

# Diplomacy in an Age of Faith

## Religious Freedom and National Security

*Thomas F. Farr*

THE UNITED STATES is a religious nation, but neither scholars of U.S. foreign policy nor its practitioners have taken religion very seriously. From the inception of international relations as a discrete discipline, its approach has been defined by the seventeenth-century Westphalian subordination of religion to the state. Consequently, as the international relations scholar Daniel Philpott has observed, most in the field have simply “assumed the absence of religion among the factors that influence states.”

But the world today is, as the sociologist Peter Berger puts it, “as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.” Berger was one of the first scholars to challenge “secularization theory,” which holds that religion will wither as modernity advances. In fact, over the past several decades, the opposite has happened. Faith, far from exiting the world’s stage, has played a growing role in human affairs, even as modernization has proceeded apace. Iran’s Shiite revolution in 1979, the Catholic Church’s role in the “third wave” of democratization, the 9/11 attacks—all illustrated just how important a global force religion has become. For the most part, however, analysts and policymakers have remained

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either ignorant or baffled. Scholars are now scrambling to reexamine the question of faith in international affairs—its “return from exile,” as one study puts it. Unfortunately, policymakers are lagging even further behind, and the implications for U.S. national interests are troubling.

To the extent that U.S. analysts and policymakers have registered the resurgence of religiosity at all, they have it viewed as a problem for U.S. foreign policy. Such concern is misguided. The United States should not see global desecularization in strictly defensive terms; it is as much an opportunity as it is a threat. Rather than being inimical to the advance of freedom, as many secularists assume, religious ideas and actors can buttress and expand ordered liberty. For much of the world, the religious quest lies at the heart of human dignity. History, moreover, suggests that protecting religious freedom and harnessing it for the common good are vital if democracy is to endure. Social science data show strong correlations between religious freedom and social, economic, and political goods.

Accordingly, U.S. diplomacy should move resolutely to make the defense and expansion of religious freedom a core component of U.S. foreign policy. Doing so would give the United States a powerful new tool for advancing ordered liberty and for undermining religion-based extremism at a time when other strategies have proved inadequate. One week before the presidential election in November, the landmark International Religious Freedom Act will have its tenth anniversary. That law mandated that the promotion of religious liberty be a central element of U.S. foreign policy. But neither Democratic nor Republican administrations, nor the U.S. State Department, have seen the IRF Act as a broad policy tool—indeed, as anything more than a narrow humanitarian measure unrelated to broader U.S. interests. A new policy on religious freedom can begin by tapping the law’s considerable potential. But long-term success will require a significant broadening of the current emphasis on opposing religious persecution and getting religious prisoners out of jail. An effective IRF policy must also address the balance between the overlapping authorities of religion and state, in particular the critical question of how religiously grounded norms might legitimately influence public policy.

DESECULARIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

THE REAPPEARANCE of public religion on the world stage has complex implications. Religion has both bolstered and undermined stable self-government. It has advanced political reform and human rights but also induced irrationality, persecution, extremism, and terrorism. Radical Islam may dominate the headlines, but the importance of religion is hardly confined to Muslim-majority countries or the Muslim diaspora. An explosion of religious devotion among Chinese citizens increasingly worries communist officials. Religious ideas and actors affect the fate of democracy in Russia, relations between the nuclear powers India and Pakistan, and the consolidation of democracy in Latin America. Even in western Europe—which has seen itself as a laboratory for secularization—religion, in the form of Islam and pockets of Christian revival, simply will not go away.

The world is overflowing with religious communities, theologies, and movements—with very public consequences. And there is little reason to believe that this state of affairs will change anytime soon. Polls from across the globe show a growth in religious affiliation and in the desire for religious leaders to be more involved in politics. Two leading demographers of religion, Todd Johnson and David Barrett, have concluded, “Demographic trends coupled with conservative estimates of conversions and defections envision over 80 percent of the world’s population will continue to be affiliated to religions 200 years into the future.”

The central U.S. national security issue is Islamist terrorism, fed by radical interpretations of Islam. Wahhabism, which has provided much of the theological oxygen for al Qaeda, is still dominant in Saudi Arabia and has been exported to Sunni communities internationally. But Osama bin Laden and Wahhabism are hardly the only examples of “political Islam” that have major implications for U.S. security. In Iraq, Shiite doctrines and leaders are a major factor in determining whether Iraqi democracy will survive. In Iran, a central question is whether religious actors can reform the revolutionary Shiism bequeathed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Across the Middle East, the Sunni-Shiite divide is of growing importance.

Elsewhere in the Muslim world, religion drives powerful political forces in countries central to U.S. interests. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood represents a strain of Islamism that has spawned or nourished radicals from Sayyid Qutb to Ayman al-Zawahiri and bin Laden, although it now operates as a democratic political party. An offshoot of the Brotherhood, Hamas, gained power in Palestinian elections and has put Islamist extremism at the center of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hezbollah has emerged as a major player in Lebanese politics, even as it is funded from Tehran and continues to threaten Israel.

There are also encouraging developments in the Muslim world. In Turkey, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) won a decisive victory in parliamentary elections last year despite deep-seated fears of political Islam among wide swaths of a Turkish society weaned on Kemalist imposed secularism. The AKP is demonstrating that religious parties need not veer into fanaticism; it has succeeded with good governance, good economic policies, and the development of an Islamic governing philosophy that contains significant liberal elements. Polls show that Turks are becoming more religious and, at the same time, more opposed to extremist sharia laws. In Indonesia, Islamic communities are resisting extremism and making significant contributions to civil society and democratic governance. While Freedom House ranks Turkey and Indonesia high on political freedom and civil liberties, both remain weak on religious freedom. The consolidation of democracy in each will require progress on that front. Interestingly, that prospect seems to be increasing, not decreasing, with the democratic involvement of Islamic communities.

The response of U.S. diplomacy to the religious scaffolding that bestrides the international order has been at best inconsistent and often incoherent. A recent study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies concludes, “U.S. government officials are often reluctant to address the issue of religion, whether in response to a secular U.S. legal and political tradition . . . or simply because religion is perceived as too complicated or sensitive. Current U.S. government frameworks for approaching religion are narrow, often approaching religions as problematic or monolithic forces, overemphasizing a terrorism-focused analysis of Islam and sometimes marginalizing religion as a peripheral humanitarian or cultural issue.”

Ambivalence toward religion in general and Islam in particular has been a profound weakness in the U.S. strategy to counter Islamist extremism. In regard to public and private diplomacy and foreign-aid and democracy programs, U.S. policy has been plagued by confusion about what role, if any, should be played by Islamic communities. In deciding how to “drain the swamps” of the social, political, and economic pathologies that feed Islamist extremism, U.S. officials have never arrived at an overarching policy toward Islam—or even decided what, exactly, a “moderate Muslim” is. U.S. dollars for democracy promotion have flooded the Middle East since 9/11, but the resulting programs as a rule have not addressed the main drivers of culture, politics, and civil society there—Muslim religious communities and Islamist political parties.

Various strategies for engaging Muslims have been floated and withdrawn, from the ill-fated Shared Values Initiative to the Muslim World Outreach program. Some reflected the United States’ own moral confusion and poll-driven culture. Attempts to “reach out” to Muslim youth have often centered on American pop music; a chair of the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors once solemnly declared that the pop star Britney Spears “represents the sounds of freedom.” Assessing the performance of the departing public diplomacy czar, Karen Hughes, the political scientist Robert Satloff observed that she saw her job as increasing U.S. poll numbers, not engaging in Islam’s war of ideas.

#### THE SECULARIST BLIND SPOT

THE PROBLEM is rooted in the secularist habits of thought pervasive within the U.S. foreign policy community. Most analysts lack the vocabulary and the imagination to fashion remedies that draw on religion, a shortcoming common to all the majors schools of foreign policy. Modern realists see authoritarian regimes as partners in keeping the lid on radical Islam and have nothing to say about religion except to describe it as an instrument of power. Liberal internationalists are generally suspicious of religion’s role in public life, viewing religion as antithetical to human rights and too divisive to contribute to democratic stability. Neoconservatives emphasize American exceptionalism and

the value of democracy, but most have paid little serious attention to religious actors or their beliefs. The U.S. “freedom agenda” has been seriously weakened as a result.

There is widespread confusion over the proper role of religion in public policy. The persistent belief that religion is inherently emotive and irrational, and thus opposed to modernity, precludes clear thinking about the relationship between religion and democracy. Insufficient policy attention is paid to the work of social scientists, such as Brian Grim and Roger Finke, that suggests religious freedom is linked to the well-being of societies. Most U.S. officials were weaned on a strict separation-of-church-and-state philosophy and simply resist thinking about religion as a policy matter. (In the late 1990s, a memorandum to the secretary of state on the subject of religion was returned by a senior official with a stern note saying that this was not an appropriate subject for analysis.) Although some U.S. actions in the realm of religion may raise constitutional issues, the U.S. Constitution neither mandates ignorance about religion nor proscribes its public practice. What it unambiguously requires is the defense of religious freedom.

Such disarray cuts across the conventional left-right divide. The left’s strict separationist instincts dictate that religion should be a private matter, but liberal multiculturalism pushes in a different direction. Some on the right want their religion in the public square, but not Islam, which they view as theologically flawed and a launching pad for extremism. In this sense, conservatives’ views on political Islam coincide with those of liberal secularists.

Unduly influenced by such thinking, U.S. foreign policy does not seek to advance religious freedom in any systematic way. The State Department has made modest efforts to fight persecution, but U.S. denunciations seldom have much impact. And even if they did reduce persecution, that alone would not constitute religious freedom. In a press conference to announce the governments that are considered, under the IRF Act, to be the worst religious persecutors, a State Department spokesperson said that U.S. policy

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goals were “to oppose religious persecution, to free religious prisoners, and to promote religious freedom.” That summary exemplifies what has gone wrong. The first two goals have been so dominant that the third has been all but lost.

Religious persecution is generally associated with egregious abuse—torture, rape, unjust imprisonment—on the basis of religion. A political order centered on religious liberty is free of such abuses, to be sure, but it also protects the rights of individuals and groups to act publicly in ways consistent with their beliefs. Those rights include, most importantly, the freedom to influence public policy within the bounds of liberal norms. Addressing this aspect of religious liberty is a critical

step in creating stable self-government in societies with powerful religious groups—a step that current U.S. policy ignores.

After the United States deposed the Taliban in 2001, the Afghans elected a democratic government and ratified a democratic constitution, and the terrible religious persecution of Afghan women and minority Shiites slowed dramatically. But these developments did not bring about religious freedom. The Afghan government no longer tortures people on the basis of religion, but it continues to bring charges against apostates and blasphemers, including officials and journalists seeking to debate the teachings of Islam. Instead of seeing such cases as serious obstacles to the consolidation of Afghan democracy, the State Department has treated them as humanitarian problems. It declared victory when U.S. pressure sprang the Christian convert Abdul Rahman from an apostasy trial (and from certain execution), permitting him to flee the country in fear of his life.

But the Rahman case was actually a defeat for U.S. IRF policy, because it ignored the real problem: Afghanistan's democracy is unlikely to endure unless it defends the right of all Afghan citizens to full religious liberty, especially the right of Muslims to debate freedom and the public good, the role of sharia, and the religion-state nexus. This kind of sustained discourse is vital to the success of any Islamic democracy and to overcoming Islamist radicalism. U.S. IRF policy should be confronting this problem in Afghanistan and elsewhere, but it lacks the resources, the bureaucratic clout, and the policy mandate to do so.

The IRF Act created an office in the State Department, headed by an ambassador at large, to monitor religious persecution around the world, to issue an annual report on religious freedom, and to produce an annual list of the worst persecutors. When a country appears on the list, the secretary of state must consider taking some punitive action, such as imposing economic sanctions, against it. This framework has had some modest successes. IRF ambassadors have headed off the passage of some bad laws and achieved the release of some religious prisoners. The current ambassador has negotiated with governments on the list, most notably Vietnam and Saudi Arabia, over what they must do to be taken off.



Unfortunately, the effort against religious persecution is generally considered little more than an isolated humanitarian gambit. Most foreign governments view it as a matter of “America management.” In the State Department, IRF policy is functionally and bureaucratically quarantined. Both the Clinton and the Bush administrations nested the IRF ambassador and his office in the human rights bureau, itself outside the mainstream of foreign policy. This means, among other things, that the ambassador is subordinate to a lower-ranking official and, unlike other ambassadors at large, does not attend senior staff meetings. When senior meetings are held on U.S. policy in China or Saudi Arabia—or even on engaging Islam—the IRF function is not considered relevant. This may seem trivial to those outside the State Department. Inside, it communicates a deadly message: IRF is not a mainstream foreign policy issue and can safely be ignored.

Some of these problems are slowly being addressed. U.S.-funded programs, especially those administered by the Asia Foundation, are paying dividends in Indonesia, where a moderate understanding of sharia appears to be developing. The U.S. embassy in Nigeria has gotten Muslims and Christians thinking together about the religious benefits of democracy. But such programs are underresourced and are operating without any clear policy mandate.

The situation will truly improve only if Washington more fully integrates religious considerations into its foreign policy. The message cannot be carried by one ambassador in one small office in the State Department who is unfortunately perceived as the representative of a special interest. This must be addressed within the department by, among other things, elevating the ambassador’s authority. But much more will be required than bureaucratic reshuffling. Major policy changes will be necessary if religious freedom is to contribute to U.S. national security.

#### DESECULARIZING DIPLOMACY

HOW CAN a new strategy on religion and religious freedom lend consistency to U.S. foreign policy while advancing U.S. security interests in the Muslim world and elsewhere? First, by adopting an overarching principle: religion is normative, not epiphenomenal, in human affairs.

Policymakers should approach religion much as they do economics and politics—that is, as something that drives the behavior of people and governments in important ways. Like political and economic motives, religious motives can act as a multiplier of both destructive and constructive behaviors, often with more intense results. When faith is associated with social identity, ethnicity, or nationality, it becomes all the more important as a focus of foreign policy.

The problem is most urgent in the greater Middle East. At least five states in that region—Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Egypt—are of critical importance to U.S. national security, because each is a major source of Islamist extremism. The consolidation of democracy in any one of them would provide a boost to reform in nearby countries, but each presents distinct, formidable obstacles. The United States' current IRF policy is seen by reformers in these countries as U.S. unilateralism and cultural imperialism. A refurbished policy could help overcome such fears, encourage religious actors to embrace democratic institutions, and lead over the long term to religious freedom and durable democracy.

Iraq's quasi-liberal constitution and elections have both demonstrated how Iraqi political culture is driven by religion. It is now clear that the United States did not pay sufficient attention to this factor, along with many others, in its planning for Iraq. A lasting solution in Iraq will require the involvement of religious actors who can speak from the heart of their respective communities. U.S. diplomacy, accordingly, should work to empower religious leaders such as the influential Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and his Sunni counterparts. The Iraq Study Group's recommendation for an American Shiite envoy to Sistani should be adopted, but he should not be treated as simply one among other sectarian leaders in Iraq. Sistani's brand of Shiism, which is open to democratic and, to some extent, liberal norms, could be instrumental in consolidating Iraqi democracy. It could provide a theological warrant for tolerance and, over time, religious freedom. It could also play a positive role in Iran, where Sistani was born and educated and where he now has many followers.

Iran has substantial democratic potential, and not simply among the 30-something secular modernists who are the hope of Western analysts. A little-studied path to democratic reform in Iran lies with

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Iranian jurists who might be diverted from the Khomeini model of clerical despotism, some of whom are interested in the Sistani experiment. For the time being, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, despite popular dissatisfaction

with the current government, have succeeded in connecting dissent with treason. But U.S. policymakers should still find ways to work with Iranian religious scholars in Qom and elsewhere. Among other things, this means clearly communicating that the United States is interested in, and open to, Shiite reformers. For example, the Catholic University of America's Interdisciplinary Program in Law and

Religion has yielded substantive exchanges with Iranian jurists on topics such as family law and weapons of mass destruction. By judiciously supporting such efforts, the United States can encourage internal reform that rejects both theocracy and terrorism as inimical to Shiism.

Saudi Arabia is the most difficult of the Muslim states to envision as a democracy, notwithstanding mild reformist tendencies shown by King Abdullah. The Wahhabi establishment and its pernicious political theology remain deeply rooted, and no political or social institution has been effective in countering its influence. Wahhabi-blessed candidates would very likely dominate national elections. U.S. diplomacy should be working to change this dynamic—for example, by pressing Abdullah to permit the development of national Islamic political parties, both Sunni and Shiite, that are open to democracy. Washington should urge the disbandment of the *mutawiyin* (religion and morals police), which is currently under unusual scrutiny for its usual extremist activities, and support the emergence of a non-Wahhabi Islamic polity that is capable of developing liberal norms. This could take several forms, including a constitutional monarchy.

Pakistan's nuclear weapons capability, its status as a safe haven for Islamist extremists, and its instability in the wake of the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto make the country an exceptionally important case. Pakistan's military, like that of Turkey, has played a critical role in the development of the state's



political culture. Unlike the secular Turkish military, however, Pakistan's military (including former General Pervez Musharraf) has supported extremist Islamist parties as a means of retaining power. But radical Islamists have not achieved electoral success on their own in Pakistan. Historically, their popularity has increased with authoritarianism and decreased with free and fair elections. The United States should adopt a broader antiradical agenda in Pakistan. It should certainly encourage a return to democracy, the development of a moderate political center, and more effective action against Islamist extremists. It should also support religious actors who are capable of undermining extremism by developing a more liberal political theology, sustaining madrasah reform, and conducting a public debate over Islam and democracy.

Egypt arguably has the greatest potential for lasting democratic reform. It is the largest of the Arab states and the traditional center of Sunni jurisprudence. Despite half a century of authoritarian regimes, it has some experience with constitutional rule, the beginnings of a civil society, professional and entrepreneurial classes, a fairly independent judiciary, and a Christian Coptic community that accounts for 10–15 percent of the population. Over the years, the United States has paid Cairo more than \$50 billion to buy stability and predictability and keep the lid on radical Islam. According to Hosni Mubarak's government, if the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist opposition movement, were to gain power, it would revoke the Camp David accords, precipitate war with Israel, and work to restore a caliphate.

U.S. aid has helped, but it has prevented neither the growing appeal of radical Islam in Egypt nor its continued export, both of which are increased by Mubarak's policies. If free elections were held, the Muslim Brotherhood would very likely win. Unfortunately, the United States has little idea what this would mean. Despite indications that some Brothers are adopting liberal norms, Washington refuses to talk to them officially and rejects opportunities to influence their political evolution. Its policy is to support the Mubarak regime and hope for the best.

This is the logic that led to 9/11. The United States cannot eradicate Islamist radicalism through unconditional support for authoritarian regimes. Even in Iraq, assuming the continued success of U.S. military

strategy, extremism and terrorism can in the final analysis only be defeated by Muslims speaking from the heart of Islam. And the only means of affording them the opportunity is durable democracy grounded in religious freedom for all—especially Muslims.

In Egypt, the United States should adopt a policy of engaging all religious and political communities, including the Muslim Brotherhood. But it should not assume that the Brothers are liberals aborning. To the contrary, it must find out precisely what they are and whether they are capable of political and theological evolution. The United States must not repeat the mistakes it made in Iran during the late 1970s, which led to its waking up one morning to face an Islamist group in power without any secure understanding of its vocabulary, let alone its goals.

The objective should be to encourage the Brotherhood to explain publicly what Islamic democracy would mean in Egypt. Handled correctly, this would force the organization to clarify its understanding of religious freedom and, necessarily, of pluralist democracy. Does the understanding include, for example, the right to debate Islamic teachings in public, to demand full equality under the law for women and religious minorities, to change religions? It is by no means inevitable, but certainly possible, that nascent liberals would be empowered by such a discourse. At the very least, it would increase U.S. understanding of what the Brotherhood in power would mean.

This strategy of discovery could include several elements adaptable to a global IRF policy. What the Brotherhood says in private must be said publicly, in Arabic, in Egypt. U.S. diplomats must speak not only the Brothers' Arabic language but their religious language as well. Training at the Foreign Service Institute should be revamped. The self-defeating instruction to U.S. diplomats "Avoid using religious language," which was presented in the 2007 public diplomacy strategy paper, should be reversed. Washington should support the development of Islamic feminism, a potentially fruitful skirmish in the Muslim war of ideas. A privately funded Islamic Institute of American Studies on U.S. soil could bring the best jurists and religious leaders from across the Muslim world to study U.S. history, society, politics, and—most important—religion.

REDISCOVERING THE AMERICAN MODEL

DESPITE THE failure of U.S. foreign policy to understand and address religion, the U.S. system of religious freedom remains vigorous and adaptive. American history should itself be instructive as U.S. policymakers seek to adjust their bearings in an age of faith. In the 1660s, colonial Congregationalists tortured and hanged Quakers on Boston Common. A century later, Americans embraced a system of religious liberty that remains unsurpassed in history. This system was not the result of the Enlightenment alone or of separating religion from society or politics. It was the result of theology and politics developing in tandem. Surely that system has contributed to the fact that American Muslim communities, despite being subject to Wahhabi influences for decades, have not been radicalized in the way that many of Europe's Muslim communities have. *The Economist* noted the irony: "The strange thing is that when America has tried to tackle religious politics abroad—especially jihadist violence—it has drawn no lessons from its domestic success. Why has a country so rooted in pluralism made so little of religious freedom?"

As the United States commemorates the tenth anniversary of the IRF Act, its foreign affairs scholars and foreign-policy makers must retrieve one of the nation's founding beliefs: religious freedom means much more than the right not to be persecuted for one's religion or the right to worship as one pleases in private; religious liberty protects human dignity and bolsters civil society. It means the durable and mutual accommodation of religion and the state within the boundaries of liberal democracy. And this accommodation matters not only for humanitarian reasons. It will also give the United States a new and powerful tool for addressing national security threats and foreign policy challenges that have so far proved confounding to a foreign policy establishment blinded by secularism. 🌐