About the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs

The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, created within the Office of the President in March 2006, is part of a university-wide effort to build knowledge about religion’s role in world affairs and promote interreligious understanding in the service of peace. The Center explores the intersection of religion with contemporary global challenges. Through research, teaching, and outreach activities, the Berkley Center builds knowledge, promotes dialogue, and supports action in the service of peace. Thomas Banchoff, Associate Professor in the Department of Government and the School of Foreign Service, is the Center’s founding director.

About the LUCE/SFS Program on Religion and International Affairs

The Luce/SFS Program on Religion and International Affairs has been exploring the intersection of faith, world politics, and diplomacy since September 2006. A collaboration between the Henry Luce Foundation, the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service (SFS) and the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs at Georgetown University, the Luce/SFS Program initially focused on two issue areas: Religion and Global Development and Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy. A follow-on award from the Luce Foundation in November 2008 has enabled the continued growth of both program areas and the addition of two more: Government Outreach and an online Religion and International Affairs Network.
INTRODUCTION

On October 28, 2010 scholars and policy makers gathered on the campus of Georgetown University to explore the relationships between religious freedom and national security.

The definition of religious freedom varies and its role in communal life and foreign policy is contested. Many definitions include some of the following components. The right of individuals to believe or not, and of individuals and religious communities to pursue the practices that stem from their beliefs. Those practices include worship, teaching, raising children in the faith, building houses of worship, and choosing and training clergy. They also include the right of all individuals and communities in a society, on the basis of equality under the law, to share their faith with others, peacefully and noncoercively, to perform charitable services, and to make religiously-informed arguments about public laws and policies, within due limits.

Two panels of scholars and policy experts engaged the question of whether there is a link between America’s national security and levels of religious freedom abroad, especially in Muslim-majority nations. Some also addressed the problem of how, if such a link exists, American policy might employ its existing policy of advancing religious freedom as a pro-democracy, counter-extremism strategy. A keynote address was delivered by the U.S. Special Envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the honorable Rashad Hussain.

Some panelists argued that there was an important relationship between religious freedom and national security. Some reasoned that a more effective U.S. policy of advancing religious liberty in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq would help counter religious terrorism in those countries, and increase the security of the United States. One panelist strongly disagreed with these assessments, insisting that the absence of religious freedom is not a cause, but an effect of extremism, and that U.S. international religious freedom policy cannot successfully be used to undermine it. What follows is a series of excerpts from this vigorous discussion. We believe you will find it stimulating and informative.

Beginning in 2011, the Berkley Center’s Religious Freedom Project, supported by the John Templeton Foundation, will engage a team of leading international scholars to explore different understandings of religious liberty and its importance for democracy, economic and social development, international diplomacy, and the struggle against religious extremism.

Thomas Farr
Visiting Associate Professor, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service
Senior Fellow, Berkley Center
REPORT OF THE GEORGETOWN SYMPOSIUM ON
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND
NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY

Program

Welcome: Thomas Farr, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs

Religious Freedom in U.S. National Security Policy
Pauletta Otis, Professor of Security Studies, Command and Staff College, Marine Corps University
William Inboden, Distinguished Scholar, Strauss Center for International Security and Law; Assistant Professor, LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas
Eric Patterson, Assistant Director, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs; Visiting Assistant Professor of Government, Georgetown University
Moderator: Jennifer Marshall, Director, Richard and Helen DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society

Keynote Address: Rashad Hussain, U.S. Special Envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference

Religious Freedom and National Security in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq
Knox Thames, Director of Policy and Research, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
Andrew Natsios, Georgetown University; former USAID Administrator
Touqir Hussain, Professor, Georgetown University; former Pakistani Ambassador to Brazil, Spain, and Japan
Moderator: Rebecca Johnson, Georgetown Public Policy Institute and Marine Corps University
Under what conditions might greater U.S. support for religious liberty abroad help to reduce political instability, religious radicalism, and terrorist violence? Under what conditions might religious liberty advance democratization, social harmony, and economic development?

Paulettta Otis
If by religious liberty we mean inclusive pluralism under the law, such liberty is fundamental to democracy, social harmony, and economic stability. Religious liberty is more than the simple freedom to believe and practice a “religion.” It is the power of ideas, values, beliefs, and related behaviors that support the ideals a society holds as aspirational.

A country can claim to be democratic only to the extent that the free exchange of ideas is supported. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes (1919) stated, “the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas ... that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market.” According to this way of thinking, no society needs to fear religious liberty if that liberty is supported by the free trade in ideas.

William Inboden
In the late 1990s when the Taliban first took power in Afghanistan, the main voices in the West raising alarms about the Taliban's depredations were women's rights advocates and religious freedom advocates. In contrast, at the time much of the foreign policy establishment took little interest in Afghanistan, which was determined to be outside the scope of the national interest, however lamentable the Taliban's oppression might be. ... This is not at all to imply that the West’s relative indifference to religious persecution in Afghanistan in any way caused the September 11 attacks, but rather to make the point that severe violations of religious freedom can sometimes serve as a diagnostic device to signal the presence of terrorist elements that potentially pose a security threat.

Religion-based terrorism shares some common attributes with religious persecution. Both define themselves by intolerance of persons of different religious identities; both seek to employ coercive (often violent) measures; both claim a monopoly on truth that denies any rights of dissent; both regard religious dissent as a first-order threat to their goals. Likewise, often the most effective voices against religion-based terrorism are other religious persons themselves who advance a peaceful, tolerant interpretation of their faith.

In a democracy, religious freedom is an indispensable ingredient. There is not a single nation in the world that is an established democracy yet also engages in severe violations of religious liberty. This is in part because religious freedom includes other civil liberties such as freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and
freedom of association. Religious freedom is an essential pillar of a free and prosperous society, as it helps create the conditions for property rights, rule of law, civil society, and mediating institutions that facilitate democratic institutions and economic growth.

**Is there a link between America’s security concerns and religious freedom abroad?**

**Eric Patterson**

President Obama’s National Security Strategy (NSS) lays out four “enduring American interests,” all of which have connections to issues of religious liberty. For instance, the U.S. and its allies are not threatened by any religious liberty-loving government or group, but we are challenged in various ways by those who deny religious and other liberties: China, Iran, North Korea, and others. Religious freedom supports a strong economy and an open global economy based on individual freedom, the rule of law, trust, and moral behavior. Indeed, the financial meltdown of the past 18 months is based in the erosion of the rule of law and trust in the marketplace. And religious liberty supports an international order characterized by peace, security, and opportunity; it is tyrannical governments and/or authoritarian religious monopolies that threaten and feel threatened by such an international consensus.

**William Inboden**

Winning the “war of ideas” – or even making progress in it – will depend on protecting and empowering those religious voices who contend for peaceful interpretations of their faith and who refute the versions that support terrorism. Promoting religious freedom is the most effective way to do this. It not only provides space for reformist voices, but also helps ameliorate the “enabling environment” of religious intolerance in which extremist ideologies often thrive. There is a notable correlation between religious freedom and security; one would be hard-pressed to find a nation that respects religious freedom and also poses a security threat to the United States.

**Knox Thames**

The conflict in Afghanistan is occurring within a religious narrative, as the Taliban and al-Qaeda both espouse religious worldviews to justify their ambitions. However, much of the U.S. foreign policy establishment seems to view the role of religion as irrelevant or almost so. For instance, nowhere in the 2010 “Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy” does the word “religion” appear. South Asia is one of the most religious regions of the world, and U.S. policymakers seem to accord it no role or consideration in their planning.

At the same time, while the U.S. may be disengaged, the Taliban and other anti-government elements continue to expand their influence over religion. The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) reported this summer on how religious moderates in Afghanistan are being forced to the political margins or cowed into silence through violence. Many of these leaders likely fear prosecution, imprisonment, and possible execution for statements that could be considered blasphemous by opponents of their moderate views. With this occurring, religious extremists dominate the discussion about religion and politics, further pulling Afghanistan towards the very groups the U.S. intervened against. Some, however, are becoming sensitive to these concerns. American Rear Adm. Gregory Smith, chief spokesman for NATO forces, was quoted by *The Washington Post* in October saying that the Taliban has “co-opted the religious narrative” for several years.

To have impact, the United States needs to incorporate a
greater awareness of the religious dynamic into its strategy. Specifically, the United States needs to augment its counterinsurgency efforts with a greater sensitivity to the role of religion and specific religious leaders.

* When, where, and why might an emphasis on religious liberty provoke negative reactions abroad that undermine American political and security interests? Might a wise and prudent religious liberty policy overcome such objections and if so how? *

**William Inboden**

It is almost the norm that countries with religious liberty violations are also implicated in other American political and security interests. ... For example, American adversaries that do not respect religious freedom but also preoccupy American policy in other important areas include Iran (nuclear weapons program, terrorism support) and North Korea (nuclear weapons program, proliferation). In each of these cases, American policy focuses on the security concern often to the neglect of religious freedom. Other nations that violate religious freedom yet hold additional significant interests for the United States include China (trade, currency reserves, maritime security, non-proliferation), Saudi Arabia (counter-terrorism, energy, regional security), Egypt (counter-terrorism, regional security), Pakistan (counter-terrorism, regional security, non-proliferation), Uzbekistan (regional security), Vietnam (trade, regional security), Russia (non-proliferation, energy, regional security), and numerous others. In many of these cases, for American policymakers the more immediate security and political concerns trump any meaningful religious freedom advocacy. On one level this is understandable. Time and diplomatic capital spent on religious freedom can come at the expense of other issues and foreign governments resentful of American pressure can (and sometimes do) reduce their cooperation in other areas if the U.S. raises religious freedom. Yet in the long-term – and often in the short and medium-term – increasing religious freedom is also in the American interest.

**Pauletta Otis**

There are two perspectives: (1) us, and (2) them. Insofar as the United States is concerned, Americans need to know the religious history of the United States, which includes religious factionalism as well as the ways the United States has handled religious disputes based on the strictures of the First Amendment. The freedoms stated as speech, religion, assembly, and petition are freedoms associated with communication of ideas, i.e., the limits on freedom are those related to behaviors – not beliefs. Americans “handle” [religious and political controversy] ... in public, in the press, and in the courts. The conflicts do not lead to street violence, genocide, mob rule, or government repression.

The second perspective is “them.” Working with others to address problems requires seeing their problems are “our” problems – which together, can be addressed in humility and wisdom. This is true not only in the sense of a “global humanity” but specifically when violence crosses state borders: the well-being of the commons is inherently a common interest.

Religious freedom is easy to subscribe to in the abstract; far more difficult in the concrete. It is not that people in other countries do not want religious liberty; it is often that they do not know how such ideas would “work” in their society without engendering social chaos. Their concerns may be verbalized in different ways: “young people would not respect their parents, there would be fighting in the streets, international religious movements would engage in proselytizing, the core values of the society would be compromised, etc.” The reaction to these fears should not be one of judgment – but one of compassion and helpfulness.

**Eric Patterson**

I would like to contrast the President’s June 2009 Cairo speech and his National Security Strategy (NSS) published in May 2010. The Cairo speech called for a “new beginning” with the Muslim world and it overtly championed religious liberty for all, to the loud applause of the live audience and millions worldwide. The Cairo speech called for a “new beginning” with the Muslim world and it overtly championed religious liberty for all, to the loud applause of the live audience and millions worldwide. Indeed, survey research demonstrates that religious and civil liberties are popular worldwide, including in Muslim-majority countries. Obama linked religious freedom with other critical liberties: speech, conscience, assembly, private property, and press. However, for all of its many merits – the speech was just a speech. To this day, and despite its savvy media operation, there is little for the
Obama administration to trumpet as tangible success following Cairo.

In contrast, the National Security Strategy of the United States (NSS), published in May, outlines the key strategic priorities for this administration. NSS documents are congressionally mandated documents that establish the strategic landscape, and they result (by law) in the Secretary of Defense’s National Defense Strategy and the Joint Chief’s National Military Strategy. These documents then become increasingly operationalized at lower levels. All of this says nothing about how other agencies (e.g., State, CIA) respond to the NSS.

When the “New Beginning” is placed beside the NSS, we have a conundrum on issues of religious and individual liberty. Cairo was the aspirational moment of the Obama presidency, but security policy derives from the NSS, and it says next to nothing about religious or civil liberties. In short, a wise and prudent American religious liberty policy would begin by operationalizing, in a whole-of-government fashion, concrete policy action congruent with U.S. foreign policy and security interests.

The Obama administration’s 2010 National Security Strategy does not mention religious freedom, although it does have a section on “Values.” Is this omission significant? What are the ramifications, and possibilities, for U.S. security policy?

Paulettta Otis
The inclusion of religious liberty in the 2010 NSS may matter to a domestic, attentive audience; it is less likely to matter to the rest of the world. We are known by our actions and have an enviable historical record of religious inclusion that is well-known and documented. The challenge is to support foreign policy goals that are consistent with fundamental American values and do so in a way that leads by example. The interesting point here is that the NSS emphasizes the role of leadership through example. It states: “... the most important way for the United States of America to promote our values is to live them.”

Eric Patterson
The 2010 NSS says little positive about religion, and is blind to the nexus of U.S. interests and global religious liberty. The NSS asserts that the world is “polarized” by “race, region, and religion” and that the route to peace is by replacing them with “a galvanizing sense of shared interests.” This negative language should not be surprising; in September 2010 the President told the UN “ancient hatreds and religious divides are now ascendant.”

The 2010 NSS does argue that it is in America’s interest to support “universal values” worldwide. These values are poorly defined in the NSS, but generally seem to mean human and electoral rights. But the values portions of the NSS says very little about the foundational experiences and ideas in the American past that undergird and inform those values, nor does it lay out a defense for the centrality of freedoms of religion, conscience, and belief to all of the other “values” in the document.

William Inboden
In full disclosure, I played a significant role at the staff level in the design and drafting of the Bush administration’s 2006 National Security Strategy. That said, the absence of religious freedom from the 2010 NSS is puzzling and disappointing. Puzzling because President Obama elsewhere has made laudable statements on religious freedom (most notably in his 2009 Cairo speech), and disappointing because of the missed opportunity to make religious freedom a strategic priority, particularly in what is arguably the administration’s most important foreign policy document. The reasons for this are unclear, though when coupled with the inexcusable 17-month delay in the appointment of an International Religious Freedom (IRF) Ambassador, and the general lack of any visible religious freedom advocacy, might indicate that religious freedom is not a priority for the Obama administration.

The contrasts with the 2006 NSS are revealing. Religious liberty is not only mentioned numerous times in the document, but in at least four distinctive ways. First, it is described as the “First Freedom,” and thus given a priority as well as theoretical grounding as a foundation for other freedoms. Second, it is integrated with other liberties in a comprehensive picture of a free society (“In effective democracies, freedom is indivisible. Political, religious, and economic liberty advance together and re-
inforce each other”). Third, it is identified not only as an intrinsic good, but also as an indispensable component of counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization, specifically as a tool to “empower peaceful Muslims to practice and interpret their faith.” Fourth, it is integrated into the context of great power relations with nations such as China (e.g., “China’s leaders must see that they cannot let their population increasingly experience the freedoms to buy, sell, and produce, while denying them the rights to assemble, speak, and worship”). While the 2006 NSS may have given the most extensive treatment of religious freedom, it is not alone in prioritizing the issue. For example, the 1999 NSS issued by the Clinton administration declared, “promotion of religious freedom is one of the highest concerns in our foreign policy. Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is a bedrock issue for the American people.”

What concrete policy prescriptions do you suggest to advance religious freedom in the context of broader U.S. national security interests?

William Inboden
The U.S. can mitigate against religious freedom advocacy harming other interests in part by the following measures: First, integrate religious freedom promotion as a consistent policy priority across all bilateral relationships. Doing so will prevent any other government from complaining of being “singled-out” or that religious freedom is being raised selectively and insincerely. Second, be flexible in how religious freedom is promoted, depending on the timing, venue (public or private; bilateral or multilateral), tools (carrots or sticks or both). Third, ensure that religious freedom is raised by principal-level officials and regional officials, and not just the IRF Ambassador. Doing so will demonstrate its connection with other important issues and locate it in an appropriate strategic context.

NSS documents are important for the message they send to the world about an administration’s strategic framework and priorities, and for the guidance they give to all relevant departments and agencies in the U.S. government on implementing the strategy. While the 2010 NSS is a disappointment in this respect, the Obama administration can still remedy this neglect by issuing a National Security Policy Directive (NSPD) instructing all relevant departments and agencies to make religious freedom a priority, delivering a presidential speech or other high-level public statement on religious freedom, and empowering the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom.
Eric Patterson

It is not too late for the Obama administration to alter course, to operationalize the Cairo vision by marrying it to national security objectives. The first step is to publicly champion human liberty in a whole-of-government fashion: at present there is simply no linkage between the governance and anti-corruption efforts of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the religious freedom mandate of the State Department, the National Endowment for Democracy, and other similar offices across agencies. Second, the U.S. government need not be heavy-handed, but should firmly call on all states to uphold their commitments under binding international law – such as the promise to protect religious freedom enshrined in the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, which nearly every country has signed. It is difficult to do so, however, with key posts unfilled in the administration – most notably the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. Third, the government can call upon the rich religious capital of the American citizenry and serve as an intercivilizational bridge on issues of religiously-inspired difference and conflict in a way impossible for our European allies.

Knox Thames

The U.S. needs a “whole-of-government response.” The United States could pursue these activities in the following ways:

*High-level coordination.* Right now, the United States has an ad hoc array of offices and envoys working on religion issues, without any strategic guidance or framework. Staffing a senior position, such as at the National Security Council, could help pull these disparate initiatives into a synchronized effort.

*Increase the State Department’s ability to understand religion.* The State Department’s excellent, though small, Office of International Religious Freedom has recently expanded its work from reporting to include interfaith engagement. To continue its efforts in these areas and to meet this new challenge, the staff would also need to be expanded to meet the needs of such an operation and have an expeditionary capacity.

*Build up the chaplaincy corps’ capacity to engage religious leaders.* A new doctrine was established last year on religious leader engagement, through the issuance of Joint Publication 1-05 for religious affairs in joint operations, which gives commanders the option of using chaplains to engage religious leaders in their area of responsibil-
ity. Chaplains have the potential to help commanders understand the needs of local communities on these complex battlefields from a religious perspective while not violating their noncombatant status. The program is just getting off the ground, and if properly resourced and if chaplains are properly trained for this new mission, it could become a real asset.

Better understand the religious dynamics on the ground. The Foreign Service Institute and the various professional military education schools need to increase their teaching on religion and religious freedom before U.S. personnel are deployed.

Engage in theater. The U.S. should ensure that engagement or partnership with Afghan religious leaders is mindful of the religious dynamic and respectful of international standards of religious freedom. Initial steps are being taken in this direction, such as through the Af/Pak Center for Excellence at CENTCOM and the work of some chaplains there. In addition, increased public diplomacy efforts and additional Voice of America coverage of discussions about religion in society, religious tolerance, and freedom should also occur.

What is the intersection of U.S. religious freedom initiatives and the cultural and security situation of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq?

Touqir Hussain
The relationship of religious freedom in Pakistan and U.S. national security cannot be examined without looking at what has gone wrong in and around Pakistan, the contribution of U.S.-Pakistani relations, and U.S. foreign policy in the region and across the broader Islamic world. Yes, religious freedom as a fundamental right does exist in the Pakistan Constitution. Article 20 of the constitution guarantees religious freedom. But in reality societies do not always live life consistent with their constitutional liberties or even religious beliefs ...

To begin with, the laws themselves have sabotaged these liberties. The Ahmadis continue to be treated as non-Muslims and the blasphemy laws (295-298 of the Pakistan Penal Code) remain on the books. In practice, the situation is even worse. The blasphemy laws impact on minorities more than Muslims. Incidents of attacks on churches and places of worship of the Ahmadiyya community continue to happen, and charges of blasphemy are mainly against non-Muslims. These communities do not feel safe.

How is it that Pakistan has strayed too far away from the moderate liberal and secular vision of its founder Jinnah? There is a battle raging for the soul of Pakistan with competing visions of the idea of Pakistan, its identity and national purpose, and – last but not least – the place of religion in the society. Indeed there are competing visions of religion itself. The country has been further caught up in the crosscurrents of sectarian, ethno-linguistic and other domestic tensions.

Andrew Natsios
Religious intolerance by one group or another in Afghanistan and Iraq is certainly one factor of several exacerbating internal tensions in both countries; this intolerance is often layered on top of tribal and ethnic conflict. The Taliban is a tribally based insurgency, which has grown out of one of the sub-clans of the Pashtun tribe believing in a more puritanical interpretation of Islam that has been associated with Salafism (which does not recognize any of the other Islamic traditions that have developed since the first three generations of the Prophet’s time). Sufism is one of the other great traditions of Islam, which was for centuries the dominant one in Afghanistan and central Asia. The Sufists and Salafists are theological adversaries. Sufism as it is practiced in the Muslim world now represents a much...
more tolerant tradition of mystical Islam which conflicts with Salafist teaching. When al-Qaeda (which advocates an extreme and violent interpretation of Salafism) and the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan they conducted several massacres of the Sufi brotherhoods.

Any effort to introduce the concept of tolerance in either Afghan or Iraqi society might be seen as an effort to support Sufism against Salafist or Wahhabist schools of Islam. Western policymakers have often seen the Sufi brotherhoods as their natural allies in any effort to introduce notions of tolerance of other religious traditions. The problem with taking this route is that it associates a discussion of tolerance with one tradition of Islam. It is certainly a legitimate way of approaching the issue, but is not the only approach.

Knox Thames
Religion matters in Afghanistan, but the United States has accorded the religious dynamic insufficient consideration in its strategic planning and engagement. The Taliban and other insurgents meanwhile have effectively hijacked religion and use it to justify their violent acts against U.S. and International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF). Politically moderate religious leaders are forced to the sideline through violence and intimidation, giving anti-government elements free reign to force their extremist religious views on the population. The result is a rising tide of violent religious extremism that could overwhelm the Afghan government in Kabul.

In this context, can the United States engage the religious landscape in a way that promotes U.S. national security and individual freedoms? Can the negative religious narrative offered by the Taliban be challenged to undermine their popularity with the population at large? Can the United States push for religious freedom protections in a way that counters extremism and does not trigger a backlash resulting in greater abuses? The answer to all three is yes, but it will take dexterity, sensitivity, and commitment. What is the relationship between religion, religious freedom, and democracy in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq?

Andrew Natsios
Another approach, perhaps more likely to succeed, might be to take a secular legal and constitutional approach to tolerance based on the U.S. and other western political experiences. Since Salafist Islamic groups (often funded by Saudi Arabian missionary efforts) are minorities in both Afghanistan and Iraq, the argument could be made to these groups that they would be best protected by a culture of religious freedom where they could worship and teach without persecution. This might have a considerable appeal to Salafists who are under attack by other traditions. Such an appeal might get support from the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani—the most revered theological figure in entire Shiite world—in Iraq who initially opposed the notion of an extra-majority vote of Iraqi provinces approving the Iraqi constitution in 2004. But when the concept of majority rule with minority rights, which implied a broad consensus of a country’s population for constitutional arrangements of power, was explained to him he embraced the idea of an extra majority vote. Given the terrible suffering of Shiite Muslims (who make up 60% of the population of the country) under Saddam Hussein’s government and the historical oppression of Shiites by the ruling Sunnis for many years before Saddam, the protection of the religious freedom of all people in Iraq would be appealing to the Grand Ayatollah as a way of protecting his followers regardless of who governs in Iraq.

Touqir Hussain
Democracy may provide an enabling environment for religious freedom, but Pakistan unfortunately is barely a democracy. Democracy is a graded experience which nations acquire by hard work in schooling themselves in literacy and appropriate habits of thought, accommodation, and tolerance, and by modernizing social structures with openness to such concepts as rights of man, people’s sovereignty and humanistic values. It also involves harmonizing the tribal, ethnic, regional, religious, and sectarian divisions, if any. Pakistan’s regressive social order and the political culture and mental habits that go with it are not simply consistent with democratic norms, which foster religious tolerance and freedom.

Years of authoritarian rule, degraded rule of law, deformed democracy, and weak institutional architecture have collided with Pakistan’s societal tensions not only encouraging a public tendency over time to resort to extremist solutions but also leading to crisis of governance. No wonder
Pakistan has been unsuccessful in finding an open and stable political process that promotes tolerance and liberal habits of the mind and supports justice for all, not only for the citizenry but also for the smaller provinces and minorities.

Pakistan’s internal dynamics have not been the only problem. Poor governance made Pakistan dependent on financiers like the United States and Saudi Arabia, who have exploited Pakistan’s religious infrastructure (especially during the Afghan jihad of the 1980’s) and the services of a capable and professional army to further their own political and strategic agendas, adding to the extremist tendencies and the mindset that limits religious freedom. Not only U.S. foreign policy and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry (for which Pakistan has provided the main battleground), but also global Islamic revivalism and regional dynamics (especially the festering Kashmir issue) have played havoc with Pakistan.

Knox Thames
The weak and weakly secular Afghan government cannot withstand the pressure religious leaders can bring to bear on social and political issues. The outcome is that when the government moves to accommodate their views, it becomes more religious and less secular, more rigid and less accommodating.

This is happening already – in the early fall, the 350-member government-backed Ulema Council voted to demand that President Karzai implement sharia law. Considering the body advises on new legislation and the implementation of promulgated laws, this is an alarming development. The Council is only nominally independent, as the Afghan government reportedly pays members’ salaries, yet the Council’s positions have become increasingly extreme. If their demands were implemented, it would constitute a major reversal of progress made on human rights and democracy since the fall of the Taliban.

By leaving these forces unaddressed and by allowing their inclusion into the Karzai government, there is a real possibility that the blood and treasure spent by the United States to oust the Taliban could ultimately result in the re-installment of neo-Taliban rule. Therefore, part of the answer is to prevent religious extremists from dominating the debate on religious matters by allowing and protecting other Islamic perspectives. Creating a civic space in Afghanistan where different religious interpretations can be shared and debated on a variety of critical issues, both

Andrew Natsios (left), Touqir Hussain (right)
religious and political, can give politically moderate religious leaders the critical oxygen they need to survive.

Call this supporting religious freedom or creating civic space for Muslims, but either way it would counter extremism. The opening of civic space would help displace insurgent influence from social networks by creating opportunities for peaceful religious debate, alternative views, and pluralism. New voices could emerge with alternative and less violent interpretations of Islam. This could supplant the insurgents’ religious views that have sway over the population, helping to lead to their marginalization by denying them a popular base in the Islamic faith.

Is religious freedom in the Middle East and Central Asia truly a national security concern for the U.S.? Does the U.S. need to change course?

Touqir Hussain
The nature of the threat to U.S. security is different in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Afghanistan, it comes from potential state failure and its takeover by the Taliban and their affiliate al-Qaeda and Afghanistan once again becoming a haven for international terrorism. In Pakistan, it comes directly from terrorism, most of it al-Qaeda and its affiliates like Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Pakistani Taliban, which in turn is hosted by an extremist world view, societal mindset, and infrastructure such as madrassas. Not to mention the broader context of a jihad-based security paradigm, sectarian tensions, rise of fundamentalist Islamic interpretation, to which even the young and the educated are falling prey, and the failure of institutions. Such institutions as exist to mediate the differences lack capacity, integrity, and autonomy being subservient to the centers of power.

The U.S. cannot approach extremism by working for religious freedom. Extremism is a separate and indeed the main challenge. Religious freedom or the lack of it is a reflection of it, not the other way round. It is a subtext of extremism if one may call it that. Pakistan, like some other countries of the Islamic world, has been under a slow and sustained assault from an illiberal, pro-Western elite, and religious extremism has been fomenting such popular feelings as national honor, social discontent, and religious identity. The liberal intelligentsia has been protesting in the name of freedom and progress and the weak and vulnerable masses could do no more than despair and contemplate extreme and illusionary avenues to empowerment, swayed as they were by ideologues and demagogues. Both have a constituency.

Knox Thames
“Creating a civic space in Afghanistan where different religious interpretations can be shared and debated on a variety of critical issues, both religious and political, can give politically moderate religious leaders the critical oxygen they need to survive.”

The U.S. has alienated both, on one hand by having historically blocked true democratic reform by supporting the army and on the other by appearing to be working against Islam in the wake of 9/11. They are now both united in a fierce nationalism triggered by the war on terrorism and the Afghanistan war, both of which are seen as the cause of increasing threat to Pakistan’s integrity and stability and an affront to its sovereignty, especially through drone attacks. Anti-Americanism is making people vulnerable to the radical propaganda. So, in a deadly paradox, the democratic surge and the religious surge both overlap and conflict. The challenge is how to unscramble the egg. Religion has not caused all this frenzy, it is merely giving expression to it. Religion has become an idiom of expression of people’s anger, fear, and hopes, spurred by social discontent, economic dissatisfaction, political frustration, and personal unhappiness. Islam is thus becoming a mix of idealism, ideology, religiosity, populism, nationalism, moral and political activism, social discontent, economic dissatisfaction, political frustration, and personal unhappiness. In fact, by its policies the U.S. is
strengthening the extremist forces, the very forces that pose a national security threat to her. So the immediate objective is to do something about these policies so as to weaken these radical forces.

Can the United States effectively champion religious freedom in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq, or are its efforts more likely to harm than help?

Touqir Hussain
Is religious freedom susceptible to direct influence by the U.S.? No. Can the U.S. help? Yes, but not with the present policies. The U.S. does not even understand these societies very well, mainly because there has been no need to. It always related to them through a predatory elite and not directly with people. People are getting ready to overthrow this system and, along with that, the power that sustains it – that is, the U.S. The U.S. has become an indirect adversary. One needs to change the context of the relationship with the U.S. so that it is seen as beneficial to people. Only then can the U.S. influence the domestic dynamics and promote conciliation and accommodation and coexistence.

Any direct role in promoting religious liberty not only will not work but will be counter-productive. The talk of an unavoidable conflict among religions is emphasized only by the extremists and hardliners who are motivated by their domestic and local considerations. By cultivating the fear of the “others,” they get more support for their hard-line perspective; they tend to make people more inward-looking with an increased fear or distrust of those who do not belong to their religion. The hard-line religious approach builds pressures on religious minorities in any country, although the nature of pressure varies. At times, the phobia is created about the threat from a religious minority, Christians or Jews in Muslim-majority countries, Muslims in a non-Muslim-majority country. The rise of religious intolerance in Afghanistan and Pakistan threatens religious and cultural conflict and societal disharmony because both societies, especially Pakistan and Afghanistan, are multi-religious and multi-ethnic with differences among the Muslim denominational groups.

The U.S. needs to encourage liberal and tolerant tendencies in these countries against the backdrop of democracy. If religious hard-line groups are pushed back, the society and state become secure. This also eases security pressures on the U.S. in Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, religious and cultural tolerance/intolerance is closely linked with social and economic conditions and above all people’s empowerment and feeling about whether they are getting social and economic justice. There is a need to address the issue of human security, and issues of poverty and underdevelopment in these societies. It is going to be a slow process but long-term societal security in Pakistan and Afghanistan requires immediate attention to these issues with a focus on societal development. This will discourage religious extremism and terrorism in these countries. And it is doable. The tide of extremism is reversible. The West is employing the wrong policies, which instead of weakening are strengthening extremism and making it look like a bigger challenge than it is really is.

Andrew Natsios
The argument could be made in Afghanistan that every Islamic tradition – even those which are outside of Islam such as the small Buddhist community, the animists in Nuristan, or small groups of Christians – would be better protected by a constitutional and legal framework of general religious tolerance. Afghan and Iraqi leaders and their followers may at some point become so exhausted by the years of pervasive violence – which the clash of religion and tribe has caused in both countries – that a policy of tolerance may have considerable appeal. Such a debate should be framed by several principles.

It must to be organized and led by the people and leaders in the two countries and not be seen as a U.S. government or even an international community initiative. No policy change will occur unless it is locally sustainable and that requires roots within the societies themselves. It would have to be contextualized to the present circumstances in each country, and the strategy tailored by local leaders to that context. Trying to impose some standard template for change and reform in every country is a recipe for failure. Change usually happens over time, incrementally rather than all at once. And so any effort should have a long time horizon. The debate should engage the leaders of various religious traditions and tribes, but also the
general public, using the medium of radio broadcasting. In Afghanistan, radio is the principal source of mass popular entertainment in both rural and urban areas and would be the logical means for introducing the legal and constitutional notion of tolerance to a larger audience than just the elites. This might also put public pressure on leaders to consider these ideas. Since both countries are overwhelmingly Muslim, some effort might be made to capture parts of the Prophet’s sayings, which support the notion of tolerance. For example, the Quran teaches “there is no compulsion in religion.”

Knox Thames
Two interconnected approaches are suggested – one empowering and protecting actors on the ground and one that exposes Afghans to outside experts and new information. This approach would not be the answer to the challenges in Afghanistan, but it would be part of the overall U.S. effort. In this regard, some possible activities could include:

Bolstering the position of Afghans who advocate respect for religious tolerance. Steps can be taken to amplify the voices of politically moderate religious leaders, political reformers, and human rights defenders.

Inclusive reconciliation talks. With frequent news stories about ongoing overtures to the Taliban and the contours of a grand bargain on the drawing board, now is the time to ensure that politically moderate religious leaders, representatives of civil society, including Shi’a Muslims, members of other religious and ethnic minorities, and women are included in reconciliation talks.

Security. For those willing to express divergent views, steps must be taken to ensure their safety. In the context of Iraq, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCRIF) recommended that the Iraqi government “fund, train, and deploy police units for vulnerable minority communities that are as representative as possible of those communities.”

Exposing Afghan religious leaders to other models of mosque/state relations. The U.S. government can facilitate trips of Afghan religious leaders to the United States through the International Visitors Program. Also useful would be similar tours through Islamic countries like Indonesia and Turkey, where democracy and Islam are working well together (albeit imperfectly).

Increasing people-to-people exchanges, or perhaps priest-to-priest. If it is difficult to bring Afghan religious leaders out, then we should take Americans in. The September visit of the U.S. Special Envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference, Rashad Hussain, was hugely successful, as he was able to “talk religion” with high-level Afghan government officials, religious leaders, civil society representatives, and students. Other U.S. officials with a religion portfolio should also visit, like the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, the Special Representative to Muslim Communities, the Special Envoy on Anti-Semitism, and Commissioners from USCIRF. Further, such efforts could be undertaken with interfaith delegations of American religious leaders.

Andrew Natsios

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Education. Programs administered by USAID should lead to the development of primary and secondary education, such as through printing textbooks that incorporate religious tolerance and religious freedom. The Afghan constitution recognizes the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, so the curriculum for both secular and religious schools that are controlled or under the oversight of the government should have materials on international human rights standards.
Summary of the Remarks of Rashad Hussain
U.S. Special Envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference

My role as President Obama’s Special Envoy to the OIC is to deepen and expand our partnerships with Muslim communities around the world, as outlined in the framework he set forth in Cairo last year. As the President has stated and emphasized, all people around the world, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, or they’re in a Muslim country or a non-Muslim majority country, they share many of the same fundamental concerns and aspirations. And I found that to be true in my travels, and whether I’m in the United States or in a Muslim-majority country when I ask people “what are your major concerns,” they’ll say we’re concerned about jobs, we’re concerned about the ability of our children to get a good education, to have quality healthcare. And so we want to make sure that when we engage that we’re engaged on the basis of those issues, and that we don’t securitize exclusively our relations with Muslim communities around the world.

Often times when people bring up these issues the first things that come to mind, or the first thing that they discuss, are counter terrorism issues or many of the political conflicts. And while those of course continue to be crucial components of our national security strategy and our policy – and we work to address those issues head on and those are many of the issues that the President addressed first and directly in his speech at Cairo – we have to make sure that we’re also planting the seeds for long term partnerships in these areas as well. Because, as we’ve said, we cannot engage one fourth of the world’s population based on the beliefs of a fringe few. And so we are working hard to establish partnerships in education, in entrepreneurship, in health, in science and technology, and there’s literally dozens of programs that have been implemented.

Now, with regard to the issue of violent extremism, the President stressed in Cairo the fact that this is something that is rejected in Islam. He referenced a very famous verse from the Qu’ran which makes clear that killing one innocent person is as if you’ve killed the entirety of humanity in Islam, and this is a message that the President has repeated throughout his time in office, including in the aftermath of the Fort Hood incident, the attempted terrorist attack on December 25, and the attempted terrorist attack in Times Square. And we’ve been very clear about the fact that we cannot let that tiny minority – that handful of people, that would seek to create a wedge between the United States and Muslim communities around the world – we cannot allow them to do that based on those actions, and we cannot fall into this trap of thinking that our relationship is based exclusively around issues like violent extremism. But it is an important issue, and this is the first major area where I think it
intersects with a discussion about religious tolerance and religious freedom.

And that is that we often wonder with the widespread condemnation of violent extremism, the consensus among qualified scholars in Islam that this is something that is totally rejected by their religious faith and religious tradition, how is it that we continue to lose young people to this ideology?

It is clear that throughout the tradition there is no place for the idea that you can kill innocent people as a way of addressing your grievances, no matter how serious those grievances, and how real those grievances may be. But the debate needs to occur at a more robust level in many places, and religious scholars need to be able to speak freely and openly on these issues, and I would say that in the work that I’m doing that is one of the first areas where I have seen a clear intersection between religious freedom, religious tolerance, religious dialogue, and national security. There are countries that I’ve been to where just mentioning these ideas and saying that this type of violent extremism is rejected by the faith actually puts religious scholars in danger.

The more open a government is towards these types of debates, it helps our national security in the sense that it becomes very clear what the scholars of Islam and many leaders of the Muslim community have made clear already, which is that violent extremism is something that is totally rejected by Islam and every other religious faith.

The second major point that’s directly related to my work is that the protection of religious freedom and the promotion of religious tolerance has a significant impact on our ability to advance our foreign policy agenda and partner with Muslim communities around the world.

Here is an example: I was in Afghanistan meeting with President Karzai, and we were discussing many of the major foreign policy issues, and some of the grievances that he has with regard to foreign policy in other areas. But when it came to the issue of religious freedom he spoke very, very positively about the United States and he told a story of a time when he was in the United States and he was with his mother and it was time for her to do her prayers and the time was running short and they were in a grocery store. And he related the story about how his mother began to do her prayers in the grocery store, and the security guard approached them, and his natural inclination was that he became a little bit concerned about what the security guard

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was going to do. But it turns out what the security guard did was put down something for her to pray on and to make sure that no one disrupted her in her prayers, and so to him that was a shining example of religious freedom in the United States and it spoke very positively towards our sincerity in our efforts to reach out to Muslim communities.

There’ve been a number of recent controversies that in my travels abroad people have raised questions about, and they’re directly related to issues of religious freedom and religious tolerance and our ability to communicate our message. And the most high profile of those issues of course was the recent proposal by a pastor in Florida with a congregation of between 30 and 50 people to burn the holy Qur’an on September 11th. Now this was something that caused a great deal of concern in Muslim communities around the world. It was a little bit tricky from a government perspective on how to get involved because at first you see something like this and obviously it’s a crazy idea, it’s a disgusting act and something that should be condemned. At the same time you’re living in a world with six billion people and there’re going to be crazy people everywhere, and so rather than raising the profile of this issue and addressing every single person, every single potential act, there’s an inclination to try to make sure that this doesn’t get the attention that would raise the profile of such an act, because it doesn’t deserve that type of attention. But at the same time as we saw very clearly this lack of respect for religious tolerance, this lack of respect for religion, quickly became a national security issue (e.g. rioting, safety of our troops).

And since the pastor backed down, everyone has been very appreciative of the fact that we were again able to have this robust debate about this issue and at the end of the day the pastor didn’t go forward with it.

A third issue that I’d like to address as an area where my work directly intersects with issues of religious freedom, foreign policy, and national security is on the issue of the OIC’s proposed resolution on what they have termed the “defamation of religion.” Here’s where our administration stands on this issue – we need to continue to take action to defend religious freedom, including for Muslims, whether it’s through the protection of individual rights, the protection of people to go to Friday prayers, for example, the protection for men to wear a beard, the protection of women to wear a hijab, which is of course an important religious freedom, the prosecution of hate crimes – all of which the United States government has been aggressive in doing.

While some serious problems exist, we have significant religious freedoms for all people in the United States – including Muslims. I often tell the story that when I travel and as Muslims we have five daily prayers, I have never ever had a problem on any American airline to go to the flight attendants and ask to use space on the plane for just a few minutes. That’s one example I like to give because as you know the national security threat tied to September 11th had to do with airline transportation. So that’s an example that I give to show that even in the face of all of that, that to have that religious freedom is something that’s very strong and something that I’ve been able to talk about during my travels and something that people have appreciated.

So, with regard to the “defamation of religions” resolution specifically, we recognize that there is a problem with anti-religious discrimination, and as I said we will be aggressive in prosecuting hate crimes and protecting individual rights and protecting individual freedoms – and the main area of disagreement we have is over this broad prohibition that would be proposed on speech. Any type of restriction on defamation generally, as that could be very broadly defined, we think is counter productive for a few reasons, the first of which is that it’s against our free speech tradition, our first amendment tradition in the United States in which people are allowed to speak their mind freely, even if it’s speech that we may despise. For example, in this country the Supreme Court has upheld the right for Nazis to march through Jewish neighborhoods in Skokie Illinois, the Supreme Court has upheld the right to burn the American flag, and although those are things that we condemn and we despise, they are freedoms that are very much a part of what makes the country what it is.

But you know at a policy level what I try to emphasize is that this type of restriction on speech can actually be counter productive from a religious freedom and a religious tolerance perspective and here’s why: we saw for example with the Danish cartoons that it was when people tried to restrict those cartoons and tried to prevent them from spreading that it just raised the profile of that speech. When you have a law passed to restrict that type of speech
and you have the government coming in, that’s when you raise the profile of that speech, that’s when the media gets involved; it can actually make the situation worse, and I think that the example of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* also demonstrated that when you have attempts to forcibly stop that speech you can just raise the profile of those types of speech acts and make the situation much worse. So from a policy perspective those types of restrictions are often counterproductive.

From a religious freedom perspective also when you have this general prohibition on speech that might be considered defamatory then you also have the question: what is considered defamation? You could have minority religious groups, you could have minority sects within Muslim communities, Ismailis or Ahmadiyyis for example, who might be practicing their faith in a way or teaching ideas that could then be considered defamatory and therefore illegal. So from that perspective a resolution that purports to protect religious freedom might actually undermine religious freedom.

The fourth area that I wanted to address with regard to the intersection between these areas that is directly related to the work that I’m doing is our continued emphasis on the promotion of religious freedom. As the President said in Cairo, no system of government can or should be imposed on one nation by another, and that America is committed to advancing government that reflects the will of people, and this is something that we have stressed when I have met with civil society groups, when I have met with governmental interlocutors as well, and something that we raise at the highest level. And the President committed the U.S. to supporting human rights everywhere and made clear that the ability of people to speak their mind and have a say in their government is critically important. It’s important that they have confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice, it’s important that government is transparent and that it doesn’t steal from the people, it’s important for people to live as they choose. And it’s important that governments continue to protect these rights, because ultimately when they do that results in stable successful and secure societies, as the President talked about in Cairo, and there’s a few different ways in which our government continues to do so in addition to raising these issues at the highest levels and meeting with civil society groups and promoting civil society. We have bolstered our democracy assistance by increasing funding for democracy support in USAID in the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) across the Middle East and North Africa in addition to major investment in governments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Funding for MEPI we’ve increased by approximately 30% and an additional 32% request has been made for FY 2011.

The last point that I just want to make is again is with regard to some of what we’re seeing here in the United States and the position that the government and the President specifically has taken with regard to religious freedom, the ability to build places of worship, condemnation of acts such as the proposed burning of the Qur’an and really attempts to address sort of the “otherization” of minority communities, including Muslim communities.

Let me conclude with what President Obama has said on these issues: “This country stands for the proposition that all men and women are created equal, that they have certain inalienable rights, and one of those inalienable rights is to practice religion freely, and what that means ...” “From a national security interest, we want to be clear about who the enemy is here. It’s a handful, a tiny minority of people who are engaging in horrific acts, and who have killed Muslims more than anyone else. The other reason it’s important for us to remember that is because we’ve got millions of Muslim Americans, our fellow citizens in this country, they’re going to school with our kids, they’re our neighbors, they’re our friends, they’re our coworkers, and when we start acting as if their religion is somehow offensive, what are we saying to them? I’ve got Muslims who are fighting in Afghanistan in the uniform of the United States armed services. They’re out there putting their life on the line for us, and we’ve got to make sure that we are crystal clear for our sake and their sakes that they are Americans and we honor their service, and part of honoring their services is making sure that they understand that we don’t differentiate between them and us. It’s just us.”

And this I think encapsulates the approach that we’ve taken with these issues, the comprehensive nature of the relationship that doesn’t focus on just political conflicts, or just violent extremism, but as we address these, we also seek to create partnerships of mutual interest and mutual respect with all people, all over the world. Thank you very much.
About the Participants

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