

SPECIAL REPORT

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Maintaining International Religious Freedom as a Central Tenet of US National Security

By *Knox Thames and Peter Mandaville*



A Rohingya Muslim man prays in one of the few undamaged mosques in Ngan Chaung in northern Rakhine State, Myanmar, on May 29, 2019. (Photo by Adam Dean/New York Times)

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Summary

- The international dimensions of religious freedom work often concern matters of physical safety, life, and death for targeted groups and are therefore different in nature from most US domestic debates about religious freedom.
- The promotion of international religious freedom will find the greatest support when grounded in core, broadly shared US priorities relating to national security, while reflecting American values and history.
- Given the shared nature of the challenges they face, proponents of religious freedom should explore opportunities to work in partnership with diverse groups at risk around the world, including, for example, with ethnic minority groups and LGBTQI+ communities.
- As the United States works to support democracy around the world, religious freedom—a core component of liberal democracy—should be an integral part of that effort.
- In efforts to protect and promote religious freedom abroad, the United States should employ the full set of available policy tools—including sanctions—to promote human rights, the rule of law, and political pluralism.
- In addition to taking action when countries challenge religious freedoms, the United States should actively seek opportunities to work with civil society in promoting tolerance, mutual respect, and peace.



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RELIGION

ABOUT THE REPORT

In 2021–22, the Religion and Inclusive Societies Program at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) convened a Working Group on US International Religious Freedom Promotion to Advance Peace and Stability. This report summarizes the group’s discussions and proposes recommendations, formulated by the working group’s co-chairs, for promoting international religious freedom as a key component of American national security and peacebuilding.

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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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Muslim women pray as a relic believed to come from Islam's Prophet Muhammad is displayed at the Hazratbal shrine in Srinagar, in India-administered Kashmir, on March 12, 2021. (Photo by Dar Yasin/AP)

Introduction

In 2021–22, the United States Institute of Peace convened a Working Group on US International Religious Freedom Promotion to Advance Peace and Stability.¹ Co-chaired by this report's authors, its purpose was to discuss concrete actions to ensure international religious freedom (IRF) remains a central pillar of US foreign policy and national security—and a key aspiration of the American public—in an environment characterized by new challenges to bipartisanship, some of which risk lessening US commitment to this core value.

Although members of the working group represented a wide range of views and perspectives, all members shared a deep concern that attacks on religious freedom and the rise of authoritarianism and extremism around the world are undermining the right of individuals to pursue truth as their conscience leads. They also shared a deep concern that repression of individuals based on religion or belief, persecution of belief groups, and the targeting of religious minorities are major drivers of instability, intercommunal conflict, violence, and in some cases mass atrocities. Examples abound, such as the treatment of Muslims in India, Rohingya in Myanmar, Uyghurs in China, Yazidis in Iraq, and Christians in Pakistan, all of whom are subject to forms of discrimination and violence that impact broader prospects for democracy, peace, and stability.

Over several months, the working group, consisting of advocates, academics, and former officials from across the political spectrum, discussed the need to sustain IRF as a central pillar of US foreign and peacebuilding policy and the best ways to do so. Discussions focused on several

Once the United States became independent, the importance that the founders gave protecting domestic religious freedom was evident through the First Amendment to the US Constitution. America's leadership also embraced tolerance and religious freedom.

key areas, including (1) analyzing the factors most likely to worsen political polarization around international religious freedom and impact its promotion beyond America's borders, (2) identifying strategies for strengthening bipartisan approaches to international religious freedom in US foreign policy and building bipartisan consensus around promoting international religious freedom as one of the best ways to advance peace and stability worldwide, and (3) clarifying the relationship between international religious freedom and other components of the human rights and religious engagement agendas.

This report provides an overview of the working group's deliberations and presents the co-chairs' recommendations with the goal of fostering nonpartisan partnerships to promote global peace and stability by embracing international religious freedom as a central pillar of US global engagement.

Background on US Commitment to International Religious Freedom

Religious freedom has been part of the American story since before the republic's founding. Many of the first European settlers came to North America fleeing religious oppression and finding space to practice their beliefs. Once the United States became independent, the importance that the founders gave protecting domestic religious freedom was evident through the First Amendment to the US Constitution. America's leadership also embraced tolerance and religious freedom. President George Washington in 1790 famously wrote to a Jewish congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, that "the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support."²

Though religious freedom is a cherished right at home, domestic tensions existed even before the nation's founding. In the 1630s, the authorities of the Massachusetts Bay Colony banished Baptist minister Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, a pioneering figure in feminist theology and practice, because of their religious views. Williams later founded Rhode Island as a place for religious tolerance and freedom on principles that, in Williams's words, were "naturall, humane and civil."³ Even after ratification of the First Amendment in 1791, several states retained established religions, and the religious provisions of the First Amendment were not applied to the states until the 1940s (although some adopted provisions consistent with the establishment clause well before this date). In the ensuing decades, American religious freedom debates increasingly found their way to the US Supreme Court.

While several communities of European heritage settling in America were able to enjoy greater religious liberty, other groups have had very different experiences. Many enslaved Africans brought to North America were cut off entirely from previous religious beliefs and practices, and their ability to practice their faith was heavily circumscribed. Native American populations,

for whom religious identity and practice are often intrinsically tied to the lands they inhabit, experienced widespread violations of religious freedom as the federal government appropriated more and more territory. With these failures and differing interpretations of the right of religious freedom at home, these issues have been actively debated and discussed throughout US history in an effort to live up to America's unique founding ideals.

Although the United States had recognized religious freedom as part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, it was not until 1998 that it articulated a distinctive diplomatic commitment to promote and protect this right overseas. The International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) emerged with bipartisan support after contentious and complicated legislative debates between the House and Senate. During the drafting of IRFA, there was concern that the new act might create a hierarchy of rights, with religious freedom more important than others. While early versions emphasized Christian persecution, the final text focused on the universal human right of religious freedom. After the bill was signed by President Bill Clinton, the new law committed the United States to advocate for religious freedom for all, as established by international standards such as Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

IRFA was an early precursor to, and became a model for, subsequent congressional efforts that established other specialized initiatives to advance a range of human rights through US diplomatic action, including efforts to stop trafficking in persons and to combat anti-Semitism. In particular, IRFA declared unequivocally, "It shall be the policy of the United States" to "condemn violations" and to have an "unwavering commitment" to religious freedom.

The US government was tasked with implementing the most effective response to "the range of violations of religious freedom by a variety of persecuting regimes." To do so, the US government was to be "vigorous and flexible," finding ways to "promote, and to assist other governments in the promotion of, the fundamental right to freedom of religion" through the channeling of "United States security and development assistance."⁴

Most important, IRFA declared that the United States would use all the levers of statecraft, including "diplomatic, political, commercial, charitable, educational, and cultural channels, to promote respect for religious freedom by all governments and peoples." In this effort, the legislation proclaimed that America would be "standing for liberty and standing with the persecuted."⁵

To meet these ambitious goals, IRFA did several things. First, it created a high-ranking position—an ambassador at large for international religious freedom—with the responsibility of serving as the point person for all US diplomacy relating to religious freedom.⁶ The ambassador was responsible for leading the newly created Office of International Religious Freedom within the State Department.⁷ In addition, it mandated a special annual report on international religious freedom conditions, separate from the preexisting human rights report, which would document abuses and improvements worldwide.⁸

IRFA created a special designation for the worst violators of religious freedom. Under IRFA, the State Department is required to conduct an annual review of religious freedom conditions worldwide to help determine whether a state should be designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC). For such a designation to occur, a government must have "engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom." The act created a high bar for this designation, defining *particularly severe violations* as "systematic, ongoing, and egregious."⁹

A number of issues have started to impact more than two decades of bipartisan consensus on [international religious freedom]. These include diverging understandings of religion and freedom, and differing views on how to promote IRF.

Countries on this list may be subjected to sanctions (referred to as presidential actions). To date, of the ten countries currently designated as CPCs, five have been granted waivers. The other five had preexisting sanctions based on other concerns; in these instances, the United States has taken no specific action on account of religious persecution.¹⁰ Eritrea is the only country that (briefly) has had a specific religious freedom–related sanction levied under IRFA.

Lastly, to ensure that the US government upholds Congress’s intent and to help devise effective strategies to promote religious freedom, IRFA created the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). USCIRF is an independent US government advisory body, separate from the State Department, led by nine volunteer commissioners appointed by the president and leaders of Congress. A professional staff supports the commissioners, and the ambassador at large is an ex officio, non-voting member of USCIRF. Similar to the State Department, USCIRF monitors religious freedom worldwide and produces an annual report. Instead of reporting on every country, however, USCIRF focuses on the worst situations and issues nonbinding recommendations for US policy.¹¹

In 2016, Congress passed the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act to close legislative gaps and update some IRFA provisions.¹² The Wolf Act mandated that the ambassador at large report directly to the secretary of state and obligated international religious freedom training for all Foreign Service Officers. It also created a new Special Watch List as a second tier to the existing CPC designation list and a new “entity of particular concern” designation for nonstate actors occupying territory and engaging in severe violations of religious freedom.

Around that time, other initiatives related to religion were also launched, although these had a more expansive focus than the specific issue of religious freedom. For example, following several years of effort by various State Department officials and at the recommendation of the secretary of state’s 2011–2013 Working Group on Religion and Foreign Policy (as part of a broader federal advisory group), the Obama administration established the Office of Religion and Global Affairs (RGA) at the State Department in 2013. This was part of a larger interagency effort led by the National Security Council to develop a national strategy for engaging faith communities and religious leaders to advance US foreign policy and national security priorities. The RGA office engaged religious actors on issues broader than human rights, while educating various offices within the State Department about how religious issues and communities were both a source of and solution to foreign policy challenges the US faces. The Trump administration continued RGA’s mission by folding it into the Office of International Religious Freedom and rebranding it as Strategic Religious Engagement.

The Trump administration also launched a multilateral effort to promote international religious freedom. In 2018 and 2019, the administration hosted an annual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, which brought together over 100 governments and more than 1,000 members of civil society and religious communities. Other nations pledged to host subsequent ministerial meetings—Poland in 2020 and the United Kingdom in 2022, and Brazil pledged for 2023. In addition, the Trump administration initiated the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, currently comprising more than 40 countries committed to advancing freedom of religion or belief as defined by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Perspectives on Current Challenges and Opportunities

Working group discussions covered a wide range of topics at the intersection of religious freedom and US foreign policy, but three in particular stood out as recurring themes: the risks posed by US domestic political polarization to the bipartisan consensus on international religious freedom, the relationship between religious freedom and the broader international human rights agenda, and ensuring solid engagement on international religious freedom by all US administrations.

CONSENSUS AROUND INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

A number of issues have started to impact more than two decades of bipartisan consensus on IRF. These include diverging understandings of religion and freedom, and differing views on how to promote IRF—either as a foundational freedom deserving of unique attention or embedded within a set of mutually reinforcing universal freedoms.

During working group discussions, some members viewed the language of religious freedom as a tool that has historically been used to limit the advancement of minority and women’s rights, and most recently LGBTQI+ communities in particular. Others were concerned that failure to engage on IRF issues is driven by animosity toward conservative groups, especially those that proselytize or hold traditional views toward marriage. Both ideas emanate, in part, from domestic debates about the proper balance between civil rights and religious freedom claims. The working group viewed these manifestations of contested domestic politics and values as limiting the potential for bipartisan collaboration, risking a widening gap between policy and implementation, and ultimately hindering the long-term effectiveness of US efforts abroad.

Members worried that polarization and lack of transparency impacted the political environment around IRF. There was a shared concern that mutual misunderstanding, bias entrenchment, and politically grounded suspicions could combine to undermine collaboration between IRF actors and slow the expansion of a diverse and robust network of allies pursuing effective IRF policy.

Members readily acknowledged that despite these worrying trends, IRF work continues to be performed with integrity on both sides of the aisle, as well as by core government agencies. For over 20 years, civil servants have been advancing IRF work, advocating for religious freedom for all and speaking up when individuals have faced persecution for their faith or nonbelief. Many members felt that day-to-day policy formulation, policy implementation, and annual IRF reporting have had impact.

Members of the working group also highlighted the emergence of new nonpartisan and multifaith advocacy initiatives including the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief; the UK All Parties Parliamentary Group on International Religious Freedom or Belief; the Washington, DC–based International Religious Freedom Roundtable and its affiliate roundtables; the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief; and the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. While encouraging, several of these groups face similar challenges related to mutual misunderstanding and bias entrenchment.

The working group members broadly agreed that focusing on global persecution—including the international contexts of religious repression and large-scale violence—is the best way to advance international religious freedom in the current environment.

IRF AND HUMAN RIGHTS

In the face of ongoing challenges to international religious freedom, working group discussions reflected on two approaches for bolstering bipartisan support for the international religious freedom agenda: (1) emphasize the centrality of IRF work to US national interests, particularly around national security and peacebuilding; and (2) promote a values-based approach that addresses religious freedom from the perspective of the inherent dignity of the individual, an approach that is situated, but not buried, within the broad context of human rights.

The first approach is based on the recognition that the United States benefits from a world of liberal democracies committed to religious freedom, human rights, the rule of law, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. The centrality of the universal right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief (including nonbelief) is foundational to liberal democracies and promotes tolerant societies at peace with themselves and their neighbors.

The commitment to promote the rights of all populations potentially at risk because of their beliefs or practices aligns IRF work with bipartisan and core American values. This approach encourages the expansion of a network of IRF allies and international partners willing to collaborate and coordinate efforts with the US government.

The second approach is based on the recognition that the US commitment to a global human rights agenda, advanced through American power and influence, is possibly the most effective way to respond to deteriorating respect for democratic norms and the rise of authoritarian governments that are actively undermining the international institutions and standards developed after World War II to protect fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom. This approach is not without risks. It requires sensitivity in countries with different viewpoints and finding the right balance of advocating for specific human rights while not forcing an agenda offensive to the religious sensibilities of majorities.

Members of the working group stressed the importance of fostering new alliances among rights-respecting nations to address the deteriorating human rights environment. While a diverse coalition of nations with different religious, political, and regional orientations would be powerful, members recognized that achieving a common approach among partners would be made more difficult if some view the United States as promoting a hierarchy of human rights with religious freedom at its pinnacle or as decentering the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the defining framework for US human rights commitments. Conversely, other partners may hesitate to sign on if religious freedom is subsumed into a larger human rights agenda. Some working group members also pointed to possible differences over whether religious freedom should be defended as an individual right or used to defend groups of persecuted ethnic and religious minorities. One solution could be combining both perspectives, which could help mobilize new support and ensure bipartisan—as well as *nonpartisan*—support in the future.

Members frankly acknowledged differing views on how best to advocate for religious freedom. Some working group members argued that aligning IRF policy with a holistic and balanced human rights platform is the best way to shield it from partisanship, avoiding the perception of a hierarchy



Christians attend Easter services in Our Lady of Fatima Church in Islamabad, Pakistan, on April 17, 2022. (Photo by Rahmat Gul/AP)

of rights. Others stressed the need to avoid disproportionate or inaccurate focus on the religious aspects of particular communities, especially in highly complex environments where violence and conflict are linked simultaneously to religion, race, ethnicity, economics, and social class (e.g., treatment of the Rohingya in Myanmar and violence in Nigeria) and require a holistic policy response.

In contrast, a number of members worried that placing IRF within a human rights agenda risks IRF being subsumed under or within a broader array of issues. Such an approach risks lessening impact and priority and taking the focus off the need to develop targeted policies that address root causes particular to religious freedom. Making IRF part of a broad agenda may also risk IRF becoming an “orphaned right” rather than drawing attention to its unique nature, and risks ignoring or downplaying persecution on account of belief or practice. Some members saw a risk in removing the focus from religious freedom itself, as the issue could become a lesser priority championed only selectively. Members acknowledged that many institutions and priorities are established in law and not easily changed. Political opportunities for advancing IRF are shaped by these realities, which have the potential to be either positive or constraining or both.

Whether IRF is placed within the broader human rights agenda or not, many members saw opportunities for it to advance other human rights–based issues. For instance, feminists can use

religious freedom to enhance women’s rights by empowering women to determine what their faith teaches about their role in society. Religious freedom, properly understood, allows members of the LGBTQI+ community to form faith groups and meet for collective worship; and it allows religious denominations and organizations supportive of LGBTQI+ and women’s rights to nurture these values within their communities and advocate for them within their broader societies.

A number of members pointed out that a holistic human rights approach protects religious minorities, as it de-emphasizes religion and ensures the rights of all individuals as equal citizens, regardless of faith or creed. One of the central components of religious freedom is the fundamental principle that no one’s rights as a citizen should ever depend on religious identity, beliefs, or peaceful practices. This formulation has the advantage of opening new advocacy avenues by linking religious freedom to other human rights while not diminishing its unique importance.

ENGAGING THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

The Biden administration is continuing many of the approaches adopted by previous administrations. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has highlighted in speeches the importance of IRF and singled out countries, including India, Iran, Nigeria, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, among others, for violating the principles of religious freedom. At the same time, the administration has positioned IRF within a universal human rights agenda, arguing that the right to religious freedom is one component of an integrated rights approach.

Members also acknowledged the importance of the role played by the ambassador at large, currently Rashad Hussain, the first Muslim American to hold the position. This includes engagement between the ambassador at large and key stakeholders, particularly the secretary of state—engagement that amplifies and raises the profile of IRF rather than absorbs and lowers it. Related to this is the reorganization that placed Strategic Religious Engagement in the IRF office, and the question of whether religious engagement should be made functionally independent of the IRF office while preserving the capacity of the office for sustained human rights advocacy and collaboration.

Toward Common Ground: Recommendations for a Nonpartisan Approach

Throughout their deliberations, members of the working group agreed on the need for a dynamic IRF framework that aligns with a human rights agenda grounded in trust, credibility, and American values and interests, with appeal across the domestic political spectrum. Members agreed that when IRF is perceived as accepted and prioritized at home, its importance is enhanced in the eyes of US allies and other international partners, which can foster a more substantial multilateral commitment to the issue across US administrations. Members also recognized that when advocates stress the holistic nature of the right to religious freedom for everyone, with freedom of conscience at its core, civil society becomes a critical and influential partner in advocating for freedom of religion or belief.

Religious freedom represents a core value for coalescing bipartisan concerns about China; and because it is a core value, it has the potential to unite national security and peacebuilding sectors.

The following recommendations for policymakers and practitioners come from report authors and working group co-chairs Mandaville and Thames, and are based on insights and contributions offered by working group members over the course of their discussions. Despite differences among participants regarding the best approach to IRF in light of the political and policy complexities outlined above, the co-

chairs' recommendations benefited from the ideas working group members advanced to address the challenges facing effective and bipartisan promotion of IRF in US foreign policy.

Recognize key differences between domestic debates and repression abroad and assert IRF as a core American value and central pillar of US foreign and security policy. Although debates about religious freedom stir strong views and passions at home, policymakers, activists, and academics have a role in showing that when these violations take place abroad, they are usually much more severe and frequently involve violent conflict, mass atrocities, and even genocide. In doing so, there is no intention of downplaying the importance of domestic controversies over religious freedom—these are significant and a matter for the American public and elected representatives to debate and resolve. The intention is to deepen the shared commitment to promote international religious freedom as a central pillar of US values-based foreign and security policies.

Ground and explain IRF in relation to broadly shared, cross-partisan policy priorities connected to advancing peace, stability, and national security. The more IRF advocates demonstrate the ways that promoting religious freedom contributes to stability and security, including in areas of strategic significance for the United States, the broader the base of support for IRF becomes, helping to transcend partisan differences. For instance, religious freedom represents a core value for coalescing bipartisan concerns about China; and because it is a core value, it has the potential to unite national security and peacebuilding sectors and build new constituencies and champions in favor of IRF.

Explore the common challenges and needs of diverse at-risk communities to enable broader cooperation across advocacy agendas. Authoritarian regimes commonly seek to exacerbate differences between groups as a tactic for maintaining control and reducing freedom. People and communities persecuted for their religious beliefs, marginalized ethnic minorities, women, and victims of discrimination against LGBTQI+ communities often find themselves experiencing a similar plight and shared threats to their basic human dignity. Efforts to foster connections between groups subject to different forms of discrimination in conflict and peacebuilding settings and to facilitate coalitions of the vulnerable are powerful ways of confronting and undermining authoritarianism and helping to ensure that gains for one group help other victimized communities.

Use IRF policy tools to strengthen democracies across the globe committed to human rights, the rule of law, and political pluralism. The Country of Particular Concern and Special Watch List designations give the State Department the ability to highlight persecution and motivate governments to change abusive policies. IRF progress in Sudan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam would not have been possible without the CPC designation, yet US administrations rarely use the sanctions function, leaving one of the most powerful IRF policy tools on the sideline. A first



Men stand in line to enter a temple in Lalish, the holiest site of the Yazidi religion, in Shekhan District, Nineveh Province, Iraq, on January 13, 2017. (Photo by Alice Martins/AP)

step in assessing the impact of this tool would be annually reevaluating the effectiveness of waivers and double-hatted sanctions by the State Department before extending them for another year.

Balance the use of sanctions with community-level efforts to cultivate mutual respect and pluralism. While naming and shaming countries can be valuable, initiatives that foster religious freedom through civil society are key to sustaining religious freedom. Programs that cultivate tolerance, mutual respect, pluralism, and peace, and that counter and address long-term dynamics that promote fear of “the other,” including education programs in K–12 schools, are often the most successful and should receive more funding than they currently do.

Integrate the work of the IRF office—and the position of the ambassador at large—with the core functions of the State Department, particularly those bureaus and offices whose missions overlap with IRF. This includes inviting the ambassador at large to key meetings of the secretary and assistant secretaries of state and involving IRF officials in partnerships with other human rights ambassadors and policymakers, creating a stronger voice for IRF in discussions of related issues. As part of ensuring that IRF remains a central pillar of national foreign and security policy, it makes sense to arrange meetings with national security officials of other

nations when the ambassador at large and IRF staff are travelling to those countries, and to regularize meetings in Washington between the IRF office and US national security officials.

Continue strategic religious engagement as a core function with its own office. Maintaining and strengthening the capacity of State Department personnel to engage and understand religious dynamics in their assigned countries or regions in order to advance US government priorities effectively is a key priority. Reestablishing a stand-alone Office of Strategic Religious Engagement, outside the IRF office and situated under the Undersecretariat for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, would elevate the issue and place it on par with the IRF office, allowing for coordination.

Continue to support the religious freedom ministerial meetings and the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. Ministerial meetings remain invaluable and unique forums to advocate for freedom of religion or belief. Secretary-level participation at these meetings is ideal, as it projects American leadership and ensures these events focus on religious freedom for all, not just a particular group. With more than 40 members representing different regions, political systems, and religious demographics, the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance is a particularly promising forum for international engagement and collaboration, including emphasizing the relationship between religious freedom and global peace and stability.

Make a concerted effort to model bipartisanship within the relatively small community of IRF officials, advocates, and practitioners. To meet the challenge of 21st-century persecution, a diverse coalition is needed, one that spans the political spectrum and involves members of all belief communities. Appointments across the aisle and showcasing the religious freedom achievements of colleagues from the other party are important and enduring demonstrations of shared American values. Faith and belief communities who advocate for religious freedom for all, speaking up even when nonmembers (or members who believe or practice differently) face persecution, builds lasting trust and cooperation, and shields the right to religious freedom from efforts to diminish or undermine it as a core American value.

Conclusion

Millions of people across the globe suffer violent persecution for pursuing truth as their conscience leads or belonging to a particular community, resulting in instability, conflict, and worse. The United States is uniquely positioned to meet this challenge, reflecting American values and interests as it leads through direct and multilateral action. The stakes are enormous. Challenges to international religious freedom outside US borders are often matters of life and death.

The promotion and protection of religious freedom has been a major aspect of American diplomatic engagement and peacebuilding for generations and should remain so, even as the United States faces major challenges on a multitude of issues. IRF will only remain a central pillar of US foreign and security policy if it receives bipartisan support. Allowing differences to threaten the IRF agenda serves only to strengthen its adversaries and the forces of authoritarianism, and to diminish the United States' historic and transformative commitment to values-based global leadership.

Notes

1. The working group members were Peter Mandaville (co-chair), senior visiting expert, United States Institute of Peace; Knox Thames (co-chair), senior visiting expert, United States Institute of Peace; Tiffany Barrans, global advocacy director, Open Doors International; Judd Birdsall, senior research fellow, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University; Sam Brownback, former US ambassador at large for international religious freedom; Cole Durham, director emeritus, International Center for Law and Religion Studies, Brigham Young University; Mohamed Elsanousi, executive director, Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers; Susan Hayward, associate director, Religious Literacy and the Professions Initiative, Harvard Divinity School; Kirsten Evans, former director, Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives, United States Agency for International Development; Simran Jeet Singh, executive director, Religion and Society Program, Aspen Institute; Douglas Johnston, president emeritus, International Center for Religion and Diplomacy; Katrina Lantos Swett, former commissioner, US Commission on International Religious Freedom and co-chair, International Religious Freedom Summit; David Little, research fellow, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University; Katherine Marshall, executive director, Word Faiths Development Dialogue; Eric Patterson, executive vice president, Religion Freedom Institute; Zeenat Rahman, executive director, Institute of Politics, University of Chicago; David Saperstein, former US ambassador at large for international religious freedom; Chris Seiple, president emeritus, Institute for Global Engagement; Arsalan Suleman, former acting US special envoy to the Organization for Islamic Cooperation; Asma Uddin, visiting assistant professor, Columbus School of Law, Catholic University of America; and Corey D. B. Walker, Wake Forest Professor of the Humanities, Wake Forest University.

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