

Press Releases: Ambassador Michael Kozak of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor On the 2016 International Religious Freedom Annual Report

Special Briefing

Ambassador Michael Kozak, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

Via Teleconference

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MS NAUERT: Well, welcome to our call today with Ambassador Mike Kozak of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. Ambassador Kozak will talk about the 2016 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, which Secretary Tillerson released about an hour ago here at the State Department. This call is on-the-record, although it's embargoed until the end of the call.

With that, I'll turn it over to Ambassador Kozak. Thank you, sir.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Thank you, Heather. I thought I might just briefly introduce what the report is, how it's prepared, the purposes it serves, and then be ready to take your question. As Secretary Tillerson mentioned in his remarks, the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 requires the Secretary of State to prepare and transmit to Congress an annual report on international religious freedom describing the status of religious freedom in foreign countries and U.S. actions and policies in support of religious freedom worldwide.

Department of State officers in our embassies and consulates around the world, working with the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom, obtain input from governments, media, NGOs, and others to come up with the content that goes into the report. The purpose of the report is to give Congress and the Executive Branch data to inform judgments about foreign assistance, allocation of diplomatic resources, and other issues, including adjudication of asylum and refugee requests. It is not designed to pass judgment or to rank other countries, but rather to create a fact-based review for use in U.S. Government decision making.

The instructions for preparing the report are the same for all countries. We do not single out countries or religious groups for special treatment. The

record should be based on a country's actions, not on anybody's preconceived notions. The report does not automatically affect policy, but it does provide the factual input to policy decisions that get made during the year.

I would also note that as – that this is the first religious freedom report to be issued under this administration – as the Secretary pointed out in his remarks, the administration is making a strong commitment to advancing religious freedom for all. The President, the Vice President, and the Secretary have all emphasized religious freedom as a priority of the administration. As the Secretary mentioned, Governor Brownback is the highest-ranking person to be nominated for the ambassador-at-large position since its creation in 1998. The U.S. has multiple ways to advance these rights across the world, and congressional actions add to them and last year strengthened those mechanisms. We will continue to lead the international community and partner with allies on ways to advance this issue.

Just a few highlights, and a bit in the good news program. First, that ISIS is being defeated. And since the defeat of ISIS in great chunks of Iraq, it means that religious minorities can return to their liberated towns and villages, and the next challenge is to see that they have security and that their homes are rebuilt. There is also good news in terms of positive U.S. engagement. For example, due to steady engagement, and despite the severe religious freedom problems that the Secretary mentioned, Sudan this year released some people who were imprisoned for their religious beliefs.

Vietnam also, as a consequence of heavy U.S. engagement, improved its religion law. At the same time, in both countries the situations remain of great concern, and so we will stay engaged. But this is the kind of activity that we're looking for, incremental progress in improving religious freedom.

We've also had some positive overtures from the Uzbek Government, such as the president there's offer to amnesty to some religious prisoners. And if implemented, this would address a key religious freedom concern in Uzbekistan. We've also, as the Secretary mentioned, asked the Sudanese Government to engage on religious freedom concerns and to work on an action plan for improving religious freedom in that country.

One note is that there is a growing consensus on the need to act. The genocidal acts of ISIS awakened the international community to the threats facing religious minorities. And in response, the U.S., with our Canadian partners, created a network of more than 20 countries focused on advancing religious freedom. It's called the International Contract [\[1\]](#) Group for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

There is also increasing religious tolerance in some parts of the world. In Marrakech, Islamic scholars got together and issued a declaration promoting equal citizenship for religious minorities. In Tunisia, there was a remarkable display of government support for the annual pilgrimage to the Djerba island synagogue. And in the Persian Gulf, the United Arab Emirates and Oman allowed the construction of churches to host large expatriate communities, as well as Hindu temples and Sikh gurdwaras.

So with that, I will be happy to take your questions about the report. Please do stick to the report itself, which covers calendar year 2016. If you have questions about other issues or other periods of time, our regular spokespeople will be able to take those questions on another occasion. But with that, I'd be happy to take your questions and comments concerning the report.

MS NAUERT: All right. Thank you, Ambassador. First question, please.

OPERATOR: All right. Ladies and gentlemen, again, if you do wish to ask a question, please press * followed by the 1. You'll hear a tone indicating that you've been placed in queue, and you may remove yourself from queue at any time by pressing the pound key. Once again, for questions please press *1 at this time.

Our first question comes from Matthew Lee with the Associated Press. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi there. Thank you for taking my question. I'm just – I imagine other people are going to have similar questions, so I'll make this one really brief. I'm wondering how the report can – and the Secretary can – square the line, the protection of these groups, referring to the ISIS victims, and others who are targets of violent extremists remains a human rights priority for the Trump administration – how do you square that with the refugee decision? The appendix on refugee admissions to this report mentions that refugee admissions are a vital tool in helping to deal with religious persecution.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Yes, thanks for the question. Look, obviously, one of the purposes of the report is to provide that factual database so that our department and the Department of Homeland Security can use that in evaluating refugee claims from around the world. Every year, unfortunately, there are way, way, way more refugees than any one country can possibly take in. The number for the United States gets set each year through consultations between the President and the Congress. There have always been different protocols for vetting refugees for security and other reasons, and those vary from country to country.

So just in talking with my colleague in the refugee department the other day, we are moving along, processing refugees. And I think a number of them – I don't have an exact number how many are people who are fleeing religious persecution as opposed to other types of persecution, but a significant percentage will be.

I think also you should look at what we are doing in some of these areas. As I mentioned, your – in the areas liberated from ISIS, the preferred option is to allow people to return to their traditional villages and areas. We don't want to uproot communities that have been there for thousands of years and take them elsewhere if we can help provide them with the security and other means that they need to be able to resume their traditional role as valued members of their own societies.

MS NAUERT: Okay, thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Question comes from the line of Michele Kelemen with NPR. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yeah, just to follow up on Matt's question: Do Christians or other minorities sort of go to the front of the line in the refugee program now that you've said that this is a – that protection of these groups is a human rights priority?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Look, you'd have to ask our refugee people exactly how they're prioritizing different groups. It depends on the country. In some places, religious persecution is the primary form of persecution; in others, it's ethnic; sometimes it's a mixed state of the two. And I know PRM, our refugee bureau, does set up priorities for different countries or typologies that they look at, but I'm not the expert on that.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question today comes from the line of Nick Wadhams with Bloomberg. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. I have a similar sort of squaring-the-circle question, which is: How do you sort of square the demand for religious freedom overseas in the report against President Trump's own comments when he was a candidate seeking a Muslim ban, and then registry for Muslims, and then also circuit court decisions on the travel ban, finding that reasonable observers would conclude that the executive order was – its primary purpose was to exclude people on the basis of their religious beliefs? Thanks.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Thank you. Well, first, I would put our record on religious freedom up against pretty much anybody in the world. The U.S. has a long, strong tradition of this. On the executive order, I – not sure I would share the characterizations that you've made, but I'm not the expert on the order. I think you've had plenty of good explanation of what's behind it, how it operates and so on, both from our spokespeople, but also from Homeland Security, the Justice Department, and the White House. So I would just refer you back to them.

MS NAUERT: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from the line of Gardiner Harris with *The New York Times*.

QUESTION: Hi. I noticed that – do you not track religious freedom in the United States? And if so, how would you square, for instance, this spike in attacks on Muslims in the United States that the FBI has cited and many others have cited over the past year? Isn't that precisely this sort of thing that your report would, and should, take note of?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Yes, thank you. As is the case with the Human Rights Report, we do not rate ourselves. I – there was an effort to do so – I'm old enough to remember; it was 30-some years ago. And when we all looked at it,

people started laughing. It was like writing your own performance evaluation or something. You either were way too modest or you looked like you were bragging on yourself. So that – but that does not mean that the U.S. thinks itself exempt from this kind of rating. There are mechanisms in the United Nations, in the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe and so on that do publish this kind of data. There's an excellent, for example, in the OSCE, a tolerance unit. We – the U.S. is actually a pretty good model in that the data that you're citing there comes from FBI reports, and those are all cranked into the OSCE reports at the end of the year. So we actually have, I think, a better record than many of the other member-states in terms of reporting details about performance in our own country.

So, again, we're very much desirous and responsive to being judged on our record, but are not – figure we should not be the judge and jury when it's – when it comes to ourselves but let others take on that role.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Thanks. Our next question comes from the line of Evan Wilt, representing *WORLD Magazine*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for taking my question. My – first part of my question is that from what I understand is that this report is supposed to come out May 1st each year, so my question for you is why was this delayed until August 15th?

And the second part is that from what I understand, you, sir, recommended that Russia should be designated the country of particular concern, and I don't think this report had Russia as a country of particular concern, so I was wondering why they were omitted. Thank you.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Okay, thank you. On the date of the report, I think we're – this – pretty much the same place we were last year. It came out in mid-August last year as well. This is – when you're trying to get high-level people involved in the rollout and so on, trying to get all the stars to align sometimes takes a little bit of time, and in any event, we're very pleased that the Secretary did take the time and was able to do it personally this morning.

On countries of particular concern, let me be clear that this report does not designate any countries as countries of particular concern. A separate part of the International Religious Freedom Act requires the Secretary and the President to make those designations 30 days after the issuance – or not 30 days, 90 days after the issuance of the report, so the ones you see designated were the ones that were designated last year. So the connection between the two is simply that this report does provide the fact base that will inform those judgments by the Secretary when the time comes to issue the CPC report.

The role of the USCIRF, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, in this is that it is a – again, another separate entity established by the IRF Act, and it's designed to be an advisory body to the Executive

Branch. So you've got some really sharp, high-powered people on the IRF – USCIRF commission. In previous incarnations, I've worked very closely with them. They come up with lots of good advice, but their advice isn't binding on the Executive. The Secretary will make his own decisions taking into account their recommendations, his own staff recommendations, and first and foremost the information that – the facts that are contained in the report.

MS NAUERT: Okay, thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Next we'll go to the line of Lisa Schwartz with *The Wall Street Journal*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks for doing this. The judge – or the assessment of genocide that the Secretary mentioned, citing the report, does that imply any sort of legal ramifications or actions separate from a similar determination that the Obama administration made?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Yes, thank you. I'll jump back to one of my old jobs to try to give you the best answer I can, although I'm not currently with the Legal Adviser's Office. The obligation with respect to genocide is that countries that have signed on to the convention are supposed to criminalize it, which the U.S. has; and then second, if you find someone who has committed genocide within your territory or jurisdiction, you either have to prosecute them or extradite them to another country that can prosecute them. So that's the essential legal obligation with respect to genocide, and it hasn't changed whether it's this administration or the previous administration. And it – now, there's the moral side of it too, which is what are you going to do to try to put a stop to genocide, and I think on that we, the U.S., have a good record in that we're in the process of defeating the perpetrators of the genocide pretty soundly in Iraq and elsewhere. So those are the – there's first the legal obligation, which is extradite or prosecute, and then the moral obligation is to try to stop it, and I think the administration has very good news on that front in terms of pushing ISIS back into the hole it crawled out of.

MS NAUERT: Okay, thank you. Next question.

OPERATOR: All right, thank you. Our next question comes from the line of David Clark with the AFP. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, good afternoon – good morning, thanks for taking the call. Secretary Tillerson has been very clear when he's been outlining his policy review that the goal of America First is to prioritize prosperity and the security of the American people. Can you explain why it's so important to protect religious freedom in foreign countries and how this aids in the prosperity and the security of Americans at home? Thank you.

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Yes, thank you. Good morning. I think it's true of religious freedom, particularly also of human rights abuse generally that when we see serious abuses of people's basic rights, that correlates very often and very closely with instability and unrest and warfare and murder around the world. And so if you can take care of these problems or make

improvements, give people hope that they can practice their own faiths without interruption, you reduce the chances of civil wars breaking out and terrorist recruitment and that kind of thing.

So it's – yes, we have a very strong national interest in not having those things happen and get ourselves caught up in it, and if we can, through diplomacy and through programming and other work that we do, try to minimize the – or reduce the fertile field for those kinds of things growing up, we've done something that does help protect the American people.

MS NAUERT: Thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Next question today comes from the line of Yeganeh Torbati with Reuters. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing this. In the section on Saudi Arabia, it notes that Saudi Arabia often uses counterterrorism laws to target both atheists and Shia Muslims, and I'm just wondering, given the cooperation between the United States and Saudi Arabia when it comes to counterterrorism, particularly the new initiatives that were announced when President Trump visited in May, is there any effort or are there any restrictions that the United States places on its support when it comes to Saudi Arabia to make sure that it's not used to target religious minorities?

AMBASSADOR KOZAK: Yes. Well, I think in Saudi, that it – we had the problem of the excessive or overbroad use of antiterrorism laws. That's true of quite a number of countries. And then also, the Saudi Government simply does not recognize the right of non-Muslims to practice their religion in public and imposes criminal penalties for doing so. So that is why Saudi has been listed in the past as a country of particular concern, which does cut off assistance unless there is a waiver, and there have routinely been waivers for that country because of the things that we do in common.

Now, that said, we – with respect to our security assistance everywhere in the world, there are efforts made to be sure that none of it goes to units that would engage in repression of people. We have – one of the things our bureau does, for example, is anytime we're training or equipping foreign security forces, whether it's police or military, we have to vet the units that are being trained or equipped to see if they have any record of committing gross violations of human rights. And if they have, they don't get that.

So yes, the problems exist in Saudi Arabia. We've been working to try to get the government to improve its record and have made some progress on some parts of it – not enough to get them off the CPC list as – at least as of last year. And at the same time, we applied it to them but also to all other countries. We do our darndest to try to be sure that we're not putting U.S. training and weaponry to use in service of human rights or religious freedom violations.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Thank you, everyone. That's all we have time for right now. Thanks for joining us and thank you to Ambassador Kozak for answering the

questions. The embargo on this call has now been lifted. Hope you have a great day and we look forward to seeing you later.

[\[1\]](#) Contact

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