

STATEMENT BY SARAH SEWALL

Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights
House Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security
September 18, 2014

Chairman Chaffetz, Ranking Member Tierney, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today and to provide details on how the Obama Administration is promoting religious freedom worldwide.

Today's hearing could not come at a more appropriate time. In too many corners of the globe, religion is perverted by cynical forces as a tool of subjugation and to justify violence. Differences among religions are exploited to expand power and to advance parochial political agendas. There is no greater example of this terrifying reality than the metastasizing growth of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist group in Iraq and Syria.

Countering violent extremism is a top priority for the Bureau of Counterterrorism, and is a policy priority that cuts across many of the bureaus I lead as Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, and the basic rights of freedom of expression and thought, conscience, and religion are at the core of this task. Violent extremist groups flourish when religious freedom and other rights are repressed and accountability is absent.

The United States government is appalled by the horrendous violence and unmatched violations of religious freedom and other human rights to which we are all witness in Iraq and Syria. ISIL has carved a path of terror and destruction across the face of Northern Iraq in the last few months and Syria for even longer, threatening the very existence of religious minority communities in these countries. The President told the nation last Wednesday that, "*We cannot allow these communities to be driven from their ancient homelands.*" President Obama recognized the alarming nature of the violence by ISIL against the Yezidi community last month, saying that ISIL's forces, "*have called for the systematic destruction of the entire Yezidi people, which would constitute genocide.*" These unique circumstances, combined with the request from the Iraqi government, prompted the necessary action to protect this community and other innocent civilians. On August 7, President Obama authorized a humanitarian effort to help save those trapped on Mount Sinjar, targeted because of their religion and facing almost certain death. This effort was reinforced by a series of targeted airstrikes to

break ISIL's siege of Mount Sinjar and allow civilians trapped there to escape. Again in Amerli, we acted when ISIL had a large number of civilians—this time Shia Turkmen—cut off from escape and facing a humanitarian catastrophe. We air-dropped food and water and provided air support for Iraqi forces that broke ISIL's siege of the city. Going forward, the coalition mission and our actions in Iraq will continue to include protection of vulnerable communities.

Our efforts to combat ISIL and ensure the long-term safety of the religious communities now so threatened in the Middle East are led by the Administration's abiding commitment to advance freedom of religion and protect people at risk due to their faith. Mindful that we can never do enough, yet focused on how we can do more, this Administration is seized by the pursuit of religious freedom as a central foreign policy priority. President Obama has clearly stated that religious freedom is a national security priority. During his remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast this year, he explained why, noting: *"History shows that nations that uphold the rights of their people -- including the freedom of religion -- are ultimately more just and more peaceful and more successful. Nations that do not uphold these rights sow the bitter seeds of instability and violence and extremism. So freedom of religion matters to our national security."*

The President's commitment to this issue has been matched by that of Secretary of State John Kerry. Just last week, in Baghdad, the Secretary urged the new Iraqi government to protect and integrate members of religious minorities, saying that we are committed to working with the new government *"as long as they're committed to diversity...to inclusivity...as long as they're going to protect minorities in Iraq."* Such protection for members of religious and ethnic minorities is indispensable if there is to be lasting peace in the region and must be an integral part of the work of the new Iraqi government under Prime Minister Abadi.

My team, including the International Religious Freedom (IRF) office, has been directly engaged with those most targeted in the violence waged by ISIL. I personally met with representatives of the Yezidi community in the United States a week after ISIL attacked their coreligionists around Mt. Sinjar. Their story was very compelling and deeply moving. Just last week I met with an Iraqi human rights group advocating for religious minorities, again presenting a forceful argument for how long-term stability requires governments that fully respect the rights of their citizens. The State Department is in regular communication with representatives of the Yezidi, Christian, and other religious communities in both Iraq and the United States. They have shared information about ISIL abuses against their community members that has been vital in protecting vulnerable

groups and getting humanitarian assistance to displaced community members. The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), also part of the Under Secretariat for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, has provided \$171.8 million thus far in Fiscal Year 2014 for aid to Iraqis both inside Iraq and in the region through the United Nations and other international and non-government organizations. PRM has been working closely with these organizations to ensure humanitarian relief is reaching those in need.

We note that ISIL's recent assault on northern and western Iraq is an extension of its brutal acts in Syria, where it has conducted a similar campaign of violence and atrocities against the Syrian population. There have been reports of mass killings in Christian and Alawite villages, forced conversion at gunpoint, beheadings, kidnappings, and extreme oppression and abuse of women from all communities, including communities comprised of their fellow Sunni Muslims. In all of our engagements with Syrians, from Secretary Kerry down to the working level, we have consistently called upon all opposition parties to respect the rights of all Syrians, including the right to religious freedom, and to pursue a government and legal framework that protects these rights. Despite the challenges in realizing these goals, we have been heartened that the Syrian Opposition Coalition that we have recognized has repeatedly and publicly denounced any affronts to freedom of religion.

Sadly, religious freedom violations are not limited to the dire situation in Iraq and Syria. In nearly every region of the world, we can see examples of limitations on the exercise of religious freedom in varying degrees. For example, in Pakistan, numerous religious minorities face high levels of violence and discrimination. In Turkey, nearly 20 percent of the population claim to be Alevis, although the government discriminates against them by refusing to officially recognize their houses of worship, and the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate also continues to face restrictions on the exercise of their religious freedom. Pew Forum statistics highlight that over 80% of the world's population claims a religion, while more than 70% of the global population lives in countries in which religious freedom is restricted. These statistics underscore the momentous step the U.S. Congress took in support of religious freedom when it passed the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998. Enacting this landmark law sent a clear and strong signal that the universal right of religious freedom would be a priority in U.S. foreign policy.

We are deeply committed to our obligations under the IRF Act. We also acknowledge the significant contributions of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom towards implementation of the IRF Act. On July

28, Secretary Kerry released the 2013 International Religious Freedom Report, which describes the status of religious freedom in every corner of the globe. At that time, Secretary Kerry also announced his designations for Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs) under the IRF Act. CPC designations are a valuable tool that highlights the most egregious violations. We use CPC designations and the range of other tools of the IRF Act to their full potential to advance international religious freedom. We press governments to stop violations wherever they happen, not only in those countries designated as CPCs.

When it comes to being a voice for the voiceless, there is no stronger example than our persistent call for the protection of the rights of Tibetans to practice their faith freely. As the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, I work to coordinate U.S. government efforts to promote an end to interference by authorities into the religious affairs of the Tibetan people. In this role, I promote the policy of seeking to assist the preservation of the distinct religious heritage of Tibetans. In February of this year, on my second day of office in fact, I met with the Dalai Lama. I plan to travel to India and Nepal in November during which I will meet with Tibetans in exile. President Obama and Secretary Kerry have repeatedly urged China to ease restrictions on religious freedom, including repressive policies in Tibetan areas as well as in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of northwestern China. We have raised concerns about these issues, as well as conditions affecting Christians and adherents of Falun Gong, during last year's U.S.-China Human Rights Dialogue in China, and we continue to document religious freedom violations in our annual reports to Congress. We are sharing our experience with China on the inherent link between effective counterterrorism efforts and open societies that allow dissent and protect the rights of members of minority groups and the rule of law. We not only must expose those who seek to inflict harm on others in the name of terrorist ideology, but we must also work to preserve and improve the lives of the most vulnerable populations and strengthen the relationship between governments and societies that are at risk of radicalization. Religious freedom, as well as the broader spectrum of human rights, remain a priority in our engagement with the Chinese government.

Around the world, in countries emerging from conflict or undergoing great change, we find that fostering respect for religious freedom and a culture of tolerance is central to the creation of a just and lasting peace. In Burma, for example, fostering mutual respect between peoples of different ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds remains one of the toughest and most important challenges in its transition toward democracy. When in Burma in May, the complexity of inter-religious and inter-communal violence was clear when I met separately with

Rohingya and Rakhine leaders in Rangoon, Muslim and Buddhist Internally Displaced Persons in Meiktila, religious and community leaders in Mandalay, and Burmese government officials. We continue to stress to the Burmese government, civil society, interfaith leaders, and other stakeholders the need to promote a pluralistic and tolerant society and the importance of ethnic reconciliation and respect for religious diversity. As we engage, we must work to record and prevent restrictions on religious freedom, but we also must work proactively to help nations in transition resolve questions of national identity in an open and pluralistic way.

In the Central African Republic (CAR), a ceasefire was signed in Brazzaville in July of this year after nearly two years of conflict and violence. This violence had increasingly begun to take on religious undertones, with Christian self-defense militias formed to confront the largely Muslim Seleka rebels, and the killing of civilians along religious lines by both sides. In December 2013, the President addressed the people of CAR in an audio message from Dakar, urging them to reject violence and work towards peace. The United States continues to call for all violence in CAR to stop, and for all parties to abide by and fully implement the terms of the Brazzaville cessation of hostilities agreement. We have supported inter-religious dialogue among U.S. and CAR religious leaders and provided \$7.5 million for grassroots mediation and reconciliation programs. The U.S. has also worked to address urgent humanitarian needs, providing nearly \$145.7 million in humanitarian funding for the crisis in Fiscal Year 2014. We resumed operations at our Embassy in Bangui on September 14, a further sign of our deep commitment to working with the people and leaders of the CAR to stop the violence and advance a democratic political transition.

As these challenging cases illustrate, advancing religious freedom around the globe is a key priority that requires our best efforts to address them. As created by the 1998 IRF Act, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom serves as the principal advisor to the Secretary of State and President on religious freedom. Last week the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a hearing to consider the nomination of our Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom nominee, David Saperstein. He has a long and distinguished career pressing for international religious freedom and we are hoping for his speedy confirmation, so that his efforts and energies will be joined in this important work.

The challenges of religious freedom around the globe far exceed the efforts of one person. They require broad cooperation both inside and outside of government. My colleagues and I work with colleagues throughout the Department, our

missions overseas, and the White House to ensure that our government is working together to advance religious freedom overseas. Tackling religious freedom challenges on a transnational basis requires a range of voices and resources. As we partner closely with other governments to advance our shared goals and address the broad range of problems with unity of purpose, we are encouraged by a promising new intergovernmental Religious Freedom Contact Group, initiated by Canada in a collaborative effort with the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and other like-minded partners. Around the globe, we are working with religious and civil society actors to build relationships among religious communities and administer programs that promote tolerance and empower members of minority groups to better advocate for their interests and rights.

While we can never do enough, we continue to strive to meet our obligations under the IRF Act, in letter and in spirit.

We appreciate Congress' support for international religious freedom and want to work closely with the Legislative Branch on our shared concerns and efforts to advance international religious freedom. I look forward to your questions and to our continued cooperation on this critical issue.

Sarah Sewall



Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights

Term of Appointment: 02/20/2014 to present

Sarah Sewall was sworn in as Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights on February 20, 2014. Prior to this position, Under Secretary Sewall served as a Senior Lecturer in Public Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. In 2012, Dr. Sewall was Minerva Chair at the Naval War College and from 2006 to 2009 she served as the Director of Harvard's Carr Center for Human Rights Policy. She joined the Kennedy School in 2000 as Director of the National Security and Human Rights Program, founding the Mass Atrocity Response Operations Project and the Project on the Means of Intervention.

Previously, Under Secretary Sewall was Associate Director for the Committee on International Security Studies at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences from 1998 to 1999. In 1997, she was a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow at Harvard's Program on Negotiations. Dr. Sewall served as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance at the Department of Defense from 1993 to 1996. From 1987 to 1996, she served as the Senior Foreign Policy Advisor to U.S. Senate Majority Leader George J. Mitchell. Dr. Sewall received an A.B. from Harvard College and a D.Phil. from Oxford University.

Under Secretary Sewall serves concurrently as [Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues](#).