

THE ETHICS & RELIGIOUS LIBERTY COMMISSION

OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION



Richard Land, D.Phil. (*Oxon.*), President

April 1, 2013

The Honorable Frank Wolf
U.S. House of Representatives
233 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Wolf:

We write to thank you for introducing legislation to provide for the establishment of a Special Envoy to Promote Religious Freedom of Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia (H.R. 301). As many Christians and other religious minorities living in volatile regions of Northern Africa, the Middle East, and South Central Asia face ongoing severe persecution, this legislation would help bring much needed attention and relief to their plight.

Religious minorities in these regions often face torture, imprisonment, and other unconscionable realities. As just one example, an Iranian evangelical pastor, Youcef Nadarkhani, was recently sentenced to death by hanging for converting to Christianity. An Iranian court later released him only after an international outcry. Even our own citizens have been subjected to cruel and unjust treatment in such regions. Pastor Saeed Abedini, a U.S. citizen, remains in an Iranian jail simply because of his faith. Incidents like these are not isolated to Iran, but occur all too often throughout the Near East and South Central Asia.

Significantly, the Near East and South Central Asia Religious Freedom Act of 2013, as the bill is often referred, would create an ambassador level position at the State Department to help monitor and combat acts of religious intolerance in these regions. We also believe it is important that the special envoy would be responsible for promoting the right of religious freedom for religious minorities and serve as a watchdog against those who are working to repress or eradicate faiths that are not their own. This position would give a much needed boost to current efforts at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom.

We stand united with our brothers and sisters around the world and with all those who are under attack because of their faith. Religious freedom is the hallmark of a civil society, and we will not stand idle as the faith community remains under assault. Thank you again for your efforts to promote religious freedom through the Near East and South Central Asia Religious Freedom Act of 2013. We look forward to the swift passage of this important legislation.

Sincerely,

Richard D. Land