

Religious Freedom and American National Security
A Hearing of the National Security Subcommittee of the
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, October 11, 2017
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Chairman DeSantis, Ranking Member Lynch, and members of the sub-committee, thank you for holding this important hearing and for inviting me to testify.

My message to you today is straightforward and hopeful: advancing religious freedom successfully in our foreign policy can help the victims of religious persecution abroad and increase the security of the American people.

But if we are to succeed we will need to change some of our thinking at the State Department about religious freedom, and our approach to promoting it in U.S. foreign policy.

Growing evidence indicates that an effective religious freedom policy can help increase our security, and that of other nations, by undermining religion-related terrorism. The evidence applies to violence that emanates from any religion. But the primary threat to U.S. national security, and that of most other nations, especially Muslim-majority nations, is Islamist terrorism.

Integrating the promotion of religious freedom across all U.S. foreign policy agencies is essential to reducing religion-related terrorism. This work will be accelerated the Senate's confirmation of Governor Sam Brownback, the President's nominee for the position of U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom.

Governor Brownback has the opportunity and the skills to build upon the work of his predecessor, Ambassador David Saperstein, and integrate religious freedom into American national security strategy. I urge the Senate to confirm Governor Brownback immediately. Those suffering violent religious persecution around the world, including the Rohingya Muslims of Burma and the Christians and Yazidis of Iraq, need him on the job now.

The Existing IRF Approach to Islamist Terrorism

Most Islamist terrorism is born and incubated in the Middle East. Our approach to terrorism as a religious freedom issue has understandably focused on the minority religious groups victimized by ISIS or the governments in the region such as Syria, Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. As we should, we focus most of our attention on the terrible suffering of religious communities that our

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own government has designated as victims of genocide, including Yezidis, minority Shiites, and Christians.

The methods historically used by the State Department to draw attention to the victims of religious persecution, and to their persecutors, consist of annual reports on the status of religious freedom, and annual designations of the worst violators – the “countries of particular concern” or CPCs. The 1998 International Religious Freedom (IRF) Act also authorized economic sanctions and the funding of religious freedom programs.

All of these provisions are needed. The annual reports from the State Department and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom are accurate and thorough. Both the State Department and the Commission are to be commended for their most recent reports. In particular, I want to recognize the work of Dan Nadel, Director of the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom, and his staff, as well as Knox Thames, Special Adviser for Religious Minorities in the Middle East and South/Central Asia. These two men have led U.S. IRF policy since the departure last January of Ambassador Saperstein.

As for the annual identification of the worst persecutors, the “countries of particular concern,” that report is also vitally important.

But the problem is that these reports are entirely diagnostic in nature. They shine a light on the problem but do little to solve it.

Economic sanctions are rarely effective. When they have been tried, they have not worked. Governments are unlikely to change their religion policies because of sanctions alone. Additional policies are needed to supplement the leverage provided by sanctions or other negative incentives the United States might impose.

State Department-funded IRF programs are a good place to start, especially if they provide reasons why religious freedom is in the target nation’s interests. Program funding historically has hovered around \$4 million annually, an amount Ambassador Saperstein succeeded in increasing to \$20 million. But even that amount pales in comparison to other programs intended to protect American national security.

Moreover, IRF programs funded by State, though often meritorious, are not part of an all-of-government strategy. They are spread too thin and are too *ad hoc* to have any appreciable impact on Islamist terrorism, or to convince governments that religious freedom will improve governance, stimulate economic growth, or undermine religious violence.

The unfortunate reality is that IRF policy has been isolated from the mainstream of U.S. foreign policy. It has been overlooked as a means of promoting stability and national security.

How Religious Freedom Undermines Terrorism

Until recently the social sciences have ignored the connections between religious freedom and religion-related violence. However, scholars at the Religious Freedom Institute are demonstrating something that the American Founders instinctively understood: religious freedom is the basis for all other rights. It is necessary for the success of any society. The evidence shows that religious freedom has a causal impact on other social, political, and economic goods, such as long-term political stability, economic growth, and even better health.

But the religious freedom effect that can best contribute to American security, and help persecuted minorities at the same time, is to help prevent religion-related violence and terrorism. Societies that lack religious freedom, such as those of the Middle East, are far more likely to incubate, suffer domestically, and export internationally, religion-related terrorism.

The reverse is also true. Societies that protect religious freedom generally do not incubate religious violence and terrorism. Despite its difficulties with Hindu radicalism, India's success as the world's largest democracy, with a huge and largely peaceful Muslim minority, stems in large part from its history of religious tolerance. The same can be said of Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country. Despite its own Islamic extremism, Indonesia's tolerant Islamic civil society helps keep that nation democratic and stable. That both India and Indonesia are moving in a worrisome direction is precisely because each is experiencing a decrease in respect for the religious freedom of all their citizens. But, at present, neither is an exporter of religion-related terrorism.

In West Africa, no less than seven Muslim-majority countries -- Senegal, Mali, Niger, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia—have avoided the violent extremism that plagues other Muslim states. Each has significant legal protections for the religious freedom of Muslims and non-Muslims, and each encourages interreligious cooperation. The result is a stabilizing religious pluralism that discourages religious extremism.

How to Integrate Religious Freedom into U.S. National Security Strategy

How can religious freedom be integrated into our national security strategy? For one thing, by focusing less on ineffective rhetorical denunciations, and instead combining practical incentives with arguments that appeal to the self-interest of the target society.

For example, the State Department recently announced the withholding of \$290 million in aid to Egypt because of human rights violations, including harsh restrictions on religious communities. This is a good start, but unlikely to change things on the ground. History strongly suggests that Egypt will not alter its policies on religious freedom for \$290 million.

The U.S. should augment the withholding of aid by providing hard evidence that altering repressive laws and policies will benefit Egypt, for example by reducing the violent extremism that is harming the country's all-important tourist industry.

To date, U.S. religious freedom arguments to Cairo have emphasized injustice, human rights, and international law. Those arguments have been correct, and fruitless. They should be amplified with evidence that religious freedom, by requiring full equality for all religious groups and open debate about Islam, does not sanction violence or extremism, and will work to undermine it.

U.S. aid can also help develop the institutions that will advance religious freedom, by, for example, integrating religious freedom training into programs with Egyptian military and local police forces, judges and lawyers, educational institutions, and civil society groups.

Iraq provides another opportunity. Since 2014, the U.S. government has allocated nearly \$1.7 billion dollars to Iraq for humanitarian assistance (USAID Fact Sheet, 9/20/17). Most of that aid has not reached the Christian minorities designated as victims of ISIS genocide. Most are unlikely to return to their ancestral homes without aid.

The plight of Christians, Yazidis and other minorities in Iraq is of course a monumental humanitarian crisis. But it also constitutes a serious U.S. national security problem. Religious pluralism is a necessary condition for long-term stability in Iraq. If minorities do not return and, over time, become fully integrated into Iraqi society, that nation will very likely become a perpetual Shia-Sunni battleground where terrorism flourishes.

The office of International Religious Freedom should ensure that USAID, State Department, and Defense resources are expended to counter the religion-related violence that is at the root of this crisis. The U.S. should mount a sustained campaign to convince Iraqi stakeholders that they will never live in peace and security without the pluralism that non-Muslim minorities bring. With our help, Iraq must provide security, jobs, and religious freedom to these non-Muslim minorities so that they can integrate into Iraqi society.

Success in such efforts will not come easy. But the long war against Islamist terrorism and religious persecution cannot be won with law enforcement and military force alone. America needs new ideas and new combatants to win this war. Religious freedom should be part of the mix.