



## SUMMARY OF THE EXECUTIVE ORDER ON ADVANCING INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

On June 2, 2020, United States President Donald Trump signed a historic Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom (Executive Order 13926). The Order is the first executive order in the United States focusing specifically on international religious freedom, and situates the protection of religious freedom worldwide as a central priority for U.S. foreign policy.

### General Overview

The Order reflects the increasing importance of international religious freedom for the U.S. In 1998, Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act (IRF Act), which created an Office of International Religious Freedom within the State Department, headed by an Ambassador at Large; as well as the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent agency designed to make recommendations to the State Department on which countries were the worst offenders against religious freedom. In recent years, international religious freedom has come to play a more prominent role. In 2016, the IRF Act was strengthened by Congress. In the summers of 2018 and 2019, the U.S. hosted two Ministerials to Advance Religious Freedom. In September 2019, President Trump hosted an event at the United Nations General Assembly with the Secretary-General of the U.N. on international religious freedom. And most recently, earlier this year the U.S. helped to launch the International Religious Freedom Alliance, a growing coalition of over two dozen countries that have agreed to promote international religious freedom in their policies.

### Specific Actions

The new Executive Order integrates international religious freedom within U.S. foreign policy and agency decisions in a number of important ways:

- **Section 1** describes religious freedom as a “moral and national security imperative” that is a foreign policy priority for the U.S., and that will be respected and vigorously promoted. Religious freedom is described as “a gift of God to every person and a right that is fundamental for the flourishing of our society.” Religious communities and organizations are described as “vital partners” with whom the U.S. will engage robustly in order to craft government policies, programs, and activities.



- **Section 2** directs the Secretary of State, in consultation with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to develop, within 180 days, a long-term plan to prioritize international religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy and the foreign assistance programs of the State Department and USAID. USCIRF had long called for the U.S. to develop such a long-term plan.
- **Section 3** creates a \$50 million budget floor per fiscal year for programs dedicated to advancing religious freedom, which includes programming regarding attacks on individuals and groups on the basis of their religion, assisting those groups in “persever[ing] as distinct communities,” promoting accountability against attackers, ensuring equal rights for individuals and groups regardless of religious belief, and protecting houses of worship and cultural sites. Further, the Order provides that agencies should not discriminate against faith-based and religious entities because of their beliefs or identity.
- **Section 4** integrates international religious freedom widely throughout the diplomatic corps. Chiefs of Mission in countries with violations of religious freedom must develop comprehensive action plans to support the U.S.’s efforts on religious freedom and to encourage their host governments to improve the religious freedom situation in their countries. In bilateral and multilateral engagements, the heads of U.S. agencies should raise concerns about religious freedom and about religious prisoners of conscience.
- **Section 5** directs all federal employees stationed overseas to receive international religious freedom training at least once every three years. This section extends religious freedom training beyond foreign service officers to include all federal employees stationed overseas.
- **Section 6** directs the Secretary of State and the Secretary of the Treasury, in consultation with the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, to develop recommendations that would prioritize the use of economic tools, such as realigning foreign assistance and the use of sanctions mechanisms like visa restrictions and asset freezes, in order to advance religious freedom.

## Conclusion

Each of the actions required by the Executive Order has previously been used to advance international religious freedom, but never at the scale that the Order envisions. Economic tools have only occasionally been used against severe violators of religious freedom, but the Order calls for a greater examination and use of these tools in order to advance international religious freedom. Previous training had been limited to only certain foreign service officers, but all federal employees are in need of education regarding the status of the fundamental right of religious freedom. Individual offices, such as the Office of International Religious Freedom, might have created long-term plans, but a detailed plan to guide the entire U.S. foreign policy apparatus has never before been attempted within the U.S. government.

The effects of the wide-ranging Executive Order remain to be seen, but it is the most extensive attempt by the U.S. government to incorporate international religious freedom into every corner of U.S. foreign policy decision-making. The implementation of the Executive Order will determine the extent to which it succeeds. Advocates for religious freedom and faith-based organizations should constantly monitor the progress of the Order’s implementation, and should suggest how it could be best implemented at every stage.

It is difficult to overstate the possibilities that the Executive Order opens up. The victims of religious persecution deserve the most vigorous implementation, as well as the best that advocates of international religious freedom and faith-based organizations have to offer. Now is the time to act.

