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## **Fall in Christian refugee admissions 'suggests Trump has no real interest in religious persecution'**

World Watch Monitor (13.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2xiZzs3> - The United States, under President Trump, has admitted 40 per cent fewer Christian refugees in the past year, US broadcaster NBC News has reported.

As the Trump administration has implemented stricter policies on immigration and refugees, almost 11,000 Christians looking for a safe place to go were reportedly refused entry to the US.

Christians from the Middle East who have been living in the US for years have also been affected, with dozens of Iraqi Christians in detention centres and facing the possibility of deportation.

"[This] suggests that the president has no real interest in religious persecution or the tenets of religious freedom," Mary Giovagnoli, director of Refugee Council USA, told NBC.

Last year Pew Research Center reported that the net number of Christian arrivals to the US was shrinking, although Christians were accounting for a steadily growing share of the arrivals.

US Vice-President Mike Pence said in May last year that the Trump administration was committed "to defend[ing] Christians, and those of all faiths, whose freedom of religion is threatened", and assured them that the US "would stand with them".

### ***Minorities 'neglected'***

Meanwhile, figures released in the UK showed that during the first quarter of 2018, a "very low number of religious minority Syrians were recommended for resettlement by the UNHCR and resettled by the UK government", noted human rights activist Ewelina Ochab in an article for Forbes.

Stating that numbers have been steadily decreasing in recent years, she said “it may be concluded that the neglect of the minorities is a long-standing policy”.

According to Ochab, this shows the UK government’s failure “to recognise the atrocities perpetrated against [minority] groups [such as Christians] as genocide”.

“If a state does not recognise such genocide, the state will treat refugees for resettlement ‘alike’, rather than taking proactive steps to ensure that the remnants of the persecuted minority group survive,” she said.

### ***International day for victims***

British peer Lord Alton and the EU’s Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religious or belief, Jan Figel’, have called for the creation of an international day for victims of religious persecution.

This follows the tabling of a motion for the creation of such a day by British parliamentarians in July.

“We have singularly and spectacularly failed to prevent, protect or to punish,” wrote Lord Alton and Jan Figel’ in an article for the UK’s Times newspaper, referring to crimes committed against religious minorities in Syria, Iraq and Myanmar.

“States must do more to identify and consider mass atrocities for what they are ... [but also] to assist the persecuted groups,” they wrote, suggesting that “a UN-led day commemorating the victims of religious persecution” would help to create and improve awareness.

“Without acknowledging and addressing the religious character of such crimes, there will never be an adequate response. The annual event could let the victims of such mass atrocities tell their stories and remind the world of how it looked the other way,” they wrote.

“The survivors’ memories of the humiliations, displacements and deaths suffered by their communities should motivate us and give us greater clarity in the approach we take.”

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## **A too-narrow vision of religious freedom**

***The Trump administration embraces a laudable desire to expand religious tolerance, but its own intolerance toward some undermines the message.***

**By The Editorial Board**

New York Times (16.08.2018) - <https://nyti.ms/2Pnlu8Y> - Even President Trump’s fiercest critics can find something to applaud in the administration’s campaign to protect and advance religious freedom around the world.

The State Department's [inaugural conference](#) on the subject drew hundreds of activists and scores of foreign officials to Washington last month and produced a statement of core beliefs and a plan to hold follow-up meetings in the United States and overseas.

Invoking the 70-year-old [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), the conference's [concluding statement](#) asserted that "every person has the right to hold any faith or belief, or none at all, and enjoys the freedom to change faith" and argued that "defending the freedom of religion or belief is the collective responsibility of the global community." To which we say, amen.

But the initiative's good intentions are in danger of being undermined by the administration's political agenda, which emphasizes the American strain of evangelical Christianity over other beliefs. In addition, the administration is pursuing immigration and foreign aid policies that belie its stated defense of religious rights.

The conference was ostensibly called to address the rising threat to religious freedom. Some [80 percent of the global population](#) is severely limited in exercising this right, and of the world's 198 countries, 55 countries, or 28 percent, experienced high or very high levels of government restrictions on religion in 2016, according to a recent study from [the Pew Research Center](#).

While the horrific genocides against [Rohingya Muslims](#) in Myanmar and against the [Yazidis in Iraq](#) have been widely publicized, there are countless other examples of religious-based persecution and discrimination — against Coptic Christians in Egypt, Muslim Uighurs and Tibetan Buddhists in China, Bahais in Iran, and others.

The Trump administration is not the first to speak up for religious liberty. Since 1998, when Congress passed the [International Religious Freedom Act](#), the State Department has issued annual assessments on how countries handle the issue and has used various government tools to defend groups and individuals overseas who are persecuted or discriminated against.

The current administration took its advocacy to a new level with the three-day conference, whose invited participants were more diverse than many expected. Despite his own strict Catholic leanings, [Sam Brownback](#), the ambassador for international religious freedom, said the goal was to protect religious freedom for all, "not to say we favor this faith or that faith."

Yet, the event, headlined by Vice President Mike Pence, an evangelical Christian, was clearly meant to appeal most to the evangelicals who are among the president's most fervent political supporters, reflecting a selectivity that is antithetical to the very concept of religious freedom.

One major focus was a demand for the release of [Andrew Brunson](#), an American Christian pastor held by Turkey for nearly two years on bogus charges of complicity in the 2016 aborted coup. Under pressure from evangelicals, Mr. Trump earlier this month [imposed sanctions](#) on Turkey, shaking its fragile economy, in an effort to secure Mr. Brunson's release. The president has been silent about 19 other detained Americans, including a NASA scientist who is Muslim.

The presence of a Hungarian delegation seemed particularly at odds with conference aims of promoting "equality under the law." Although Hungary's authoritarian prime minister, [Viktor Orban](#), has turned the Christian-majority country from democracy to nationalism and Islamophobia, he was praised by the [evangelical Christian leader Tony Perkins](#) for supporting persecuted Christians around the world.

President Barack Obama made a point of reaching out to the Muslim world, as well as to other faith communities. And like previous presidents, he tended to consider religious rights within the broad spectrum of human and civil rights. Countries that deny religious freedom invariably restrict other freedoms as well.

Many evangelicals, however, are increasingly promoting religious freedom as “our first freedom,” as [Mr. Pence did in his speech](#). Their argument is that human rights are becoming politicized and conflated with economic and social goals, such as equal rights for workers, women and gay and transgender people.

There are other reasons to question the administration’s motives, starting with the fact that it has been reliably tough on human rights abuses only when they involve adversaries like Iran, North Korea and Cuba. Last year, then-Secretary of State [Rex Tillerson told aides](#) not to let human rights concerns create “obstacles” in pursuing American interests. In a [memo](#), one of his advisers said that Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Philippines, whose repressive leaders are admired by the president, should be given a pass on rights questions.

Then there are Mr. Trump’s disgraceful attempts to [ban Muslims](#) from some countries from entering the United States; his reprehensible treatment of [refugees and immigrants](#), especially in [separating children](#) from their parents; and his continued support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen, which has caused a humanitarian catastrophe.

Such behavior hardly reflects the “tolerance” and appreciation of “human dignity” that conference [documents endorsed](#).

Supporting people facing religious persecution overseas is both a moral burden of the United States and an exercise in self-interest. As Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, religious freedom is “an essential building block for all free societies.” But it is not the only one.

If the Trump administration aspires to truly advance religious freedom, it will need to embrace a far broader vision of human rights.

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## A religious freedom summit can't undo Trump's record on Islam



***Paula White, center right, one of President Trump's evangelical advisers, and participants at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom at the U.S. Department of State in Washington on July 24, 2018. Photo by State Department/Public Domain***

RNS (25.07.2018) — This week's State Department ministerial on international religious freedom has been a well-orchestrated, if hastily organized, event with a sense of common purpose rarely seen in the current administration.

It prominently features the work of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, as bipartisan a body as you'll find in Washington these days. The foreign ministers and religious leaders from around the world all concur that politics should be the furthest thing from anyone's mind when it comes to a universal value like advancing religious freedom.

Yet it doesn't take an expert to see that politics are everywhere in the United States' current approach to religious freedom.

It's plain, to begin with, that the impetus for putting on the event has much to do with President Trump's indebtedness to conservative evangelical Christians for his election. To their credit, American evangelicals have engaged religious freedom issues for some time.

But the dominance of evangelicals in this sphere carries with it costs and oversights, including excessive deference to politicians and co-religionists who have shown hostility toward Islam.

In a meeting last month, Sam Brownback, the former Kansas senator and governor who is now U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, reportedly lobbied British Ambassador Sir Kim Darroch on behalf of an English anti-Muslim activist, Tommy Robinson, now in jail in the United Kingdom. A State Department spokesman called characterizations of Brownback's meeting with Darroch "completely false" but did not comment further.



**Sam Brownback, U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, gives opening remarks at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom at the State Department on July 24, 2018. RNS photo by Adelle M. Banks**

Brownback should comment further. Americans deserve to know what the United States' interest is in a notorious bigot who has been associated with Steve Bannon, the erstwhile Trump adviser and white nationalist. Brownback, who has done too little to distance himself from the anti-Muslim sentiments of the president who nominated him, should also take the opportunity to renounce positions that mar his leadership on religious freedom, including his support for Trump's travel ban.

The White House's equating of religious freedom with evangelical causes is apparent in its three recent nominations for USCIRF, which went to Christian political operative Gary Bauer; the Rev. Johnnie Moore, one of Trump's liaisons to the religious right; and Nadine Maenza, who served as an aide to former Pennsylvania Republican Sen. Rick Santorum.

Trump is not alone in handing off this issue to evangelicals. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell used his USCIRF nomination to appoint Family Research Council President Tony Perkins, a longtime leader in the religious right who has made disqualifying statements about Islam.

Nobody in the capital seems to be above politics when it comes to religious freedom, of course: Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer appointed Gayle Manchin to USCIRF, where she serves as vice chair. She happens to be the wife of West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, a vulnerable Democrat facing re-election this year and being pressed by Republicans to switch parties.

But the disgusting anti-Muslim sentiments of Trump and some of his supporters besmirch the argument that religious freedom is a cornerstone diplomatic priority, and, frankly, call the whole project into question.

The question is whether the ministerial, and religious freedom itself, can rise above the politics to serve a higher purpose.

The answer is likely yes. While undoubtedly a boost for evangelicals that Trump can tout as another "win," the ministerial can only foster collaborations among the assembled government officials, civil-society representatives and faith groups and encourage them in their work ahead.

It is critical, however, for the gathering to hold the White House to account for its failures to stand up for everyone affected by religious persecution. In a thoughtful op-ed in the

Globe Post, University of Vermont Professor Peter Henne says religious freedom advocates often “prize institutional access too highly.”

The well-meaning advocates who accepted the State Department’s invitation this week despite Trump’s record on Islam need to say plainly that Trumpism and international religious freedom contradict each other in ways we cannot ignore.

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## **Hope for Sister Zou Demei: Lawyer files motion to reopen her case**

Bitter Winter (13.08.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2nBFA2w> - Readers of Bitter Winter may be familiar with the case of Ms. Zou Demei, a Chinese woman detained in Detroit and facing deportation back to China, where she will be arrested and probably executed.

Ms. Zou was until 2016 the regional leader of The Church of Almighty God (CAG), a Christian new religious movement banned in China, in the four provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou, Chongqing, and Sichuan. This made her one of the top leaders of the CAG in China, and one of the most wanted by the authorities, with a substantial bounty placed on her head. As all CAG members, she destroyed all evidence of her true identity and went under the pseudonym of Yao Lu.

In 2016, Ms. Zou was informed that she was wanted not only as a leader of a banned religious movement, which was already bad enough but on trumped up charges of espionage, which might lead to the death penalty. She managed to escape from China with the passport of another person with her picture pasted on it and reach South Korea. Since South Korea, unlike the U.S. and Canada, has not granted asylum to any CAG refugee and it was unsafe for her to live there with a false passport, she decided to move to the U.S. She landed in Detroit on January 24, 2017, where her passport was detected as false and she was arrested.

Language problems prevented her and a few co-religionists who initially tried to help her to make her case understandable to the American authorities, and her asylum request was denied on December 4, 2017, with an order that she should be deported back to China. Her appeal was rejected on May 22, 2018.

At this stage, the CAG contacted several NGOs and instructed a specialized lawyer, Mr. Russell Abrutyn of Detroit, who took over representation of Ms. Zou and was informed that Homeland Security intended to deport her back to China after August 15, 2018.

Mr. Abrutyn has now filed a motion to reopen with the Board of Immigration Appeals, the highest administrative immigration court in the United States. This motion was based on new evidence that only recently became available thanks to the campaign by the international human rights community, a campaign that has drawn increased attention to Ms. Zou’s plight. As a result of this campaign, the people whose lives she touched through her leadership role in China with the CAG recognized her picture (although she had known her under a different name) and came to her defense by corroborating her role within the CAG.

Also, Mr. Abrutyn explained, “the Board of Immigration Appeals has been provided with official government reports, which should have been but weren’t provided before, highlighting the religious persecution in China against the CAG and its adherents.”

Bitter Winter, who has led the campaign in favor of Ms. Zou, trust that, with the new documents, deportation to China, which would lead to her arrest and detention and most probably to her execution, may be avoided. However, Ms. Zou needs any help she may receive from institutional and private advocates for religious liberty and human rights.

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## Breaking news: SCOTUS rules in favour of Masterpiece Cakeshop

Law & Religion UK (04.06.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2Mdr9g6> - Masterpiece Cakeshop, Ltd. is a Colorado bakery owned and operated by Jack Phillips, an expert baker and devout Christian. On 4 June, in ***Masterpiece Cakeshop Ltd et al v Colorado Civil Rights Commission et al* 584 U. S. \_\_\_\_ (2018) 3**, the US Supreme Court ruled by 7-2 (Justices Ginsburg and Sotomayor dissenting) that the Colorado Civil Rights Commission’s actions in assessing Mr Phillips’s reasons for declining to make a cake for a same sex couple’s wedding celebration violated the Free Exercise Clause in the First Amendment to the US Constitution.

In an opinion by Justice Kennedy, the Court **reversed** the decision of the Court of Appeals of Colorado. Justice Kagan filed a concurring opinion in which Justice Breyer joined. Justice Gorsuch filed a concurring opinion in which Justice Alito joined. Justice Thomas filed an opinion concurring in part and concurring in the judgment in which Justice Gorsuch joined. Justice Ginsburg filed a dissenting opinion in which Justice Sotomayor joined.

The majority held that, while the laws and the Constitution can, and in some instances must, protect gay persons and gay couples in the exercise of their civil rights, religious and philosophical objections to gay marriage were protected views and in some instances protected forms of expression. Though Colorado law could protect gay persons in acquiring products and services on the same terms and conditions as were offered to other members of the public, the law had to be applied in a manner neutral toward religion.

Mr Phillips’s claim that using his artistic skills to make an expressive statement – a wedding endorsement in his own voice and of his own creation – had a significant First Amendment speech component and implicated his deep and sincere religious beliefs. The Court also noted that in 2012 Colorado had not recognized the validity of gay marriages, nor had the Supreme Court itself handed down judgment in Obergefell. There was some force to Mr Phillips’s argument that he was not unreasonable in believing that his decision had been lawful:

“State law at the time also afforded storekeepers some latitude to decline to create specific messages they considered offensive. Indeed, while the instant enforcement proceedings were pending, the State Civil Rights Division concluded in at least three cases that a baker acted lawfully in declining to create cakes with decorations that demeaned gay persons or gay marriages. Phillips too was entitled to a neutral and respectful consideration of his claims in all the circumstances of the case.”

In the opinion of the Court, the Colorado Civil Rights Commission’s treatment of Mr Phillips’s case had “showed elements of a clear and impermissible hostility toward the

sincere religious beliefs motivating his objection”, to an extent that called into question the fairness and impartiality of the Commission’s adjudication. There had also been a difference of treatment as between Mr Phillips’s case and the cases of other bakers with objections to anti-gay messages who had been successful before the Commission.

The Commission’s treatment of Mr Phillips had therefore violated the State’s duty under the First Amendment not to base laws or regulations on hostility to a religion or religious viewpoint:

“The government, consistent with the Constitution’s guarantee of free exercise, cannot impose regulations that are hostile to the religious beliefs of affected citizens and cannot act in a manner that passes judgment upon or presupposes the illegitimacy of religious beliefs and practices.”

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## Can LGBT rights and religious rights coexist? Kim Davis-like case tests the waters

By Sarah Pulliam Bailey



**Gayle Myrick resigned from her position as a North Carolina magistrate in 2014 because she didn’t want to perform same-sex ceremonies. (The Becket Fund)**

The Washington Post (07.02.2018) - <http://wapo.st/2nNaOnV> - Since the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage nationwide in 2015, a slew of controversial cases have raised questions over whether LGBT rights can coexist with religious rights. One of the most hotly debated cases involved Kim Davis, a Kentucky county clerk who famously refused to let her staff issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples in 2015 and went to jail for six days during a legal battle that went to the Supreme Court.

As the battles continue in the courts and in legislatures, some religious-freedom advocates who would like to see a compromise have expressed fears that the country is at an impasse and that the law will ultimately favor one set of rights or the other.

The Supreme Court could clarify controversial questions when it decides later this year whether a bakery owner has the constitutional right to decline to make a cake for a same-sex wedding.

Meanwhile, some advocates are pointing to a case in North Carolina that they say could provide a national blueprint for compromise on the issue.

In 2014, after same-sex marriage was legalized in North Carolina, Gayle Myrick resigned from her job as a magistrate in the state because she believed that performing civil marriages for same-sex couples went against her faith.

Unlike Davis, Myrick did not object to marrying any specific couple, and she did not ask other employees in the office to refuse to do so. (Davis has recently said she no longer objects to issuing licenses for same-sex couples since Kentucky changed the rules so clerks do not have to attach their names to licenses.)

When Myrick, who attends a Southern Baptist church, raised her discomfort with performing a same-sex ceremony, her supervisor suggested she could remove her from the duties of performing marriages altogether. However, a higher-level supervisor said her schedule could not be adjusted to excuse her from marriage duties.

"I didn't want to stop anyone from getting married," said Myrick, who is 68 and lives in Monroe, N.C. "I also knew my religious convictions would not allow me to perform those marriages personally."

A federal judge ruled last year that she should have been allowed to opt out of performing marriages because of her religious beliefs. As a result, Myrick reached a settlement in January with the government to compensate her for her pay, retirement pay and attorneys' fees. She has been represented by the Becket Fund, which has taken up high-profile cases such as Hobby Lobby's Supreme Court case on insurance coverage for contraception.

In 2015, North Carolina passed a law that allows magistrates (who work as lay judges) to opt out of performing all marriages based on a "sincerely held religious objection." The law requires counties to make other magistrates available to handle marriage licenses and same-sex weddings if they have recusals.

Some religious-freedom observers and activists see the state law and Myrick's case as a victory in the tension between LGBT rights and government workers' religious rights. A same-sex couple seeking to wed wouldn't know that a government official intends to discriminate against them, as the official would be opting out of all marriages, activists argue.

"Nobody's entitled to the right to insult someone or deny someone to their face," said Ira Lupu, a law professor emeritus at George Washington University who specializes in the First Amendment. "People have a right to be accommodated in the workplace so long as there's little harm to the people being served."

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 states that employers must reasonably accommodate the religious practices of employees if that can be done without undue hardship. The problem with Davis's case was that she didn't seek just to exempt herself, said Douglas Laycock, a professor at the University of Virginia Law School. Instead, she sought to exempt the whole county. Laycock said he believes that exemptions in government offices should be narrower than those in businesses because the government must treat all citizens equally — but that Myrick's case seemed like a win-win compared with Davis's case.

"[Davis] wouldn't let anyone issue licenses," Laycock said. "But the county is not an employee, the county has no religion, and exempting the county would deprive all same-

sex couples of essential government services. Substituting a different [official] for Myrick doesn't deprive anyone of anything."

But others are fearful that such laws could give government workers license to discriminate.

"The law already draws the line for ministers and religious institutions. But this is a government officials, said Louise Melling, deputy legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union. "The question is where the law draws the line."

Claims for exemptions based on religious beliefs aren't new, Melling said, and they were raised after civil rights laws were enacted to prevent racial discrimination. Bob Jones University, which previously banned interracial dating, lost a Supreme Court case when the court ruled that the First Amendment did not prevent the IRS from revoking the tax-exempt status of a religious university whose practices are contrary to compelling government interest.

"If you say a magistrate wants exemption ... the government is then licensing discrimination," Melling said.

Several states have wrestled with similar cases. The "Utah compromise" in 2015 was hailed by some as an accommodation between Mormon leaders and LGBT activists, a signal that leaders on both sides could be open to giving a bit. The law banned employers and landlords from discriminating against people on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, and it also protected employees from being fired for talking about religious or moral beliefs.

The North Carolina law has some similarities to the Utah law, but Utah's law didn't specifically allow government officials to opt out of performing marriages. Utah made it so that the state would perform marriages using "willing clerks" or others in the community authorized to marry people. And if a same-sex couple comes into the office for a license and no willing clerks are available, then the elected town clerk does the service.

No state anti-discrimination laws have been passed since the Utah legislation, according to Robin Fretwell Wilson, a professor at the University of Illinois College of Law who worked on the Utah legislation.

Could laws similar to those in these two states be enacted across the country? Some observers, including Laycock, believe that compromises may be difficult to find in the future and that the country could be at a stalemate.

"The challenge here is to protect the rights of both sides as much as possible, and more often than not, that is entirely possible if we had just a smidgen of goodwill on both sides," Laycock said.

The Supreme Court's decision on the bakery case, which is expected late spring, could cause a kind of stalemate between the sides, said Charles Haynes of the Newseum's Religious Freedom Center.

"In this fight, we have reached a point where both sides see this as a zero-sum game," he said.

## Judge rules bakeshop owner doesn't have to bake wedding cake for gay couple

Daily Caller (06.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2BKoZCU> - A California judge ruled Monday the state couldn't force a cake shop owner to bake a cake for a gay couple's wedding, ruling that doing so would constitute a violation of free speech.

Superior Court Judge David Lampe denied the state of California's request for a preliminary injunction that sought to force bakeshop owner Cathy Miller to [design a wedding cake for a gay couple](#).

"For this court to force such compliance would do violence to the essentials of Free Speech guaranteed under the First Amendment," Lampe ruled, according to a press release sent to The Daily Caller News Foundation. The injunction also posited that if Miller refused to design the cake, the state would force her to close her Tastries Bakery shop altogether.

"We are pleased that the judge recognized that the First Amendment protects Cathy's freedom of speech," Charles LiMandri, chief counsel and president of the Freedom of Conscience Defense Fund, said after the ruling, the press release reports.

LiMandri argued in Friday's court hearing that Miller doesn't discriminate against same-sex couples, but refuses to use her artistic talents to express a message that conflicts with her religious beliefs about marriage.

The ruling comes after two women [asked Miller to design their wedding cake](#) and filed a complaint with the state, alleging that Miller discriminated against them on the basis of sexual orientation. They also posted about the event on social media. Following their complaint, the state launched an investigation and sought a court order to force Miller to bake the wedding cake.

"This is a significant victory for faith and freedom because the judge indicated in his ruling that the state cannot succeed in this case as a matter of law," LiMandri said. "No doubt the California officials will continue their persecution of Cathy, but it is clear that she has the Constitution on her side."

The cake baking incident comes after the Supreme Court announced in June that it would hear a similar case that occurred in 2012, when a baker in Colorado refused to bake a wedding cake for a gay couple. Lower courts had previously ruled that Jack Phillips, the owner of Masterpiece Cakeshop, had violated the state's accommodation laws by refusing to serve a customer based on sexual orientation, according to The Washington Post.

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# 100 Iranian Christians waiting to enter U.S. could be sent back to Iran

By Nina Shea

Washington Free Beacon (09.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2qMfz4U> - U.S. government action could send 100 mostly Christian Iranians stranded in Vienna back to Iran this week, where their return during the harsh government crackdown on dissidents could target them for further persecution, human rights activists warn.

The deportation threat looms despite the Trump administration's and Congress's vocal support for protesters in Iran, who are waging the strongest nationwide uprising against the government in Tehran in eight years.

"These deportations, during a human-rights crackdown in Iran no less, could be a death sentence for these persecuted Christians and other minorities," Nina Shea, an international human rights lawyer who directs the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom, told the Washington Free Beacon. "They would undermine the important statements against Iran's repression by President Trump, Vice President Pence and U.N. Ambassador [Nikki Haley]."

"The administration needs to act fast to stop this travesty," she said, noting that the U.S. government could give the refugees notices denying them entry to the U.S. as early as this week. This would leave the Austrians with little choice but to send them back to Iran.

Activists say the timing of the deportation threat is also particularly troublesome for the Trump administration, after the State Department last week designated Iran among 10 countries "of particular concern" for "systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom."

The Iranian Christian refugees traveled to Vienna in January 2017 under a 27-year-old U.S. law passed by Congress to help Jews escape persecution in the Soviet Union. Under a 2004 update of the law, known as the Lautenberg amendment, the State Department has helped tens of thousands of Iranian Jews, Christians, and Baha'is who were at risk in their home country to resettle in the United States.

During the end of the Obama administration, the State Department initially signed off on plans to resettle the latest group of mostly Iranian Christian refugees but then placed a hold on them toward the end of last year before Trump took office, according to Anna Buwalda, executive director of the Jubilee Campaign. The Jubilee Campaign is a nonprofit organization that advocates for religious minorities who suffer persecution in their home countries.

Buwalda says she and other human-rights activists don't know why the U.S. appears to be on the brink of denying them entry to the United States, and no one at the State Department or DHS has provided any answers.

"This is part of the mystery, and nobody's been able to receive any information to explain it," she said.

One-third of the refugees were set to resettle in California, where many of their relatives who have already gone through the refugee resettlement process are located, according to the activists.

The Department of Homeland Security, which has an office in Vienna, helped interview and vet the refugees, along with HIAS, the global Jewish nonprofit that works with the State Department on Lautenberg program refugee cases, Buwalda said.

HIAS referred a request for comment to its partner, the State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. Neither the State Department nor the DHS provided a response.

The refugees, most of them Armenians and Assyrians, have been waiting in Vienna for a year as U.S. courts have weighed in on the constitutionality of the travel ban, and recently were informed they must go back to Iran, according to Shea and Buwalda.

It is unclear if the Trump administration is behind the deportation threat or if Austria is becoming impatient with these cases remaining in limbo.

Human rights groups are urging the administration to take action and are worried the refugees and other priorities involving religious minorities in hotspots around the world are falling through the cracks as key Trump administration posts remain vacant a year into his presidency.

"The U.S. has broken its promise to Iranian religious minorities," Buwalda said. "They traveled to Vienna at the invitation of the United States, with the understanding that they would soon be reunited with their American families. Instead, the groups of refugees have been forced to wait there for more than a year with no explanation. They have no source of income, and many have spent down their life savings."

"The U.S. government must solve this situation quickly and humanely," she said.

One key post that would normally handle Lautenberg program issues remains vacant. Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback's nomination to the State Department post of ambassador at large for religious freedom is in limbo after Democrats placed a hold on it late last year and blocked the Senate from approving him.

The White House re-nominated Brownback on Monday but has not publicly disclosed whether it intends to expend the political capital to lean on the Senate to quickly confirm him. Senate GOP leaders would have to devote at least three days of precious floor time to hold a floor vote on the nomination if Democrats continue to oppose him instead of passing him quickly by unanimous consent.

The White House did not respond to an inquiry into Brownback's nomination.

Catholic and other Christian leaders have praised the Trump administration's rhetoric on the issue. They point to the administration's National Security Strategy report, unveiled in late December, and its pledge to "protect religious minorities" abroad.

Pence in October received a standing ovation at a dinner devoted to religious freedom issue when he pledged that "help is on the way" to religious minority communities in Iraq struggling to recover from Islamic State genocide.

However, Trump also has yet to appoint a special adviser for international religious freedom at the White House's National Security Council and has kept a special envoy for religious freedom post downgraded in power, as it was during the Obama administration.

The faith office at USAID also remains without a leader.

