are Muslims are effectively disenfranchised. Coupled with Pakistan's blasphemy laws which affect every faith community, these laws have helped foster a climate of violence against Ahmadiyya members. The terrible attack on two of their mosques in Lahore in May of 2010, killing nearly 100 people, was but one example.”

Christians in Pakistan are among the groups most impacted by the blasphemy laws. In March 2011, Pakistan's only Christian cabinet member, Shabbaz Bhatti, was gunned down outside of his mother's house for daring to challenge these laws and for being

The Honorable James Webb

July 18, 2012

Page 3

outspoken in his defense of Asia Bibi, the young Christian mother of five, facing a possible death sentence on charges of blasphemy. For months, prior to his assassination, I had urged the State Department, in face of repeated threats on his life and in recognition of his strategic import in the region, to provide Shabbaz with an armored vehicle. Such a vehicle never materialized, leaving Shabbaz vulnerable to the murderous aims of extremist elements in his own country.

The examples above are but a sampling of a devastating trend which has broader geopolitical implications. Religious pluralism is central to any vibrant democracy and religious minorities have historically been a moderating influence in these parts of the world.

And yet, despite the strategic imperative and the moral obligation to act, the State Department presently seems unable or unwilling to address this issue with the urgency it demands.

Your spokesperson's comments in *The Christian Post* story parroted the "concerns" expressed by the State Department in its position paper related to this legislation. I found it particularly interesting that the department, in explaining its view, pointed to a number of positions already in existence that are charged with working on these issues, among them the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom.

I was the author of the legislation which created that post and the International Religious Freedom office which the ambassador heads. At the time, as is their institutional inclination, the State Department was adamantly opposed to the legislation and sought to undermine it at every turn. Since then, successive administrations have marginalized the ambassador's position, none more so than this administration. Congress intended the ambassador to be the principle advisor to the Secretary on these matters, not buried within the department's bureaucracy reporting to the assistant secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that when I first introduced the special envoy legislation, the IRF ambassador post had been vacant for two years, sending a clear message globally that this issue simply was not a priority.

I believe the current IRF ambassador Suzan Johnson Cook, is a good woman who cares about these issues. But her influence in the department is minimal, and foreign governments take note. Earlier this year, in an almost unprecedented move, she was denied a visa by the Chinese government which prompted a front page article in *The Washington Post*. The denial came on the eve of a visit to the U.S. by China's presumptive next president, Xi Jinping.

The paper reported, "Rights advocates working with Cook's office say that she and her staff were told by superiors in the Obama administration to avoid talking publicly about her canceled trip in the days before Xi's visit." The Chinese government's behavior is outrageous — but the administration's handling of the situation is just as troubling. Rather than protest this action at the highest levels, the White House, and by default the State Department, opted for silence. The article continued, "The quiet handling of Cook's visa denial this month revived concerns about

The Honorable James Webb
July 18, 2012
Page 4

Obama's approach to issues of religious freedom in China." The same could be said of religious freedom globally — and no more so than in these highly volatile and transitional regions on which the special envoy would seek to focus.

I found it especially ironic that the State Department's position paper cited its work on Iraqi Christians as evidence that this issue was given appropriate attention. Earlier this month the General Accounting Office (GAO) released a report, "U.S. Assistance to Iraq's Minority Groups in Response to Congressional Directive," which it had conducted at the request of several Members of Congress, including myself, after hearing from representatives of the Iraqi Diaspora community that despite targeted congressional funding intended to assist these religious communities, little tangible proof or impact was being seen on the ground.

Over multiple years, Congress directed the State Department and USAID to dedicate certain funds to help Iraq's minority population. But GAO found that these agencies couldn't prove they spent the funds as Congress intended. GAO reported, "Since 2003, minority groups in Iraq have experienced religiously and ethnically motivated attacks, killings, and forced displacements... GAO found that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) could not demonstrate how the projects that it reported to Congress met the provisions of the 2008 directive..."

I would venture that if you were to meet with members of any of the communities that the department cites as having undertaken "active efforts" on their behalf — you would find a very different and much less generous account of the State Department's actions. This has been my experience and it is what prompted me to introduce the special envoy legislation.

You have a distinguished record of service to this country which I greatly admire, and I am hopeful we can reach some sort of mutually agreeable outcome to this current impasse. If you are unconvinced as to the merit of this approach, than you should vote against the legislation as your conscience dictates. But, I would respectfully urge you not to deny other Senators that same opportunity — especially on a matter of such import.

Best wishes.

Sincerely

Frank R. Wolf
Member of Congress

FRW:ea

Thank you
Best wishes

JIM WEBB

VIRGINIA

COMMITTEE ON
ARMED SERVICES

COMMITTEE ON
FOREIGN RELATIONS

COMMITTEE ON
VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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July 19, 2012

The Honorable Frank Wolf
U.S. House of Representatives
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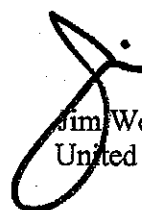
Dear Frank:

Thank you for your letter of yesterday containing further arguments in support of H.R. 440, your bill to establish a special envoy within the State Department to safeguard religious freedom in the Near East and South Central Asia.

As I have expressed to you on several occasions, I appreciate your steadfast and unwavering commitment to human rights generally, and to the specific concerns about freedom of worship embodied in H.R. 440. My reservations on H.R. 440 are based on my belief that it is appropriate for the bill to proceed under regular order, including consideration by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, as opposed to the present recommendation that it be moved under a unanimous consent request without debate or amendment. Regular order with respect to H.R. 440 is particularly important given the State Department's opposition to your legislation and its detailed concerns about redundancy and cost.

With respect to the specific instances of religious persecution cited in your letter, I have conveyed them to the State Department and to Chairman Kerry, asking for renewed attention to this important issue. Additionally, I sent a letter today to Chairman Kerry requesting that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hold a hearing on H.R. 440. As soon as I receive any response from the Committee, I will let you know.

Sincerely,



Jim Webb
United States Senator

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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
July 20, 2012

The Honorable James Webb
248 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

Dear Jim:

Thank you for your letter yesterday regarding H.R. 440. I am grateful for your response and appreciate your kind words.

I do not have any objection to the legislation being considered by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee prior to consideration by the full Senate. I was heartened to hear that you wrote Chairman Kerry and requested that the committee schedule a hearing. That said, the legislative calendar is waning and the situation for the communities who would be served by this special envoy is increasingly grave. In short, time is of the essence.

The House passed this legislation nearly a year ago, and to date the Senate has declined to act. As such I remain concerned that practically speaking, regular order may result in the legislation never seeing the light of day. However, with your overture to Chairman Kerry, perhaps the legislation will advance more swiftly. I intend to write Senators Kerry and Lugar and affirm your request. I appreciate your offer to keep me informed as to any response you receive and I will do the same. If the committee chooses not to act before the August recess I hope I can count on your support for an up or down vote on the Senate floor before the lame duck session.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,

Frank R. Wolf
Member of Congress

FRW:ea