



## AMERICAN JEWISH WORLD SERVICE STATEMENT TO THE RECORD

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**To Co-Chairs Chris Smith and James P. McGovern**, members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony to the record of your March 5, 2026 hearing, “U.S. Presidency of the G20—An Opportunity to Champion Human Rights.”

As faith-based actors ourselves, the American Jewish World Service (AJWS) community recognizes the role of religion to inspire, motivate, and teach. But because we are committed to advancing the human rights of all people around the world, including those most marginalized, AJWS has grave concerns the significant shift in U.S. foreign policy it has observed in the last several months. The U.S. should be championing universal, internationally recognized rights in multilateral fora like the G20, instead of abdicating its role in defending these longstanding freedoms on the global stage.

Indeed, the modern understanding of human rights is rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1948 in the aftermath of World War II. Drafted by leaders from a wide range of cultural, religious, and political traditions, the UDHR established a shared commitment to protecting the dignity and freedom of every individual, without exception. Central to this framework is the belief that human rights are universal, indivisible, and interdependent. Its authors made clear that the rights they enumerated apply to all human beings, regardless of origin or status. By the same token, it pointedly declined to elevate certain rights over others, since its authors were all too aware that this opened the path to selective interpretations of its principles.

The UDHR became the foundation for international human rights and has guided civil society, international organizations and governments, including the U.S., for decades.

During the first Trump administration, however, a significant shift in perspective began to take shape. In 2019, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo created the Commission on Unalienable Rights, an advisory body that gave itself a mandate to reassess the role of human rights in U.S. foreign policy. As Professor Glennon, who chaired that Commission, testified at this hearing, the Commission’s remit was to provide “advice and recommendations on human rights to the Secretary of State, grounded in our nation’s founding documents and the declaration.”

The Commission’s interpretations suggested that some rights – namely religious freedom – should be prioritized over others. Purposefully confusing the individual freedom to worship with a state license to advance a particular religious agenda is a gross misreading of the UDHR and other fundamental texts. This perspective was then, as it is now, an attempt to impose a narrow, religious ideology on the rights of people across the globe. In its efforts to shift the role of the U.S. towards this restrictive view, the Trump administration has increasingly emphasized what it calls “natural rights.” This doctrine argues that rights granted by governments are inherently political and therefore less worthy of protection than those grounded in religious or moral traditions.

This disturbing shift in how the U.S. frames and prioritizes human rights potentially carries grave consequences for promoting discrimination against the marginalized communities that AJWS supports worldwide, including women and girls, LGBTQI+ people and Indigenous communities.

The administration’s abandonment of universal human rights was further made evident in the radical revision of the State Department’s Country Reports on Human Rights Practices. For decades, the Country Reports have been used to inform foreign policy and security decisions, support civil society, advance human rights around the world through diplomatic channels, and set international standards for accountability. Court systems worldwide also rely on these reports to assess asylum cases. The changes eliminated sections addressing the violent suppression of protests, unfair elections, attacks on the health and rights of women and girls, Indigenous communities, and LGBTQI+ people — and, in the process, completely devalued the reports themselves.

The “natural rights” agenda is not merely a rhetorical pose but a shift with profound implications in the way the U.S. expends billions in foreign assistance, moving from funding that saves lives to funding that is inextricably linked to and conditional on acceptance to a narrow religious prejudice.

Nowhere is this more evident than the Trump administration’s recent expansion of the Global Gag Rule. In its original form, this policy (also known as the Mexico City Policy) prohibited foreign non-governmental organizations that receive U.S. family planning assistance from providing, referring, counseling, or even advocating for abortion, even using their own resources. During Trump’s first term, the policy was expanded to apply to all global health assistance, affecting billions in funding for HIV/AIDS care, maternal and child health, malaria prevention programs, and more, upending global health services.

This latest expansion includes restrictions on any services, activities, advocacy, and speech related to “gender ideology” and programs that utilize diversity, equity, and inclusion practices. This policy weaponizes foreign aid to threaten lives, deepen inequities, and undermine global progress and partnerships.

The shift in favor of so-called “natural rights” should be of concern to any person or entity that values democracy, justice, equality, and the rule of law. Under the universal human rights framework, not only are all rights considered equally important, but they are also mutually reinforcing. Governments are expected to adhere to shared international norms and can be held accountable through institutions designed to monitor compliance.

By contrast, the “natural rights” approach allows governments to decide which rights are legitimate and which can be disregarded. This creates a hierarchy in which some freedoms are recognized and protected while others are treated as secondary or dismissed altogether. When governments apply human rights standards selectively or redefine them in ways that exclude certain groups, the legitimacy of those standards is weakened – and will be cheered in the capitals of countries already guilty of the worst human rights abuses.

For a faith-based organization committed to justice and human dignity of all, the universal approach inspired by the UDHR transcends language. The Jewish tenet that all human beings are created b’tzelem Elohim—in the Divine image—underlies our belief that all people are infinitely valuable and deserving of respect. Human dignity is not conditional or selective; it is universal and belongs equally to all.

Like many others, Jewish faith traditions insist on compassion, justice, and respect for human dignity, even for those with whom we disagree. Religious freedom is an important principle, and one that our own community cherishes, but it must not be used as a pretext for denying others their rights or protections under the law.

The U.S. should reaffirm its commitment to the universal human rights framework that has guided international diplomacy and cooperation for nearly 80 years. Doing so would reinforce the principle that every person—regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or political belief—deserves equal dignity and protection. Preserving that vision, we believe, is essential not only for the rights of all, including marginalized communities around the world, but also for the credibility and moral leadership of the U.S. on the global stage.

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