

Promoting Religious Freedom in the Arab World, Post-September 11

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Brief Analysis

On November 27, 2001, Amy Hawthorne, a Washington Institute Soref fellow, addressed the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing on "Promoting Religious Freedom during the Campaign against Terrorism." The commission is an independent government agency advising the administration and Congress on issues of religious freedom worldwide. The following is a condensed version of her testimony. [Read a full transcript. \(templateC07.php?CID=10\)](#)

To win the war against terrorism, the U.S. government must pursue with equal vigor both the short-term imperative to root out terrorist groups, including their international support networks, and the longer-term objective of advancing a positive vision for the Arab world, one that offers an alternative to the destructive ideology of the terrorists. Both efforts are essential; focusing on the former at the expense of the latter will almost surely prove self-defeating.

Specifically, this means that the United States will need to shed its reluctance to engage Arab leaders on the highly sensitive issues of political reform, rule of law, and the spread of democratic values. The widening of religious freedom must be a cornerstone of this effort. This is not merely a humanitarian objective; it is essential to the promotion of U.S. interests in a stable, productive, peaceful Arab world anchored in the global economy of the twenty-first century.

In the Arab world, the state of freedom for religious minorities still ranges from fragile to nonexistent. September 11 made another dimension of religious freedom more apparent than ever: the often precarious position of moderates squeezed between extremist Islamist ideologies on one side and nondemocratic governments on the other. Osama bin Laden's message of intolerance and violence has placed religious freedom on center stage in the Arab and wider Muslim worlds. His message threatens the region's religious minorities, its millions of moderate Muslim believers, and its millions of others who, while personally pious, do not wish to live under strict religious governments. Meanwhile, some Arab governments may feel emboldened to launch overly broad security dragnets-with the stated goal of clamping down on terrorists-that also target "opponents" of the regime, including religious moderates and human rights groups monitoring religious freedom.

Of course, tolerance and the freedom to worship can never be imposed from the outside. The responsibility for building institutions to protect religious freedom and for fostering a culture of tolerance rests within the region itself.

Nonetheless, the United States has a critical role to play; its voice and leverage do matter.

Regional Issues

The United States should pay particularly close attention to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan. Each of these countries faces problems with religious freedom, yet, at the same time, Washington is seeking intelligence and security cooperation from their governments in the campaign against terrorism. The administration may thereby be tempted to sideline religious freedom issues in pursuit of such cooperation.

Saudi Arabia. Before September 11, the Saudis' poor record on religious freedom was considered a humanitarian problem by the United States; areas of concern included the apparently wide appeal of extremist ideologies in the kingdom, discrimination against the Shi'a minority, and the total absence of religious freedom for millions of foreign workers. In the wake of September 11, however, these concerns have become issues of national security.

Educational reform inside Saudi Arabia should be a priority for the United States, not for the purpose of forcing open Saudi society but rather for the sake of helping make it more tolerant of its own people and, eventually, of the outside world. Rather than trying to impose a U.S. educational model on the kingdom, the best approach would be to show Saudi leaders examples of other nations where successful educational reform has occurred.

Egypt. The recent improvements in Egypt's policies toward Coptic Christians are promising, such as increased issuance of church renovation and building permits. Yet, the United States must be willing to speak out more firmly and consistently on religious freedom issues than it has in the past. Key problems beyond Coptic-Muslim relations include the sufferance of anti-Semitism in the government-backed media and the regime's potential for using the campaign against terrorism as an opportunity to persecute non-terrorists. More generally, the United States should recognize that the Egyptian government's restrictions on civil society and peaceful political activity also harm religious freedom.

Sudan. No country better exemplifies the need to avoid compromising long-term goals like religious freedom for the sake of potential short-term benefits in security and intelligence cooperation. Indeed, Sudan is a test case for how religious tolerance objectives will fare in the campaign against terrorism. Washington should evaluate Khartoum's recent progress against terrorism on its own merits. Yet, the administration should also avoid taking steps—such as appointing an American ambassador to Sudan—that would reward Khartoum before progress has been made on critical issues such as religious freedom.

Policy Tools

The most important policy tool that the United States can deploy to promote religious freedom in the Arab world is sustained political engagement at high (sometimes the highest) levels. Such engagement will be most meaningful if it is part of a broader policy of democracy promotion, one that emphasizes U.S. values like tolerance and free expression. Encouraging genuine avenues for political participation will help create space for moderate Muslim figures and beleaguered liberals to express their views.

The invigorated U.S. public diplomacy campaign now underway is critical to reinforcing these themes. We should remember, however, that it is not America's role to try to explain "what Islam is" to Middle Easterners; that is the job of Muslims themselves. The most appropriate task for the United States is the clear projection of American values in U.S. foreign policy, in order to help Middle Easterners make informed choices about how best to order their own societies.

Some are reluctant to "pressure" our Arab friends on human rights issues, particularly one as touchy as religious freedom, lest we exacerbate the instability that many believe is lurking beneath the surface of many of these governments. This is the wrong analysis; by and large, the absorptive capacity of these regimes for U.S. engagement on religious tolerance and overall democratization is greater than is widely believed. Some religious freedom issues

are best addressed privately, especially in the cases of Arab governments with whom the United States has close relationships. Yet, judicious public statements are sometimes crucial. Arab governments will likely resent and publicly reject such statements, but what the U.S. government says matters a great deal. A [1999] Washington Institute [Research Note \(templateC04.php?CID=215\)](#) on religious minorities in Iran presented cases in which international pressure had no effect on religious persecution, and cases in which it had positive effects, but no cases in which it worsened the situation of those being persecuted-thus, the worst that can result from international pressure is that it will be ignored.

Some argue that an activist approach to religious freedom in the Arab world will increase the vulnerability of specific minorities (e.g., Christians) by opening them up to charges of "protection" by foreign powers. This risk will be mitigated if the United States pursues a broad regional policy that encourages religious freedom for those of all faiths and emphasizes values and principles over specific individuals or groups.

Indeed, our voice carries far more weight than we realize. When the United States rewards good behavior and criticizes bad behavior, people in the region notice. When the United States turns a blind eye to the excesses of its friends in the pursuit of "strategic interests," they also take note.

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