

U.S. International Religious Freedom Policy: the Outlook for 2010

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Remarks to a Briefing Hosted by Chairman Russ Carnahan, February 3, 2010
House Subcommittee on International Religions, Human Rights and Oversight

Let me begin by thanking Chairman Carnahan for sponsoring this event, and for his interest in America's international religious freedom (IRF) policy. It is a subject that, in my view, has not received the attention that it warrants. I want to address three questions this morning: first, why is IRF vital to America? Second, why has our policy been so weak? Third, how do we fix it?

The Importance of IRF to America

There are two basic reasons why this issue is, or should be, important to the United States. The first is human dignity and simple justice. Religious freedom is at the heart of what it means to be human, and to live a fully human life. We should be outraged and alarmed by the Pew Forum's finding that 70 percent of the world's population live in regimes that severely restrict religious liberty. To prevent someone from believing, worshiping or acting on the basis of religious conscience is to attack the core of human dignity, and to assault the very meaning of justice. In order to be true to its history and its self understanding, America must stand for religious freedom. That means, at a minimum, the right of people to be free of persecution. It also includes a right that is increasingly at risk in our own country, let alone elsewhere: the freedom of religious individuals and communities to preach, teach, and engage in the political life of a nation on the basis of religiously informed moral judgments.

Now if it is true that individual human beings require religious freedom in order to flourish, then it is true of societies as well. Hence the second reason why the United States should promote religious freedom: the well being and stability of societies and the vital interests of the United States. Brian Grim has just reported to you the results of some of his research. His other academic research, published in leading journals, strongly suggests that religious liberty is associated with less religious persecution and conflict. Religious freedom is a constituent part of what he has called a 'bundled commodity' of human freedoms," that is, those freedoms that are necessary to security, the consolidation of democracy, socio-economic progress, and the absence of violent religious extremism.

A successful democracy will have each of the "bundled commodity" of freedoms, but it cannot omit religious freedom. Here is a critical argument for highly religious, especially Muslim, societies: in order to achieve the benefits of stable democracy, you must embrace religious freedom. And if the United States wishes such societies to cease the incubation and export of religious extremism and terrorism, we must find ways to help them embrace religious freedom. This is a major reason why IRF policy should be seen as a national security issue.

Why Is US IRF Policy So Weak?

Given these powerful twin imperatives -- justice and national security -- one would expect that our foreign policy would long ago have integrated IRF into various US programs and policies, including democracy and civil society promotion, commercial and economic strategies, global women's issues, development programs, and counter terrorism. Unfortunately, that has not been

the case. It has now been 11 years since the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act. That law put in place a substantial bureaucracy, namely, an ambassador at large for IRF -- a very senior diplomatic official who is by law "principal advisor to the President and Secretary of State;" a State Department office under the ambassador; and an independent, bipartisan IRF commission intended to provide separate policy recommendations and act as a watchdog.

Alas, despite some heroic efforts by the men and women who have served in these agencies, and some important successes (especially in the last year), US IRF policy has remained in the diplomatic backwater. It has not been integrated in any meaningful sense into the work of US foreign affairs, but instead has been functionally and bureaucratically isolated. Its work has largely been reactive, often focusing on cases of persecution, rather than working with governments and civil societies to develop the political and social institutions that can yield religious liberty. Partly as a result, our IRF efforts are widely viewed abroad as only benefiting Christian minorities, as a front for Christian missionaries, and as anti-Islam. This perception is, let me say it firmly, utterly wrong. Indeed, if anything, US foreign policy has tended to downplay the fates of Christian minorities in the Middle East and elsewhere. And it has advocated for the rights of Muslims. But perception is critical, and, in this case, the perception of our IRF policy as pro-Christian and anti Islam is crippling.

Within the State Department the ambassador and his office have been bureaucratically quarantined. Although an ambassador at large has traditionally been senior to assistant secretaries, this ambassador was placed under the assistant secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor by both the Clinton and Bush administrations. Unfortunately, the Obama administration has yet even to nominate an ambassador at large for IRF, even though other senior diplomatic officials have long been in place, such as ambassador at large for global women's issues and senior envoys for anti-semitism, outreach to Muslim communities, disabilities, counterterrorism and global AIDS.

Each of these officials are viewed by foreign governments and American diplomats as more important to the United States than the ambassador at large for IRF. And, in fact, they are correct. When the new IRF ambassador finally shows up for work, he or she will very likely be treated as a mid level State Department official, working under the assistant secretary for DRL, with no regular and direct access to the Secretary of State, let alone the President. Unless things are changed, the ambassador will be excluded from senior policy meetings, even those in which religion is a factor.

Unfortunately, the outlook for change is not good. This administration has done very little to establish a policy on advancing international religious freedom in the Muslim world or elsewhere. Even though the President highlighted religious freedom as a key issue in his June Cairo speech, the post Cairo interagency working group does not even have a religious freedom component. And I am told that the President's council on Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, which will issue its report this month, does not address IRF in any substantive way in its section on international religious issues. If that is correct, it is a very bad signal.

Unfortunately, it takes its place amidst a host of bad signals from this administration. They include Secretary Clinton's ill advised statement in Beijing that pressing China on human rights could not interfere with more important issues, and the increasing use of the term "freedom of

worship” instead of “freedom of religion.” The former is largely a private activity with few if any public policy implications. As I’ve noted, religious freedom broadly understood obviously includes the right to worship, but it also includes the right to engage in the political life of the nation on the basis of religious beliefs. It is the latter that we have failed to address in our IRF policy.

A Way Forward

How, then, can these problems be addressed? There is much to say here and, for those who are interested, my colleague Dennis Hoover and I have provided detailed recommendations in a booklet entitled *The Future of US IRF Policy: Recommendations for the Obama Administration*. They include some obvious steps, such as placing the ambassador and his office directly under the Secretary of State as the IRF Act intended, and integrating IRF into policies such as civil society and democracy programming, public diplomacy, and counter terrorism strategies.

Let me focus here on one critical issue --the President's Cairo speech and his much praised strategy of engaging Muslim majority communities. It was a good speech. A significant portion was devoted to issues of human dignity and stability, namely, democracy, religious freedom, women's rights, and development. Here's what he said about religious freedom: “People should be free to choose and live their faith based upon the persuasion of the mind and the heart and the soul. ... Freedom of religion is central to the ability of peoples to live together.” In other words, the President told Muslim communities that religious liberty is central to human dignity and to social and political stability. In light of this, we are entitled to ask why his administration has so far ignored IRF policy in the Muslim world.

Is the answer that the administration does not really believe in the public value of religious freedom, including the rights of traditional religious communities to engage in the public square on the basis of their religious beliefs? Surely not. Let me quote a prominent public intellectual on this issue:

Secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square. Frederick Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, Williams Jennings Bryant, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King - indeed, the majority of great reformers in American history - were not only motivated by faith, but repeatedly used religious language to argue for their cause. So to say that men and women should not inject their "personal morality" into public policy debates is a practical absurdity. Our law is by definition a codification of morality, much of it grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

That public intellectual was Barack Obama. Members of his administration should pay attention to what the boss has to say.

Perhaps the administration has not engaged on this issue because it does not believe Islamic countries capable of achieving religious liberty. If so, this attitude is outdated and inaccurate. Let me draw your attention to a remarkable report from the Project for Middle Eastern Democracy. During an extensive series of meetings in the Middle East late last year, the authors listened to

the views of young civil society leaders, all under the age of 35, on the issues raised by the President in Cairo, including religious freedom. Listen to their answers:

Referring to the perceived US focus on Christian minorities and individual cases of persecution, the report states the following: "In our conferences, participants sharply objected to U.S. practice relating to religious freedom, but instead of calling for an end to the IRF office and its reports they argued that its mandate should be expanded to focus on a) freedom of political participation by religious persons and b) the freedom of independent religious debate and institutional life, in addition to c) the freedom of individual practice...Participants also urged American policymakers to gain a better understanding of Islam and political actors with a religious frame of reference."

So what does this tell us? Let me conclude with this thought: The report provides direct evidence that US IRF policy should be reenergized and expanded. We can help persecuted minorities far better than we have by encouraging the political institutions and habits that root religious freedom, rather than simply reacting to and reporting on cases of persecution. These young Muslim leaders are telling us that they want democracy, and, like most Americans, they want their religiously informed moral judgments to play a role in democratic discourse. We need them to hear from the United States that we will support democracy in all Muslim majority countries, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran, and that we will support the rights of Muslims to engage in political life on the basis of Islamic principles. But to achieve this and the other benefits of democracy, Muslim majority communities must embrace religious freedom for others. This means that members of their own communities must be able to interpret and even criticize their own traditions; that majorities must forswear privileged access to the civil authority and police powers of the state; and that minorities must have complete freedom of worship and equal access to the democratic public square, and the opportunity to influence law and public policy.

In short, we must help the younger generation of Muslims achieve their goals. We must convince them that their success requires religious freedom. Thank you very much.