Employing Religious Freedom Diplomacy to Combat Extremism
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Thomas F. Farr[*]

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding this important hearing and for inviting me to testify.

My message today has three parts. First, **U.S. International Religious Freedom diplomacy can improve our nation's ability to combat Islamist terror. More religious freedom abroad can help prevent the spread of terrorism, and protect Americans here at home.**

Second, religious freedom can protect fundamental U.S. interests here and abroad by enhancing political, economic, and strategic stability. Stability grounded in religious freedom can strengthen resistance to religious extremism of all kinds.

Third, **a religious freedom diplomacy that employs evidence-based self-interest arguments can reduce religious persecution more effectively than do our current diplomatic methods,** which are highly rhetorical, reactive, and ad-hoc.

For almost twenty years U.S. religious freedom diplomacy has been led by smart men and women, and staffed by some of the best minds in our diplomatic service. But they have been hamstrung by a lack of imagination and vision within the State Department. Fortunately, that deficit has begun to diminish, in large part because of the work of the current staff and the most recent Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, David Saperstein.

Unfortunately, so long as that position remains vacant, those gains are at risk. It is vitally important that the Senate vote quickly on the President's nominee for Ambassador, Governor Sam Brownback. People around the world are suffering vile religious persecution. Religion-related terror is spreading. We need Ambassador Brownback on the job.

The Shortcomings of U.S. International Religious Freedom Policy

The International Religious Freedom Act, which formally established U.S. religious freedom policy, was passed in 1998. Since then its implementation has consisted primarily of verbal advocacy for human rights -- urging governments to protect their citizens by adhering to international norms, such as those in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Likewise, the policy has entailed rhetorical condemnation of persecutors through annual reports and lists of particularly severe violators. On rare occasions, it has imposed a punitive sanction. In 2004, it imposed new economic sanctions to punish Eritrea. In 2005, the visa of a senior Indian official was revoked.

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[*] Thomas Farr is President of the Religious Freedom Institute. He also directs the Religious Freedom Research Project at Georgetown University where he is an Associate Professor of the Practice of Religion and International Affairs at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service. Farr was the first Director of the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom.

These punitive actions were not only unusual. They were also reactive and ultimately ineffective, which is to say they did little to address the causes of persecution. Eritrea today remains a persecuting nation. The Indian official in question is now Prime Minister of India, but the underlying problem that led to his visa revocation – Hindu extremism – remains in place.

Between 2004 and 2006 Vietnam was listed as a particularly severe violator and then removed in return for religious freedom concessions. A decade later, most of those concessions have disappeared.

It has been my contention for some years, including in appearances before this Committee, that this general mode of U.S. action – rhetorical advocacy, reports, ad hoc punitive actions, none of which is part of a national strategy -- is insufficient. By itself it has not been effective.

During the past two decades, global religious persecution has increased dramatically and protections for religious freedom have been in sharp decline. Millions suffer persecution. Tens of millions lack religious freedom. Religion-related terrorism threatens much of the world, including the United States.

Indeed, during these years we have seen the emergence of a global crisis in religious freedom. While U.S. foreign policy is not responsible for this highly-significant development, the State Department has not recognized it as a crisis, and has done little to address its root causes. Our religious freedom diplomacy has not been employed strategically. It has not been understood as, or used as, a counter-terrorism weapon.

The reasons for our inertia and ineffectiveness are complex, but, as I have argued elsewhere,[1] they derive in part from an aggressive secularism in our own political culture. Many of our leaders no longer believe in the value of religion in our public lives and therefore are indifferent or hostile to religious freedom. It is hard to sell a product in which you do not believe, let alone one you hold in contempt.

Unfortunately, there are also powerful reasons why our religious freedom policy is staunchly resisted by foreign societies and their governments, and why our rhetorical, reactive, and occasionally punitive actions have had so little purchase.

Each society is different, but the resistance often comes down to this: no nation responds well to condemnations of, and exhortations to alter, its policies on religion. Religion is often culturally and politically integral to a nation's identity and fundamental interests. In the case of communist nations such as China or Cuba, religion is a threat to the state's monopoly on power. Moreover, ad hoc punitive actions not only do not work; they are deeply resented and sometimes make things worse on the ground.

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[1] Farr, *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Freedom is Vital to American National Security* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

Improving the Effectiveness of U.S. International Religious Freedom Policy

I believe that there is an answer to this twin pathology, i.e., increasing confusion over the meaning and value of religious freedom in the U.S., and persistent international skepticism over U.S. religious freedom policy. The answer lies in re-examining the facts about religious freedom.

Twenty years of working on this issue have convinced me that a simple proposition, one instinctively understood by America's founders, is both true and useful: religious freedom is *necessary*. It is necessary for the flourishing of every individual and of every society.

And it is certainly necessary if societies abroad are to reduce the incubation and export of violent religious extremism.

The Religious Freedom Institute where I serve has, along with other groups, accumulated substantial empirical evidence that indicates a causal relationship between religious freedom and other social goods, such as political stability, economic development, the equality of women, increased literacy, and – most important for today's hearing -- undermining violent religious extremism.

We have disseminated that evidence widely within the government, but, unfortunately, it has thus far largely been ignored. The United States can no longer afford to neglect this important opportunity for advancing religious freedom and American interests simultaneously.

Our foreign policy and national security leadership should, on the basis of the evidence, *make a conscious decision* to integrate religious freedom into our national security strategy, and to generate far more diplomatic energy and resources than currently is the case. Given the will to do so, our diplomacy can reduce the threat of religion-related terror by presenting to skeptical nations abroad persuasive evidence that religious freedom is in their interests, and that it can benefit their own societies.

How Religious Freedom Undermines Terrorism

Social scientists at the Religious Freedom Institute and elsewhere have amply documented that societies lacking religious freedom are far more likely to incubate, suffer domestically, and export internationally, religion-related terrorism.

We have documented the reverse connection as well: Societies that protect religious freedom generally do not incubate religious violence and terrorism. Several Muslim-majority states in West Africa 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. Even in the face of externally funded extremist pressure in recent years, these states have managed to retain broad protections for religious pluralism.

How does religious freedom help create stability via religious pluralism? First, by protecting and encouraging anti-extremist Muslim voices to advocate for a tolerant, non-violent interpretation of

Islam. Second, by protecting the rights of non-Muslim minorities – not only to exist as tolerated minorities, but to contribute to their societies as equal citizens.

Even a secular foreign policy establishment should be able to recognize these connections and construct a sensible strategic response to these empirical facts.

Unfortunately, current U.S. counter terrorism policy ignores these connections. Our policy consists almost exclusively of the employment of military force and its accessories, law enforcement and intelligence. While each is necessary, none is sufficient to defeat Islamist terrorism. That form of violent extremism is not simply a military force. It is not a cadre of militants called ISIS or Al Qaeda whose military defeat, capture, or death will end the threat. It is an ideology – a set of lethal ideas derived from Islam that have proven their capacity, over and over again, to motivate men and women to kill, torture, and destroy.

Islamist terrorism's persistence and lethality make the threat to our nation and our interests around the world a grave one.

It has hit us in the homeland – in San Bernardino, Ohio State, Fort Hood, Manhattan, Orlando, and elsewhere.

It has come close to eliminating the possibility of stabilizing pluralism in Iraq by forcing from the country most non-Muslim minorities. If those minorities, especially the Christians, do not return, Iraq will very likely become a perpetual breeding ground for the ideology of Islamist terror, a development with terrible consequences for the region and the world. Of all the counter-weights to this development, none is more important than advancing religious freedom in Iraq.

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

To summarize: Notwithstanding compelling evidence of its value to all societies and to vital American interests, religious freedom has been isolated from the mainstream of U.S. foreign policy and national security thinking. It has largely been overlooked as a means of promoting stability and national security.

It is important to note that State Department-funded programs have begun to help. Under former IRF Ambassador David Saperstein program funding increased to $20 million. But that amount pales in comparison to other programs intended to protect American national security.

Unfortunately, those religious freedom programs we do have, 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.

In practical terms, religious freedom policy can advance U.S. national security by going beyond rhetoric and employing a combination of sticks and carrots that directly targets the self-interest of key societies. Let me end with two examples.

Last summer the State Department announced the withholding of $290 million in aid to Egypt because of, inter alia, its harsh restrictions on religious communities. This is a good start, but we must go further. The U.S. should also provide 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, and threatening the government itself.

Iraq provides another opportunity. Since 2014, the U.S. government has allocated nearly $1.7 billion in humanitarian aid to Iraq, but most of that aid has not reached the Christian and other minorities designated as victims of ISIS genocide. These people are unlikely to return to their homes without our help.

This is a U.S. national security problem. Religious pluralism is a necessary condition for long-term stability in Iraq. If minorities do not return and stay, Iraq will likely become a perpetual Shia-Sunni battleground where terrorism flourishes. The current administration has pledged to change its aid policies and focus on these minorities, but financial aid is only the first step,

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, economic development, and religious freedom to those non-Muslim minorities. It must also provide religious freedom to Muslims who will defend tolerant, non-violent forms of Islam.

What is true for Iraq is also true for Syria and the rest of the Middle East. What happens there will impact the region and the entire world.

We will prevail against Islamist extremism only when we expand our national security strategy to include the advancement of religious freedom. And we can achieve that goal only by adopting a clear-eyed, pragmatic set of policies and programs that show governments how religious freedom can advance their own interests.

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 must be part of the mix.