

Trump Announces New Religious Freedom Initiatives in United Nations Speech

President Donald Trump announced Monday at the United Nations his determination to continue to fight for religious freedom and new plans to accomplish that goal. In doing so, Trump became the first sitting U.S. president to convene a meeting at the United Nations on religious freedom. During his remarks, Trump said the U.S. would donate an additional \$25 million to protect religious sites and relics, and that he intended to partner with the private sector to protect the rights of all religions in the workplace.

While introducing Trump, Vice President Mike Pence explained why it was so important to convene the United Nations regarding international religious freedom.

“There’s no better time for a meeting like this on the world stage,” Pence said. “As we gather here at the United Nations, more than 80% of the world’s population live in nations where religious freedom is threatened or banned. The regime in Iran brutally persecutes Christians, Baha’i, Sunni and Jews. In Iraq, Iran-backed militias terrorize Christians and Yazidis who were nearly wiped out by ISIS’ recent campaign of genocide.

“The Communist Party in China has arrested Christian pastors, banned the sale of Bibles, demolished churches and imprisoned more than a million Uyghurs in the Muslim population. In our hemisphere, the regime of Daniel Ortega is virtually waging war on the Catholic Church in Nicaragua. In Venezuela, the dictator Nicolas Maduro uses anti-hate laws to prosecute clergy even as his media cronies spread anti-Semitism by trivializing the Holocaust. Communities of faith across the

wider world have also faced unspeakable acts of violence in places of worship, shocking the conscience of the world.”

Trump reminded attendees that religious freedom is of paramount importance to democracies around the world.

“Our founders understood that no right is more fundamental to a peaceful, prosperous and virtuous society than the right to follow one’s religious convictions,” Trump said. “Regrettably, the religious freedom enjoyed by American citizens is rare in the world. Approximately 80% of the world’s population live in countries where religious liberty is threatened, restricted or even banned. ...

“Today with one clear voice, the United States calls upon the nations of the world to end religious persecution. To stop the crimes against people of faith, release prisoners of conscience, repeal laws restricting freedom of religion and belief, protect the vulnerable, defenseless and oppressed. America stands with believers in every country who ask only for the freedom to live according to the faith that is within their own hearts. As president, protecting religious freedom is one of my highest priorities and always has been.”

Trump began his speech by thanking those in his administration who have been fighting on behalf of religious liberty: Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross, Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin, U.N. Ambassador Kelly Craft and Ambassador-at-Large Sam Brownback. He also recognized Pastor Andrew Brunson—who was in attendance with his wife Norine at the U.N. meeting—and called Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan a “friend.”

“With us today is Pastor Andrew Brunson, who was imprisoned in Turkey for a long period of time,” Trump said. “Last year, my administration was thrilled to bring him back home after a very short and respectful negotiation with a strong man, and a man who’s become a friend of mine fortunately, President

Erdogan of Turkey. I called the president and I said, 'He's an innocent man. They've been trying to get Andrew out for a long time, the previous administration.' I don't think they tried too hard, unfortunately."

Brunson was imprisoned Oct. 7, 2016, and released Oct. 12, 2018. Trump was inaugurated into office Jan. 20, 2017.

Trump also praised Franklin Graham, who was in attendance, and the disaster relief work Graham oversees through Samaritan's Purse.

"Franklin Graham [has] been so instrumental in everything we're doing," Trump said. "He's done such an incredible job in so many different ways, including floods and hurricanes. And every time I go, I see Franklin there. He's always there before me. I don't know how he gets there before me. I'm going to beat him one day, but he's always at these places of, really, disaster areas. He's right there with an incredible, large staff of volunteers that are just amazing. Thank you very much."

Trump recounted several accomplishments he had made on behalf of religious liberty, including a White House meeting with survivors of religious persecution earlier this year.

"In July, I met with survivors of religious persecution at the White House, and we're honored that many of them could be here today as well," Trump said. "Some of these individuals suffered as a result of state-sponsored persecution, others at the hands of terrorists and criminals. No matter the case, America will always be a voice for victims of religious persecution everywhere. No matter where you go, you have a place in the United States of America."

However, Trump did not announce any changes to reports that his administration may allow no refugees into the United States next year. Senators Chris Coons and James Lankford—who co-chair the annual National Prayer Breakfast—expressed in a

letter to Pompeo that such a policy would prevent the U.S. from protecting people fleeing “persecution because of their faith.”

Trump praised Pompeo’s annual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom and made two more new program announcements.

“Today the Trump administration will dedicate an additional \$25 million to protect religious sites and relics. We’re also pleased to be joined today by many of the partners from the business community as we announce a very critical initiative. The United States is forming a coalition of businesses for the protection of religious freedom.

“This is the first time this has been done. This initiative will encourage the private sector to protect people of all faiths in the workplace, and the private sector has brilliant leadership. ... Too often people in positions of power preach diversity well, silencing shunning or censoring the faithful. True tolerance means respecting the right of all people to express their deeply held religious beliefs.”

Trump also mentioned that he had “obliterated” the Johnson Amendment—a provision in the U.S. tax code that forbids nonprofit organizations and churches from explicitly endorsing political campaigns. The repeal of the Johnson Amendment was one of Trump’s signature campaign pledges in 2016.

“The Johnson Amendment—[this] doesn’t get spoken about enough, but I’m very proud to say we’ve obliterated the Johnson Amendment within our country, so that now we can listen to the people we want to listen to, [and] listen to religious leaders without fear of recrimination against them,” Trump said.

On May 4, 2017, Trump signed an executive order that urges the Treasury Department to show leniency to violators of the Johnson Amendment. A formal congressional effort to repeal the Johnson Amendment failed in December 2017. As a result, the law is less widely enforced but continues to exist.

You can watch Trump's full speech, as well as comments by Pence and other officials, [here](#).