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House of Representatives

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The Honorable James Webb
248 Russell Senate Office Building
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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, Sabeen

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

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

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

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