

Press Releases: Interview With Tony Perkins of FRC Radio

Interview
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

Via Telephone
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QUESTION: Welcome back to Washington Watch. I'm your host, Tony Perkins. So glad to have you with us. Wednesday, we had one of my fellow commissioners from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Kristina, join us from Turkey with the news that American pastor Andrew Brunson was not going to be released from prison in Turkey, where he has been held for the last two years.

Now, Pastor Brunson's case is reflective of a growing threat to religious freedom and the spread of religious persecution around the globe that really has reached historic proportions, so much so that the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has called for the first-ever Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, which will take place next week. The three-day event will bring together government officials, representatives of international organizations, religious leaders, rights advocates, and members of civil society organizations from around the world, and I'll be there as well.

With us now is the host of the event, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Secretary, welcome to Washington Watch.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Tony, it's great to be back on with you.

QUESTION: It's been a while. And it's great to have you on in this new capacity. And let me first just commend you for one of your first actions as Secretary is to call for this gathering of international leaders to discuss religious freedom.

I want to start with the obvious question: Why?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Tony, it's incredibly important in our administration, in President Trump's administration, to make the case and sound the clarion call for religious freedom all around the world. You mentioned Pastor Brunson. There are many countries in which religious freedom is not available. And we believe that by gathering citizens from around the world – we'll have over 80

delegations from different countries; forty-plus of my counterparts at the foreign minister level will be in attendance – and religious leaders like yourself all brought together to highlight the central nature of religious freedom, and it's important to individuals and countries.

We believe that religious freedom is important for every citizen around the world and we want to bring everyone together to discuss how all faiths have the right – people, individuals have the right to worship in the way that they choose, or if they choose not to. And every country ought to honor that.

QUESTION: Now, Mr. Secretary, you and I have been around government for quite some time. And a lot of times there's a lot of meetings and there's not always tangible outcomes. I know you're a man of action. What do you hope will be the tangible outcomes of this gathering?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We expect, Tony, this to be far more than just talk. We do believe that just putting people together from all across the world in a room and talking about this topic will empower them to go back to their home country and advocate for religious freedom as well. It's difficult, Tony, as you know, in many countries to even speak about religious freedom. And so we hope to provide a support system and a basis for some of them to head back to their own countries.

But we'll announce a number of initiatives. The Vice President will be speaking; Ambassador Brownback will be speaking there. And we will be laying out a path where we are hopeful that the State Department here in the United States can lead a process where religious freedom is raised as a priority for the citizens of every country. And we will have our teams in the subsequent weeks and months in the field talking about religious freedom on a continued basis. We'll have just three days here, but this will be a mission of the State Department every day.

QUESTION: Now, Secretary Pompeo, this is the first ever, and I don't want this to be lost on our listeners. As you pointed out, this issue of religious freedom, both domestically and from a foreign policy standpoint, is a priority for this administration. This is much more than lip service. I mean, this administration takes this serious.

SECRETARY POMPEO: You've seen that with President Trump very clearly. Look, we want people of all faiths – Christians, Muslims, Jews, people of all different faiths – we think that this forum will reinforce for countries that enjoy that religious freedom and encourage those that are on the cusp, who are in a place where it's more challenging, will help provide them a courage to continue to make religious freedom a priority for the citizens of their own countries as well. This was laid out in the President's National Security Strategy, which is unique and different from previous administrations. We do place a high priority on religious freedom and we can – we will continue to fight for it every place that we travel.

QUESTION: What has been the response from your counterparts around the globe?

SECRETARY POMPEO: It's been remarkable. I literally, as I was traveling this

past week – I think I was in six or eight different places – I had foreign ministers say, “I’m going to be there,” and I hadn’t seen the list. They’re excited to come be around others who believe religious freedom is important. I was in Muslim countries; I was in places with religions very different than my own Christian faith. But every one of those leaders was excited about the opportunity to gather with likeminded individuals who share the desire, the quest for every individual to be able to practice their faith in their country in the way that they wish to do.

QUESTION: And I know from my role at USCIRF that there’s actually countries that are on a waiting list. There’s people wanting to get to the –

SECRETARY POMPEO: (Laughter.) It is indeed oversubscribed, Tony, which we consider an enormous blessing.

QUESTION: It is.

SECRETARY POMPEO: And we’re going to do our best to accommodate each and every one of them so that they can come be part of this. And it bodes well for continuity for a program like this as well, not just these three days but to make sure that there are real actions that follow from this event.

QUESTION: One final question for you, Mr. Secretary. I know you’ve got a busy schedule. What can the average American do to bring greater awareness to this issue of religious freedom? Not just as an American right, but as the State Department and the United States Government recognizes this is a human right. What can we be doing?

SECRETARY POMPEO: It is deeply a human right. I think we can do a number of things. I think those of us who believe in faith and prayer can pray. I think it’s important for every individual to demand of their elected officials that they consider religious freedom among one of their priorities as they seek to lead and to be part of government service. And then I just think it’s important that groups – we have dozens and dozens of NGOs that will be attending this – to support groups like that and nongovernmental organizations that are prepared to help fight for religious freedom all around the world.

QUESTION: Do you anticipate seeing movement in countries like Turkey, like North Korea? I mean, do you really think this – during this Trump administration that we’re going to see movement?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We’ve seen some already. A good case in point would be Uzbekistan that has begun to move in the right direction. Tony, you know this is a long march, but absent leadership, absent the State Department engaging in this as an important priority, we know that the likelihood of it happening is less so. So we’ll work in every place to raise the awareness of the centrality of religious freedom not only for individual human dignity, but for success of nations as well.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, thank you so much for coming back on Washington Watch in your new capacity, and I look forward to seeing you next week at the

ministerial.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Bless you, Tony. I look forward to seeing you next week as well. So long, sir.

QUESTION: All right. Thanks so much.

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