

March 7, 2011

The Honorable John F. Kerry
Chairman
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
446 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-6225

The Honorable Richard G. Lugar
Ranking Member
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
444 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-6225

Dear Senators:

The president has re-nominated Dr. Suzan Johnson Cook as Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom (IRF), and we write to respectfully urge you to demonstrate your commitment to our “First Freedom,” and to America's policy of advancing international religious freedom, by attending and participating in the upcoming confirmation hearing.

Having been disappointed by the low attendance at Dr. Johnson Cook's first confirmation hearing last year, we want to communicate how important it is for members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to urge the administration to set a clear policy course and develop a serious program to promote religious freedom around the world. Dr. Johnson Cook's confirmation hearing is a perfect opportunity to let the nominee and the administration know that IRF should be a high priority for the United States.

Religious freedom is the first and most personal of all human rights. It goes to the very core of what it means to be human. A government that denies this right to any of its citizens will sooner or later deny all other fundamental human rights.

Moreover, international religious freedom has also proven to be a matter of national security. Its presence is necessary for stable democracy, including civil society, stable economic growth and social harmony, while its absence is highly correlated with religious terrorism and instability.

The turmoil now ongoing in the Middle East – including the alarming spike in incidents of violence and persecution against Christian and other minorities – increases the importance of having a senior official to lead our IRF policy. To take but one example, Egypt's quest for stable democracy, an outcome squarely in America's interests, is unlikely to succeed without religious freedom. This means not only the protection of minorities, but the commitment of all Egyptian parties (especially the Muslim Brotherhood) to full equality under the law – for women, non-Muslims, disfavored Muslims, and non-religious citizens.

It is no accident that religion-based extremism and transnational terrorism has emerged in countries where religious freedom is virtually non-existent. With strong leadership in its IRF policy, the United States could have had a much greater effect on levels of religious violence, persecution, and terrorism than it has had to date.

Given the importance of the ambassador-at-large's position, and the potential for IRF policy to contribute to America's interests in the world, we trust that you share our concern that the position has remained vacant for so long. We are alarmed at reports that, while other ambassadors at large work directly under the Secretary of State, the IRF ambassador will be several levels removed from the Secretary. We are concerned that the ambassador's effectiveness will be further reduced if, as reported, the administration removes the IRF office from his or her direct authority. Both of these steps would harm American interests. Both would appear to contravene the terms of the International Religious Freedom Act, which establishes the IRF ambassador as a "principal advisor" to the President and the Secretary of State, and as the head of the IRF office. It is our view that the IRF office should be strengthened and its staff should operate directly under the ambassador's authority.

Most critically, if the ambassador is to have an impact on levels of religious freedom in the world, he or she must have the authority and the resources to do the job. At present, both American diplomats and foreign governments are justified in concluding that neither the position nor the policy is a high priority for the United States.

This problem could be remedied by a series of steps, such as including the IRF ambassador in senior policy planning, giving the IRF office authority over programs for the advancement of religious freedom, and ensuring that the National Security Council works with the ambassador and other agencies to address the impact of IRF on U.S. foreign policy and national security. In short, IRF policy should be fully integrated into U.S. foreign policy, including democracy promotion, public diplomacy, counterterrorism strategies, multilateral diplomacy, and international law.

For all of these reasons, we urge you to use the upcoming confirmation hearing to demonstrate to the administration that U.S. IRF policy is important to the Senate, to the interests of our nation and its people, and to the causes of peace and stability in the world.

Respectfully,

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