

Testimony of Rabbi David Saperstein
Nominee for Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom
September 11, 2014

Chairman Coons, Ranking Member Flake and Members of the Committee, thank you for this hearing to consider my nomination as Ambassador At Large for International Religious Freedom. I am honored by this opportunity to appear before you, as I am honored by the confidence President Obama and Secretary Kerry have placed in me to serve our nation in advancing the right to freedom of religion around the world.

First, I want to pause and remember those we lost on September 11th, thirteen years ago. On this day, we stand with their families and loved ones, and honor all survivors of those tragic events. As we say in the Jewish tradition: *zichronom livracha* – *may their memories ever be for a blessing*.

I want to acknowledge the presence today of my wife, Ellen Weiss, a distinguished journalist, and my son, Daniel; my remarkable colleagues from the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism; and an array of religious leaders from varied faith traditions and political persuasions who have been my partners in the vital work we have done to help ensure that religious freedom and our shared values of human dignity, justice and peace flourish more fully in our nation and around the world.

Indeed, it has been one of the great opportunities of my life to have had the opportunity to play a leadership role in interfaith coalitions that span many, diverse faith groups around the world, and faith groups in the U.S. with a broad range of theological views. To current events, efforts to isolate extremist groups willing to use force to impose their views on others must include, among other things, empowering and strengthening civil society actors (including religious communities) that subscribe to the rule of law, freedom of religion, and principles of religious tolerance and coexistence. I hope I can draw on those long relations and experiences in this urgent task.

I want to express, as well, my abiding appreciation to the Members of this Committee, and to the Congress, for consistently elevating international religious freedom issues and concerns. Enacting the *International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA)* sent a clear and strong signal that the universal right of religious freedom

would be a priority in U.S. foreign policy. I was honored to have worked closely with key senators and other Members of Congress of both parties in the shaping of that legislation as part of the broad coalition of religious organizations and denominations who so staunchly supported the passage of IRFA.

During my career, my mandate has covered a wide range of issues. I believe that the ability to see the inter-connected relationship of varied issues will be an asset for the work of the International Religious Freedom office. But there are few issues that have been as central to my career as that of religious freedom, and with it the universal freedoms of thought, conscience and belief – including freedom to change one's religion or beliefs, and to manifest one's beliefs not only through worship but through teaching, preaching, practice, and observance -- as well as the right to hold no religious beliefs.

I started young in my exposure to these issues in that my father, a beloved congregational rabbi for 60 years and my mother, herself active in varied social justice causes, managed to travel to some 80 nations, sometimes bringing my brother and myself, visiting Jewish communities and engaging with other religious leaders wherever they could. Both spoke widely to community forums on issues of Jewish and religious life across the globe. They were outspoken advocates for Soviet Jewry long before it became the norm. My older brother, Marc Saperstein, a leading Jewish historian, has written extensively on the history of Jewish-Christian relations.

Like most Jews, I know all too well that, over the centuries, the Jewish people have been a quintessential victim of religious persecution, ethnic cleansing, and demonization. We have learned, first hand, the costs to the universal rights, security and well-being of religious communities when good people remain silent in the face of such persecution.

This is just one key reason why I cannot remain silent today, when we see historic Christian, Yezidi, and other communities in Iraq and Syria being devastated; when we see Bahais in Iran; Tibetan Buddhists in China; Shia Muslims in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Bahrain; Rohingya Muslims in Burma -- all victims of governmental or societal discrimination, harassment, persecution or physical attacks. And even in Western Europe we are witnessing a steady increase in anti-Semitic discourse and violence against Jewish communities. Sadly, this list is far from exhaustive but shows the broad range of very serious threats to religious freedom and religious communities in nearly every corner of the globe.

It was these passions that led, 16 years ago, to my engagement with passage of IRFA. And, I suspect, my track-record of engagement with religious freedom issues led in 1999, to the honor of being appointed to the first USCIRF – and the subsequent honor of being chosen unanimously by my colleagues to serve as its first Chair.

This nomination comes at a time when forces aligned against religious freedom have grown quite strong. Encouragingly, in many countries, such freedoms flourish. Yet in even more, religious freedom faces daunting and alarming challenges. Seventy-five percent of the world's population lives in countries where religious freedom remains seriously limited, and many religious minorities face persecution, intimidation and harassment.

Recently, we have all seen the tragic violent attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) against Yezidis, Christians, Alawites, Shabak, Turkmen Shia, Sunnis, and others, in parts of Iraq and Syria. ISIL, and groups like it, use violence to impose their views on others who do not share them, and use the claims of religion to justify their abhorrent behavior as they target vulnerable groups based on religious and ethnic identity. They terrorize their neighbors and offer nothing but death, forced conversions, forced marriages and rape. ISIL's attacks illustrate, in real time, just how vulnerable religious minorities can be to violence, displacement, marginalization, gender based violence, and property destruction. This, Mr. Chairman, to say nothing of the unspeakable atrocities they have committed against members of their own sect, Sunni Muslims, who make up the majority of the Syrian population. We have witnessed ISIL crucify members of their own Sunni sect in public squares in Raqqa and stone to death Sunni women accused of adultery, proudly tweeting and posting these horrific acts on YouTube and other social media. Indeed, ISIL's brutality spares no one.

Our goal should be to ensure the internationally recognized right to religious freedom for everyone. It is an urgent task, and the needs are great. With President Obama, Secretary Kerry, Under Secretary Sarah Sewall and Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Tom Malinowski, we have gifted leadership deeply committed to this agenda. I am well aware that the strong leadership of an Ambassador at Large is more important now than ever, and we should participate in this important work both because it is the right course of action, and because it is in our national interest. Towards that end:

- If confirmed, I commit to using this position fervently (and fiercely) to advocate for the rights of individuals to choose, change, and practice their faith safely, to

end blasphemy and apostasy laws, and without government interference or the threat of violence or marginalization, to ensure that people are free and safe to assemble, worship, teach, learn, and share their faith with others.

- If confirmed, I will seek to engage every segment of the State Department and the rest of the U.S. Government, to integrate religious freedom into our nation's statecraft: counter-terrorism, conflict stability efforts, economic development, human rights – all these foreign policy goals need the stability, the security, the contributions of members of religious majorities and religious minorities, in every country, to further our nation's values, interests and agenda.
- If confirmed, I pledge to ensure the integrity of the annual International Religious Freedom Report. I expect to regularize annual reviews of country designations for Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs) to ensure timely and appropriate designation of CPCs and Presidential Actions, which I believe are key instruments in motivating progress on religious freedom.
- If confirmed, I will do everything within my abilities and influence to continue the close working relationship with USCIRF and consult closely with the Congress. I know full well from my tenure on USCIRF that we do the best work when the legislative and administrative branches are reinforcing our respective efforts.
- If confirmed, I pledge to elevate the focus on religious freedom in regional and multilateral organizations, and within the international community at large.

And if confirmed, I will work closely with all faith groups domestically and abroad, and expand efforts to coordinate with outside stakeholders and civil society groups in order to pursue our religious freedom goals abroad. To this end, I will work closely with my long-time friend Shaun Casey, a brilliant and talented leader, appointed by Secretary Kerry to enhance the Department's engagement with religious leaders in the US and across the globe.

In sum, religious freedom was essential in the founding of America, and the American people continue to value the freedoms of religion, thought, conscience, belief, expression, and association. We began our magnificent Bill of Rights with a commitment to religious freedom, knowing that without it, all other freedoms were imperiled. And so too today.

I am dedicated to advancing those freedoms, and hope to be able to do so from the position of Ambassador At Large for International Religious Freedom.

Allow me to conclude with a personal story. In 1939, my father traveled throughout Palestine and Central Europe on the eve of the Second World War. He was one of the last to see the glory of European Jewry in full bloom before the nightmare of Nazism enveloped and destroyed it. He visited Danzig, now Gdansk, just days after the Nazis had been elected in the May elections. He went with enthusiasm to see the magnificent historic main synagogue of this vibrant Jewish community. To his utter dismay; it lay in ruins, only the portal over what had been the beautiful entrance front doors was still intact. On the front lawn, there was a sign that had been erected during the election campaign by the Nazis which said “Komm lieber Mai und mache von Juden uns jetzt frei -- come dear month of May and free us from the Jews”. With tears welling up in his eyes and a chilling sense of the impending disaster symbolized by this scene, his glance gazed upward and then he saw the words – the ancient vision of Malachi, still inscribed over the remaining doorway: “Halo Av echad l’chulanu; halo eyl echad b’ra’anu: have we all not one Father? Has not one God not created us?” (Mal. 2:10). Two visions: one of hatred and tyranny, the other of brotherhood and sisterhood, of unity and peace; one of oppression, the other of freedom; one of darkness and despair, the other of light and hope. This is the choice we face today with a sense of great urgency.

To the religiously oppressed in every land who live in fear, afraid to speak of what they believe in; who worship in underground churches, mosques or temples -- lest authorities discover and punish their devotion to an authority beyond the state; who languish in prisons, bodies broken, spirits too often disfigured -- simply because they love God in their own way or question the existence of God; who feel so desperate that they flee their homes to avoid killing and persecution because of their faith – to all of them, together, you and I, the State Department and the Congress, can be a beacon of light and hope. Should you confirm me, I pray that contributing to fulfilling that dream will be my legacy.

Thank you again for your consideration and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.