



Why Religious Freedom Is a National Security Issue

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Key Points

For far too long, foreign policy elites have intentionally sidelined religious freedom from their negotiations with countries that restrict freedom of belief.

There is a strong correlation between states and nonstates that engage in religious persecution and those that pose a threat to U.S. national security.

When religious freedom is cultivated worldwide, it is often accompanied by economic growth, stability, and security. These things benefit the United States' own long-term strategic national security interests.

Summary

On Palm Sunday 2021, a suicide bomb was detonated outside a Catholic church in Indonesia, wounding more than 20 people.¹ The incident was a disappointing setback for a Muslim-majority country that has battled extremism. This and many other attacks on peoples of faith and houses of worship point to a connection between religious freedom and stability and security.

Religious freedom is a human right, and countries seeking to protect this right worldwide (like the United States) often do so strictly out of humanitarian concern. Yet, the need to promote this right can be made on other grounds as well—namely, that promoting religious freedom around the world is in the best interest of our own national security.

In the West, religious freedom has not yet been incorporated into a consistent, long-term, foreign policy strategy. But perhaps it should be.

Lessons from the Past: Ronald Reagan and the Cold War

To better understand the necessary shift in our thinking on international religious freedom, we should consider the lessons of the Cold War.

Natan Sharansky, a well-known Jewish dissident in the Soviet Union, spoke out against his government on behalf of his fellow citizens. As a consequence, he was imprisoned in 1977 and sent to the Gulag. There, he engaged the regime in a battle of wills, resisting, going on hunger strikes, and refusing to compromise. Sharansky's wife and others helped fight for his freedom, raising awareness in the West and the United States about his plight. Sharansky was likely spared from execution because the Soviet government knew that President 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 and flown to West Germany. He then emigrated to Israel.² He is now a celebrated democracy activist and has served his nation in the Knesset and advocated for freedom around the world.

Sharansky's release was made possible by the U.S. government taking a strong stance at a pivotal time in an episode of religious and political oppression. Despite being criticized 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 did not 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.³

The Soviets knew where President Reagan stood—he supported freedom, including religious freedom, without compromise. A mere eight years after Reagan said these words, and after two terms of his presidency, the Soviet Union collapsed.

Reagan’s religious freedom advocacy wasn’t limited to the Soviet Union. Visiting communist China in 1984, he spoke to 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.⁴

At the time of his address, Chinese Christians were sitting in jail for speaking—less boldly than President Reagan just did—about their faith.⁵ Chinese government officials and other authoritarians of that era clearly knew where Reagan stood.

This history lesson can apply to U.S. engagement with China today. The Chinese Communist Party still rules via a one-party system. As the United States confronts the Chinese government as a rising power, religious freedom concerns should be front and center. China continues to harass and imprison house church pastors,⁶ imprison human rights lawyers who defend religious groups,⁷ crack down on Falun Gong practitioners,⁸ enforce strict measures on Tibetan Buddhists,⁹ and are committing—as officially determined by the U.S. government—an ongoing genocide against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang.¹⁰

China’s external aggression and internal crackdowns on dissidents and religious believers are related to the party’s attempt to keep a tight grip on power. In order to address this and promote a free and peaceful China, religious freedom and human rights concerns must be addressed in tandem with

national security and foreign policy concerns. American leaders today have many opportunities to pick up the mantle of President Reagan and stand for religious freedom, even in the most challenging cases.

Contemporary Challenges: Violence in Nigeria

Perhaps nowhere in the world do religious freedom and national security overlap as clearly as they do in Nigeria. For years, terrorist groups—including Boko Haram, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), and Fulani militants—have claimed the lives and livelihoods of many. Well over 11,000 Christians have been killed since June 2015.¹¹ Although Christians are certainly not the only victims, Islamist ideology has contributed to countless tragedies across the country and been a source of increasing violence.

In northern Nigeria, Boko Haram is responsible for regular attacks against Christian individuals, faith leaders, communities, schools, seminaries, and churches. Shia Muslims also suffer attacks. ISWAP similarly targets peaceful individuals and communities and takes inspiration from the brutality of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria).¹² In the Middle Belt (Nigeria’s central region), Fulani militants have taken to attacking Christian farming communities, brutalizing the people, stealing and destroying their property, and justifying the atrocities with the slogan “Allahu Akbar.”¹³

The routine attacks against Christians are clearly an issue of religious freedom because many Nigerian Christians, especially in the northeast and Middle Belt regions, cannot freely live out their faith without the legitimate fear of attack. The violence has caused the U.S. government to label Nigeria a “Country of Particular Concern” on religious freedom in 2020.¹⁴ This is also a security issue, as these Islamist groups pose a grave danger to the Nigerian people, the broader Lake Chad Basin region, the continent, and beyond.¹⁵

Thus far, the Nigerian government has lacked the willingness to take meaningful measures to protect religious freedom or even to guarantee its citizens’ security.¹⁶ The consequences are grave; more Christians were killed in Nigeria due to their faith in 2020 than anywhere else in the world.¹⁷

As the largest country in Africa by population and the continent's largest economy, the increasing violence threatens to have widespread impacts. Some experts have expressed concern that if Nigeria's violence continues to spiral out of control, it could spark a global refugee crisis, sending Nigerians fleeing into Europe.

As Dr. Eric Patterson says, "We do not want to see falling dominos of failing states, millions of destitute refugees, and a global petroleum shock. We, in the West, care about Nigeria both because it will affect us and because we want the very best for the citizens of Nigeria."

State Department and other U.S. officials may be quick to brush concerns about Nigeria aside. Yet, we know the dangers of allowing terrorist groups to fester and grow uninhibited, even far from home. The situation in Nigeria is one that national security officials should be taking seriously. As a first step, the U.S. State Department should compile a report to assess the extent of violent incidents that target religious or ethnic communities in Nigeria, the dangers that this might pose to U.S. national security, and what we might do to confront it.

Foreign Policy Elites Are Sidelining Religious Freedom

Most foreign policy professionals fail to see religious freedom as directly relevant to advancing *U.S. interests* around the world—a view due to apathy and even hostility to religion and religious freedom. Unfortunately, this view is currently permeating the world inhabited by foreign policy elites.¹⁸

As Nilay Saiya and Joshua Fidler have observed, "[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."¹⁹ 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 wrong, as "religion remains a primary identity around the world."²⁰ Recent data shows 84 percent of the world population adheres to a religious identity, and that percentage is only expected to increase in the future.²¹

The fact that this is a systemic problem primarily involving career civil servants instead of elected officials explains why subsequent presidencies have not tried to imitate the Reagan administration's success. If a president is not personally engaged on the issue, 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 civil servants responsible for implementing our foreign policy.

Compounding these problems is a misplaced fear of being seen as “promoting” religion and thereby violating the First Amendment. There is 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.”²² Yet, it is futile to try to cultivate self-government in a religious society and completely neglect to incorporate the quite necessary role of religion out of some misplaced concern about violating the Constitution.²³

Whatever the precise reason, the U.S. government has in the past blocked funding for programs due to religious references.²⁴ One Peace Corps volunteer in El Salvador “received funding from USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development] to print an environmental storybook she had created,” but 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.”²⁵ This is inappropriate and unnecessarily harms good efforts that happen to be associated with a religious institution.

We Must Embrace Religious Freedom for National Security's Sake

Let's cut to the chase. Why *should* foreign policy and national security professionals care about religious freedom, and how exactly is it in the United States' long-term strategic interest?

In a nutshell, religious freedom is in America's national interest because, as Professor William Inboden (who formerly served on the U.S. 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.”²⁶

As of the end of the 20th 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.” As Inboden observes, the evidence shows that “entities engaging in religious persecution—both states and nonstates—are more likely to pose a security threat to the U.S.”²⁷

Even if a state engaged in religious oppression happens to be on good terms with the American government, the American people will often harbor negative sentiments toward that state. Saudi Arabia, a country with a long history of religious oppression, is a prime example. Although often labeled as a key trade partner and a crucial ally in the regional rivalry against Iran, Saudi Arabia is viewed unfavorably by a wide margin of the American public, a statistic consistent across two decades of Gallup polls.²⁸

In addition to being a human right, religious freedom is an international stability issue. Religious Freedom Institute points out, “In most countries where religious persecution causes human suffering, violence, and instability, religion is the linchpin of politics and culture.”²⁹ Ensuring that all people have the freedom to practice their religion can mitigate tensions and instability rooted in religious conflict. And the security and stability of societies elsewhere ultimately affect the national security of the United States.

In addition to religious freedom’s positive relationship to security, we now know—thanks to recent scholarship done in only the past few years—that it is associated with economic growth³⁰ and linked to peaceful social outcomes.³¹ 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, since economic growth aids stability and security.³²

Promoting religious freedom is good foreign and domestic policy. 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.”³³

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.”³⁴

Violations of religious freedom, 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 freedom, it is unlikely to show respect for other aspects of society. Thus, wherever religious freedom violations occur, they stifle growth and threaten security. Given that, as of 2021, at least two-thirds of the world’s population lives in countries where religious freedom is not upheld, it seems that the violation of religious freedom is something to which our foreign policy and national security professionals should pay close attention.³⁵

It is true that the evidence isn’t complete. But after more than 20 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 necessary to long-term security. And for that to happen, religious freedom must develop and flourish globally.

The U.S. government has taken steps to recognize this reality. Every National Security Strategy Report since 1998 (except 2010) has featured a commitment to defend religious freedom globally.³⁶ The most recent National Security Strategy, from 2017, stated:

The United States also remains committed to supporting and advancing religious freedom—America’s first freedom. Our 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 ... Priority Actions ... Protect Religious Freedom and Religious Minorities: We will advocate on behalf of religious freedom and threatened minorities. Religious minorities continue to be victims of violence. We will place a priority on protecting these groups and will continue working with regional partners to protect minority communities from attacks and to preserve their cultural heritage.³⁷

President Donald Trump’s Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom, issued on June 2, 2020, affirms that “Religious freedom, America’s first freedom, is a moral and national security imperative. Religious freedom for all people worldwide is a foreign policy priority of the United States, and the United States will respect and vigorously promote this freedom.”³⁸

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 enough to be engaged on matters involving religious freedom.

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: when the

oppressed realize they have a friend in the United States, that realization accrues goodwill in those countries where liberty is scarce, and believers and their allies keep hope for their futures.

We must embrace a strong stand for human rights and religious freedom because it's in America's interest to do so. On it hinges the security of our own place in the world and our very survival in the long-term.

A Change in Our Foreign Policy Approach Is Needed

It is clear that we need a *change in our philosophical approach* to this issue. We must create the expectation that foreign policy and national security professionals will consider religious freedom in their strategizing and decision-making. Foreign service professionals must stop thinking of religious freedom as merely a human rights issue and incorporate it more broadly into their thinking on national security and foreign policy as they seek to advance U.S. interests.³⁹

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.”⁴⁰ In view of the failures of *realpolitik*, neo-conservatism, and liberal interventionism to deal with the religious freedom and security challenges of the past several decades, Saiya and Fidler propose a “religious *realpolitik*”—in essence, *realpolitik* modified by religious literacy and religious freedom.⁴¹

This approach 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.”⁴²

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (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.⁴³

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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵

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

We can start to put an end to the neglect by addressing the challenges and opportunities currently before us. Russia and other autocratic regimes are flexing their muscles and cracking down on religious freedom, China continues suppressing faith and imprisoning religious actors who speak out against the government, and violent Islamic theologies are being spread around the world by militant extremists.

Taking this last challenge as an example, we can observe that it is a challenge to both religious freedom and national security. 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.

When Christians, Yazidis, and others driven away by ISIS are restored to their communities in Iraq, we must understand that we are not only working toward religious freedom and pluralism in that region but are also 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 clear and open support for Muslims and Muslim organizations developing theologies that are consistent with a civil government framework protective of religious freedom for all. In some cases, publicity may set back their efforts. Nevertheless, advocates must be notified we are on their side, even if our support must be confidentially conveyed. In any case, our policy must at least recognize (though not necessarily validate) and work with the religious roots of the ideas that 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.” The rationale for this is not difficult to follow:

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.⁴⁶

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).⁴⁷ 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 consider their own situations.⁴⁸

Muslims willing to assist in this endeavor exist. But they are often under serious pressure to remain silent, as speaking up poses a risk to 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.”⁴⁹

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.

Five Ways the United States Can Better Defend Religious Freedom

There are several steps that the U.S. government can implement in order to more fully address religious freedom concerns in our foreign policy and national security. They include the following:

1. The U.S. government should clearly and consistently articulate a commitment to religious freedom around the world.

World leaders should know that international religious freedom is a U.S. foreign policy priority. Public broadcasting such as Voice of America and Radio Free Asia can also raise awareness of religious persecution.

2. The U.S. government should include religious freedom concerns in bilateral and multilateral relations with other countries.

Trade negotiations and agreements and foreign aid initiatives should be crafted with an awareness of the religious freedom and human rights issues in any given country. They should integrate ideas for how these agreements can be leveraged to advance religious freedom and human rights.

3. In accordance with Executive Order 13926, all agencies that send staff members overseas should take additional measures to ensure that training incorporates information on religious freedom.⁵⁰

American diplomats must be equipped to articulate a robust definition of religious freedom, its status in international law, and threats to religious freedom in various contexts. U.S. officials should also meet with religious dissidents and learn from faith communities about their concerns.

4. The U.S. government should take steps to prioritize the admission of religiously persecuted refugees.

We must ensure that there is always a pathway for refugees fleeing persecution to resettle safely in the United States.

5. The presidential administration must continue to include religious freedom in the National Security Strategy.

The National Security Strategy should outline specific ways that the United States will seek to advance international religious freedom and articulate why it is important for our national security that we do so.

Conclusion

The United States has a noble track record of defending religious freedom around the world, although up to this point it has mostly been driven by humanitarian motivations. While religious freedom is certainly a humanitarian issue, it is much more than that. Religious freedom’s cultivation worldwide—and the security and economic development that occur along with it—advance the United States’ own long-term strategic national security interests. To accomplish this, a course correction in the mindset of our foreign policy professionals is needed, 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 the unique challenges of today.

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³⁷ “Religious Freedom in the National Security Strategy of the United States,” Helsinki Commission Report.

³⁸ “Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom,” The White House, June 2, 2020, accessed August 12, 2021, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-advancing-international-religious-freedom/>.

³⁹ “Mixed Blessings,” 42.

⁴⁰ Saiya and Fidler, 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁴² “In God’s name – A special report on religion and public life,” *The Economist*, November 3, 2007, accessed March 29, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/sites/default/files/special-reports-pdfs/10015148.pdf> (see p. 18).

⁴³ “Mixed Blessings,” 10.

⁴⁴ “The lesson from America.”

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Saiya and Fidler, 10.

⁴⁷ “Mixed Blessings,” 16-17.

⁴⁸ *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.”).

⁴⁹ Saiya and Fidler, 14.

⁵⁰ “Advancing International Religious Freedom,” Federal Register, Executive Order 13926 of June 2, 2020, accessed August 12, 2021, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/06/05/2020-12430/advancing-international-religious-freedom>.