



U.S. INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM POLICY: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE BIDEN TRANSITION TEAM

The Bottom Line

A statutory US international religious freedom (IRF) policy has existed for over two decades. Four presidents, two Democrats and two Republicans, have each had successes. But during this period global religious persecution and invidious religious discrimination have increased.

The Biden Administration has a remarkable opportunity, at low cost, to build on earlier achievements and, consistent with its internationalist foreign policy, reverse the downward trajectory of international religious freedom by advancing religious freedom equality.

Building on earlier foreign policy approaches that have shown promise can also help unify an American public deeply divided over religion and religious freedom.

The Issue: Religious freedom is important because religion is important

- Religious freedom is critical to human and social flourishing, and to stability, because *religion* is of extraordinary importance to most people around the world.
- Religious freedom is both an international *human rights* and an international *stability* issue.
- In most countries where religious persecution causes human suffering, violence, and instability, religion is the linchpin of politics and culture.
- Success in advancing religious freedom should be understood as inducing nations to see the value of permitting religious freedom for *all* their religious communities.
- History and research make it clear that success in advancing *stable democracies* cannot be achieved without sustained attention to religious freedom equality.
- Accordingly, US IRF policy cannot yield its positive effects if it is treated as a narrow issue within the State Department. Simply naming and shaming the worst violators does not work.
- Millions suffer religious persecution, and we should work in justice to reduce their suffering.
- But success in US IRF policy will also further our fundamental national interests by countering religious violence and extremism, and by enhancing political stability, the equality of women, and opportunities for economic development.
- Accordingly, success in US IRF policy requires a coordinated all-of-government effort.

The Problem

- Religious persecution, violence, and instability are on the rise and spreading.

- A major reason is unjust and unwise government restrictions on religion. The Pew Research Center reports that such restrictions are at their highest global levels since 2007.
- US IRF diplomacy has worked hard to address this problem but until 2016 no President had invested sufficient authority in the IRF ambassador to develop and lead an effective policy.
- Because of his stature and the authority given him, Ambassador Sam Brownback has had signal successes in the Ministerials, the global IRF alliance, and the global IRF roundtables.
- Despite increasing attempts to do so, however, no administration has yet succeeded in integrating IRF into the mainstream of American diplomacy, defense, intelligence, or development strategies. The June 2020 IRF Executive Order moves in this direction.

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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Set a clear Presidential direction.

The President should state publicly within 30 days of taking office that IRF policy is vital to US values of human dignity and justice, and to its fundamental interests in the world, including international cooperation and democratization. He should reassure all Americans that under his administration IRF policy will be prioritized and fully integrated into American foreign policy.

2. Retain the historic bi-partisan nature of US IRF policy by emphasizing “religious freedom equality.”

- Americans come from a broad spectrum of religious traditions. Many are deeply committed to their own religions and are naturally concerned about the fate of their co-religionists abroad, including Muslims, Jews, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and others. This motive is both honorable and just.
- And yet each has benefited from the American commitment to religious freedom for everyone – *religious freedom equality*. They understand, or can come to understand, that the best way to protect their own is to protect everyone. The principle of religious freedom equality should be the starting point for the Biden administration’s IRF policy.

3. The President should nominate within 30 days an IRF Ambassador who will garner bipartisan support and will have the opportunity to succeed.

- Nominate immediately, and secure Senate approval for, a highly-qualified and widely respected IRF Ambassador at Large. The qualifications for IRF Ambassador include:
 - Being a man or woman of deep faith;
 - Possessing significant foreign policy and national security experience;
 - Stature among political and religious communities in the US and abroad;
 - Deep understanding of the meaning and value of religion and of religious freedom;
 - Proven capacity to manage others and to succeed in a difficult bureaucracy.

4. Avoid the Transition Mistakes of Past Administrations

- History suggests that if the IRF office has no ambassador for an extended period, the policy will languish, morale will plummet, and stakeholders foreign and domestic will conclude the new administration is moving IRF policy to a low priority.
- Until the new Ambassador is in place, seek to retain the current Ambassador, Sam Brownback.

5. Provide Authority and Resources to the IRF Ambassador and the IRF Office

- Invest sole authority in the Ambassador at Large for developing and implementing US foreign policy in all matters involving religion. Avoid the mistake of diluting the ambassador's authority and responsibility.
- Ensure the ambassador reports, at a minimum, to the Under Secretary responsible for civilian security, human rights, and democracy. Consider putting the ambassador directly under the Secretary in order to enhance further his or her authority.

6. Policy Recommendations: Internationalizing IRF in Ways Consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

- Incorporate the new International Religious Freedom and Belief Alliance into the administration's emphasis on internationalism. Grow the current membership (approximately 30 nations) to include more problematic governments of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.
- Emphasize the participation of nations, including Muslim-majority nations, where a dearth of religious freedom causes great human suffering and contributes to political instability, economic stagnation, and the threat of religion-based violence and terrorism.
- Internationalize the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, held at State in 2018 and 2019, and held virtually by the Poles in 2020. Confirm and secure offers from Brazil and the UK to host in the next two years, respectively. Seek a Muslim-majority host, such as Indonesia, in 2023.
- Continue internationalizing the IRF roundtables – gatherings of civil society leaders and government officials in nations all over the world. Currently approaching 100 participating nations, the roundtables diversifies religious freedom discussions beyond governments *and provides a pillar for democratic stability*.
- Continue support for other multilateral networks on religious freedom (e.g., the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief).

- Develop the Abrahamic Faith initiative, with the goal of building support among major Islamic, Jewish and Christian leaders for religious freedom equality.
- Review the June Executive Order and build upon it as follows:
 - Continue integrating USAID into US IRF policy, especially in fragile states, in concert with the Global Fragility Act.
 - Ensure the USAID administrator supports this integration.
 - Accept the floor of \$50 million per annum in IRF foreign assistance.
 - Encourage other heads of US foreign affairs agencies to engage with counterparts on IRF policy, and to implement IRF training for all US personnel assigned overseas.
 - Continue the trajectory, begun under Ambassador David Saperstein during the Obama Administration of strengthening IRF training, currently available online and, for FSOs, in residence at regional hubs.
 - Consider developing in-residence courses and training in Washington DC.

CONCLUSION

We conclude by urging the Biden administration to envision a world of “religious realism,” in which respect for religion and its counterpart, religious freedom equality, is the order of the day. This is not a utopian vision, but one which reflects the reality of humanity’s deeply spiritual nature. It is a world where individuals and communities practice and share their respective religious beliefs, while respecting those of their neighbors, without a hint of coercion from anyone – especially governments.

It is a world where the intellectual, moral, and charitable gifts of religious people and religious institutions are seen as important sources of human goods, and are interwoven into all spheres of society. It is a world where religious identity is a source of pride and gratitude, but never chauvinism. It is a world where religious authorities never endorse violence, and where religious people are never the targets of violence because of their faith.

A world characterized by religious freedom equality would not solve every problem. Nor would it be easily achieved. But its potential for advancing human dignity, social harmony, political stability, economic development, the rights of women and of minorities, and international peace renders the effort extraordinarily important – for America and the world.