BRIDGES AND BARRIERS:
PROMOTING U.S. INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM POLICY IN
THE MIDDLE EAST THROUGH PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

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ABSTRACT

Religious freedom has played an essential role in American history. Yet, there is a long tradition of neglect and ignorance in matters of faith in the U.S. foreign policy arena. As a result, diplomats are ill prepared to understand the evolution of religious freedom in the America which handicaps the effective promotion of U.S. international religious freedom policy through public diplomacy in the Middle East.

Consequently there are widespread concerns and misunderstandings about U.S. international religious freedom policy in the region. Many Muslims see a disconnect between the secular, American lifestyle portrayed through films, music videos, and television, and the policy values espoused by U.S. diplomats. There is the widespread perception that U.S. international religious freedom policy is biased, benefits Christian missionaries, and supports strict separation of church and state. Left
unaddressed, these concerns build resentment and weaken U.S. national security and economic objectives.

In order to regain credibility and advance international religious freedom, the U.S. should explain its internal struggles with religious freedom, from its inception to the present. Unlike the current primarily punitive implementation of U.S. international religious freedom policy, diplomats should be trained to understand the central role religion plays within cultures and engage foreign audiences about the personal and communal benefits of religious freedom. Public diplomacy provides a unique opportunity to reach key segments of society including, business owners, students and women. In the end, citizens living in the Middle East will have to debate and determine what is acceptable within Islam and develop their own system. However, the U.S. can contribute to this process by thoughtfully explaining its unique model and experience.
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INTRODUCTION

The publicly stated goal of U.S. international religious freedom policy is to promote religious freedom as a fundamental human right and source of stability for all nations.¹ Still, many people in the Middle East question the sincerity of those intentions. U.S. international religious freedom policy is frequently perceived as imperialistic and offensive by Muslim audiences. According to a 2007 World Public Opinion poll, 79 percent of respondents in Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan and Indonesia believe that the objective of America and its policies is to “weaken and divide the Islamic world.”² In addition, approximately 60 percent of those surveyed think that another goal is to “spread Christianity to the Middle East.”³ These figures should alarm U.S. foreign policy makers.


² World Public Opinion, Muslim Public Opinion on U.S. Policy, Attacks on Civilians and Al Qaeda, (College Park: University of Maryland, 2007), 5.

³ Ibid.
Public opinion about U.S. international religious freedom policy at home and abroad has handicapped the effectiveness of policy in the Middle East. In order to advance American interests, the U.S. Department of State needs to train diplomats about the role of religion in U.S. history, address concerns and misunderstandings about international religious freedom policy and engage foreign audiences about the benefits of religious freedom through public diplomacy.

**U.S. International Religious Freedom Policy**

In simple terms, religious freedom can be defined as the search for and experience of God or the Transcendent. However, as a human right protected by international law, it also includes the ability to act on those beliefs within due limits. It is helpful to view this complex concept in three layers. As the former Director of the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom and current Georgetown professor Thomas Farr describes, “The first level is the interior right to believe or not. The second level provides individuals the right to enter and exit religious communities (including the rights of individuals to persuade others about their truth claims).
The third level, includes the most difficult challenge -- allowing religious groups, both minority and majority, to make religious-based moral arguments in the public square within due limits."

When surveying empirical research, this multi-layered approach to religious freedom carries significant security and economic benefits for all nations. Not only does the data suggest that religious freedom plays a key role in stability and peace, but there is also evidence that religious freedom is an essential component of economic development and social progress. In order for a society to thrive, however, all three levels of religious freedom must exist.

The International Religious Freedom Act is designed to promote these levels of protection and evolved out of growing concerns about religious atrocities around the world during the 1990’s. Various groups, including Christians, Muslims and Jews worked tirelessly to see this landmark legislation become U.S. law in 1998. As a result,

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America is the only nation to include religious freedom as one of its core foreign policy objectives.

Not only does this act authorize the President to impose economic sanctions against countries in violation of religious freedom, but it also established several core programs. These entities are responsible for designing, implementing, and reviewing religious freedom around the world. They include the Office of International Religious Freedom in the State Department, an Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, the Annual Report on International Religious Freedom and a bi-partisan U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. A provision to create a special advisor to the President in the National Security Council was also created, but has never been implemented because it is not a legal requirement.

Despite numerous bureaucratic challenges within the State Department, officials have successfully secured the release of dozens of religious prisoners. Yet, when it comes to advancing religious freedom on a broad scale, significant challenges remain. While it is worthwhile to

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free existing prisoners in the short-term, the long-term focus should remain on creating a climate of religious acceptance devoid of the fear of persecution.

International religious freedom needs to be accepted on a broader, theoretical level in order to achieve lasting social change.


Religious freedom is rooted in U.S. history, however there has been a long tradition of ignoring matters of faith both in domestic and international affairs. As scholar Paul Marshall notes, the “secular myopia” within the foreign policy community, has led to “…an inability to see, much less understand, the role of religion in human life.”7 Despite America’s success in building a peaceful, pluralistic society, the U.S. has failed to explain persuasively its story in the Middle East. As The Economist commented, “The strange thing is that when America has tried to tackle religious politics abroad -- especially jihadist violence -- it has drawn no lessons

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from its domestic success. Why has a country so rooted in pluralism made so little of religious freedom?“8

Interpretations of historical documents and Constitutional structural tensions are complex, but they are worth explaining if the U.S. wants to successfully promote international religious freedom abroad.

U.S. diplomats need a more thorough training about the evolution of religious freedom throughout early U.S. history. This includes openly acknowledging the decades of discrimination against, and sometimes persecution, of religious minorities. The phrase, *E pluribus Unum*, the U.S. motto meaning “Out of many, One,” engraved as a founding ideal on the Seal of the United States since 1776 reflects America’s unique historical legacy. Out of a mix of Pilgrims, Indians, Baptists, Protestants, Catholics, Quakers and Jews, America has expanded and evolved into one relatively peaceful nation. However, this took hundreds of years.

It is vital to examine these developments that may be traced to the founding fathers. Not only were they men of faith, but they also laid the groundwork for religious

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freedom. The three most notable were George Washington, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. As Senator Joseph Lieberman (I-CT) reflected in a speech to the Senate floor supporting the International Religious Freedom Act, the founding fathers were drawn to America "because of a belief that no government has the right to tell the people how to worship and certainly not the right to discriminate against them or persecute them for the way they chose to express their faith in God."\(^9\) These early political pioneers viewed religious freedom as an essential ingredient of a vibrant democracy and went to great lengths to ensure its place within the Constitution. They believed that an authentic relationship with one’s Creator strengthens individuals, families and communities.

Religion remains an important characteristic of American society. A vast majority of the public holds favorable views about the influence of religion in daily life. According to a recent Pew survey, 92 percent believe in God, 60 percent are members of a local religious

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congregation and more than half pray at last once a day.\textsuperscript{10} Yet, few Americans are dogmatic about their beliefs. 70 percent believe that more than one religion can lead to eternal salvation.\textsuperscript{11} These factors reflect how the U.S. is not only the most religiously diverse nation on earth\textsuperscript{12}, but also one of the most tolerant.

\textbf{The Conflict: Perceptions of U.S. International Religious Freedom Policy in the Middle East}

Despite being highly religious, Americans are repeatedly portrayed as immoral and materialistic in popular culture. Many Muslims see a disconnect between the secular, American lifestyle portrayed through films, music videos, and television, and policy values espoused by U.S. diplomats. Perceptions that U.S. international religious freedom policy is biased, benefits Christian missionaries, and supports strict separation of church and state policies are reflected throughout the Middle East news media. These views suggest a U.S. without a religious soul and may be used by Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations to


\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 21.}

recruit disenfranchised youth and increase support among the general public.

During a January 2008 confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the nominee who became the Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, James Glassman, addressed the mistrust and resentment against the U.S. Mr. Glassman acknowledged that, “In the Arab and Muslim world, especially, they have major misconceptions about America, our aims, and our policies … such as a belief that we want to supplant Islam with Christianity in the Middle East.” He noted, “Our enemies are eating our lunch in terms of getting their messages communicated using ‘digital technology’ … it is just plain embarrassing that Al Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the internet than America.”13 America cannot afford to turn a blind eye to these concerns or counter Al Qaeda’s message by relying only on digital technology to gain supporters. International religious freedom is a sensitive subject that requires direct engagement with foreign audiences.

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There are also serious concerns abroad about how U.S. international religious freedom policy is implemented. Currently, the primary application of international religious freedom policy is accusatory and threatening. Annual reports, Congressional hearings and public statements routinely criticize foreign governments for not doing enough to protect or promote religious freedom within their own borders. Unsurprisingly, these actions are taken as a great offense, especially those identified as Countries of Particular Concern for “systematic, ongoing and egregious” violations of religious liberty. They view the State Department’s Annual Report on International Religious Freedom as both disrespectful of their internal affairs and as a violation of their state sovereignty. U.S. analysis and advocacy is perceived as meddling in outside affairs and unwelcome in the majority of nations throughout the Middle East.

While its important to identify countries where religious liberties are infringed upon, the resulting

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public relations fall out may undermine benefits gained. Many Muslims point out U.S. support for Israel, the Abu Ghraib scandal, and prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay as direct violations of religious freedom sanctioned by the U.S. government. This in turn breeds greater distrust and resentment against the United States. In order to bridge the credibility gap and advance international religious freedom on a broad scale, the U.S. must hold itself to its own standards. There will be difficult choices; however, justifying these decisions through a well thought out public diplomacy strategy will be critical toward breaking this chain of mistrust.

**The Opportunity: Promoting International Religious Freedom Policy through Public Diplomacy**

There is a fundamental similarity between American and Middle Eastern culture that rarely receives attention. Americans, like the vast majority of Muslims in the Middle East, are a deeply religious people. For example, Georgetown professor John Esposito and Gallup analyst Dalia Mogahed found that 98 percent of Egyptians, 96 percent of Indonesians and 86 percent of Turks believe, “religion is
an important part of their daily lives."\textsuperscript{15} Both cultures consider matters of faith to be fundamental to the preservation of morals and values.

Yet, instead of highlighting common ground, the media continues to focus on sensational stories such as the “burka bikini” to create a water cooler buzz or worse, a beheading that deepens distrust. As is commonly said in the mainstream news media, “if it bleeds, it leads.”

Unfortunately, in the Middle East, increasing violent news coverage has empowered extremists to commit more heinous criminal acts and furthered fears on all sides of society. This anxiety contributes to a perpetual cycle of avoidance discussing international religious freedom policy, misunderstanding, resentment and violence.

Breaking this cycle will require the full force of public diplomacy. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which is government-to-government interaction, public diplomacy is a government-to-public and public-to-public strategy to further American interests. The ability to influence people and policy through attraction and cooperation is

increasingly referred to as soft power. The State Department defines public diplomacy activities as “engaging, informing, and influencing key international audiences.” Program initiatives are divided into three major categories: international information programs, educational and cultural exchanges, and international broadcasting.

If these potentially powerful communication tools remain under utilized, U.S. national security is vulnerable to further attacks by radical extremists. This requires an ability to communicate with foreign audiences about matters of faith and U.S policy. A 2007 memo detailing the U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication stated, “Government officials should be extremely cautious and, if possible, avoid using religious language, because it can mean different things and is easily misconstrued.” As the media coverage and poll

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numbers reflect, continuing to avoid issues about religion and international religious freedom policy serves to exacerbate misunderstandings.

As President Obama recently said during his speech at Cairo University in Egypt, it is time for a “new beginning” with the Muslim world. He emphasized the value of religious freedom during this speech, stating that “People in every country should be free to choose and live their faith based upon the persuasion of the mind and the heart and the soul.” Following this sentiment, U.S. diplomats need to understand the evolution of religious freedom within early U.S. history and tackle dangerous perceptions surrounding international religious freedom policy. Public diplomacy efforts must engage audiences about the benefits of religious freedom in order to build relationships based on common interests.

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CHAPTER 1
THE CONTEXT: UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF RELIGION THROUGHOUT EARLY U.S. HISTORY

According to the Central Intelligence Agency, 86 percent of the world’s population is currently affiliated with at least one religion.¹ As Thomas Farr explains, “All of us are religious by this definition in that we seek to understand why we are here, if there’s something after this life, and if there’s something out there other than me to whom I owe a debt of obligation.”² Indeed, archeological evidence suggests religious beliefs have been a normative aspect of human affairs for thousands of years. By recognizing religion as the deepest part of any given culture, diplomats can take the first step toward effectively engaging audiences about international religious freedom.

The world’s population is also becoming increasingly religious. As sociologists, John Mickelwaite and Adrian


Wooldridge note, “The very things that were supposed to destroy religion — democracy and markets, technology and reason — are combining to make it stronger.”\(^3\) Hence, the U.S. will have difficulty implementing the majority of its policies if it fails to recognize the growing salience of religion around the world. In fact, the world is “as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.”\(^4\) According to Demographers Todd Johnson and David Barrett, the “demographic trends coupled with conservative estimates of conversion and defections envision over 80 percent of the world’s population will continue to be affiliated to religions 200 years into the future.”\(^5\)

There is widespread popularity for religious freedom around the world. A 2007 Pew Global Attitudes survey found that the vast majority of people want to practice their religion freely. This ranges from “84 percent in Eastern


\(^5\) Todd Johnson and David Barrett, “Quantifying Alternate Futures of Religion and Religions,” *Futures* 36, no. 9 (November 2004): 947.
Europe to 98 percent in Africa." The worldwide average is 93 percent stating that, “It is important to be able to live in a country where they can practice their religion freely.” In the Middle East, the average is 92 percent. These figures provide U.S. diplomats with an open door for discussing religious freedom.

**Resistance to Religion**

However, many U.S. government officials are reluctant to discuss religion either in public or private. Despite pervasive religious underpinnings, they view faith as either too complex or irrelevant. Consequently, U.S. international freedom policy frequently remains unaddressed among foreign audiences in the Middle East.

This resistance can be partially attributed to two factors. The first is the secularization theory, the idea that religion is in a permanent state of decline as modernization advances society. This theory was originally supported by influential thinkers such as Karl Marx,

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7 Ibid.

Sigmund Freud and Max Weber who posited that as science and technology develop, religion will become less necessary for social progress. Foreign policy experts have also been significantly influenced by the Treaty of Westphalia. This 1648 treaty ended the brutal religious wars in Europe and officially established the sovereignty of the nation-state. Since it’s signing, scholars have all but “assumed the absence of religion among the factors that influence states.” The combination of the secularization theory and the Treaty of Westphalia have resulted in a notable absence of interest in the study of religion among political scholars.

Consequently, religious freedom in America is frequently referred to as a secular concept. In the book, The American Revolution, historian Gordon Wood claims that, “many of the distinguished political leaders of the Revolution were not very emotionally religious. At best, they only passively believed in organized Christianity, and at worst they scorned and ridiculed it. Most were deists or lukewarm churchgoers and scornful of religious emotion

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and enthusiasm.” Wood portrays George Washington as a secular man who rarely referred to God as anything but “the Great Disposer of events.”

Scholars, like Wood, commonly paint the founding fathers as deists or avoid discussing their religious views altogether. As political professor Walter Berns explains, “Instead of establishing religion, the founders established religious freedom, and the principle of religious freedom derives from a non-religious source.” However, there is significant evidence that Washington, like many of the founding fathers, was a dedicated and active member of his local church. It is clear from his writings that he believed in God, however, unlike many politicians today, he was a private man who did not advertise his religious activities. Without close examination of the documents and remarks produced by America’s founding fathers, diplomats

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will continue to have a handicapped understanding of the influence of religion within early U.S. history.

This longstanding pattern of side stepping religious issues cultivates governmental officials that do not engage in serious discussion about religion. As Thomas Farr notes, “Modern realists see authoritarian regimes as partners in keeping the lid on radical Islam and have nothing to say about religion except to describe it as an instrument of power. Liberal internationalists are generally suspicious of religion’s role in public life, viewing religion as antithetical to human rights and too divisive to contribute to democratic stability. Neoconservatives emphasize American exceptionalism and the value of democracy, but most have paid little serious attention to religious actors or their beliefs.”13 This ripple effect can be seen throughout the U.S. government.

State Department training needs to move past limiting secular ideologies and expand training so that diplomats understand the legal and political effects of religion within every nation. This includes the task of

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familiarizing diplomats with multiple religious sects, texts and authorities. As Madeline Albright elaborates in her book, *The Mighty and Almighty*, “If diplomacy is the art of persuading others to act as we would wish, effective foreign policy requires that we comprehend why others act as they do. Fortunately, the constitutional requirement that separates state from church in the United States does not also insist that the state be ignorant of the church, mosque, synagogue, pagoda, and temple.”

Cultivating this understanding demonstrates respect, which is critical for creating an open atmosphere of discussion about religious freedom.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were an alarming reminder that the influence of religion, particularly within the Middle East, cannot be ignored. Prior to 9/11, the National Security Strategy only mentioned religious issues four times in 2001, compared to nineteen times in 2006. As the U.S. struggles with the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, ignoring the

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influence of religion has come at a major cost to advancing its foreign policy objectives. For instance, failing to take Sunni and Shiite factions into account has significantly hampered reconstruction and development efforts.

Too many government officials are ignorant of the origins and objectives of U.S. international religious freedom policy. As Nina Shea, of the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom, described in a 2008 article, one senior official working on Iraqi policy within the U.S. State Department was completely “unaware of the existence” of the religious freedom office. In order to be effective, religious freedom needs to be tied to the broader agenda of supporting stable, democratic societies.

_U.S. Diplomatic Education_

Advancing international religious freedom policy first starts at home. This means providing diplomats with a thorough education of early U.S. history and an understanding of the way religious freedom evolved in America. Passing the Foreign Service Exam, as it is

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currently designed, is not a clear indication of whether or not a diplomat understands the role of religion in foreign affairs or is familiar with the unique way in which the founding fathers viewed religious freedom and the protections guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.

Indeed there seems to be political amnesia among the American public when it comes to the U.S. constitution and religion. According to the First Amendment Center, despite overwhelming support for religious freedom, only 19 percent of Americans could name religious freedom as one of the rights secured by the first amendment. This concerning gap is reflected overseas when the U.S. diplomatic corps struggles to explain religious freedom in the Middle East. Foreign Service Officers should work through this dense legal and historical subject matter in order to engage foreign audiences about the value of international religious freedom.

A key function of a diplomat is to explain the historical and cultural aspects of the United States. This is particularly true for public diplomacy officers. The

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State Department website lists “explaining to foreign audiences how American history, values and traditions shape our foreign policy” as part of the job description. Therefore, it is critical that a well-designed public diplomacy strategy take the origins of international religious freedom policy into consideration. Diplomats need to be knowledgeable about the years of discrimination that religious minorities endured throughout early U.S. history. Moreover, they should be familiar with the structural tensions of the first amendment and the constitutional myth of a “wall of separation” between church and state. As Jennifer Marshall of the Heritage Foundation explains, “The lack of understanding of religion’s continued relevance in America’s constitutional order prevents clear thinking about the relationship between religion and liberty. It also creates blinders to religion’s influence abroad. If policymakers are unfamiliar with a religious framework for interpreting human action and motivation, they will be ill-equipped to communicate effectively with highly religious audiences.”

By fully examining the U.S. model of church and state through additional coursework, diplomats may serve as critical interpreters of American policy to foreign audiences and develop a more constructive dialogue about religious freedom in the Middle East. During a 2008 Senate hearing before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, numerous panelists recognized the need to “significantly expand training” for public diplomacy officials. Diplomats need to know that from a historical viewpoint, the ideas put forth by the founding fathers were not only radical, but also distinctly religious.

In order to put U.S. history into context of international religious freedom, the State Department also needs to provide additional training on world religions. To date, there are primarily ad hoc classes about religion and no courses focusing exclusively on international religious freedom policy at the Foreign Service Institute. The International Religious Freedom Act only requires the

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State Department to provide “instruction on international documents and United States policy in human rights” and “the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion....”\textsuperscript{20} This minimal approach has done little to prepare U.S. diplomats to discuss religion, much less religious freedom, in the Middle East.

Tackling controversial issues surrounding religious freedom requires diplomats to stretch beyond their mental and emotional comfort zones. This can range from being misunderstood to being accused of violating blasphemy laws. Despite a diplomat’s ability to promote the importance of reason and rule of law, religion fills an emotional space for many people. Therefore diplomats need to be prepared with a thorough education in history and religion in order to engage audiences with tact and sensitivity.

\textit{Early U.S. History}

The current concept of religious freedom has evolved significantly since the Pilgrims first sought freedom from religious persecution in England. Indeed, it is not as

straightforward as most Americans were taught.\textsuperscript{21} Classrooms across the country teach children about how the first Pilgrims came to America seeking refuge from religious persecution. In the U.S. Capitol rotunda, one of eight paintings depicts this journey with the Pilgrims huddled on the deck of a ship praying before their dangerous voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. It is a simple, yet inspiring story that American families gather to celebrate every year on Thanksgiving Day.

The truth that inspired the Pilgrims to flee to America is far more complex and nuanced. The Pilgrims did seek religious freedom in America. However, their idea of “religious freedom” was a very narrow notion that only included the ways in which they sought to practice their own faith. Even though their financial investors insisted others travel with them on the Mayflower, the Pilgrims discriminated against these people and referred to them as the “strangers” while calling themselves the “saints.”\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{21} Kevin Seamus Hasson, The Right to be Wrong: Ending the Culture War over Religion in America (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2005), 1.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 9.
Once settled in the New World, these “saints” silenced or punished those who did not agree with them.

Thus began the difficult road toward religious freedom in America. To the dismay of multiple waves of incoming immigrants, the founding colonies routinely established rules targeting religious minorities and routinely persecuted dissenters. For example, the Massachusetts General Court barred Quakers from entering their colony “under pain of death.” However, four Quakers followed their inner conscience and refused to abide by this law. As a result, they were hung in Boston Commons in 1659 and 1660.23 Unfortunately, the challenges and setbacks faced by the Quakers were common for other religious minorities during this period of U.S. history.

Over the following two hundred years, religious discrimination was rife throughout America. The founding colonies became states and passed laws making it acceptable to harass and discriminate against religious minorities. In Maryland, Jews could not hold elected office, fight in

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the militia or practice law until 1825. In New Hampshire, Catholics could not hold public office until 1876.\textsuperscript{24}

The U.S. struggled with its own forms of religious extremism, as do societies within the Middle East. Indeed, the Puritans were not unlike some of the more radical religious groups of today. They viewed secularism as a threat to their traditional way of life. Puritans persecuted, punished and executed anyone who dared to disagree with them. Their methods of intimidation were not unlike Al Qaeda’s current tactics. U.S. diplomats should acknowledge the internal battle religious minorities faced for decades during this period of religious intolerance in America.

However, unlike some nations in the Middle East, multiple religions were allowed to debate and compete for followers within the U.S. political arena. Eventually sects that did not contribute to the social advancement of society, lost support and withered away. The same principle of religious competition may apply to religious extremist groups today. This is one of the primary ways in which religious freedom furthers U.S. national security

\textsuperscript{24} Hasson, \textit{The Right to Be Wrong}, 110.
interests and the social and political stability of all nations. However, when diplomats fail to address concerns about international religious freedom policy, ironically, radicals twist American policy objectives in order to gain more supporters and sympathizers. Therefore an honest assessment of U.S. history is critical toward combating hateful propaganda.

**Faith of the Founding Fathers**

From the inception of the United States, the founding fathers believed “conscience is the most sacred of all property.”\(^{25}\) In their view, an individual’s most important rights are derived by conscience and reason, rather than privilege and authority. Their concept of natural rights can be traced to both ancient Greek and modern British philosophy and is now commonly referred to as human rights. According to Aristotle, what is “just by nature” is not the same as what is “just by law.” Centuries later, the British philosopher John Locke expanded on this idea. His logic posited that, “government has no authority to make decisions for the individual in matters of belief, because

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the individual cannot logically delegate to government the ability to make up his mind for him.”

The founding fathers viewed religious freedom as a direct byproduct of this natural right. Yet, they didn’t limit this idea to only Christian language. According to philosopher and theologian, Michael Novak, the founding fathers described religion as part of a “Hebrew metaphysic.” This does not necessarily imply that Christianity and Judaism were the preferred religions, but this unique word choice did lay the groundwork for the belief that a society could include more than one religion.

Although the religious views of the founding fathers varied to a degree, they all saw religion as a deep and personal obligation to God. They felt strongly that institutions, be it church or state, should not interfere with such private matters. This notion was radical at the time because all of the founding colonies had established, colony-supported churches. Many of the early American settlers maintained strong religious beliefs and feared

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that the separation of church and state would lead to an immoral and lawless society. Like their ideological opponents, founding fathers George Washington, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson agreed that religion and morality were central to a healthy and vibrant democracy. However, they took a distinctively different view about how to achieve this goal. They believed creating space between church and state was the best way to allow individuals to fulfill their religious duties. They considered religious liberty to be a natural right as well as a requirement for leading a moral life.

It is worth considering how the difficult debates taking place within communities across the Middle East are not unlike ones that took place on U.S. soil less than 250 years ago. Concerns about morality were as great in early U.S. history as they are for many Americans and Muslims now.\textsuperscript{28} After six years of research and over 50,000 interviews, researchers John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed found, “What Muslims around the world say they least admire about the West is its perceived moral decay and breakdown

\textsuperscript{28} Esposito and Mogahed, \textit{Who Speaks for Islam?}, 47.
of traditional values -- the same responses given by
Americans when posed the same question.”

Like many people in the Middle East, the founding fathers were deeply religious men. They, too, felt a profound duty to the Creator and did not consider this responsibility to be optional. However, they also believed that meeting this obligation required separation of church and state. Not only did Washington, Madison and Jefferson think this space allowed for a more authentic relationship with the Creator, but they also saw it a pathway to political and social harmony. Indeed, the centuries of bloody political turmoil in Europe were a major testament to the continuous power struggle between church and state. Yet, if the Puritans had their way, there would be an established national religion in the United States, much as there is in many Middle Eastern countries now. By exploring alternative historical perspectives such as this, U.S. diplomats may draw unique parallels with audiences in the Middle East and have a more engaging conversation about the evolution of religious freedom.

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29 Ibid., 48.
One of the most notable supporters of religious freedom was Commander-in-Chief and first U.S. President, George Washington. Washington frequently referred to virtue and religion as being essential to maintaining a free society because they preserve “the moral conditions of freedom.”

In several of his most important speeches Washington referenced the role faith played during the founding of the new nation. During his first inaugural address in 1789, Washington said that America’s every step “seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency.” Seven years later, during his farewell address in 1796, Washington said, “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism who should labour to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens.”

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31 George Washington, First Inaugural Address, 1789.

32 George Washington, Farewell Address, 1796.
Statesman and fourth U.S. President James Madison was also a passionate advocate for religious liberty. At the young age of twenty-five, Madison was initially elected into the state legislature and assigned to the committee responsible for preparing the first declaration of rights for the Commonwealth of Virginia. A scholar and philosopher in his own right, Madison seized the opportunity to draft legislation that promoted robust religious freedom rights.

Later he drafted the Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessment in opposition to bill that required public taxes for religious teachers. Within this document, he proposed that “Religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be governed only by reason and conviction, not by compulsion or violence; and therefore all men are equally entitled to the full and free exercise of it according to the dictates of conscience.”

Madison’s resolution sparked great debate within early American society. The public started to question seriously whether religious freedom was a natural or government

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ordained right. At the time, the general policy of “toleration” was vulnerable to misinterpretation. Unlike religious freedom, which protects personal space to think, practice and express one’s religious views, toleration is an attitude. However its sentiment may greatly vary from one person to another at severe detriment to the “other” being tolerated. Therefore each new wave of immigrants faced multiple challenges and trials in order to publicly and privately follow their faith in the U.S.

In Madison’s view, religious freedom was necessary not only allow for a more authentic relationship with the Creator, but it also strengthened individuals, families and communities. He did not believe government should be able to force any citizen to worship in one church or prohibit the religious practice of another. In order to fulfill one’s duty to the Creator, Madison believed Americans required religious liberty. His work cemented into the American psyche the concept that all people - regardless of religious background - have the inalienable, natural right to follow their conscience.

Madison also furthered legislation written by Thomas Jefferson. While Jefferson served as the U.S. ambassador
to France, Madison shepherded the Virginia Statute for Religious freedom through the Virginia state legislature in 1786. This landmark legislation officially separated the Anglican Church from the Virginia Commonwealth. Despite the bitter political battle fought against proponents for established state-run churches, Jefferson saw the passage of this legislation as one of his three greatest accomplishments in life and requested that his role be inscribed on his tombstone.\footnote{Feldman, Divided by God, 23.} In his own words, Jefferson’s provision created “freedom for the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Mohammedan, the Hindu and infidel of every denomination.”\footnote{Thomas Jefferson, Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, 1786.} This legislative victory was unprecedented at the time in U.S. and world history.

Jefferson is best known for writing the Declaration of Independence. Before going to war against Britain, the founding fathers were faced with three choices: coerce with threats, convince by pointing out interests or appeal to ideals.\footnote{Walter Isaacson, “A declaration of mutual independence,” New York Times, July 4, 2004.} As the principle author of the Declaration, Jefferson crafted the famous line, “We hold these truths to
be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." \(^37\) Jefferson and the founding fathers used the Declaration as a tool to persuade allies that America was unique through soft power. It also acknowledged the endowment of "unalienable rights" by the natural law. Eleven years later, the protection of these rights were enshrined as the first article of the U.S. Constitution.

**The First Freedom and the Constitutional Order**

As important as the Declaration of Independence was in laying out the principles of liberty and equality, it is the Constitution that provides the political bridge between U.S. philosophy and law. The first two clauses of the First Amendment state, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” \(^38\) Essentially the first line, the Establishment Clause, gives all the power to establish and regulate religion to state authorities. The subsequent line, the Free Exercise Clause, dictates that individuals

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\(^37\) U.S. Declaration of Independence, 1776.

\(^38\) U.S. Constitution, amend. 1, 1791.
have the freedom to decide how they want to practice their religious beliefs. The First Amendment does not, however, create a wall of separation between church and state as many believe in the United States as well as the Middle East.

The idea that the Constitution created a “wall of separation” between church and state is one America’s most widespread myths. It is difficult for many Americans to conceive of today, but the historical norm was state-run religion. At the time of the signing of the U.S. Constitution in 1791, twelve out of thirteen colonies had an established church. With the exception of Philadelphia, most of these churches were Episcopal in the South and Congregationalist in the North. After significant debate, early members of Congress agreed on the Establishment Clause because it forbade the federal government to interfere with religion, but allowed business as usual on the state and local level. These activities ranged from collecting taxes to pay for churches to enforcing religious requirements for voting or running for political office.

The term, “wall of separation,” was actually derived from a letter written by Thomas Jefferson to the Danbury
Baptist Association in 1802. Jefferson wrote, “I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should “make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” thus building a wall of separation between church and state.”

While Jefferson had a strong distaste for religion on an organized level, he was a vociferous advocate for religious freedom on a personal level.

Jefferson’s analogy about a wall of separation has been continually misconstrued as U.S. law within recent history. Most notably, the case of Everson v. Board of Education in 1947 was influenced by Jefferson’s views and marks a radical shift in the American public’s understanding of religious freedom. The ruling determined that payments by local New Jersey school boards for transportation costs to and from parochial Catholic schools was a violation of the Establishment Clause. Judge Hugo Black opined, “In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to

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“erect a wall of separation between church and state.”

This case has had major effect on subsequent judicial rulings over the past sixty years.

Indeed, many groups have come to believe that the “wall of separation” was the original intent of the First Amendment. Without understanding the historical conditions of the Establishment Clause, religious conservatives and liberal secularists remain in continual culture clashes over nativity scenes and courthouse steps every Christmas holiday season. As scholar Phillip Hamburger observes, the metaphor of separation "has simplified and impoverished discussions of religious liberty in ways that have obscured the necessarily complex and textured relationships between civil and religious societies." It is vital that diplomats are trained to understand the structural tension between the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause.

The founding fathers established an innovative system that encouraged a remarkable degree of toleration between

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church and state in the U.S. Not only does this enable a robust dialogue and debate, but it also permits religious convictions to shape and influence public policy within due limits. According to scholar Alfred Stepan, this cooperation between church and state is considered the “twin tolerations.” In order for a nation to be stable, the government allows religious groups to worship, organize and make religious arguments in the public square. In return, these groups do not have “constitutionally privileged prerogatives” to determine policy. ⁴² Religious freedom afforded by the twin tolerations has anchored American democracy and allowed it to flourish from its founding to present day.

CHAPTER 2

THE CONFLICT: PERCEPTIONS OF INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

With United States history properly in context, the next step towards advancing international religious freedom is to address concerns and misunderstandings. These perceptions are frequently reflected throughout the media in the Middle East. Therefore, it is critical to take articles, editorials and broadcasts into consideration when formulating a public diplomacy strategy to promote international religious freedom. For better or worse, the media plays a major role informing and influencing public opinion. Consequently, this has a direct impact on the successful implementation or failure of U.S. foreign policy.

Imperialism Concerns

One of the primary concerns about international religious freedom policy is the perception of U.S. imperialistic meddling in outside affairs. Instead of bringing fresh insights for debate, America is viewed as arrogantly imposing its values upon societies that have deep historic and cultural roots.
Most notably, this includes the 800-page Annual Report on International Religious Freedom that addresses governments “that repress religious expression, persecute believers, and tolerate violence against religious minorities.”¹ This document covers more than 198 countries and divides government violations into five main categories, both “blatant and subtle.” Within this report, the State Department also designates several Countries of Particular Concern. According to the 2009 report, there are currently eight Countries of Particular Concern. These countries are Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan. Four of these countries, Burma, China, Iran and Sudan, have been listed as Countries of Particular Concern every year since the report was first issued in 1999. Last year an editor for a well-known Jordanian newspaper, Al-Dustour, blasted the 2008 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom as follows:

We would like to discuss the benefit the world gains from such reports by which the U.S. State Department insists on officiously interfering in the affairs of others in a crude manner that does not show any sensitivity toward religions and cultures of other

nations .... The report developed the practice of celebrating the disappearance of the veil in Afghanistan as one of the signs of liberation, calling for the rights of homosexuals, and blaming Saudi Arabia for refusing to build places of worship for non-Muslims, although Saudi Society compromises only Muslims ... the U.S. report on religious freedom whose publication began 10 years ago, harms and does not benefit. It does not serve freedoms and world peace, but indeed it inflames conflicts and provokes sedition. As the age of U.S. superiority has ended after recent political and economic developments, it is now required to shelve this report with other dossiers that became public law after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, when the United States believed it was the sole power in the world, and that [it] can re-shape the universe according to U.S. measurements and in a way compatible with US moral values.2

This editorial makes several controversial claims. First, U.S. international religious freedom policy plays no role “celebrating the disappearance of the veil” or advocating for the “rights of homosexuals.” These are hot subjects of debate within U.S. society and there is nothing within religious freedom policy objectives that promote these specific activities. To the contrary, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has repeatedly argued that Muslim women should have the choice to wear or not wear the veil in Turkey as well as France.

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2 Nabil al-Sharif, “A report that harms and is of no benefit,” Al-Dustur (Amman), September 21, 2008.
Second, the assertion about “refusing to build places of worship” in Saudi Arabia is accurate, but his statement that “Saudi Society comprises only Muslims” is incorrect. It does not take into consideration approximately seven million foreign workers who come from a wide range of countries and are Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Jews.

The author says the U.S. is trying to “re-shape the universe” according to its own morals and values. This opinion fails to acknowledge international law. The United States is encouraging countries, such as Jordan, to adhere to previous agreements within international documents.

Most notably, this includes the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Written in 1948, the religious freedom provision has been extended and elaborated in additional international documents. Article 18 states, “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice,
worship and observance." There is widespread support for these principles over 60 years later. A World Public Opinion poll surveyed 25 countries and found that 74 to 99 percent of all respondents said that it is important "for people of different religions to be treated equally."  

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights later gave birth to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966, this binding legal document states, "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching." As of 2009, this multi-lateral treaty has a total of 72 signatories and


165 parties. The only notable exceptions within the Middle East are Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar and Pakistan.

Fifteen years later, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief in 1981. The opening statement of this document explains the principles of religious freedom and the subsequent eight articles elaborate on the general guidelines outlined by the 1966 treaty. Three of these articles define specific rights, including a legal definition of religious freedom (article 1), rights for parents, guardians and children (article 5) and the freedom to manifest religion or belief (article 6). It is not a binding legal instrument, however it currently serves as a central reference point for determining the international violations of religious freedom.

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A second editorial, published in a popular Pakistani newspaper also refers to the perceived “superiority” of the U.S. and religious freedom policy. In 2002, the *Nawa-i-Waqt* said:

The entire world will attest to the lack of religious freedom in the United States. What is the level of religious freedom in the United States and in Israel, the U.S. closest ally? We all know how the two countries treat the followers of other faiths. Because of its unchallenged superiority in the world, the Unites States feels free to interpret human rights the way it chooses. It has no regard for world opinion when it grossly violates human rights ... No country is strong enough to challenge U.S. power. However, several countries do realize that the world must break free from U.S. oppression. In a move to hunt down the al-Qa’ida and the Taliban, the United States ransacked religious freedom in its own country. The Arabs and Pakistanis living in the United States will testify to the U.S. campaign of religious persecution.\(^8\)

Contrary to the editorials claim, there has never been nor never will be a government sanctioned “U.S. campaign of religious persecution.” However, he does raise a valid concern about religious discrimination at home. According to the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, there were 700 violent incidents against Arab Americans and those perceived to be Arab Americans in the United States during

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\(^8\) Editorial, “U.S. report on international religious freedom,” *Nawa-i-Waqt* (Rawalpindi, Pakistan), September 10, 2002.
the weeks following September 11, 2001. These unfortunate incidents are disturbing and a reminder that U.S. society is also far from perfect.

Even as the U.S. promotes the highest ideals of religious freedom, public officials cannot ignore major missteps. This not only includes religious discrimination during early U.S. history, but also recent scandals such as prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib. The Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman cited these situations in an interview with the Fars News Agency. He said, “The United States is mocking at the world beliefs and understanding through practicing double-standards and making a political case of everything.” In order to be a credible voice for religious freedom, the U.S. must take full responsibility for its actions and failures.

Double Standard Concerns

Many Muslims are also distrustful of U.S. international religious freedom policy because they view it as unfairly biased. For instance, they see U.S. support

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for Israel as a Zionist state as a double standard. They do not understand how the U.S. government can insist that Islamic governments like Saudi Arabia accept non-Muslims, whereas non-Jewish Palestinians are prohibited from returning their homes in Israel.

The implementation of U.S. sanctions is also seen as a double standard. To date, Eritrea is the only country to receive sanctions for religious abuses. All other sanctions have been “double-hatted,” meaning that State Department sanctions that “were already in existence were just designated as the sanctions to [also] apply to the religious freedom violations.”

Countries like Saudi Arabia have never received sanctions despite a history of religious oppression. As a Tehran Times article explained, “President Bush waived financial sanctions on Saudi Arabia for failing to make significant efforts to stop slave trade in prostitutes, child sex workers and forced laborers.”

This selective application of U.S. policy dilutes its


impact. Foreign audiences recognize the priority the United States places on economic and security interests.

**Compatibility Concerns**

In addition to U.S. international religious freedom policy being seen as a form of cultural imperialism, there are those who believe that it is not compatible with Islam. These followers refer to a *hadith* that states, “He who changes religion should be killed.”\(^\text{13}\) They consider this statement by the prophet Mohammad to be the definitive reason why Muslims cannot forsake their religion and exit Islamic society. They also view religious freedom as a threat to the conventional Muslim way of life. According to Iranian columnist Yaser Jebri’ili, the promotion of pluralism through religious freedom is offensive and has become the “West’s front-line weapon against Islam.” He claims as follows:

The story of pulling the rotten corpse of 'religious pluralism' from its grave and attempts to establish the new concept of 'Islamic pluralism' become[s] more significant when one carefully examines the final goal of those promoting religious pluralism and their backers. Islamic pluralism wants to say [sic] anyone is free to have their own reading and interpretation of Islam, and their interpretations are to be

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respected and nobody should have the right to object to them ... as soon as they are certain of the existence of many readings of Islam and existence of profound divisions among Muslims, [the West will] no longer believe in this and take it back to its grave and speak of a unified Islam in harmony with the current world discourse and the new world order. For they believe certain interpretations of Islam to be 'extremist' and 'undesirable.' Muslims are in turn obliged to move in line with this unified Islam and if anyone speaks of other readings, they are outside Islam!\textsuperscript{14}

To a certain extent, Jebra’ili’s analysis is correct. The greater the degree of religious freedom, the more respect there will be for various “interpretations of Islam.” Islamic sects will be forced to compete among other religious groups for believers. Their claims will not only be judged on their validity, but also how they can directly contribute to the advancement of civil society. Statistical evidence by sociologists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke demonstrate that this model of religious competition leads to increased social capital.\textsuperscript{15} Stark asserts, “Religion thrives in a free market, where many religious groups vie for followers and those … [religions] lacking

\textsuperscript{14} Yaser Jebra’ili, “Daily sees Iran reformists as part of Western plot to divide, weaken Islam,” Keyhan (Tehran), September 1, 2008.

energy or appeal fall by the wayside. By now there is a very large research literature that supports these conclusions.”  

Ideological competition is not only beneficial for society, but it also supports national and regional security. When religious groups with “extremist” or “undesirable” interpretations of Islam are not able to make persuasive arguments, they will eventually lose public support and whither.

However, Jebraili’s view that the West’s concept of pluralism through religious freedom is a “weapon against Islam” is unfounded. First, he failed to mention that the Koran supports the concept of religious freedom. This holy book, considered to be the ultimate source of authority within Islam, makes it clear that one cannot be forced into belief. For example, passage 2:256 states “No compulsion in religion: truth stands out clear from error.”  

And passage 16:82 says that “But if they turn away from you, your only duty is a clear delivery of the Message.”

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17 2:256, Koran (Yusufali translation).

18 16:82, Koran (Yusufali translation).
is increasing public approval that religious differences are acceptable within Islam. Nonetheless, this is a sensitive, internal dialogue that must take place within Muslim communities. Second, he fears that some Muslims will be silenced or punished for being “outside Islam.” However, the beauty of religious freedom is that internal public opinion dictates the popularity of every religious group and sect. This is not something the U.S. government can determine within a foreign society.

Laicete Concerns

When it comes to democracy and religion, most Muslims are familiar with the French model of church and state. This is due to the fact that the French and British dominated the Middle East for a major portion of history. The U.S. did not become a player in the region until the 1950’s and 1960’s. Therefore, many people in the Middle East associate the U.S. model of church and state with the popular French ideology of laicete. As a result, they believe U.S. international religious freedom policy supports strict separation between church and state. This is extremely contentious because most Muslims consider
Islam a complete way of life and the foundation of all government activity.

In 1924 President Kemal Ataturk implemented the concept of laicete in Turkey. He sought to revolutionize society by creating a modern, secular state with absolute separation of church and state. To the dismay of millions of religious believers, Ataturk banned all forms of religion within public life. According to Turkish columnist Mustafa Akyol, the “Turkish model ... guarantees the state’s right to dominate religion and suppress religious practice in any way that it deems necessary. This devolves from the veneration of the state as an end in itself, an entity to which all other values may - and must - be sacrificed.”19

As a result, many Muslims in neighboring countries correlate separation of church and state with religious suppression. They assume that the concept of separation of church and state in Turkey is the same as in America. They worry that if they support religious freedom, they will also be forced to compromise their religious views. These

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perceptions have muddied understanding of religious freedom in the Middle East and made it more difficult for U.S. diplomats to promote international religious freedom policy. As Thomas Farr explains, “Islamists have controlled the discourse on secularism by identifying it with the French/Turkish model widely seen in the Arab world as anti-Islam.” Extremists have latched onto grievances about religious suppression and furthered misunderstandings about U.S. international religious freedom policy.

Diplomats need to provide evidence that U.S. is suggesting a different religion-state model. Despite international and domestic opinion, there is no “wall of separation between church and state” in the United States. Thomas Jefferson’s analogy has repeatedly been taken out of context and associated with French/Turkish concept of laicité. Within recent history, influential Harvard philosopher John Rawls has strengthened this theoretical prism by suggesting that separation of church and state “protects religion from the state and the state from...”

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religion.”21 Yet, American history demonstrates that the founding fathers appreciated the influential role religion played providing the moral conditions for a vibrant and productive society. As Michael Novak states, “The leaders of the American Revolution were not, like the leaders of the French revolution, secularists. They did not set out to erase religion. Quite the opposite.”22 These views are evident in numerous historical documents. Moreover, religion continues to play a vital role in American society today. There are dozens of active religious groups that organize constituents and lobby local, state and federal levels of government. Diplomats need to do a better job highlighting differences between the U.S. and Turkish model of religion and state. Contrary to concerns, the unique U.S. model contributes to a stable, prosperous nation for people of all religious beliefs.

Missionary Concerns

Another major misunderstanding is that U.S. policy seeks to primarily benefit Christian missionaries who want to proselytize in the Middle East. As noted earlier, James


22 Novak, On Two Wings, 115.
Glassman testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee about the pervasive misperception that U.S. policy is designed to benefit American missionaries. Additionally, in a column written by the founder of *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, Chris Seiple mentions “religious freedom” as one of the top 10 terms not to use with Muslims. He writes, “Sadly, this term too often conveys the perception that American foreign policy is only worried about the freedom of Protestant evangelicals to proselytize and convert, disrupting the local culture and indigenous Christians.”

While the reasoning behind Seiple’s analysis is correct, his advice not to use this term only furthers misperceptions about U.S. international religious freedom policy. Instead U.S. diplomats need to tackle the issue directly and make it repeatedly clear: the American government does not fund or support Christian missionaries. Moreover, the U.S. should not ignore aggressive proselytizing by Americans without a host country’s permission. In order to successfully

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advance religious freedom, the U.S. should first respect outside cultural and religious norms.

However, the Egyptian newspaper Al-Musawwara described a report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom as being “prepared from a purely American point of view.” The article claimed the U.S. is “placing the freedom to proselytize on a pedestal.” It said “The report notes that some religions consider it the duty of their followers to proselytize. The commission does not mention that some religions ban their followers from converting to other creeds.”24 While it is understandable that believers want to share the benefits of their religion with others, there should be legitimate limits on proselytism. The U.S. Department of State and U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom should do a better job defining and denouncing illegal proselytism. Even though both the Koran and international law dictate that there should be no compulsion in religion, there are some Islamic governments that give the death penalty for changing religions. For

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now, the issue of proselytism and conversion is best left
to debate among educational institutions and legal jurists.

A 2008 Jordan Times article highlighted one of these
situations. It described the circumstances surrounding the
deporation of thirty expatriate missionaries from Jordan
The article said, "The missionaries were deported earlier
this year for illegally proselytizing under the guise of
registered humanitarian organizations, a violation of their
residency permits." It also mentioned accusations against
"certain missionary groups of attracting poor and
unemployed youth and implanting them with "their own
radicalism and aspirations" before sending them across the
region, causing difficulties for native Christian
communities."25 Violating a residency permit is a serious
legal offense. It is unclear how many of these expatriates
were Americans, however they should comply with same level
of immigration laws that hold true for Jordanians living in
the United States.

25 “Report Expresses Concern Over Religious Freedoms,” Jordan
Times (Amman), September 21, 2008.
Another example of perceived support for Christians is reported by the Fars News Agency in Iran. In response to the 2008 International Religious Freedom Report, it declared, "The decades-old U.S.-funded program to help Christians, Zoroastrians and Jews leave their country for America has not been successful. Alleging 'persecution' of religious minorities in Iran, U.S.-backed groups help them move to the U.S. for a fee of $3,000."26 It cites Yonathan Betkolia, an Assyrian Christian member of Iran's parliament, who states, "They give all those green cards to our people. Their only goal is to propagate the idea that Iran is mistreating its minorities." The article continues, "...after the release of the report in September, Iranian religious minority groups in separate statements rejected the report, calling it a politically motivated move." For example, The International Fellowship of Christians and Jews received the cold shoulder from Iranian Jewish leaders in a 2007 statement. It said, "Iranian Jews will not abandon their identity for any amount of money... We love our Iranian identity and culture, so threats and

enticements can not persuade Iranian Jews to give up their identity."\textsuperscript{27}

These Iranian assumptions further misperceptions that religious freedom is a form of cultural imperialism designed to primarily benefit Christians. However, the International Religious Freedom Act does not give preference to any one religion. From the very beginning, the original legislation referred to Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, Jews, Bahais and Hindus.\textsuperscript{28} Working collectively together, these various religious groups lobbied Congress to pass this legislative milestone.\textsuperscript{29} As a result, multiple religious groups and individuals, Christian and non-Christian, have benefited from U.S. international religious freedom policy.

The U.S. government has repeatedly come to the aid of Uighur Muslims, for example. Despite it’s peaceful religious practices, this minority group continues to face severe repression and restrictions in China’s western province of Xinjian. According to the U.S. International

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{28} “Findings Section” of the Freedom From Religious Persecution Act of 1998, HR 2431, 105th Cong., 1 sess., (September 8, 1997).

\textsuperscript{29} Allen Hertzke, \textit{Freeing God’s Children}, 39.
Religious Freedom Commission, “Religious freedom restrictions are an ongoing source of resentment for Uighurs. Beijing continues to view peaceful Muslim religious activity with suspicion and as a source of “extremism and separatism.” ⁴⁰

Prior to the 2008 Olympic games in Beijing, the Chinese government conducted a closed trial against fifteen Muslim Uighurs alleged guilty of terrorism. Authorities immediately executed two people found guilty, gave three suspended death sentences and sentenced the remaining ten to life in prison. This trial took place under the guise of the “War on Terrorism,” however the international community was barred from viewing any evidence. The U.S. strongly condemned Chinese government action against these Muslims. Yet, only one international Arabic news station acknowledged these efforts. ⁴¹ Too frequently these instances go unnoticed and U.S. policy appears biased against non-Christians. However, with a more well thought out public diplomacy strategy in the Middle East, diplomats


⁴¹ “U.S. Slams Crackdown on China’s Muslims,” Al Arabiya News Channel, July 12, 2008.
can highlight U.S. advocacy on behalf of other religious groups.

Another example is the repeated concern over laws regarding French religious symbols. In August 2009, the European Court of Human Rights denied requests by four Muslim girls and two Sikh boys to cover their heads while attending French public schools. According to Leonard Leo, Chairman of the U.S. International Religious Freedom Commission, “International standards guarantee to every individual the freedom to peacefully manifest his or her religious beliefs, in public as well as in private, which includes wearing religious clothing or head coverings. It is unfortunate that, in the absence of actual evidence of a legitimate threat to public order, France and the European Court of Human Rights have interpreted a general notion of secularism so radically that it has trumped religious belief. Secularism does not mandate a ban on peaceful individual religious expression, including the decision to wear religious articles that other believers or
Despite the fact that many Muslims and Sikhs consider it a religious obligation to cover their hair, these children were expelled from school. Yet, misperceptions cited earlier in the Jordanian newspaper, Al-Dustour, would have one believe the U.S. celebrated the disappearance of the veil. Clearly, the U.S. needs to set the record straight.

Bridging the Credibility Gap

As these media samples reflect, U.S. international religious freedom policy is a public relations conundrum in the Middle East. Not only are perceptions primarily negative, but they also contribute to increasing resentment against the United States. The U.S. has critiqued and judged countries based on violations of religious liberty for the past ten years. While U.S. analysis and actions may provide a needed voice for a few religious minorities, this strategy has done little to advance religious freedom policy on a broad scale. This punitive strategy of

promoting international religious freedom runs counter to U.S. national security and economic objectives.

The bulk of the work should be focused on bridging the gap between illusory perceptions and reality. It is not necessary to eliminate the Annual Report or the designation of Countries of Particular Concern, however they should be a small fraction of U.S. energy and efforts dedicated to advancing religious freedom. Instead of an implementation strategy that is 80 percent punitive and 20 percent positive, the reverse should hold true. Diplomats need to study the media and prepare themselves for arguments they will likely face when engaging audiences on the ground. Ideally, the U.S. should be continuously opening a door for discussion about the economic, political and social benefits of religious freedom across the Middle East.

In order to regain credibility and advance international religious freedom, the U.S. should take a hard look at it’s own struggles, both within early U.S. history and today. Otherwise, foreign audiences will continue to be unduly influenced by negative and often misguided opinion within the news media and hateful propaganda by religious radicals. As the Defense Science
Board report on strategic communication explains, “Fifty years ago political struggles were about the ability to control and transmit scarce information. Today, political struggles are about the creation and destruction of credibility.” Information alone is not enough to rectify misunderstandings about U.S. international religious freedom policy.

Diplomats need to tackle shortcomings in U.S. foreign policy. If America makes the argument for religious freedom based on international law, then diplomats need to address areas where the U.S. government is perceived by foreign audiences as violating religious liberty. In particular, this includes concerns about the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and their right to a fair trial. This prison should not be closed simply to improve public opinion. It should be closed because not only is it a violation of international human rights law, but also the U.S. Constitution. U.S. diplomats should be prepared to discuss accusations of double standards in a frank and honest manner. This includes the current dilemma of...
finding countries to accept prisoners and securing prisons in the U.S. for those who will not be released.

Admittedly, there have been circumstances when perceived national security interests have propelled the United States unerendipitously into the politics of the Middle East. Nonetheless, U.S. international religious freedom policy should not be a continuation of earlier misguided policies. It is neither an attempted coup nor secret arms exchange. On the contrary, it is an open policy designed to promote stable, pluralistic societies. These American objectives may irritate some in the Middle East, but such concerns point to the need for the State Department to do a better job explaining to Muslim audiences why religious freedom is in their national interest.
Communicating well about religious freedom issues will not dissolve all concerns, but it cannot be overlooked. It’s clear that the current approach to international religious freedom policy is not working. Instead, it appears to be aggravating tensions and building resentment within the Middle East. The notion that Britney Spears “represents the sounds of freedom”\textsuperscript{1} is not effective when trying to promote American foreign policies with complex historical foundations. If diplomats do not receive the necessary training and resources they need, foreign audiences will perceive a primarily shallow, selfish and crass image of America through the media. The United States government must move beyond pop stars and cultural icons and pursue new levels of engagement through public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy activities are designed to break down barriers and build relationships of mutual trust and respect. It is considered the “heart work” of foreign

policy and a Cold War success story. Through informational and cultural exchange programs, public diplomacy influenced key Soviet audiences and gradually softened relations between the world’s two largest superpowers and ideological archenemies. Carnes Lord and Helle Dale, two national security scholars note that, “America’s informational campaigns were instrumental in hastening the fall of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Communist world. Locked in an epic ideological struggle for over four decades, organizations such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the Voice of America, and the U.S. Information Agency communicated the ideals of democracy, individual rights, and the free market. In the end, the promotion of these values contributed mightily to the nearly bloodless dissolution of the Soviet Empire.”2 The U.S. government would be wise to draw on these lessons and begin renewed engagement about the objectives of international religious freedom policy in the Middle East. When employed effectively, public diplomacy can serve as a strong catalyst for long-term social change.

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Attempts by the State Department to find common ground in the Middle East have failed over the past eight years. Two notable examples include the “Shared Values” media campaign and the Arabic-language “Hi” magazine. The $15 million “Shared Values” program was designed to highlight Arab Americans discussing common values and illustrate that the U.S. was not at war with Islam. However, according to a Government Accountability Office report, “media outlets in many countries found the campaign to be propaganda” and refused to air the programs. The “Hi” magazine was not much more of a success and operations were indefinitely suspended after less than two years of production. In the larger context, these media products are just two examples of a long line of State Department attempts to sell U.S. culture and values through superficial programming and glossy literature. These products are one-dimensional and fail to connect audiences on a more meaningful level; one that is required for advancing international religious freedom.

**State Department Structure and Embassy Conditions**

It is worthwhile to note that exactly one year after the *International Religious Freedom Act of 1998* passed
through Congress, the agency responsible for public diplomacy, the U.S. Information Agency, was folded into the State Department. The primary intention of this merger was to provide public diplomacy officials with a better seat at the policy making table. As Edward Murrow, the first U.S. Information Agency Director, explained after the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, “If they want me in on the crash landings, I better damn well be in on the take-offs.” Far too often public diplomacy is used to allay questions and concerns among foreign audiences after a policy is implemented.

Despite the best intentions of the 1999 merger, there is widespread consensus among practitioners and scholars alike that it has failed.3 Instead of decision makers taking public diplomacy officers’ understanding about local attitudes and values into consideration during the policy making process, their views have been routinely marginalized. Dissolving the U.S. Information Agency has left public diplomacy officials with no “home base” in

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Washington, and no offices directly supervising their field operations. Moreover, the development of personnel, resources and programs to promote international religious freedom policy has been severely neglected. As a result, damaging perceptions about U.S. international religious freedom policy in the Middle East have continued to proliferate.

Growing security concerns have also significantly curtailed the ability of public diplomacy officials to engage directly with citizens in the Middle East. After the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, many of the new U.S. embassy compounds have been criticized for their all-encompassing “fortress-like” structures. Additionally, many American cultural centers were relocated from easily accessible downtown locations to inside U.S. embassy compounds. Known as “American Centers,” these places traditionally served as the central hub for public diplomacy activities. However, as a 2009 Senate Foreign Relations Committee report discovered, this relocation has

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4 Ibid.

resulted in six times fewer visitors to some Information Resource Centers in the Middle East. In order to engage foreign audiences about the benefits of international religious freedom policy, diplomats need to make a concentrated effort to reach beyond embassy walls and engage with citizens in their daily environment.

**New Social Media**

The changing landscape of international communications has created fertile ground for either cultural conflict or cooperation. As a public diplomacy fellow from the University of Southern California testified during a 2008 Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs hearing, “The web, the internet, blogging—these are all modern public diplomacy vehicles and we need both traditional skills and new information technology savvy public diplomats.”7 This requires advanced training to understand how to communicate U.S. culture and values through new media platforms and social networking.

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Currently there are 1.5 billion internet users\textsuperscript{8} and 1 billion YouTube video hits\textsuperscript{9} each day. As Newsweek columnist Fareed Zakaria describes in his book, \textit{The Post-American World}, “Groups and individuals have been empowered, and hierarchy, centralization, and control are being undermined…. Power is shifting away from nation-states, up, down and sideways.”\textsuperscript{10} Not only has the internet revolutionized the speed by which people communicate, but it also has given rise to dozens of new social networking tools. Over 184 million bloggers share their thoughts, experiences and opinions worldwide.\textsuperscript{11} In addition, websites like Facebook, Myspace and Twitter are engaging and mobilizing people into action. These platforms play an increasingly important role communicating and organizing with Middle East youth. According to Navtej Dhillon, Director of Middle East Youth Initiative at the Brookings Institution, almost 65 percent


of the population is under the age of thirty.\textsuperscript{12} Across the
globe, citizens who would not normally speak to each other
are being introduced to ways of life previously never
considered.

For example, in Egypt, students are starting to
challenge the socio-economic and political status quo
through online social networking. Whereas the government
bans the unregistered gathering of more than five people,
young Egyptians have started organizing protests for large
groups of disenfranchised members of society through
Facebook. In April 2008, over 80,000 supporters gathered
to protest rising food prices and later organized a textile
workers protest and strike.\textsuperscript{13} The Egyptian government has
considered blocking the website; however there is
widespread support to keep it running. Last year, Facebook
had the third highest group of users in Egypt, second only
to the U.S. and Canada.\textsuperscript{14} If the U.S. is serious about
targeting and influencing younger segments of society, then

\textsuperscript{12} Navtej Dhillon, “Middle East Youth Bulge: Challenge or
22, 2008).

\textsuperscript{13} Sherif Mansour, “Egypt’s Facebook Showdown,” \textit{Los Angeles Times},
June 2, 2008.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
U.S. public diplomacy officials would do well to amplify their message on a digital level.

Another interesting example of new social networking can be found in Iran. Recently, Twitter played a critical role communicating messages within the country and the outside world during the 2009 presidential elections. Tweets -- short messages of fewer than 140 characters -- reported important internal events such as when people disappeared or if troops were mobilized. For example one tweet stated, “Woman says ppl knocking on her door 2 AM saying they were intelligence agents, took her daughter.” Another declared, “Ashora platoons now moving from valiasr toward National Tv staion. mousavi's supporters are already there. my father is out there!” As Time magazine reports, mobile technology makes “Twitter practically ideal for a mass protest movement, both very easy for the average citizen to use and very hard for any central authority to control.”\textsuperscript{15} Although this new technology did not effect immediate change in Iran, it did engage massive portions of the population that had been previously disconnected.

These people are now linked in new ways and constitute a future base for social and political change.

The State Department is following these trends and expanding many new media resources. This includes a YouTube channel and accounts with Facebook, Twitter and Flickr, a website designed as a portal for online photograph sharing. One can also track diplomatic activity through the State Department blog called Dipnote. While traveling overseas, it is possible to follow Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on an interactive travel map and text her questions. Many of these platforms are interactive and overlap with each other. For example, the State Department Facebook account includes videos posted on YouTube, blog posts from Dipnote and the interactive travel map.

Harnessing the power of the internet allows diplomats to utilize both the power of images and information.

Despite these advances, diplomats should remember to utilize new media, but not rely entirely on it. Neither a handshake nor a smile can be transmitted through digital technology the same way face-to-face contact can. The bulk of public diplomacy activities should remain as direct engagement through field operations. However, diplomats
can use new communication tools to amplify the work they are already conducting on the ground. For example, they can organize a student luncheon about international religious freedom through Facebook or post an embassy panel discussion on YouTube. President Obama has set an example of how to take advantage of these new communication resources during his first year in office.

President Barack Obama’s Recent Outreach

Obama’s remarks in Turkey this past spring are a good example of public diplomacy through engagement on a direct level in order to advance international religious freedom. Unlike traditional diplomacy that primarily deals with negotiating U.S. foreign policy with government officials, the focus of public diplomacy is to inform and influence foreign audiences by conveying American culture, history and politics. While addressing students during a town hall meeting in Istanbul, the President discussed misunderstandings about America and its values. Indeed, these views parallel the way in which international religious freedom policy is perceived or more accurately, misperceived. He said:

I know that the stereotypes of the United States are out there, and I know that many of them are informed
not by direct exchange or dialogue, but by television shows and movies and misinformation. Sometimes it suggests that America has become selfish and crass, or that we don't care about the world beyond us.16

Due to the images broadcast by the media, including Hollywood films, music videos, and fashion, the U.S. is frequently seen as shallow and self-serving. These images also serve to exacerbate how America is perceived as an entirely secular nation with few, if any people of faith and religious values. As a result, international religious freedom policy is seen as hypocritical and offensive since it is not put in historical context. Heritage Foundation scholar, Jennifer Marshall notes, “In the 21st-century war of ideas, it is critical that U.S. public diplomacy rely on the bedrock of the American founding principles. Pop culture and commercialism cannot do justice to American ideals. They are flimsy and inadequate in the fight against potent ideologies that present strong, coherent, and deeply misguided explanations of the nature and purpose of human existence. This war of ideas calls for stronger

substance than Coca-Cola and Britney Spears.”

Unfortunately, the media often works against U.S. diplomatic efforts by negatively contributing to this war of ideas and must be offset to whatever degree possible. Given sufficient time and commitment of resources, intellectual as well as material, this can change. President Obama’s remarks were a welcome step towards accomplishing this, perhaps, opening the door for deeper dialogue on the far-reaching implications of the disjunction between what the U.S. appears to value and its stated values.

In addition, during his travels in Turkey, Obama discussed the value of religious freedom. This is important, because as noted earlier, many in the Middle East associate U.S. religious freedom policy with Turkish laïcité. During his address to the Turkish parliament, President Obama said, “...for democracies cannot be static -- they must move forward. Freedom of religion and expression lead to a strong and vibrant civil society that only

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17 Marshall, Religious Liberty in America, 3.
strengthens the state.” Obama’s remarks reflect an important distinction between the U.S. concept of religious freedom and its Turkish counterpart. Unlike Turkey where public expression of religion is strictly prohibited, the outward expression of faith in the U.S. enhances the daily discourse of American life. It allows for the free expression within the public sphere, so that citizens can discuss and debate their views openly in order to determine the best way forward for society. If public diplomacy officials don’t explain this, Muslims will continue to believe that the U.S. promotes strict separation between church and state as established in Turkey.

In both of these speeches in Turkey, Obama set a tone based on “mutual interest and mutual respect.” Two months later at Cairo University he echoed this phrase. On June 4, 2009, he made a historic address proclaiming:

I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead,

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19 Ibid.
they overlap, and share common principles --
principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the
dignity of all human beings.\textsuperscript{20}

After years of low American poll numbers in the Middle
East,\textsuperscript{21} these remarks were received widely as a welcome
change throughout the region. And even though the success
of public diplomacy strategy should not be simply measured
by polls, it is vital to establish an atmosphere where the
public is willing to engage in a discussion about
international religious freedom. Once this is created,
diplomats can hold an honest dialogue about the struggle
for religious freedom at home and explain the unique
religion-state model developed by America’s founding
fathers.

By seizing upon Obama’s call for a “new beginning,”
diplomats can also clarify misunderstandings and concerns
about international religious freedom policy. More
importantly, they can also gradually persuade foreign
audiences to understand how the benefits of religious
freedom impact their personal and communal life. Indeed,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Obama, \textit{A New Beginning}, June 4, 2009.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Pew Global Attitudes Project, “Opinion of the United States,”
http://pewglobal.org/database/?indicator=1&group=6 (accessed on October
17, 2009).
\end{itemize}
Obama touched on the controversial subject of religious freedom during his speech in Cairo. He said:

Islam has a proud tradition of tolerance. We see it in the history of Andalusia and Cordoba during the Inquisition. I saw it firsthand as a child in Indonesia, where devout Christians worshiped freely in an overwhelmingly Muslim country. That is the spirit we need today. People in every country should be free to choose and live their faith based upon the persuasion of the mind, heart, and soul. This tolerance is essential for religion to thrive, but it is being challenged in many different ways.²²

Obama’s personal experience with Islam’s “proud tradition of tolerance” is central to the argument for religious freedom today. Religious tolerance and freedom is possible in the Middle East in accordance with the Koran. However, as noted during early U.S. history, an attitude of tolerance is only the first step towards religious freedom. In the long term, it is susceptible to public opinion and does not provide adequate protections of religious minorities. In order to create a healthy pluralistic society for all citizens, it is necessary to secure religious freedom.

Despite the sensitive nature of his remarks, President Obama’s speech won widespread public acclaim throughout the

Middle East. The Lebanese Daily Star said it was “…a significant departure from traditional politics.”23 A newspaper editorial from the United Arab Emirates said it was “…truly historic and is likely to be remembered long as much for its respectful tone and tenor as its refreshing content. Standing up in Cairo, a city that is steeped in history and Arab-Islamic tradition, Obama reached out and touched the hearts of a billion Muslims -- a feat no Western leader, let alone a U.S. president, has accomplished before.”24 Al Ahram, an Egyptian paper said that "Without any exaggeration, Obama's address will go down in history as one of the most important documents conveying the desires of the West, led by the United States, for a different dealing with Islam and the Muslims after centuries of aggression and hatred."25 Last, Abdallah Schleifer wrote an opinion piece for Al Jazeera that said “One minute into his speech he won nearly every heart and mind in the great hall, announcing his pride to be carrying


the goodwill of the American people, and a greeting of peace Muslim communities use in my country: asalaamu alaikum. The audience rose to its feet and I was not the only one in that vast hall with tears in my eyes.”

The U.S. President’s speech was a demonstration of the powerful communication channels available through public diplomacy. As a result of “unprecedented web outreach” conducted by the White House there were 12,000 Google news search hits referencing his remarks and over 600,000 YouTube views. It was made available on Facebook, Myspace, Twitter and other social networking sites popular in the Middle East. In addition, it was translated into thirteen different languages and available via text message in Arabic, Urdu, Persian and English. It was streamed live on the White House website and broadcast by Al Jazeera and other regional Arab news networks. Obama’s speech set a vital tone for renewed dialogue; however, the U.S.

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government now needs to go beyond words. In order to accomplish this, the State Department needs to focus on the mutual benefits of international religious freedom through public diplomacy.

**Embassy Events**

Embassies should host bi-monthly speaking events about religious freedom in order to connect with Muslim audiences on a more direct and personal level. As the former U.S. Information Agency Director Edward Murrow once explained, “The real art in this business is not so much moving information or guidance or policy five or 10,000 miles. That is an electric problem. The real art is to move it the last three feet in face to face conversation.”

Instead of the standard ambassadorial speech or routine talking points, such events should engage foreign audiences by drawing on speakers from the local community, as well as from the U.S. This can be in the format of a panel discussion or highlighting a particular expert. In order to attract as many members of the community as possible, these events should be widely publicized and open to the media. By allowing panelists and audiences to peacefully

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air dissenting viewpoints the third level of religious freedom (public expression) will be quietly reinforced within embassy walls.

Such events provide an opportunity for foreign audiences to ask questions about religious freedom and engage in dialogue, but also it provides an opportunity for embassy officials to listen to concerns and clarify misunderstandings about U.S. international religious freedom policy. The act of listening cannot be overlooked. Perhaps because it is so simple, its importance has been undervalued as a part of public diplomacy programming. Brookings scholar, Kristin Lord states in her review of recent public diplomacy efforts, that listening if done “publicly and genuinely, it is itself an act of public diplomacy.”

By listening to the concerns of foreign audiences in the Middle East, public diplomacy officials can slowly begin to rebuild trust by taking the impact of their views into consideration when formulating and presenting policy.

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30 Kristin M. Lord, Voices of America, 39.
**Target Audiences**

Traditional channels of diplomacy focus on government officials; however, members of an Islamic government are the most likely to feel threatened by religious freedom reform. Therefore reaching out to nongovernmental communities is one of the most effective ways to support grassroots change in the Middle East. Religious freedom is a social mind-set that will require a collective sea change of public opinion in order to flourish.

The State Department should target three socio-demographic groups within the Middle East: business owners, students and women. Each group plays an influential role within the community and holds a particular vested interest that is inherently connected to the success of religious freedom. Each facet of the following program activities is designed to go beyond simply projecting American values and policies. These ideas are designed to engage target audiences and appeal to their personal interests in order to support long-term change.

**Business Owners**

- **Vested interest:** economic development
- **Influential role:** community leaders
Due to the correlation of economic growth and GDP, business owners are in a unique position to understand and appreciate the development of religious freedom in the Middle East. According to scholars Robert Barrow, Rachel McCleary and Brian Grim, a high GDP is closely correlated to religious freedom.\textsuperscript{31} \textsuperscript{32} Moreover, Cato researchers Ilan Alon and Gregory Chase have found that religious freedom has the strongest link to per capita GDP, after economic freedom and civil liberties.\textsuperscript{33} Therefore, in the long-term, they conclude that is in a nation's best interest to not only increase economic freedom, but also religious freedom.\textsuperscript{34} As such, business owners have a vested interest in the interplay between religion, government and economic growth.

The State Department should regularly engage this sector of society by hosting an annual Business Roundtable.


\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
on Religious Freedom. This could be a lunch or dinner event, where influential leaders throughout the community are invited to a presentation and panel discussion about international religious freedom. This event could include speakers from the local community as well as scholars and business owners from the region. Participants may be provided statistics reflecting the impact of international religious freedom and encouraged to discuss and debate the issue at their tables.

Students

Vested interest: social stability

Influential role: future generations

After 9/11, the State Department significantly increased programming targeting youth in the Middle East. This included the Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program and the Partnerships for Learning Undergraduate Studies (PLUS) program. The U.S. should expand these programs in order to delve more deeply into interfaith issues. If there is a greater focus on religion while studying abroad, students will be able to experience the work ethic and religious values that shape American life. Not only will these interfaith exchanges allow students to understand
that the U.S. in not completely a secular society, but it will allow Muslims to witness the way institutions of church and state overlap and interact in order to meet the local and national needs of all citizens.

Exchange programs are among the most effective long-term tools available when it comes to building relationships of mutual trust and understanding. As Senator Richard Lugar (R-ID) wrote in a February 2009 editorial for Foreign Policy magazine, “America's best players in public diplomacy have always been its people and its ideas.” Social science evidence proves that dialogue and structured contact are able to reduce prejudice and misunderstanding between conflicting groups. Building these bridges is a staple of any effective public diplomacy strategy.

Diplomats can sustain relationships with students who have returned to their home country by hosting embassy brown bag lunch discussions. The specific topic may vary, but it can regularly raise awareness about issues of

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religious freedom both at home and around the world. This strategy supports the development of young leaders who share U.S. values and interests.

Students have a vested interest in religious freedom because empirical evidence demonstrates that it is inherently connected to stability and peace. This affects the likelihood of serving in the military as well as the prospects for a well-paying job after graduation. Not only do societies with less religious freedom spend a significantly higher percentage of their GDP on the military, but it has also been found that religious regulation and social conflict are closely correlated. According to data gathered by sociologists Brian Grim and Roger Finke, “Restriction of religious freedom correlates with diminished well-being and violent social conflict.” Their data demonstrates that both social and government regulation are closely tied to varying degrees of religious persecution. They found, “While governments typically view religious regulation as a necessity to maintain order and

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37 Grim, God’s Economy, 43.

reduce potential violence, the irony is that more
regulation leads to increased persecution, which means less
order and more violence, as shown by the data.”

Women

**Vested interest: social development**

**Influential role: children**

Like much of the world, the role of women is
continuously evolving within the Middle East. Still, a
majority of women in the Middle East stay at home as
housewives. Their most important responsibility is
attending to the needs of the family and their attitudes
have the greatest influence on their children.

Diplomats should tap into this hidden resource of
power by regularly hosting events about religious freedom
as part of a Women’s Culture Club. Women are generally
excellent listeners; therefore activities will be designed
to encourage discussion about the impact of religious
freedom on family values and social progress. According to
Brian Grim, when religious freedom is evident, there is
also greater women’s development and improved healthcare.

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39 Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, “Religious Persecution in Cross-
National Context: Clashing Civilizations or Regulated Religious
He asserts religious freedom is the lynchpin among a set of “bundled freedoms.” In his research, Grim correlates religious freedom with higher numbers of women in parliament and lower infant mortality rates. It appears as though when members of society are free to worship as they choose, they also have additional socio-economic freedoms. However, the reverse is also true. When there is less religious freedom within a society, there are fewer opportunities for women and healthcare for the sick.

Embassy activities would compare and contrast U.S. culture around the world through book discussions, films and speaking events. Local women leaders involved in nonprofits, academia and the media would be invited to participate as members as well as serve as guest speakers. Additionally, the embassy would arrange rotating dinner parties within the homes of Americans living in-country in order to provide a more intimate experience of American culture and customs. These types of events would build positive relationships among citizens in the Middle East and foster the kind of environment where the progression of religious freedom is possible.

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40 Grim, God’s Economy, 46.
Finally, the U.S. should utilize the second track of public diplomacy, which is people-to-people engagement. As professor Pauletta Otis notes, religious leaders are powerful political actors because of their “intimate knowledge” of local customs, history and institutions.  

This includes knowing which informal leaders have significant weight within the community and what are their follower’s deepest grievances and hopes. Many religious groups have a profound understanding of the underlying ethnic and religious tensions within local and national cultures. These organizational leaders have a level of credibility that is difficult for U.S. government officials to replicate.

The U.S. should encourage various religious groups based in America to discuss the concept of religious freedom with their counterparts in other countries. This can include local congregations as well as national associations, such as the American Muslim Council, Muslim Public Affairs Council, Council on American-Islamic

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Relations, Muslim Student Association News and the Muslim American Society. The State Department can support this dialogue about religious freedom by granting access through visas and limited sponsorship. However, there would be no “ideological strings attached.”\textsuperscript{42} Instead, visiting groups would be allowed to freely express their political views and then U.S. faith-based groups can follow up by inquiring if they are doing what they say they promote within their own countries. By gently prodding their counterparts towards religious freedom, U.S. organizations create an internal check and balance that holds these groups accountable and conscious of their own actions and beliefs.\textsuperscript{43} In this manner, Muslim groups can still adhere to and build onto their own culture and religion without furthering perceptions of U.S. imperialism.

In closing, discussing the personal and communal benefits of religious freedom with foreign audiences is essential towards advancing religious freedom in the Middle East. All social progress is the result of questioning assumptions. Why can’t there be an end to religious

\textsuperscript{42} Dr. M. Al-Faruqi, email to Georgetown professor, November 10, 2009.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
persecution? Why can’t there be religious freedom in the Middle East? This may the greatest U.S. policy challenge to implement, but it also the greatest opportunity. Not only does it strengthen American national security, but according to the cited empirical evidence, it would also increase social and political harmony in the Middle East. As Albert Einstein once famously said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.” It’s time to imagine a new religious paradigm, one that is possible through the promotion of international religious freedom through public diplomacy.
CONCLUSION

The objective of United States international religious freedom policy is to support peaceful, pluralistic societies. However, the ability to promote religious freedom in the Middle East is fraught with challenges and misunderstandings. Will advancing U.S. policy sometimes be perceived as meddling in outside affairs? Yes. Is it possible that many Muslims will understand, but still disagree? Yes. Despite these challenges, is it still worth pursuing? Yes. America should use its power, strength and voice for those who don’t have one. The case for religious freedom not only benefits persecuted Mandaeans in Iraq, Ahamdis in Pakistan and Baha’is in Iran, but also the millions of individuals too afraid to express their beliefs for fear of death or imprisonment.

Despite the long-term adherence to a primarily punitive approach, it is not likely the U.S. can threaten its way into fostering international religious freedom. Ultimately, Muslim communities within the Middle East will have to debate and determine what is acceptable within Islam and develop their own system. That being said, the
U.S. can contribute to this process by thoughtfully explaining its unique experience and model.

This strategy will require thorough training of the American diplomatic corps, as well as renewed engagement of Middle East audiences through public diplomacy. It will not be as simple as talking at audiences about the benefits of religious freedom. Nor should the U.S. publish more shiny brochures about the views of America’s founding fathers and early U.S. history. Real public diplomacy is a continuing dialogue about these issues. It’s about engaging foreign publics and asking tough questions. For instance, what would it look like if religious groups were allowed to compete? Do you think religious minorities should be allowed to share their views in public? This is a long-term strategy that will require U.S. leadership, patience and perseverance.

Indeed, history demonstrates that significant social change takes time. For example, slavery existed in America for over 250 years. It was not until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment that involuntary servitude was abolished officially in 1865. Similarly, the women’s suffrage movement began slowly during the 19th century, yet
it was not until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 that women were guaranteed the right to vote. Indeed, religious freedom in America is no different. Diplomats should continuously remind themselves how it has taken hundreds of years to develop within U.S.

In addition, diplomats should not ignore how fear factors into the fight for religious freedom. This human emotion is rarely discussed for many of the same reasons government officials resist addressing religion. It is avoided because thoughts and feelings are dismissed as too soft, complicated or irrelevant. However, fear is a primitive and primary emotion that has pushed the human race toward survival. Some religious groups are notorious for harnessing this energy and demonizing anyone who disagrees with them as the “other.” In this way they have justified the destruction of individuals, communities and nations, all in the name of God. Misunderstandings and concerns about U.S. international religious freedom policy in the Middle East only serves to perpetuate fears and comes at great expense to U.S. national security.

The best way to advance religious freedom policy is to confront these fears, not ignore or belittle them. Public
diplomacy programs are crucial because they are designed specifically to work against fear by building trust and respect through increased understanding and engagement. Allowing dissenting views to be aired in an open forum or through an interfaith exchange mitigates fear and puts a face on the unknown “other.” Indeed, there are enough similarities among religious believers to find common ground.

There are no exceptions to the Golden Rule for any of the world’s major religions. This is particularly true with Islam, Christianity and Judaism, which share the same Abrahamic root. The New Testament states in Mathew 7:12, “in everything, do to others what would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”\(^1\) Mohammed, during The Farewell Sermon, told his followers, “Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you.”\(^2\) In the Old Testament, the Jews are commanded in Leviticus 19:18, “love your neighbor as yourself.”\(^3\) Given these divine instructions as

\(^1\) Mathew 7:12 (NIV).

\(^2\) Mohammed, The Farewell Sermon, 632.

\(^3\) Leviticus 19:18 (NIV).
a base, pluralistic societies may be able to flourish if they are afforded religious freedom.

Not only is international religious freedom an issue of justice, but it is also in America’s economic and security interests. If diplomats truly understand these implications, they will waste no time and start with themselves. This means:

- Understanding the evolution of religion throughout U.S. history
- Addressing concerns about international religious freedom policy
- Asking hard questions and engaging foreign audiences through public diplomacy

This is a strategy that will minimize misunderstandings and grievances against U.S. international religious freedom policy. It is also the best way to advance American interests and move the Middle East towards social and political harmony.
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