

Prioritizing International Religious Freedom in US Foreign Policy

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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for holding this important hearing. Mr. Smith, thank you for your lifetime of leadership and personal sacrifice in opposing religious persecution and advancing the right of religious freedom for all people.

And thank you for inviting me to testify on HR 1856, the amendments to the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

Mr. Chairman, I have with me a letter from a wide variety of religious and human rights organizations, and signed as well by a number of individual scholars and experts, which endorses HR 1856. While recognizing that the letter has just been published, and will doubtless engender more signatories, I ask that it be entered into the record.

HR 1856 builds on the lessons we have learned since the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). If these amendments are passed, I believe the IRFA can move closer to fulfilling its promise -- an international religious freedom policy that will advance both America's values and America's national security.

These amendments are necessary because no administration, including the current administration, has successfully employed IRFA to advance our values *or* our national security. Over the dozen years since IRFA's passage, our policy cannot be said to have, in any substantial way, reduced religious persecution, advanced religious freedom, or increased America's national security. In my view this constitutes a significant failure, and a major opportunity missed.

Part of the reason for this failure has been an abiding suspicion among US diplomats about the wisdom, and even the constitutionality, of the policy. That problem continues.¹ Moreover, US IRF policy is often perceived by its objects (and by some Americans) as American cultural imperialism, designed, for example, to marginalize Islam, or pave the way for Christian missionaries. This perception is not only false, but ironic -- even tragic -- in the extreme. The United States has been at pains *not* to marginalize Islam or to support Christian missionaries. On the other hand, it has done far too little to remedy the rising tide of religious persecution against indigenous Christian minorities in the Middle East.

¹ See the report by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for US Foreign Policy*, 84-85; also see, Liora Danan and Alice Hunt, *Mixed Blessings: US Government Engagement with Religion in Conflict Prone Settings* (CSIS, 2007), 43-44.

HR 1856, if adopted, will help to remedy these problems by empowering, and by *requiring*, the State Department and other agencies of the U.S. government to take actions that they should have been taking for the past 12 years. It will provide the means to overcome diplomatic reticence, and the false perceptions at home and abroad, that have hamstrung our efforts.

Why U.S. IRF Policy is Important

The American people understand the profound moral and humanitarian issues at stake when it comes to religious freedom. They want our nation, as the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) puts it, "to stand with the persecuted."

We must never forget the men, women and children who suffer because of their religious beliefs and practices, or those of their tormentors. They are people such as:

- The martyred Pakistani Christian Shabbaz Bhatti, whom many of you knew, who was murdered for opposing Pakistan's blasphemy laws, as was his Muslim colleague, Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab;
- The Iranian Baha'is and Christians who are routinely detained, tortured, and killed;
- The Iraqi Catholics who were slaughtered at mass last Christmas, and whose co-religionists continue to flee Iraq in such numbers that the very presence of Christianity in Iraq is imperiled;
- The Egyptian Copts who were murdered as they left their church in Alexandria, and whose co-religionists are deeply concerned about their fate as Egypt struggles toward democracy;
- The Ahmadiyya of Pakistan and Indonesia whose lives are under constant threat, and whose nations will never achieve stable democracy until this minority is fully integrated;
- The Indian Muslim mothers and children, unprotected by the police, massacred by Hindu mobs in Gujarat;
- The Tibetan Buddhists whose ancient culture and religious practices are under assault from a pitiless Chinese government;
- The countless victims of religion-based terrorism, including the men and women murdered in the twin towers, in the Pentagon, or in the fields of Pennsylvania, on September 11, 2001.

Americans of all faiths expect their leaders to put in place policies that will help to prevent such outrages in the future, and give hope to the victims of religious persecution.

But there is another reason the American people support U.S. IRF policy, a reason that is no less noble and is, in fact, closer to home. The advance of international religious freedom is important to vital American interests abroad, and to the security of the American people at home.

Both history and modern scholarship² make it clear that highly religious societies cannot attain stable, lasting democracy without religious freedom in full³ — the set of institutions and habits

² Brian Grim and Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the 21st Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

³ See Thomas F. Farr, "The Widow's Torment: International Religious Freedom and American National Security in the 21st Century," *Drake Law Review* 57.4 (2009), 862-863; also see Farr, "International Religious Freedom and

that guarantee equality under the law for all religious actors and a sustainable balance between religion and state.

Unless nations like Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan can achieve the institutions and habits of religious liberty, democracy will not root in those countries and is likely to collapse into anarchy, theocracy, or authoritarianism.

Among other things, this means that, unless they embrace religious freedom in full, these societies are unlikely to achieve what they seek, including the secular benefits of democracy such as security, economic opportunity, and peace with the neighbors. Most critically for American interests, the chance that each would become, or continue to be, incubators and exporters of religion-related terrorism would dramatically increase.

Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that religious freedom will help determine the success or failure of the whole Arab Spring, including in major countries such as Egypt. A May 30th article in the New York Times makes the point well. That article, "Egypt's Christians Fear Violence as Changes Embolden Islamists," demonstrates that Egypt's political future rests on whether it will accord full religious freedom for all its citizens, Christians as well as Muslims. "Will Christians have equal rights and full citizenship or not?" asked Sarkis Naoum, a Christian commentator in Beirut, Lebanon. "The Copts are the crucial test case," said Heba Morayef, a researcher with Human Rights Watch, who added that facing off against "societal pressures" may in some ways be ever harder than criticizing a dictator. "It is the next big battle." As reporter David Kirkpatrick went on to observe, this is "a pivotal test of Egypt's tolerance, pluralism and the rule of law."

There will be no real freedom in Egypt -- period -- and there will be no real stability in Egypt -- period -- unless there is full religious freedom in Egypt, not only for its Coptic minority but also for moderate and reformist Muslim voices who might otherwise face impossible pressures from extremist Islamist forces.

It is therefore significant that HR 1856 updates the findings section of the law to acknowledge that religious freedom "is necessary for democracy to endure, and to yield its social, economic, political, and intellectual benefits to all its citizens. Contemporary scholarship also demonstrates that the absence of religious freedom is causally related not only to the persecution of religious minorities, but also to religious conflict, violence, extremism, and terrorism, including the kind of terrorism that has reached the American homeland."

Mr. Chairman, it is in our vital interests for democracy to succeed in the broader Middle East, in places like Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. If those nations collapse into anarchy or move toward some form of theocratic authoritarianism, such as exists in Iran and Saudi Arabia, America will suffer. Not only will our sacrifices of blood and treasure have been for naught but these and other countries could join Iran and Saudi Arabia as breeding grounds for religious terrorism.

In short, the policy established by the IRFA is about the well being of our fellow human beings around the world. But it is also about the well being of our own children and our grandchildren (I

Moral Responsibility," in Gerard V. Bradley, ed., *21st Century Challenges to Religious Liberty* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

am proud to say I have eight). So what I have to say about this law is not just about international relations and foreign policy. For me it is personal, as I know it is for you.

The Failures of US IRF Policy

The IRFA has now operated under three administrations. I had the honor to serve as director of the office of international religious freedom under the Clinton and Bush administrations, and I have published analyses⁴ of the policies of both. At the outset of the Obama administration I authored, along with my colleague Dennis Hoover, a comprehensive set of policy recommendations⁵ for the use of White House and State Department officials. For the past two and one-half years I have published a number of critiques⁶ of US religious freedom policy. And I now direct the Religious Freedom Project⁷ at Georgetown's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs.

My view is that none of the three administrations has implemented the law in a vigorous and effective fashion. While each has had modest successes, all have fallen short in three areas: incorporating religious freedom into democracy and counter terrorism programs; investing sufficient authority in, and providing resources to, the ambassador at large and her office; and training America's diplomats on the importance of religious freedom and how to advance it.

HR 1856

Fortunately the amendments in HR 1856 address these three critical deficiencies, along with others. I believe that putting these amendments into law will go a long way toward extricating America's religious freedom policy from its longstanding isolation within the State Department and contribute to America's vital national interests, including its national security.

First, HR 1856 requires the ambassador at large for international religious freedom to integrate our religious freedom and religious engagement policies into US democracy and civil society programs, and into the counterterrorism policies of the United States.

It is profoundly ironic that American democracy promotion programs have for decades avoided the engagement of religious actors and the promotion of religious freedom. These programs have for too long been administered as if American history had nothing to teach us about the necessity of religious liberty to the health and stability of democracy.

I want to acknowledge that this "religion-avoidance syndrome" in American diplomacy is slowly beginning to change. In programs funded by the National Endowment for Democracy, for example, we are seeing greater engagement of religious ideas and actors. The Obama administration has also increased our religious engagement. But there remains a great deal of

⁴ Thomas F. Farr, *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty is Vital to American National Security* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Thomas F. Farr and William L. Saunders, Jr., "The Bush Administration and America's International Religious Freedom Policy," *The Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*, Vol. 32, No. 3, June, 2009.

⁵ Thomas F. Farr and Dennis R. Hoover, *The Future of International Religious Freedom Policy: Recommendations for the Obama Administration* (The Berkley Center, 2009)

⁶ See publications and blogs at <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/people/thomas-farr>

⁷ See the project's homepage at <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/programs/religious-freedom-project>

disarray and confusion on the importance of religious freedom itself, and our actions in that field remain ad hoc and without strategic direction.

The same can be said of our counterterrorism policies. The success of the counterinsurgency strategy adopted by the US military in Iraq demonstrates the importance of engaging religious actors. But our policy cannot simply be one of talking and listening to religious leaders; talking, listening, and even "understanding" are means to an end. They are not a policy. Our goal should be to employ programs that convince religious actors, governments, and societies that embracing religious freedom is in their own interests. For example, we must help the Pakistanis to see that their anti-blasphemy laws encourage the extremist ideas that encourage religious terrorism and threaten Pakistani democracy itself.

Success in this approach can help overcome the false perception that US IRF policy is anti-Islam, and a front for Christian missionaries.

The reality is that stable democracies will not emerge in the greater Middle East, and religious terrorism will continue to be incubated and exported, unless those societies adopt religious freedom. In short, this aspect of HR 1856 speaks to America's investments of blood and treasure in Iraq and Afghanistan, and its vital interests in the emergence of stable democracy in Pakistan and Egypt.

I am pleased to see that HR 1856 allocates a percentage of the Human Rights and Democracy Fund to the IRF ambassador for use in funding these kinds of programs. But, Mr. Chairman, the percentage now in the bill – five percent – is entirely too low. The importance of this issue is such that the allocation should be much higher. I would recommend that a minimum of one third of the Human Rights and Democracy Fund be allocated to the advancement of religious freedom. This provision would not require any additional appropriation of monies by Congress.

Second, it is important that HR 1856 requires the State Department to place the office of international religious freedom and the ambassador at large under the Secretary of State, and that the ambassador will report directly to the Secretary. This placement represents the status that most other ambassadors at large have historically enjoyed at the Department, including the current ambassadors for Global Women's Issues, Counter Terrorism, and War Crimes. It is, in my view, the status that was originally intended by Congress in the 1998 IRFA when it established the IRF ambassador as "principal advisor to the President and Secretary of State."

Most importantly, placement in the Secretary's office will empower the ambassador and the religious freedom staff to carry out the duties prescribed by IRFA as amended, especially those of integrating US IRF policy into our democracy and counter terrorism programs. Its current placement within the bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor not only subordinates the ambassador to a lower ranking official, but communicates to foreign governments and US diplomats alike that religious freedom is not a priority for the American government.

I also note that HR 1856 requires that the State Department fund 15 "full time employees" (FTEs) for the religious freedom office. It is my understanding that the office, in fact, now has 15 FTEs. But it needs more if it is to accomplish its mission. For this reason, I would recommend that HR 1856 require the Department to fund 25 FTEs. Again, this provision would not require any additional appropriation by Congress.

Mr. Chairman, I hope I am wrong, but I anticipate the State Department will resist the elevation of the status of the ambassador and her office. I urge you to stand fast. This is critical to the future success of our policy.

Third, HR 1856 requires the Department of State to train its diplomats on the scope and value of religious freedom. Once again, Congress thought it was levying such a requirement in the 1998 IRFA, which in fact mandated training and instruction. But it left the details to the Department and the results are unsurprising. For the past 12 years training has been ad hoc and inconsistent.

During my four years in the office of international religious freedom we had some success in convincing the Foreign Service Institute to let us teach particular classes, and I know that my successors have attempted this as well. But occasional, voluntary classes will not overcome the deep suspicion that attaches to religious freedom policy among our diplomats. To their credit, FSI has initiated a three-day course on "Religion and Foreign Policy," which has been in the planning stage for many months. I spoke at that course two days ago, and it is an important beginning, for which FSI and the Secretary of State should be applauded.

But it is only a beginning. If religious freedom is to become an integrated, effective part of US foreign policy, these courses must not be occasional and voluntary. Rather, they must be mandatory for all diplomats, and occur regularly. HR 1856 accomplishes that objective. It requires mandatory training for all diplomats when they enter the foreign service and when they are receiving "area studies" training prior to posting to a foreign country. Critically, training on religious freedom will also be required for all ambassadors and deputy chiefs of mission before they assume their duties.

Mr. Chairman, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of this amendment to the IRFA. I anticipate that the Department will resist this provision, perhaps citing the training which has just taken place. But -- again -- that training was voluntary. Moreover, it did not focus on US international religious freedom policy so much as it did the idea of "religious engagement." The two are of course related but they are not the same thing.

If our IRF policy is to succeed, all our diplomats must be properly trained.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, let me repeat: HR 1856 is a much needed corrective to the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. I urge that it be passed.

Thank you.

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Committee on Foreign Affairs

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