

Congress creates envoy for religious minorities persecuted in Asia

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [September 17, 2014](#) issue

As Islamic State fighters in Iraq and Syria send religious minorities fleeing for their lives, Congress has created a new job at the State Department: Special Envoy to Promote Religious Freedom of Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia.

Those regions “are the hot burning center” of the global problem of religious persecution,” said Katrina Lantos Swett, who heads the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which Congress created in 1998 to monitor the issue independent of the State Department.

Advocates for global religious freedom have lobbied for the position for years, and some say it is possible that the White House will combine the envoy’s duties with those of the larger portfolio of the ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom.

The White House on August 20 declined to comment on that possibility. President Obama’s choice for the ambassador-at-large job is Rabbi David Saperstein, who has led the Washington office of Reform Judaism for four decades. His nomination is pending before the Senate.

“A lot of people feel he would do an excellent job if this was rolled into his portfolio,” Lantos Swett said. She also noted that it seems as if Congress intended the ambassador-at-large and the special envoy to be two separate positions.

“I have confidence that Saperstein, whatever his title, can make a difference” if he is given the authority and resources those positions warrant, said Thomas Farr, director of the Religious Freedom Project at Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs.

But Representative Frank Wolf (R., Va.), a lead sponsor of the bill for the special envoy, said the two jobs call for two people.

“There needs to be a person solely focused on the Middle East,” said Wolf spokesman Dan Scandling. “What is happening there demands the total—and focused—attention of a special envoy. The ambassador-at-large has the world. The special envoy would focus entirely on the Middle East.”

He added that while the ambassador must be confirmed, the envoy could be appointed and start serving far faster.

The office of the special envoy comes with a \$1 million budget, according to the law, signed by Obama August 8.

In recent months, the Islamic State has rampaged across Muslim and non-Muslim communities, demanding that they choose conversion or death and kidnapping girls and women. But militant forces and governments imperil other religious minorities in the Middle East and South Central Asia, as detailed in the annual U.S. report on international religious freedom.

Asked for comment on the special envoy, White House spokesman Shin Inouye confirmed that the president had signed the bill that created the job and urged the Senate to confirm a new ambassador-at-large.

“We are hopeful the Senate will quickly confirm Rabbi Saperstein to this important position,” said Inouye. —RNS

This article was edited September 3, 2014.