

Secretary of State: Restrictions on Religious Freedom Cannot Be Tolerated

Religious liberty advocates from across the country have praised U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson for his defense of religious freedom in light of annual report released Tuesday.

Baptist Press reported that Tillerson, in introducing the International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, has held the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria responsible for crimes of genocide not only against Christians but also against Shia Muslims, Kurds and Sunni Muslims in areas it has controlled.

“Almost 80 percent of the global population live with restrictions on hostilities to limit their freedom of religion,” Tillerson said in his report. “Where religious freedom is not protected, we know that instability, human rights abuses and violent extremism have a greater opportunity to take root.”

Members of Congress who have championed international religious freedom lauded Tillerson for his statements.

“It is vitally important that our top diplomat clearly and unequivocally proclaim that religious freedom is a core American value and a universal human right,” Sen. James Lankford, R-Okla., told *Baptist Press*. “It is important for America to be clear about the human rights abuses happening around the world, as well as the genocide being committed by ISIS against Yazidis, Christians and Shia Muslims.”

Republican New Jersey Rep. Chris Smith commended Tillerson for taking this action in light of the previous administration’s apathy to the problem.

“These groups are looking for help and leadership, and I am proud that, after eight years of denial and foot dragging, this report positions the United States to become a world leader in helping those who need it most,” Smith said.

Tillerson made it clear that the designation of genocide against ISIS and other terrorist groups was a U.S. State Department determination rather than an individual one.

Nina Shea, director of the Hudson Institute’s Center for Religious Freedom, told Baptist Press that Tillerson, “pressed for a more religiously tolerant culture, specifically in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Pakistan and other Muslim countries.”

Iran law calls for the death penalty for efforts by non-Muslims to convert Muslims. Baptist Press reported that Iran’s government executed people, ‘including 20 Sunni Muslim Kurds,” for “enmity against God.”

Saudi Arabian law criminalizes non-Muslim public worship. The Chinese government continues to harass, arrest, abuse and imprison members of unregistered Christian churches.

Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are considered among the world’s most severe violators of religious freedom according to the report’s list of “countries of particular concern” (CPCs).