SPECIAL REPORT

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Advancing Global Peace and Security through Religious Engagement: Lessons to Improve US Policy

By Peter Mandaville and Chris Seiple

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken speaks at a meeting with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople on October 25, 2021. (Photo by Patrick Semansky/Reuters)

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Summary

- Over the past two decades and across multiple agencies, the US government has sought to enhance the capacity of the country's diplomatic, development, and defense efforts to engage with religion and religious actors in order to advance foreign policy and national security priorities related to peacebuilding.
- Although a bipartisan consensus exists about the value of religious engagement, more conversation and clarity are needed regarding the interrelated definitions and concepts of religious engagement, religious freedom, and religious literacy.
- All three hold significant relevance for peacebuilding: religious actors play a central role in maintaining stability and social cohesion in societies around the world; deficits in religious freedom can serve as a major driver of conflict; and peacebuilding professionals cannot fully understand either of these without religious literacy.
- To enhance its capacity for religious engagement, the US government must decide which issue areas are most amenable to religious engagement; where within the State Department a religious engagement unit should be located; how to improve training for diplomats and defense and development officials; and how to promote the complementary but distinct goals of religious engagement and religious freedom.

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RELIGION

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report sketches the recent history of religious engagement by the US government and offers suggestions for better institutionalizing engagement efforts. The authors draw on their extensive firsthand experience with such efforts and their participation in ongoing debates within the policymaking and academic communities. The report was funded through an interagency agreement between USIP and the Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships at the US Agency for International Development.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace. An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our website (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

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Pictured here at a news conference with then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on June 10, 2020, Sam Brownback served as ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom from 2018 to 2021 during the Trump administration. (Photo by Andrew Harnik/AP)

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, alternating Democratic and Republican administrations have sought to more intentionally engage religious actors worldwide in support of various diplomatic, development, and defense initiatives. Although American diplomats had certainly found strategic value in religion earlier—for example, as a useful counterpoint to global communism during the Cold War—the turn of the millennium brought an unprecedented institutionalization of religious awareness across the US government. In 2001, the George W. Bush administration created a unit within the White House to help faith-based initiatives to be launched. Similar offices were subsequently established at several cabinet agencies, including, in 2002, one at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) focused on religious engagement (which continues to operate in its current form as the USAID Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships).

In October 2011, the Obama administration convened a Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group at the State Department. The group's October 2012 recommendations contributed to the establishment of the Office of Religion and Global Affairs at the State Department in August 2013, in conjunction with the adoption of the US Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement.[1] In October 2020, the Trump administration convened an Evidence Summit on Strategic Religious Engagement at USAID.[2] Together, USAID's Faith-Based Center and the State Department's religious engagement office—which currently takes the form of a

FIGURE 1.

Religious engagement offices in the US Department of State and USAID

strategic religious engagement unit within the Office of International Religious Freedom—constitute the two main mechanisms for engaging religious actors in US diplomacy and development. (See figure 1 above.)

Collectively, these various initiatives taken over the past twenty years under three very different presidents suggest that no matter which political party is in power in Washington, DC, the idea of engaging religion to advance the interests and values of the United States is here to stay. The question is not whether the US government should engage religious actors (it has done so since the early days of the republic), but how to do this work shrewdly, sensitively, and strategically.[3] This report seeks to provide some answers to that question by first describing in general terms the notion of strategic religious engagement abroad, and then offering specific suggestions for steps the US government can take, including addressing deficiencies in religious literacy, clarifying the nature of and priorities for the religious engagement mission, and better institutionalizing the coordination of religious engagement in relation to other peacebuilding and national security priorities.

This analysis and these recommendations are informed by the authors' respective journeys over multiple decades as scholars, practitioners, and policymakers working at the intersection of religion and foreign policy. Both have closely observed and advised government—most notably with Mandaville having served directly in the State Department's religious engagement office

(2015–16) and Seiple having co-chaired the State Department's Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group (2011–13) and served as a senior adviser to USAID's 2020 Strategic Religious Engagement Summit. They played key roles in shaping and institutionalizing approaches to religious engagement in policymaking and nongovernmental spaces alike.

Religious Engagement and Religious Literacy

Religious engagement can be a significant component of the US government's overall engagement with a foreign state and its society, but it is always one among multiple components. As such, religious engagement is subject to the same considerations that should be involved in any type of engagement. Most practitioners would agree, for example, that any kind of engagement requires an examination of the parties' motivations and interests—including their values, beliefs (including religious beliefs), and behaviors. Engagement takes place along a spectrum that runs from tactical transactional exchange to the strategic trust building that characterizes the most sustainable peacebuilding work. As Admiral William H. McRaven famously remarked in 2012, "You can't surge trust." Straightforward, quid pro quo exchange may seem natural to personnel pursuing diplomatic, development, or defense agendas. This exchange, however, can be seen as "instrumentalization" by religious actors (most of whom are well aware of the value of tactical transactions), a perception that can often become more acute in the complex, post-conflict settings in which so much US peacebuilding work occurs today. For instance, efforts by governments to work with religious actors in order to gain access to specific local populations in conflict zones may lead religious leaders and organizations to feel that they are being used or exploited in ways that jeopardize their relationships of trust with those same communities. How, then, to best provide contextual knowledge and skills that can facilitate such engagement, including awareness of the assumptions American officials bring to such interactions and how they are likely to be perceived and received by religious actors?[4]

One broad and constructive approach to understanding religious engagement is presented by Gregorio Bettiza in his 2019 book, *Finding Faith in Foreign Policy: Religion and American Diplomacy in a Postsecular World*. This work provides the first comprehensive overview of the State Department's and USAID's engagement of religious actors over the past two decades.[5] Bettiza defines religious engagement as the "capacity to understand the role of religion in world politics and, based on such understanding, to engage and mobilize religious actors and voices in the pursuit of American values and interests globally."[6] More specifically, he describes a sense that religious engagement "should be built into American diplomacy to understand and mobilize religious actors and dynamics to advance the nation's security interests, humanitarian concerns, and liberal values abroad."[7]

Predicated on the idea that religious engagement capacity is constrained by relatively low levels of knowledge regarding religion and religious dynamics among government personnel, the call for "religious literacy" has been heard with increasing frequency in religion and diplomacy

Outreach by government authorities is frequently ad hoc, episodic, and . . . characterized by a repetitive, *Groundhog Day*–like quality. . . . Amid this churn, however, local faith communities generally remain stable.

circles in recent years.[8] Religious literacy exists along the same spectrum of general engagement: in its most immediate sense, religious literacy is a tool for understanding religious actors better in initial interactions and negotiations, but like any relationship that matures, mutual trust may develop as the parties gain a greater understanding and appreciation for the interests behind the original negotiating positions.[9] In this context, some scholars and practitioners regard religious literacy as a theory of change that states that if both parties work together, developing and implementing shared goals and thereby building trust, then the outcomes are more likely to be sustainable.[10] How then should we think about both of these concepts—religious engagement and religious literacy—within the context of contemporary US foreign policy?

The issue of religious literacy not only leads to discussions about appropriate training and professional education models but also raises a series of questions—ones addressed in the following sections of this report—whose answers highlight fundamental challenges surrounding the effective operationalization of religious engagement in US foreign policy. Although it is important to determine how best to integrate knowledge about religion and religious engagement in training for foreign affairs professionals, there is not just one kind of religious literacy, and if religious engagement is to be *strategic* (i.e., if it is to advance US strategic interests), it is essential to ask which kind of literacy will allow specific peacebuilding issues and challenges to be addressed most effectively. Closely related to this latter question, and similarly informed by religious literacy, is the question of what kinds of institutional arrangements (e.g., organizational charts, bureaucratic configurations) will enable the tool of religious engagement to yield the greatest utility for American diplomacy, development, and defense.

There are also questions of intragovernmental coordination to address, similar to the questions found in the conclusion of a 2014 report issued by the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California on religious literacy during US domestic emergencies. That report not only highlights a lack of awareness and understanding of religious literacy and explains why it is needed, but also foregrounds a fundamental reality of engagement whether at home or abroad: outreach by government authorities is frequently ad hoc, episodic, and, given frequent changes in the personnel and portfolios of government agencies and offices, characterized by a repetitive, *Groundhog Day*–like quality of appearing to start from scratch every two or three years. Amid this churn, however, local faith communities generally remain stable. As the 2014 report characterizes the problem:

> The deficit in religious literacy and competency is further complicated when one understands how many government agencies attempt to engage faith communities on a broad spectrum of issues. When one includes fire, police, EMS, local emergency management and public health emergency response, public works, housing, and other city, county, state and federal agencies, the result is that dozens of agencies in any given jurisdiction are attempting to partner with the same faith community groups. This overwhelms the capacity of faith communities and contributes to burnout, confusion, and erodes trust, thus amplifying the impact of the lack of religious literacy and competency.[11]

Based on the authors' experience, these comments could also serve as a general summary of the US government's religious engagement overseas. In any given US mission around the world there may be State Department, USAID, and Department of Defense personnel all trying to engage local religious actors with little to no coordination or communication between them. There has been no strategic cohesion in religious literacy training in the US government because there has been no systematic discussion of, let alone a policy that defines, religious literacy and its relationship to religious engagement. Given this lack of consideration of key issues, how can the government create greater coordination and integration of its religious engagement efforts across agencies in ways that advance strategic priorities? How also can it ensure the complementarity of religious engagement work with existing lines of religion-related effort in US peacebuilding, such as the promotion of international religious freedom?

Based on their more than two decades of experience thinking about and working in the religion and foreign policy space, including as practitioners and policymakers, the authors believe the evolution of religious engagement will depend on how those in charge of such efforts address five sets of questions that go to the heart of the challenges involved in integrating greater awareness of religion into US global engagement. This section addresses each of those sets of questions in turn, first teasing out the issues involved and then presenting a recommendation for measures to improve and better institutionalize religious engagement efforts.

The relative newness of the State Department's work on religious engagement, the uncertainty surrounding its institutionalization, and the fact that both authors have advised or worked on this issue at the State Department leads to a focus primarily on US diplomatic structures, rather than broader interagency policy architecture, in what follows.

Appropriate Policy Breadth for Religious Engagement

While religion as an analytic factor is undoubtedly relevant across the full range of foreign affairs concerns, is religious engagement as a diplomatic tool equally applicable to all foreign policy issues or only to some? USAID's 2020 Evidence Summit on Strategic Religious Engagement demonstrated the clear relevance of religious engagement to the humanitarian and development dimensions of peacebuilding. Although it is certainly possible to make the case that almost any issue that bears on stability and sustainable peace—from climate change to public health, poverty reduction, refugee resettlement, weapons proliferation, and corruption—has a potential religious engagement angle to it, is it actually the case that incorporating awareness of religion adds value equally across *all* issues? In practical terms, is there not perhaps a narrower set of issues where incorporating religious engagement clearly helps advance US diplomatic, development, and defense goals? Is there anything that research can tell us about which issues and challenges benefit most from religious engagement—about which are the issue areas where religious engagement yields the greatest "added value" for building peace? When Mandaville worked in the State Department's Office of Religion and Global Affairs (now the Strategic Religious Engagement Unit in the Office of International Religious

Freedom), it quickly became apparent that while the office frequently claimed that religious engagement is potentially relevant to almost every aspect of US diplomacy, in practice there was a more limited range of issues—namely, efforts to tackle corruption, mediate conflict, and combat violent extremism—where religious engagement seemed to gain the most traction.

More difficult to discern, however, is whether the Office of Religion and Global Affairs enjoyed relatively greater success on these particular issues because they are inherently more amenable to religious engagement approaches or whether it was due to a serendipitous (but highly contingent) confluence of personnel (expertise, country partners) and policy priorities. This is not just a point about the importance of avoiding hubris; rather, it potentially has important implications for how to answer questions about where to place religious engagement responsibilities within agency organizational charts and how to prioritize resources connected to religious engagement. In other words, the US government needs better metrics and evaluation to gauge religious engagement and, therefore, the impact that results from it. So, to put the operative question another way, what are the attributes of religious actors that make them particularly insightful and influential with respect to certain issues that are also of concern to the US government in its peacebuilding efforts?

Recommendation: Building on broad proposals from USAID's 2020 Evidence Summit on Strategic Religious Engagement, the State Department and USAID should develop frameworks for systematically assessing the impact and added value of religious engagement on relevant policy and programming workstreams across the diplomatic and development missions. Steps in this direction could include conducting a mixture of randomized control trials (where a religious engagement dimension is added to some programs but not others), as well as identifying tangible metrics—including qualitative indicators—for assessing the contributions of religious engagement to policy and programmatic outcomes. When coupled with existing experiential data, such indicators can help to identify which policy priorities benefit most from religious engagement and where limited resources (in terms of both time and money) are best spent.

Organizational Structure and Coordination

Who should serve as the overall lead on US government religious engagement in foreign affairs? More specifically, where best within the State Department should a religious engagement unit be located? In the years immediately following the adoption of the 2013 US Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement, the White House National Security Council convened an interagency policy committee on this issue, but it tended to serve more as a clearinghouse for reporting individual agency accomplishments to the White House than as a hub for active policy coordination. There was also a short-lived effort to organize and implement coordinated, interagency religious engagement strategies in several pilot countries. Arguably, these efforts were mounted prematurely, before the value of religious engagement had been sufficiently socialized across relevant agencies and, especially, within the relevant US diplomatic, development, and defense missions and initiatives abroad.

As administrator of the United States Agency for International Development, Samantha Power, shown here at a Congressional hearing on March 23, 2021, oversees one of the key offices for US engagement with international religious actors. (Photo by Greg Nash/AP)

Recommendation: The White House should revive the previous interagency policy committee on engaging religious leaders to serve as a consistent and more enduring coordinating structure for interagency religious engagement efforts—but give it a narrower focus than its earlier incarnation, focusing on policy issues where religious engagement already has a track record of success and, initially, on peacebuilding settings where those issues are already a priority for multiple US agencies. Given the increasing frequency of interplay between domestic and external aspects of US policy and national interest, it will also be useful for officials responsible for religious engagement in agencies whose missions primarily face the rest of the world to be able to coordinate regularly with their counterparts in domestic-facing agencies.[12] The interagency Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group established in 2018 as a non–White House mechanism for informal communication and information- and experience-sharing between agencies has proven valuable and should continue to be part of the broader policy ecosystem around these issues. This combined approach would position religious engagement as a tool to advance existing policy strategies in priority settings, while creating test cases that could inform a revisitation of the August 2013 national strategy for religious engagement.

At the level of individual agencies, USAID, the Department of Defense, and the Department of State face different challenges. After two decades of work, USAID's faith-based center arguably enjoys a higher level of institutionalization than the religious engagement unit at the State Department. The center has previously reported to the USAID administrator, but in its current incarnation as the Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships it has been designated as one component of the Local, Faith, and Transformative Partnerships Hub within the new Bureau for Development, Democracy, and Innovation (DDI). Although this new status holds the promise of potentially mainstreaming religious engagement as one among several cross-cutting technical functions at USAID, the DDI Bureau was a late product of the previous administration and its role within the broader agency is still in the process of being clarified.

In the Department of Defense, military chaplains have a clearly defined role vis-à-vis the free exercise of religion, including ministering to the spiritual and psychosocial needs of US troops at

home and abroad. Because they are unarmed and do not collect intelligence, chaplains can often seem more approachable to religious communities than their war-fighting colleagues. However, in recent years—particularly in the contexts of Afghanistan and Iraq—chaplains have found themselves called on to serve as (literally) forward-deployed religious engagement specialists with local communities and leadership structures. Although some of these efforts are closely tied to the peacebuilding mission at hand, such work can cross into the diplomacy and development lanes. Mechanisms for fostering greater cross-fertilization of agency missions and cultures between the State Department, USAID, and the Department of Defense in the religious engagement space are needed, as is enhanced training in public-facing religious engagement for chaplains serving in the uniformed services. At the same time, consideration should be given to whether and how re-tasking uniformed chaplains as liaisons to local religious communities could detract from or come into tension with the spiritual care mission they originally signed up for.

The question of where to position religious engagement within the State Department is particularly challenging.[13] Although the original Office of Religion and Global Affairs appeared to enjoy a privileged status implied by its location on the rarefied seventh floor of the Harry S. Truman Building as a direct part of the secretary of state's office, this status simultaneously presented a significant obstacle to the longer-term institutionalization of the religious engagement function within the department. Despite being led by officials carrying titles such as "special representative" and "special envoy," such specialized, often niche, offices frequently find themselves struggling to attract attention, resources, and buy-in from the core State Department bureaucracy such as the regional bureaus and country desks. Under the Trump administration, the Office of Religion and Global Affairs was reduced in size, reconstituted as a Strategic Religious Engagement (SRE) unit, and moved into the Office of International Religious Freedom (which was mandated by Congress in 1998, not by any particular administration).

Recommendation: The Biden administration should consider building up the religious engagement unit and relocating the office elsewhere on the State Department organizational chart. Doing so would allow it to establish more direct, regular, and organic connections with relevant policy functions and to become better integrated into the day-to-day rhythm of the policy process. Several of the issues relevant to peacebuilding where religious engagement has been most successful in forging constructive partnerships—namely, governance and anti-corruption, conflict stabilization, and refugees—reside within the Undersecretariat of Civilian Security and Global Affairs (known internally as the "J" cone). Housing religious engagement as a unit within this undersecretary's front office would give it a clearer functional "docking point" within the bureaucracy as well as greater proximity to a family of bureaus and offices—such as Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor; Population, Refugees, and Migration; Conflict and Stabilization Operations; and, of course, International Religious Freedom—with which it has enjoyed close and productive collaborations.

The religious engagement office should be headed by a senior career diplomat (or at least someone with significant previous government experience), preferably someone with a reputation as a no-nonsense, pragmatic problem solver. Focusing on career leadership would solve two problems. First, given that issues relating to religion and public life can often be a political lightning rod in US domestic politics, it would avoid the perception—certain to surround any political

Although the original Office of Religion and Global Affairs appeared to enjoy a privileged status . . . as a direct part of the secretary of state's office, this status simultaneously presented a significant obstacle to the longer-term institutionalization of the religious engagement function.

appointee in the position—that the religious engagement office is willing to engage only with religious actors aligned with the tastes and preferences of the prevailing administration. Having a career diplomat running the show would help to emphasize the idea that the office's approach is first and foremost pragmatic insofar as its criteria for engagement are driven by the question of which interlocutor or partner is most appropriate for addressing the issue at hand. Second, having as its champion someone already well trusted by the bureaucracy would enable the religious engagement office to overcome some of the skepticism within the State Department about whether the religious engagement function actually adds value to the diplomatic mission. Although the ranks of a reconstituted religious engagement team probably do not need to swell to the thirty-plus staffers once found in the Office of Religion and Global Affairs—indeed, arguably more could be accomplished with a leaner team, strategically configured—the potential for the religious engagement office to advance US diplomatic objectives merits at least a doubling of the current size of the SRE staff.

Training and Professional Capacity Building

The limited time and resources available for training and professional development activities given the many demands of diplomatic life means that the organizers of training programs in religious engagement have to make hard decisions about which concepts, issues, and skills to include and which to omit. Since 2011, the Foreign Service Institute has regularly offered a weeklong elective course, "Religion and Foreign Policy," which has served both as an introduction to the relevance of religion in diplomacy and as training for those tasked with writing the annual reports on international religious freedom required by the International Religious Freedom Act. The course has evolved considerably over the past decade and continues to enjoy strong enrollment, but it also continues to suffer from a lack of pedagogical focus and ongoing tension between training diplomats to engage religious actors and training diplomats to monitor and report on religious freedom violations.

Recommendation: Suggestions on this question are less focused on the inclusion of specific content and more concerned with the structure and format of religious engagement training. The existing FSI course on religion and foreign policy should be divided into two sections. One section would provide a basic overview of religion's global relevance and major trends in world religion. The other section would itself be divided into two streams: one stream would include students taking the class because writing international religious freedom reports will be an aspect of their new postings and who would thus spend more time studying the International Religious Freedom Act; the second stream would consist of students seeking to integrate religious engagement into their new diplomatic or peacebuilding assignments and who would thus explore those aspects of religious literacy that involve practical skills for engaging religious actors. It is also advisable

to find space for at least a minimal introduction to religion in other courses and programs at the Foreign Service Institute, in particular the so-called A-100 training undertaken by all newly minted Foreign Service Officers, as well as the professional development programs focused on mid- and senior-level career officers (including briefings for outgoing chiefs of mission). Junior diplomatic officers are likely to feel more confident and empowered to engage routinely with religious actors if their leaders are also able to recognize the strategic value of such work. Finally, there is value in the development of interagency training opportunities (involving the State Department, USAID, and the Department of Defense, among other agencies) around religious engagement that would allow for the cross-fertilization of different agency cultures and experiences.

Religious Engagement and Promoting Religious Freedom

Religious engagement is distinct from but complementary to the work of the Office of International Religious Freedom, the State Department unit created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. That office operates with a knowledge base and skill set tailored to its dual mission of understanding the nature and significance of global violations of religious freedom and of advancing religious freedom as an internationally recognized human right and as an American value whose promotion serves US interests. The Office of International Religious Freedom can most efficiently and effectively advance its agenda when it is able to dedicate maximum attention and resources to its specific mission. In recognition of this, a group of experts convened by Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy (a group in which both authors participated) in 2018 stressed the importance of having a separate State Department capacity to engage religion in connection with the broader diplomatic agenda—including, for example, tools to engage religious actors on topics such as reducing corruption, preventing election violence, and tackling human trafficking. Religious engagement work, in turn, helps to reinforce the mission of the Office of International Religious Freedom: with greater capacity to engage with religious actors in multiple fora, US diplomats can enjoy more opportunities and have more resources to advocate for religious freedom as a component of peacebuilding.[14]

Of course, opportunities to advance US foreign policy goals through religious engagement exist in places where religious freedom is not a salient issue and priority. But in the many countries where the promotion of religious freedom is a US priority, the goals of religious engagement and religious freedom are often complementary. The US government can advance religious freedom most effectively when it has cultivated broad and deep partnerships with a diverse range of religious actors on multiple issues. At the same time, it can promote religious engagement most effectively when it is robustly advocating for the rights of religious actors and freedoms.

Recommendation: The State Department's religious engagement office and the Office of International Religious Freedom should be organizationally distinct but closely aligned. Two separate offices, but located close to one another, would contribute more to advancing US foreign policy than a single office. Ideally, the religious engagement office would inform and support a

wide range of relevant bureaus and offices as well as US embassies—alongside regular and sustained collaboration with the Office of International Religious Freedom, which could be enhanced through greater physical proximity within the State Department headquarters building. Such an approach would also recognize the fact that religious engagement is a relevant tool in many parts of the world where issues of religious freedom are not a focus of US diplomatic engagement.

Working with Civil Society

The above recommendations have been focused on the US government, especially the State Department. Even if implemented, however, they will have little impact without an institutionalized manner of receiving input *from* religious actors and others—individual and institutions—in civil society, who have significant (and often superior) knowledge and experience. Therefore, there is a pressing need to create a standing advisory committee (under the Federal Advisory Committee Act) on religious engagement (as was done with the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group at the State Department in 2011–13). Made up of scholars, experts, and practitioners in religious engagement and religious freedom, the committee could provide advice to the State Department, and across the interagency, on a more regular and transparent basis, while also becoming a de facto brain trust of experts, educators, and trainers available to teach in religious literacy training programs in Washington, DC, and around the world and to provide advice, as requested, to ambassadors, mission directors, and commanders through appropriate channels.

Conclusion

Successive US administrations of diverse partisan character have now affirmed the need for American diplomats, specialists in development assistance, and national security officials to incorporate awareness of religion and to engage strategically with religious actors as an integral aspect of their work. Over the past two decades, the foreign affairs apparatus of the US government has made significant strides toward the realization of this priority through the creation of new offices, training platforms, and diplomatic partnerships. Religion and religious actors are a consistent presence across most conflict and peacebuilding contexts in which the United States is engaged today.

While the common tendency among many observers of global affairs to view religion as a source (or "driver") of conflict undoubtedly persists, it is increasingly clear that achieving sustainable peace and stability in most settings depends on the ability to involve religious actors—and the diverse roles they play across the many issues and sectors that constitute peacebuilding—in that process. The ability to fully realize the potential of religious engagement to advance US policy priorities—to take this work to the next level—will be a function, in part, of how the questions above are answered. This report has offered some initial responses as well as a variety of ideas for concrete steps to advance the United States' ability to use religious engagement effectively. Doubtless, other experts and practitioners will have alternative perspectives. What is crucial is that the conversation continue and find reflection in the tangible maturation of policy and practice.

Notes

1. See “A White Paper of the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group of the Secretary of State’s Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society,” October 16, 2012, www.globalengage.org/_assets/docs/1300_Religion__Foreign_Policy_Working_Group_Submitted_WP_16Oct2012.pdf; and the archived overview of the key elements of the “U.S. Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement,” https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/rga/strategy/index.htm.
2. United States Agency for International Development (USAID), “2020 Evidence Summit on Strategic Religious Engagement,” April 28, 2021, www.usaid.gov/faith-and-opportunity-initiatives/2020-evidence-summit-strategic-religious-engagement.
3. In August 1790, for instance, President George Washington warmly addressed the Jewish community in Rhode Island in a move designed to underscore the fledgling country’s commitment to religious freedom and, we suspect, to bolster support for the Bill of Rights then being debated in the legislatures of Massachusetts and Connecticut.
4. Of course, there are some who see such engagement as being in tension with, or even violating, the Establishment Clause of the US Constitution’s First Amendment, which prohibits the government from establishing an official religion or favoring one religion over another. We certainly respect those opinions, but we also hold that such views have long been discussed and that there is bipartisan and legal consensus that there is no inherent constitutional impediment to religious engagement. Properly conceived and executed, religious engagement can be undertaken in ways that advance a secular purpose without advancing or inhibiting religion while also avoiding excessive entanglement of government and religion—the conventional standard for assessing compliance with the Establishment Clause.
5. See Gregorio Bettiza, *Finding Faith in Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). For a discussion of the Office of International Religious Freedom, see pages 1–2 and 55–96; regarding USAID, 97–136; regarding the Office of Religion and Global Affairs, 1–2 and 174–206. For a critique of Bettiza’s book, see Chris Seiple’s review in *Religion & Politics* 13, no. 3 (September 2020): 671–677.
6. Bettiza, *Finding Faith in Foreign Policy*, 174.
7. Bettiza, *Finding Faith in Foreign Policy*, 1.
8. Diane Moore of Harvard Divinity School defines religious literacy as “the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world’s religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.” Diane Moore, “Religious Literacy Project: Our Method,” Harvard Divinity School, 2015, https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/files/hds-rlp/files/rlp_method_2015.pdf.
9. For a deeper discussion of the relationship between “positions” and “interests,” see Roger Fischer and William Ury’s classic study, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In* (New York: Penguin, 1981).
10. For example, see Chris Seiple and Dennis R. Hoover, “A Case for Cross-Cultural Literacy,” *Review of Faith & International Affairs* 19, no. 1 (2021): 1–13.
11. *Working with U.S. Faith Communities during Crises, Disasters, and Public Health Emergencies: A Field Guide for Engagement, Partnerships & Religious Competency* (Center for Religion and Civic Culture, University of Southern California and the National Disaster Interfaiths Network, 2014), 18, www.n-din.org/ndin_resources/FGS/FieldGuide-HighRes.pdf. In October 2020, the Center for Religion and Civic Culture released an app for religious literacy in support of first responders. See RNS Press Release Services, “New App Equips Disaster Responders to Better Help Religious Americans,” October 27, 2020, www.religionnews.com/2020/10/27/new-app-equips-disaster-responders-to-better-help-religious-americans.
12. Offices for faith-based engagement exist at a wide range of domestic agencies, including the US Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Education, Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, and Labor.
13. Our thinking here represents a refinement and update to ideas that first appeared in Peter Mandaville, “The Future of Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy under Trump,” Brookings Institution, March 7, 2017, www.brookings.edu/research/the-future-of-religion-and-u-s-foreign-policy-under-trump.
14. The Experts Working Group on Engaging Religious Actors and Promoting Religious Freedom in U.S. Diplomacy published its conclusions in “Engaging Religious Actors and Promoting Religious Freedom in U.S. Diplomacy: Statement and Recommendations,” Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, Georgetown University, July 2018, https://isd-georgetown-university.myshopify.com/products/engaging-religious-actors-and-promoting-religious-freedom-in-u-s-diplomacy-statement-and-recommendations.

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