

Executive Order on International Religious Freedom Signed; Agudath Israel Commends President's Action

In an action that is seen to have important ramification for U.S. foreign policy, President Donald Trump has signed an "Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom." The EO is intended to make religious liberty around the world a central feature of American diplomacy.

"The President's directive reflects the meaningful engagement the State Department has had in the arena of international religious freedom," noted Rabbi Abba Cohen, Agudath Israel of America's Vice President for Government Affairs and Washington Director. "Under Ambassador for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback's leadership, the Administration has been proactive and aggressive in highlighting the plight of several religious minorities. He has made the fight against religious persecution an American priority on the world scene, and a major focus for many foreign nations."

The EO will prioritize, as a core tenet, the cause of international religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy in a number of ways. Among other things, it will direct ambassadors and embassies to promote, support and defend religious freedom in their assigned countries and it will emphasize religious freedom in U.S. foreign aid programs and through other economic means. This includes a joint State Department/USAID initiative, under President Trump's direction, that will ensure that at least \$50 million per year is allocated for programs that advance international religious freedom.

“For world Jewry, this is an important stride forward,” observed Rabbi Cohen. “As anti-Semitism rises abroad, there is greater fear and danger associated with being a Jew and a religious minority, with going to synagogue and other community institutions, with performing religious rituals, observing Jewish holidays, and wearing religious garb. Life, and religious life, lived in fear and danger, cannot be said to be free.”

In the past several years, Jewish communities abroad have experienced violence against Jews, attacks and defacing of synagogues, threats against kosher slaughter and ritual circumcision, and desecration of Jewish cemeteries – all violations of international religious freedom.

“Agudath Israel’s Washington Office will continue to work closely and cooperatively with Ambassador Brownback, as well as with Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism Elan Carr, both of whom are doing outstanding work, in protecting endangered Jewish communities around the world and in helping them to live, and practice their religion, freely,” Rabbi Cohen noted.