

**TASK FORCE SERIES**

# **Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for U.S. Foreign Policy**

**REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON RELIGION  
AND THE MAKING OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY**

R. Scott Appleby and Richard Cizik, *Cochairs*

Thomas Wright, *Project Director*



SPONSORED BY

**THE CHICAGO COUNCIL  
ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS**

## Executive Summary

Religion has been a major force in the daily lives of individuals and communities for millennia. Yet recent data show that the salience of religion is on the rise the world over. Once considered a “private” matter by Western policymakers, religion is now playing an increasingly influential role—both positive and negative—in the public sphere on many different levels. Religious actors are central players in local, national, and international life, from providing basic services in impoverished areas of the world to influencing larger social, economic, and political developments; shaping important international debates; and advancing the goals of peace, justice, and freedom.

Well-organized and well-funded extremist groups also use religion to deepen existing cultural and political fault lines and justify militancy and terrorism. Just as globalization and communication technologies have supported positive religious developments, they have also facilitated the growth of extremist religious views and the development of dangerous terrorist networks.

As America looks ahead, it is clear that religious actors will not only continue to present major challenges to our security, but provide enormous opportunities to create new alliances and forge new paths to peace and prosperity in many troubled areas of the world. This means that the United States government will not only need to develop a far greater understanding of religion’s role in politics and society around the globe—including a detailed knowledge of religious communities, leaders, and trends—but it must move beyond traditional state-to-state relations to develop effective policies for engaging religious communities within and across nations.

After decades of assuming that religion had only a waning influence, policymakers in the United States have gradually become more aware of religion’s role in many dilemmas and developments around the world—often through painful experience dating back to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Events such as the September 11 attacks and the struggle with intrareligious conflict in Iraq have more recently concentrated the attention of many policymakers on religion as a “problem” or threat. However, a focus on religion through the lens of terrorism and counterterrorism strategy is too narrow—and even then still poorly understood. This limited focus has caused many U.S. decision makers to overlook and undervalue the influential role of religious leaders and communities in helping address vexing global problems and promoting peace.

In his speech in Cairo on June 4, 2009, President Obama recognized the importance of engaging economically and politically influential sectors of societies, including religious communities. This follows efforts by the Clinton and Bush administrations to begin raising the profile of religious engagement. Yet while a vision has been articulated, the way to move forward has not. The U.S. government lacks the framework, strategy, and capacity to fully understand and effectively engage religious communities. While there have been advances across the U.S. foreign policy bureaucracy over the last several years in recognizing that religion is an important driver in global affairs, there is still much to be done.

First and foremost, this report argues for greater acknowledgement of the full range of opportunities and challenges religious leaders and communities provide. This includes a focus beyond the Muslim world to encompass religious communities more broadly.<sup>1</sup> What is needed is an informed and coherent framework that allows actors within and outside government to better understand and respond to religiously inspired actors and events in a way that supports those doing good, while isolating those that invoke the sacred to sow violence and confusion.

This report aims to provide this needed framework. It reflects the consensus of leaders drawn from academia, religious institutions, the foreign policy community, development agencies, and nongovernmental organizations. It is structured around three key objectives that the Task Force set itself: (1) offering an understanding of the role that religion plays in world affairs, (2) explaining why this matters for the United States, and (3) charting a strategy for moving forward.

## Religious Patterns in a Volatile World

The Task Force has identified six principal patterns that together reflect religion's increasing importance in international affairs.

1. The influence of religious groups—some with long-established and others with newly won voices—is growing in many areas of the world and affects virtually all sectors of society, from politics and culture to business and science.

1. Due to the political context and current foreign policy discourse, many of the examples in this report have to do with Muslim communities. However, the strategic framework provided by the Task Force is applicable to the engagement of all major religious communities abroad.

2. Changing patterns of religious identification in the world are having significant political implications.
3. Religion has benefited and been transformed by globalization, but it also has become a primary means of organizing opposition to it.
4. Religion is playing an important public role where governments lack capacity and legitimacy in periods of economic and political stress.
5. Religion is often used by extremists as a catalyst for conflict and a means of escalating tensions with other religious communities.
6. The growing salience of religion today is deepening the political significance of religious freedom as a universal human right and a source of social and political stability.

## Strategic Challenges for the United States

Each of these trends is interesting but not necessarily consequential when taken alone. Yet they combine to become a powerful force on the local, national, and international stage, making them impossible to ignore in the conduct of foreign policy if the United States is to achieve its strategic aims. It will be much harder, if not impossible, to accomplish important goals—including development objectives, conflict resolution, and the promotion of social and human rights—without understanding the religious context. Yet moving forward with religious engagement also presents some important strategic challenges that must also be clearly understood.

First, while the United States has an interest in religious communities realizing their legitimate aspirations, including the right to live in a democratic society, it must also seek to maintain its strategically important bilateral alliances and partnerships throughout the world. These two interests—democratization and alliances—are, at times, in conflict. In particular, there is a concern that the introduction of elections in certain countries could result in the empowerment of parties and movements, often defined in religious terms, with an expressed anti-American agenda. The United States needs a way to reconcile these two objectives.

Second, the United States has an interest in promoting human rights, including religious freedom, as core values of U.S. policy, but

must do so in a way that is not perceived as a Western assault on local faith and custom. U.S. policymakers must also acknowledge the challenges of doing this effectively.

Third, while debates inside religious communities have a bearing on the wider world, including the United States, outsiders currently lack the standing to influence them. The United States should be actively engaged in dialogue with the leaders of these communities, while not manipulating religion for its own ends or treating religion exclusively as a “problem.”

## A New U.S. Strategy

This report proposes a new strategy for effective religious engagement that is indirect rather than direct. The Task Force believes the United States should avoid trying to change religious societies through direct action or to promote an uncompromising secular alternative. Both of these approaches would likely backfire with dangerous consequences. Instead, the Task Force advocates an indirect approach that builds, cultivates, and relies upon large networks and partnerships—which will vary by degree—with religious communities. This requires building the capacity at home to listen to and interpret the advice provided by these networks and institutionalize the expertise needed to determine how best to engage these communities.

This approach rests on the following assumptions:

1. Religion should not be viewed only as a problem, but also as a source of creativity, inspiration, and commitment to human flourishing that can and often does provide enormous opportunities.
2. The United States should avoid actions that use or appear to use religion instrumentally, i.e., the United States should not try or be widely perceived as trying to manipulate religion in pursuit of narrowly drawn interests.

## Recommendations

The recommendations in this report fall into two main areas: (1) how to build the internal capacity to engage religion and religious communities and (2) how to engage religion and religious communities

more effectively by better identifying whom to engage, what issues to engage, and the goals of that engagement.

### Building internal capacity to engage religion overseas

The report’s recommendations include the following:

#### *Establish religious engagement within the government bureaucracy.*

The U.S. effort to engage religious communities must be broad and deep. The United States must broaden its definition of engagement and empower a larger number of government departments—including those outside the national security and foreign policy realm—to engage with religious leaders and organizations on issues defining their societies. The Task Force recommends that the effort to address the role of religion in world affairs be directed by the National Security Council (NSC), which will serve as the guardian and the definer of the strategic parameters of engagement. Presidential leadership and commitment is an indispensable element of any foreign policy, particularly one that is frequently neglected. The NSC reflects the views of the president more than any other agency in the U.S. government. It is also the only agency that has the authority and influence to ensure the strategy is coordinated across all government departments so presidential goals do not fall victim to parochial interests and concerns.

The Task Force recommends appointing a distinguished American Muslim as ambassador or special envoy to the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC).<sup>2</sup> A robust vetting process will be necessary to ensure that this individual is qualified to both understand religious debates and to advance American interests.

The United States should also ensure that ambassadors to countries where religion plays a significant role (for example, Afghanistan, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Vatican, among others) have the standing and expertise (either themselves or in-house) necessary to effectively engage religious communities.

2. On February 13, 2010, after the Task Force had finished its deliberations, President Obama announced the appointment of a special envoy, Rashad Hussain, to the OIC. This is an important next step in the engagement of Muslim communities and Muslim majority states.

*Provide mandatory training for government officials on the role of religion in world affairs.*

The United States will be able to effectively engage religious communities only if it puts the structures and requirements in place that enable officers in the Foreign Service, military, and development sectors to be trained and educated about the role of religion in world affairs. This should include language training, cultural exchange programs, and courses on the varied ways religion informs political life and affects U.S. interests.

*Take steps to integrate and nurture the skills and expertise of military veterans and civilians returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.*

Over the next few years, veterans and those with field experience from nongovernmental organizations should be encouraged to develop their expertise in higher education or enter government and other forms of service to develop and make use of their practical knowledge. Although this expertise has come at a high cost, it is a welcome development and a significant opportunity to build capacity inside and outside the government on religious and cultural matters.

*Clarify the Applicability of the Establishment Clause.<sup>3</sup>*

The Task Force calls upon the president of the United States, advised by executive offices and agencies who have studied the problem, to clarify that the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment does not bar the United States from engaging religious communities abroad in the conduct of foreign policy, though it does impose constraints on the means that the United States may choose to pursue this engagement. Such clarification would serve as a major “next step” in the president’s post-Cairo follow-up.

### **Engaging religion and religious communities effectively**

The report’s recommendations include the following:

<sup>3</sup> A dissent to this recommendation and a response to that dissent can be found on pages 83-34 at the end of this report.

*Engage on the societal level, not just the governmental or diplomatic level.*

To connect with billions of people of faith, the United States must engage with them on the issues that touch their daily lives. In much of the world, particularly in Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia, many schools, hospitals, social services, relief and development, and human rights programs are sponsored by religious institutions. While these activities may appear to be nonpolitical, in the aggregate they have a powerful influence over peoples’ lives and loyalties. By engaging with institutions providing these services and assisting them in their endeavors, the United States can help build good will in religious communities and connect directly with ordinary citizens rather than just engaging with regimes.

To do so the United States must engage with credible and legitimate indigenous groups in religious communities, including women’s organizations, civil society associations, professional organizations, religious political parties, clerical centers, environmental groups, educational institutions, grade school and high school teacher groups, and particularly young people, who are often at the forefront of conflict. This report proposes several specific initiatives in pursuit of this goal, including the areas of education, health, energy, climate change, democracy, religious freedom, interfaith exchanges, and the rule of law. For example, American educators should establish programs with elementary and secondary educators in selected countries to enhance the teaching of computer technology, math, and the sciences, while American energy experts—from the private sector, the U.S. Department of Energy, and the national laboratories—should work with civil society groups in selected countries to increase the availability of clean drinking water and combat diseases that are associated with polluted water.

*Engage religious political parties even if they may oppose U.S. foreign policy.*

While we should not paper over the differences with such parties, evidence from the past decade indicates that religious political parties often place pragmatism and problem solving over ideology. Indeed, no Islamist party elected to national parliament has sought to put greater emphasis on Sharia laws as the source of legislation, despite preelection rhetoric to the contrary. Instead, they often become mired in the day-to-day necessities of ruling, which include making good on commitments to tackle corruption and provide much-needed public services in order to build a record of practical

accomplishment. The Task Force endorses six criteria for how and when to engage with these parties.

*Reaffirm the U.S. commitment to religious freedom, while clarifying the meaning of the term.*

As the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognize, religious freedom is a human right and an integral part of a vibrant democracy. The ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom's first priority should be to clarify that religious freedom not only includes the right of individuals and groups to be free of persecution, but also includes both minority and majority rights as well as the right of religious individuals and groups to advance their values publicly in civil society and political life. The ambassador should communicate to majority as well as minority religious communities why religious liberty is in their interests. The administration should elevate the position of ambassador-at-large for religious freedom, as intended by the IRFA, to a status commensurate with other ambassadors-at-large based at the State Department. The administration should also ensure that the ambassador has adequate resources to perform his or her tasks.

The new ambassador should develop U.S. international religious freedom strategies within the context of the religious engagement policy recommended in this report. This includes articulating religious freedom in a way that is not viewed as imperialism, but as a means to support religious agency to undermine religion-based terrorism and promote stable democracy.

*Embrace a comprehensive approach to democracy promotion and human rights in order to accommodate the legitimate aspirations of religious communities.*

The United States faces a gathering crisis where its alliances with certain nations are dependent upon autocratic regimes, while the opposition, usually represented by religious parties, often (though not always) espouses anti-American positions. The challenge is to promote democracy without strengthening anti-Americanism. However, a comprehensive approach to democracy promotion is actually the critical element in maintaining U.S. alliances and partnerships. Democracies require active and organized civil societies; elections are often the last, not the first, step. The United States needs

to engage, both bilaterally and through multilateral organizations, with authoritarian regimes on specific aspects of governance such as law enforcement, freedom of the press, health and educational issues, religious freedom, and women's contributions to the country's economic life. Engagement must include exchange programs across the range of issues, bringing foreign officials and leaders to the United States and U.S. officials and leaders to the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

*Work with multilateral organizations—for example, the United Nations, UN agencies, the World Bank, the G-20, and the G-8—to expand and deepen their engagement with religious actors.*

International organizations such as the United Nations, its major specialized agencies like UNICEF and UNESCO, the World Bank, and others would benefit from a better understanding of religious dynamics in the contemporary world as they carry out their respective missions. The United States plays significant leadership roles in these organizations, which, for the most part, suffer from similar blinders where religion is concerned. The United States should urge global institutions to take religious institutions and actors more explicitly into account. The United States also stands to learn from the experience of international organizations and their interactions with faith-based institutions in numerous fields.

## Conclusion

President Obama's speech in Cairo in June 2009 set the stage for a new departure in U.S. foreign policy toward Muslim communities. This is a vital task and a laudable beginning. However, the scope must be much broader. Engaging Islam is only one very crucial component of a larger challenge—engaging the multitude of religious communities across the world as an integral part of our foreign policy.

Without a more serious and thoughtful engagement with religion across a host of issues and actors, U.S. foreign policy will miss important opportunities. America's long history of influencing the international understanding of democracy and human rights will be compromised. The United States will be absent from crucial global conversations about matters such as managing climate change and ensuring that the United Nations Millennium Development Goals are advanced. Opportunities for resolving conflict and building peace may be lost. We will be less capable of waging successful counterin-

surgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan and of understanding Pakistan. And, we will undermine our ability to protect citizens from violence perpetrated by religious extremists. Indeed, pushing an uncompromising secular alternative can have the unintended effect of feeding extremism by further threatening traditional sources of personal, cultural, and religious identity. The challenge before us is to marginalize religious extremists, not religion.

The time has come to build on Cairo—to expand its scope and add substantive initiatives to the concept. It is the hope of this Task Force that the analysis and recommendations in this report will provide a path forward in this important endeavor.