

April 2, 2014

The Honorable Jessica L. Wright
Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness
4000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-4000

Dear Acting Under Secretary Wright:

On January 22, 2014, the Department of Defense released a revised version of its Instruction 1300.17 – *Accommodation of Religious Practices Within the Military Services*. We appreciate the fact that these revisions establish, for the first time, a formal process for requesting and granting accommodations for our men and women in uniform who seek to abide by the requirements of their faith – wearing, for instance, head coverings or neat beards. However, we are writing to express our concerns that these provisions still needlessly infringe on the rights of these religiously observant service members and prospective service members. As written, the revised Instructions will have the effect of limiting diversity in the ranks and preventing talented and patriotic Americans from serving in our nation’s military because of their religion.

As currently drafted, section 4(g) of the revised Instruction would require religiously observant service members and prospective service members to remove their head coverings, cut their hair, or shave their beards – a violation of their religious obligations – while their request to accommodate these same religious practices is pending. This is so, even if they are otherwise qualified to serve and an accommodation is unlikely to undermine safety or other necessary objectives. We urge you to reconsider this provision, which has the effect of forcing some religiously observant service members to make an impossible choice between their faith and their chosen profession.

Further, under Section 4(j) of the revised Instruction, even if an original accommodation request is approved, religiously observant service members would be required to submit a new request for the same accommodation every time they receive a new assignment, “transfer of duty station, or other significant change in circumstances.” The uncertainty associated with this requirement to repeatedly request an accommodation for the very same religious practices is stifling, and may needlessly limit career opportunities – or, in some cases, end careers.

Without further revisions, Instruction 1300.17 will have an unwelcome and unnecessary chilling effect on religious liberty – and will limit opportunities for talented individuals of faith to serve in our nation’s military. If service members can successfully perform their military duties, their religious practices, such as wearing head coverings or beards, should not be an obstacle to service.

We urge you to consider fine-tuning the revised Instruction to better accommodate these kinds of religious practices. We would be pleased to meet with you and members of your staff to discuss this matter further.

Thank you for your consideration of this important request.

Sincerely,

**American Civil Liberties Union
American Jewish Committee (AJC)
Americans United for Separation of Church and State
Anti-Defamation League
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty
Becket Fund for Religious Liberty
Chaplain Alliance for Religious Liberty
Christian Legal Society
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
The Episcopal Church
Forum on the Military Chaplaincy
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
Interfaith Alliance
Muslim Advocates**

National Council of Jewish Women

Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF)

Sikh Coalition

South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT)

United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society

Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America

Union for Reform Judaism