Introduction

In the nearly seventy years since the end of World War II and the founding of NATO, U.S. global involvement has reached previously unseen heights. Politicians and political pundits speak ceaselessly of protecting regions vital to U.S. interests. The Cold War brought with it the desire to champion the cause of democracy and in the past thirteen years, following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the United States has embarked on a series of military operations to overthrow standing regimes and replace them with democratic governments. All of this has been done in the name of safeguarding U.S. interests, yet even as American public interest in national security has risen, disillusionment with U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan has led to a growing desire to reduce the resources and funds allocated to the U.S. defense budget. The threat of U.S. military intervention in Syria, and the growing menace posed by Putin’s actions in Ukraine, revealed both a government and a public that were widely divided over the prospect of becoming involved in another war abroad The onus has thus shifted onto the policymakers to develop policies that will achieve the necessary national security aims without the traditional use of force.
The past decade has seen a concentrated effort on the part of the United States to establish stable democracies in regions of concern to U.S. national security. To this end, the U.S. and her allies are directly responsible for the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq as well as the ousting of the Taliban government of Afghanistan. More recently, President Obama used drones to aid Libyan dissidents in the overthrow of their longtime dictator, Muammar Gaddafi. However, as stated above, there is diminishing popular support for using military means to establish top-down democracies abroad. Furthermore, incidents of insurgency and sub-state conflict in recently created democracies demonstrate that the conventional means of putting a new regime in place are not sufficient for creating lasting peace. The recent military gains of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Iraq\(^1\) have proven that even after years of war and U.S. involvement, there remains an insufficient infrastructure on which to build a sustainable peace. As foreign policy experts and military strategists debate the menu of options available, all while lamenting the original 2003 invasion, there is regrettably little discussion dedicated to addressing why it is that democracies imposed by militaries are inherently flawed. The military can provide security, as the U.S. did in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and it can even assist in putting a new government in place with a freshly created constitution and political system; however, this will never be sufficient. The problem lies in the inability of the new government to enforce the necessary cultural, not strictly political, changes that must take place for a democracy to be successful and stable. For a democracy to have these attributes, there must be a

---

strong civil society capable of providing civilians with the proper understanding of both how to live in and how to sustain their nation’s democracy.

Critical to fostering a strong civil society, which in this paper refers to that part of a state separate of both the government and the military, is the protection of certain rights which will grant civilians the ability to live freely and thus create a flourishing civil society. Political scientist, Alfred Stepan, wrote: “Democracy is a system of conflicts regulation that allows open competition over the values and goals that citizens want to advance”\(^2\) Such open competition is only possible in a nation with a vibrant civil society which protects certain rights of its citizens. Key among these rights is the right to freedom of religion. This liberty, which bestows the right to practice and profess freely the truths that guides one’s life, strikes at the very core of what it means to be free. It is a protection that can be written into any constitution and guaranteed on paper by any government. Indeed, there are a myriad of nations - Egypt comes first to mind\(^3\) - which claim to provide religious freedom in their official documents, but which remain egregious offenders against this right. True freedom of belief requires the proper nourishing, a mixture of governmental allowance and civic understanding. Those citizens who do not comprehend what constitutes religious liberty have no ability to demand it for themselves or for others. If then, religious liberty is so crucial to fostering a strong civil society and thus a stable democracy, to what extent should the U.S. reform its foreign policy to focus more on civilian education regarding religious freedom in

order to create stable governments and defend national interests? If the United States truly believes that stable governments with increased popular representation are vital for protecting U.S. interests abroad, then the first priority of policymakers should be to work towards creating an environment in the foreign nation which will lend itself to a sustainable peace. The most critical aspect of a stable democracy is a flourishing civil society, but this cannot be achieved without a civilian population that is educated of its rights; therefore, foreign civilian education regarding religious freedom should become a key focus of U.S. foreign policy.

To prove the above thesis, it will first be necessary to establish what is meant by religious freedom, both in theory and in practice. Then, the paper will explain the importance of it in a flourishing civil society for any form of sustainable stability in a newly formed government. Next, the role of religious freedom as the linchpin of a thriving civil society will be discussed in two parts. The first part will examine the link between religious intolerance and religiously driven violence in a society using the history of Syrian religious strife as a example of this relationship, and the second part will analyze how the coexistence, and even proliferation, of religious factions drives a healthy civil society, using the founding of the United States as a proven case of religious factions leading to greater stability. Finally, the paper will demonstrate the necessity of an educated civilian populace in order to establish and protect religious freedom. Once these points are established, this paper will provide analyses of U.S. involvement in both Iraq and Syria, noting policies that should have been, and still may be, put in place regarding civilian education and what the implications of these policies
would be for U.S. national security concerns. Based on these implications, the paper will conclude with recommendations for how to best implement these policies.

**Religious Freedom Defined**

In order to make the case for incorporating international religious freedom into U.S. foreign policy, and specifically as a national security priority, it is critical to define exactly what is meant by the term “religious freedom”. Religious freedom as it is described in this paper has a three-part definition. On its most basic level, it must guarantee the individual the right to practice in private according to their own beliefs. This is the most easily granted aspect of religious liberty as it only asks that individuals be allowed to subscribe to their religious beliefs in the privacy of their own homes and communities without seeking to evangelize and convert others. Essentially, all a nation must do to be in compliance with this first tier is grant an individual the right to live out their beliefs in their own living room. The second tier requires that religious communities have the right to practice in accordance with their beliefs as well as the right for individuals to exit or enter their chosen religious communities as desired. In many nations, where apostasy is illegal, this second facet of religious freedom is denied to those who wish to leave their religion. The third and most elusive protection of religious freedom calls for the right to discuss one’s beliefs in the public sphere. It is this final part of the definition which allows for proselytizing and grants individuals the right to cite their religious beliefs publicly as in the case of conscientious objection. It is necessary to note that this definition is an ideal, one that no nation has managed to achieve utterly, but one which should be aspired to if religious freedom is to improve.
The ability to hold and profess one’s beliefs is a desire innate in mankind. In his essay *Secularism in Retreat*, sociologist Peter Berger wrote: “the religious impulse, the quest for meaning that transcends the restricted space of empirical existence in this world, has been a perennial feature of humanity”. The essay was written as an analysis of the demise of secularization theory - theory that Berger himself had previously endorsed – and it addresses exactly why the proponents of secularization theory were wrong. The original secularists, dating back to the Enlightenment era, presumed that once they provided an alternative to religion’s superstitions and antiquated traditions, then people would flock gladly to their side and religious institutions would die out. They failed to account for what Berger called “the religious impulse”, that “perennial feature of humanity” which drives man to seek some truths that transcend reason and the material world. This compelling force, pushing people to discover those truths that will grant meaning to their life, plunges to the heart of the human condition. To be able to carry out that search and to practice the faith discovered without facing persecution forms the basis of what it means to live freely.

The realization that the secularists were mistaken in their premise, and that man is just as much driven by a search for meaning and a desire to practice his beliefs fully and without discrimination, points to the conclusion that we do not live in a secularized world and thus our policies cannot be wholly secular in nature. International Relations theorists and U.S. diplomats have to accept that such a driving force which compels so many billions of people cannot be written off in discussions of policy any more than

---

economic or military motives can be ignored. However, once foreign service officers and policymakers are made aware of this, how can it be, and more importantly why should it be, added to the U.S.’s arsenal of policies? The connection between religious liberty and foreign policy has been elucidated, and it is now necessary to show how adapting international religious freedom policies do not simply serve to aid those who receive these rights, but also to demonstrate how it can serve U.S. security interests abroad.

**Religious Freedom and Civil Society**

Religious freedom, as defined above, is of critical importance in building a strong civil society, which can then support a fledgling democracy. The relationship comes in two parts, both of which will be discussed in greater detail below. First, by granting and nourishing the right for civilians to live in accordance with their beliefs, the government manages to quell the threat of religiously motivated violence. Second, citizens who have the right to practice and profess their faith publicly are more engaged in their society and can help create the many organizations, schools, and communities necessary for maintaining cultural and political stability. Without religious freedom, civil society has no chance of developing, and thus the government either collapses as a result of its shaky foundation, or it begins to take over increasingly larger swathes of public life until it becomes a tyranny.

*The Relationship Between Religious Intolerance and Religious Extremism:*

Religious intolerance has the effect of breeding extremism among its victims. Those who would be considered moderates are radicalized by the constant persecution they face, especially when the persecution is endorsed by the government, a phenomena
that is clearly demonstrated in the tumultuous history of Syria. During the period of French colonization in Syria, a critical component of France’s strategy of dominance was to increase fragmentation between the various religious communities within Syria in order to achieve their economic and political goals. Threatened by the growing nationalism movement headed by the Sunni majority in the country, the French response was to increase communication with the Christian community and the minority Muslim branches of the Alawites, Druzes, and Ismailis. The increased autonomy bestowed upon these minorities kept them pacified and thus contained the nationalist sentiments within the Sunni population. Additionally, the French adopted a strategy of dividing the region into segments in order to prevent the spread of the independence movement until it was more beneficial for them.

The result of this institutionalized religious discrimination resulted in growing Sunni resentment of the Alawites, Druzes, and Ismailis, whom they already considered to be heretical in nature. Religious disdain compounded with political frustration. Twenty-four years after the independence of Syria from the French in 1946, Hafez al-Assad rose to power and established his regime as the leader of the Ba’ath party, the secular political party in Syria. An Alawite, Hafez immediately faced the hostility of the Sunnis majority within his nation, led by the Muslim Brotherhood. The religious tensions which the French had so skillfully aggravated during the decades of colonial

5 Tekdal Fildis, Ayse. "The Troubles in Syria: Spawned by French Divide and Rule." Middle East Policy Council (n.d.): n. pag. Web
rule were far from eased, and the Ba’ath party was viewed as a betrayal of Islam with its relatively more secularist views. Despite Hafez’s several attempts to create an atmosphere of at least religious tolerance, his efforts were futile in the face of a population which had been radicalized by years of government-enforced oppression. In the years following Hafez’s rise to power, riots and terrorist attacks raged across Syria. Hafez’s response was one of violent aggression as he brutally decimated each attempted rebellion. Patrick Seale wrote of the strife, epitomized in the siege of Hama: “Behind the immediate contest lay the old multi-layered hostility between Islam and the Ba’th, between Sunni and ‘Alawi...”7. The Sunnis opinion that the Alawites and other minorities were heretics was not a French creation, however the resentment and growing hostility based on state-sponsored religious intolerance galvanized already strained relations and created a mentality of extremism among the persecuted majority, leading to increased terrorism and instability.

On a more cultural level, the continuous repression and persecution of individuals based on belief creates a mentality of dehumanization. In a nation where a government refuses to grant equal rights to members of different religious communities, there can be no expectation that either group will view the other as equal or perceive their rights as worthy of protection. The religious discrimination that was rampant under French rule and pushed the Sunnis to a new level of extremism also fostered a society in which the various sects viewed each other with hostility and contempt. A nation founded on inequality based off of religious differences indoctrinates its

population to believe that those who do not subscribe to their beliefs are subhuman. The philosopher and writer, Donald Demarco, in his writings on tolerance, described a form of toleration which is grounded in “respect for truth and dignity of others”\(^8\). Conversely, if there is no tolerance, there is no respect for the dignity of others; ergo, acts of violence and terrorism are more likely to increase, often times at an exponential rate.

*Necessity of Religious Freedom for a Flourishing Civil Society*

Although undoubtedly every nation brings with it its own unique history and grievances, to understand the importance of religious freedom in stabilizing a new government in a state still recovering from war, U.S. policymakers need look no further than their own nation’s founding. Although the majority of the Founding Fathers were not particularly religious personally,\(^9\) they were keenly aware of how important religion was for a properly functioning Republic. Virtue was considered absolutely critical as a bulwark against any corruption that could destroy the new nation and put a final end to the great American experiment. Despite the deist, and even agnostic, tendencies of the Founders, many of whom had been educated during the period of the Enlightenment with its strong emphasis on human rationality, there was no doubt that religion would be the best provider of the virtuous citizens necessary to guide the young Republic. George Washington, in his Farewell Address averred:

> “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and


citizens…Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”

Consequently, they realized the necessity of providing a forum for religion in the public square. Coupled with the American aversion to an established religion, the clear answer was to encourage religion to prosper and to allow citizens to not only hold whichever beliefs they chose, but to permit them to voice those beliefs and allow religion to grow and to infuse the social mores of the citizenry.

Having established the indispensability of religion in creating a stable and moral civil society, which would support the Republic, the Founders were faced with the additional challenge of ensuring that both religion and government could flourish without one impeding upon the other. It was in this spirit that the notion of the “Separation of Church and State” was developed. However, unlike more modern interpretations, this separation was conceived, not to keep religion away from the public arena, but instead to keep it out from under the thumb of the government. Both entities would then be allowed to flourish in their separate spheres, religion forming the foundation of a virtuous population who would then establish just laws and govern the Republic properly. This concept was wholly new and untried; therefore, it naturally faced some skepticism. Among these skeptics were those in the General Assembly of Virginia in 1785. In response to their doubts that the nation would benefit by allowing freedom of religion to prosper, James Madison responded:

---

“The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature an unalienable right. It is the duty of every man to render to the Creator such homage and such only as he believes to be acceptable to him. This duty is precedent, both in order of time and in degree of obligation, to the claims of Civil Society. Before any man can be considered as a member of Civil Society, he must be considered as a subject of the Governour of the Universe”

Convinced that only by allowing the free practice of all faiths would they avoid the religiously driven wars of Europe, the colonists supported the decision to not establish a state church, and thus freedom of religion was given its place of honor as the “First Freedom” in the Constitution.

Naturally, by protecting freedom of religion within the Constitution, the Founding Fathers were well aware that factions would no doubt arise and potentially threaten the stability of the Republic. Although instability is of grave concern to any nation in its formative years, the early leaders of America recognized that factions were a necessary part of any thriving political discourse, and thus, rather than attempting to stifle disagreement through law, they sought to provide the correct forum in which to incorporate disputes. Indeed, James Madison seemed to almost welcome the prospect of such quarrels taking place in the public square. When speaking of the relationship between liberty and factions in Federalist No. 10, he wrote: “Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an aliment without which it instantly expires. But it could not be less folly to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, because it nourishes faction, than it would be to [abolish] air, which is essential to animal life, because [of] its destructive

agency.”\(^{12}\) James Madison clearly recognized that it was only through liberty, even if it meant dissension, that civil and political life could thrive, and his defense of this stance was utterly critical to the fledgling Republic. It was in this spirit that the Constitution’s Framers sought to establish religious freedom; they correctly perceived that if they were to stifle man’s freedom to practice his own faith, then in no way could civil society develop and support the political system. However, by allowing religious communities and individuals to freely interact with each other, and even disagree, they were able to encourage civic engagement and defend against the tyranny of the state. Fr. John Courtney Murray, S.J. famously defined religious freedom as “creeds intelligibly in conflict”,\(^ {13}\) and indeed this was the aim pursued by the Founders in providing religious liberty in the United States, with the objective of achieving an engaged and virtuous citizenry.

As previously stated, no one nation’s path to stable democracy will be identical to another nation’s. However, the success of the American experiment can at the very minimum provide an example for how critical religious freedom is to creating a strong civil society, which can then provide a firm foundation for a newly created government. Religious strife was hardly a new phenomenon to the early Americans, with many of them having fled religious persecution themselves. When the French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville traveled to America in the 1830s, he wrote to his


French contemporaries of the success of the new government he saw\textsuperscript{14}, and he credited much of it to the strength of the civil society in the U.S., a success which would not have been possible without the nourishing of religious freedom by the Founders.\textsuperscript{15} U.S. policymakers should not expect any state to strictly follow the pattern of the American Founding; however, there should be a clear recognition that without civil society, no new government, regardless of the nation’s history, has the ability to stand on its own, and no civil society can flourish without religious freedom.

**Civilian Participation in Religious Freedom**

In order to create a mentality of religious tolerance with the goal of religious liberty within a nation and thus to prevent the violent effects of radicalization and dehumanization, as well to build an engaged citizenry, it is necessary for the civilians of the nation in question to understand what is meant by a right to religious liberty. If a population does not comprehend the value of their rights, then they cannot combat the injustices being inflicted upon them by their government. In an article discussing policies of reconciliation, political scientist, Daniel Philpott, enumerated several methods by which governments could inflict political injustices, and reasons three through five addressed the problem of civilian ignorance regarding their rights:

“3. Victim’s ignorance of the source and circumstances of the political injustices that harmed them.
4. The failure of the community members to acknowledge victims’ suffering, either through ignorance or indifference.


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
5. The “standing victory” of the perpetrator’s political injustice. It is not only harms to the victim’s person that political injustices leave behind, but also an unchallenged defeated message that disregard for the victim’s dignity—a message that constitutes an additional harm to the victim and to the shared community”\textsuperscript{16}

The first reason cited above points to the problem presented when civilians themselves are unaware of the rights being denied to them. No nation can hope to have protection of freedom of religion if its population is ignorant of what religious freedom even means. The second reason discusses both ignorance and apathy. It touches upon the lack of education concerning religious liberty in many oppressive nations as well as the dehumanizing effect of intolerance, creating an environment of indifference regarding the defense of others’ rights. Without civilian education regarding religious freedom, there can be no hope of fostering true religious freedom in a nation where there has traditionally been government oppression and religious intolerance.

The traditional method of the United States regarding the establishment of democracies abroad has involved a top-down approach which has been devoid of the necessary component of civilian education in the subject of protection of rights, particularly religious rights. The problem inherent in the conventional approach is that it creates all the political institutions necessary for a democracy but without creating the strong civil society needed to support a democracy. A new constitution is drafted; free and fair elections may even be held in an effort to put in place a democratically elected leader. However, while the governmental hallmarks of democracy are present, the social

mentality necessary for a stable democracy and lasting peace are not present. If the United States, or any other nation, hopes to install a fledgling democracy and have it be successful, then it is not sufficient to create offices and hold elections. It must root out and destroy the ideas of political oppression and religious intolerance at their source. The key to stemming the violent extremism that flows from religious intolerance is to create a strong civil society, and a necessary component of that society is the education of civilians regarding religious freedom.

The challenge then becomes to provide this civilian education without appearing culturally imperialistic. A population trained to be intolerant and accustomed to conflict and extremism will most certainly not respond positively to a troupe of foreign diplomats swooping in and attempting to radically shift their entire societal mindset. They must instead reach out to those groups and individuals within the nation who could help them in this endeavor. These entities - authors, professors, and filmmakers among them - who already have influence within the civil sphere must be called upon to aid in the task of educating a previously repressed population on their right to practice their beliefs as they wish. A Muslim scholar and writer, Fethullah Gulen, known for his moderate views and call for tolerance on the part of all Muslims wrote: “Muslims should say: ‘in true Islam, terror does not exist’". Influential thinkers such as Gulen are precisely of the ilk policymakers should contact when attempting to foster civil societies abroad. It is intuitive that a population would be more likely to adhere to principles advocated for by their own countrymen, particularly those who subscribe to their

---

17 Gülen, M. F. Toward a Global Civilization of Love & Tolerance. 2006
religion as well. The clearly preferred way of attaining a civil society educated in their right to religious liberty must then be to approach it from a grassroots perspective, seeking those individuals, communities, and organizations within the nation who would be able to help educate others about religious liberty and thus foster a cultural shift towards a society which values tolerance, and eventually, religious liberty.

**Case Studies: Iraq and Syria**

Adapting policies to increase outreach to civilians in foreign nations in order to promote religious liberty and foster strong civil societies has clear connections to U.S. security if it is done in the name of establishing stable democracies, a stated security goal of the United States\(^\text{18}\). However, in the past decade, although the U.S. has been faced numerous times with the challenge of dealing with transitioning regimes, most notably in the Middle East, it has failed to incorporate international religious freedom policies effectively. In 2003, a full-scale U.S. invasion of Iraq toppled Saddam Hussein’s regime and put in place, at least on paper, a new democratic government. Nevertheless, ten years later, there is still widespread violence and corruption within Iraq\(^\text{19}\). In the past several months, numerous cities have fallen to radical group ISIS, and the sectarian violence in the nation has reached levels reminiscent of the bloodshed in 2006\(^\text{20}\). This is clear evidence that the established democracy was not able to fully create a lasting peace;


somewhere it fell short of achieving what was hoped for and as a result Iraq remains yet another unstable nation in a region wreaked by sub-state conflicts.

In 2011, the Arab Spring created a climate of widespread political change in the Middle East and the United States was faced once again with the possibility of aiding in the creation of stable democracies in the hope of decreasing the volatility of the region and serving U.S. national interests. When revolution reached Syria that same year, the rebellion against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad threw the nation into a civil war that has continued for over three years. Despite claims from Washington that a stable democratic government in Syria would be in the best interests of the United States, the policies regarding the conflict have been largely ineffective while the crisis continues with no hope of a resolution in the near future.21 Analyses of both of these conflicts, in Iraq and more recently in Syria, reveal the gaping hole in U.S. foreign policy, a hole created by the inability to view religion freedom as a critical component of a stable democracy.

Iraq

When the United States and her allies invaded Iraq in March of 2003, ostensibly due to the existence of weapons of mass destruction and the threat of terror, the clear goal was to remove Saddam Hussein from power and put in place a democratically elected and stable government. Within months Hussein was captured and executed, and by November 2004 the first elections were held. 22 U.S. interests in Iraq were fairly clear,

from both a national security and an economic position. As the neighbor of Iran, Iraq could serve as a major counterweight to the growing threat from Tehran if it was stable and allied with the U.S. Additionally, under the rule of Saddam Hussein, a Sunni dictator in a Shi’a majority nation, Iraq had become a hotbed of terrorist activity and growing extremism. Although there was no direct link between the regime and al-Qaeda, it was well known that Hussein sponsored numerous terrorist activities in surrounding nations.\textsuperscript{23} Economically, Iraq’s oil resources were of interest to the United States and are often claimed to be a large motivation behind the 2003 invasion. Now, in 2014, although U.S. combat forces have been withdrawn from Iraq, the security implications behind instilling a stable democracy are present, and the growing threat of ISIS has led the U.S. to redeploy several hundred military advisors.\textsuperscript{24} Rising tensions between the U.S. and Iran as well as the continuing instability in Syria and elsewhere in the region mean that the United States still has a vested interest in ensuring that the Iraqi government is capable of fostering lasting peace within its borders, a goal which seems to be slipping further and further from being realized.

The largest threat to stability within Iraq today is the rising sectarian violence between the Shia majority and the Sunni minority, a conflict that has escalated exponentially in the wake of the military successes of ISIS. The Sunnis received preferential treatment under the regime of the Sunni dictator Saddam Hussein while the Shi’a majority population suffered dramatic religious intolerance. However, After the

overthrow of Saddam, the majority of the Sunni elite was ejected from power by the U.S. led coalition and were replaced by Shia officials who had no intention of forgetting their past tribulations under the Sunni regime. This old rivalry, coupled with new power in combination with the rising resentment of the Sunnis, who already viewed the Shiites to be heretical.25 Worried by the growing violence, the UN has pressured the Iraqi government to put pressure on the Sunni extremists and attempt to stem the bloodshed.26 Unfortunately, without major shifts in the cultural undercurrent of religious discrimination enhanced by political rivalries, there is small chance that the violence will decrease and Iraq will continue to be rife with hostility, often with fatal results. The cycle of religious intolerance and persecution has done nothing but feed the fervor of ISIS and increase their recruiting power, to which the Shi’a response has been to answer in kind to the violence, hoping to discourage Sunnis from joining the Islamic State’s forces.27

In the case of Iraq, the failure of the U.S. to establish a stable democracy lies in the flawed and secularized approach that was taken to address a nation torn apart by religious differences. In his essay on U.S. foreign policy in Iraq, its shortcomings, and the need for reconciliation, Daniel Philpott describes the usual paradigm of policies that are adopted by those nations wishing to install “liberal democracies upon other nations”28.
Philpott addresses the seven tenets that comprise this paradigm, the majority of which focus on punitive measures, namely the ousting of the offensive regime and the punishment of violators. The rest of the tenets highlight the importance of establishing democratic institutions such as representative assemblies and ratifying new constitutions. The inherent problem of this methodology is that it blatantly ignores social tensions, which are only aggravated by inflicted penalties. In the case of Iraq, the punitive measures carried out by the coalition against the formerly powerful Sunnis only led to more hostility and created an even deeper divide between the two factions.

The secularism that dominates U.S. foreign relations blinded policymakers to the seeds of discontent sown by their top-down efforts to impose a democracy without considering the religious undercurrents of Iraqi society. This secularism, driven by decades of caution regarding bringing religion into discussions of policy, is to blame for the utter disregard for religious freedom demonstrated by those wishing to instill stable democracy abroad.

The inability of policy makers to incorporate religious freedom into the constitution and institutions of the newly created democracy in Iraq has had devastating effects. According to the 2012 International Religious Freedom Report on Iraq put out by the U.S. State Department, the Iraqi constitution claims to guarantee freedom from religious coercion, while simultaneously stating: “no law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam.”

2012
responsible for establishing democracy in Iraq failed to understand is that a government which claims to protect religious freedom, but also states that all laws must be in accordance with Islam, allows for civil prosecution for religious misdemeanors and can in no way provide citizens with the right of religious freedom. Given that the majority of Iraqis in the government are Shiites who have deep religious differences with the minority Sunnis population, it is intuitive to see how religious intolerances can quickly become instances of legal prosecution. As discussed previously, such intolerance breeds extremism within the disadvantaged group, in this instance the Sunnis, adding to the terrorism and violence which has continued to splinter Iraqi society, even after the establishment of the new government.

In hindsight, what could the U.S. have done differently in having religion play a larger role in fostering a civil society that would have created a democracy given the demographics within the Iraqi population after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein? The mechanics of democracy - the elections, constitution, and governmental representation - were all provided, and civil leaders were engaged to a degree, but these were insufficient. What was necessary was for those responsible for installing the new government, namely the U.S. and her allies, to engage religious communities in discussion. Civilians needed to be educated on the protection of their right to practice their beliefs freely and on the necessity of having a government who defended that right in all aspects of the law. Had there been an emphasis on civilian education in matters of religious freedom, in conjunction with the other measures taken, perhaps the constitution would have been phrased differently and the legal system structured in
ways that would not provide prosecution for religious differences. As it was, this aspect of civil society was ignored and policymakers expected a thriving civil society to emerge without providing any form of reconciliation and established tolerance to treat the divisive religious issues that had been tearing the nation apart for decades.

As of 2011, U.S. military involvement on a mass scale in Iraq has ended, but the nation’s stability remains a security priority for the United States given its oil reserves, its proximity to Iran, and the growing violence brought by ISIS. Therefore, the focus of policymakers must now shift to how the U.S. can work with the new Iraqi government to improve conditions of religious freedom within Iraq and thus strengthen the civil society and stabilize the government, which currently is faced with the threat of civil war brought on by rising sectarian violence. Because the U.S. no longer has the direct access to the government that it had during the years of occupation, it is even more logical that it reaches out to the civilian population. Foreign Service Officers must work not just with government officials, but also with those authors, professors, and popular figures who could educate and influence the population on the importance of the protection of religious freedom. Dr. Thomas Farr, the former Director of the Office of International Religious Freedom at the State Department, wrote in 2008:

“Amid all the strategies adopted by the United States to undermine Islamist terrorism and to encourage stable liberal governments in the Muslim world, we have thus far failed to credit a critical objective: the religious rationale for violence must be turned on its head. Mainstream Muslims who reject violence and coercion not in spite of Islam, but because of it, must move to the fore”

---

The failure to establish stable democracy in Iraq can serve to point out to policymakers in the U.S. that in a region marked by sectarian violence, simply omitting religion from policy discussions will not aid in creating a strong civil society with the capability of sustaining a lasting peace.

**Syria**

The current crisis in Syria has provided the U.S. with another opportunity to have a hand in shaping a nation’s new government, without already having troops on the ground as in Iraq. U.S. interests in establishing a new, democratic regime in Syria have much to do with maintaining influence in the Middle East. The Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad has close ties with Russia, China, and Iran. China and Russia have strong economic ties to Syria and both are determined to keep the United States from gaining another foothold in the region. Iran’s motives are more ideological in nature, as it sees the Assad regime as an ally in the fight between Sunnis and Shiites. Additionally, Assad has traditionally been allied with Iran in their position against Israel. These allegiances have provided the U.S. with great incentive to see Assad’s regime ousted and replaced with a government more agreeable towards U.S. interests. Furthermore, the more unstable and oppressive a regime is, the more likely it is to breed pockets of extremism and violence which lends itself to terrorism, as proven by the operations undertaken by ISIS in the region. Therefore, the stabilization of Syria with a new, democratic regime has direct links to the United States interest in increasing its sphere of influence in the Middle East as well as its priority of reducing terrorist threats.
Sectarian violence in Syria, which rose in large part due to the policies adopted by the French during their colonial rule favoring the minority Muslim sects, has escalated in recent years in response to the brutality of President Assad’s regime. Assad, who is an Alawite Muslim, an offshoot of Shi’ism, and thus viewed as an infidel by the more orthodox Sunnis, strongly favors the Shia community in Syria. According to reports by the U.S. State Department, the minority Muslim population, including the Alawites, comprises about 13% of Syrians while Sunnis account for 74%. In retaliation for the brutality of Assad’s government, the Sunnis have responded by increasing their attacks on the minority communities within Syria. In turn, the government has inflicted even more crackdowns on the Sunnis. These attacks are allowed by their constitution, which claims to protect religious freedom but allows for government intervention and prosecution in the case of extremists causing public disorder. As it is left to the judgment of the government to determine what constitutes “extremism” and what incidents can be termed as “public disorder”, there is in reality minimal protection of religious liberty within Syria, and violence bred by intolerance and systematic persecution occurs regularly, increasing hostility and fragmenting the population further.

The U.S. response to the crisis in Syria has been limited to providing resources and arms to the rebels of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) – a primarily Sunni-rebel group. Unfortunately, the brutal oppression of Assad’s regime has had the effect of further radicalizing the rebels who may have once been considered moderate. ISIS has taken full

---

32 Ibid, 18
advantage of this radicalization and has gone to great lengths to ally with Syrian rebels
who can help them in their quest to establish a caliphate.\textsuperscript{33} At this critical juncture, it is
necessary that policymakers recall and learn from the failures of Iraq. In a 2013 interview
with the Council on Foreign Relations, Daniel Philpott said: "(The violence in Iraq) is
because of the failure of American foreign policymakers to understand religion...You
could see something like that with Syria. I would encourage American foreign
policymakers to be aware and remember religion matters"\textsuperscript{34}. Arming and supplying the
rebels, or simply encouraging diplomatic negotiations between the rebels and Assad is
not sufficient. Given Assad’s past use of brutality, most recently displayed in his usage
of chemical weapons, in response to challenges to his authoritarian rule, it is unlikely
that he can be persuaded to entertain a transition to democratic government. Therefore,
the only hope the U.S. has of seeing a stable democracy in Syria is to hope that Assad is
defeated and that his replacement is not an extremist Muslim regime. Victory for the
FSA is unlikely as they are currently fragmented by religious differences and have
become more radical, forcing many of their western supporters to reduce or totally
withdraw aid. Faced with an authoritarian regime and an even more extremist rebel
army, the best option for the U.S. is to reach into the civilian population, including those
who have fled to surrounding nations.

\textsuperscript{33} Yan, Holly, and Samira Said. "Floodgates Open as ISIS Bridges Victories between Syria and

\textsuperscript{34} Philpott, Daniel, PhD. "The Role of Religion in Post-Conflict Syria." Interview by Zachary
In dealings with the FSA, U.S. Foreign Service Officers must find ways of showing and persuading the rebels that if they continue with their radical and divisive methods then they will not be able to accrue enough support to defeat Assad. Therefore, it is in their own best interest to adopt policies of tolerance, which will hopefully lead to a higher possibility of religious freedom being institutionalized should they achieve victory. Simultaneously, U.S. diplomats need to increase their education of the Syrian civilians regarding religious liberty, using members of the native population such as professors and religious leaders, even those who have fled the war. If civilians can be taught what constitutes religious liberty, and how it will benefit their society, as well as how a government spreading religious intolerance often translates into violence and bloodshed, then they will be more likely to demand it from those who wish to govern. The FSA needs support both from abroad and domestically in order to win the revolution, but the international community is understandably dubious of aiding an organization with proven links to such terrorist organizations as ISIS. Therefore, by taking this two-pronged approach in convincing the Free Syrian Army that they need to be more tolerant as well as educating civilians on the necessity of their right to religious freedom, the United States has an opportunity to help in shaping a new regime which will place a higher priority on religious freedom, creating a stronger civil society which will lead to a more stable democracy.

Conclusion

The two case studies analyzed above demonstrate how the United States can incorporate religious liberty, specifically through the education of civilians abroad, in
order to help establish stable democracies and thus to more efficiently achieve national security goals. It would be foolish to presume that such policies on their own could accomplish these aims, but it would be more foolish to attempt once again to solve sub-state conflicts with deep religious undertones and sectarian violence solely through secular means and policies. In order to make international religious freedom policy a viable option in policy discussions, it is critical that policymakers lose their deep fear surrounding the discussion of religion. In 2006, former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, wrote: “(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”\textsuperscript{35}. That mentality, which has resulted in the absence of religious discussion in the policies enacted in Iraq and thus far in Syria, must be eradicated from the State Department and its diplomats if international religious freedom policy is to be taken seriously and utilized in establishing stable democracies abroad.

Once religion is no longer a forbidden word in policy discussions, it will be necessary to educate Foreign Service Officers properly concerning religious issues abroad and how to implement religious freedom policies correctly. Currently, the International Religious Freedom Act, passed in 1998, stipulates that the State Department offer a training course for all Foreign Service Officers,\textsuperscript{36} but the course is not mandatory for FSOs and thus is sparsely attended. Making this course a higher priority


in training for the Foreign Service will enable FSOs to become conversant in the role of religion in sub-state conflicts. Properly trained, these diplomats can then go about reaching out to the individuals and organizations who can help with civilian education abroad concerning religious freedom. Additionally they can meet with religious leaders in nations of concern who may be of assistance in encouraging pushes for religious freedom within their communities.

When U.S. policymakers have properly invested in the process of civilian education, civil societies will grow strong enough to support fledgling governments, and the instability wrought by regime change and religious intolerance will decrease over time. More importantly, by focusing on a more organic rather than top-down approach, the strain on U.S. resources, both in military and in foreign aid, will decrease dramatically. As politicians in Washington, DC seek to reduce military spending while not compromising national security, it will be increasingly vital for policymakers to find new and sustainable methods of carrying out the United States’ national security strategy. Improving policies regarding civilian education on religious freedom will give troubled regions the tools needed to foster a stronger civil society and thus stabilize governments that could otherwise pose large security threats to the U.S. and her allies. More importantly, this stabilization can occur without increasing U.S. military presence abroad. International Religious Freedom policy is not intended to be used singularly in national security strategies, but if civilians abroad are not taught to fight for religious freedom in their government and civil societies are not granted the opportunity to flourish, free of religious intolerance, then no democracy has the chance of achieving
stability and lasting peace, no matter how many resources are poured into establishing the new regime.
Bibliography


Gülen, M. F. Toward a Global Civilization of Love & Tolerance. 2006


