

U.S. International Religious Freedom Policy: Addressing the Global Crisis in Human Rights and Increasing American National Security

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Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify at this important hearing. My purpose today is to outline the distinctive religious freedom components of the global human rights crisis, and to suggest why the United States should be doing more to address both.

Let me begin, however, by commending this Committee for passing out HR 1150, the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, later passed unanimously in the House. The bill would kick start the process of accomplishing much of what I am advocating here today. It contains provisions that advocates have been urging for many years – including several that I outlined in 2014 testimony before two of this Committee’s Sub-Committees.

If the Wolf bill is passed in the Senate, the State Department will be required for the first time to provide the authority and resources needed by the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom to succeed in a world of declining religious freedom and increasing religious persecution.

State will also be required to provide more effective, systematic training for America’s diplomats in the meaning and value of religious freedom, and how to advance it in U.S. foreign policy.

And, for the first time, our foreign policy will be required to place the issue of international religious freedom squarely into official thinking about American national security.

I urge the Senate to pass the Wolf bill as soon as possible.

Because I have been critical of the State Department’s failures to advance religious freedom effectively, and will do so again today, I want to give credit where credit is due. There are State Department officials who care deeply about U.S. International Religious Freedom policy, and who have worked very hard to improve it. Their efforts have not been unavailing.

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I want in particular to commend Ambassador at Large David Saperstein, and Knox Thames, Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Middle East and South/Central Asia. They have increased the IRF staff committed to this issue, added programs, and revitalized the process of designating “countries of particular concern.” They have instituted training abroad on religious freedom for US diplomats that is unprecedented. Special Advisor Thames has been a leader in establishing and developing the International Contact Group for International Religious Freedom.

Both men played a key role in the Department’s determination that ISIS actions against Christian, Yazidi and other minorities in Iraq and Syria constituted “genocide.” And later this month they will convene two days of meetings – one of them organized and hosted by Georgetown’s Religious Freedom Project -- to urge and galvanize the international community in planning for the future of those minorities.

I firmly believe that these efforts can and should be expanded and institutionalized, something that the Wolf bill will help accomplish.

Let me turn to the two questions I want to address today: the global crisis of religious freedom and the largely-ignored consequences of that crisis for vital American interests here and abroad.

The Global Crisis in Religious Freedom

A few months ago at a conference at Catholic University I heard a young Iraqi couple tell of the terrible travail of Christians in Iraq and Syria. I will never forget what they said: “[ISIS terrorists] are raping and killing children in front of their parents. Then they are killing the parents.”

If someone does not stop this slaughter, they told a stunned audience, Christians and Christianity will soon be eliminated in these two lands of the religion’s birth. The same is true of the Yezidis and other minorities in Iraq and Syria.

At the same conference, a Chinese woman named Sarah Liu told of being tortured and sexually abused for four months at a Chinese “Women’s Reeducation Through Labor Prison” because of her Christian beliefs. A subsequent arrest sent Sarah to Forced Labor Camp for three years. Her escape from China allowed her to tell her story, which may surprise those who think religious freedom is progressing in that nation.

A few years ago, in Gujarat India – the world’s largest democracy – Hindu extremists attacked Muslim women, some of them pregnant, raping and slaughtering women and their unborn children as they went from house to house. Terrified women called the local Hindu police begging for help. They were told: “we have no orders to save you,” a heartless response suggesting the complicity of government officials.

These are but a few of the millions of stories of terrible human suffering resulting from the vile religious persecution that is occurring with growing frequency around the world. We are

witnessing in the 21st century a global human rights catastrophe, one with extraordinary, but largely unacknowledged, consequences for the United States.

Last month the non-partisan Pew Research Center issued the latest in a series of reports entitled *Global Restrictions on Religion*. These annual reports cover eight years from 2007 through 2014. They measure government restrictions on religion and social hostilities toward religion, including religion-related terrorism.

The findings are chilling.

First of all, some three-quarters of the world's people live in countries where religious freedom is severely restricted. Between 2007 and 2014, that figure has varied slightly, but has remained remarkably constant overall.

The same has been true of the religious groups most subject to harassment. For each of the eight years studied by Pew, Christians have been the most harassed group. In 2014, Christians were harassed in 108 countries. Muslims were not far behind, being subject to harassment in 100 countries – many of them Muslim-majority countries.

The most troubling change in this category has been the rapid increase in persecution of the third most harassed group – the Jews of the world. In 2007, Jews were harassed in 51 nations. By 2014, that number had increased by almost 60 percent -- to 81 countries. Many of these are Muslim-majority nations. But the problem is rising in Europe as well. Surely this should be a clarion call for all of us.

Perhaps the most striking change in the past eight years has been the increase in injuries and deaths from religion-related terrorist activities. In 2007, seventeen nations experienced such casualties. In 2014, the number of nations experiencing injuries or deaths from religion-related terrorism, such as those inflicted by groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda, had risen to sixty.

The Pew studies also reveal troubling patterns in the United States. As of 2014 social hostility toward religion in America has increased so dramatically that the U.S. is now listed in the category of countries with “high” levels of social hostility toward religion.

This phenomenon ought to be a source of concern to us all. I would note that we are seeing the same patterns in Western Europe: France, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Greece and Italy all exhibit “high” hostility to religion. They join the United States in that category alongside nations that might be expected to be there, such as Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Libya, and Egypt.

This is not good company for America.

The Stakes

What does all this mean for America and its foreign policy? Speaking broadly, I would suggest two very significant implications.

The first involves our nation's traditional commitment to human rights in general and religious freedom in particular. The growing hostility to religion in America suggests a decline in the belief that religious freedom is our first freedom. This may help explain why U.S. foreign policy has proven so ineffective in advancing this fundamental right.

But religious freedom stands at the core of what it means to be human. No person can live a fully human life without the right – protected in law and culture -- to seek God and to live in accord with the truth as he or she understands it.

Of course, a regime of religious freedom imposes limits. It does not justify violence or a state-mandated religious monopoly. At its core, religious freedom means an immunity from coercion on religious matters by any human agent, especially the state, and full equality under the law for all religious individuals and groups.

This concept of religious freedom underlay the American founding. It led to our understanding of religious liberty as “the first freedom,” without which the Founders believed American democracy would fail. Since then most Americans have understood religious liberty as the birthright of every person, necessary to the success of any society that seeks to establish a system of ordered liberty.

As far as I am concerned this rationale is, or ought to be, sufficient to energize American human rights policy in general and our religious freedom policy in particular. But we all know that it isn't that simple. Along with our own declining respect for religious freedom, the vagaries of American interests in the world complicate the attention given all human rights in our foreign policy.

China is an example of a huge and influential nation where our economic and strategic interests have traditionally led U.S. administrations to sideline human rights and religious freedom. It is true that the State Department always puts China on its list of “countries of particular concern” for its egregious violations of religious freedom, and that the Department has regular discussions with Chinese officials about its crackdowns on dissidents and minorities. But these efforts, while necessary, have had little or no effect on Chinese behavior. The problem is that our policy is largely rhetorical. It suggests movement, but rarely produces results.

When those results do occur, they usually involve China or some other nation responding to our demands to free a prisoner, or permit a family to emigrate. When that happens, of course, it is far from trivial – it is a reason for celebration. American diplomats involved should be applauded. But the release of a prisoner or the emigration of a family does nothing to change the structures of persecution. Those structures remain in place, leading to more and more human rights violations and human suffering.

The unfortunately reality is that America's religious freedom policy remains highly rhetorical and rarely focuses on structural change. When I testified a few years ago before the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee, I was asked where U.S. IRF policy had made a

sustained impact. I had to say, in truth, “nowhere.” There was then, and there is today, not a single country in the world where our religious freedom efforts have induced systemic changes.

Some would doubtless argue that seeking structural change sets too high a bar, either because we have no right to seek such fundamental changes in other nations, or because we cannot hope to succeed. I disagree on both counts. American foreign policy can and should have a more sustained impact in advancing human rights and religious freedom abroad. But it will occur only if our government – including the executive and legislative branches – becomes convinced that these policies would enhance our fundamental interests, including our security here and abroad.

This leads to the second implication of the global crisis in human rights and religious freedom. Advancing religious freedom successfully would do precisely that – help U.S. foreign policy advance the interests and security of the American people. We should view our IRF policy as a key element of our national security policy, one that is much cheaper in blood and treasure than military action, and one that holds the potential to advance American interests across the board.

Religious Freedom Can Undermine Violent Religious Extremism and Terrorism

Over the past six years the [Religious Freedom Project](#) at Georgetown University has developed a body of scholarly work that demonstrates in virtually all societies the potential connections between religious freedom and other individual and social goods. Human beings are truth seekers, and religious freedom protects the precious right to seek religious truths, and to live in accord with the truths discovered.

But religious freedom also helps societies achieve stable democracy, the equality of women, economic growth, the invigoration of religion itself, and the avoidance of violent religious extremism.

I invite you to review our work if you are interested,¹ but let me give you the bottom line: *where religious freedom is missing, other social goods are missing. The reverse is true as well: religious freedom contributes to social flourishing. This means that increasing religious freedom can contribute to human rights, democratic stability, and economic growth, and can undermine religious violence and extremism.* While religious liberty is not the only causative factor in producing these outcomes, it is both necessary and, more often than not, completely absent.

Our foreign policy should begin to take this serious deficiency into account.

For example, if we want to have a real impact on China’s perennial and brutal religious persecution against Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, and Christians, we ought to mount a sustained diplomatic effort to convince the Chinese that they can achieve one of their greatest

¹¹ See, for example, *Religious Freedom and Violent Religious Extremism: A Sourcebook of Modern Cases and Analysis* (The Religious Freedom Project, December 2012)

priorities as a nation – sustained economic growth -- if they simply back off their persecutory policies. We need to show the Chinese how greater religious freedom will help them protect their own interests.

The most immediate imperative for U.S. foreign policy is to undermine violent Islamist extremism and terrorism, especially as it continues to be incubated in the Middle East and exported around the world, including to the American homeland. Religious freedom should in my view play a much more central role in our national security policy than it currently does.

The plight of Christian and other minorities in Iraq and Syria represents more than a human rights catastrophe; it carries clear dangers for American national security. If these minorities are eliminated or forced to flee, with them will go any opportunity for pluralism and stability. Not only will this outcome put greater pressure on already-besieged Christian minorities elsewhere in the region, it will virtually ensure that Iraq and Syria become fields of permanent conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims, and perpetual training grounds for Islamist terrorism.

Both the U.S. administration and the Congress have declared as “genocide” what is happening to Christians, Yezidis and other minorities in Iraq and Syria. This is manifestly a good thing. But a declaration is nothing but empty rhetoric if it is not accompanied by action. I believe the administration’s military actions in the region have been anemic and ineffective. Like others, I earnestly hope that is changing with the liberation of Fallujah and the prospective liberation of Mosul from ISIS control.

But military means alone, however effective, are not going to defeat the scourge of violent Islamist extremism, of which ISIS is only the most virulent current practitioner. If we succeed in defeating ISIS as a military force and killing every one of its terrorists, we will not have eliminated the source of instability in the region and around the world -- the ideology that feeds extremism.

The *ideology* of extremist Islam must be defeated, or at least circumscribed and sidelined to an insignificant, occasional appearance, rather than the lethal, spreading global force of instability and violence that it is today. If we fail at this task, we will face continued upheaval in the Middle East, Europe and elsewhere, as well as an increase in violent attacks against our own children and grandchildren here at home.

Members of both political parties have written about how the United States might protect itself against this violent ideology, for example, improving our intelligence collection, interrupting the flow of funds to ISIS, building better alliances in the region, stopping the flow of extremists into our country, policing social media, and the like. Each of these ideas has some merit. But none is sufficient – individually or collectively.

The only force that can defeat the ideology of violent Islamist extremism is Muslim stakeholders in the nations where these ideas are dominant. But this cannot happen without the advancement of religious freedom in those nations.

Today in many Muslim-majority countries public debate over Islam is dominated by extremists who argue that the defense of Islam requires its insulation from criticism, especially from within. Laws against blasphemy, defamation and apostasy ensure the dominance of radical understandings of Islam, and prevent Muslims from debating their own religious principles and obligations.

Success in advancing religious freedom would break this monopoly, empowering liberal Muslims and reformers to argue not only that Islam rejects terrorism, but that it requires equality for all citizens of a Muslim-majority nation, including non-Muslim and female citizens.

Success will also provide young Muslims an alternative to violence and extremism by encouraging them to participate in their own political systems – an opportunity that has never existed within the nations where Islamist terrorism has emerged and flourished, such as the theocratic authoritarian systems of Saudi Arabia and Iran, or the secular authoritarian system of Assad’s Syria and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.

Needless to say, none of this will be easy. But a sustained, all-of-government effort by U.S. foreign policy in advancing religious freedom could have a major impact in attacking the ideological wellsprings of Islamist terrorism. This will require leadership by the new President, the new Secretary of State, and the Congress.

Again, let me commend this Committee for its own leadership in passing HR 1150 in a bipartisan fashion. Let us hope that this bill will trigger a new bipartisan conversation in America and in Washington DC – a conversation about how the advancement of religious freedom can help those societies where it occurs, and also help protect the American people against the vile enemy that threatens their security and well-being. We cannot fail in this effort.

Thank you for having me here today.