

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Policy Question: How can the United States improve its effectiveness in promoting international religious freedom to accomplish its related foreign policy and security objectives?

Recommendation: I recommend that Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom Sam Brownback prepare a persuasive presentation for incoming Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on why international religious freedom (IRF) should be a priority within the State Department; President Trump appoint a Special Adviser for IRF to the National Security Council; the National Security Adviser create a Policy Coordination Committee for IRF on the National Security Council; and that the State Department and President request increased appropriations from Congress for nongovernmental organizations that specialize in IRF policy.

Background: In 1998, President Bill Clinton signed into law the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The law's stated purpose was "to express United States foreign policy with respect to, and to strengthen United States advocacy on behalf of, individuals persecuted in foreign countries on account of religion" and "to implement appropriate tools in the United States foreign policy apparatus...to promote respect for religious freedom by all governments and peoples" (International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, [IRFA], 1998, Preamble & H.R. 2431-4). At the time IRFA passed, more than one-half of the world's population lived in countries that either severely restricted or prohibited religious freedom (IRFA, 1998, H.R. 2431-3). Evidence from the Pew Research Center demonstrates that limits on freedom of religion have worsened during the 20 years since the law passed. A Pew study reported that as of 2015, "79% of the world's population lived in countries with high or very high levels of religious restrictions" (Cooperman, Kishi, & Schiller, 2017). The continued deterioration of religious freedom internationally demonstrates that IRFA and the structures it created have not been effective or sufficient in addressing this global crisis. This paper reviews the challenges that have hindered IRF policy at the State Department and Executive Branch and makes recommendations for how to address them. Further, it argues that effective IRF policy is necessary not only for upholding American values and human rights but for ensuring U.S. national security.

IRF Policy and National Security: It is critical to U.S. national security that the federal government has an effective strategy for promoting international religious freedom. Research from the past decade identifies associations between religious freedom and societal goods like political stability, economic growth, and improved health (Testimony of Thomas Farr, December 2017). Additionally, a lack of religious freedom within a society is associated with higher levels of religious violence (Grim and Fink, 2007). Many of the countries with significant levels of religious persecution are Middle Eastern states dealing with Islamist terrorism (Testimony of Thomas Farr, December 2017). Promoting peace and stability within this region of the world continues to be one of America's top security priorities (National Security Strategy, 2015).

Policy Alternatives: Based on a thorough analysis of the academic literature covering U.S. IRF policy and interviews with academic, government, and non-profit personnel working in IRF policy, I identified four alternatives to improve U.S. IRF promotion:

1. Have Ambassador Brownback prepare a persuasive presentation for incoming Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on why IRF should be a priority within the State Department.
2. Appoint a Special Adviser for IRF to the National Security Council, consistent with the sense of Congress expressed in IRFA and the Frank R. Wolf Act.
3. Create a Policy Coordination Committee (PCC), chaired by the Special Adviser for IRF, on the National Security Council to specifically manage IRF policy.
4. Request increased appropriations for NGOs that work with civil society to promote IRF.

Criteria: The four alternatives are evaluated based on the following criteria:

- Gainers support from senior administrative leaders.
- Contributes toward a whole-of-government strategy for IRF policy.
- Promotes long-term sustained progress in countries with religious persecution.