

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

**“Religious Freedom in Eurasia: Are Governments Keeping Their
Commitments?”**

Committee Members Present:

**Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS), Chairman;
Senator Benjamin Cardin (D-MD), Ranking Member;
Representative Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ), Co-Chairman;
Senator Cory Gardner (R-CO)**

Participants:

Sam Brownback, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom

**The Hearing Was Held From 10:47 a.m. To 11:47 a.m. in Room 106, Dirksen
Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS),
Chairman, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding**

Date: Tuesday, December 11, 2018

WICKER: This hearing of the Helsinki Commission will come to order. Good morning, and welcome to the hearing on “Religious Freedom in Eurasia: Are Governments Keeping Their Commitments?”

The commitments on human rights and fundamental freedoms of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the OSCE, are the strongest of any multinational security organization in the world. All 57 OSCE participating States have made these commitments, including the commitments on religious freedom. In the words of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, quote, “the participating States will recognize and respect the freedom of the individual to profess and practice, alone or in community with others, religion or belief acting in accordance with the dictates of his own conscience.” Despite this and other OSCE commitments, some of the worst violators of religious freedom in the world are, regrettably, participating OSCE States.

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, authored by my friend former Congressman Frank Wolf, requires the president to issue annually an International Religious Freedom Report and designate the worst violators as countries of particular concern – CPCs – a country so designated when its government has engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom, defined as systematic, ongoing egregious violations such as killing, torture, prolonged detention without charges, abduction, or clandestine detention.

Central Asia has the highest concentration of CPCs, of any region in the world. Since 2016, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have been designated as CPCs. But perhaps there’s good news. Under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan is the only one of these CPCs moving toward compliance with its international obligations. His government has been taking significant steps to make the necessary reforms. That’s why we’re here today.

That’s why when Secretary Pompeo announced in May that he would host the first Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, I publicly urged him to consider inviting Uzbekistan. And indeed, this invitation was issued. Soon thereafter I introduced the bipartisan Senate Resolution 539 urging the president to strengthen efforts of the United States to combat religious freedom violations in Eurasia and providing a blueprint for some key action. The resolution acknowledges the reforms in Uzbekistan and calls on the United States to prioritize supporting ongoing reforms in Uzbekistan.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly passed the Berlin declaration in early July with amendments I authored, that recognized the government of Uzbekistan’s ongoing reforms and encouraged the government to align national policies with Uzbekistan’s OSCE and other international commitments. Later that month, I met with the Uzbekistan delegation to the ministerial to advance religious freedom. The delegation was led by Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov and included Senator Sadyk Safoyev, who is a former ambassador to the United States, and Akmal Saidov, member of parliament and head of the National Human Rights Centre. We discussed how the United States can work with Uzbekistan on reforms, security, and economic prosperity.

Uzbekistan is already a strong partner of the United States. I'm pleased to say we have a special relationship between the Mississippi National Guard and Uzbekistan through the National Guard Partnership Program. We work closely together to support Afghanistan, fight terrorism, and combat narcotics. My good friend and colleague Representative Trent Kelly, who represents the First Congressional District of Mississippi – and is a brigadier general in the Guard – has seen firsthand the value of the joint military exercises between our forces. I share his view.

I will now say what I've already said publicly: Uzbekistan can be an even stronger partner of the United States – and that is our goal – more economically prosperous and a model in the region and beyond. For this to be so, it must follow through with reforms and fully comply with its international commitments on human rights and freedoms. There is still a lot to do before the law, regulation, and government personnel are in full compliance with these commitments, including formally consulting with international experts, consistently holding perpetrators accountable for violations, and releasing religious prisoners who were arrested despite exercising their religion peacefully.

The president of Uzbekistan and the parliament have committed to reform and to keep Uzbekistan international – to keep Uzbekistan's international commitments. The Congress will continue to work closely with the executive branch and the government to achieve these objectives.

Our witness today traveled to Uzbekistan in September and has a long history with Central Asia. But there are more reasons why he's ideal to discuss these and other OSCE issues today. Sam Brownback, my friend of 25 years, is Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. This is his first congressional hearing since being confirmed. I'm especially pleased to welcome him as a former House colleague, a former Senate colleague, and a former Helsinki Commission member. His qualifications are numerous. I will place them in the record and welcome Ambassador Brownback.

Mr. Ambassador, thank you for your unflagging efforts to get Pastor Brunson freed from imprisonment in Turkey on baseless charges of terrorism and espionage, including traveling to Turkey to attend the trial. Thank you, sir, for that. The full-court press, from you, President Trump, Vice President Pence, Secretary Pompeo, and members of Congress – both Republican and Democrat – made the difference. His release was the answer to many prayers. I repeat my call for the administration to maintain Global Magnitsky sanctions on Turkish officials complicit in the continued unjust detention of American citizens and consulate employees. NATO has no space for hostage-taking.

I'm grateful to you, Mr. Ambassador, for the annual OSCE Human Dimension Implementation meeting in Warsaw, Poland. Having someone of your seniority and stature in the chair was a strong signal of the importance of religious freedom in this administration. I'm also heartened that while in Poland you joined the Helsinki Commission-initiated visit by the U.S. delegation to the memorial at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp—a place where Senator Cardin and I have also visited—and laid a wreath and lit a candle on behalf of the American people.

As a final introductory remark, let me note with sadness the passing this weekend of Russian human rights advocate Ludmila Alexeyeva, one of the founders of the Moscow Helsinki Group in 1976. Already an experienced human rights activist going back to the 1960s, she was exiled from the Soviet Union after the Moscow Group formed. She found a home in the United States, where she continued to struggle for human rights in her country. She was a strong supporter of this Helsinki Commission, and helped us enormously in our work. She returned to Moscow in 1993 and remained an advocate of human rights in Russia until the end, including those rights which are the focus of this hearing. Ludmila will be deeply missed. We hope that her life has inspired new generations of activists in Russia and elsewhere – activists that will seek to hold governments accountable for violations of the Helsinki Final Act and other OSCE commitments.

We are joined today by two very distinguished human rights advocates. I will turn to them for whatever introductory remarks they would like to make. Senator Ben Cardin, my colleague from Maryland.

CARDIN: Mr. Chairman, first, thank you very much for holding this hearing.

I just want to make one observation, if I might. This will be the last hearing of the Helsinki Commission in this Congress. We have been led by Senator Wicker, who's done a great job as our chairman during extremely difficult international times. Under the Helsinki statute, the chairmanship will now go back to the House of Representatives in the 116th Congress. I just want to congratulate Senator Wicker for the work that you did during these two years leading the Commission very actively, attending international meetings, raising human rights issues around the OSCE region – including here in the United States – and being just a great leader of the Commission.

It's been an honor to be your ranking member on the Senate side. I know the co-chair, Congressman Smith, who's had a long tenure—the longest tenure on Helsinki Commission—participated in a very active way to make sure we had a very successful year. It's really a pleasure to serve on this Commission, when you don't know who the Democrats and Republicans are when it comes to the commitment of the Helsinki Final Act. So it is wonderful that Senator Wicker continued in that tradition.

We don't always find the senators as active as House members at times. That was certainly not true when Senator Brownback was on the Commission, because he was a very active member of this Commission. He got his training, we think, in the Helsinki Commission. He has shown really good judgement by making his first congressional hearing in the Senate before the Helsinki Commission. So we applaud you on that good judgement. We do apologize. I thought Senator Wicker had more clout with the leadership and we wouldn't be interrupted by votes, but that's not going to be the case because there's a vote scheduled at 11:00 today.

I also join the chairman in expressing our condolence on Ludmila. She was a pioneer in standing up for human rights under the Soviet Union when, as you know, the risk factors were so high for anyone to speak out against the government or to speak out in favor of human rights.

She was there from the beginning of the Helsinki process and, of course, was very much engaged in the human rights Moscow Helsinki group. She came here for safety. She returned to Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union and has continuously been a beacon of hope for those who stand up for the principles of the Helsinki Final Act.

One of those principles is the right to practice your religious. Let me just quote, if I might, from the Helsinki Final Act. "Recognize and respect the freedom of the individual to profess and practice alone or in community with others religion or belief, acting in accordance with the dictates of his own conscience." That's one of the basic principles. We're very proud that we have put a major focus on that, including with our Ambassador Brownback, to fight for religious protections around the world. In the OSCE, we see it under attack in Europe and in the United States.

We all know the recent attacks on religious practice here in the United States, the horrific event that took place in Pittsburgh, where 11 people were killed solely because they were in the house of prayer of their religion. We also know that shortly before that, an African-American church was targeted in Kentucky. So we have problems here. I can tell you we need to understand that hateful and racist rhetoric has consequences. We have to speak out in leadership against any hate here in America or anywhere around the world.

I know my colleagues experience the same as I have. I've traveled throughout the whole OSCE region. I always try to visit a synagogue when I'm in one of the countries. I've seen over time the amount of security on my visits to a synagogue have always increased. That's a reality of the target areas for people to express their anger and hate. We now see that's true also in the United States. I am amazed at the amount of security that I see at houses of prayer here in the United States. That's the new reality. I'm not criticizing the amount of protection, because we want people to be safe, but I do think it points out that the U.S. has always been at the forefront on the Helsinki principles, particularly religious freedom. We need to not only fight for that globally, but we have to recognize that we have challenges here at home and we have to take care of our own issues as well.

I am proud to be the special representative of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly for anti-semitism, racism, and intolerance. In that capacity, I've tried to set as priorities the protection of people and all religious. We're very concerned about the attack on Muslims, on Christians, and on Jews. We fight in all of those areas. I've introduced legislation here that I hope one day will be passed to end racial and religious profiling by law enforcement. It's one of the priorities of the OSCE special representative that the discriminatory policing, which is true in Europe, but also true here in the United States, and also true in my home city of Baltimore, as we saw in a pattern and practice investigation by the Department of Justice.

Mr. Chairman, let me just point out we are seeing an increasing intolerance abroad under the guise of national security. Countries throughout the OSCE have laws that would severely impact the practice of religious communities. Rising intolerance against Muslim communities is evident by efforts to adopt laws restricting the religious practice of Muslims, from the banning of a mosque in Sweden to recent bans on Muslim women attire in Austria and in Denmark. Close to 15 countries exercise prohibitions on Muslim religious ritual slaughter of animals. Many

Muslim communities still face excessive regulations or other barriers attempting to build mosques. Earlier this summer, political leaders in Austria called for Jews and Muslims to pre-register to consume Kosher/Halal food, uncomfortably echoing the use of lists to track Jews during the Holocaust.

Jews and Christian communities are also implicated in the so-called fight against radical Islam. During this year's French elections, one candidate pledged to ban all religious clothing – including Christian crosses, Jewish kippahs, reasoning that Jews and Christians would have to make this sacrifice to fight for the advance of political Islam. These efforts increasingly pit religious and other vulnerable communities against one another at a time when communities should be working towards addressing hate.

Mr. Chairman, I'm very pleased we have Ambassador Brownback here. I think what we need to do at this Commission, which has been the hallmark of America's commitment to fighting intolerance and hate, that we have a strategy to show that America truly is in the leadership to say that hate has no place in any community, and we protect all minority communities in their ability to practice their religion, how we show that leadership here in America and throughout the OSCE, and throughout the globe.

SMITH: Thank you, Senator Cardin.

I too want to add my welcome and complete gratitude to Ambassador Brownback. Thank you for your decades on religious freedom. Your hard work and achievement on this issue as a congressman, senator, including as chairman of this Commission and then as governor, made you the most eminently qualified person to be our ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom. Indeed, the nation – and I would argue the world – is very fortunate to have you in this critically important and very strategic position. So thank you for that service.

I'd like to just briefly raise a few countries of concern that I am particularly focused on and you are as well. Russia. Pursuant to the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, the State Department is announcing today that Russia will be placed on the Special Watch List, which we newly created, a designation for governments that engage in or tolerate severe violations of religious freedom. The violations of religious freedom in Russia are real, thoroughly documented, and at times brutal. The Russian government deserves this. Next year we should consider carefully whether it belongs on the list of countries of particular concern, or CPC list, for the worst of the worst.

Second, Central Asia. For the past several years the U.S. government has designated Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan as countries of particular concern. These governments are guilty of particularly severe violations of religious freedom, as the statute has it, and the State Department is announcing that Turkmenistan and Tajikistan remain on the CPC list, and Uzbekistan will be moved to a slightly less-reprehensible watch listSpecial Watch List. I'm sure you will discuss that today and give us some insights about how those decisions were arrived at.

The government of all three used sweeping counterterrorism authorities to target broad categories of individuals engaging in unsanctioned religious practice. Uzbekistan holds

thousands of individuals in custody for such infractions. Meanwhile, Turkmenistan continues its heinous practice of holding untold scores of prisoners incommunicado, in abject conditions, and trials in secret courts. This kind of mirrors exactly what the Chinese are doing against the Muslim Uyghurs, although that is on an absolute massive scale. Marco Rubio and I co-chair the China Commission. We had another hearing just a week ago on this brutality that's being used under the guise of antiterrorism to crack down on people that they find objectionable. In that case, Muslims in that part of the world.

Third, Turkey. Just two months ago Turkey released American Pastor Andrew Brunson. I want to thank you for being at his trial – you and Senator Tillis. I think that sent a clear message of U.S. resolve and concern. We know that he was detained for more than two years on bogus terrorism charges. Turkey's mistreatment of this innocent man and his family was absolutely unconscionable. In its 2018 annual report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom found that Pastor Brunson's prolonged and unjustified detention, quote, "had a chilling effect on Christians living in the country."

Indeed, Pastor Brunson's plight appears to be the most publicized incident making a disturbing increase in government targeting of protestant ministers. Citing Turkey's Association of Protestant Churches, USCRF reports that at least 100 pastors have been forced to leave Turkey due to government refusals to renew visas or other permits. Sadly, the brutal repression of the Orthodox Christians is ongoing, particularly in Turkish-occupied Northern Cyprus, where its 44-year occupation of Northern Cyprus has left a legacy of destruction, gutting ancient religious life, and despoiling priceless cultural property. According to the government of Cyprus, the estimates are 500 Greek Orthodox churches and chapels have been pillaged, vandalized, or demolished, 133 churches, chapels, or monasteries have been desecrated, the whereabouts of 15,000 paintings are unknown, 77 churches have been turned into mosques, 28 are being used by the military forces as hospitals or camps, and 13 are used as agricultural barns.

The Turkish government also continued to meddle in the internal affairs of major Christian and Jewish authorities. The government wields effective veto power over leadership elections within these institutions by requiring that electors and candidates hold Turkish citizenship – something the state alone can confer. This unjustifiable requirement directly violates the internationally recognized right of the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, the Armenian patriarch of Constantinople, and the chief rabbinate of Turkey to conduct their own affairs, free from unwelcome external interference.

Astonishingly, in the Haliki seminary, the only theological school for the training of priests for the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, remains closed 47 years after it was first shuttered by the state. This situation endures despite numerous public commitments from Turkish officials over the years guaranteeing the seminary's reopening. Taken together, this litany of long-standing and flagrant religious freedom violations strikes me as abundant justification for the administration to designate Turkey as a Country of Particular Concern, or at a minimum as a Special Watch List country.

I do look forward to your testimony. I would like to yield to my good friend and colleague, Mr. Gardner.

GARDNER: Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. Thank you for your service and the heavy work ahead that you have and continue to do.

Obviously, matters of religious freedom have taken a more and more prominent role in the work that we do each and every day in Congress – rightfully so. Just last week I chaired a hearing in my Asia Subcommittee, where we were talking about religious freedom in China, where we talked about Tibet, and we talked about Chinese authorities’ determinations to impose their own Dalai Lama, and whether or not countries around the world would recognize that fiat from the Chinese government. Recent reports there have talked about registrations and pastors going missing, and what happens to people who speak out, whether or not they’re mentioning President Xi in churches.

This is an important issue in Europe. It’s an important issue in the United States. It’s an important issue in Asia. It’s important, as you know, around the globe. So I’m grateful for your service and the challenges that we have. I hope today in your discussion that you’ll also talk about other leaders around the globe that we can help turn to, other nations that are providing leadership, and hope for us to partner with as we look out for people’s ability to worship freely. This is a human right, and it’s something this Congress will always stand up for. Thank you, Ambassador.

SMITH: Thank you so much.

I’d like to now formally introduce Senator – Senator, that too – Ambassador Sam Brownback, who was sworn in as ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom on February 1st, 2018. He served as governor of Kansas from 2011 to 2018. Previously he served as a U.S. senator from 1996 to 2011 and a member of Congress from ’95 to ’96. While a member of the Senate, he worked actively on the issue of religious freedom in multiple countries and was a key sponsor of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. He also served as Kansas secretary of agriculture from ’86 to ’93 and was a White House fellow in the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative from 1990 to ’91. Prior to his public service, Ambassador Brownback was a private attorney in Kansas and taught agricultural law at Kansas State University, co-authoring two books on the subject. He earned his B.S. from Kansas State University and his J.D. from the University of Kansas. Again, we welcome with great gratitude Ambassador Brownback.

BROWNBACK: Thank you very much, Mr. Co-Chairman, and Senator Gardner. Good to see you all. I know you’ve got to go vote, and I’ve been on that train. I’m glad when the bell rings I don’t jump anymore. So best to you, and thank you guys, both, for your heart and your long service. And Chairman Wicker as well.

Human rights are just critical, but they need advocates. They need people like yourselves to really push. It makes a huge difference. No other country in the world pushes it like we do. I mean, the Europeans do, and other places do. But it’s the United States and the muscle of the United States that makes the difference, and particularly in this space of religious freedom.

We're the ones that push it. The first-ever ministerial on religious freedom was conducted by the United States, by the Trump administration, this past July. Nobody's ever done that before. We had 84 countries at it. It was fabulously successful. We had hundreds of civil society religious freedom advocates that were there. We're going to do it again this next year. The secretary has already announced that we're going to get a much bigger room, so we can get more advocates added. This is really taking off.

We've got now six countries we're working with, to your question Senator Gardner, to do regional religious freedom summits in various places. They'll soon be announced and on specific topics. I hope some of you may consider going to some of these, and possibly speaking at them, if they're in areas and places that you feel like it would be of something of interest. Countries are stepping up. They're expressing themselves. This was one of those areas that we've just got to push the global community to do something, because virtually everyone has signed the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights, which declares support for religious freedom.

And yet, 80 percent of the world lives in a religiously restrictive atmosphere, much of it trending badly. So while everybody's for it, very few practice it. Then we constantly hear about deaths and buildings being burned and people being taken hostage all over the world, on a regular basis. It's the United States' advocacy that really keeps people alive. I want to thank a number of members of this Commission and others for the help with Andrew Brunson. I want to singularly thank President Trump for getting Andrew Brunson out. His putting of tariffs on Turkey, a NATO ally, that's never been done before, was really, I think, the factor that pushed the Turkish government to release Andrew Brunson, and thankfully so.

I want to join with the chairman on expressing my condolences as well to family and friends of people that were impacted by Ludmila Alexeyeva, incredible defender of human rights that died in Russia at age 91. I didn't personally know her, but everybody that I know that did work with her said she was an absolutely amazing lady, and the things that she did and got accomplished were incredible.

Before I begin my prepared testimony, I want to put forth some news. Here earlier today the secretary publicly announced his designation of countries of particular concern under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, and the follow-on Frank Wolf Act. These are countries that have engaged in or tolerated systemic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. These include, this year, Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Those are the countries that the secretary has announced as countries of particular concern.

He also placed Comoros, Russia, and Uzbekistan on a Special Watch List for governments that have engaged in or tolerate severe violations of religious freedom. It's worth noting that for the first time since 2006, Uzbekistan is not a Country of Particular Concern and Pakistan has been added as a Country of Particular Concern. Finally, the secretary designated Al-Nusra Front, al-Qaida, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, the Houthis, ISIS, ISIS-Khorasan, and the Taliban as entities of particular concern according to the designation allowed under the Frank Wolf Act. These designations are a tool and key part of our efforts to advance religious freedom.

I want to thank you for your dedication and commitment to this process. We're grateful for your partnership in defending and promoting religious freedom around the world. I look forward to discussing these designations. I might note that these are all things that were put forth by the Congress. Congress has been particularly interested in religious freedom and has really propelled this area. So I'm thankful for it. This is an ongoing review. So while there may be people on this list or not on this list, we continually review this. Pakistan, as you may recall, was added as a Special Watch List in the middle of last year by the former secretary.

I value the work of the Helsinki Commission and its members. When I reflect on my time in the Senate, I'm humbled by the human rights work. Those are things you look back on as a senator and congressman. You do lots of different things, but the human rights work, you're touching people. Thank you for doing it. It's an honor to be back with you.

Religious freedom is a beautiful right. It flows from the inherent dignity of each human being. No state, in our estimation, can rightly take it away. This is a God-given right. And no state has that right then to interfere with it. It is also an obligation under international law that people and governments protect religious freedom. This administration is serious about pushing that. Today, as I noted, nearly 80 percent of the world lives in countries with significant restrictions on religious freedom. This is totally unacceptable – totally unacceptable. That's why this administration established religious freedom as a top foreign policy priority. And we're acting on it.

I mentioned the first ministerial that we put forth to nature and push for religious freedom, but also trying to expand the reason for countries to pursue religious freedom. In the past we've mostly stated this is a right – this is a key right and you're entitled to it. Now we note to countries, if you want less terrorism and more economic growth, you need more religious freedom. It's a key part of growth and a key part of less terrorism. So we're noting the positive benefits of this.

Since being sworn in in February this year, I've traveled to a number of countries to press for religious freedom reforms. Because of the priority this administration has placed on religious freedom, I've had the opportunity to meet and work with a number of heads of state, including the leaders of Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Nepal, and Hungary, as well as dozens of foreign ministers. My first visit was to Turkey to, as you noted, Andrew Brunson's hearings, who was wrongful imprisoned for over two years. Thanks to the work of the president, the vice president, as well as members of Congress, he's free and at home.

But we are engaged in other areas of the OSCE region as well. In September, I traveled to Ukraine where I met with religious leaders, parliamentarians, and President Poroshenko. I expressed the United States' belief that members of religious groups – including the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – should have the freedom to govern their religion according to their beliefs, free of outside pressure and malign influence. I then traveled to Poland, where I made an intervention at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation meeting, reinforcing the United States' commitment to religious freedom and to combating the scourge of antisemitism. As you noted, we traveled to Auschwitz as well, an absolutely unforgettable place and trip.

At the Human Dimension Implementation meeting, the U.S. delegation also spoke about what we are seeing in Russia, and particularly, overly broad anti-extremism laws that are misused to target for prosecution peaceful members of religious minorities and unduly restrict peaceful religious expression, belief, and worship. Russia has continued to do that with a number of different groups, thus their being placed on the Special Watch List.

Central Asia, another area of focus. In September I visited Uzbekistan, where I met with President Mirziyoyev and discussed the economic and security benefits that come from an increased recognition and protection of religious freedom. Uzbekistan's new leadership is making truly committed to making changes. They've made changes in a number of areas, including religious freedom areas. With respect to Kazakhstan, at the ministerial in July I engaged the foreign ministers and urged full protection for religious freedom in Kazakhstan, and other senior U.S. officials have continued to press that as well. Regarding Turkmenistan, my office takes part in an annual bilateral consultation with their government, to urge the government to ease registration requirements for religious organizations, and lift restrictions on religious literature, and decriminalize conscientious objection to military service.

One last trip I'll mention. Right before Thanksgiving I visited Hungary. I thanked the government for their engagement on humanitarian aid to religious groups in Iraq. They have been one of the pioneers to help reestablish some of the religious minorities in northern Iraq, particularly the Christians and the Yazidis. I also met with religious leaders and civil society groups, who are key to establishing and sustaining an environment that is conducive to religious freedom. I met with Jewish leaders and visited a synagogue as well. – the synagogue was in Ukraine.

Our world is filled with challenges to religious freedom. But I have faith that, in time, our dedicated work in partnership with civil society groups, religious leaders, and visionary parliamentarians and legislators like you, here and around the world, will open the gates to religious freedom for all. Indeed, I am heartened to see all the people committed to religious freedom that work here in this town. I would invite either of you gentlemen to attend the religious freedom roundtable that we do every Tuesday when I'm here with the religious freedom activists, from 11:00 to noon, normally on the Hill. They would love to hear from you. We regularly are getting over 100 people attending that, and activists that want to pursue these topics. There's a dedicated group that's here. They're moving forward. I think really now is a key season for us to push this right around the world. I look forward to the discussion and your questions.

WICKER: Thank you very much, Ambassador Brownback. We appreciate your testimony and we appreciate your efforts.

Let's just talk about the movement represented by designation of the special watch list today. Specifically, the inclusion of Uzbekistan represents a positive step is that not correct Mr. Ambassador?

BROWNBACK: That is correct.

WICKER: If you will outline – although your testimony has touched on this – the positive steps that make us optimistic about Uzbekistan. Then if you would talk about two other particular countries – and I know they’re all of interest – but in particular what is happening in a negative way in Pakistan? What has happened over the last reporting period in Russia that brought about the change in their status?

BROWNBACK: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Uzbeks have decided they’re going to promptly to move forward on human rights. They’ve changed in a number of categories. I had a two-hour meeting with the president where we discussed what all they needed to do. We had the U.N. special rapporteur on religious freedom go out to Uzbekistan, do a special report, what changes they need to make. We just told the Uzbeks, basically, implement the report and we’ll move forward with you.

To date already what they’ve done is they’ve released over 1,000 religious prisoners. They’ve delisted thousands of individuals from blacklists, many of who previously accused of engaging in religious extremism. They registered 14 religious organizations, including the first Christian church in nearly a decade. They’re allowing the majority-Muslim population to practice more freely, including allowing children to be able to go to mosque for the first time. They didn’t previously allow them to go to mosque. They passed a religious freedom roadmap to address recommendations that the U.S. special rapporteur made. Now, it’s a roadmap. So in effect, we would look at it as a resolution. They haven’t put it into law, but they’ve said our next step is to put these into law.

Those are a series of the steps that they’ve made. In my interactions with the government officials, we’re continuing to press them on any other religious prisoners.

WICKER: Mr. Ambassador, when do you think that law might be voted on?

BROWNBACK: I was hopeful this year, but I just heard word this morning that it won’t be until next year that they’ll actually implement it. But they’re still on special watch list because they continue to have issues and problems. There was a Baptist church that was recently raided. They had previously stopped all the raids, but then this just happened. I called the foreign minister up about that. I’ve been personally engaged with the Uzbeks very aggressively, because we want to showcase to other countries in Central Asia, there is a way off this list. But you got to change. You got to really do things. The Uzbeks have done a series of things, but they continue to be on the watch list because of concerns that we have that still remain in place. The resolution, the roadmap, has not become law.

WICKER: Mr. Ambassador, before you get to the other two countries I asked about, is it your sense that public opinion in Uzbekistan is behind the president and the leadership in moving toward more acceptance of religious freedom?

BROWNBACK: Yes.

WICKER: Is this a way for Uzbeks to have a better economy, is that not correct, and a better life for everyone?

BROWNBACK: That's a big reason, I believe, why the leadership is pursuing it. They want to show you can do this. Our data says you do it, you will have less terrorism and more economic growth. We believe it. They've been taking these measures publicly. They've led press conferences here at the National Press Club and in New York to showcase the new Uzbekistan, and more opening to the West. I'm hopeful that this is very successful, for them to show a different scene. That's part of our effort to expand the draw of religious freedom. Heretofore, we basically pushed countries. We put up name and shame lists. We would say: You need to do this because of your international obligations. We want to say as well to countries, it's also good for you on less terrorism, and you're going to have more economic growth.

WICKER: If you could, then, take a half a minute and sort of summarize what's going on in Pakistan and Russia.

BROWNBACK: Pakistan continues to enforce blasphemy laws. This is an area that in our Potomac Declaration out of the international ministerial that said these need to be repealed around the world. Half of the people that are in prison for blasphemy laws around the world are imprisoned in Pakistan. They continue to not allow the Ahmadi Muslims to practice their faith or even call themselves Muslims. There continues to be a lot of violence taking place in Pakistan. Now, a new government's been elected. They have indicated a desire to change courses and to work more openly.

Recently, when there was a number of protests that were taking place, a number of the protests were regarding somebody that was released on the blasphemy charges. They arrested a number of the leaders of the protest. It's a positive sign from this new government. Still, you base these findings on what the report that we put out this last year. Pakistan we put on this special watch list in the middle of the year. They certainly meet the criteria of a Country of Particular Concern.

WICKER: And Russia.

BROWNBACK: Russia's been trending in the wrong direction. It has done a series of things – arbitrary arrests and imprisonments, particularly of Jehovah's Witnesses, that were banned, widespread suppression of religious expression and practice. They have a 2016 law criminalizing illegal missionary activities that's included 156 such cases reported by NGOs in 2017, starting with Salvation Army, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witness of course, Baptists, the administrative center of the New Apostolic Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Lutheran Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Ukrainian Reformed Orthodox Church, and the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. Along with a series of Muslim groups, and then the banned the readings of the Turkish Islamic theologian Said Nursi under a distorted interpretation of its extremist laws.

They have 145 currently jailed prisoners for religious beliefs, 106 of which are Muslims. They particularly as well go after the Church of Scientology. And those are the reasons that we've put them on the special watch list, along with other areas as well we could talk about. Some of the things they're doing in eastern Ukraine that prohibit religious expression in that region, and these are by groups that are supported and sponsored by Russia.

WICKER: Thank you.

Congressman Smith.

SMITH: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Ambassador, if I could, as you know, we all know, there is a rising tide of antisemitism, particularly in the Middle East but also in Europe and the United States. The most recent FBI hate crime statistic shows that from 2016 to 2017 the number of antisemitic hate crimes directed based on religious belief of identity jumped by 37 percent. It is now 58 percent, far eclipsing any acts here in the United States against Muslims, or Christians, or anyone else. That is mirrored throughout the OSCE space itself. And I'm wondering – you know, we have been asking the president – and perhaps you could take this back – repeatedly to put in place a special envoy.

I authored that amendment in 2004 that created the special envoy. It seems to me that that point person, working in tandem with you, would greatly – especially during this rising tide that's occurring – to get that person in place. So I would respectfully ask that you could raise that with the president. I've raised it with Secretary Pompeo. He promised. They had someone. Apparently there was a real problem with a health issue. So hopefully as soon as possible that person could be put in place.

Secondly, on the whole issue of the designated persons list for particularly severe violations of religious freedom, which we included in the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, my hope would be that that list could be forthcoming, because that would work in tandem, in my opinion, with the Global Magnitsky Act. The more we put people on lists who torture and abuse, the more we're going to get compliance. As you mentioned so well, as soon as President Trump moved economically against Erdogan, that was probably the linchpin that caused Pastor Brunson to be freed. So that designated persons list I think is extremely important.

On the training issue, going back to when Frank Wolf wrote his original bill, and when I wrote the bill that we named in his name, training has always been a problem. There are great Foreign Service officers and DCMs and ambassadors. But if they don't get the right training – and you and your staff certainly know it inside and out, all the nuances of religious freedom and/or the lack thereof. But it seems to me that we need to do a better job on that training component. And you might speak to what – and we put that in the Wolf bill – we tried to ratchet up a better understanding.

Like you, I travel all over the world. I have been astonished by some foreign services and even ambassadors whose perspective on religious freedom is, at best, naïve, if not

prejudicial, while others are all-in, and they understand it, and they are competent as the day is long. So we need, I think, to raise that bar if we could.

And finally, on the issue of Turkey, I would hope there would be an ongoing evaluation for the designation of Turkey as a CPC country. As I said in my opening, their persistent violations of religious freedom and their acts of persecution have been longstanding, but they're fresh every time they commit or recommit them, which is ongoing. It's pervasive. I've been to Turkey many times. I've been to Ankara, Istanbul. I've raised these issues. We raised it – Mr. Wicker and I – Senator Wicker and I – when we were in Istanbul for the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and got a lot of blank stares from some of the parliamentarians for raising those issues. So there is a problem. I think CPC directed towards Turkey for its mistreatment of so many, including the Orthodox, would send a powerful, powerful message. So with respect, I would ask that that be considered as well.

BROWNBACK: Thank you very much, Congressman Smith.

Let me first start by saying the Religious Freedom Act turned 20 years this year, that you and Senator Nichols did, in the Senate side, and a number of others. I was supporting of it. I said yesterday, while things have not been going well lately, I think the pump's fully primed. It's ready to go. Things are moving now. You're going to see a lot of action. You've seen a lot more action. You're going to see a lot of action on religious freedom.

The special envoy, the secretary is committed to get an antisemitism special envoy appointed. He had one. There were issues. I've been cleared to say that we anticipate somebody will be in that job right after the first of the year. So it is not for a lack of effort. There just seriously had been health issues that come up. In his place, I have been meeting with Jewish outside groups. When I travel, I meet with Jewish activists as well, raise these issues regularly. It was raised at the ministerial. We had a sidebar on anti-semitism. It has been rising. You'd think, and the shadows of World War II and what happened to the Jewish community and the Holocaust, that people would say never again, and it would literally mean that. And yet, you see it rising again. But hope to have that person onboard relatively soon.

Thank you for your suggestion on the designated persons list. I think that's a good thought of another tool. You've seen this administration use Global Magnitsky in a number of settings. It's an important tool that's a recent one that the Congress has given the administration. It is used, and I think used quite a bit, and will be used more.

We're doing more training. Our office – Dan Nadel, that's the Foreign Service head of the office, is out regularly doing training. We're getting more training sessions established. I agree with you, it's something that needs to take place. We've got this great Foreign Service system. They're generally used to being trained in other fields, but not so used to being trained in this field. But now with the administration's putting this big push on religious freedom, more of these training sessions are set up and you'll see more of this happen. It is important, because like anything you need – people need to know how to operate the equipment. We've got equipment that the Congress has passed. There's the second bill, Frank World Act, that gave more tools here. We need to use that.

Turkey has been an area of real concern. I've been there. I met with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew as well when I was there. The concerns that he raises, that Brunson raises, that other pastors have raised, that the situation – it's one we continue to watch, and work, and actively work throughout the agency. I can tell you, it's not for lack of discussion of focus. They are a NATO ally. That creates other pressures in other places. We were pleased that they finally released Pastor Brunson. He shouldn't have been taken in the first place. He shouldn't have been held for two years. But they continue to be one that merits a lot of focus and does get a lot of focus from this administration and from my office and will continue to.

WICKER: Ambassador, just let me tie up one little loose end on Uzbekistan. OSCE has the Parliamentary Assembly, which those of us at this table are part of. There's also the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, commonly known as ODIHR. They're available to help countries that want to move in the right direction in areas such as human rights and areas such as religious freedom. But the country has to ask for it. So I wrote a letter to Uzbekistan asking them to request the assistance of ODIHR. I sent the letter to the Foreign Minister Kamilov urging the government formally to request an ODIHR legal review. I've not received a response. Do you have any knowledge about that? Is this something that's come to your attention? And do you have – do you know if, in fact, Uzbekistan has availed themselves of this tool?

BROWNBACK: Mr. Chairman, I don't know. I'll have –

WICKER: OK. I'm spreading that on the record today and saying it publicly to anyone within the sound of our voices, that I think this would be a very positive step for a country that is absolutely legitimately intent on moving in the right direction. And so I'll let you have the last word in this hearing, but let's celebrate the progress that we're making in this one section of the globe, Uzbekistan. I don't want this hearing to be seen as coming down hard on Uzbekistan. We are holding this hearing to try and improve the situation, but also to celebrate the fact that we are better off today than we were a year ago in Uzbekistan. This is a country that wants to move in the right direction, that has so many opportunities. We are publicly commending the progress that they are making.

I'll let you have the last word, Mr. Ambassador.

BROWNBACK: Mr. Chairman, I think it's well-said. We should celebrate this. I mean, this has been a real effort by this country. They've taken specific, tangible acts, and not just in religious freedom. They've done it in child labor. They've done it in the cotton harvest recently. They've had human rights progress. Now, you could say, OK, well, there's still issues to deal with. Yes, but they have made specific and tangible progress. They're committed to do it. And the president is committed to do it. I had a lengthy meeting with him. I've had lengthy meetings with the foreign minister. These things don't happen overnight. This is a country that was under Soviet rule for many years, and an authoritarian regime. Certainly Karimov's regime ahead of Mirziyoyev was authoritarian regime. So they're making a real change. We should celebrate that. We're going to continue to work with them.

One other thing that we offered them to work with is that the president's – and we're going to work with him – picking 15 young leaders in that country, particularly in the government, to come here – and we're going to pay for this – in training and relationship-building with people about how to run a government that pushes human rights, religious freedom. That's been offered, and they've accepted. I hope to do with Uzbekistan the same thing with other countries in Central Asia, as a way of moving forward. So we hope to work with them closely. I've offered the Tajiks the same thing. Work with us. We'll get the U.N. special rapporteur to do a report so you're not seeing it as just from the United States. It's a U.N. report. We'll review it and see if that's something that we can back. And then let's get you on a track out of CPC designation. Because we want to see countries progress on this, not just stay in the CPC's designation.

WICKER: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador. We stand ready to be your teammate and partner in this regard. Please convey our appreciation to the secretary of state and to the president of the United States for elevating this as an important issue, and for putting someone of your stature and renown to be part of the United States message in this regard. Thank you for your effort. I'm looking forward to a very productive and positive 2019. As I pass this gavel to one of my colleagues in the House of Representatives, please know that the Senate will stay involved on a bipartisan basis. We want to be there for you and to provide the resource support, as well as the public opinion support that we can have.

And with that, we will close this hearing with the thanks of the Commission. Thank you, sir.

[Whereupon, at 11:47 a.m., the hearing ended.]