

# Awaiting the First Report on International Religious Freedom

Sep 2, 1999



## Brief Analysis

**T**he U.S. State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom will release an Annual Report on International Religious Freedom on September 7, 1999 -- the first since it was required to do so by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). The Report will offer "an assessment and description of the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom in each foreign country," including "trends toward improvement in the respect and protection of the right to religious freedom." How aggressively the report deals with religious freedom issues in the Middle East will be a telling sign of how values issues like religious freedom will fare in the overall framework of U.S. foreign policy.

## Country Issues

**Saudi Arabia:** The temptation for the State Department will be to let the strong U.S. ties to Saudi Arabia inhibit criticism of Saudi laws discriminating against non-Muslims. In a speech at the Middle East Institute (MEI) on August 9, 1999, Robert Seiple, ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, said the Saudis care most about the ban on public non-Muslim worship and the prohibition on proselytizing. Besides those two restrictions, the Saudis impose other limits on non-Muslim religions. American service personnel and foreign service officials stationed in Saudi Arabia, including military chaplains, have faced great difficulty in wearing religious insignia and celebrating freely their individual religious beliefs and practices. During the Gulf War, this issue was laid to the side. A delicate issue for IRFA will be the analysis of restrictions on religious practice by the large non-Muslim temporary worker community in Saudi Arabia.

**Egypt:** The Copts, a Christian denomination with 6 million to 10 million adherents in Egypt, are generally able to practice their religion but are threatened to varying degrees by terrorism from extreme Islamic groups, by abusive practices of local police and security forces, and by discriminatory and restrictive Egyptian government policies. In recent years there has been substantial evidence of discrimination and physical violence against Copts, including an incident in El-Kosheh in August and September 1998, where 1,014 Christian men, women, and children were arrested. U.S. president Bill Clinton raised concerns about Coptic Christians during his recent meeting with Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Faced on one side by the pressure of Islamic fundamentalism and on the other by the international human rights community, the government of Egypt is in a precarious situation. The quandary facing the report's authors is whether to emphasize the difficult position facing the Egyptian government or to condemn Egypt for allowing discrimination and persecution. In his MEI speech, Ambassador Seiple noted the recent rescinding of legislation requiring the Egyptian president's signature to conduct renovations on churches. It is possible that the report will congratulate the government of Egypt for this positive step. Yet, the flip side of this legislation is that the president's signature is still required to build a church.

**Israel:** In his MEI speech, Ambassador Seiple commented that the Office of International Religious Freedom will not become involved in the most volatile religious issue in Israel: intra-Jewish relations among the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox branches of Judaism. One challenge he will likely face will be the annual report's

discussion of proposed Israeli legislation that would increase the criminal penalties for proselytizing. This legislation would make illegal the possession of "proselytizing materials," which some Christian groups argue could criminalize the possession of the New Testament. Yet another issue is a study of the causes for the diminishing Christian community in Israel, including the tensions between Muslims and Christians, as was seen in the conflict over the building of the Millennium Square in Nazareth earlier this year. A final issue is that of access to the holy places for West Bank Muslims and Christians.

Palestinian Authority (PA): The key issue regarding the PA that needs analysis is why the Christian community in the Palestinian-controlled territories is shrinking. The question is, What is the PA doing to counter pressure from political Islamists who seek to reduce the Christian presence in the Holy Land?

Iraq: The report may pan America's enemies, like Iraq. The challenge will be to show that non-Sunnis (Shi'is and Christians) face worse problems than the suffering all Iraqis endure under Iraqi president Saddam Husayn's repression. There is clear evidence, for example, regarding political -- although not necessarily religious -- repression of Shi'is. There is far less evidence of religious repression of either Shi'is or Christians. Despite the attraction of including Iraq on another list of sanctioned countries, the credibility of the report itself will be undermined if it condemns Iraq without substantial evidence that religious persecution in Iraq is worse than in U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia.

Jordan and Tunisia: Jordan and Tunisia are countries where the relationship with the relatively small Christian -- and, in Tunisia's case, Jewish -- communities are cordial. Whereas there has been some concern about proselytizing, religious freedom has generally prospered. The report should be looking for opportunities to praise those countries for whom the religious freedom "cup" is mostly full, not merely to condemn those where the "cup" is mostly empty.

Iran: Iran has had a long-standing history of persecuting Baha'is as followers of a religion allegedly heretical to Islam. With 300,000-500,000 adherents, they constitute the country's largest religious minority. Recently, Iran arrested thirteen members of the country's dwindling Jewish community for treason, charging them with spying for Israel. Sadly, religious freedom has become part of Iran's power struggle between progressive and fundamentalist sectors.

Syria: Although Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad clamps down brutally on political or ethnic dissent, ever since 1992 -- when he let Syrian Jews have exit visas -- there has been "little evidence" of discrimination or violence against religious minorities, according to the 1999 State Department report on human rights. Its treatment of Syria's Christian minority has been cordial and supportive. Thus, Syria may get a "bye" from the IRFA report.

Sudan: Perhaps the driving force behind passage of the International Religious Freedom Act was the concern of the American religious community over Islamic persecution (and indeed enslavement) of Christians in Sudan. The report will likely come down hard on the Sudanese government and demand government efforts to reduce slavery and stop harassment of churches in Sudan.

#### Next Steps

In addition to mandating the annual report, IRFA created an independent Commission on International Religious Freedom, whose members are appointed by the president and Congress to suggest to the president and secretary of state specific U.S. policy actions that promote religious freedom abroad. The commission is mandated to publish a full report of its own each May; that report is expected to focus on a handful of individual countries rather than tour the entire globe.

IRFA authorizes the president to label as "Countries of Particular Concern" those states where religious persecution and discrimination are quite evident. President Clinton has turned that responsibility over to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Although Albright's designations do not depend on IRFA reports, they will be used as the primary source of information when she makes her decisions. Sudan, Iran, and Iraq are likely to make the list of

Countries of Particular Concern, and as such they will be subject to a list of sanctions, authorized by IRFA, that range from little more than a private demarche to being cut off from aid and loans. As the likely countries are already subject to a variety of U.S. sanctions, it is by no means clear if any additional sanctions will be imposed.

Two strategic choices the annual report must make are how to treat allies and whether to tackle the issue of political Islam. It is easy to condemn fundamentalist excesses in Iran. And it is tempting to excuse the Egyptian government of indifference to the plight of Copts because of the Islamist threat. And it is understandable to downplay Turkey's repression of religious freedom for fundamentalist Muslims, as the country is a military ally. One wonders, however, if the report will apply the same standard when analyzing allies and unfriendly states, and whether it will take on the larger issue of Islamic fundamentalism. Analyzing whether political Islam is in essence inimical to Western values of tolerance and individual freedom becomes more urgent as political Islam gains in popularity and power.

The United States has had a long record of concern for religious liberty throughout the world. And that concern -- as with Soviet Jewry and the Jackson-Vanik amendments -- has been reflected in U.S. foreign policy. The integrity of the IRFA annual report and the autonomy reflected in its findings will suggest how important a factor religious freedom is becoming among the panoply of U.S. foreign policy goals.

Marshall Breger, a professor of law at the Catholic University of America's Columbus School of Law and an adjunct fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, is coauthor of *Jerusalem's Holy Places and the Peace Process* (The Washington Institute, 1998).

Policy #407

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,  
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

### TOPICS

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)