

## **Testimony for Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

### **Freedom of Belief: Countering Religious Violence**

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Chairman McGovern, Chairman Hultgren, members of the commission: Thank you for holding this important hearing on international religious freedom and countering religious violence. This hearing comes at a time when religiously motivated violence – as well as violence targeting members of certain religions – is on the rise around the world.

Pew Research Center and its experts do not promote specific policy positions or offer recommendations for policy changes. Nonetheless, I hope my testimony today can provide some useful context. At the Center, we have been tracking changes in both government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion across 198 countries for nearly a decade. Our latest report, which covers events in 2015, found that restrictions on religion were once again on the rise after two, back-to-back years of decline.

Our research showed a modest increase in government-imposed religious restrictions, defined as laws, policies or official actions that restrict religious beliefs and practices. A total of 50 governments had high or very high levels of restrictions on religion in 2015, up from 47 the prior year.

Separately, we also track social hostilities involving religion, defined as acts by private individuals, organizations or groups in society that either are motivated by religion or that target adherents of particular religions. We found high or very high levels of social hostilities in 53 countries, up from 45 in 2014.

A few countries have very high levels of both government restrictions and social hostilities. In 2015, these countries were Egypt, Iraq, Russia and Syria. In 2014, only Syria had scored very high in both categories.

I cannot offer any simple explanation for the overall rise of restrictions on religion, but I would like to focus on two of the more than 30 indicators that we monitor each year: government harassment or discrimination against specific religious groups, and government use of force against religious groups, ranging from detentions to displacements, assaults and killings.

In 2015, there were increases in these two measures – harassment and use of physical force – in almost all major regions of the globe, including sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, the Asia-Pacific region, and Europe. In fact, government

harassment of religious groups was the most widespread it has been since 2007, the first year for which we have data. One hundred fifty-seven governments engaged in some form of harassment or discrimination against religious groups in 2015, up from 129 countries the year before. And more governments also used force: officials in 106 countries sanctioned various physical acts of repression, compared with 81 countries in 2014.

One striking development was an increase in harassment and use of force by European governments. More than half of the 45 countries across the whole of the continent, from the United Kingdom in the west to Russia in the east, engaged in increased levels of harassment or physical force against some religious groups in 2015.

Some of the incidents in Europe involved refugees from Syria and other Muslim-majority countries. Government officials in multiple European countries made derogatory statements about Muslim refugees, sought to block the construction of mosques or minarets, tried to ban the wearing of headscarves in certain circumstances, or targeted Muslims in law enforcement actions, some of which were later ruled unjustified. In Bremen, Germany, for example, police raided an Islamic Cultural Center, saying they suspected that a person associated with the mosque was distributing automatic weapons for a terror attack. Police broke down the front door of the mosque, handcuffed worshippers and forced some to lie on the floor for hours. No weapons were found, and a court later ruled that the search was unlawful.

In addition to government actions, Europe also saw a rise in acts of social hostility in 2015, with Muslims and Jews as the primary targets. All told, hostilities ranging from vandalism and destruction of property to physical assaults against Jews were reported in 33 European countries, about the same as in 2014. Over the same period, hostilities against Muslims increased dramatically, from 26 countries in 2014 to 32 countries in 2015.

European Muslims were targeted particularly after the Charlie Hebdo shootings in January and the Bataclan shootings in the fall of 2015. There were reports of vandalism at mosques, protests by far-right groups against Muslim immigrants and Islam in general, and hate speech and violence against Muslim individuals throughout the year.

Meanwhile, the Middle East-North Africa region continued to have the highest average levels of government restrictions on religion. Governments across the region targeted religious minorities, atheists and political groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. In Egypt, authorities used tear gas and live ammunition on Islamist demonstrators on the anniversary of the 2011 uprisings, resulting in 23 deaths and 516 arrests, according to the government. In Saudi Arabia, Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh was sentenced to death for apostasy and publicly promoting atheism. His sentence was later reduced to an eight-year prison sentence and 800 lashes.

The Middle East-North Africa region also had the highest levels of social hostilities involving religion in 2015. In Iraq, for example, Sunni Muslims were frequently targeted for abduction. In February 2015, the prominent Sunni tribal leader Sheikh Qassem Sweidan al-Janabi was kidnapped and killed by unidentified militants. He had recently called for the return of 70,000 displaced Sunnis.

Elsewhere, sub-Saharan Africa saw the largest *increase* in social hostilities involving religion in 2015. Twenty-five countries across the region experienced violence or the threat of violence to enforce religious norms, up from nine countries in 2014. For example, Boko Haram fighters engaged in attacks in Nigeria and Niger while also killing over 200 civilians in Chad during the year. And across sub-Saharan Africa there were numerous incidents of violence involving allegations of witchcraft or occult rituals. In the Republic of Congo, two elderly men were killed after being accused of witchcraft, and in Burkina Faso elderly women were barred from their villages after being accused of witchcraft.

Worldwide, religion-related terrorism was somewhat less widespread in 2015 than in 2014, according to our data. Acts of terror motivated by religion or targeting religious groups were reported in 50 countries, down from 60 countries the year before. Similarly, fewer countries were engaged in religion-related armed conflicts. But while these types of religion-related violence were on the decline, the number of displaced persons resulting from them remained high. We estimate that religion-related terrorism and armed conflict contributed to the displacement of approximately 9 million new refugees and internally displaced people in 2015.

The types of religious restrictions we track can sometimes muddy the distinction between government and social actions. For example, government policies that ban or ostracize certain religious groups often coincide with the societal harassment of those groups. In Russia, the government has harassed Jehovah's Witnesses for years, and, in 2015, followers of the religion were the subject of numerous physical attacks and incidents of property damage by private groups or individuals.

However, government restrictions on religion are not always accompanied by social hostilities. For example, China had some of the world's highest levels of government restrictions on religion in 2015. But levels of social hostilities involving religion remain moderate in China, by our measures.

In general, around the globe, we find that government restrictions and social hostilities tend to go hand-in-hand, rising or falling together. In the language of social science, they are positively correlated. But there are exceptions to this relationship – as in China. And I should note that even when government actions and social hostilities appear to be rising or falling in tandem, the causal connections are often difficult to discern. This is an area where generalizations are fraught with peril, and the unique characteristics of various countries, including their demographic profiles and political histories, can contribute to understanding the relationship between government and social actions.

While it is too soon to know whether the modest uptick in government restrictions and social hostilities involving religion that took place in 2015 constitutes a long-term trend, we hope that our continuing research on this issue can provide helpful context and may be useful to policymakers seeking to prevent and counter religious violence.

Thank you.