

Islamist Terrorism, Genocide, and U.S. National Security: Empowering U.S. IRF Policy

Testimony before Sub-Committees of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs

September 10, 2014

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Sub-Committees, thank you for inviting me to this important hearing.

Tomorrow we mark the 13th anniversary of the Islamist terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. What we are facing in Iraq and Syria today has deeply troubling similarities to 9/11, both in its origins and its threat to American national security.

There is, of course, at least one major difference between now and then. While Christians in the Middle East were under mounting pressure in 2001, today their very existence is at risk. We are witnessing the disappearance of Christians and Christianity from Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere in the Middle East – a religious/cultural genocide with terrible humanitarian, moral, and strategic consequences for Christians, for the region, and for us all.

Some blame the current threat to Christians on the 2003 American invasion of Iraq and the chaotic movement toward democracy that it triggered. While there is some truth in that assessment, I believe it is at best a half truth. The threat to Christians and other minorities in this region was not ultimately caused by U.S. military action or the struggle for democracy. The root cause is Islamist terrorism of the kind that hit us on 9/11. That phenomenon finds its origins in a radical, and spreading, interpretation of Islam -- nourished and subsidized by secular and religious Middle Eastern tyrants.

Since 2001 Islamist terrorist movements have emerged throughout the world, and – notwithstanding administration insistence that Al Qaeda was “on the run” and a spent force -- are today present in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. While they have doubtless taken advantage of the chaos attendant on transitions to democracy in places like Iraq and Egypt, and of the openness of free societies, democracy did not incubate these barbarians.

Instead, these groups – from Al Qaeda to the extremist Ayatollahs in Iran -- are motivated by a common belief that God is calling them to brutality and violence against the enemies of Islam, and to control territory in order to carry out this divinely-ordained mission. Over the long-term, while the use of military force will doubtless be necessary, stable self-government, grounded in religious tolerance and ultimately religious freedom, is the only reliable antidote to the toxic religious convictions of Islamist terrorists.

President Obama is said to be pondering – as did President Bush in 2001 -- a military strategy to destroy or contain the Islamist group, ISIS, which is responsible for the current threat to

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Christians and other minorities in Syria and Iraq, and which could threaten the American homeland as did Al Qaeda on 9/11. Such a strategy is, in my view, necessary.

But we should have learned from the growth of Islamist extremism since 9/11 that military force alone cannot kill the religious ideology that created and sustains ISIS, Al Qaeda, the Al Nusra Front, the Taliban, Boko Haram, Al Shabaab, Hezbollah (and its Iranian sponsors) and the countless other violent Islamist terror groups that would destroy us if they had the means.

I will focus my remarks today on the nature of the threat, the stakes involved, and how U.S. International Religious Freedom policy might play a role in addressing this crisis. Since 9/11, that policy has played almost no role in American diplomatic attempts to encourage stable self-government and undermine violent religious extremism. This must change.

The Threat and the Stakes

Last year, prior to the movement of ISIS into Iraq, Georgetown's Religious Freedom Project, in partnership with Baylor University, sponsored an international conference in Rome. The subject was Christian contributions to freedom, historically and in the contemporary world. Our keynote address was given by the Iraqi Patriarch of the Chaldeans, Archbishop Louis Raphael Sako, a heroic and holy man who is now in the eye of the storm.

The title of the Patriarch's speech was: "What Happens to the Middle East if Christians Flee?" His answer was hauntingly prescient. Christians, he said, would continue to suffer the agony of violence and displacement. But, he insisted, Middle Eastern societies and Muslims themselves would also suffer. In Iraq Christians had lived for two millennia, and had made substantial economic, intellectual, and religious contributions to the common good. The very presence of Christian communities was stabilizing, the Patriarch told our audience. Among other things, it ensured religious pluralism, and made possible a measure of religious toleration that is utterly necessary for the success of any highly religious society.

I am told that Patriarch Sako is safe at the moment. But if he and his Christian flock are never to return in peace to their homes in Iraq, we will have witnessed the virtual elimination of an ancient religious community -- by death, conversion, or expulsion. It is difficult to overstate the civilizational catastrophe that such a development would portend. The purging of Christians and others from Iraq and Syria has already ended or devastated the lives of millions of innocent human beings. The disappearance of Christianity from Iraq, Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East will also reduce dramatically the chances of achieving stable self-government grounded in religious tolerance, and the long-term defeat of violent Islamist extremism.

Mr. Chairman, it is true that Christians fared better in recent years under tyrants in the Middle East, such as Saddam Hussein, the Assad regime, and Hosni Mubarak. But tyranny is a fragile safe haven. It has played a major role in the emergence and spread of Islamist terrorism. We cannot, and should not, support a return to despotic political systems that incubate violence and protect terrorists. Such systems are, in the long-run, safe for no one but tyrants and terrorists; they pose a long-term threat to Christians, other minorities, and American national security.

Violent Islamist extremism has deep roots in the last century. Varying factors contributed to the emergence of religiously disparate groups like Saudi Wahhabism, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Taliban, Hezbollah, ISIS, the Al Nusra Front, Boko Haram, Al Shabaab, and Al Qaeda in its various guises. I have heard many of those factors discussed by experts in recent months – economic deprivation, rage at the West because of its history of imperialism, the U.S. invasion of Iraq. After the vile beheadings of two American citizens, I also read a good deal of psychoanalysis – the killer is a sociopath, a mal-adjusted youth who could not fit into his own society. Much of this analysis is similar to what we heard after 9/11.

I leave it to others to sort out these factors, some of which are, doubtless, nonsense. Whatever their relative salience, there is one overarching cause of Islamist terrorism, whether it is Sunni or Shi'a, one that we long ago identified, but that our foreign policy leaders continue to ignore. On this day preceding the 13th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, let me quote from the 9/11 Commission Report:

“...Islamist terrorist leaders draw on a long tradition of extreme intolerance within one stream of Islam That stream is motivated by religion.... Islamist terrorists mean exactly what they say: to them America is the font of all evil, the ‘head of the snake,’ and it must be converted or destroyed. [This] is not a position with which America can bargain or negotiate. With it there is no common ground – not even a respect for life – on which to begin a dialogue. It can only be destroyed or utterly isolated.”

Mr. Chairman, we must contain ISIS militarily, but we cannot destroy with force of arms the religious ideology that sustains it and other Islamist terrorist groups. Notwithstanding any economic grievances, or hatred of the United States, or sociopathic tendencies that may motivate them, all these groups have in common an interpretation of Islam that comes down to this:

Anyone who insults my religion must be punished because they have insulted God. I, on the other hand, am Islam's defender and God's enforcer. I must defend Islam with ferocity, violence, and cruelty because it is my obligation to God. If I do this well, I will be rewarded in Heaven.

The vast majority of Muslims, Sunni, Shi'a or Sufi (let alone the Islamic minorities like the Ahmadiyya or the Baha'i, who suffer grievously), do not support violence or cruelty. They are horrified by what is taking place in the name of their religion and point out that the acts of ISIS constitute a grotesque and barbaric distortion of the religion in which they believe. But it is also the case that most Muslim majority countries are supportive of legal and social structures, such as anti-blasphemy, anti-defamation, and anti-apostasy laws and practices, that encourage extremism, including against Muslim minorities, and discourage the liberalizing voices of Islam.

It is here that U.S. religious freedom policy can make a contribution. Until the extremist understanding of Islam is utterly discredited in the Islamic world, or at least moved to the margins of intellectual, theological, and political life in Muslim-majority countries, Islamist terrorism will continue to grow and flourish.

Better U.S. intelligence (such as the mine of information gleaned from the Bin Laden raid, information which apparently has still not been completely mined by the intelligence

community) and precise military strikes that limit the damage to innocents, can certainly help disrupt terrorist actions. But intelligence and military action, however effective, cannot, by their nature, kill the ideas that motivate the terrorists. Those ideas will remain virulently attractive to some until Muslim majority societies become convinced that *their own interests* demand religious toleration and, ultimately, religious freedom.

Let me give a brief example to illustrate the point. A few years ago an Afghan graduate student submitted a research paper that argued from the Koran that Islam supports the equality of men and women. His professors turned him in to local police; he was charged with blasphemy, convicted, and sentenced to death. The rationale for this action was that the young man had offended Islam and must be punished.

So long as this malevolent idea remains institutionalized in Muslim societies, radicals will dominate the discourse about what Islam requires of its adherents. That idea must be isolated within, if not eliminated from, Muslim societies if they are to rid themselves of the scourge of Islamist extremism and terrorism. A regime of religious freedom would help in this task by ensuring open debate about Islam and other religions without fear of criminal charges or mob violence. One could criticize anti-blasphemy laws, and support religious freedom, without fear of being murdered, as were two Pakistani leaders -- Shabbaz Bhatti and Salman Taseer. Religious freedom would afford full equality under the law for all religious groups and individuals. History, modern research, and common sense tell us that such a system undermines radicalism. On the other hand, repression of the kind that has been endemic in the Middle East encourages radicalism.

The Potential Role of U.S. International Religious Freedom Policy

As it happens the United States has had for 16 years a statutory requirement to promote religious freedom in its foreign policy. It has utterly failed to accomplish that task. Our ineffectiveness is evident in the findings of the Pew Research Center that 76 percent of the world's population lives in countries where religious freedom is highly or very highly restricted. Millions are subject to violent persecution because of their religious beliefs or those of their tormentors.

While the United States is not responsible for these numbers, it is, or ought to be, a source of deep concern that we have done so little to affect them. While no administration has been successful in promoting religious freedom, the issue has been an especially low priority under the current President.

For example, the position of Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom (IRF) -- the position established by the IRF Act to lead this policy -- has been vacant for over half this President's tenure. Even when it was filled, the incumbent had virtually no resources or authority. There was then, and there is now, no American strategy to advance religious freedom in our foreign policy. Given the stakes in the Middle East and elsewhere for American national security, this lassitude is stunning.

To be sure, there are people in the State Department who care deeply about religious freedom, and have been responsible for some potentially fruitful internal steps. For example, there is a

working group of civil society representatives on religious freedom, and a training program for diplomats that includes some discussion of religious freedom. But overall our policy has devolved into reports and speeches without strategy or policy action. We need a working group of U.S. foreign policy officials, not just of private citizens. We need formal, mandatory training on what religious freedom is, why it is important for our national security, and how to advance it.

I am hopeful that there will be positive changes under Rabbi David Saperstein, the man nominated to be the next ambassador. I urge the Senate to confirm him quickly.

Let me end by addressing what a wise and effective U.S. International Religious Freedom policy might do to mitigate the crisis of Islamist terrorism in the Middle East. The key to success is overcoming the presumption that religious toleration and, ultimately, religious freedom are in effect a Trojan Horse designed to destroy Islam.

In particular, we must convince the struggling democracies such as those of Iraq, Egypt, Afghanistan, and Pakistan that until they move toward religious freedom, they will never achieve their own goals of stable self-government, internal security, economic growth, and peace. Hopefully in the near future, the Syrian people will be freed from the Assad regime, and in a position to hear and act on this message as well.

Those should be our general goals. In order to achieve them, we will need an overall national security strategy that incorporates IRF policy, and a strategy for each country where the absence of religious freedom threatens our national security.

I do not discount the extraordinary difficulties that will attend the development and implementation of such a policy. But, in my view, the stakes are high enough to make the effort. While I support military action against Islamist terrorism, I believe we can also mount an effective IRF counter-terrorism policy that does not entail the costs in blood and treasure that military action does. Indeed, IRF diplomacy, if successful, would reduce the need for military action.

I want to emphasize, however, that none of this can happen until and unless the position of the IRF Ambassador at Large, and the training of America's diplomats, is taken seriously. Accordingly, I call on the House Committee on Foreign Affairs to offer the following amendments to the International Religious Freedom Act. These amendments will help mainstream U.S. IRF policy.

1. Require the State Department to treat the IRF Ambassador as it does the Ambassador at Large for Global Women's Issues, i.e., to report directly to the Secretary of State, rather than the Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. This will increase the status and authority of the IRF ambassador and help overcome the perception – among American diplomats and foreign governments alike – that this issue is not a priority.
2. Give the Ambassador the resources he needs to develop strategies, and to implement them, in key countries around the globe. This need not involve the appropriation of new monies, but the

allocation of portions of existing appropriations for programs such as democracy promotion and counter terrorism.

3. Make training of American diplomats mandatory at three stages: when they enter the Foreign Service, when they receive “area studies” training prior to departing for post, and when they become Deputy Chiefs of Mission and Ambassadors. This training should tell them what religious freedom is, why it is important for individuals and societies, why advancing it is important for America’s national interests, its status in the country and region to which they have been assigned, and how to advance it.

4. Amend the IRFA to *require* that the list of particularly severe violators (the “countries of particular concern”) be issued annually with the Report. In addition to describing any economic sanctions that might be levied against these countries, *require* the State Department to provide a comprehensive analysis of other policy tools being applied in each country, including programs that target democratic stability, economic growth and counter terrorism.

5. Require the State Department to respond in writing to recommendations by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. At the same time, require the Commission to pay greater attention to the question of why the United States is not succeeding in advancing religious freedom, as gauged by objective reports such as those of the Pew Research Center. The Commission should recommend concrete steps for the State Department that will result in increasing the status and authority of the ambassador at large, increasing the resources allocated to religious freedom policy, achieving permanent, effective training for all diplomats, and integrating religious freedom into US strategies for democracy promotion, economic growth, and counter terrorism.

Such changes will not work overnight. But without steps like this, and without the commitment of the President, the Secretary of State, the Congress, and the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, the remaining Christians and other minorities of the Middle East will face violent persecution into the indefinite future. And the United States will face a permanent threat from the ever spreading phenomenon of violent Islamist extremism. For all these reasons, I urge you to act.

Thank you for having me here today.