

Table of Contents

- ***Minnesota governor calls mosque bombing 'act of terrorism'***
 - ***Five faith facts about Sam Brownback: Political champion of religious freedom***
 - ***USCIRF praises nomination of a new Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom***
 - ***Iraqi Christians targeted for deportation face 'death sentence' in Iraq, lawyers say***
 - ***Mosque wins equal treatment, \$3.25 million settlement***
 - ***Atheist organisation files lawsuit against Donald Trump's 'Religious Liberty' executive order***
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Minnesota governor calls mosque bombing 'act of terrorism'

Jenna Zucker

Reuters (08.08.2017) - <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-minnesota-blast-mosque-idUSKBN1AM0T1> - Minnesota's governor called the bombing of a mosque outside Minneapolis the previous day "an act of terrorism" during a visit to the site on Sunday.

Police in Bloomington, Minnesota, were called on Saturday at 5:05 a.m. local time about an explosion at the Dar Al Farooq mosque, after a bomb was thrown through the window of the imam's office while worshippers were gathered for morning prayers. No one was injured.

Governor Mark Dayton, along with a delegation of public officials, visited the mosque on Sunday morning. He called on the community to unite against such attacks.

"What a terrible, dastardly, cowardly act was committed," he said.

"It is a criminal act of terrorism," added Dayton, who also described it as a hate crime that was "unthinkable, unforgivable."

Federal Bureau of Investigation officials in Minneapolis are investigating the incident and declined to provide further details on Sunday.

Mohamed Omar, the mosque's executive director, previously said a member of the congregation saw a pickup truck speeding away from the building's parking lot just after the blast.

Omar told the Star Tribune on Sunday the perpetrator may have known which window was the imam's, who missed the blast by only a few minutes.

Anti-Muslim incidents have risen sharply in the United States over the past year, according to a review by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which offered a

\$10,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the Minneapolis-area bomber.

Reporting by Jenna Zucker in New York; additional reporting by Joseph Ax in New York; Editing by Lisa Shumaker

Five faith facts about Sam Brownback: Political champion of religious freedom

By Adelle M. Banks



Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback waves to guests before delivering his State of the State address to a joint session of the Kansas Legislature in Topeka on Jan. 10, 2017. (AP Photo/Orlin Wagner)

RNS (27.07.2017) — Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback, President Trump's nominee for international religious freedom ambassador, describes religious freedom as "the choice of what you do with your own soul."

If confirmed, the 60-year-old, two-term Republican governor, former U.S. senator and onetime presidential candidate would be the first politician confirmed as the ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom. Previous ambassadors were religious or nonprofit leaders, and Brownback would follow a rabbi and a Protestant minister.

"Religious Freedom is the first freedom," he said in a tweet responding to Trump's announcement. "I am honored to serve such an important cause."

Here are five faith facts about this Methodist-turned-Catholic politician:

1. He was a key sponsor of the legislation that created the office he may lead.

As senator, he supported the [1998 International Religious Freedom Act](#), which also created the ambassadorial post.

During his two terms as governor, "his actions on international religious freedom would be minimal," said Rabbi David Saperstein, the [most recent](#) international religious freedom ambassador. But Brownback's support of the State Department office while he was senator, and his efforts to end the South Sudan civil war, were noteworthy, Saperstein said.

"Issues of religious freedom were very much at stake in his lead work on the Sudan Peace Act," he said, adding he thinks Brownback will be "an effective ambassador-at large."



Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback, at far right, and three bishops attend the religious freedom rally on Feb. 17, 2016, in Topeka, Kan. Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City, from left, Bishop Edward J. Weisenburger of Salina, and Bishop Carl A. Kemme, of Wichita attended with Brownback. Photo courtesy of Joe Bollig/The Leaven

2. He is a Catholic convert who has attended evangelical churches with his family.

Brownback has been a bit of a Christian church hopper. He grew up a Methodist but [converted to Catholicism in 2002](#). Today he attends Topeka Bible Church, said Teresa Jenkins, a spokeswoman for the nondenominational evangelical church with an average weekly attendance of 1,400.

Sometimes, he rises early for Mass before joining his family at the church, calling the routine, according to author Jeff Sharlet, a "great mixture of the feeding."

Sharlet's book, "The Family," about a secretive Christian group to which Brownback belonged, said the governor was "baptized not in a church but in the 'Catholic Information Center,'" a Washington chapel run by Opus Dei, another secretive group.

3. He has supported "religious liberty" issues and rallies with conservative Christians.

In 2016, he joined a "Rally for Religious Freedom" alongside Catholic bishops, the lead pastor of Topeka Bible Church and Barronelle Stutzman, a Washington state florist who was sued after she cited her religious beliefs in refusing to create an arrangement for a gay wedding. "I have never seen a bigger rally at this statehouse than this one," Brownback [told](#) the demonstrators, according to a Catholic diocese website. "It is fantastic."

When then-Texas Gov. Rick Perry, now U.S. energy secretary, invited 49 other governors to attend "[The Response: A Call to Prayer for a Nation in Crisis](#)" in Houston in 2011, Brownback was the only other governor who showed up in person. (One other sent a video.)

In 2012, he was criticized by church-state separationists for [promoting](#) a ReignDownUSA.com prayer event for which he said, "We've been favored like no nation in history and yet too often we've forgotten God."

4. His nomination has been hailed by a range of evangelicals.

The National Association of Evangelicals called Brownback "[a strong candidate](#)." Faith and Freedom Coalition declared "help is on the way" after dozens of reports of Christian persecution abroad "in the last month alone." Southern Baptist ethicist Russell Moore noted Brownback's "dealing with AIDS in Africa and advocating on behalf of persecuted religious minorities." Focus on the Family founder James Dobson called him "a man of deep personal faith."

5. He signed legislation allowing religious campus groups to restrict membership.

The [2016 bill](#) "allows religious organizations to establish religious belief as qualification for membership," he said at that time.

The ACLU, reacting to his nomination, said, "In Gov. Brownback's view, 'religious freedom' has meant issuing a license to discriminate against others, especially against LGBT Kansans."

University of Vermont political science professor Peter Henne said a Brownback appointment could change emphasis on LGBTQ issues abroad: "If there are countries repressing LGBTQ people for reasons they claim are related to religion, we might not push back on that as much as we would otherwise," he said.



Adelle M. Banks, production editor and a national reporter, joined RNS in 1995. An award-winning journalist, she previously was the religion reporter at the Orlando Sentinel and a reporter at The Providence Journal and newspapers in the upstate New York communities of Syracuse and Binghamton.

USCIRF praises nomination of a new Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom

USCIRF commends the White House for action to Promote the Freedom of Religion or Belief

USCIRF (28.07.2017) – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) welcomes the White House nomination of Governor Sam Brownback of Kansas as the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. As a Senator from 1996-2011, he was at the forefront of international religious freedom issues.

USCIRF Chairman Daniel Mark stated that, ***"The Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom is a vital post and Gov. Brownback is an outstanding choice for it. The person who fills this position will be America's primary voice for the freedom of religion abroad and Gov. Brownback has impressive qualifications in this area. The Ambassador-at-Large also plays a key role in USCIRF's work as an ex officio member of the Commission, so we look forward to working with him."***

While in the Senate, Gov. Brownback consistently supported religious freedom and human rights for all, serving as co-chair of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. His record included: legislation condemning Iran for its treatment of Baha'is; sanctions on Vietnam for human rights abuses; legislation to protect religious communities in Russia; and actions providing for humane treatment of immigrant detainees. In addition, he was a key sponsor of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act that established USCIRF and the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom.

In May 2000, then Sen. Brownback chaired a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing to review the first USCIRF annual report. He described an atmosphere that was more open to a public discussion of religious freedom. He added that he hoped it was not a "cyclical thing, but rather something...on a trajectory toward growth, that we recognize this most fundamental of human rights."

"We are very pleased that President Trump has made this selection," added Chairman Mark. ***"Gov. Brownback understands that religious freedom violations must be sharply highlighted and that progress must be clearly recognized, precisely what USCIRF aims to do in its work. We hope that the Senate confirms his nomination swiftly."***

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission, the first of its kind in the world. USCIRF reviews the facts and circumstances of religious freedom violations abroad and makes policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the Congressional leadership of both political parties. To interview a Commissioner, please contact USCIRF at Media@USCIRF.gov or John D. Lawrence, Director of Communications (JLawrence@USCIRF.gov/+1-202-786-0611).

Iraqi Christians targeted for deportation face 'death sentence' in Iraq, lawyers say

The Guardian (15.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2se0Gp5> - Iraqis are being swept up in immigration raids across the US and targeted for deportation by the Trump administration, in a crackdown attorneys and advocates described as a "death sentence" for members of Iraq's Christian minority.

US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Ice) arrested more than 200 Iraqi nationals over the weekend who have been the subject of deportation orders following criminal convictions or pending criminal charges.

One hundred and fourteen people were detained in Detroit alone, most of whom are members of Iraq's Chaldean minority – which, like other Christian groups, has been targeted for persecution by Islamic State and other jihadist groups.

Najah Konja, 55, who was arrested in Detroit on Sunday morning, immigrated to the US with his family in 1977. No other relatives remain in Iraq, according to his brother, Shoki "Steve" Konja.

"What is he going to do there?" Steve Konja, a US citizen, told the Guardian. "Basically, they are sentencing him to death."

Konja said his brother does not speak Arabic, and that the last member of their family to leave Iraq was kidnapped twice and held for ransom because of his relatives in the US. "The government of Iraq cannot protect and defend its own citizens – let alone a bunch of Christians coming from the US," Konja said.

These concerns were echoed by advocates including the [Minority Humanitarian Foundation](#) (MHF), which provides aid to Iraqi minorities. MHF planned to file a lawsuit with the American Civil Liberties Union to stop the deportation of Chaldeans to Iraq.

"Donald Trump has essentially given these Christians a death sentence," said MHF founder and president, Mark Arabo.

Last year, then US secretary of state John Kerry said a genocide was occurring against Christians in Iraq, though international courts have not officially given the violence there that designation.

Ice spokeswoman Gillian Christensen said an "overwhelming majority" of those arrested were convicted for crimes including "homicide, rape, aggravated assault, kidnapping, burglary, drug trafficking, robbery, sex assault, weapons violations and other offenses".

In Detroit, Christensen said the operation "was specifically conducted to address the very real public safety threat represented by the criminal aliens arrested".

But community advocates scoffed at that claim, arguing many of the charges were handed down decades ago and those convicted had served their sentences for the crimes.

Konja served 23 years in prison for drug charges and was released in 2009. In prison, he pursued his GED and helped teach other inmates, his brother said.

For the past eight years, he has worked at a large chain store where he was a director of operations, overseeing 400 employees. "He completely turned his life around," his brother said.

Steve Konaj said the arrest has left him disillusioned with the country he considers his home.

"This is not United States," he said. "I've been here 40 years. I believe in the dream, I believe in the constitution. I love it to death. I'm willing to sacrifice myself if needed, but to tell these people: 'You committed a crime 30 years ago, when you were 19, 20 - now you have to pay again for that mistake.'"

Iraq had previously not cooperated with US deportation efforts but the two countries negotiated a new policy in March after Trump issued a travel ban for citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries including Iraq.

The ban was revised after it was struck down in a federal court; the new ban - which is also the subject of a legal challenge - no longer includes Iraq and removes language that prioritized entry for religious minorities, including Christians, from these countries.

The executive order said the rules for Iraq had changed because "the Iraqi government has expressly undertaken steps to enhance travel documentation, information sharing, and the return of Iraqi nationals subject to final orders of removal".

Another focus of the recent sweep was Nashville, Tennessee, where at least 30 Iraqis were arrested, said local immigration attorney Andrew Free.

Unlike Detroit, Ice raids there have hit Kurds, members of the largest ethnic minority in Iraq, who have been fighting Isis alongside US soldiers in Syria.

Nashville has the largest population of Kurds in the US. Attorneys and advocates there said the Ice raids began by targeting people with criminal histories early last week. Then Ice conducted sweeps of predominantly Kurdish neighborhoods, going door-to-door starting at 6am.

In response, Drost Kokoye, who is Kurdish and a founder of the American Muslim Advisory Council, helped set up a hotline for people to call when Ice knocks on their door. She said the hotline has been "buzzing" every day from 6-9am since last week.

The sweep has had a chilling effect on the community. Kokoye said that at Nashville's Kurdish mosque the daily breaking of the fast, iftar, the crowd is about a quarter of what it was at the beginning of Ramadan, which started before the Ice raids. She said: "People are terrified, people are rattled, people don't feel safe in their homes."

Mosque wins equal treatment, \$3.25 million settlement

New Jersey town agrees to treat all houses of worship equally

BECKET Religious Liberty for All (30.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2scQjO8> - A New Jersey town agreed to treat all houses of worship equally and pay \$3.25 million in damages and attorneys' fees, after a federal court ruled that the town had illegally discriminated against a local mosque. The settlement agreement, signed today, ends lawsuits brought by the United States Department of Justice and the mosque and ensures that all houses of worship in the town will be treated equally.

The Islamic Society of Basking Ridge has been trying to build a permanent house of worship for almost a decade. In 2012, it purchased a four-acre lot zoned for houses of worship and designed a small, unassuming mosque that met every requirement of the local zoning code. But four years and 39 public hearings later, the town denied the mosque a permit—after making up new zoning requirements that had never been applied

to any other house of worship. The mosque and the U.S. Department of Justice sued, and a federal court ruled on December 31, 2016, that the town had illegally discriminated against the mosque.

"Our constitution guarantees every religious congregation equal treatment under the law," said Hannah Smith, senior counsel at Becket, which filed an amicus brief in support of the Islamic Society. "Every religion is a minority in some part of the country. If one religious group can be denied equal treatment because of hostility to their faith, then all religious groups are at risk."

Becket filed a friend-of-the-court brief on behalf of a diverse coalition of religious, legal, and civil liberties groups—including Christians, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, and others—to defend the mosque's right to equal treatment. Becket has defended houses of worship against discriminatory zoning practices across the country – from Jewish synagogues in Florida to Christian churches in California, and almost everything in between.

The mosque was joined in its lawsuit by the U.S. Department of Justice. To settle the Department of Justice's lawsuit, the town agreed to amend its zoning ordinance to treat all houses of worship equally.

Becket was joined in its friend-of-the-court brief by Christopher J. Paoella of the New York law firm Reich & Paoella. The Islamic Society of Basking Ridge and Mr. Chaudry are represented by the New York law firm Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler LLP.

Atheist organisation files lawsuit against Donald Trump's 'Religious Liberty' executive order

A group from the Midwest claims the president is breaching the constitution.

By Andrew Buncombe

The Independent (08.05.2017) - <http://ind.pn/2qSTosW> - The Godless are trying to take down Donald Trump.

A organisation of atheists from Wisconsin has filed a lawsuit challenging the president's so-called "religious liberty" order, claiming his move to allow religious groups to preach politics from the pulpit is in breach of the constitution.

The Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF), established in 1978, said recent comments by Mr Trump were a clear attempt to roll-back the provisions of the Johnson Amendment, a 1954 law that prohibits all tax-exempt institutions from campaigning for political candidates.

The group cited the president's comments when he signed a recent executive order that directed the US's Internal Revenue Service (IRS), not to target churches.

"Now [you're] in a position to say what you want to say. I know you'll only say good," he said to an audience of religious leaders gathered in the White House's Rose Garden.

"Freedom is not a gift from government, it's a gift from God."

The atheist group said that his actions would would selectively benefit churches and religious organisations by allowing them to endorse political candidates without risking losing their tax-exempt status.

Annie Laurie Gaylor, an executive director with the FFRF, said Mr Trump was seeking to use this order to "usher in a new era" of church politicking.

"Trump is communicating to churches that his administration will not enforce the Johnson Amendment," said Ms Gaylor. "The IRS needs clear direction that it must enforce the law equally."

Mr Trump's views on religion have been fluid, both when he was a presidential candidate and now as the country's leader.

While campaigning during the Iowa primaries he famously appeared confused on how to behave when he attended a communion service at a neighbourhood church.

However, he has worked hard to court the support of religious conservatives and evangelicals.

Jerry Falwell Jr, the head of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, was among his early backers. Vice President Mike Pence is also a member of the religious right who has sought their backing.

Two days before the election, Mr Pence appeared in a campaign video aimed a religious conservatives in which he urged people to vote for Mr Trump for two key reasons - his support of a Supreme Court Justice who would defend the "rights of the unborn", and his promise to repeal the Johnson Amendment.

Mr Pence said: "The Johnson Amendment has literally been on the books since the 1950s and it essentially threatens tax-exempt organisations and churches with losing their tax status if they speak out against important issues facing the nation from the pulpit."

The FFRF lawsuit says: "Among its many faults, [Mr Trump's] order requires the IRS to selectively and preferentially discontinue enforcement of the electioneering restrictions of the tax code against churches and religious organisations, while applying a more vigorous enforcement standard to secular non-profits."
