

**Intervention by Knox Thames, Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in
the Near East and South/Central Asia
U.S. Department of State**

**Ninth session of the Forum on Minority Issues: Minorities in situations of
humanitarian crises**

**24-25 November 2016
Room XX, Palais des Nations
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Item 2: Legal framework and key concepts

On behalf of the U.S. government, I want to thank the Special Rapporteur for convening this important meeting. The United States supports the position of the Special Rapporteur on minority issues and wants to thank the current mandate holder for her tireless efforts. We wish you well and look forward to partnering with your successor.

The United States is committed to protecting the human rights of all people, including members of minority groups and people in vulnerable situations. This is a foundational tenet of the United States, reflected in our laws and constitutional protections domestically, as well as in our international human rights obligations. My position, for example, was created by the U.S. Department of State, in close consultation with the White House, to help sharpen U.S. government efforts to assist religious minorities in the Middle East and South and Central Asia. I am tasked with finding ways the United States can protect diversity of thought and belief in these key regions where we have seen violent extremists and authoritarian governments attack minorities.

Our story is not perfect – no country's is – and we face current challenges – as all nations do. And it is because of our lessons learned, that the U.S. government is concerned about the ability of all people to practice a religion or belief—including non-belief—alone or in community with others, and free from violence or discrimination of any kind. It is a daunting task, but one we want to address with our friends and allies, which is why I am here.

Some facts to consider that should frame our discussion: Members of minority groups have human rights. Every country has minority groups. And every ethnic and religious group might be a minority somewhere.

International law firmly enshrines the human rights of all individuals without distinction of any kind. Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights issued a clear statement on the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, which was supported by the 1992 minorities declaration.

These principles are more relevant than ever, as we know today that in so many situations around the world, refugees come from minority communities who have been or fear being persecuted, and so have been accorded protections under the 1951 Refugee Convention.

We have seen these situations before: the 20th century witnessed mass movements of people, with millions fleeing extreme violence targeted against them due to their religious or ethnic identity. The advancement of international humanitarian law and international human rights law was partly in response to the atrocities committed against Jews and other minorities by the Nazi regime during World War II. The United Nations literally emerged out of the ashes of the Holocaust.

Can this web of protections help ensure “never again” actually means “never again”? Can we, as a community based on values, help promote and respect the rights of members of minority groups? And when humanitarian crises arise, either man-made or natural, how can we better respond to protect this diversity?

I look forward to discussions over the next two days about these questions and hope the recommendations are concrete and actionable. We should all work in concert on these issues. I will be sure to bring these concerns about religious minorities to the International Contact Group for Freedom of Religion or Belief, a network launched by Canada and the U.S. of likeminded countries centered around Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In this regard, the United States has welcomed and is partnering with other special positions to assist religious minorities, such as new religious freedom envoys from the European Union and Norway, and the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB and the OSCE Panel of Experts. Similarly, the United States would welcome the creation of a specific

focal point on diversity and pluralism within the UN Department of Political Affairs to focus on the challenges facing religious and ethnic minorities in the Middle East, which we understand has been under consideration.