Bill would strengthen role of religious freedom envoy

by [Daniel Burke](#)
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WASHINGTON (RNS) New legislation proposed by a leading congressional watchdog would push the State Department to make international religious freedom a greater priority.

Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va., introduced a bill on Wednesday (May 11) that would boost the profile of the ambassador-at-large for religious freedom, require religious training for foreign service officers, and reauthorize an independent panel that monitors restrictions placed on beliefs and practices abroad.

The bill would also require the State Department report to Congress about concrete measures it has taken toward countries that violate religious rights.

"Religious freedom, often referred to as the first freedom, is of central import to the American experiment," Wolf said on Wednesday. "As such it should feature prominently in U.S. foreign policy."

Wolf authored the 1998 bill that established the State Department's international religious freedom office, created an ambassador-at-large for the issue and founded a bipartisan commission to monitor foreign governments.

President Obama's new religious freedom envoy, the Rev. Suzan Johnson Cook, was confirmed by the Senate last month. Wolf's bill, which was co-sponsored by Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., would give Cook and future envoys a direct line to the secretary of state.

It would also require the secretary of state, the Treasury Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development to issue a

report to Congress on the best ways to use U.S. aid to promote religious freedom.

In addition, Wolf's bill would reauthorize the independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, whose nine members are appointed by the White House and Congress.

The commission, due to expire Sept. 30, issues annual reports that flag religious freedom concerns and offers recommendations to the president, State Department and Congress. Critics say the bipartisan commission lacks the teeth to execute its policy recommendations.