



# Ministerial to Advance **RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

**Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom**

**July 24-26, 2018**

**Potomac Plan of Action**

*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.*

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Faced with challenges to religious freedom worldwide, the Chairman of the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom presents this Potomac Plan of Action as a framework for national and multinational activity. The international community is encouraged to draw on the Plan of Action's provisions when responding to violations and abuses of religious freedom or instances of persecution on account of religion, belief, on non-belief:

## Defending the Human Right of Freedom of Religion or Belief

States should increase collective advocacy and coordination to promote and protect religious freedom and to counter the persecution of individuals because of religion or belief. In that spirit, states should work to:

- Condemn strongly acts of discrimination and violence in the name of or against a particular religion or lack thereof and press for immediate accountability for those responsible for such violence, including state and non-state actors.
- Protect members of religious communities, dissenting members, and non-believers from threats to their freedom, safety, livelihood, and security on account of their beliefs.
- Respect the liberty of parents to provide their children religious and moral education in conformity with their own conscience and convictions and to ensure members of religious minority communities and non-believers are not forcibly indoctrinated into other faiths.
- Protect the ability of religious adherents, institutions, and organizations to produce in quantities they desire religious publications and materials, as well as to import and disseminate such materials.

- Increase international understanding of how suppression of religious freedom can contribute to violent extremism, sectarianism, conflict, insecurity, and instability.
- Ensure false accusations of “extremism” are not used as a pretext to suppress the freedom of individuals to express their religious beliefs and to practice their faith, or otherwise limit freedoms of peaceful assembly and association.
- Eliminate restrictions unduly limiting the ability of believers and non-believers to manifest their faith or beliefs in observance and practice, either alone or in community with others, through peaceful assembly, worship, observance, prayer, practice, teaching, and other activities.
- Speak out bilaterally, as well as through multilateral fora, against violations or abuses of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

### Confronting Legal Limitations

States should promote religious freedom and bring their laws and policies into line with international human rights norms regarding freedom of religion or belief. In that spirit, states should work to:

- Protect freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief and ensure individuals can freely change beliefs, or not believe, without penalty or fear of violence, and encourage the repeal of provisions penalizing or discriminating against individuals for leaving or changing their religion or belief.
- Encourage any state-managed registration systems for official recognition of religious communities be optional (rather than mandatory) and not unduly burdensome, so as to help facilitate the free and legal practice of religion for communities of believers.
- Allow religious communities to establish freely accessible places of worship or assembly in public or private, to organize themselves according to their own hierarchical and institutional structures, to train their religious personnel and community members, and to select, appoint, and replace their personnel in accordance with their beliefs without government interference.
- Repeal anti-blasphemy laws, which are inherently subjective, and often contribute to sectarianism and violent extremism. Enforcement of such laws unduly inhibits the exercise of the rights to freedoms of religion, belief, and expression and leads to other human rights violations or abuses.
- Recognize that respect for religious freedom can afford space to religious actors to engage in constructive efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism, terrorism and conflict, and to collaborate with non-religious actors on the same.
- Encourage the development of conscientious objection laws and policies to accommodate the religious beliefs of military age persons and provide alternatives to military service.

### Advocating for Equal Rights and Protections for All, Including Members of Religious Minorities

States should promote the human rights of members of religious minorities, dissenting members from the majority faith, and non-believers, including freedom of religion or belief. In that spirit, states should work to:

- Treat all persons equally under the law – regardless of an individual’s religion, beliefs or religious affiliation, or lack thereof – and ensure law enforcement officials take measures to protect all persons, including members of religious minorities, from harm or discriminatory acts on account of their faith or beliefs.
- Prevent discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in access to justice, employment, education and housing, in personal status and family laws, and in access to opportunities for expression in public forums.
- Ensure that all people, including religious minority community members, are free from forced conversions, and are entitled to and receive equal protection under the law without discrimination.
- Respond quickly to physical assaults on persons and the destruction or vandalizing of holy sites or property based on religion or belief, and hold those responsible accountable.
- Encourage teaching about the value of intra- and inter-faith understanding and collaboration, and promote a general understanding of world religions to reduce harmful misunderstandings and stereotypes.
- Foster religious freedom and pluralism by promoting the ability of members of all religious communities, including migrant workers, to practice their religion, and to contribute openly and on an equal footing to society.
- Encourage authorities to denounce and condemn public discrimination and crimes targeting individuals on account of their religion or belief or lack thereof.

#### Responding to Genocide and other Mass Atrocities

States should use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other necessary means to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, including when based on religious convictions. In that spirit, states should work to:

- Take immediate action to protect their populations from genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing.
- Condemn messages or narratives that promote violence against the holders of certain religious or other beliefs or that foster intra- and inter-religious tensions, whether by government officials or non-state actors.
- Take steps to support investigative efforts and work to preserve evidence and document suspected crimes when reports of atrocities arise, including genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, or ethnic cleansing.
- Hold accountable those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, mass atrocities, and ethnic cleansing and related crimes, and employ mechanisms to promote accountability, justice, and reconciliation.
- Consider the needs of survivors and families of survivors of atrocities and provide them assistance and resources to help rebuild and heal traumatized communities and individuals in post-conflict areas.
- Work with willing victims and survivors of mass atrocities to develop and disseminate communications and educational efforts about their experiences, recovery and resilience.

### Preserving Cultural Heritage

States should increase efforts to protect and preserve cultural heritage, including that of threatened minority religious communities, particularly in conflict zones, and to preserve cultural heritage sites, even those of communities whose members have dwindled or emigrated to other countries. In that spirit, states should work to:

- Adopt and implement policies that introduce or improve inventory lists of cultural sites and objects that promote respect for and protect heritage, including places of worship and religious sites, shrines, and cemeteries, and that take appropriate protective measures where such sites are vulnerable to vandalism or destruction by state or non-state actors.
- Safeguard heritage sites, and help other governments do so, by offering technical assistance and professional training to relevant officials, as well as provide emergency assistance for sites in immediate danger.
- Assist impacted communities to secure, protect, repair and/or stabilize their cultural heritage sites.
- Encourage participation by the local population in the preservation of their cultural heritage, and engage members of religious communities and others, including their leadership, with training on ways to protect their cultural heritage from damage and/or looting.
- Assist with efforts to restore cultural heritage sites of significance to multiple communities in a conflict zone so as to foster intra- and inter-faith relations and rebuild trust.
- Raise public awareness, particularly among youth, of the significance and history of cultural heritage, by working with and through religious actors and other community leaders.

### Strengthening the Response

States should take actions to respond to threats to religious freedom that continue to proliferate around the world. In that spirit, states should consider endorsing the Potomac Declaration and work to:

- Extend financial support to assist persons persecuted for their religious freedom advocacy, affiliation or practice, or for being a non-believer and support the capacity-building work of religious freedom advocacy organizations, and encourage private foundations to increase funding to such causes.
- Strengthen rule-of-law, fair trial guarantees, and the institutional capacity to protect religious freedom and other human rights.
- Provide additional diplomatic resources through the creation of special ambassadorial positions or focal points in foreign ministries, and support collective action through such groupings as the International Contact Group for Freedom of Religion or Belief and the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- Train and equip diplomats in the meaning and value of religious freedom and how to advance it.

- Recommit annually to promoting religious freedom for all, by establishing August 3, the first day of ISIS's Sinjar massacre targeting Yazidis, as a nationally or internationally recognized day of remembrance of survivors of religious persecution.
- Allow and support civil society organizations and religious actors in their efforts to advocate for, and organize on behalf of, religious freedom, pluralism, peace and tolerance and related values.
- Facilitate the creation of domestic forums, or utilize existing groups, where religious groups, faith-based organizations and civil society can meet to discuss concerns about religious freedom at home and abroad, as well as through bodies at the regional level.
- Encourage government ministries and officials to engage with and listen to the domestic forums regularly, and implement relevant suggestions when possible.
- Encourage national economic investment projects that foster collaboration and trust building across different communities and demonstrate the economic, societal and individual benefits of respect for religious freedom and pluralism.
- Train and support religious community actors, including religious actors, to build resilience to and prevent violent extremism and terrorism, which negatively affect religious freedom, by disseminating alternative messages, engaging at-risk community members, and implementing intra- and inter-faith partnerships.