



## Religious Freedom and National Security

Travis Weber, J.D., LL.M.

### Introduction

On Palm Sunday 2017, ISIS terrorists bombed two large Coptic Christian churches in Egypt, killing 47 and injuring scores more.<sup>1</sup> Even this community, already embattled by ongoing instability and constant persecution, was thrown into unprecedented disarray by such a direct attack on their places of worship. As had come to be expected, the world's attention was focused very briefly on this tragedy, before once again turning elsewhere.

The public's inconsistent focus on religious freedom has received no help from most of those within the foreign policy community. At least in recent years, our foreign policy elites have primarily viewed this issue as the parochial interest of humanitarian-minded pastors and religious freedom-focused human rights activists. Concerns were addressed when possible, yet the government handled problems on a one-off basis, usually to solve the annual flare-up over some imprisoned pastor somewhere. However, these religious freedom challenges haven't been incorporated into any consistent, long-term, strategic thinking on foreign policy.

But what if they should be? One could argue the one-off approach hasn't really advanced religious freedom worldwide, and that we should change the way we try to protect this right. Regardless, the assumption is that we are operating from a humanitarian basis. But what if the appeal was made on other grounds – that religious freedom is not simply a humanitarian concern, but that it is in the *interest of our own security* to advance it around the world?

Despite a pattern of ongoing persecution and instability in various countries around the world, which is clearly related to a lack of religious freedom in those places, we have nevertheless resisted the possibility that homeland security threats exist because we have failed to cultivate religious freedom elsewhere. We tend to want to separate our own national security from worldwide religious freedom.

Emerging evidence suggests we've been wrong. With ongoing security threats around the world which show no sign of abating, shouldn't we at least be open to the possibility that we need to change our thinking on this issue?

### Ronald Reagan and the Cold War

To help understand the need to shift our thinking on international religious freedom, we must go back to a time before the United States adopted its current approach to the issue – back to the Cold War.

During that time, a certain Jewish dissident in the Soviet Union spoke out against his government on behalf of his fellow citizens. As a consequence, he was imprisoned and sent to the Gulag. There, he engaged the regime in a battle of wills; resisting, going on hunger strikes, and refusing to compromise. The dissident's wife and others helped fight for his freedom. They raised his plight with the West, and in

the United States. This dissident was likely only spared from execution because the Soviet government knew that Ronald Reagan knew – and cared – about his imprisonment. On February 11, 1986, after President Reagan applied enough pressure on the Soviet government, Natan Sharansky was freed, flew to West Germany, and then emigrated to Israel.<sup>2</sup> He's now a celebrated democracy activist, and has served his nation in Parliament and advocated for freedom around the world.

What enabled this to happen was the strong, clear, and public stance President Reagan took in declaring that the Soviet government's treatment of Sharansky was simply unacceptable. Despite being criticized for being too bold and forward-leaning at the time, Reagan stood his ground.

This wasn't the only time President Reagan raised the issue of religious freedom. He was relentless in his advocacy for the freedom of those trapped in Soviet prisons – and the Soviet government knew it. This didn't mean Reagan simply engaged in public posturing; he strategically used private conversations too. But he was clear and firm when he did speak and act. In particular, Reagan made a point to stand publicly with religious dissidents. He also expanded religious broadcasting on Voice of America, and gave the Soviet government this message:

To those who would crush religious freedom, our message is plain: You may jail your believers. You may close their churches, confiscate their Bibles, and harass their rabbis and priests, but you will never destroy the love of God and freedom that burns in their hearts. They will triumph over you.<sup>3</sup>

The Soviets knew where President Reagan stood – he was dependably pro-religious freedom. A mere eight years after Reagan said these words, and after two terms of his presidency, the Soviet Union collapsed.

It was not just to the Soviet Union that Reagan spoke on religious freedom. Visiting Communist China in 1984, he addressed students at Fudan University, in an address televised in China:

Religion and faith are very important to us. We're a nation of many religions. But most Americans derive their religious belief from the Bible of Moses, who delivered a people from slavery; the Bible of Jesus Christ, who told us to love thy neighbor as thyself, to do unto your neighbor as you would have him do unto you.<sup>4</sup>

At the time of his address, Chinese Christians were sitting in jail for speaking – less boldly than President Reagan just did – about their faith.<sup>5</sup> Chinese government officials and other authoritarians of that era clearly knew where Reagan stood. We must continue making it clear to them today.

### **Our Neglect of Religious Freedom in Current Foreign Policy**

Given its value in defeating Soviet Communism, one would think national security professionals would be scrambling over one another to understand, assess, and try to incubate religious freedom. But they haven't. For various reasons, our nation's foreign policy elite haven't embraced religious freedom as an integrated part of our approach to solving security issues – despite consistently falling short when trying to address the quite religious (and quite anti-religious freedom) ideologies at the root of Islamic terrorism. Why, then, have we neglected a strong defense of religious freedom?

Simply put, most foreign policy professionals just don't see religious freedom as directly relevant to advancing *U.S. interests* around the world – a view which is due to apathy, neglect, ignorance, and even hostility to religion and religious freedom permeating the world inhabited by foreign policy elites.

"[A]s a result of their training, many policy makers have been inculcated with a secularist mindset that believes religion is irrational, violent and (fortunately) on the decline."<sup>6</sup> In other words, many think they can solve the world's problems *without dealing with religion*, or indeed, even by intentionally sidelining it. However, the so-called "secularization thesis," has been proven to be "dead wrong," as "religion remains a primary identity around the world."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, recent data shows 84 percent of the world population adhering to a religious identity, and that percentage is only expected to increase in the future.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, we have hamstrung ourselves by refusing to understand the very deep, sincere, and important role of religion in the lives of so many around the world – a familiarity which is essential to conducting foreign relations.

The fact that this is a systemic problem primarily involving career civil servants as opposed to elected officials helps explain why subsequent presidencies haven't tried to imitate the Reagan administration's success. If a president is not personally engaged on an issue already unacceptable in the foreign policy profession, certainly no career civil servant is going to take up the cause. Primarily, we have a problem with the mindset and philosophical approach among the governing class elites and civil servants responsible for implementing our foreign policy. While there obviously are exceptions, the broad sense within the foreign policy bureaucracy is that religious freedom is simply not relevant to the strategic interests of the United States.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, compounding the above problems is the misplaced yet lurking fear of being seen as "promoting" religion in violation of the First Amendment. There is clearly a sensitivity on the part of some in government "about approaching religion because they fear being personally attacked – via litigation or public opprobrium – for possibly violating the Establishment Clause."<sup>10</sup> Yet it is futile to try to cultivate self-government in a religious society, and completely neglect to incorporate the role of religion out of some (misplaced and overly sensitive) concern about violating the Constitution.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the precise reason, the U.S. government is blocking programs due to religious references.<sup>12</sup> However, if we are to succeed in addressing these issues, we must overcome this mindset – whether derived from misplaced fears of unconstitutionality or something else. When "a Peace Corps Volunteer in El Salvador received funding from USAID to print an environmental storybook she had created," and was subsequently "told that USAID was retracting funding for the project because," according to the volunteer, "she had used the Salvadoran Christian foundation as the context for her environmental message," it's time to stop and recognize the absurdity of our approach to religion in foreign assistance and international relations.<sup>13</sup>

### **Embracing Religious Freedom for National Security's Sake**

How do we change course? In order to correct the problems described above, we must confront the question head-on: Why *should* foreign policy professionals care about religious freedom, and how exactly is it in the United States' long-term strategic interest?

In a nutshell, they should pay attention because, as Professor William Inboden (who formerly served on the State Department's Policy Planning staff and as senior director for strategic planning at the National Security Council) points out, "[t]here is not a single nation in the world that both respects religious freedom and poses a security threat to the United States."<sup>14</sup>

As of the end of the twentieth century, the countries that violated religious freedom "overwhelmingly coincide[d] with those [nations] the United States was already at war with or would soon go to war with, or that would emerge as first-order national security concerns." Overall, as Professor Inboden observes, the evidence shows that "entities engaging in religious persecution – both states and nonstates – are on balance more likely to pose a security threat to the U.S."<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, the facts of recent history show that the level of religious freedom of a society is related to its security and stability, and the security and stability of societies elsewhere ultimately affect the national security of the United States.

In addition to its positive relationship to security, we now know – thanks to groundbreaking scholarship done in only the past few years – that religious freedom is associated with economic growth,<sup>16</sup> and is linked to peaceful social outcomes.<sup>17</sup> As Dr. Brian Grim has observed, when religious freedom flourishes, corruption is lowered and there is more peace, less harmful regulation, reduced liabilities, and more diversity and economic growth. And all of this is not unrelated to national security, for economic growth aids stability and security.<sup>18</sup>

Promoting religious freedom is good foreign and domestic policy, for as it bolsters economic growth it also counters instability and a lack of security. Indeed, “recent history demonstrates that today’s failures to take pro-active measures against the growing epidemic of global religious persecution are sowing the seeds of tomorrow’s threats to global security and stability.”<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Tom Farr, who served for decades as a Foreign Service Officer and spent years studying this issue, has said the research shows that “religious freedom is highly correlated with other things that aren’t normally thought to go along with religion, particularly the consolidation of democracy.” Religious freedom also

[C]orrelates with good social outcomes, for example, low infant mortality and high female literacy. Female literacy is one of the major bellwethers of development in this world. Where it’s low, you have big problems; it is an indicator in almost all cases.<sup>20</sup>

Violations of religious liberty, whether characterized by active oppression or more subtle, legalized coercion, are evidence of authoritarian governmental or social structures. Governments or cultures that oppress or coerce religious believers are, by such actions, demonstrating a totalitarian impulse that undermines social stability. After all, if the government can take action against religious liberty, it is unlikely to show respect for other areas of society. Thus, wherever religious freedom violations occur, they stifle growth and threaten security. Given that, as of 2014, “roughly three-quarters of the world’s 7.2 billion people (74%) were living in countries with high or very high restrictions or hostilities” on religion, it seems that the violation of religious freedom is something our foreign policy and national security professionals should pay attention to.<sup>21</sup>

It is true that the evidence isn’t complete. But after almost twenty years of military intervention failing to eliminate the radical Islamist security threat in Afghanistan and Iraq (to say nothing of other hotspots where it is spreading), aren’t we at least open to trying something new? Sure, our intervention may have slowed or disrupted possible attacks. It may have prevented safe havens for terrorists. But it certainly failed to change the culture and attitude of many radical Muslims around the world – something which is absolutely necessary to long-term security. And for that to happen, religious freedom must develop and flourish globally; hence, it is in the strategic interest of the United States to cultivate it as much as possible.

Thankfully, we appear to be at least recognizing this reality. One of the pillars of our National Security Strategy, recognizing “the hope of every soul to live in freedom,” is to “advance American influence” by “protect[ing] religious freedom and religious minorities.” It makes clear that this is a “priority action,” and that the United States “remains committed to supporting and advancing religious freedom – America’s first freedom,” for “[o]ur Founders understood religious freedom not as the state’s creation, but as the gift of God to every person and a fundamental right for our flourishing society.”<sup>22</sup>

If our stated policy is to be made a reality, we need to understand that worldwide religious freedom must be dealt with not on a one-off basis out of humanitarian motivation, but as a long-term strategic interest of the United States – in furtherance of our own national security. For this purpose alone, our foreign policy professionals have reason to be engaged on it.

Thus, religious freedom should be a central priority in U.S. diplomatic and strategic engagement worldwide in order to promote freedom for its own sake as well as for its effect on global stability, security, and economic growth. An added component of these benefits is less tangible but no less real – as the brief review of Ronald Reagan’s approach showed us: When the oppressed realize they have a friend in the United States, such realization accrues good will in those countries where liberty is scarce and believers and their allies seek hope for their futures.

While the ideological challenge may change with the times, the strategy for addressing it has not. Communism was the opponent in the battles of ideas during the last century; now radical Islam and rising autocracies are our foes. Yet the answer remains the same – we will firmly stand our ground, insisting that religious freedom and human rights be protected. This is not just the right thing to do; it’s the safe and secure thing to do. As President Reagan did, we must embrace a strong stand for human rights and religious freedom because it’s in America’s interest to do so. For on it hinges the security of our own place in the world, and in the long-term – our very survival.

### **The Way Forward: What Needs to Change**

Religious freedom is stated as part of our National Security Strategy. Now we must act on it. Implementation should involve specific steps such as (1) leveraging our bilateral and multilateral relationships, utilizing trade, aid, sanction, and visa bans (where appropriate); (2) clear, consistent, communication and priority given to the issue from the United States government, including appeals directly to faith communities, public broadcasting, and public meetings with religious dissidents; (3) revised training for foreign policy professionals; (4) prioritizing religiously persecuted refugees, and (5) other steps.<sup>23</sup> According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the State Department should “broaden its approach to international religious freedom,” and set a more aggressive agenda, dialogue, and debate on the issue (including through utilizing the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom).<sup>24</sup>

However, implementation must go *beyond specific steps*; we need a *change in the philosophical approach* to this issue. We must create a culture in which it is expected that foreign policy and national security professionals will consider religious freedom in their strategy and decision-making. Foreign service professionals must cease to think of religious freedom merely as a human rights issue, and incorporate it into their thinking on national security and foreign policy more broadly as they seek to advance U.S. interests.<sup>25</sup>

But will they see the need to do so? Professor Nilay Saiya and Joshua Fidler contend that “[m]ainstream foreign-policy approaches and the theoretical frameworks on which they are based remain secular in orientation and ill-equipped for dealing with many of today’s religiously based security problems,” and do not “take the faith factor seriously.”<sup>26</sup> In view of the failures of realpolitik, neo-conservatism, and liberal interventionism to deal with the religious freedom and security challenges of the last several decades, Saiya and Fidler propose a “religious realpolitik” – in essence, realpolitik modified by religious literacy and religious freedom.<sup>27</sup>

This will help adjust for our “assumptions that turned out not to apply in parts of the Muslim world – such as the idea that religion could be divided from politics or that the prime focus of identity was the

nation state.” For we must remember that “once religion is part of politics, it must also be part of the solution.”<sup>28</sup> CSIS believes the U.S. approach to foreign policy has not taken religion into account very well:

Although many U.S. government officials and offices acknowledge the importance of religion in the formulation and implementation of U.S. policy in conflict-prone states, a survey of the U.S. foreign policy bureaucracy reveals that the government as a whole is not proceeding strategically on this issue. Lack of strategic thinking has left American practitioners without a clear set of policy objectives or tactical guidelines for dealing with emerging religious realities. Offices, programs, and initiatives are more often happenstance than coherent.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, America’s lack of focus on religion in diplomacy has left non-Americans baffled. As *The Economist* has noted, the fact that the United States has “mastered the politics of religion at home, but not abroad” makes no sense.<sup>30</sup> We are “the spiritual home of modern choice-based religion and pluralism,” and should seek to bring its lessons onto the world stage. The authors explain:

The strange thing is that when America has tried to tackle religious politics abroad – especially jihadist violence – it has drawn no lessons from its domestic success. Why has a country so rooted in pluralism made so little of religious freedom? In the cold war, America gained the high ground on human rights by getting friends and foes (including the Soviet Union) to sign the Helsinki Accords. That made it hard to be accused of favouritism.<sup>31</sup>

As Professor Inboden also observes, “[t]his neglect is especially paradoxical given the United States’ own history and religious diversity.” Indeed, it is.

To change that, we can start by addressing the challenges and opportunities before us. Russia and other autocratic regimes are flexing their muscles and cracking down on religious freedom. China continues to suppress faith and imprison religious actors who speak out against the government. The religious freedom challenge posed by violent Islamic theologies being spread around the world is huge.

Taking this challenge as an example, we observe it is also a national security challenge. For if the propagation of violent Islamic *thinking* is not dealt with directly and with a long-term strategy to defuse it at its source, it is likely our national security will always remain in doubt, and religious freedom will never successfully spread around the globe. The two issues are inextricably linked.

For example, when Christians, Yezidis, and others driven away by ISIS are restored to their communities in Iraq, we must understand that not only are we working toward religious freedom and pluralism in that area, but we are stabilizing it and leaving one less spot for the next variation of ISIS adherents to plot attacks against the United States.

One way to tackle the ideological threat of radical Islam is through a policy of clearly and openly announcing our support for those Muslims and Muslim organizations developing theologies consistent with a framework of a civil government protective of religious freedom for all. In some cases, publicity may set back their efforts, and a message of support can be confidentially conveyed – but advocates must *know* we are on their side. In either case, our policy must at least recognize (though not necessarily validate) and work with the religious roots of the ideas which inform so much of the Muslim world on the relationship between mosque and state. Ignoring or downplaying them – especially when tackling the relationship between religious and civil authority – will get us nowhere.

In particular, we must “build relationships with faith leaders abroad who are best equipped to make theological arguments against proponents of violent extremism.” For

These spiritual leaders possess a degree of moral standing and influence based on shared values, credibility with their constituencies and an intimate knowledge of cultural values and local issues that no outsider can possibly have. Because they have personal relationships with members of their communities, they are uniquely well positioned to credibly verbalize counternarratives, positively influence would-be militants, mobilize support for compromise and reduce the likelihood of conflict.<sup>32</sup>

Diplomats must also engage such partners, and not settle for outreach limited to surface-level issues such as pop culture (which, incidentally, risks insulting Muslims and backfiring given U.S. decadence in this area).<sup>33</sup> As part of this engagement, America should also convey to the world that Muslims in the United States are quite free – leaving Muslims elsewhere (in Iran, for instance) to reflect and compare that fact to their own situations.<sup>34</sup>

Muslims willing to assist in this endeavor exist. But they are often under serious pressure to remain silent, and speak up at risk of their own lives. They must know they do not stand alone, for at least when facing the threat of radical Islam in the *realm of ideas*, progress can only “be accomplished . . . through Muslims themselves, made possible through religious and political reform in the world of Islam.”<sup>35</sup>

On this topic, at least, we must honestly and constructively recognize the religious roots of violent conflicts involving Islam, while making it clear that our religious freedom policy will accept nothing less than protection for the freedom to choose, and live out, one’s beliefs. If properly conveyed, this message will shine as a beacon from the hilltop of freedom, offering hope to those seeking it, while providing security to those of us (e.g., the United States) in search of it.

## Conclusion

The United States has a noble track record of defending religious liberty around the world, though it has to this point mostly been driven by humanitarian motivations. While religious freedom is certainly a humanitarian issue, it is much more than that. As it is cultivated worldwide, and as security and economic development occur along with it, the United States’ own long-term strategic national security interests are advanced. Yet to accomplish this, a course-correction in the mindset of our foreign policy professionals must occur, and our entire philosophical approach to the issue must shift. President Reagan provides us a template in his confrontation of Soviet Communism with religious freedom. We can do the same while adjusting to face our own, unique challenges today.

*Travis Weber, J.D., LL.M., is Director of the Center for Religious Liberty at Family Research Council, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, and a former Navy pilot. Among his other work, he has overseen training for Iraqi leaders and civil society members on religious freedom protections in international human rights law.*

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Michaelson, “Egypt: Isis claims responsibility for Coptic church bombings,” *The Guardian*, April 9, 2017,

<sup>2</sup> Natan Sharansky, *Fear No Evil* (PublicAffairs, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan* (Harper Perennial, 2004), 285. (To read the full speech, see “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters, January 31, 1983,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum, accessed March 29, 2018,

<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/speeches/1983/13183b.htm>).

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- <sup>5</sup> Paul Kengor, 276.
- <sup>6</sup> Nilay Saiya and Joshua Fidler, “Taking God Seriously: The Struggle against Extremism,” *Middle East Policy* XXV (Spring 2018): 2, accessed March 29, 2018, <http://www.mepc.org/journal/taking-god-seriously-struggle-against-extremism>.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> “The Changing Global Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, April 5, 2017, accessed April 3, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>.
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- <sup>10</sup> “Mixed Blessings,” 39.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 20.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 21.
- <sup>14</sup> William Inboden, “Religious Freedom and National Security,” *Policy Review*, Hoover Institution, October 2, 2012, accessed March 29, 2018, <https://www.hoover.org/research/religious-freedom-and-national-security>.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>24</sup> “Mixed Blessings,” 48-49.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 42.
- <sup>26</sup> Saiya and Fidler, 1.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 8-9.



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<sup>28</sup> "The lesson from America," *The Economist*, November 1, 2007, accessed March 29, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/node/10015163>.

<sup>29</sup> "Mixed Blessings," 10.

<sup>30</sup> "The lesson from America."

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Saiya and Fidler, 10.

<sup>33</sup> "Mixed Blessings," 16-17.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.; *see also* "The lesson from America" ("Similarly, in its battle for hearts and minds, America has made scant use of its own Muslim population. 'The people of Iran and Pakistan have no idea that American Muslims are free,' laments one Bush adviser.").

<sup>35</sup> Saiya and Fidler, 14.