

Religious Freedom Advocate: Rex Tillerson Should've Been Asked These 3 Questions

Tina Ramirez, the president and founder of Hardwired Global, a nonprofit that works with religious minorities and persecuted groups in the Middle East and around the world to promote religious freedom, recently wrote an op-ed outlining three important questions Secretary of State-designate Rex Tillerson should be asked during his Senate confirmation hearings.

The former staff director of the House International Religious Freedom Caucus noted the important role the Department of State plays in religious freedom cases around the world. And just because Tillerson was a wildly successful businessman doesn't necessarily mean he's going to do a good job protecting one of our nation's most sacred first liberties.

"Managing a global enterprise is far different than managing hundreds of global crises that are not measured in dollars and barrels, but in lives and freedom," she wrote. "One of the most pressing concerns, largely ignored by the Obama administration, is America's first freedom—religious liberty—and its application to U.S. policy devised in Foggy Bottom. As America's chief diplomat, Tillerson should commit to protecting the rights and freedoms of the oppressed the world over."

The first question senators should ask Tillerson, Ramirez wrote, was whether or not he would advise the administration to include religious freedom and respect for human rights in the National Security Strategy, and embed in it relevant agency protocols, strategic documents and diplomatic training:

Because the Obama administration's abdication of American leadership on this human right is well-known. The

ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, a position mandated by the International Religious Freedom Act, has been vacant for half of the current administration. Religious freedom was erased from the National Security Strategy, the religious factors in conflict ignored and global terrorist groups grew by 58 percent under Obama's administration.

In late 2016, Congress responded by passing the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016 to strengthen IRFA. The bill will provide President-elect Trump an opportunity to restore America's leadership on religious freedom during his administration.

The Foreign Service Institute must also revise human rights courses and make them mandatory for all U.S. diplomats. At the same time, the ambassador can work with other agencies to increase public literacy about the ambassador's role and importance of religious freedom in foreign policy and American history.

Ramirez then said Tillerson should be asked if he would tie foreign aid and international assistance funding—including to the United Nations—to assurances of respect for human rights and religious freedom:

Because the State Department needs to outline a concrete plan for improving legal and social respect for religious freedom in countries of particular concern. While this may seem obvious, it has never been attempted. To date, U.S. policy has only been reactive. Confronting the challenges of global terrorism in the name of religion requires a proactive strategy –and at the forefront of the plan should be specific measures to build local sustainable leadership for this right globally.

We must incorporate conditions to foreign aid on respect for religious freedom and create a special bilateral dialogue in

countries with deteriorating records on religious freedom with special attention to supporting efforts in countries at risk of being destabilized by religious extremism. If the lessons of Iraq have taught us anything, it is that countries will never stabilize without this freedom, no matter how much support we give them to defend against groups like ISIS.

Finally, she wrote, Tillerson should be asked if he will prioritize persecuted religious minorities for refugee resettlement, particularly Iraqi and Syrian Christians and Yazidis who face genocide at the hands of ISIS:

While pre-war Syria was 10 percent Christian with hundreds of thousands of other religious minorities, only half of 1 percent of the nearly 13,000 Syrian refugees the State Department resettled were Christians and 24 (sic) were of the deeply persecuted Yazidi faith, targeted by ISIS for extermination and sexual enslavement. More than 98 percent of the refugees were of the majority Muslim faith.

While Muslims deserve religious liberty as much as any other group, the discrimination (intentional or not) against religious minorities is unacceptable.

Iraqi and Syrian Christians (and other persecuted groups) should be prioritized in refugee resettlement programs. America has historically prioritized many persecuted groups, and now is the time to help a community that has no alternative for local resettlement. The State Department under Tillerson can privilege private sector efforts to meet the humanitarian and resettlement needs with a specific focus on nuclear families, orphans and widows.

Ramirez concluded that Tillerson must outline the Trump administration's commitment to religious freedom "clearly and boldly," even before his confirmation. One way he could quickly do this is by appointing an ambassador-at-large for

international religious freedom in the first 100 days after the president's inauguration.

"If we can protect religious freedom abroad, we will have greater freedom at home," she wrote. "And if we understand this freedom at home, we will preserve it around the world to ensure that it is never taken from us. If we don't, who will?"
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