Promoting Religious Freedom in the Middle East, Post-September 11

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To win the war against terrorism, the U.S. government will need to pursue with equal vigor the short-term imperative to eradicate terrorist groups and their international support networks and the longer-term objective to advance a positive vision for the peoples of the Middle East that provides an alternative to terrorists' destructive ideology. 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 local leaders on the highly sensitive issues of political reform, rule of law, and 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 Middle East that is anchored in the global economy of the twenty-first century.

Of course, tolerance and the freedom to worship can never be imposed from the outside. Ultimately, as is true with democratic development more broadly, responsibility for societal, political, and cultural change rests with the leaders and citizens of local countries. U.S. efforts can affect local processes only on the margins; we must always respect genuine national sensitivities. Nonetheless, the United States has a critical role to play; indeed, to stand any chance of success, any conceivable international effort to promote religious freedom must have America in a leading role.

Religious Freedom Policy, Post-September 11

In the period since September 11, there has been no clear change in U.S. policy toward the promotion of human rights (or religious freedom, more specifically) as regards the Arab world. There are, however, factors influencing an evolution in the policy.

The most important development is perhaps the most obvious: Osama bin Laden's message of intolerance and violence toward non-Muslims has placed the issue of religious freedom and tolerance on center stage in the Arab and wider Muslim worlds. He has given voice to some of the most reactionary instincts in the Middle East, with a message that threatens the region's religious minorities, its millions of moderate, peace-loving Muslim believers, and its millions of other citizens who, while personally pious, do not wish to live under strict religious governments. Al-Qaeda's brand of hatred -- which also feeds anti-American, anti-Christian, and anti-Jewish trends in the region -- too often finds a receptive ear in the undemocratic societies prevalent in the Arab world, even if most people strongly

reject bin Laden's violent means.

At the same time, there is compelling evidence that some regional states may wish to take advantage of America's understandable preoccupation with rooting out terrorism to target religious opponents (or perceived opponents) with the net effect of a worsening of democratic values, including religious freedom, precisely at the time when they are already under siege from bin Laden sympathizers. In some traditional U.S. allies, like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as well as in a country like Sudan, which wants to improve ties with Washington, regimes may feel emboldened to launch security dragnets with the stated goal of clamping down on terrorists. If not pursued carefully and fairly, religious freedom and tolerance may be an early casualty of these efforts. Moderate Muslim figures and local human rights groups who work to bring public scrutiny to religious freedom issues may also suffer from narrowed political space after September 11.

A third development after September 11 is the unprecedented level of interest among the American public in internal conditions in the Arab world, including the issue of the political repercussions of religious extremism within such key U.S. allies as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Bolder U.S. initiatives to promote humanistic values -- especially those of religious tolerance and social moderation -- may be particularly welcome at this time by many Americans dismayed that the cacophony of Muslim radicals seems to drown out the voices of Muslim moderates.

Taken together, the need, motive, and opportunity are all present for an enhanced and invigorated U.S. effort to advance American values of tolerance, religious freedom, human rights, and, more generally, democracy. Recognizing the urgency of security cooperation from local governments in prosecuting the war against terrorism, it is still not too early for the United States to articulate and sustain a bolder approach toward these key issues. Indeed, waiting for the "right moment" may mean waiting forever.

Regional Issues Within the Arab world itself, the state of religious freedom still ranges from fragile to non-existent, though there are a few small hopeful signs.

Immediately after September 11, the region experienced intensified anti-American feelings, with many appearing to endorse, directly or tacitly, bin Laden's radical call for establishing a fundamentalist Islamic state across the Muslim world and the expulsion -- or extermination -- of Westerners and non-Muslims. Anecdotal reports suggest that this popular reaction may now be subsiding. Among some religious and political figures, a fragile counter-trend -- still in its infancy -- has emerged, reflected in intra-Muslim soul-searching about how to combat extremism and intolerance. This is very positive. Some religious minorities also privately welcome crackdowns by Middle Eastern governments against extremists as a signal that regimes may no longer look the other way towards their intolerance, as has too often been the case.

In general, however, one cannot argue that the climate for tolerance and religious freedom has improved in the wake of September 11. The same problems of inadequate legal protections to safeguard religious freedom, inadequate enforcement of existing laws, and inadequate educational systems that contribute to popular ignorance and intolerance, persist. Among other problems, by and large, Christians in the Middle East still feel uncomfortable in their own societies.

Within the region, the U.S. should pay particularly close attention to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan. These countries have serious religious freedom problems and at the same time are countries whose intelligence and security cooperation the U.S. is seeking now in the war on terrorism.

Saudi Arabia: Until September 11, the Saudis' dismal record on religious freedom issues -- including the apparent appeal of extremist ideologies among large segments of Saudi religious leaders and some elements of the populace, the discrimination against the Kingdom's large Shia minority, and the total absence of religious freedom for millions of foreign workers -- was viewed as an issue of humanitarian concern to the United States. After September 11, these

are issues of national security. A top priority for U.S. efforts should be educational reform inside Saudi Arabia, not to force open a closed society but to help make that society more tolerant to its own people, a process that would make it more tolerant to the world. In addition, the U.S. government needs to bolster its engagement with Saudi leaders on protecting private religious practice throughout the country, especially as pertains to foreign workers in the Kingdom. As a point of entry into this admittedly thorny situation, the U.S. should energetically, if privately, pursue dialogue with both political and religious leaders inside Saudi Arabia on issues of religious tolerance.

Egypt: After years in which issues of religious tolerance were addressed sporadically with the Egyptian government, Washington must pursue a consistent dialogue at high levels. Recent improvement in policies toward Copts should be recognized, e.g., increased issuance of church renovation and building permits. But the United States must be willing to speak up more loudly and more firmly than in the past. Key issues include the sufferance (even endorsement) of wide-scale anti-Semitism in government-backed media and the potential for exploiting the Campaign Against Terrorism to silence non-extremist Muslims. Maintaining a keen interest in the retrial of the al-Kosheh case is critical. More generally, the United States needs to recognize that the Egyptian government's restrictions on civil society, including on any meaningful domestic human rights monitoring, has had a deleterious impact on religious freedom. The imprisonment of rights activist Saad ed-Din Ibrahim is illustrative of this problem.

Sudan: No country better exemplifies the need to avoid compromising long-term goals of 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 war on terror. The U.S. should evaluate Khartoum's recent progress in terrorism issues on its own merits. Yet the U.S. should also not take steps, such as appointing an American ambassador to Khartoum, that would prematurely reward Khartoum before progress in critical issues such as religious freedom has been registered. The difficult recent mission of Senator Danforth to Sudan demonstrates that Khartoum is not yet serious about resolving its internal conflict peacefully -- the key prerequisite to religious freedom in Sudan.

While focusing on these allies and would-be allies, it is important to keep in mind that egregious violations of religious freedom in the region occur in countries long inimical to U.S. interests, especially Ba'athist Iraq and non-Arab Iran. The absence of religious freedom is a key element of the repressive nature of these two governments and deserves higher priority in U.S. public diplomacy about both. This is particularly important with respect to Iran, whose president's calls for a "dialogue of civilizations" has not yet spurred tolerance within his own country, as evidenced by the continued persecution of the country's its Bahai population and the ongoing harassment of elements of the Jewish population as well as of liberal figures.

Policy Tools

The most important policy tool the U.S. can deploy to promote religious freedom in the Middle East is sustained political engagement at high (sometimes the highest) levels. Such engagement will be most meaningful if conceived of as part of a broader policy of democracy promotion that projects U.S. values and expresses the priority the U.S. places on tolerance and free expression. A more vigorous democracy promotion policy in the region will also pay dividends in terms of religious freedom. Encouraging the expansion of political space and the creation of genuine avenues for responsible political participation will help create space for moderate Muslim leaders to express their views. The invigorated public diplomacy campaign now underway will be critical to reinforcing and broadening these themes.

Some are reluctant to "pressure" our Arab friends on human rights issues, particularly one as sensitive as religious freedom, lest it exacerbate instability that many believe is lurking beneath the surface in many of these societies. This is the wrong analysis. By and large, these regimes are stronger than we give them credit for; it is self-evident that the reason bin Laden, Ayman Zawahiri, and their ilk are in Afghanistan is because of the success of Egypt and

Saudi Arabia in rooting them out of their own societies and pushing them to the margins of the Middle East. These regimes' absorptive capacity for U.S. engagement on issues of religious tolerance and the overall democracy agenda is greater than is widely believed; their systems have learned the lessons of Iran in 1979 and can be more flexible than a generation ago. Given how unassuming any U.S. pro-democracy effort is likely to be anyway, Washington need not fear that it will be risking instability in these countries by pursuing a modest agenda.

In the cases of many Arab governments, especially Saudi Arabia and Egypt, with whom the U.S. has especially close relationships, some religious freedom issues may best be addressed privately. Yet judicious public criticism is crucial at times; what the U.S. government says publicly matters a great deal. Governments will most likely always resent it and publicly reject it, but it does make a difference. It is likely, for example, that sustained international attention on last February's problematic al-Kosheh verdict in Egypt contributed to this summer's decision to hold a retrial. A 2000 Washington Institute Research Note on religious minorities in Iran showed that there are cases where international pressure has had no effect and cases where it has had positive effect, but no cases where it worsened the situation of those being persecuted -- demonstrating that the worst that can result from international pressure is that it will be ignored.

Of course, the U.S. should also commend positive regional developments, such as in Bahrain, where treatment of the country's Shia population has improved recently. Highlighting Bahrain can help provide a demonstration effect for elsewhere in the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia.

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 listen and take note. And when the United States turns a blind eye to the excesses of its friends in the pursuit of "strategic interests," people in the region listen and take note, too. In our public diplomacy, we should remember that the most appropriate U.S. role is not to try to explain "what Islam is" to Middle Easterners; that is appropriately the task of Muslims themselves. The task for the United States is to project American values in our foreign policy so that Middle Easterners can make an educated choice about how best to order their own societies so as to be constructive, productive members of the global community. ❖

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