

United States Senate

October 8, 2015

The Honorable John Kerry
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry:

In 2014, Congress passed the Near East and South Central Asia Religious Freedom Act (Pub. L. 113-161) to establish a Special Envoy to promote religious freedom of religious minorities in places like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Under the bill, the Special Envoy would have the rank of ambassador. The bill was passed without objection and signed into law by President Obama on August 8, 2014.

On December 12, 2014, David Saperstein was confirmed as the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. The position was vacant for nearly a year before President Obama nominated him.

According to the State Department's website, "the Ambassador at Large is, by law, a principal advisor to the President and Secretary of State and serves as the United States' chief diplomat on issues of religious freedom worldwide." However, the Office of International Religious Freedom, of which the Ambassador-at-Large is the head, falls under the Office of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, which is under the jurisdiction of the Under Secretary for Civilian Security.

In April of 2015, Members of Congress sent President Obama a bipartisan, bicameral letter urging the appointment of a Special Envoy, given the brutal attacks by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) targeting Christians, Assyrians, Yezidis and other religious minorities.

Finally, on September 16, 2015, Knox Thames was appointed as the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia. While I am pleased that someone will be dedicated to promoting and protecting the religious freedom of those in this region, I am very concerned about the length of time it took to fill the position and the ultimate status of the position.

The Administration has taken the position that religion is playing an increasingly important role in international affairs, yet it took over a year to fill the position and there was no formal announcement regarding the appointment of Knox Thames. Instead, the announcement came from a Twitter post from Ambassador Saperstein's account.

The Near East and South Central Asia Religious Freedom Act specifically called for a Special Envoy, yet a Special Advisor was appointed.

Within the State Department, there are Special Envoys for climate change, the closure of the Guantanamo Bay detention facility, to promote the human rights of LGBT persons, and to promote Islamic cooperation. The Administration has been clear that all of these issues are top priorities and the designation of Special Envoy reflects that. According to the organizational chart on the State Department's website, most Special Envoys and Special Representatives report directly to you, again showing the priority of the positions.

It is my understanding the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia will work in the Office of International Religious Freedom and report to Ambassador Saperstein.

The Administration has taken the position that “promoting and protecting religious freedom is a key objective of U.S. foreign policy,” yet the Ambassador-at-Large for religious freedom is buried in layers of bureaucracy rather than reporting directly to you like the Ambassadors-at-Large for the Office of Global Women’s Issues and the Office of Global AIDS Coordinator.

The world has seen the priority placed on issues like climate change and women’s health by this Administration and the status of those positions within the State Department are a direct reflection of those priorities.

However, regarding religious freedom, actions do not reflect the words. If it is the goal of the United States to stand for the universal human right of all people to practice their faiths, then we must make that a priority not just internationally but here at home as well. If it is a priority, it must be treated as such in terms of the position within the State Department.

Due to these concerns, I ask that you provide answers to the following questions by October 30th:

- As your principal advisor on issues of religious freedom, why doesn’t the Ambassador-at-Large report directly to you? How often do you meet with him personally?
- Despite signing the law calling for a Special Envoy, why did President Obama designate Ambassador Saperstein to carry out the duties in the Near East and South Central Asia Religious Freedom Act instead?
- If the Near East and South Central Asia Religious Freedom Act called for a Special Envoy, why was a Special Advisor appointed? What are the implications for his job responsibilities and his longevity in this position as a Special Advisor rather than a Special Envoy?
- How does creating a lower level position reflect that promoting and protecting religious freedom is a key objective of U.S. foreign policy?
- How will your Department fulfill the professed commitment to religious freedom, and to the international covenants that guarantee it as the inalienable right of every human being?

Thank you for time and attention to this critical matter and I look forward to hearing from you.

In God We Trust,


JAMES LANKFORD
United States Senator