

STATEMENT BY SUZAN D. JOHNSON COOK

Nominee to be Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom
Senate Foreign Relations Committee

March 29, 2011

Madam Chair and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today.

I am truly grateful for your consideration of my nomination by President Obama as United States Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. I am deeply honored by the trust that President Obama and Secretary Clinton have placed in me by nominating me to serve our nation in advancing the right to freedom of religion abroad. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my family and extended family, who are here with me, for their sacrifice, love, and endurance.

As President Obama so eloquently stated in his historic speech in Cairo in 2009, "People in every country should be free to choose and live their faith based upon the persuasion of the mind and the heart and the soul." Religious freedom is the birthright of all people everywhere; it is a foundation of civil society, it is a key to international security, and it must always be a pillar of U.S. foreign policy. I believe this in my mind, heart, and soul. Religious freedom is a universal principle, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and protected in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

The dramatic events unfolding in the Middle East and North Africa remind us that the desire for freedom lies deep within the human spirit. No greater freedom exists than the inherent desire of all people to enjoy the freedom to live according to their beliefs without government interference and with government protection. I am deeply disturbed by the increase of persecution and violence against religious minorities in this region and in many other parts of the world. These developments belie both our values and our security.

In addition to violence, Christians, Bahais, Jews, Ahmadis, and other religious minorities often face social, political, and economic exclusion or marginalization. Secretary Clinton has made clear that "We need to do much more to stand up for the rights of religious minorities" She also said we have to speak out more and to hold governments accountable. If confirmed, this will be my core mission.

In my travels around the country and around the world, I have found that my experience as an African American woman and faith leader has enabled me to identify with other minority communities, both religious and ethnic. African-Americans did not enjoy full religious freedom in this land for centuries, and religion was used by many to justify slavery and segregation. So I am particularly committed to this issue, in the United States and for people of all faiths around the world. Immediately following and since the attacks of 9/11, as the Chaplain for the New

York City Police Department, I have been called upon to aid many citizens from many faiths and diverse national backgrounds.

We were tragically reminded just weeks ago that the universal value of religious freedom is not embraced by all. The March 2 assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's Minister for Minority Affairs, and a courageous champion for religious freedom, is a painful reminder that our challenge is not easy. It requires an unwavering commitment to support those around the world who are risking their lives to stand up for religious freedom. President Obama paid tribute to Minister Bhatti with these words: "Minister Bhatti fought for and sacrificed his life for the universal values that Pakistanis, Americans and people around the world hold dear – the right to speak one's mind, to practice one's religion as one chooses, and to be free from discrimination based on one's background or beliefs."

If confirmed, I will carry out the full Congressional mandate as established in the IRF Act, in letter and in spirit, including serving as the principal advisor to the President and the Secretary of State on religious freedom. I will bring bold leadership to advance and defend religious freedom abroad. I will ensure the integrity of the annual International Religious Freedom Report to Congress and draw on these reports, while engaging governments and societies on the importance of respecting and protecting religious communities and safeguarding the right of individuals to believe or not believe. If confirmed, I will press for the timely and appropriate designation of Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs) and Presidential Actions, a critical tool to motivate progress on religious freedom. I will seek to expand training of diplomats on religious freedom. I will use program resources to implement projects that address systemic issues challenging religious freedom -- including blasphemy, apostasy, and the right to change one's religion.

The life and professional background I offer this position is unique. My international experiences have particularly shaped my perspectives and brought me to this point. I have been privileged to enjoy a range of experiences in bringing people of different faiths together to achieve common objectives -- including religious freedom and respect for people of other faiths and beliefs. I have traveled to five continents to engage Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Protestants, Jews, and practitioners of several other spiritual traditions. I have led interfaith delegations to Israel, Jordan, and Egypt, and throughout the Caribbean. I worked with World Vision, in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, in its efforts to combat global poverty. I have traveled to Zimbabwe and South Africa to meet with Zulu faith leaders to promote religious freedom and tolerance. As a young woman, I worked with Operation Crossroads Africa, and participated in a cross-cultural exchange with spiritual groups in Ghana.

If confirmed, I will engage government and religious leaders, as well as grass-roots faith-based communities around the world, which have enormous impact on cultivating a climate more receptive to religious freedom in difficult places. As a religious leader myself, I would like to bring this perspective and use my skills and experience to encourage diverse religious communities to jointly defend and advance religious freedom and foster a climate of mutual respect.

America has learned much from its experience with religious diversity. We must share our lessons, stand with the persecuted, and encourage all governments to respect and protect the universal rights of all people. As President Obama said on Religious Freedom Day January 14th, “The United States stands with those who advocate for free religious expression and works to protect the rights of all people to follow their conscience, free from persecution and discrimination.”

I have learned important lessons and wisdom from each of my experiences. If confirmed, to serve as Ambassador at Large, I will seek to work with all religious groups. And I will work with human rights organizations, think tanks, universities, media partners, foreign governments, Congress, and, of course, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. If confirmed, I will seek appropriate resources needed both for the IRF Office and for innovative programs and other activities to advance our priorities. I will work with colleagues at the Department, our Ambassadors overseas, and the White House to ensure that all parts of our government are working together to advance religious freedom. This mission is too important to be left to one official or one office in the U.S. government.

I also want to acknowledge and commend the efforts of the two previous Ambassadors at Large, Robert Seiple and John Hanford. Both embraced the mandate of the IRF Act and were responsible for overseeing the Office of International Religious Freedom in the Department of State. If confirmed, I pledge to build on their efforts as faithful stewards of this congressional mandate and President Obama’s vision of focusing U.S. attention on issues of religious freedom and working with persons of all faiths to pursue this critical goal.

If confirmed, I especially look forward to working closely with Congress in advancing this agenda together on behalf of the American people, our national interests and the values we hold dear. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.