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How important—to Muslims and to American national interests—is the emergence of religious freedom in the lands of Islam? Both history and contemporary social science suggest that it is quite important, for at least two reasons.

First, non-Muslim minorities, Muslim minority groups, and Muslim reformers are under siege in many Muslim-majority countries. The result is a humanitarian crisis of the first order: 70 percent of the world’s population lives in nations where religious freedom is severely restricted, and in most of those nations Islam is the majority faith.1 The plight of Egyptian Copts, recently under severe attack from Islamist extremists and undefended by Egyptian police, is one example.2 The political upheaval in Egypt increases Christians’ fear for their long-term security. Another example is the murderous assaults on Iraq’s ancient Christian community, and its de facto forced emigration.3 In yet another example, the only Christian cabinet member in Pakistan—Shahbaz Bhatti—was recently gunned down in his car. Moreover, not only are Christian minorities at risk, but non-Christian minorities are also under increased pressure.4

As for Muslims themselves, the Saudi Shiite minority, Iranian Bahai’s, and Pakistani Ahmadis, among other Muslim minority groups, are constantly at risk of abuse.5 The freedom of members of the majority Muslim group is also usually quite limited. Muslims who are part of their country’s dominant Islamic tradition but dare to challenge that tradition’s orthodoxy are often persecuted. In democratic Afghanistan, for instance, a Sunni journalism student who wrote that the Qur’an supported the equality of women was tried for blasphemy and sentenced to death.6 In Pakistan, the Sunni Muslim governor of the state of Punjab, a man who defended religious freedom for minorities, was murdered by one of his bodyguards for opposing the blasphemy laws of that country. The Pakistani public supports these laws and many appear to support the murderer. An influential imam in Pakistan declared that a parliamentarian seeking to amend the blasphemy laws was an infidel and, thus, worthy of killing.7

Second, the emergence of religious freedom in Muslim-majority countries is important because the absence of religious freedom, especially in highly religious societies, stands as a powerful barrier to the emergence of stable and peaceful democracy and the defeat of religious extremism. Studies show that a dearth of religious liberty is causally connected to religious violence, persecution, and terrorism.8 This puts the issue of religious liberty squarely into the realm of national and international security. The logic is simple, but compelling: even if the military threat of radicalism is curbed, nations like Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are unlikely to remain stable—and to reject extremist Islamist political theologies—unless they address the issue of religious freedom successfully. If they do not, the

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expenditure of American blood and treasure will have been in vain. Moreover, if events in Egypt move that nation toward democracy, it will be vital for all elements of Egyptian politics and society—especially the Muslim Brotherhood—to embrace the advantages, and accept the limits, of religious freedom.

Unfortunately, American policymakers have not recognized this logic, a subject to which we shall return below. To set the stage for that discussion, let us explore briefly: What might a successful regime of religious freedom look like in an Islamic democracy? There is, regrettably, no historical or contemporary model for answering this question. The two largest Muslim-majority democracies, Indonesia and Turkey, have made significant strides in advancing political and civil rights overall, but far less in advancing religious freedom.9 Certainly the structure and practice of religious liberty would vary among nations— influenced by history and culture, degrees of political maturity, and levels of civil society. For example, Indonesia’s relatively mature system of Muslim civic organizations, including the Sunni groups Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, gives it a distinct advantage over Afghanistan’s tribal society.

Nevertheless, history and human nature permit some generalizations. The first is that religious freedom is unlikely to emerge full blown anywhere in the Muslim-majority world anytime soon. In many cases, perhaps most of them, the best that can be hoped for in the near term is some form of religious tolerance. In this scenario, a government would not only outlaw massacres, torture, and unjust imprisonment, but it would actually enforce these and other laws protecting minorities. For some time this is likely to be the best case scenario in authoritarian societies such as Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Iran, and for democratic aspirants such as Egypt, where there is entrenched resistance to anything approaching religious freedom.

In theory, US foreign policy should expect more in emerging Muslim-majority democracies, where there is already some commitment in law and culture to fundamental rights, including equality under the law and religious freedom, however tenuous that commitment might be. It is in these democracies—Indonesia, Turkey, Pakistan, Iraq, and Afghanistan—that the greatest progress is possible, both because of the presence of liberal reformers and because of the mounting evidence that democracy cannot succeed without religious liberty.

Three Characteristics of Religious Freedom

Over the long run, a successful regime of religious liberty—i.e., one that helps to root democracy and denude it of religious extremism—will exhibit certain common characteristics. First, religious minorities will not only be protected from physical persecution and permitted to worship unhindered, they will also possess full equality under the law. This means, among other things, that they will have the right, should they choose to exercise it, to make their claims about religious truth in the public square, and even to invite converts.

Empowering minorities in this fashion, of course, presents an extraordinary problem for most Muslim populations. For example, the periodic persecution of Egyptian Copts—often triggered by rumors that a church is being built, or that a Coptic man seeks to marry a Muslim woman—demonstrates both the fragility of the Copts’ existence and the climate of impunity that exists for anti-Coptic abuses.10 As Egypt struggles toward democracy, Christian concerns increase in direct proportion to the Muslim Brotherhood’s proximity to power. In Egypt, as elsewhere, equality for minorities would require the official sanctioning of actions such as intermarriage or building houses of worship, but also, in effect, of blasphemy, defamation, apostasy, and conversion from Islam.

Embracing religious liberty in full will be exceedingly difficult in any Muslim society; it may prove impossible for the Muslim Brothers. But the evidence suggests that if liberal democracy is to take root in Muslim-majority nations, such perceived affronts to Islam must be met by better teaching and preaching, not by violence or by employing the police powers of the state.11 The choice is stark but clear: either you find ways to accommodate religious minorities or you cannot achieve stable democracy.
Of course, the principle at the heart of religious freedom—equality under the law for all individuals and all religious communities—cuts many ways. The second common characteristic of religious freedom would be enabling the majority’s cultural and political dominance, but within due limits. For example, Shiites in Iraq and Iran, or Sunnis in Egypt, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, would have the advantages that democratic majorities enjoy the world over. This would include the right to form democratic political parties on the basis of religion or religious identity, something that has already occurred in Turkey and Iraq, as it once occurred in Italy and West Germany.

In Europe such parties, operating under the normal pressures of democratic competition and governance, have tended to evolve away from particular religious identities or teachings. However, there is no structural or institutional reason that this evolution must take place in Muslim-majority democracies as it has in Europe. Islam-based majority parties may last much longer, provided that they are willing to accept the tradeoffs and constitutional limits that liberal democracy requires, especially the foreswearing of coercion to impose particular religious beliefs or practices, and the willingness to protect minority rights.

Beyond those limits, however, there still lie significant opportunities for a majority religious community, whether organized around political parties or as religiously inspired actors in civil society (such as in Indonesia), to shape the values, laws, and policies of its society. And, lest it be overlooked in this targeted discussion, the majority will benefit proportionately from the broad advantages a mature democracy typically yields, such as security, economic opportunity, social harmony, intellectual ferment, and the flourishing of religious life. This kind of argument should be presented to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to test its assertion that it is capable of operating as a democratic political party.

A third characteristic of religious freedom in Muslim-majority countries is intimately related to the broader characteristics of democracy: vigorous freedom of religious expression. This will include the right of minorities to make religious truth claims, and the right to engage in the political life of the nation on a basis of equality with other religious and secular institutions. However, the right of religious expression must also encompass those within the majority communities who, like the Afghan journalism student or the Governor of Punjab, wish to challenge dominant theological and political premises. If such potential reformers are deterred by the likelihood of prosecution for blasphemy, or the threat of mob violence or murder even in the absence of official prosecution, neither religious freedom nor democracy is likely to endure.  

Two critical questions emerge from this discussion: Do Muslim-majority countries have the internal resources, including their respective theological traditions, to move towards religious freedom in full? If so, should US foreign policy be more fully engaged in encouraging them to do so? The answers ought to be of considerable interest to American foreign affairs thinkers and policymakers. For the most part, however, the US foreign policy establishment has declined to advance religious freedom systematically in the Middle East or elsewhere, notwithstanding its statutory mandate to do so under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. It has rarely asked whether, or to what extent, Islam is compatible with religious freedom. It has studiously avoided grappling in any systematic way with either the humanitarian crisis or the national security dilemma implicit in the rejection of religious freedom by Islamic governments and societies. It has simply not asked, let alone answered, the key question: Should the United States advance religious freedom in full? If so, should US foreign policy be more fully engaged in encouraging them to do so?
freedom as a means of encouraging stable, anti-extremist Islamic democracies? The views feeding US reticence are varied, contradictory, and powerful. They include the beliefs that Islam’s core teachings and practices (e.g., jihad and shari‘a) render it incapable of embracing religious freedom; that the key to successful Islamic democracy, and to Islamist extremism, is not religious freedom in full, but rather modern secularism; that the Council of Europe is correct to assert “a right of citizens not to be insulted in their religious feelings;” that problems in Islamic countries have little to do with a dearth of religious freedom, and much to do with US policies; that US international religious freedom policy is illegitimate because it is imperialistic, unilateralist, and/or unconstitutional; that religion, including Islam, is not the business of diplomacy; that American diplomacy possesses neither the institutional framework nor the training to advance religious freedom abroad.

Notwithstanding their internal inconsistencies, the combined weight of these arguments has fed a kind of paralysis in US international religious freedom policy, which, on balance, has been anemic and ineffective in Muslim-majority countries. While the scruples of skeptics and critics may provide reasons for prudence, they do not justify ad hocery or timidity. The stakes are too high.

Cautious Optimism

It is beyond the scope of this essay to address in any detail the question of whether Islam or particular Muslim-majority countries have the internal resources to achieve religious freedom. I believe that they do, although it will take time, perhaps generations. As noted, in many of these countries, the most immediate and achievable goal is a form of toleration rather than full religious freedom. But this is the way history usually moves—in small, halting steps rather than in great leaps. Religious tolerance can be a half-way house to religious freedom.

That said, I believe it is a serious mistake for American policy thinkers simply to assume Islam incapable of liberal, stable democracy rooted—as it ultimately must be—in religious freedom. There are Muslim leaders who clearly understand the need to move in the right direction, such as the martyred Punjab Governor, or the man who is arguably the most important religious leader in Shiism, Iranian-born Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani of Iraq. Political theorist Al Stepan has written that, “all great religious civilizations are multivocal,” including Islam, where there is “a strong Qur’anic basis for religious tolerance.” In fact, some Muslim reformers, most of them living in the West, have provided powerful defenses of Islam’s compatibility with democracy, human rights, and religious freedom.

History provides some reasons to believe that Stepan is correct. At the outset of the democratic era, the Roman Catholic Church resisted religious freedom as antithetical to Catholic teachings. Indeed, liberty, as interpreted in late 19th century France, Italy, and Germany, was often aggressively anti-Catholic, designed to attack the Church and remove its influence from public life. It was in part the Catholic experience of religious liberty as a minority in the United States that led to the Church’s Declaration on Religious Freedom in 1965, during the Second Vatican Council. In this document, the Catholic Church declared for the first time that religious liberty adhered in every person by virtue of his existence. What it demanded in return was libertas ecclesiae, i.e., the liberty of the Church to manifest its teachings, not from the vantage point of a privileged relationship with civil authority, but on the basis of equality under the law with all other religious and secular organizations within civil society. The Declaration had an immediate and profound impact on Catholic nations worldwide, helping to drive what Samuel Huntington called “the third wave of democratization” during the next four decades. Of course, Catholicism and Islam have deep theological differences, and the development of Catholic political-theology is no guarantee that Islam is capable of similar development or that Islamic leaders will choose to move in that direction. But even so trenchant a critic of Islamist extremism as the Catholic
theologian George Weigel has acknowledged the potential fruitfulness of the Catholic–Muslim historical analogy. Noting the intellectual evolution of Catholicism’s “disentanglement of the Church from state power” by retrieving and developing its ancient teachings, he urges Islamic reformers to look back into “the philosophical resources of [the Islamic] tradition in order to … shape [the] tradition’s encounter with the economic and political institutions of modernity.”

Implications for US Diplomacy

Against this background, and recognizing at least some of the pitfalls, what might US foreign policy do to advance religious freedom in Muslim-majority contexts? To paraphrase an American pop philosopher, there are two problems here: them and us. Even if one accepts the need for religious freedom and believes it achievable, there remains the need to engage the deficiencies of American diplomacy. Before US foreign policy—and the Department of State in particular—can have a long-term impact on international religious freedom it must change three things: its way of thinking about religion, its diplomatic training, and its understanding of how international religious freedom can be integrated into policy and the bureaucracy.

Thinking About Religion

For much of the modern history of international relations, scholars have assumed the secularization theory—the idea that the accumulation of scientific knowledge and the maturation of human reason will cause religion to fade to the irrelevant margins of human existence. By the late 20th century, sociologists such as Peter Berger and Jose Casanova were challenging secularization theory, but it was the events of September 11, 2001 that unleashed a veritable barrage of scholarship acknowledging and exploring the role of religion in international affairs.

Unfortunately, despite the outpouring of scholarship since 2001, the religion-avoidance syndrome is still dominant at the Department of State. In 2006, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright wrote that, to America’s diplomats, the subject of religion “was above and beyond reason; it evoked the deepest passions; and historically, it was the cause of much bloodshed. Diplomats in my era were taught not to invite trouble, and no subject seemed more inherently treacherous than religion.”

This attitude, it should be said, is slowly beginning to shift. For example, there is currently an interagency Religion and Global Affairs working group led by the State Department, which has begun to have some influence on foreign affairs thinking. Recently the Department completed a survey of religious engagement by American officials at US embassies abroad. While the results have not been made public, the fact that the survey was done at all is a step forward. The Foreign Service Institute, where diplomats are trained, has plans to initiate voluntary training on religion and religious freedom.

All of these initiatives were pioneered by State Department officials seeking to change the way religion is addressed in American diplomacy, and they are to be applauded. But they need support if this nod in the right direction is to become a substantive policy change that yields dividends for citizens in Muslim-majority countries and for American national interests.

Training

Among all the disappointments attending the State Department’s implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), the failure to train diplomats ranks among the biggest. The law instructs the Department as follows:

The Secretary of State … shall establish as part of the standard training provided after January 1, 1999, for officers of the Service, including chiefs of mission … instruction on the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion, the nature, activities, and beliefs of different religions, and the various aspects and manifestations of violations of religious freedom.

That legal requirement has virtually been ignored. Far from integrating religious freedom into “standard training,” engagement of the issue
has been ad hoc and ineffective. Even the more targeted course about to be implemented at the Foreign Service Institute will be voluntary, and as a result is unlikely to have any sustained impact on the way Foreign Service officers (FSOs) think about religion. Indeed, its ad hoc nature delivers a message to diplomats: the issue of religious freedom is not a major priority for the State Department; it remains on the margins of the American diplomatic mission. If you happen to be one of those officers interested in this issue, you may take this training if you can find the time (which most FSOs cannot). If you find this subject distasteful, no one—certainly no one in the Department leadership—will mind.

What is needed is systematic and mandatory training, required of all officers when they come into the Foreign Service, i.e., at the outset of their careers. The State Department should also provide targeted training on religion and religious freedom geared to a given country prior to an officer’s departure for that country. In addition, every ambassador and every deputy chief of mission should be required to receive training before they take their assignments. The President’s written instructions to ambassadors should include the requirement to integrate religious freedom policy into their programs and plans. Foreign Service Officers should be offered the option of a career subspecialty in international religious freedom. American public diplomacy should be heavily involved in developing and implementing US international religious freedom policy.

Institutions and Policy Changes

If the absence of systematic training has been a disappointment, the treatment of the officials responsible for leading US policy has been a disaster. The IRFA established a very senior diplomatic official—an ambassador at large—to lead international religious freedom (IRF) policy. The position was styled “principal advisor to the President and Secretary of State” on matters of religious freedom, and was established as the head of an IRF office. Since 1998, however, the ambassador and the IRF office have been buried deep in the State Department bureaucracy. While other ambassadors at large have almost all worked directly under the Secretary of State, as is the norm for such ambassadors, the IRF ambassador has not. To date, both IRF ambassadors have worked under an assistant secretary of state, several levels removed from the Secretary.

This bureaucratic isolation of the IRF function has not been lost on US and foreign officials. They have concluded, correctly, that religious freedom is not a significant element of American foreign policy. If that policy is to have an impact on religious persecution and religious freedom in the world, the ambassador at large must be given the authority and the resources necessary to integrate the issue into US strategy, and to carry out the intent of the IRFA. If necessary, the IRFA should be amended to require these changes.

A change in policy requires only the will of the President, the Secretary, and their respective advisers. Congress has already provided a mandate for a broad and effective policy with the IRFA. The President can, and should, issue a National Security Directive which directs all foreign policy agencies to integrate the promotion of religious freedom into civil society, democracy, development, and counter-terrorism programs. Both the President and the Secretary of State must make it clear to their immediate aides, all US government officials, the Congress, the American public, foreign leaders, the United Nations and other multilateral bodies, foreign religious communities, foreign publics, and the victims of religious persecution that the United States has put religious freedom at the center of its foreign policy.

Conclusion

My experience in this area—21 years as a diplomat and almost a decade of writing about international religious freedom—leads me to three conclusions: making the necessary changes will be difficult; with the proper leadership it can be done; and the stakes are high enough to warrant the effort. When it comes to the issue of religion, American foreign policy is like a giant aircraft carrier at sea. Changing course, let alone reversing course, will require the cooperation of officials at every level, including the admiral of the fleet, the captain, officers, trainers, and,
especially, the men and women below decks who make the vessel go. Similarly, a successful policy of advancing international religious freedom will require the active support of the President and Secretary of State, the active involvement of senior officials at the State Department and elsewhere, and a well-trained diplomatic corps.

Achieving the latter is not as daunting as it may seem. American Foreign Service Officers are among the brightest and most capable people on earth. Given the right incentives, and the right set of tools in their diplomatic toolkit, they can overcome the scruples that currently restrict the effectiveness of this policy. Of course, legally required or not, none of this is likely to happen without direction and oversight from the Secretary of State and the President. And there is virtually no evidence that the current administration values religious freedom policy enough to make such changes. It has put far more emphasis on the international establishment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights than it has the advance of religious liberty, notwithstanding that the former remains a highly contested issue and the latter was once considered America’s “first freedom.” At this writing, well over two years into the Obama administration, the ambassador at large for international religious freedom has only now taken her position in the State Department.

If the United States wishes to have an impact either on the humanitarian tragedy that is emerging in the greater Middle East, on the national security threat that it represents, or both, it must learn to advance religious freedom more effectively than it has to date. It seems, however, that if the United States is to significantly affect religious freedom in Muslim-majority countries, or anywhere else, it will have to await another President, another view of American responsibilities in the world, and another understanding of American national security.

3. Cohen, “Iraq’s Displaced”
6. Ibid.
15. See my discussion of this issue as it was addressed by publications of the Rand Corporation in Farr, World of Faith and Freedom, 253–8.
18. For these arguments, see the blogs by Winifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, and Peter Danchin at The Immanent Frame, available at http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/.
19. Ibid.
25. See the special collection of articles on “Roman Catholicism and Religious Freedom Since Vatican II” in the Winter 2005 issue of The Review of Faith & International Affairs (Vol. 3, No. 3).
31. A sampling: Jelen and Wilcox, Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspective; Carlson and Owens, The Sacred and the Sovereign; Fox and Sandler, Bringing Religion into International Relations; Seiple and Hoover, Religion & Security; and Thomas, The Global Resurgence.
37. One possibility for improving US policy would be amending the International Religious Freedom Act to make more explicit what is required of the State Department concerning, for example, the training of diplomats and the placement and authority of the ambassador at large.
38. For a detailed set of policy recommendations that any President might consider, see Farr and Hoover, The Future of U.S. International Religious Freedom Policy, 2–5.

References


