



Briefing on the Release of the 2015 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom (IRF)

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AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN: I want to thank Deputy Secretary Blinken for his leadership and for his deep and abiding commitment to religious freedom. And I want to acknowledge as well Tom Malinowski, who as assistant secretary of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor so ably coordinates all the human rights efforts at the State Department. Thank you all as well for coming today for the release of the 2015 International Religious Freedom Report, an event that provides us each year with an important opportunity to highlight this key issue that continues to be a top priority for the Administration – that of international religious freedom.

Per our congressional mandate, we document the status of the universal human right to religious freedom in 199 countries around the world. Through the immense efforts of countless State Department officials in Washington, at our embassies and consulates across the globe, I can affirm once again that the 2015 report maintains the high standards of objectiveness and accuracy for which our report is known, making it an important source of information for nongovernmental organizations, civil society, and governments alike.

I would like to begin by speaking about one country we are not charged for reporting on: the United States. Religious freedom was essential to the founding of America, as the Secretary said. We have built a system that allows members of the religious majority, members of religious minorities, and non-believers alike to live, to worship, to practice and express their beliefs freely. Religious freedom has always been at the center of American values and at the center of our success as a nation, just as it is a vital component of our foreign policy today.

I am glad to report to you that in the year and a half since my swearing-in, we have continued to make headway on the priorities I enumerated during my confirmation hearing and my swearing-in remarks. The clear commitment of our government and this department to religious freedom is affirmed by the priority it has given to this issue, as described by Deputy Secretary Blinken. And since my appointment, we have been given significant increases in staff and resources, allowing us to expand our country monitoring work, to increase our visits to country where our religious freedom advocacy can make a constructive difference, and to increase our already robust programmatic work internationally.

In many countries, religious freedom flourishes. According to the 2014 annual Pew study on global religious freedom trends, 76 percent of the world's countries provide the basic conditions for people to freely practice their religion or beliefs.

Our work, however, focuses on those 24 percent of the countries with serious restrictions on religious freedom, whether caused by government policies or the hostile acts of individuals, organizations, or societal groups. These are countries in which 74 percent of the world's population lives. In countries where religious minorities have long contributed to their national societies in relative comity for decades, centuries, even millennia, we continue to witness violent upheavals, some of historic proportions, in which entire communities are in danger of being driven

out of their homelands based solely on their religious or ethnic identities. In the pages of this report, we're able to put a human face on this incredibly important issue that touches so many lives and remains a value of such concern in the hearts of the American people.

While the report touches on all manner of restrictions to religious freedom, I want to highlight this year the chilling, sometimes deadly effect of blasphemy and apostasy laws in many places of the world, as well as laws that purport to protect religious sentiments from defamation. Roughly a quarter of the world's countries have blasphemy laws, and more than one in 10 have laws or policies penalizing apostasy, and the existence of these laws has been used by governments in too many cases to intimidate, repress religious minorities, and governments have too often failed to take appropriate steps to prevent societal violence sparked by accusations of blasphemy and apostasy. And when these claims turn out to be blatantly false accusations made to pursue other agendas, governments will often fail to act to hold perpetrators accountable. These government failures weaken trust in the rule of law, creating an atmosphere of impunity for those who would resort to violence or make false claims of blasphemy.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom states that blasphemy laws inappropriately position governments as arbiters of truth or religious rightness as they empower officials to enforce particular religious views against individuals, minorities, and dissenters. In contexts where an authoritarian government supports an established religious creed, blasphemy accusations are frequently used to silence critics or democratic rivals under the guise of enforcing religious piety. And former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Heiner Bielefeldt noted in his December 2015 report to the UN Human Rights Council, "Abundant experience in a number of countries demonstrates that blasphemy laws do not contribute to a climate of religious openness, tolerance, non-discrimination and respect. To the contrary, they often fuel stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination and incitement to violence. ... Such laws have a stifling impact on the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief, and healthy dialogue and debate about religion" is stifled.

There are unfortunately many tragic stories in our report that illustrate the harm posed by blasphemy laws, apostasy laws, laws that purport to protect religion. I'll mention just a few to dramatize that no one region, country, or religion is immune to the pernicious effects of such legislation. Iran continues to execute prisoners of conscience for their beliefs. The government executed at least 20 individuals on charge – on charges of moharebeh, or enmity against God, in 2015. According to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, at least 250 members of minority religious groups remain imprisoned, including Sunnis, Bahais, Christian converts, Sufis, Yarsanis, and Zoroastrians.

Shia religious leaders who did not support government policies reportedly continued to face intimidation and arrest, and the government continued to arrest Bahais and regulated religious practices of Christians closely to enforce a prohibition on proselytizing.

Saudi Arabia penalizes blasphemy with lengthy prison sentences and lashings, often after detention without trial or so-called protective custody, according to legal experts. In January, authorities publicly lashed Raif Badawi 50 times in accordance with the sentence from his 2013 conviction, calling for a thousand lashes for violating Islamic values, violating Sharia, committing blasphemy, mocking religious symbols on the internet. And in November, media and local sources reported that the General Court to Abha had sentenced Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh to death for apostasy after initially being charged for blasphemy and spreading atheism.

In Nigeria in 2015, the Sharia court in Kano sentenced nine members of a Muslim sect to death for blasphemy for allegedly elevating the group's founder above the Prophet Muhammad.

In Indonesia, local governments selectively enforced blasphemy laws that undermined the exercise

of religious freedom. For example, in June 2015, a court in Banda Aceh convicted four members of the GAFATAR movement of blasphemy and sentenced them to prison terms ranging from three to four years for spreading teachings contrary to Islam.

In Pakistan, the government continued to enforce blasphemy laws, for which a punishment can be death sentence, for a range of charges including defiling the Prophet Muhammad. Christians as well as Muslims were arrested on charges of blasphemy in the last year. In 2016 after a Hindu convert to Islam was accused of blasphemy, two Hindu youths were shot and one died from his wounds in ensuing communal violence. We remain deeply concerned also over authorities targeting and harassment of Ahmadi Muslims for blasphemy, violations of anti-Ahmadi laws, and other crimes.

In Germany, blasphemy laws were used to punish those who defamed religion. This past February, an avowed atheist was fined in the city of Muenster for having bumper stickers that challenged the beliefs of Catholics.

And of course, as we heard, non-state actors like ISIL inflict punishment of their own – for their own interpretation of blasphemy. In May, seven-year-old Muaz Hassan was playing soccer with his friends in Raqqa, Syria. During the game, he said a bad word out of his frustration. He was detained by Daesh for blasphemy or cursing God. In a matter of days, he was marched out into a public square and murdered by a firing squad in front of a crowd of hundreds, including his parents.

Chilling stories like this show how terrorist organizations have committed, by far, some of the most egregious abuses when claiming individuals have engaged in apostasy, blasphemy, or cursing God, including those involving public crucifixions and beheading of men, women, and children.

And alarmingly, the brave lawyers and human rights defenders who stand up on behalf of those accused of blasphemies themselves too often become targets. We saw this in Mauritania when the prominent human rights activist Aminetou Mint El Moctar, who defended blogger Mohammad Cheikh Ould Mohammad, herself became the target of death threats. And similarly, Waleed Abu al-Khair was convicted of charges related to his work as a human rights lawyer in Saudi Arabia, including the defense of his brother-in-law, the aforementioned Raif Badawi, on charges of blasphemy.

So what are we doing? In the pages of our annual report, we lift up these examples and others to highlight the need for the elimination of laws like these that, when enforced, severely restrict the exercise of religious freedom. We believe that shining light on these problems is the best way to address them, and our report does just that. But beyond reporting conditions on the ground, leaders at the highest levels of our government regularly speak out against and engage with government leaders regarding the broad panoply of religious freedom violations and abuses, including blasphemy and apostasy laws.

We work with people in power to change laws and practices, and in public we use social media, speeches, and op-eds to advocate fervently for these issues about which we care so deeply. In my own travels to now more than 25 countries, I've specifically raised our concerns about blasphemy and apostasy laws as well as legislation dealing with defamation of religion in countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, Sudan, Burma, Iraq, Nigeria. I strongly affirm the U.S. Government's opposition to blasphemy laws, urging that they be eliminated or, as a start, not enforced.

I have raised as well in each of these countries and others individual cases of prisoners of conscience who suffer in jail for peacefully exercising their right to live in accordance with their beliefs. We also partner with communities and local NGOs around the world to build programming that addresses intolerance and promotes promotion. Since the creation of this office in 1998, the Department of State has devoted tens of millions of dollars to foreign assistance programs that

promote religious freedom.

One example is our programming based on UN Human Rights Council 16/18, which focused on combating intolerance, negative stereotyping, discrimination, incitement to violence, so-called defamation of religion through non-penal ways, except for enforcement of criminal statutes involving actions on hate crimes beyond just speech.

Drawing on experts from the departments of State, Justice, and Homeland Security, we work with foreign law enforcement officials to promote best practices in police training, criminal prosecution, community engagement in their societies, and encourage legislative reforms to achieve those goals.

And across the globe, encouraging efforts of governmental and nongovernmental responses at addressing the negative impact of such laws is seen. Thus, in 2015, Iceland abandoned its 75-year-old blasphemy law. We hope that will be a model for other nations to emulate. And in June, an international contact group on religious freedom of more than 25 likeminded governments, encompassing countries from six continents with majority populations of varied faith groups – all seeking to advance freedom of religion, of belief across the globe – met at the Department of State in Washington.

We are taking collective action to address the most urgent religious freedom challenges. In a similar vein as you heard, just two weeks ago we convened a major international meeting coordinated by Knox Thames, our special envoy for religious minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia, that brought together more than 30 countries and international agencies to discuss how to meet the needs of religious and ethnic minorities victimized by Daesh.

Then there are the inspiring nongovernmental efforts, and here I'll address not only blasphemy and apostasy but broader religious freedom issues. In Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, groups, including many Muslim youth, formed human rings around synagogues to protect them after anti-Semitic attacks. And just recently in France, after the brutal beheading of a priest in Rouen, local Muslims showed their solidarity with the grieving Catholic community, attending mass with their fellow countrymen.

In May 2015, Muslim leaders in Lahore, Pakistan courageously stepped forward, placing themselves between a mob and neighbors accused of blasphemy to successfully protect their fellow Pakistanis who were Christians.

In a crowded courtroom in Sudan in August 2015, I was present to watch the release of two of the country's most prominent religious prisoners of conscience – although, sadly, after they were freed and left the country, charges were reapplied again.

When al-Shabaab militants attacked a bus in Kenya in December 2015, reportedly with the intention of killing Christians, a group of Kenyan Muslims refused to be separated from their fellow Christian travelers, told the militants to kill them or leave them all alone. And although two passengers were killed, the attackers eventually relented and withdrew.

In January 2016, a group of more than 300 Islamic scholars, religious and interfaith leaders, gathered in Marrakesh, where Muslim scholars and intellectuals would issue a declaration embodying common themes for protecting religious minorities in Muslim-majority countries. And Islamic religious leaders, NGOs, and political leaders are – in a number of countries are following up with plans to build on efforts of the declaration.

The pope's visit to the Central African Republic helped to significantly ease tensions between religious communities; however, those tensions are again on the rise beginning in June after a

Muslim motorcycle taxi driver was stabbed to death and six police officers were taken hostage, both in Muslim PK5 neighborhood. I will be traveling there next month.

In closing, the protection and promotion of religious freedom remains a key foreign policy priority for the United States. As daunting as the many challenges are that we face across the globe, we will not be deterred in the work that we do. We will continue to partner with other nations, with committed NGOs, and with courageous individuals and communities on the ground across the world to advance these core freedoms. This report is at once vivid testimony for the many whose plight might otherwise receive scant attention and a document – a blueprint – of what must be addressed to bring us closer to the day when religious freedom will thrive for all. Towards that end, we rededicate ourselves anew today.

MS TRUDEAU: Thank you, Ambassador. Thank you all for coming. While we're familiar with many of you, I would ask that you identify yourself by name and by outlet. First we'll go to Reuters.

QUESTION: Arshad Mohammed with Reuters. In the executive summary and in your own opening remarks, you have emphasized the prevalence of anti-blasphemy laws and the ways in which particularly Islamic societies can use them to punish people and discourage religious freedom or inhibit it, and also how they can lead to mob violence against people. So, three things. One, is it the case – I mean, you emphasized that by making it the first part of your summary – is it the case that there is more violence, more prosecutions in the Islamic world related to blasphemy and other such laws last year? Is this clearly a trend that's increasing, or is it largely the same as it's been in years past?

Second, I think you mentioned that Iceland had abandoned an anti-blasphemy law. Are there significant numbers of non-Muslim-majority countries that have anti-blasphemy laws, or is this largely a problem confined to the Muslim majority world?

And then, finally, what is your – you spoke of religious freedom in the United States. What is your assessment of Donald Trump's call for the banning of all Muslims temporarily from entering the United States? How does that square with the traditions of religious freedom in this country?

AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN: Hm. Okay, first, with the blasphemy laws, you can go online at the Pew reports to see a list. They issued a report recently and you can see a list of every country in the world that comprise that quarter of the countries that have blasphemy laws, and there are still five states in the United States that have blasphemy laws on the books. It is more – first, your first question – it is about the same as it has been. It is not increasing. Every year we lift up one trend in this – in the area of religious freedom to try and have people – to try to ensure that people don't overlook some of the most serious ongoing abuses that take place. So this was not lifted up as, for example, last year when we focused on non-state actors as a new development, but as a development that is – as a factor that is too often overlooked. And it is in that sense that we have brought this up.

It probably is more prevalent that – in the Muslim world that the laws that exist are implemented, but it does happen. I cited Germany as an example. They are on the books, and it does happen in other countries as well. So in Burma, for example, which has blasphemy laws on the books, we had an incident not too long ago in which that was a factor. So we do have examples in other countries that are not Muslim countries as well.

In terms of Donald Trump, that's obviously beyond the purview of this. The Administration has spoken clearly about the concerns, putting aside from who they emanate from, about the concerns of singling out any group for different treatment because of their religious identity or their religious – their peaceful religious practices here. That would apply in the United States as it would elsewhere.

Those are universal rights; they're enshrined in our constitution. Based on the model of our constitution, it's ban on the religious test for office, it's no establishment of religion, it's promise of free exercise. America gave to the world this concept embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that no citizen's rights, as a citizen – their political or human rights as a citizen – should ever be impaired, ever be different because of their religious identity, their religious practices, their religious beliefs. It's one of America's great gifts to the world. It animates our foreign policy work in this area.

QUESTION: Do remarks like his make it harder for you to do your job encouraging religious freedom elsewhere?

AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN: I truly think that countries across the globe – and I travel now to many countries of very different religious majority populations – they see clearly the basic constitutional, institutional constraints against violations of religious freedom in the United States, and I think believe deeply in America's promise – clearly, and believe deeply in America's promise to be a model about treating all people equally without regard to religion. So I think that that is clear and that is not tarnished by the statements here. No matter who is elected, the institutions of the United States, constitutional restraints, will ensure that we continue along the line we have for the last 200 years.

MS TRUDEAU: Carol.

QUESTION: Just following up a little bit on what Arshad was asking – I'm Carol Morello with The Washington Post. Are you expecting to be accused of hypocrisy by governments for bringing up – for pointing the finger this year, given the statements that have been made by Donald Trump? And also a few months ago, when the Secretary declared that Daesh had committed genocide, can you point to a single thing that has changed or anything that designation has accomplished?

AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN: So let me deal with the first question. The United States – in terms of the statements that are made, the policies of the United States, the law in the United States, the constitutional structure of the United States in terms of its promise of religious freedom, remains intact. It doesn't mean that we don't have problems internally within the United States. There are debates over religious freedom. Those are serious debates. How do we balance out fundamental First Amendment promises of religious freedom with other core constitutional civil rights protections that other groups have? We have a major debate in America about that. People can choose up sides from abroad. People can be critical of the way that we may handle some of those things. We have debates over questions – do corporations have religious freedom?

I pray for the day that the kind of debates, the kind of concerns that we are addressing in the global community are debates about how we balance out robustly protected religious freedom rights and other civil rights, whether corporations have religious freedom. We are dealing with repressed communities, brutalized communities subject to societal violence, subject to religious impression; people who are in jail, tortured, killed, butchered, raped, enslaved, forced to marry, forced to convert in countries across the globe. So I'd really hope that the kind of problems we have in America become the kind of problems that other countries have to deal with. But right now I'm proud of the fact that America has taken its historic commitment to religious freedom and help mobilize the international community to address it more significantly and robustly.

Here.

QUESTION: Genocide --

AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN: You asked about the genocide, I think. First, I am extremely proud

of the genocide determination that was made. The Secretary insisted that we very carefully document and take the time to do it right, gather the evidence that would allow for his ability to make a fact-based determination in his best view as to whether or not genocide had happened. From the moment he did that, he called us to actually act to implement.

So first, I would point out that regardless of whether he had made that determination, from the beginning we acted as though that were the challenge we faced. And with the Yezidis on Mount Sinjar, we did by robustly putting together the coalition of now it's over 65 countries who militarily are assisting to defeat Daesh. We took a significant step to prevent genocide explicitly. That was what the President said. We have a potential genocide, we have to stop it; and we moved to do that. And we have robustly helped support all of the displaced populations, refugee populations, and have led the world in mobilizing resources, including at the recent pledging conference here that really – that initiated – that resulted in over \$2 billion of new commitments to help these populations.

But since that time, we've begun to deal with the question – people either – they have to choose: do they want to go as refugees, to migrate someplace else; do they hope to return home? We have over a million people in the Kurdistan region who are waiting in Iraq, many of them wanting to return home, and we have been active in responding to the genocide determination to create conditions that would allow them to return home. Knox has been leading the efforts on behalf of protection of cultural heritage. We've been now beginning to arm and train some of the local defense forces of the different minority groups and – who are going to be integrated with the Peshmerga and the government of – Iraqi military forces. We have been making plans in terms of moving into the Nineveh plain. What kind of transitional justice modalities need to happen when people return home to former neighbors or others who've taken over homes or businesses to prevent it from descending into sectarian violence? What kind of way are we going to be rebuilding the infrastructure so utilities are working so that people have security that they can depend on there so that there will be schools and medical care for their kids?

There is planning going on all the time in this area, so all of that was on the foundation of that genocide determination at the instruction of the Secretary. And we've been very proud to have played a role in helping to bring that about in the conference that we held just two weeks ago in bringing together 30 countries across the globe to address these questions was also an explicit outcome of the genocide determination.

MS TRUDEAU: Said, name and outlet.

QUESTION: Yes, my name is Said Arikat.

AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN: Hi.

QUESTION: I write for Al Quds daily newspaper. It's a Palestinian newspaper in the occupied East Jerusalem. And my question to you, sir – if you could share with us some of the practical steps that you are taking to mitigate or reverse the perils faced by Christian Arabs in three places – in Iraq, which is largely as a result of the U.S. war on Iraq, 2003, and occupation and the – its consequences; in Syria as a result of attacks by overwhelmingly fundamentalist groups that are aided by the U.S. or its allies; and Palestinian and Christian as continued and unending occupation seems to go on forever, which you unbridledly support.

AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN: Well, I already have answered the question in Iraq in terms, Said, in terms of the robust effort we've made to create conditions to protect religious minorities. I would point out that if you look at those who – 127,000 refugees who have come to the United States from Iraq in the last decade, they had a – 40 percent of them are minorities and mostly Christians

who have come to the United States. But all of our efforts to allow people to return home – to do it safely, to ensure their security, will be protected – benefits all minorities, but it certainly benefits the Christian minorities as well. We worked very closely with the diaspora communities here to gather what information we can, to supplement what we have from our own diplomatic sources and military sources and intelligence sources about what the needs of these communities are and to be responsive to them. In addition, we remain the largest donor in terms of supporting the displaced populations, including the Christian populations in Iraq.

In Syria, many of the areas that the minorities were most densely concentrated on were not areas that were in the early stages of the civil war most protected, as you know. And now more and more we're seeing those areas obviously being affected as well. I would point out that when up in the Hasakah area, when the Syrian Christian communities were attacked, again, our intervention, military intervention from the air, together in support of the Syrian militias and the Kurdish militias, were indispensable in terms of allowing those forces to push Daesh out of the areas that they had taken. So again, we're moving militarily and we're trying to plan ahead for that time when people will have the option to return home.

Many of the lessons we're learning out of our work in Iraq in this area are fully applicable to Syria as well. So the coalition of the groups that we're – been dealing with, the conference that was held at the UN Security Council, at the coordination of the prime – former foreign minister of France and then in Paris last summer, and then there'll be another building on our conference – a gathering of these same countries, even a larger number of them, in Spain hopefully by – before the end of the year, are all aimed at evoking commitments from different countries what they're going to do to allow minorities to return safely to their areas.

And in terms of the Palestinian Christian community, on my trip to Israel and Palestine, I met with a broad range of all religious minorities there, but almost every one of the major religious groups – the patriarchs of many of the groups of the grassroots leaders – particularly was focused on some of the challenges evangelical Christian communities faced there because they're not recognized under the Ottoman traditional construct of religious groups that are recognized by Israel, and so their status to marry people and their status to divorce people of the pastors of those churches, their ability to travel to minister to their people is somewhat constricted, and we're working very hard to try and ease some of those restrictions.

In terms of the broader issues, the political efforts of the United States to reach some kind of a peace accord remains indispensable in terms of fully allowing us – allowing the rights of all involved to be able to thrive and be protected, and we continue on that front as well.

MS TRUDEAU: Sir, right behind you.

QUESTION: Abdelrahman Youssef from Egypt. My question is: Does the USA consider the (inaudible) in arrests against the individual Islamist or youth of Muslim Brotherhood of helping to advance religious freedom in Egypt?

AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN: The president – President al-Sisi has done a number of things regarding religious freedom, and let me just give a broader context on the Egypt situation. The Copts in Egypt still face significant challenges. However, President al-Sisi has made a very public – taken a very public position that the Copt community needs to be protected. He's gone twice to Christmas mass. He's talked openly. We – whether they were talking about Muslim Egyptians or Christian Egyptians, these are all Egyptians. And he's helped to rebuild many of the churches that were destroyed in the violence of a couple of years ago. So while Copts still face enormous challenges, particularly in the more rural areas, I hear there's been a change there.

He's also called on Muslim leaders to be more assertive and robust about putting forward a more traditional view of Islam, as he understands it, here to contest the extremist interpretations that suggest that violence is justified by the Islamic tradition – violence against innocent people is justified based on their difference of religious views on these issues. And that has led to some very important changes we've seen, in textbooks that are being changed in the – to mitigate extremist pro-violent messages in the textbooks. So there have been some improvements of that as well.

We believe whether – whatever entity people belong to, if they are prepared to express their religious life peacefully, they ought to be allowed to do that. And across the world, we have said to rulers that we have the connections and the influence to make a difference; we've said to them we urge you in responding to legitimate security threats not to be overbroad in repressing peaceful expressions of religion that may be unpopular with you because it drives it underground, it diminishes transparency, it fills those people with frustration and anger, it leads groups to give up on believing they can live out their lives in accordance with the laws of the land, and it is simply a strategy that divides society along sectarian lines and religious lines, and undercuts the stability of a society.

The question is whether they are peaceful or whether they are advocating violence in their life. So that would apply as much to the members of the Muslim Brotherhood as it would to any other group.

MS TRUDEAU: So we have time for two more. We'll go to Tejinder and then Michael Lavers.

QUESTION: This is Tejinder Singh from Indian-American Times and a bunch of Indian television stations. I don't have to repeat what is very well put in the executive summary and while going through the rest. I have just two questions. One is: This is a new thing, this – Muslims being attacked in India for the beef ban, cow slaughter, and most of the cases, it is some other kind of meat. And the second one is the NGOs facing what has been going on with their money coming in and if they are not exactly catering to the whimsical directions or directives of the Modi government. So – and if you go through this summary and on India, the word "Gujarat" keeps coming up repeatedly. And now – and that, whatever happened happened during the – when Narendra Modi was the chief minister of Gujarat, and today he's the prime minister of Gujarat and it seems to laymen that Gujarat – that India is being converted into Gujarat, like that I – not one week passes without my inbox seeing something, somewhere Christians being attacked or having the problems in India.

Now, when you talk about all this ISIS and ISIL, these are people who are doing genocide. They are not governmental. And you have invited Prime Minister Modi here in two years four times, so – and then today you come out with the – what is – are they just there sitting in Delhi and laughing at your report if there is no follow-up action to do something about this?

AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN: President Obama traveled to India. He gave a major public speech in which he was very clear about the need for religious freedom in India that could be exercised without people being subject to violence, urging the government to ensure that all people were able to safely live out their religious lives.

We have been clear in our engagement with India about our concerns about those times that the government has been slow to react when violence has taken place. And some of those controversies over the cows are an example of that. There have been other times where President Modi has spoken out and has spoken out very forcefully about the need to protect religious freedom for all and the security for all.

So I think we've been clear where there – about our view of what is needed and our willingness to

be supportive in confronting the challenges to religious freedom that need to be addressed there and the – and when the government's been slow to react, urging them to be more assertive on that, et cetera.

So the – when he has promised to ensure that everyone has the – I'm quoting him now – the “undeniable right to retain or adopt religions of her – his or her choice without coercion or undue influence,” this is responding to some of the attacks on Christians because they are seen as proselytizing and encouraging others to convert. Here it is a – we've been clear and consistent in our messages about the things that we think are most helpful for the stability of the region and the stability of the country, and we'll continue to be supportive of those efforts where he is acting in accordance with the international obligations of India in these regards. So --

MS TRUDEAU: Mr. Lavers.

QUESTION: And just --

MS TRUDEAU: I'm sorry, Tejinder. We're just going to wrap up.

QUESTION: Michael Lavers of the Washington Blade. You had mentioned earlier in your comments that there's a, quote, “major debate” about religious freedom here in this country. And I wanted to ask you about evangelical preachers and other folks from this country who promote anti-LGBT efforts in many countries overseas. I think of Jamaica, Belize particularly, some of the counties in Africa, Uganda. Do you have any position on that? And I know the Administration has spoken out, but do you personally have any position on these folks who are promoting anti-LGBT efforts overseas who are from the United States based on religion?

AMBASSADOR SAPERSTEIN: First of all, my personal views that you're asking for are not relevant to this. I'm here to speak on behalf of the United States Government that has been quite clear on the issue of protecting the LGBTI community across the globe, that people ought not to be discriminated against simply because of immutable characteristics or in terms of religious freedom, the most core central organizing beliefs of conscience that they hold. We have robustly protected that right. It would include the right of people in the LGBTI community to organize religiously and participate in their own religious life as well, and that's a long-held position that we have had.

We equally defend the right of freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of religion of those groups who differ with the position of the United States Government on such issue to exercise those rights – again, so long as they do so peacefully. We believe in the free marketplace of ideas, that in the end the vision that we hold about fundamental civil rights for all communities, including the LGBTI community, will prevail, but we protect the right of religious groups to express views that are countervailing both within the United States and outside the United States.

The construct of our rights, our fundamental rights here, is that our fundamental rights are not absolute; there can be compelling interests in which the United States Government has the right to say that the compelling need to limitedly curtail free exercise of fundamental freedoms can be justified. They are rare. And our standard is if there is a compelling interest we have to pursue it in the way that least infringes on the fundamental rights. But just because, let's say, another country – to change your question from the evangelical groups to other countries that's claimed religious beliefs that – to curtail the rights of women, of children, of the LGBTI community, et cetera, we believe we've taken the position that it is a compelling interest under international law and under our own legal system here to protect the fundamental civil rights of people but to do it in the most limited way possible, and that would include allowing the right of people who differ to speak out on their rights here. So we will continue to pursue that scheme.

Let me just say one other word. This will be the last time that I will take the podium under the Obama Administration here. As the deputy secretary indicated, this Administration has been so robust on this. I mean, just look at the structure here. Our office has significantly increased its staff. We've created the Religion and Global Affairs Office as well. Together that's over 50 full-time people working on religion and religious freedom here at the State Department and working in concert with dedicated staff in every one of our embassies who is tasked to focus on religious freedom, to reach out to the religious communities who may face oppression or discrimination or limitation on religious freedom. That has an extraordinary impact in our being effective in our foreign policy to address issues of the role of the religious community, in affirming our fundamental values and our goals across the world, and to do so with a thriving sense of religious freedom and protection of religious freedom and belief for all peoples across the globe. I've been immensely proud of what this Administration has done, and I've convinced it is – I've seen firsthand how it has made a real difference in the lives of very real people all across the globe. And we will continue to push as vigorously as we can until, as I said, religious freedom becomes a reality for every person in every nation across the globe. So thank you all.

MS TRUDEAU: Thank you, and thanks to Ambassador Saperstein. Have a great day, everyone.

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