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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement Ranking Member Stephen F. Lynch

Hearing on “Review of the U.S. Government’s Role in Protecting International Religious Freedom” Subcommittee on National Security

October 11, 2017

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I’d like to thank you for holding this hearing to examine the progress of U.S. Government efforts to promote international religious freedom. I’d also like to thank our witnesses for helping this Subcommittee with its work.

The U.S. framework to address international religious persecution is based on our shared commitment to advancing religious freedom as a fundamental and inalienable human right. It also recognizes that the protection of religious freedom abroad is critical to our national security. As recently stated by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, “where religious freedom is not protected, we know that instability, human rights abuses, and violent extremism have a greater opportunity to take root.” Similarly, the independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom underscores that religious freedom is a “vital element of national security and critical to ensuring a more peaceful, prosperous, and stable world.”

In furtherance of these objectives, the Office of International Religious Freedom at the State Department monitors religious persecution and discrimination worldwide and releases an annual report detailing the status of international freedom in each country. The office also identifies “Countries of Particular Concern” for subsequent designation by the Secretary of State given their severe violations of religious freedom. In announcing the first Annual Report on Religious Freedom issued under the new Administration in August of 2017, Secretary Tillerson highlighted the particular threat posed by the terrorist group known as I.S.I.S. as a result of its genocidal activities targeting Yazidis, Christians, Shia Muslims, and other religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq and Syria. This latest report also notes that ten nations were rightfully designated as “Countries of Particular Concern” in October of 2016 – including North Korea, Iran, China, and Saudi Arabia.

As the State Department continues its work to identify “Countries of Particular Concern” for 2017, the Office of International Religious Freedom should coordinate with the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Congress has statutorily authorized this bipartisan and independent Commission to conduct its own oversight in this area and develop policy recommendations to further inform the State Department’s designation process. Importantly, the Commission has strongly recommended that the State Department add six countries to its list for 2017 due to their perpetration or tolerance of systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.

Chief among these additional countries is Russia. This year in fact marks the first time that the Commission has recommended Russia as a “Country of Particular Concern” in light of its continued

religious freedom violations in the Russian mainland as well as activities in Ukraine and Crimea. According to the Commission's 2017 annual report, Russia presents a unique case in religious persecution as:

“the sole state to have not only continually intensified its repression of religious freedom...but also to have expanded its repressive policies to the territory of a neighboring state, by means of military invasion and occupation.”

The repressive policies implemented by the Russian Government include administrative harassment, arbitrary imprisonment, and extrajudicial killing as well as the enactment of new laws in 2016 that criminalized all non-government-sanctioned private religious speech. Moreover, the Russian Supreme Court recently upheld a Justice Ministry order calling for the liquidation of the Jehovah's Witnesses denomination and prohibiting its operation as a so-called “extremist organization.” Russian security forces also continue to subject minority Muslim groups to fabricated terrorism charges, kidnappings, and disappearances. I strongly believe that the State Department should accept the Commission's recommendation and add Russia to the designation list.

Reports of religious persecution and intolerance in Russia are not at all surprising in light of the impunity with which the Russian Government continues to conduct itself on the world stage. In January of 2017, our nation's Intelligence Community issued an unclassified and unprecedented “high-confidence” assessment that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign aimed at the 2016 U.S. presidential election. This malicious campaign included cyber breaches and other covert intelligence operations as well as nefarious efforts undertaken by Russian government agencies, state-sanctioned media, and even paid social media users to spread Russian-desired messaging. To date, our Committee has not held a hearing to examine an intelligence community-wide assessment that Russia attempted to undermine our national security and compromise the very foundation of our democratic process.

Mr. Chairman, I look forward to discussing these and other issues with today's witnesses.

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