

**Secretary Michael R. Pompeo At a Press Availability On the Release of the 2019 International Religious Freedom Report**

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Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State

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Press Briefing Room

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Good morning, everyone. It's great to be with you all today. I'm here one more time, proudly, to talk about freedom and free societies. And while America is not a perfect nation by any means, we always strive towards that more perfect union, trying to improve. We remain the greatest nation in the history of civilization.

One of the good things that we do in this administration is our dedication to the protection of religious freedom all around the world. Last week, President Trump signed the first ever executive order that instructs the entire U.S. Government to prioritize religious freedom.

Here at the State Department, I've hosted the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom now twice. We've launched the International Religious Freedom Alliance. We've trained our Foreign Service officers to understand religious freedom issues much more deeply.

And today, I'm proud to release the 2019 International Religious Freedom Report. There is no other nation that cares so deeply about religious freedom, that we gather accounts from all across the world – it's an enormous, it's a comprehensive accounting of this fundamental human right.

Let me highlight a few positive developments we've observed in this past year:

The Gambia, an International Freedom Alliance member, has courageously brought a case before the International Court of Justice regarding crimes against the Rohingya.

The United Arab Emirates, long an ally for religious freedom in the Middle East, has become the first country in the Middle East to permit the construction of a temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

In Uzbekistan, steps have been taken to improve its record on religious freedom, and those steps continue. I had a great chat with religious leaders where I was there earlier this year.

We documented no police raids of unregistered religious group meetings during 2019, compared with 114 such raids in 2018, and 240 – 240 the year before that. These are great strides, real progress, the efforts of our State Department team showing or bearing fruit.

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But there's also a great darkness over parts of the world where people of faith are persecuted or denied the right to worship:

The Nicaraguan Government harasses and intimidates religious leaders and worshipers and desecrates religious spaces, often using proxies.

In Nigeria, ISIS and Boko Haram continue to attack Muslims and Christians alike. ISIS beheaded 10 Christians in that country just this past December.

And in China, state-sponsored repression against all religions continues to intensify. The Chinese Communist Party is now ordering religious organizations to obey CCP leadership and infuse communist dogma into their teachings and practice of their faith. The mass detentions of Uighurs in Xinjiang continues. So does the repression of Tibetans and Buddhists and Falun Gong and Christians.

I commend the report released today to everyone. Its very existence is evidence of our strong resolve to defend human dignity.

Ambassador Brownback, who is standing up here with me, will take questions from you after I wrap up my conversation with you all this morning.

Speaking of China, last week I was humbled and honored to meet with several survivors of the Chinese Communist Party's massacre at Tiananmen Square that happened 31 years ago.

I also released a statement on China's obscene attempts to take advantage of our domestic situation to press their political agenda, which I'm sure many of you saw.

There is no equivalence between our two forms of government. We have the rule of law; China does not. We have free speech and embrace peaceful protest. They don't. We defend religious freedom; as I just noted, China continues its decades-long war on faith.

The contrast couldn't be more clear: During the best of times, China ruthlessly imposes communism. And amidst the most difficult challenges the United States faces, we work to secure freedom for all.

And speaking of freedom, I want to say how happy I am that Michael White's back home safely. I want to thank our team, led by Special Representative Brian Hook, for the great diplomacy that he engaged in that led to Michael's release. I want to thank the Swiss Government, too, for their assistance.

The work is not done. Baquer Namazi, Siamak Namazi, and Morad Tahbaz are Americans still wrongfully detained by the Iranian regime. Tehran must release them immediately.

Staying in the Middle East, a brief comment on Libya.

The agreement between the GNA and the LNA to re-enter UN security talks was a good first step, very positive. Quick and good faith negotiations are now required to implement a ceasefire and relaunch the UN-led intra-Libyan political talks. It's time. It's time for all Libyans on all sides to act, so that neither Russia nor any other country can interfere in Libya's sovereignty for its own gain.

Putting Libya on the path to economic recovery means preserving Libyan oil facilities and strong access to the National Oil Corporation.

On Iraq: The Government of Iraq has agreed to the Strategic Dialogue proposed in April, beginning tomorrow. Under Secretary Hale will lead that discussion with the representatives from Department of Defense, Treasury, Energy, and other agencies, and their Iraqi counterparts.

In keeping with previous dialogues based on our 2008 Strategic Framework Agreement, the dialogue will cover all of the areas of interest between our two countries: politics, economics, security, culture, and energy.

With new threats on the horizon, including the global coronavirus pandemic, collapsed oil prices, and a large budget deficit, it's imperative that the United States and Iraq meet as strategic partners to plan a way forward for the mutual benefit of each of our two nations.

A little bit closer to home, the Trump administration continues to work with our partners to sustain the great transformation here in the Western Hemisphere, to turn it into that hemisphere of freedom that we have talked about.

That work must continue in bilateral, multilateral settings – why I'm voicing the United States concerns over the Pan American Health Organization's role in facilitating forced labor by Cuban doctors in Brazil's Mais Medico program, during which more than 10,000 Cuban health care workers have allegedly been trafficked.

PAHO must explain how it came to be the middleman in a scheme to exploit Cuban medical workers in Brazil.

PAHO must explain how it came to send \$1.3 billion to the murderous Castro regime.

PAHO must explain why it did not seek the approval of the executive council – its own executive council – for its role in this program.

And PAHO must explain who in the organization approved a potentially illegal agreement.

And it must explain what it did with the \$75 million it collected when it brokered this program.

It needs to undertake reforms to prevent such things from ever happening again.

And just as we did with the World Health Organization, the Trump administration will demand accountability from all international health organizations that depend on American taxpayer resources. Our money must support things that create value and support our values.

The United States continues to stand for democratic values elsewhere in the hemisphere too.

We look forward to a quick and credible conclusion to the vote recount in Guyana.

We expect transparent and credible outcomes in the legislative elections in Suriname as well.

And we continue to support the Venezuelan people in their quest for freedom.

Let's not lose sight of how the Maduro regime has harmed Americans, either. We call once again for the regime, which has held six U.S. oil executives for more than two and a half years now without a trial, to release each of these individuals.

We also call on Russia to do the same for Paul Whelan, who needs to be released now.

Rest assured Ambassador Sullivan and his team will keep fighting for Paul.

The United States will also keep our focus on Moscow's other human rights violations. Since 2015, Russia has conscripted thousands of Crimean men into its armed forces and imposed criminal penalties on those who do not comply. Russia must end its repression of those who oppose its occupation, release unjustly imprisoned Ukrainians, and return full control to the peninsula of Ukraine. Crimea is Ukraine.

In brighter news, on the other side of the Atlantic, our consulate in Nuuk, Greenland formally begins operations today. I'm excited about that. It took a lot of work and it's good news. It's the culmination of the administration's efforts to strengthen our engagement in the Arctic region, and a big thanks to Ambassador Carla Sands and her team in Copenhagen for help making this happen.

We're grateful for the solid cooperations we've seen from Greenland and Denmark in making this day arrive. I was supposed to make a trip last year to announce this news and I'm still hoping that I can make it up that way north. I know you'll all want to come along with me on that trip.

One more item from Europe: I also welcome Albania's cross-party agreement on electoral reform, which will strengthen its democracy and further solidify Albania's European future. We encourage all stakeholders to codify this political agreement.

On to Africa. The United States welcomes Congo's arrest of Trazor Mputu Kankonde, who is accused of involvement in the 2017 murder of UN experts Michael Sharp and Zaida Catalan. Finding and apprehending him is an important step forward for the rule of law in the DRC and justice for the murder of an American citizen.

More good news: We want to congratulate France on its announcements of operations that killed in northern Mali Abdelmalek Droukdal, the leader of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. This is a big victory. We've taken another senior al-Qaida leader off the battlefield, a terrorist threat who has presented risk all across the globe.

And I want to mention briefly too an upcoming meeting General Secretary Xi is having with leaders in Africa on COVID-19. We've taken note of the very modest financial donations that China and so-called private Chinese entities have disbursed in Africa.

China's contributions to fighting the pandemic are paltry compared to the financial and human costs of the cover-up that it engendered. And I note too our concern that China will exploit the pandemic as a pretext to continue its opaque lending practices that have led nations to debt and disappointment all throughout Africa.

The United States has done and will continue to do enormous good work in Africa. PEPFAR has saved millions of African lives and the U.S. is sustaining multiple programs in Africa to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. We'll continue this remarkable humanitarian work as a reliable, transparent, and steadfast partner to our many African friends.

And finally, I have an announcement regarding America's unyielding pledge of help for countries and people afflicted by pandemic.

First, I want to announce \$14 million in new humanitarian assistance for refugees and vulnerable migrants.

Second, President Trump is proud to help supply ventilators to countries all around the world.

Today we're providing nearly \$180 million to support the purchase of those ventilators as well as the training and support needed for these complex machines.

So far, we've committed to deliver nearly 15,000 ventilators to more than 60 countries.

I'm happy, with that, to take a handful of questions.

**MS ORTAGUS:** Welcome back, Shaun. Go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Shaun, there you are. Shaun, yes, sir.

**QUESTION:** Thanks, Mr. Secretary.

Actually, I wanted to ask you about events in this country over the past week – the killing of George Floyd. You've – I saw you commented on Twitter about this. And you've criticized China and Iran over their response, how you say they're exploiting it, but what is the message from the State Department? What is the message the United States projects to the world about this, when we have greater attention to the racial disparities here in the United States, when you've seen the use of force in Lafayette Park? What message can the United States have as a sound position to raise morally these issues like the ones we hear today about religious freedom?

And the State Department itself, is there any more focus that you think should be done in terms of diversity in the State Department? Thanks.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Well, I'll take your second question first. Since the day I arrived here, we've been very focused to make sure we brought every talent to bear all across the State Department, a diverse set of people working from all across the country of every race, of every nature, of every political persuasion to bring them here, to execute America's diplomatic mission. I'm really proud of the work we've done to make sure we have the right team, a diverse team here or on the field. I think the statistics show that hard work by Carol Perez and her team in our Department of Human Resources. I think they've done fantastic work at that end. It's important. It's important as we travel the world that our team represent America in a way that reflects the full glory and diversity of the United States of America.

And as for your first question, I think the question is so troubling, right. Because you ask the question assuming there is a moral equivalency between what takes place in these countries where they repress their people and they bludgeon their people and they burn down their religious facilities, and they deny journalists – you all – the chance to ask a question of a secretary of state – just like the question you had, the opportunity to ask me and demand that we provide responses to you and hold us accountable. Those things don't happen in those nations.

Our diplomats all around the world can be incredibly proud of the fact that they represent a nation that has God-given rights ensconced in our fundamental founding documents that ensure that when we get something wrong here in the United States, when something as tragic and as awful as what happened to George Floyd takes place, that the government responds, right.

We saw both local law enforcement and our Department of Justice move very quickly to address the particular situation. We've now seen people say, "Hey, we're calling for changes in the way law enforcement works." It's not my space here as the Secretary of State, but you can see this debate take place in America. That doesn't happen in nations across the world. In Tiananmen Square 31 years ago, when thousands of people were massacred, instead they repressed journalists, they disappeared people. It's fundamentally different.

Our nation is so special and it's the greatest nation in the history of civilization. It's so special that challenges like the ones that we're confronting here in the United States today will be managed head-on, there will be a political process that's engaged of, there will be wide open debate, and our core principles – the fact that we respect every human being because they are made in the image of God – will be reflected in the way that the United States responds to these challenges. And I actually think our diplomats have this incredible opportunity to tell this important story about how America confronts challenges inside its own country in a way that reflects the finest of what our founders would have hoped America could achieve.

**MS ORTAGUS:** Rich.

**QUESTION:** Hi, Mr. Secretary.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Hey, Rich.

**QUESTION:** Since we last spoke, Mr. Linick has testified that the undersecretary of management tried to bully him on multiple occasions, including an attempt to assume control of leak investigation and dissuade his investigation of last year's arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Is that accurate, and if so, is it appropriate? And is State currently looking into Mr. Linick?

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** So I haven't had a chance to see the transcript of Mr. Linick's testimony. I understand it's now out, sometime this morning it came out. I haven't had a chance to see that, so all I've seen is what the committee put out in its press release.

Here's what I can tell you: Steve Linick was a bad actor in the inspector general office here. He didn't take on the mission of the State Department to make us better. That's what inspector generals are supposed to do; they work for the agency head – that's me – and they are supposed to deliver and help make that organization better. It's not what Mr. Linick did.

With respect to the leak, there's still work going on. I don't want to comment it – on it other than to say that we have asked for a more thorough investigation than Mr. Linick had permitted. Mr. Linick didn't do what he was asked to do: to respond to a story, I think written by one of you, that suggested that a couple of anonymous sources from inside his operation – I think it was referred to as people close to the investigation – had leaked a very politically sensitive document designed to destroy the career of a professional State Department official. And that leaked almost certainly, according to the report, from his office. We asked him to investigate it in a certain way, he refused to do that, and that's inappropriate. And we still don't, as a result of that, know the answer for precisely how that

information got out. We're determined to figure out how that information escaped, which was aimed at harming someone here.

As I said before, my mistake was letting Mr. Linick stay here as long as he did. He continued to undermine what it is the State Department's mission is aimed at achieving. We'll respond as appropriate to the various things Mr. Linick said when we get a chance to read the interview transcript, but I'll leave it at that for this morning. I want to talk about foreign policy issues, the things that really matter.

**MS ORTAGUS:** Okay. Christina.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Secretary, thank you for that.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Yes, ma'am.

**QUESTION:** Going back to your response to Shaun's question.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Mm-hmm.

**QUESTION:** Respectfully, I wanted to ask you, not killing journalists or imprisoning dissidents surely cannot be the bar for American exceptionalism. My colleagues and I have seen firsthand this week on the streets police using nightsticks against peaceful protesters and actively targeting members of the media, but we've heard no condemnation of these acts from the White House. And I'm wondering how and why this administration so vocally supports the rights of protesters overseas, in Hong Kong, and not the protesters a mile or so down the road from where you now stand.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Oh, I think this administration has and continues to support peaceful protesters wherever we find them.

**QUESTION:** We've not seen a statement from the White House against acts against journalism, against peaceful protesters being attacked by police. What is your opinion of those acts?

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** For two and a half years, I have worked for journalists to have the right to say whatever the heck they want. I come out and talk to you. You can ask me whatever —

**QUESTION:** You do.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** — question you choose, right?

**QUESTION:** And I have.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Well, you — and you have. And there — sometimes I like them, sometimes less so. This is — but this is part of the process. I welcome that.

With respect to the particular things that you suggested, I know there have been concerns from some countries of their reporters having been treated inappropriately here. We've seen some of those allegations come into the State Department. You should know, and those countries should know, we will — we will handle them in a completely appropriate way. We will do our best to investigate them to the extent the State Department is capable of doing

that, and we will address them in a way that is appropriate to try and address any concerns those nations may have about their journalists who we, too, do our level best to protect whenever – you’ve seen them, the international press travel alongside you – we do our best to take care to make sure that they get an opportunity both to ask questions of us and that they can feel safe and secure in doing so.

**QUESTION:** What is your opinion about the protests?

**MS ORTAGUS:** That’s – that’ll be it. Thank you.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Great. Thank you all.

**MS ORTAGUS:** We’re going to have Sam now.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** All right.

**MS ORTAGUS:** Thank you.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Ambassador Brownback, you’re up. Thank you all. Have a good day.

**MS ORTAGUS:** And just one clarifying point. You can actually look to White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany. She addressed Christina’s question (inaudible). So the White House is on the record.

Go ahead, Sam.

**AMBASSADOR BROWNBACK:** Thank you. Thank you. Well, thank – thank you all for being here today. I thank Secretary Pompeo. Grateful to President Trump, Vice President Pence, leading on this important issue on religious freedom.

Just as a brief overview, quickly, there are many firsts that this administration has done on this topic of religious freedom that I’d like to highlight here. Last week you saw the executive order on religious freedom the President put out. It’s the first time that’s ever been done by any chief executive anywhere in the world. President Trump was the first president ever, first chief executive of any country ever to host a religious freedom event at the UN General Assembly, in September last year.

The Secretary mentioned the ministerials to advance religious freedom. He hosted two of them. Those were the largest religious freedom events ever of their kind in the world, largest-ever human rights-focused conferences hosted by the State Department. The Secretary launched the International Religious Freedom Alliance. It’s the – he is the first-ever U.S. Secretary of State to organize an international coalition at a national leadership level to push the issue of religious freedom forward around the world. Last year we launched the Abrahamic Faiths Initiative to push for peace between Muslims, Christians, and Jews by engaging in the cause key theologians of each of the faiths.

The Trump administration has done and continues to do more than any other administration to protect and promote religious freedom for all faiths, groups, or for people of no faith at all.

Today, Pastor Andrew Brunson has been reunited with his family. The world has taken notice of the PRC Government’s human rights abuses and is beginning to speak out. Asia Bibi has been freed for more than a

year. And due to recent improvements, both Sudan and Uzbekistan have been removed from the list of Countries of Particular Concern. Major accomplishments and major things happening.

Since the emergence of the COVID pandemic, we've seen Burma drop its charges and release more than 1,000 Rohingya from jail. Iran furloughed a few of the dozens of unjustly detained members of religious minorities.

The administration has answered the call to fight for people of all faiths, everywhere, at all time. It's been a very fulfilling job for me working with the incredible staff and pushing for religious freedom in every corner of the globe. Yet the state of religious freedom remains far from perfect, and very troubling. In many places of the world, individuals have become more familiar with religious oppression than religious freedom, and that's – this report we've put forward today, the 2019 International Religious Freedom Report – Religious Freedom Report that's put out today.

Faith groups in China are among those suffering greatly on account of their beliefs. In Iran, 109 members of minority religious groups remain in prison for simply being religious minority practitioners. And last year the government executed a number of individuals on charges of enmity against God. In Nigeria, conflicts and carnage continue between predominantly Muslim Fulani herdsmen and predominantly Christian farmers in North Central states.

So our work is clearly cut out for us. We must continue to build partnerships and alliances with nations who share our commitment to advance religious freedom around the world, and we must continue our efforts to stop bad actors. And we must also continue to expand our capacity. The importance of advancing religious freedom cannot be overstated. It must extend to all areas of our foreign policy, and that's why President Trump announced a new executive order last week, as I mentioned, which prioritizes international religious freedom in the planning and implementation of United States foreign policy and in the foreign assistance programs.

We will continue to press forward our commitment to promote religious freedom for all, and that's what we have done and that's what we'll continue to do, and the Secretary's been outstanding in leading this effort, as has the President and the Vice President, and I think you'll see more to come.

Happy to take questions if you want to.

**MS ORTAGUS:** Going to try to get through everyone who hasn't had a chance yet, so start with Nick.

**QUESTION:** Ambassador, Nick Schifrin, PBS NewsHour. Thank you for doing this. I wanted to ask about China and Xinjiang and what you're seeing. China's obviously long said that the Uighurs, Muslim Uighurs who have been imprisoned or detained in Xinjiang have been released, so do you have any evidence that any Uighurs have been released from these detention camps during the coronavirus? And have you seen evidence that independent researchers have found, which is that some of these detainees ended up working in factories, including factories who make products for Western companies? Thanks.

**AMBASSADOR BROWNBACK:** We have no evidence that they've been released, and even if they were released, they're released into a virtual police state that China has created that Chen Quanguo, the chair of the Communist Party in Xinjiang who was the chair in Tibet, has created. And he's been well funded to create this. These are facts that we do know. We do know that a number of workers have been put into forced labor facilities now in Xinjiang, and even Commerce Department now has sanctioned several of the companies in saying these products are produced by forced labor and they cannot be received into the U.S. marketplace.

It is a horrific situation, and our big concern here is that this is the future of what oppression's going to look like, is what it looks like for the Uighurs when they get out of the prison camps. It's going to be cameras and identification. It's going to be social credit systems. It's going to be oppression, particularly if you want to practice your faith. In many of these places, you're fine if you want to do anything – you want to get an education, fine. You want to work, fine. You're – anything – but if you want to practice your faith, it's a no go. And if you do, there will be consequences for you and anybody else that pings you on your cell phone. These are the things that is the virtual police state that we're very concerned about it being the future of – beyond Xinjiang.

**QUESTION:** And on those forced labor facilities, as you called them, any evidence that these are factories that make products for the West?

**AMBASSADOR BROWNBACK:** Well, the – I would refer specifically to what Commerce Department has done on the entities list where they blocked these products coming in, and go off of what their records have produced. But this is the information, the anecdotal evidence information we're getting from people that testify, that have relatives or they themselves have been in these facilities.

**MS ORTAGUS:** Said, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Morgan. Thank you, sir. Are you concerned that many of the authoritarian regimes, especially in the Arab world, are taking advantage of the COVID-19 spread issue and lockdown to basically restrict religious freedoms and go after a lot of practicing people and so on? Are you concerned about that, that this – they are continuing to do that, keeping mosques off limit and saying that –

**AMBASSADOR BROWNBACK:** Absolutely. Here's the big concern on the COVID crisis from my perspective in the space that I'm in: Number one is that you're subjecting people that are prisoners of conscience to a pandemic. Then they should be released. They shouldn't be in prison in the first place. These are prisoners of conscience. They're in because they're simply peacefully practicing their faith, and they shouldn't be in prison and subjected to it in the first place.

Number two, we're very concerned that in the future, you're going to see a number of governments that see an advantage here, a chance: "Okay, we've shut down all these religious institutions. We're going to keep them shut down after the COVID crisis passes because we don't like these religious institutions operating freely in the first place." And that's a deep concern that has been – that I've raised to our alliance allies and others on the religious freedom space. We don't want to see the leftover of this impact the closing of these religious institutions.

Having said that, I'm very appreciative of religious leaders and their cooperation with health officials around the world to really push back against congregations coming together during the COVID crisis. You saw COVID happen during the Easter period, you saw it happen during Passover, you saw it happen during Ramadan, three of the major kind of religious events of the year for three major religions. And all of the – not everybody, but almost all of the major religious leaders said don't come together, don't congregate, for the first time in a thousand years, because we don't want to see the spread of this. And I thought the religious leaders by and large were very responsive during this COVID crisis, and I think it helped enormously. And they're going to be a big part of the future, too.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MS ORTAGUS:** Kylie.

**QUESTION:** Thank you for doing this. Two questions. With regard to the report this year versus the report last year, which country has fallen behind, taken steps backwards the most in terms of religious freedom? And then the second one, you were just talking about religious institutions maybe staying shutdown as a result of coronavirus. Can you point us to a few countries where you guys are looking at that so that we can continue to keep tabs on it? Thank you.

**AMBASSADOR BROWNBACK:** Good questions, and pretty hard to answer, really. And maybe it sounds like a broken record, but China is just such a big player in this space in such a negative way that it's hard to overlook, and they're an exporter of their ways and their technology. That's the other piece of it. If they were – if they weren't an exporter, if they just did it to their own people, which is terrible in and of itself – but that's one you just can't really take your eyes off of.

I'm deeply concerned about what's happening in Nigeria because of the escalation of the violence and the carnage and the lack of response – effective response – by the government. We really need the Nigerian Government to step up and act much more effectively in their space.

Those are two key ones. There's others that – you're seeing, unfortunately, a lot of communal-level violence that's happening in many countries and you're seeing it in democracies, too. We're just – there's a clash of faiths, and it becomes violent and deadly. And to me on a long-term basis that's the piece I get most concerned – one of the pieces I get concerned about because I just – the world gets more and more closer – other than during COVID we haven't, but just – it's more and more integrated. So you're getting these religions touch up against each other a lot more, and unless we can put forward the use of religion for peace and not for war and division, you're going to have a lot more of these conflicts happen.

And that's why this Abrahamic Faith Initiative and others that we're working on to try to – when we did that in the Balkans, even, we put forward a conference working with Albania and others of the use of religion for peace, where in the Balkans it's often been used for war. And that's what we want.

**MS ORTAGUS:** Michel.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Ambassador, thank you for doing this. What are the main points that you registered or noticed on the Middle East in this report?

**AMBASSADOR BROWNBACK:** In the Middle East, both progress and hope and yet continued difficulty. Honestly, UAE, I'm – really did an amazing thing in hosting the pope on a papal visit. First time the papacy has been in the Arabian Peninsula in the history of mankind – and celebrated it. The UAE Government did as an open statement, and you heard the Secretary say they opened a church to LDS and – amazing. And yet you still have blasphemy and apostasy laws in the places.

Saudi Arabia has continued to be a country of particular concern, and they still are the only nation in the world without a single church. And you're – you're going, "Really?" You used to have churches there. There are historical churches that are there. So I – and I meet with a lot – prior to the pandemic, I meet with a lot of Middle East leaders, and they're thinking much more along this line because their children were raised on the internet like most of the places around the world – again, other than China, that has a firewall. They mostly have open access and they want a more open society and a freer society. So the leaders are feeling, I think, that pulse of the population and I hope more will continue to lean forward on how they can open up. And we're getting more indications like that.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**MS ORTAGUS:** Ken, you're the only one that hasn't gone. Do you have anything? If not, it's fine. Christina —

**QUESTION:** I guess the UN recently came out with a report saying that the Taliban was still close to al-Qaida. What does that do to religious freedom in the future in that country? Are you concerned?

**AMBASSADOR BROWNBACK:** I don't have a good thought to give you, and so rather than taking a stab at it, I'm — I don't know how I would really frame or categorize that, so sorry.

**MS ORTAGUS:** Thanks, Sam. Appreciate it. Thank you.