



# PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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## "Briefing on International Religious Freedom: Outlook for 2010"

House Subcommittee on International Operations, Human Rights, and Oversight

2200 Rayburn House Office Building

February 3, 2010, 11:00 AM – 12:00 PM

**Congressman Russ Carnahan** (D-MO), Chairman of the House Subcommittee on International Operations, Human Rights, and Oversight, sponsored a public briefing to discuss the status and future of U.S. international religious freedom policy. **Sue Gunawardena-Vaughn**, Senior Program Manager of Human Rights of Religious Freedom at Freedom House, moderated a panel of three speakers: **Knox Thames**, Executive Director of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom; **Brian Grim**, Senior Researcher at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life; and **Thomas Farr**, Senior Fellow at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs. **Congressman Joseph Cao** (R-LA) joined briefing as well to ask a few questions of the panelists.

**Sue Gunawardena-Vaughn** opened by commenting on a "freedom recession" throughout much of the world. She spoke of religious liberty as a fundamental right upon which other freedoms rest, and interpreted the recent outbreak of religious violence in places like Egypt and elsewhere as perhaps an ominous sign of further repression to come.

**Knox Thames** continued with an explication of religious freedom's value in the context of U.S. foreign policy interests. He articulated four primary reasons for prioritizing it among other tools: **1)** It's a fundamental human right that has been affirmed numerous times in UN treaties and subsequent declarations; **2)** Religious liberty is a "canary in the coal mine" for other human rights – when limited, other rights are also affected; **3)** It can be an effective counter-terrorism tool – in regions with limited religious freedom, a climate of impunity can develop where extremist groups feel free to undertake vigilante activities against particular ethnic or religious groups; and **4)** Religious freedom is being hotly debated on an international level, which means that without serious U.S. engagement to help provide direction, many countries may begin to regress. Such engagement can come in the form of congressional resolutions, letters to foreign leaders, or foreign aid packages.

Next, **Brian Grim** detailed the findings of a recent Pew report on religious freedom. To start, he relayed Pew's finding that religious beliefs can be seriously infringed not only by governments, but by social groups and individuals as well; in some places, social hostilities may even have a greater impact than governmental repression. Most significantly, **Pew found that 64 countries – around one-third of all nations in the world – have high restrictions on religious freedom due to government actions, social hostilities, or a combination of the two.** This translates into 70 percent of the world's population. To underscore this point, Grim highlighted a number of other troubling statistics: two-thirds of all countries experience some level of government interference in religious expression; twenty-five percent have governments that regularly intimidate one or more religious groups; in 80 percent of countries, the government gives preferential support to specific religious groups; relative to the Americas, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has five times the level of governmental

restrictions on religious freedom, and seven times the level of social hostility between religious groups; and of the eleven countries with high levels of social hostilities, four are MENA nations.

Bringing the discussion around to policy, **Tom Farr** asked three questions: Why is this issue important to America? Why has the U.S. policy been so weak under recent administrations? And finally, how can we fix it? He answered the first question by alluding to the American experience, and declaring that "if we want to be true to our collective history, America must stand for religious freedom in the world."

**He referred to religious liberty as a "constituent part of a bundled commodity of human freedom," and in order to be a successful democracy, a country must choose to protect and nourish it.** In the eleven years since the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act – which put in place a substantial bureaucracy – Farr noted that "U.S. international religious freedom policy has still not been integrated in any meaningful sense into the broader U.S. foreign policy discussion." To the extent that the U.S. has engaged on this issue, Farr sees the approach as often reactive, instead of one that works with governments to develop institutions and habits that yield religious liberty.

With regard to the **Obama** administration, Farr highlighted the fact that it has yet to nominate an ambassador-at-large for religious freedom. And despite Obama's well-conceived Cairo speech, his post-Cairo interagency working group does not have religious freedom on its agenda. Farr believes the administration can do much more, and pointed to POMED's recent report, ["After Cairo: From the Vision of the Cairo Speech to Active Support for Human Dignity."](#) as an indicator that many activists and leaders in the Middle East want the U.S. to expand its religious freedom policies. However, to fully achieve these rights for themselves, Farr maintained that Muslim-majority countries must embrace religious freedom for others as well – "minorities must have equal access to the democratic public square, as well as complete freedom to worship."

Reacting to the panelists' calls for the prioritization of religious freedom policy, **Congressman Cao** asked how the U.S. can reconcile that particular diplomatic tool with its other interests such as economic growth and trade. Farr responded by saying that while religious freedom isn't everything, it's certainly something, "and it has not yet been integrated into our thinking." He continued that there are strong correlations between religious freedom and economic growth and productivity.

Responding to a question about the Obama administration's increasingly common rhetorical usage of "religious worship" in place of "religious freedom," **Thames commented that "freedom of worship" is too narrow a construction of the broader human right.** He hopes it won't trickle down into policy, but he's seen it enough times that he doesn't think it's an accident. Farr agreed, saying that although it may simply be a rhetorical device for aesthetic purposes, there seems to be a very truncated understanding of religious freedom among some in the current administration.