

Tillerson says protecting targets of ISIS is U.S. religious freedom priority

The secretary of state cited the militant group's attacks on Middle Eastern religious minorities.

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [September 13, 2017](#) issue

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson underlined the nation's commitment to protecting religious and ethnic groups targeted by the so-called Islamic State as he issued his department's first international religious freedom report since President Trump took office.

"ISIS is clearly responsible for genocide against Yazidis, Christians, and Shi'a Muslims in areas it controls or has controlled," said Tillerson on August 15 at the State Department.

He linked ISIS to ethnic cleansing of religious minorities and attacks on churches and Christian pilgrims in Egypt.

"The protection of these groups—and others subject to violent extremism—is a human rights priority for the Trump administration," he said. "We will continue working with our regional partners to protect religious minority communities from terrorist attacks and to preserve their cultural heritage."

The release of the 2016 *International Religious Freedom Report* came as Trump had been accused of exacerbating hostility toward Muslims and hesitating to condemn white supremacist activism and anti-Semitism within his own nation.

The report states in an appendix on the 2016 U.S. refugee policy that the United States recognizes resettlement as a "vital tool for providing refugees protection." Asked how that squares with recent administration actions on refugees, Ambassador Michael Kozak, a senior adviser to the State Department, said regulations on refugees vary from country to country.

"There have always been different protocols for vetting refugees for security and other reasons," Kozak said. "In the areas liberated from ISIS, the preferred option is

to allow people to return to their traditional villages.”

In his remarks, Tillerson also noted the continuing advocacy by the United States for the release of American pastor Andrew Brunson, whom he said Turkey has “wrongfully imprisoned.”

Tillerson said he anticipates a “swift confirmation” of Kansas governor Sam Brownback as ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom.

The annual report does not include a new list of “Countries of Particular Concern,” but the State Department is legally required to update it within 90 days of issuing the report. The countries listed as of October 2016 are Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

—Religion News Service

FOLLOWING UP (Updated November 1, 2018): Andrew Brunson, a detained missionary at the center of a dispute between the United States and Turkey, was freed on October 12 by a Turkish court. At a hearing near the city of Izmir, where Brunson had lived for two decades, the court handed down a 37-month sentence on charges of terrorism and conspiring against the Turkish government but suspended it for time already served, Religion News Service wrote. He and his wife, Norine, were arrested in fall 2016 as part of a crackdown on Protestants in the aftermath of a coup attempt in Turkey. While she was released, he remained imprisoned and then under house arrest.

“I am an innocent human being,” Brunson, a teaching elder in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, told the court. “I love Jesus, I love Turkey.”

Former members of the congregation Brunson founded and pastored who were key witnesses against him recanted at the recent hearing. They had previously testified that Brunson had connections to the Fethullah Gülen movement, which the Turkish government blames for the failed coup. A witness also accused Brunson of aiding the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, which the United States and Turkey label a terrorist organization, through his work with Syrian refugees. After Brunson’s release he was allowed to return to the United States, where he met with President Donald Trump on October 13 in the Oval Office, the Associated Press reported. Brunson offered to pray for Trump, asking for God to “give him supernatural wisdom to accomplish all the plans you have for this country and for him. I ask that you give him wisdom in how to lead this country into righteousness.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "State Department report on religious freedom focuses on ISIS."