

Remarks for Intra-Religious Roundtable
Friday, February 8, 1500
Iqbal Institute for Research and Dialogue

AssalamuAlaikum.

Dr. Ahmad Yousif al-Draiweesh, Dr. Mumtaz Ahmad, thank you for your kind introduction. Most importantly, thank you both for your continued leadership and tireless efforts to foster mutual respect and harmony between Pakistan's diverse religious communities, including among Muslims of different sects.

We are honored to be here at the Allama Iqbal Institute in the company of some of Pakistan's most eminent Islamic scholars. We respect and admire your commitment to religious cooperation in building a more prosperous and just society in Pakistan. Thank you for inviting me to join you today.

Let me also take a brief moment to introduce another distinguished guest here with us – Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Michael Posner. Assistant Secretary Posner has been a long-time advocate for the advancement of human rights and religious freedom in Pakistan, and I'm very pleased that he is able to join us today.

Before I go any further, I would like to take this opportunity to express my deepest condolences – on behalf of the United States Government and the American people – to the Pakistanis affected by the spate of recent terrorist and sectarian attacks in Hangu, Karachi, Quetta, and Swat. The United States stands with the people of Pakistan in condemning these senseless and inhumane acts of violence.

I will keep my remarks short, since my primary reason for requesting this gathering was to hear from you. The message I want to share with you simple: the United States strongly believes that the freedom to practice ones religion without fear of intimidation, death, coercion, or any form of reprisal is a basic human right, both in Pakistan and throughout the world.

Religious freedom is fundamental to human dignity, and the United States stands committed to working with Pakistan's government, religious leaders, and people to uphold religious freedom. Indeed, religious scholars such as yourselves have a vital role to play in this regard, and I commend you for all the work you are doing in your own communities to advance this goal.

The promotion of religious freedom, however, is not just an end in itself. Rather it is an essential ingredient in the development of a just, stable, and prosperous society. This is something I heard repeated by all the speakers when I attended the National *Seerat* Conference on January 25, including in the eloquent and compassionate statements by IIU's own Dr. Sajid-ur-Rehman.

Let me also be clear that the United States does not take sides or favor any one particular religion, political party, or ethnicity over another. We support the right of every person to worship as they choose, whether Deobandi, Ahle Hadith, Barelvi, Shia, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, or any other affiliation.

The fact is that history has shown us that when people are unable to practice their religions freely and are abused because of their beliefs, it creates an environment of mistrust and suspicion, heightening the prospects for conflict. Most importantly, it emboldens violent extremists who have no objective other than to destabilize society and cause unnecessary suffering.

As President Obama has said on several occasions: “We can choose to be defined by our differences, and give in to a future of suspicion and mistrust. Or we can choose to do the hard work of forging common ground, and commit ourselves to the steady pursuit of progress.”

I hope you will join me in pursuing the second option, “choosing to do the hard work of forging common ground, and committing ourselves to the steady pursuit of progress.”

Thank you for inviting me to join you here today. I look forward to our discussion.