

Opportunities and challenges for international religious freedom research to inform U.S. foreign policy

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Abstract

The promotion of international religious freedom (IRF) has been a consistent foreign policy goal across the past four U.S. presidential administrations. The form and implementation of approaches to advancing IRF, however, have varied. This article explores these differences and their implications for how scholarship can inform government initiatives to protect and promote IRF. Particular attention is paid to the Trump administration's expansion of IRF policy into the development space. On the one hand, that recent shift increased demand from certain departments and agencies for new data and analysis. On the other hand, those calls were also often ad hoc and uneven in nature as policymakers sought to quickly develop innovative ways to incorporate IRF into their programming. The article recommends that scholars can best respond to moments of policy change by remaining committed to nuanced, objective, and critical research that responds to empirically driven problems related to religious freedom and discrimination.

Keywords international religious freedom, foreign policy, FoRB promotion, policy, discrimination.

1. Introduction

In March 2020, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) released the latest updates to its operational model. It would be easy to overlook, in that 159-page document, the single mention of religious freedom at §201.3.2.11 (U.S. Agency for International Development 2020:33-34). However, that reference introduced a critical change in how one of the largest official aid organizations in the world administers civilian foreign and development assistance. For the first time ever, certain missions were required to incorporate religious freedom into their five-year Country Development Cooperation Strategies.²

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² This directive covered missions operating in countries listed on Tier 1 (Countries of Particular Concern)

USAID's amendment points to a broader policy shift regarding the advancement of international religious freedom (IRF) under the presidential administration of Donald Trump. Although religious freedom has been an explicit foreign policy priority for each of the last four presidents, Trump expanded IRF policy into the development space in novel ways. Most notably, an executive order issued in June 2020 allocated \$50 million for foreign assistance programs that advance IRF (The White House 2020).

These policy changes raise important questions for IRF researchers seeking to inform government officials.³ What are the key opportunities and challenges when new strategies are adopted? Do certain pitfalls arise? And what should policymakers consider when drawing on IRF research produced in response to their calls for data and analysis?

This article draws on the extant literature on IRF policy, primary source material from U.S. government agencies, and informal conversations with policymakers in Washington, D.C. between January and June 2020 to shed light on these questions. I begin by outlining the variation in how U.S. administrations have promoted religious freedom since the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IREA). The Clinton administration focused on the institutionalization of this new legislation. Presidents Bush and Obama prioritized direct engagement with faith-based organizations (FBOs), although they applied different models to do so. The Trump administration shifted attention and resources toward development aid.

I then draw attention to how policy change, especially the modifications that occurred under the Trump administration, can influence opportunities for and the impact of IRF research. On one hand, the Trump administration's expansion of IRF policy into the development space increased demand from certain agencies and actors. It also opened space to discuss what religious freedom means in the first place and how federal agencies can effectively incorporate it into their programming. On the other hand, responses from federal agencies remained ad hoc and ran the risk of being viewed as partisan.

I conclude with modest recommendations as to how academic research, especially by a growing cohort of new scholars, can maximize its impact during periods of policy change. Most importantly, analysts need to remain committed to nuanced,

or Tier 2 (Special Watch List) of either the Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom or the Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report. Although USAID has long emphasized the promotion of the free exercise of religion, it has not previously required missions to integrate religious freedom into their program cycles.

³ This article focuses on periods of policy change, rather than policy reform. The former refers to incremental shifts in existing structures, including new policies and offices to carry out those policies. Policy reform denotes larger and/or more rapid structural changes (see Bennett and Howlett 1992).

objective, and critical research that responds to real-world puzzles, not the whims of electoral cycles.

Understanding the development and divisions surrounding IRF as a U.S. foreign policy goal is important for scholars and practitioners in a variety of contexts. For those who study religious freedom, it underscores the importance of clear conceptualization and measurement, as well as causal, not casual inferences (Musci and Stuart 2019). Decision makers sometimes latch on to findings that support their positions. Scholars, therefore, need to employ thoughtful research designs and explicitly acknowledge what their findings do and do not show. Officials and activists, in turn, must think carefully and critically about the data they draw on to inform the policies they advocate for and implement.

2. IRF and U.S. foreign policy

The promotion of IRF has remained a consistent foreign policy goal across the past four U.S. presidential administrations. Since the IRFA's passage in 1998, President Bill Clinton and his successors have all, though to varying degrees, expressed support for the promotion of freedom of religion as a universal human right, a strategic national interest, and a key foreign policy objective. The strategies used to advance religious freedom have varied, however. These diverse efforts can be broadly understood as reflecting three primary approaches.

2.1 The institutionalization of IRF policy: 1990-2001

IRF emerged as the dominant framework for incorporating religion into American foreign policy following the end of the Cold War (Bettiza 2019:184). One reason for the concern about religion, in general, was the seeming increase in conflicts fought along ethnoreligious lines, such as the Yugoslav wars. The publication of Huntington's (1996) "clash of civilizations" thesis, along with other studies that documented the resurgence of religion in world politics, further fueled anxieties about a post-Cold War era dominated by interreligious conflict (see Klocek and Hassner 2019). But why should the response to this threat focus on international religious freedom?

The answer to that question is closely related to the rise of an expansive and vocal community of IRF advocates. It began as a loose arrangement of Christian groups that had been documenting for many years the persecution of Christian minorities around the globe (Hertzke and Philpott 2000). By the mid-1990s, numerous Christian churches and their policy arms, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Episcopal Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the National Association of Evangelicals, had joined this effort. As awareness continued to grow regarding both the prevalence of religious freedom violations and the limit-

ed U.S. response to such abuses, a wide-ranging and unlikely alliance of activists of other faiths and no faith developed. It included Tibetan Buddhists, Iranian Baha'is, and mainstream Jewish organizations, as well as the Congressional Black Caucus and various feminist groups (Farr and Saunders 2009; Hehir 2001; Hertzke 2004).

President Clinton responded to the growing concerns and the mounting pressure to address IRF through a number of policy initiatives (see Farr 2008:ch. 4). Among the most notable actions was the convening of the Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad by Secretary of State Warren Christopher in 1996. This was followed in 1997 by a congressionally mandated State Department report on the persecution of Christians abroad. Also in 1997, Congressman Frank Wolf (R-Va.) and Senator Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) introduced the Freedom from Religious Persecution Act. It would have mandated automatic sanctions against governments responsible for religious persecution, but this became a contentious issue within the Clinton administration.⁴ In response, Senators Don Nickles (R-Okla.) and Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) introduced the revised IRFA, which Congress passed in fall 1998.

The IRFA formally institutionalized international religious freedom as a U.S. foreign policy objective. It sought to create new offices at the State Department and on the National Security Council that were devoted to the issue, an Ambassador-at-Large position to manage the effort within the State Department, and a bipartisan, independent commission to conduct fact-finding studies, provide policy recommendations, and monitor the State Department's performance.⁵ Additionally, the IRFA require the State Department to release an annual report on the status of religious freedom around the world and on the actions that the U.S. government was taking to address violations (see U.S. Congress 1998).

The new legislation and its tools remained the primary avenue for promoting IRF during Clinton's second term. This process, of course, was not without its challenges and critiques.⁶ First and foremost, disagreement arose around the IREFA's implementation. State Department efforts initially concentrated on the release of religious prisoners. Although this was an admirable goal, some officials worried that the focus was too narrow (Farr 2008:16). Others remained unsatisfied with the practice of "double hatting," or designating already existing sanctions on a country

⁴ Opposition to Wolf and Specter's bill also emerged within the State Department over fears that it would create a "hierarchy among human rights" and was linked to the Christian right (see Farr and Saunders 2009:952).

⁵ The IRFA required the establishment of the Office of International Religious Freedom within the State Department; it encouraged, but did not mandate, the establishment of a religious freedom advisor on the National Security Council.

⁶ For more on the history of the IRFA and its critics, see Gunn (2000).

as fulfilling the IRFA provisions. Still others worried that the new Office of International Religious Freedom (OIRF) was being isolated from broader operations in the State Department because it was placed within the existing Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) rather than being given its own purview (Birdsall 2016; Hertzke 2008). Policy changes under the Bush and Obama administrations sought to address these concerns.

2.2 IRF policy and faith-based organizations: 2001-2016

President George W. Bush drew on and expanded many of the same tools used by the Clinton administration. The OIRE, for instance, remained in the DRL but grew from a handful of staff to more than 20 full-time members. It also assumed full responsibility for the production of the annual IRF reports (Birdsall 2016).

President Bush further initiated several policy changes to advance IRE. In particular, he prioritized direct engagement with faith-based organizations as a broader strategy to promote religious freedom at home and abroad. This included the establishment of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (WHOFBCI), as well as the establishment of affiliate centers in a number of executive departments and USAID.⁷ These new offices expanded the federal government's institutional capacity and generated new ideas about how to work with religious actors in the construction of foreign aid policy and the delivery of development and humanitarian assistance abroad (Bettiza 2019:2-3).

President Barack Obama built on this idea of advancing IRF through engagement with faith-based organizations after taking office in 2009. For instance, he expanded the WHOFBCI – renaming it the Office for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships (OFNP) – within his first 100 days in office (The White House 2009). In 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry established a new Office of Religion and Global Affairs (S/RGA), which was tasked with directly advising the Secretary of State on policy matters as they relate to religion and with serving as the first point of contact for both religious and secular organizations seeking to engage the State Department on matters of religion. Additionally, it consolidated a number of existing offices by incorporating the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, the Special Representative to Muslim Communities, and the Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (U.S. State Department n.d.).⁸

The Obama administration also continued to expand the work of the OIRE. In September 2015, for example, it appointed a Special Advisor for Religious Minori-

⁷ The executive departments affected included Agriculture, Commerce, Education, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Labor, and Veterans Affairs, along with the Small Business Administration. For more details, see The White House (n.d).

⁸ Although each of these was housed in the S/RGA, they maintained their specific mandates.

ties in the Near East and South and Central Asia (Bettiza 2019:192; Birdsall 2016).⁹ In 2016, President Obama also signed into law the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, which stipulated that the Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom should report directly to the Secretary of State. The Wolf Act further amended the IRFA's understanding of "freedom of thought, conscience, and religion" to include both theistic and non-theistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess or practice any religion (see U.S. Congress 2016).

2.3 IRF policy and development: 2016-present

The Trump administration followed a similar pattern to its predecessors, while also demonstrating a notable expansion of IRF policy into the development space. One of the first changes was a reorganization of the S/RGA and OIRE, announced by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in 2017 and implemented the following year. The S/RGA was formally folded into the OIRF and a new Ambassador-at-Large, Sam Brownback, was appointed to an expanded role.¹⁰

One part of this increased responsibility involved the development of the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom. In 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo hosted the first of these summits in Washington, D.C.¹¹ The Ministerial brought together more than 1,000 civil-society and religious leaders, along with more than 100 foreign delegations. A second summit took place a year later. And, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland virtually convened a third meeting in November 2020.

Additionally, the State Department launched the International Religious Freedom Alliance in February 2020. According to Secretary Pompeo, its aim was "to bring together senior government representatives to discuss actions they can take together to promote respect for freedom of religion and belief and protect members of religious minority groups worldwide" (Ochab 2020). As of December 2020, the Alliance included some 28 countries.

Finally, the Trump administration considerably broadened IRF policy into the development space, especially in 2020.¹² This expansion included the appointment

⁹ While this position was established under the Obama administration, it was a result of congressional mandate rather than executive branch policy. The position was officially established through H.R. 301, 113th Congress (2013-2014).

¹⁰ In addition, the positions of Special Representative to Muslim Communities and the Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation were restructured and the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism was reorganized within the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. See Calamur (2017).

¹¹ The Ministerial was initially proposed by senior staff within the OIRF and approved by Secretary Tillerson. After Tillerson resigned, Secretary Pompeo reaffirmed and moved forward with the summit.

¹² The desire to condition foreign aid on other countries' treatment of religious minorities has not been without its controversy. For example, fierce debate emerged in late 2019 when USAID announced two grants to Iraqi organizations – a charity that primarily serves Christian minorities and a Catholic

of two new religious freedom advisors to USAID. Additionally, the 2020 Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom directed new attention and funding toward the implementation of IRF in development programs. Fifty million dollars per fiscal year were allocated for programs that advance IRF. Under the order, executive departments and agencies that fund foreign assistance programs were required to ensure that faith-based and religious entities are not discriminated against on the basis of religious identity or belief. The order also mandated that the Secretary of State, in consultation with USAID's Administrator, "develop a plan to prioritize international religious freedom in the planning and implementation of United States foreign policy and in the foreign assistance programs of the Department of State and USAID" (The White House 2020).

3. IRF research and practice during periods of policy change

The promotion and protection of IRF has been a consistent foreign policy goal of U.S. presidential administrations over the past three decades. That said, the approaches taken to advance IRF have varied. What implications do periods of policy change have for those seeking to link research on religious freedom to U.S. foreign policy? In this section, I outline a few of the most common opportunities and pitfalls.

3.1 Opportunities

On one hand, policy shifts in the advancement of IRF can lead to increased demand for data and analysis, especially when offices expand or responsibilities grow. This is because new policies shift resources and require new or increased expertise. The creation of the S/RGA under President Obama led to the hiring of new personnel with experience in religious engagement, including S/RGA director Shaun Casey. The shift of focus back to the OIRF under the Trump administration, in turn, led to an expanded role for Ambassador Brownback, along with the various initiatives discussed above. Each of these undertakings has required additional study for their preparation and implementation.

Moreover, changes in how to advance IRF can catch federal agencies off guard. One way for them to quickly come up to speed is to commission studies and reports from IRF researchers. Under the Obama administration, the USAID Conflict Management and Mitigation Office commissioned a report on religious freedom and conflict (Finke and Martin 2012). More recently, USAID's Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives (CFOI), in partnership with the U.S. Institute of Peace, con-

university – that career officials had previously rejected for not meeting the organization's criteria. Leaked emails suggest that Vice President Mike Pence pressured political appointees within USAID to overturn the prior rejections (see Torbati 2019).

ducted a two-year research project to investigate the relationship between religious freedom, political stability, and socioeconomic development.¹³ The project also aimed to provide policy recommendations for how missions can incorporate religious freedom into their programming cycles (see Klocek 2020).

The broader aim behind this and other initiatives has been twofold. First, policymakers want to ground their policy decisions in an evidence-based framework that increases the efficacy of programming. They want, for example, more information on the causal relationships between development, democratization, and peacebuilding. Just as importantly, there is a growing call to better understand how these processes vary across different contexts and when they complement or counteract one another (Petersen and Marshall 2019).

Second, as new actors enter the IRF policy space, they are also asking challenging questions about what the concept refers to in the first place. Some decision makers, especially in the development space, come to the issue with an understanding of IRF advocacy as addressing political or economic persecution of religious minorities. Several scholars and activists, however, focus more on restrictions that limit adherence to or practice of one's faith (see Fox 2020:ch. 2).

3.2 Challenges

The demand for research on and a deeper understanding of IRF are, of course, not the only consequences of policy change. Obstacles also surface between researchers and decision makers. Three of these are worth noting.

The first concerns the potential unevenness of calls for more study on IRF. As of 2020, a handful of actors and organizations have led the charge in Washington, D.C. These tend to be people or organizations who are already committed, either institutionally or in principle or both, to incorporating religion into foreign policy, such as USAID's CFOI and the OIRF. Whether other agencies will follow this lead and whether the current demand will be sustained remain open questions.

A second challenge is to find ways to incorporate the initiatives and findings of current research projects into the broader foreign policy apparatus. As former OIRF director Thomas Farr (2008:17) noted more than a decade ago, a central reason for the ineffectiveness of IRF policy has been its isolation from overall national security strategy. How can contemporary studies inform a whole-of-government approach within USAID? Despite an increase in funding and support for IRF, those resources still remain quite small relative to the budgets devoted to foreign policy and development assistance. Therefore, efforts to support scholarship on IRF

¹³ In 2021, the Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives (CFOI) became the Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships (CFBNP).

and incorporate it more fully into the work of U.S. federal agencies face daunting obstacles.

A third, and perhaps the greatest, challenge with regard to how research on religious freedom can inform policymaking is perceptual. When research is funded by and/or primarily used by a particular administration, will other scholars and practitioners assume that it is inherently biased? Moreover, how will federal agencies view research that contradicts or calls into question their administration's approach to advancing and protecting international religious freedom? Will they ignore these analyses? Or, will they take them as opportunities for additional study of particular conditions that bolster or constrain policy goals?

These are, of course, not easy questions to answer. And their importance seems all the more pressing today as criticisms persist about successive U.S. administrations placing greater or lesser emphasis on IRF as part of their domestic political strategies. I conclude with modest recommendations for moving forward.

4. Recommendations and conclusion

During the early years of the IREFA, scholars were just beginning to catalogue religious freedom violations and persuade officials of its policy relevance (Farr and Hoover 2009; Grim and Finke 2011). Today numerous datasets exist, religious freedom remains a salient topic among decision makers, and more analysts than ever are studying the topic. How can this growing cohort of scholars continue to engage effectively with the policy world?

First, researchers should not let short-term requests, or a particular policy climate, define the questions they investigate or the findings they present. It can be tempting, especially among those with a principled commitment to the reduction of religious freedom violations around the globe, to capitalize on an uptick of interest in IRF. However, policymakers sometimes latch on too quickly to particular studies in their zeal to advocate for a cause. At other times, they apply research to policymaking simply because it fits their prior worldview. Scholars who rush to be policy-relevant without considering the politics behind research on religious freedom may find that their work contributes to misunderstanding and further polarization, or even to policies that intensify rather than reduce religious discrimination. Instead, researchers must remain guided by disciplinary norms for the collection and analysis of data, which sometimes means not being able to supply the answers policymakers want.

Second, analysts should develop, draw on, and bring attention to the most recent and accurate evidence available. Considerable new data have been collected on the regulation of and discrimination against religious groups over the past decade. Nevertheless, policymakers continue to gravitate to many of the same earlier sources.

For instance, it has seemed almost obligatory, at the start of any discussion on IRF in Washington, D.C., to reference the Pew Research Center's Global Restrictions on Religion dataset (Birdsall and Beaman 2020). This is certainly an important resource, but other datasets – such as those developed by the Religion and State and Varieties of Democracy projects – offer opportunities for analysis over longer time periods and/or with additional detail, as well as important robustness checks (see Fox 2020).

Third, researchers should not abandon nuance. Policymakers typically prefer direct, concise arguments and findings that can be applied to a broad set of cases. However, this desire for simplification can also lead to casual rather than causal inferences. The best policies are informed by scholarship that clearly acknowledges the strengths and weaknesses of its empirical work, the conditions under which its findings are most likely to apply, and what questions remain unanswered. For instance, Daniel Philpott's (2019) study of religious freedom in Islamic nations highlighted important heterogeneity in the Muslim world while also underscoring the need for locally developed policies to advance religious freedom.

Fourth, scholars must be sensitive to the motivations and processes underlying the increasing demand for more research on IRF. As we have seen, each new administration adopts its own approach to advancing religious freedom around the world and for its own reasons. The Trump administration's expansion into the development space further underscored how policy changes can fuel partisanship. As such, the continuation of new policies across changes of administration is far from certain. Scholars should, therefore, consider how best to engage with policymakers over the long-term. One way to do this is to remain committed to objective scholarship that addresses empirical puzzles and informs all participants in the debate.

Ultimately, the implementation of IRF policy in the United States and beyond has substantial real-world consequences. How policymakers and officials understand the concept and global trends in IRF will influence not only the direction of U.S. foreign policy and development assistance, but also the extent to which millions of people around the world will be free to practice their faith or choose no faith at all. Researchers in this field should, thus, maintain a consistent focus on better understanding the causes and consequences of religious persecution, rather than how to advance particular domestic policy or political interests.

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