



American Islamic Congress



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Chairman John Kerry
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
446 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Ranking Member Richard Lugar
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
446 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Jim Webb
248 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators,

As an informal group of organizations and individuals who are scholars, religious leaders, human rights advocates and practitioners, we are writing to express the importance of the Senate Bill 1245, which creates a Special Envoy for religious minorities to South Central Asia and the Near East at the United States Department of State.

Senators Roy Blunt and Carl Levin introduced this bipartisan bill on June 22, 2011, and it has been referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations. Its companion bill, H.R. 440, sponsored by Rep. Frank Wolf with Rep. Anna Eshoo, passed with overwhelming bipartisan support in the House of Representatives (402-20) over a year ago and was subsequently referred to the Senate for consideration. However, there has been no movement on S.1245 out of committee for a vote in the Senate or on H.R. 440. Meanwhile the situation for religious minorities in these regions continues to deteriorate.

The creation of the Special Envoy will add strategic support to religious minorities in South Central Asia and the Near East. Serving as a conduit of information on the current status of religious minorities within these regions, the Special Envoy will coordinate between the relevant federal agencies, congress and the Executive Branch and seek policy options that will ensure their continued survival in the lands they have inhabited for centuries. The Special Envoy is a practical tool for real-time and reliable information, testimony, measurement and evaluation within the framework and mandates outlined by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

The Special Envoy would be a dedicated resource to monitor countries of particular concern (CPC) and those on the watch list outlined in the USCIRF report and the U.S. State Department's annual religious freedom report. This is a unique opportunity for an international religious freedom practitioner to bridge the gap between what is happening on the ground and policymakers in Washington and it comes at a time of historic change in the Middle East.

The Special Envoy would also act as a representative of the U.S abroad., advocating for minority religious communities such as Baha'i, Christians, Jews, minority Muslims and others. These communities, as outlined by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life's Global Restrictions on Religion report, face increasing threats, persecution and violence for their religious beliefs. The creation of the Special Envoy is essential for curtailing the increasing restrictions on religion in South Central Asia and the Near East.

Senate Bill 1245 is currently stalled in the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. We respectfully urge you to remove the hold and release the bill to the Senate floor for a vote.

Respectfully,

ORGANIZATIONS

AMERICAN ISLAMIC CONGRESS

CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY WORLDWIDE, UNITED KINGDOM

HUMAN RIGHTS LAW FOUNDATION

INSTITUTE FOR GILGIT BALTISTAN STUDIES

INTERNATIONAL COALITION FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

INTERNATIONAL INSITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

JUBILEE CAMPAIGN

OPEN DOORS

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