Statement of Cissie Graham Lynch
Nominee For U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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Good morning, Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Shaheen, and Members of the Committee. It is an honor to appear before you today as the nominee to serve as Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. I am humbled and grateful to President Trump for nominating me to serve our nation in this important role.

I also want to thank my husband, Corey, our three children, my family, and all the others who have supported me and understand the meaningful difference the Ambassador at Large can make in the lives of those who are persecuted for their faith.

For more than 16 years, I've had the privilege of serving with two international organizations which work in more than 120 countries and help millions of people of all faiths and backgrounds, including Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, Christians, and many others.

This experience has given me a unique perspective on the challenges facing people around the world. But some of the most important lessons I've learned did not come from boardrooms, briefings, or meetings with government officials.

They came from sitting with mothers who lost sons and daughters to persecution. From listening to pastors who rebuilt their congregations after their churches were burned. From meeting families driven from their homes simply because of their beliefs.

I've stood in the mass graveyards in northern Iraq, spoken with men and women in Sudan who have had to hide with their families in the mountains, and met with family members of the 21 Coptic Christians who were beheaded by ISIS in Libya.

The courage and the faith of these people have left a lasting impression on me. They are not statistics. They have faces, names, and families, and I will carry their stories with me into this role.

Former Congressman Frank Wolf, a prime sponsor of the International Religious Freedom Act, devoted much of his public service to defending the persecuted, called international religious freedom *the human rights issue of our time.* His words remain just as relevant today.

Approximately 80 percent of the world's population lives in countries with high levels of religious restrictions. That is an alarming reality, and one that far too many Americans are unaware of.

While we enjoy the freedom to worship, pray, and live according to our convictions, billions of others face oppressive governments, harassment, imprisonment, violence, and even death for their beliefs. For many, the simple act of gathering for worship, sharing their faith, or refusing to renounce religious convictions can come at an unimaginable cost.

The freedom that they are denied is the freedom our nation was built to protect. Our Founders understood the importance of religious liberty, enshrining it before all the other rights in the First Amendment of the Constitution.

Religious freedom is often called our first freedom because the others stand on it. There is no freedom of speech, assembly, or association if you cannot first believe freely.

This fundamental freedom belongs to everyone, and as Americans, we have a moral responsibility to remain vigilant in protecting this freedom at home while advancing it for the millions around the world who do not enjoy it.

When governments respect religious freedom, it helps create conditions for greater stability, economic opportunities, and peaceful societies. In contrast, religious persecution fuels instability, extremism, displacement,

and conflict, creating threats that affect entire regions, and ultimately our own national security.

We saw the devastating consequences of this when ISIS swept across Iraq and Syria. Christians, Yazidis, Muslims, and other religious communities suffered horrific atrocities. Families were torn apart, women and children were enslaved, ancient communities were displaced, and countless innocent lives were lost. The consequences of that violence extended far beyond the region and demanded an international response.

Defending religious freedom abroad is not separate from advancing America's interests—it is an important part of protecting them.

I am grateful President Trump and Secretary Rubio have made this a priority. I was there in 2019 when President Trump became the first U.S. president in history to host an event at the United Nations on religious freedom, and he said, *"No right is more fundamental to a peaceful, prosperous, and virtuous society than the right to follow one's convictions."*

Nearly three decades ago, Congress recognized the importance of this mission when it passed the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. That landmark legislation provided important tools to identify religious freedom violations, hold persecutors accountable, and advocate for those suffering because of their beliefs. And I am thankful for the members in this room and throughout Congress who continue to care about this bipartisan mission.

The Ambassador at Large has a responsibility to help ensure that these tools are used effectively and that international religious freedom remains a central component of our nation's foreign policy.

If confirmed, I Pledge - in coordination with President Trump, Secretary Rubio, and Congress, to fulfill my authorities under the International

Religious Freedom Act to advocate, defend, and fight for all who are persecuted for their faith.

I will further the vision of our nation's founders and the bipartisan mission that Congress established, so that together, we can help others experience the precious gift of religious freedom that we enjoy in this country.

I know the challenges are immense. But I also know the extraordinary courage of those who refuse to surrender their convictions in the face of oppression. I have seen that courage firsthand. And it is their stories that remind me why this work matters. Thank you.