



Religious Freedom and International Development: An Explainer

by Andrew Nolte, Ph.D., and Arielle Del Turco, M.A.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is responsible for administering much of America’s foreign aid and development assistance. According to USAID’s mission statement, it exists in part to “promote and demonstrate democratic values abroad, and advance a free, peaceful, and prosperous world.” One of the most meaningful ways USAID can do this is by promoting religious freedom around the world. The reality is that the expansion of religious freedom contributes to many international development goals, and programming geared toward promoting international religious freedom (IRF) can play a positive role in advancing this fundamental human right for all people.

U.S. Government Has a History of Promoting Religious Freedom Abroad

The U.S. government has a history of incorporating and emphasizing religious freedom in foreign policy. This is most clearly seen in the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998 and the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016. Both established government mechanisms to promote religious freedom around the world. As required by IRFA, the U.S. State Department releases an annual report detailing the religious freedom conditions in every country and

the United States' actions and policies that support religious freedom in each country. IRFA also requires the president to officially apply "country of particular concern (CPC) designations to countries that have engaged in or tolerated systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. Under the president's authority, the secretary of State announces CPC designations every year. When non-economic policy options fail to halt severe violations, the U.S. government is then supposed to utilize an economic measure, such as sanctions.

U.S. foreign assistance funds have been effectively used to support religious freedom and religious minority communities, such as when Congress passed the Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act of 2018, which provided assistance to Christian, Yezidi, and Muslim victims of ISIS genocide. Since 2017, USAID reports having given over \$370 million for activities that support religious and ethnic minorities across the region in just the Middle East alone. Through foreign assistance, diplomatic pressure, and economic coercion, the United States continues to seek to promote religious freedom internationally.

Biden Administration Overlooks Religious Freedom, Prioritizes LGBT Issues

On March 30, 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken criticized the Trump administration's emphasis on religious freedom, saying, "[T]here is no hierarchy that makes some rights more important than others."¹ This view disregards the U.S. government's history of incorporating and emphasizing religious freedom in foreign policy. Given Secretary Blinken's comments, it is unsurprising that religious freedom has taken a backseat in the Biden administration's foreign policy.

- Two days after President Joe Biden took office, USAID rejected a project that would document attacks on Christians and Muslims by Islamist groups in Nigeria—documentation that is sorely needed to promote justice and accountability for victims.²
- Funds for some religious freedom programs have been slow-walked by USAID under the Biden administration, including a Uyghur cultural preservation project.
- On February 4, 2021, President Biden issued the Memorandum on Advancing the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex Persons Around the World. It instructs all federal agencies involved in foreign aid, assistance, and development programs to “expand their ongoing efforts to ensure regular Federal Government engagement with governments, citizens, civil society, and the private sector to promote respect for the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons and combat discrimination.”³ This directive may create situations where religious organizations or institutions could be denied aid because of religious convictions. This holds especially true in countries with high levels of religious affiliation or state-instituted churches.
- President Biden’s Executive Order on Advancing Equality for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex Individuals, signed June 15, 2022, instructs the secretary of State to consider how U.S. foreign assistance programs and America’s influence at international and multilateral institutions can pressure countries and institutions to oppose “conversion therapy,” which is usually defined as “any practice or treatment by a mental health professional that seeks to change an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity.” This definition intentionally uses broad language that extends far beyond discredited, abusive practices such as electroshock or other pain-inducing methods to include talk therapy intended to help individuals who want to become comfortable with their biological sex. This executive order creates still more possibilities for countries or organizations to be denied aid because of their religious convictions.⁴

- Under the Trump administration, USAID launched the New Partnerships Initiative (NPI), intended to provide an easier way for small, local, and faith-based organizations to apply for USAID grants (a notoriously complex process) and ensure USAID made an effort to partner with more of these organizations. However, after the Biden administration took office, the NPI still included faith-based organizations but seemed to de-emphasize them while focusing on leftist terminology such as “equity and inclusivity.”⁵

Religious Freedom Supports International Development

- A joint study by Georgetown University and Brigham Young University examined 173 countries and discovered a strong correlation between religious freedom and economic growth.⁶
 - Even after controlling for more than 20 factors, religious freedom was one of the only variables that was still a major predictor of gross domestic product (GDP) growth.
 - Although religious freedom is certainly not the only factor, it is meaningful that notorious violators of religious freedom such as Eritrea, Sudan, North Korea, and Afghanistan have low GDP.
- From the 2008 financial crisis through 2017, populous countries with decreasing restrictions on religious freedom experienced double the GDP growth rate of equivalent countries with increased restrictions on religious freedom.⁷
- Ten out of twelve indicators of economic competitiveness strongly correlate with religious freedom. In particular, innovative strength is twice as likely in countries with low government restrictions on religion and low social hostility to religion.⁸
- States with greater religious freedom are typically more economically developed.⁹
- Religious freedom and the absence of religiously motivated conflict and persecution have been found to correlate with economic growth. Ilan Alon argues that there are two main reasons for this correlation.¹⁰

- First, religious freedom is a building block for other core political freedoms that strengthen democracy, including freedom of speech and association.
- Second, religious freedom supports religious plurality and diversity. This attracts talented individuals of all faiths and allows them to participate fully in the economy without discrimination.
- Religious freedom contributes to a stable society.¹¹ That stability fosters economic opportunity and allows businesses to grow and operate in an environment that does not suffer from religiously motivated violence or discrimination.

What the Experts Are Saying

Over the past year, Family Research Council conducted a joint study with Regent University to identify the biggest obstacles to integrating IRF and international development and exploring policy options to move forward. Through interviews with government practitioners, religious freedom advocates, and academic experts, which were later coded and analyzed, we collected data on some of the biggest challenges and opportunities on this topic.

According to our research, the experts and practitioners interviewed for this study believe challenges to integrating IRF and international development include:

- Secular cultural bias at USAID (noted by 85.71 percent of experts)
 - Experts identified a cultural secular bias within government agencies as a significant challenge to utilizing development programming to advance religious freedom.
- USAID favoritism for large contractors over local faith-based organizations (noted by 87.5 percent of experts)

- A lack of understanding of what faith-based organizations do and why they are effective at serving in a religious context often causes valuable faith-based organizations to be overlooked for government contracts.
- Misplaced concerns about the Establishment Clause and/or the perception that IRF is a “Christian thing” (noted by 87.5 percent of experts)
 - Those we interviewed identified confusion from government personnel about how the Establishment Clause might relate to IRF work.
 - Similarly, some encountered resistance to religious freedom because government staffers viewed it as something only Christians are concerned about rather than a human right that protects all people.
- Perception within the government that IRF is “not development work” (noted by 83.33 percent of experts)
 - A lack of understanding about how religious freedom contributes to economic growth and development tends to stall religious freedom efforts at USAID and other agencies.
- Lack of focus on the specific needs of local religious minorities (noted by 61.54 percent of experts)
 - Some experts pointed out that taking more care to identify the unique need of particular religious minority communities would be helpful.
- Lack of oversight and accountability with respect to IRF and development (noted by 69.23 percent of experts)
 - Congress routinely overlooks USAID’s religious freedom efforts—or lack thereof—neglecting to hold hearings or taking other measures.
- Lack of direct funding for IRF programs (noted by 56.25 percent of experts)
 - Before President Donald Trump’s 2020 executive order, religious freedom did not receive dedicated funding within foreign aid. Even now, the amount remains small.

- Incompetence at the United Nations (noted by 60 percent of experts)
 - The United Nations has, at times, disregarded the specific needs of religious communities, especially in refugee camps.

What Can Be Done?

Over the course of the study, several policy recommendations became apparent. The following are actions that the U.S. government can take to better integrate IRF and international development, as identified by the experts and practitioners we interviewed:

- USAID and other agencies should require robust staff training on religious freedom (assessed by 65 percent of experts, recommended by 100 percent)
 - Congress can pass legislation that directs USAID staff to receive training on religious freedom that is specifically tailored to development work rather than the generalized religious freedom training offered by the State Department's Foreign Service Institute. Through development work, staff from USAID and other agencies will encounter unique challenges and areas of opportunities for which specialized training could better prepare them.
- U.S. leaders should foster a better understanding of the Establishment Clause within relevant government agencies (assessed by 35 percent of experts, recommended by 100 percent)
 - Congress should work with experts in First Amendment jurisprudence to draft and pass a resolution reiterating why funding IRF projects through USAID would not violate the Establishment Clause and why the U.S. government should robustly work to advance religious freedom as a part of its development efforts.
 - In addition, it is essential to emphasize the practical benefits of religious freedom, such as its correlation with economic growth and regional peace and security. Congress can

elevate the importance of IRF by integrating language that articulates the importance of religious freedom into legislation that deals with national security, such as the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).

- The U.S. government should continue to work with faith-based organizations to provide development assistance and should preserve the New Partnership Initiative (NPI) (assessed by 90 percent of experts, recommended by 88.89 percent)
 - Congress should codify the Trump-era New Partners Initiative, which was created to provide new opportunities for local and faith-based organizations to partner with USAID. Local and faith-based organizations are often the organizations best positioned to help their communities and are more financially efficient and quick to respond.
- Congress should utilize increased oversight and accountability on IRF in U.S. development efforts (assessed by 75 percent of experts, recommended by 100 percent)
 - Congress should schedule hearings at regular intervals to track how USAID and other agencies are working to promote religious freedom and learn what might need to change in order to be more effective. Congress should exercise its oversight role in federal agencies and hold officials accountable for upholding the U.S. government's commitment to promoting religious freedom as established in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.
- Congress should establish a dedicated U.S. government funding stream for IRF-focused humanitarian aid (assessed by 70 percent of experts, recommended by 100 percent)
 - Congress can use the appropriations process to dedicate specific increased funding for IRF programs. In addition to a general funding stream for IRF, specific attention should be paid to specific contemporary global religious freedom crises.
- Congress should codify the 2020 Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom (assessed by 30 percent of experts, recommended by 100 percent)

- The 2020 Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom budgeted at least \$50 million per fiscal year for programs that advance IRF. In addition, it instructed executive departments and agencies that fund foreign assistance programs to ensure that faith-based and religious entities are not discriminated against on the basis of religious identity or religious belief when competing for federal funding.¹² These are critical steps to integrating religious freedom and international development. Congress should work to codify these provisions and others from the executive order into law.

Conclusion

Because of the correlation between religious freedom and economic growth, the U.S. government's foreign assistance efforts would greatly benefit from promoting international religious freedom programming and projects. If the U.S. government wants to have a long-lasting impact in the countries it seeks to strengthen, then promoting religious freedom must be a part of the solution.

To learn more about Regent and FRC's findings on this topic, check out our full publication:

[frc.org/internationaldevelopment](https://www.frc.org/internationaldevelopment)

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¹ Nina Shea, "Secretary Blinken, Don't Downplay the Importance of Religious Freedom," Hudson Institute, April 12, 2021, accessed May 25, 2022, <https://www.hudson.org/research/16826-secretary-blinken-don-t-downplay-the-importance-of-religious-freedom>.

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- ³ Joseph Biden, “Memorandum on Advancing the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex Persons Around the World,” The White House, February 4, 2021, accessed May 25, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/02/04/memorandum-advancing-the-human-rights-of-lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-queer-and-intersex-persons-around-the-world/>.
- ⁴ “Executive Order on Advancing Equality for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex Individuals,” The White House, June 15, 2022, accessed June 20, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/06/15/executive-order-on-advancing-equality-for-lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-queer-and-intersex-individuals/>.
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- ⁶ Jared Besse, “Why Religious Freedom is Good for Business – And Your Wallet,” First Liberty, July 5, 2019, accessed March 29, 2022, <https://firstliberty.org/news/good-for-business/>.
- ⁷ Brian J. Grim, “Economic Growth Slowed by Dramatic Global Decline in Religious Freedom,” Religious Freedom and Business Foundation, July 15, 2019, accessed February 7, 2022, <https://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/2/post/2019/07/economic-growth-slowed-by-dramatic-global-decline-in-religious-freedom.html>.
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- ⁹ Anthony Gill, “Religious Liberty & Economic Development: Exploring the Causal Connections,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 11, no. 4 (2013), 5-23.
- ¹⁰ Ilan Alon, “In God’s Name: Why Should Religious Freedom Affect Economic Prosperity?,” Religious Freedom Institute, June 14, 2016, accessed May 25, 2022, <https://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/cornerstone/2016/6/14/in-gods-name-why-should-religious-freedom-affect-economic-prosperity>.
- ¹¹ Arielle Del Turco and Travis Weber, “Why Religious Freedom Is a National Security Issue,” Family Research Council, August 2021, accessed May 25, 2022, <https://www.frc.org/get.cfm?i=IS18D01>.
- ¹² “Executive Order 13926 of June 2, 2020, Advancing International Religious Freedom,” *Federal Register*, 80, no. 109 (2020), 34951-53, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-06-05/pdf/2020-12430.pdf>.