The Missing Key to More Effective U.S. Diplomacy: Religious Liberty
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Last week we were treated to the spectacle of Henry Kissinger, who had been Secretary of State during the Vietnam War and is now 91 years old, being heckled as he testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Senator John McCain, who had been tortured as a prisoner of war in Hanoi, reacted with anger, calling the hecklers “low-life scum.” Memories of Vietnam, it seems, remain strong among some elements of the American population.

Notwithstanding the hecklers, Mr. Kissinger is generally respected in the foreign policy establishment as the doyen of American “realism.” In 1994 he wrote his magnum opus. Entitled *Diplomacy*, Kissinger’s book was a survey of diplomatic history from the 16th century to the contemporary age. When he published it he was considered by many the greatest scholar-practitioner of foreign policy in American history.

Among the remarkable things about Kissinger’s book, and its status as a contemporary classic, is its treatment of religion. In fact, the book is a veritable “religion-free zone.” *Diplomacy* is quite long, and it has an appropriately large index. But the word “religion” does not appear in the index. Religious ideas and religious actors make almost no appearance in the text. After a brief treatment of the 17th century wars of religion, *Diplomacy* simply banishes religion from the world stage, as if it were no longer relevant to the motives and actions of modern men and modern states.

This, to put it mildly, is perplexing. One is entitled to wonder what definition of “realism” excludes religion from the public affairs of men and women.

The perplexity deepens when one reads Kissinger’s account of world events during the 1970s and 1980s, when he stood astride American diplomacy as Secretary of State and the nation’s preeminent foreign policy thinker. Oddly, he portrays international developments in this period as if religious ideas and actors had no bearing whatever. Missing, for example, are Karol Wojtyla, Pope John Paul II, and his brand of Catholic diplomacy.

John Paul’s ideas about religious freedom, derived from the Second Vatican Council, were helping the West undermine the Soviet imperium. They were assisting authoritarian Catholic states like his native Poland, Spain, Chile, and the Philippines make the transition to democracy. All these developments were of extraordinary relevance to American foreign policy interests. But they are not to be found in Kissinger’s *Diplomacy*.

Also conspicuously missing from the book are the 1979 Iranian religious revolution of Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeni, and the dramatic rise of Pentacostalism in South America. Kissinger does not even mention the growing, disastrous effects of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and early signs of violent Islamist extremism in the Middle East. Each of these international developments have had a significant impact on American national interests.
What are we to make of this? Was Kissinger’s avoidance of religion an anomaly, limited to him and his particular brand of foreign policy “realism”? Not so, wrote Madeleine Albright in 2006 – six years after having left office herself as Secretary of State. In a book entitled *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God and World Affairs*, Albright wrote that most diplomats and policy makers of her generation were taught to ignore the role of religion in shaping international affairs.

The subject of religion, she wrote, “was above and beyond reason; it evoked the deepest passions; and historically, it was the cause of much bloodshed. Diplomats of my era were taught not to invite trouble, and no subject seemed more inherently treacherous than religion.” The balance of her book represents Albright’s rejection of the diplomat’s habit of avoiding issues of faith, and a call for rethinking the role of religion in American foreign policy.

The world is religious, she argues, whether you or I like it or not. If the business of American diplomacy is to advance and defend American interests in the world, we cannot afford to have a diplomatic service that is ignorant, indifferent, or hostile to the subject of religion. Surely Madeleine Albright is correct.

Unfortunately, in recent decades this problem has been endemic in our foreign policy establishment. Since the 1960s, American diplomacy has, with some exceptions, been afflicted by what I have elsewhere called a “religion-avoidance syndrome,” a skepticism about incorporating the religious elements of the world into our strategic considerations. At some level, of course, most of us can appreciate that sentiment. Perhaps your mother told you to avoid the subject of religion around the dinner table, or at least at other people’s dinner tables.

That problem is that, however useful this advice might be among families today (although, to tell you the truth, that advice wouldn’t hold much weight in my family), it will not work for American diplomacy in the religion-saturated world of the 21st century. Entire societies, nations, non-state actors, economic trends, political development, and transnational terrorism are influenced by religious ideas and actors, for better or for worse. Many of these trends impact our vital interests, including our interest in national security. How can our diplomacy pursue those interests if it is ignorant of, or simply ignores, religion?

The answer, of course, is that it cannot.

And yet, it remains the unfortunate case that our diplomacy, like Henry Kissinger’s book, still attempts to do its job in a highly secular fashion, as if religion were merely a private matter that takes place in houses of worship, and is discussed by theologians, but has no bearing on the real world.

Today I want to make the case that, although the religion-avoidance syndrome in American diplomacy is gradually shifting, it is not changing quickly enough to shore up our foreign policy’s deficits when it comes to religion and, especially, to religious freedom. In particular, U.S. diplomacy is missing an opportunity to advance American interests, by failing to do
something well that, as it happens, it is required to do by law – that is, to advance religious freedom in our foreign policy.

So here’s what I will do this evening. First, I will briefly survey the evidence that the world is highly religious and that our contemporary religion avoidance syndrome is therefore particularly ill-timed. I will also tell you why I believe this to be the case, i.e. the causes of our contemporary reticence. Second, I will address the question of why it matters. I will argue that the successful advancement of international religious freedom by American diplomacy would be both morally and strategically wise for the United States. Finally, I’ll end with some brief thoughts on what might be done to remedy the situation.

Evidence: A Religious World

Let’s begin with a brief overview of the status of religion in the world.

In a comprehensive survey published in 2012, the Pew Research Center found that 84 percent of the world’s population reported having a religious affiliation. This kind of result has been fairly typical in recent years.

The numbers of people reporting no affiliation have increased a bit, primarily because of the growth in the West of what demographers call the “nones” – those people, primarily young adults, who do not identify with a particular religion. However, many of the “nones” still consider themselves religious or “spiritual” in some sense. Some scholars call this phenomenon “believing without belonging.”

Similar trends were identified in a 2010 Gallup survey, which found that across all populations in the world the median proportion of residents who said that religion was important in their lives was 82 percent. That poll was also interesting because it confirmed that most non-Western societies are highly religious, while most Western nations are increasingly secular and tend to bring the worldwide percentage down.

For example, the percentage of French citizens who say that religion is important in their lives is only 30 percent, and of UK citizens, only 27 percent. By comparison, 65 percent of American citizens say religion is important in their lives, which makes the United States by far the most religiously devout nation in the West.

Now these surveys give us some valuable evidence that religion is important to most people, at least most people outside the West. But they don’t really put a face on the reality of religion in the world. When people say their religion is important to them, they can mean many things.

Some of those things are private or interior, as, for example, the value of prayer or private worship. Others would point to external and public things, such as the value of religion for the way they live their lives by, for example, being motivated by their beliefs to help others, to enter into the world of business, or to help shape the public life of their nation – its laws and policies.
Unfortunately, sometimes the face of religion is one of suffering or terror – such as the faces of Indian Muslim women in the massacres of Gujarat, slaughtered by Hindu mobs merely because they were Muslim, or the face of Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian mother sentenced to death for insulting the Muslim prophet, or the face of Muslim Jordanian pilot Maaz al-Kassebeh, burned alive by ISIS terrorists, or American journalist James Foley, beheaded by ISIS, which asserts it is defending Islam and doing the will of God.

They are the faces of China’s Tibetan Buddhists, whose religion and culture are under siege from a calculated and ruthless campaign by the government of China. They are the faces of Iraq’s Christians whose very existence in their ancient homeland – where they have lived for almost two millennia -- is today very much in jeopardy from the 21st century barbarians who call themselves the Islamic State.

These are the faces of religious persecution, a phenomenon that is growing internationally at an alarming rate, and having a significant impact on fundamental American interests.

Sometimes the face of religion in the world is encouraging, inspiring or constructive, such as that of Muslim leaders who have condemned ISIS and seek to expel them from the Islamic religion. It is the face of Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity, who serve the destitute and the poor and have inspired others to do the same. Or the face of Pastor Rick Warren, for whom the word “religion” includes worshipping God by digging wells for those without clean water and building medical clinics for the sick and elderly. Or the face of former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, who argued throughout his life that to kill in the name of Islam was heresy.

Sometimes the face of religion involves legal, economic or political trends, both negative and positive. Examples include the terribly destructive effects of anti-blasphemy laws and practices in Muslim-majority countries, which provide a rationale for Islamist terror. They include the increasing demand in Western nations, including the United States, for the removal of religious ideas and actors from public life.

But they also include the historic contribution of religious ideas to the development of the modern liberal state, or the role of religious actors in producing economic growth.

In short, the world, for better and for worse, is made up of individuals, groups, and societies who take their religion very seriously. This has historically produced, and continues to produce, sociological trends that are of enormous significance to issues like international stability, security, and economic growth. And, as America’s founders well understood, a very important means of encouraging the creative faces of religion, and discouraging the violent and extremist faces of religion, is to embrace religious freedom – defined as the right of every human being to believe or not, and, if one believes, to act on the basis of belief, alone or with others, within due limits.

If American foreign policy fails to take these ideas, actors, and trends seriously, we will harm our own interests, including our interest in national security. In particular, if we fail to
understand the importance of religious freedom to our own interests, we are missing a critical opportunity that is, or ought to be, part of our national character.

Evidence: The Religion Avoidance Syndrome in U.S. Foreign Policy

Now let’s take a deeper look at the evidence – presented thus far by Henry Kissinger and Madeleine Albright – that in recent decades American diplomacy has not taken religion seriously, and, even more stunningly, has failed to understand the value of religious freedom to American interests.

We should note that this state of affairs is relatively new – it constitutes an anomaly in US history, a modern break with the past. As recent books by scholars like Andrew Preston and William Inboden make clear, U.S. foreign policy has since the founding been aware of and in fact often steeped in the religious issues raised in our own society, and by other nations and other societies.

This has been the case, at least in part, because Americans – unlike the citizens of Western Europe -- have traditionally been a religious people encouraged by culture and law, especially by the historic American understanding of religious freedom as codified in the First Amendment, to bring their beliefs into the public life of the nation. Partly as a consequence, engaging with others on the basis of religion has seemed neither odd nor self-defeating.

Historically our foreign policy elites have generally been at ease with religion – at least they have not been *confounded* by religion, as if it were an inscrutable activity pursued by oddballs and cranks. Our historic diplomatic comfort level with religion does not mean, of course, that we have always got it right. It does mean that we have traditionally been well-placed to deal with the religious challenges and opportunities that the world has offered.

The American diplomatic ease with religion began to change during the last decades of the 20th century. While the positive and negative *public* implications of faith around the world seemed to be increasing, in part due to the development of modern technology and communications, our own foreign policy was becoming less willing and less able to engage the religious trends of the times effectively.

*The IRFA Experiment.* The single most revealing example of this phenomenon has been the puzzling ineffectiveness of the U.S. foreign policy establishment in implementing the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act.

In the mid-90s, Christian and other human rights groups mounted a campaign to *require* the State Department to pay attention to growing international persecution of religious groups. They believed that American diplomats were ignoring the problem, and their lobbying campaign succeeded in inducing Congress to pass – and President Bill Clinton to sign – the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.
The IRFA, as that law is called, requires the President and the Department of State to oppose religious persecution and advance religious freedom in our foreign policy. It establishes a very senior official, an Ambassador at Large, to lead an office of international religious freedom at the State Department. It names the Ambassador as senior adviser to the President and Secretary of State and authorizes him to represent the United States on matters of religious liberty in diplomacy with other nations and in multilateral organizations such as the United Nations.

The Ambassador’s job is to integrate the issue into American foreign policy, to oversee the issuance of annual reports and lists of severe violators, and to develop strategies to reduce religious persecution and advance religious freedom around the world. The IRFA also established an independent watchdog Commission on IRF to oversee the operation of our policy and make independent recommendations to the President and the Congress.

IRFA, and the policy it established, have now been in operation for over 16 years, during the course of three administrations from both parties – Clinton, Bush and Obama. There have been four Ambassadors at Large – the latest, Rabbi David Saperstein, has just stepped into the job in January of this year. This passage of time permits us to draw some conclusions, not only about the effectiveness of the policy, but the nature of our diplomatic engagement with religion.

Overall, it is difficult to avoid the judgment that our record is anemic and disappointing. While some important tracks have been laid within the State Department over the past 16 years, tracks that might bode well for the future, it cannot be said that any of the three administrations have been effective in reducing religious persecution or advancing religious freedom. But the current administration, notwithstanding its protestations to the contrary, has been stunningly ineffective.

Over the past several years the nonpartisan Pew Research Center has issued a series of reports that measure restrictions on religion in every country of the world. These reports make two things clear. First, the vast majority of the world’s population – at last count 76 percent – live in countries where religious freedom is virtually non-existent. Second, there are about 70 nations in the world where religious persecution is a serious problem, and most of those nations are very important to the national security of the United States.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the problem is getting worse, not better. Religious freedom is in worldwide decline as religious persecution is on the rise. And the consequences are dire – for the victims of religious persecution, for the nations where these problems exist, and for the fundamental interests of the United States.

Now I do not argue that the United States is responsible for this state of affairs. I do argue that it would be reasonable to expect that our policy of advancing religious freedom should have had some positive impact. At a minimum, the United States should have developed religious freedom strategies for key nations, such as China and Russia, or the nations of the Middle East where we have such serious problems such as Iraq, Egypt, or Pakistan. We should have adopted the goal of convincing these nations that it is in their own interests at least to move in the direction of religious freedom. Call it religious tolerance – a kind of half-way house to religious freedom.
Alas, we have with a few exceptions not even taken those first steps. And the result is predictable. The sad fact is that there is no country in the world where our IRF policy has decreased religious persecution or increased religious freedom in any significant, sustained way. This is especially true in nations where our investment of diplomatic energy and resources has been highest – China, Russia, India, Iraq, Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran to name a few of the most important.

If we look inside the State Department, we can see why our religious freedom policy has been so anemic. In the first place, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom has been relegated to a kind of diplomatic isolation. I mentioned that this title – ambassador at large – is normally given to a very senior official. Most ambassadors at large report directly to the Secretary of State. For example, the position of Ambassador at Large for Global Women’s Issues was created in the early 1990s. That ambassador has always reported directly to the Secretary of State. Why? Because advancing the rights of women internationally is, quite properly, seen as a priority for American foreign policy, and administrations have wanted everyone to know it.

The Ambassador at Large for IRF, by comparison, has always reported to an official many layers removed from the Secretary of State. The IRF Ambassador does not attend meetings of senior State Department officials. In effect, this is like a general in the army reporting to a colonel, and hanging out with the junior officers.

Perhaps worst of all, the position of Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom has been vacant – unfilled -- for over half this President’s tenure. Even when it was filled, the incumbent had virtually no resources or authority. We can certainly hope that Ambassador Saperstein, who is a very talented man, will change things. But he will need urgently to develop a government-wide national security strategy to advance religious freedom in our foreign policy. Such a strategy has never existed. Given the stakes in the Middle East and elsewhere for American national security, this omission is stunning.

To be sure, there are people in the State Department who care deeply about religious freedom, and have been responsible for some potentially fruitful internal steps. For example, there is a working group on religious freedom consisting of civil society representatives, and a seminar for diplomats that includes some discussion of religious freedom. But overall our policy has devolved into reports and speeches without strategy or policy action. It is highly reactive and largely rhetorical.

We need a working group of U.S. foreign policy officials, not just of private citizens. We need formal, mandatory training on what religious freedom is, why it is important for our national security, and how to advance it.

The unfortunate result of all this is that foreign governments and American diplomats alike can see that the religious freedom Ambassador is not a senior official, because he is not seen as such by the Secretary of State and the President. And he is not seen as such because the advancement of international religious freedom is not a priority for the United States, which has no strategy to advance it and no serious program to train our diplomats in how to advance it.
Explaining the Syndrome: Causes

Why is this the case? In the past our diplomacy has had some success in dealing with religion and religious actors. Why are we now so passive and ineffective?

One plausible answer is that the nations we need to deal with do not seek or desire our help. There is clearly some truth to this. No country is eager to be lectured about its internal policies, including, and especially its policies toward religion. Unfortunately, U.S. IRF policy has offered little but lectures – we have become at best a kind of rhetorical scold on religious persecution. As noted, we issue annual reports and lists of the worst persecutors. Presidents, Secretaries of State, and members of Congress give speeches – sometimes splendid speeches – condemning religious persecution.

But reports and speeches, as important as they can be when they are followed by policy action, become mere empty words when they are not followed by action. Indeed, they can become harmful by manifesting an official “crying wolf” tendency. If you complain about something long enough without doing anything about it, people are going to understand that you don’t really mean what you say in your splendid speeches.

That, I would argue, is precisely what has happened in U.S. IRF policy. No society or government – not China, Russia, India, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia nor Nigeria – has any reason to believe that we are serious about reducing religious persecution or advancing religious freedom.

But the deeper question is why our policy is merely rhetorical and reactive, and therefore ineffective. The Pew Reports make it clear how little real impact our policy is having. There must be a better explanation why a country in which religious freedom historically has been understood as “the first freedom,” a country with a legacy of reasonable comfort in engaging religious issues in foreign policy, is so uneasy and so inept today.

There are doubtless many contributing factors to our religion-avoidance syndrome. For example, there is some evidence of a generalized sense among our diplomats that a vigorously pursued religious freedom policy would be unconstitutional – a highly destructive contemporary misunderstanding of the meaning of the Constitution’s Establishment Clause.

Some on the left believe our IRF policy constitutes cultural imperialism. Others think it is a policy imposed by Christians and is designed to clear the way for Christian missionaries. Some conservatives are hesitant to support religious freedom for Muslims around the world.

Such false perceptions exist – I personally have encountered each of them. But they do not, in my view, sufficiently explain our diplomatic ineffectiveness. I want to focus on what I see as the major overarching explanation.

It seems to me that a significant proportion of our foreign policy officials no longer believe that religious freedom is the “first freedom” -- of American history, of the US constitution, and of all
people everywhere. Indeed, the same Pew studies that show the decline of religious freedom in the world also show a troubling decline in the West, including in the United States.

At the State Department, and in the foreign affairs establishment in general, too many have rejected the proposition that was central to our founding, namely that religion itself is necessary for the survival of democracy, and therefore that religious freedom is foundational.

If we no longer believe that religion is important, and that religious freedom is foundational, it is no surprise that we do not make it a priority in our foreign policy.

For America’s founding generation, and most generations since, religious freedom constituted the “first freedom” because it was thought necessary for the well-being of individuals and societies. In particular, religion in the public square was considered crucial for the health of democracy.

The Founders believed that religious freedom entailed not only the right to believe and worship, but the right to act on the basis of religious belief, individually and in concert with others, privately and in civil society and political life—all within broad and equally applied limits. James Madison viewed religious actors in civil society as a critical check on the power of government. George Washington, in his farewell address, famously argued that religion was necessary for the “dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity.”

Many of our political and foreign policy leaders today, however, see religious freedom as a private matter, with few legitimate public purposes. For some, religious liberty is in no sense foundational to individuals and societies. Rather, it is merely one in an ever growing list of rights claims—in this case a claim of privilege by religious people. As such it warrants no special protection, but must be “balanced” against all other claims.

Such views are reflected in the Obama administration’s argument that the Affordable Care Act trumps the religious freedom of faith-based groups in American civil society. Whatever Americans might think of requiring groups like the Little Sisters of the Poor to cooperate in the provision of abortion, contraception, and sterilization services, they should consider the effects on civil society of that kind of state-enforced coercion.

When faith-based groups are required by the state to betray their most sacred beliefs, the state is coercing the religious conscience—an act of raw power that is by itself destructive of democracy and human dignity. But the state is also rending the underlying fabric of American democracy, which is, of course, not the government, but the vibrant system of non-governmental organizations that help guarantee our freedom by limiting the power of government.

Faith-based NGOs constitute a significant proportion of this system; they limit government by their contributions to civil society, both by providing services that government would otherwise have to provide, and by positing an authority greater than the state. The American constitutional settlement on religious freedom has for over 200 years been grounded not only in the protection of the individual conscience, but in the protection of religious entities as a check on government.
That settlement is in danger of being lost in the hands of modern secularists who seek policy outcomes that are endangered by a vigorous system of religious freedom. Accordingly, they are willing to reduce religious liberty in order to gain the policies they seek.

This reduced view of religious freedom is also evident in the administration’s foreign policy. In a 2009 speech on the importance of human rights in U.S. foreign policy, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton insisted that “to fulfill their potential, people must be free to worship … and to love in the way that they choose.”

Here we see the diminution of religious freedom in two ways. First, Secretary Clinton evokes the freedom to worship, not religious freedom. But “worship” is essentially a private activity, with few if any civic or public policy implications. As such, it is certainly easier to balance against other rights claims.

Second, she implies that a putative “right to love” is a comparable right, that is, one of equal or greater value than religious freedom. Clearly the Obama administration has in both its domestic and foreign policy weighed religious freedom against other rights claims it believes important, such as the right to contraceptives, abortifacients and sterilization, or to same-sex “marriage,” and religious freedom has been found to be an inferior right.

This helps to explain why, in its foreign policy, the Obama administration has applied far more policy energy in its international pursuit of a “right to love” than it has religious freedom.

Europe provides an example of what lies ahead. The official American understanding of religious freedom today is in many ways reminiscent of the French ideology of laicete, which relegates religion to an entirely private role in society and politics. This secularist ideology has spread throughout Europe, and is largely responsible for the growing hostility toward religion we are seeing reflected in the Pew reports, and in the growth of Islamist extremism in Europe.

The United States cannot afford to go down this road. But we are in real danger of doing so. We are in danger of abandoning the conviction that religious freedom is the first freedom because it benefits everyone, whether they are religious or not. At the end of the day this is the best explanation of why our diplomacy has settled on a lowest-common-denominator anti-persecution approach -- a largely symbolic rhetorical methodology that gives the illusion of movement but in the end accomplishes little, either for others or for our own nation.

Why It Matters

What difference does all this make? Why should we care if American foreign policy elites are uninterested in advancing religious freedom in our foreign policy? What could we accomplish anyway?

First and foremost, I believe that advancing religious freedom is simply the right thing to do. Unjust restrictions on religious individuals and groups, as well as violent religious persecution,
have steadily worsened in recent years. The results have been catastrophic for many people and many societies.

Millions of human beings are vulnerable to violent abuse, such as torture, rape, “disappearance,” unjust imprisonment, and unjust execution, because of their religious beliefs and practices, or those of their tormentors. Of the victims of religious persecution, according to the Pew reports, Christians head the list, with Muslims not far behind. Both groups are persecuted in the Far East, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

Taken together, this mounting toll of human suffering provides a clear humanitarian imperative for US policy.

But there are other reasons for conducting a serious, vigorous, and effective US international religious freedom policy—reasons that address vital American interests in the world, and our security at home.

There are approximately 70 countries where persecution and restrictions on religion are severe. That list includes virtually all the nations whose internal stability, economic policies, and foreign policies are of substantial concern to the United States, including China, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia, and India.

There is strong evidence that, in many of these countries, the absence of religious freedom is directly related to high levels of religious violence and conflict, in turn a major source of social, economic, and political instability. For example, the terrible Syrian civil war that was raging before the rise of ISIS in large part stemmed from generations of religious persecution, first of Alawites by Sunnis, and then of Sunnis by the Alawite regime of the Assads.

The evidence also strongly suggests that the absence of religious freedom can stimulate religious terrorism and energize transnational terrorist movements.

Consider the most virulent of the Islamist terrorist groups, ISIS. It is not my argument that religious freedom can defeat ISIS. This particular group of terrorists has taken territory, slaughtered innocents— including by crucifying children—and have enslaved large areas of Iraq and Syria. If they are to be pushed back, military force will be necessary. And I suspect it will take more effective military force than the United States has committed to date.

But ISIS is not simply a military force. Even if it is pushed back from its territorial gains and every current ISIS terrorist is killed, the ideological motivation behind its savagery will remain in place. This is demonstrated by the reality that young Western Muslims are being attracted to ISIS. There are many reasons for this phenomenon— social alienation and deep moral confusion among them. But the primary recruiting tool for ISIS is similar to that employed by violent Islamist extremists the world over, including Boko Haram, Al Nusra, Al Shabaab, the Iranian government, Hezbollah, and Al Qaeda in its various guises.
That recruiting tool is the conviction among growing numbers of Muslims that Islam can only be defended with violence. These people believe that the Koran commands them to defeat the enemies of Islam at all costs, with whatever atrocity is available to them – kidnappings, beheadings, burnings, stonings, rape, and torture – including of innocents. They believe that God commands their actions in the Koran and that they are its enforcers. If they do this well they will be rewarded in Paradise.

I am eager to accept what my Muslim friends tell me -- that this is a grossly distorted reading of the Koran, and the hadith, the sayings of the Prophet. Most Muslims around the world reject these views. In the West there are many Muslim leaders and scholars who openly reject them as un-Islamic, and provide alternative understandings of their own religion. Unfortunately, those leaders and scholars inside Muslim countries who adopt alternative views are pushing against the tide. When they provide those views publicly, they are susceptible to charges of blasphemy. In short, they lack religious freedom.

Put differently, they need religious freedom to undermine the extremist ideas that threaten their countries, and our own.

**Conclusion**

Let me conclude by addressing how we might help this happen. How can advancing religious freedom in American foreign policy increase American security by providing a badly needed diplomatic counter terrorism tool, as well as a substantial contribution to the consolidation of democracy and to economic growth?

Let me note that the answers to these questions provide powerful reasons why those who now resist religious freedom -- whether they are Western liberals, Indian Hindus, Chinese atheists, or Muslim skeptics – should reconsider their respective positions.

First, there is growing empirical evidence that religious freedom, protected in law and valued by culture, is necessary for a democracy to survive, flourish, and remain stable. Based on his empirical studies, sociologist Brian Grim has written that successful democracy requires a bundled commodity of fundamental freedoms. Religious freedom acts as a linchpin within the bundle. Without it, the other rights and freedoms – for example, freedom of speech and association, or the equality of all citizens under the law -- cannot do their work of consolidating democracy and rendering it stable.

Such evidence, properly developed, could be employed in any country struggling to achieve stable democracy *in pursuit of its own interests*, including Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Russia, and India.

Evidence of the connection between religious freedom and the health of democracy also provides reason for reflection by Western elites who in effect are demanding the demolition of religious liberty in order to achieve state-enforced life-style individualism and a false, impoverished
“equality.” Theirs will be a pyrrhic victory if it feeds an authoritarianism in which only state-approved voices are heard. Such a state will inevitably turn on them as well.

Second, religious freedom can make an important contribution to economic development, the reduction of poverty, and social development. For example, sociologists Grim and Roger Finke have analyzed the cross-national relationship between religious liberty and numerous indicators of economic development and political freedom. They found particularly robust relationships between religious freedom and political freedom, freedom of the press, civil liberties, gender empowerment, longevity of democracy, lower poverty, and economic freedom.

These correlations are strong enough to suggest a causal mechanism at work: the presence of religious freedom can contribute to economic, social and political goods; its absence or decline can undermine them. The Religious Freedom Project at Georgetown University, which I have the honor of directing, is supporting teams of scholars across several disciplines who are looking more deeply into the causal mechanisms.

The relationship between religious freedom and economic dynamism ought to be considered by Western liberals eager to remove religious mores from the public square, including from the world of for-profit businesses.

Finally, and most urgently, religious freedom can help defeat religion-related violence and terrorism. Especially in Muslim-majority nations, anti-blasphemy laws and practices suppress moderate voices within the Islamic tradition and ensure that public discourse is dominated by extremist arguments. The most destructive, widely accepted among Muslim publics, is the argument that anyone who defames Islam deserves punishment by the state or, absent state action, by private violence. Precisely because this assertion is so widely accepted, it provides a cultural and legal underpinning for violent Islamist extremism.

Religious freedom would free moderate voices who, speaking from within the tradition, would champion more liberal versions of Islamic practice, including ideas of equality between men and women, and Muslims and non-Muslims. Perhaps most importantly, such voices would argue – as did the Indonesian Abdurrahman Wahid – that God neither needs nor requires men to defend him with violence.

Western nations, especially the United States, should recognize the value in employing religious freedom policy as a counter-terrorism strategy. This would be far less expensive in blood and treasure than military strikes or law-enforcement measures, and more likely to succeed over the long-term.

It is also important to bear in mind that religious freedom imposes limits. A regime of religious liberty is not one in which individuals and groups are licensed to take any action whatsoever on the grounds that it is sanctioned or required by their religion. Religious acts are limited by the norms of equality under the law and the fundamental rights of others. In this sense, then, religious freedom restrains religious actors who are violent, or who seek privileged access to the civil and police powers of the state.
In struggling democracies like Pakistan or Iraq, religious freedom would impose limits on the radicals and empower the minorities. A signal task of American diplomacy must be to convince stakeholders in such societies that they will never achieve what they seek – stable democracy, economic growth, or social stability – unless they can begin to move toward religious freedom for all their citizens.

To sum up: There are many reasons for societies everywhere to embrace religious freedom, foremost among them the moral imperative to rid the world of the vile acts of persecution that are increasing with alarming rapidity, causing such terrible human suffering and darkening our future. Such human acts of evil, and the suffering they cause, will always be with us. We should never tire of countering them, including with force when appropriate and necessary.

But we must also rediscover the powerful, practical reasons for religious liberty. reasons that are grounded in the religious nature of man, his consequent need for freedom, and the value of religious freedom for social flourishing. Those reasons, apparent at the American founding, are in danger of being lost.

And yet, they can and should be understood as reflecting the interests of all people everywhere: stable self-governance, economic development, and the defeat of religion-based terror. If we act to rediscover those reasons ourselves, and overcome our contemporary skepticism about engaging religious ideas and actors in American diplomacy, we can avert the momentous consequences of rising religious persecution and declining global religious freedom.

Our own system of constitutional democracy, and our national security, depend upon it.

Thank you for having me here tonight.

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