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International Christian Concern Fellows Program*

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CHRISTIAN CONCERN FELLOWS PROGRAM



On the cover: Raveed, a young Kashmiri Christian, lifts his hands in prayer to Jesus in the afternoon sun on Kashmir's Dal Lake. The Kashmir region has seen significant religious oppression in recent years.

Credit: ICC Fellow John Fredricks

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

In 2019, International Christian Concern launched an initiative aimed at gathering the leading experts, professionals, and advocates focused on international religious freedom and pooling their expertise to help highlight the global issue of religious persecution.

ICC's fellows have written, researched, and wrestled with this topic and other related themes throughout 2019 and into 2020. This cohort of fellows has pushed the envelope, enlightened the discussion, and advocated for coherent government involvement on this largely-ignored issue. The credit for these writings belongs to them.

This is the inaugural publication of the International Christian Concern Fellows Program, and we are proud to share some of our Fellows' best pieces in this first-ever publication of the *Journal on International Religious Freedom: Collection of Writings from the International Christian Concern Fellows Program*.

Sincerely,

Matias Perttula
Advocacy Director
International Christian Concern

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BRIEF: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AS AN ESSENTIAL TOOL
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Introduction

On January 31, 2020, International Christian Concern convened a group of Washington D.C.-based experts to discuss the role of international religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy. The discussion began with a conversation about the broader U.S. foreign policy strategy and how religious freedom fits within it. It then turned to the key challenges facing the further expansion of international religious freedom around the world. Finally, participants gave their key policy recommendations and a few concluding remarks. Below is an edited transcript of the foreign policy discussion and a summary of the key policy recommendations. For the full transcript, please see International Christian Concern's website, persecution.org.

International Religious Freedom in the Context of U.S. Foreign Policy

Matias Perttula: What is IRF, and why is it critical to U.S. National Security? When I thought about this question, it became ever more critical in my calculus because this issue bleeds over into so many other policy areas. I read a lot about what U.S. National Security is right now and what the grand strategy is. Much debate exists on how

effective the current approach is, but there certainly are some priorities that I think are moving forward.

There is actually a lot of writing out there asking whether we even need a major grand strategy for U.S. foreign policy. I tend to think that we do. So what are the current strategy objectives for U.S. grand strategy and national security? How does engagement on IRF-related issues contribute to a broader U.S. national security agenda in various geopolitical contexts? And how does advancement on IRF-related issues impact you as grand strategy objectives? There's a lot of nuanced material in there, but what is IRF and how does it play into overall U.S. strategy? I leave the floor open with that.

Nathan Wineinger: I think it's important to remember the history of how IRF became a part of U.S. strategy at all. That history is actually very long and we can even point back to the time of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or Article 18, which continues to be the international definition of and for religious freedom. It's also important to remember that that was something that was pushed forward by different advocacy organizations. The different people showed up with ideas that put into what became the universal declaration, including members of churches. Members of churches, particularly Baptists, were some of those who were pushing for Article 18 to be included and it was a big push because there were various countries that had established religious traditions, in Europe those were Christian, or Muslim countries, that were very resistant to this broad, nearly heretical notion of religious truth.

And so that established it. And then, because of activists and because of the existential threat towards religious freedom presented by our great geopolitical foe, the Soviet Union. And the restrictions placed on different religious freedom actors that were increasing and egregious. Different people within the sector who had friends and colleagues who were religious actors in different countries, and also people from various NGOs, started to pay attention to this and agitated for the International Religious Freedom Act in Congress.

So congressional leadership (including Frank Wolf, but not just him; others as well) and NGO leadership built off of a legal framework that was established through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Act provided the legal platforms on which different governmental structures were built. For instance, the IRF Ambassador. So, in reality, there are several different things that IRF is, it is an idea, it is a legal construct, it is an institutional framework. It is an ecosystem of NGOs and actors that believe in the idea and its value to human beings and society. Those NGOs work to make the idea salient. All of those components are going to be really important in however IRF gets deployed into a strategy, whether that's considered the national security objectives or an economic strategy for the U.S. going forward, et cetera. Those three components, the NGO sector, the institutional framework, the U.S. government agencies, the interagency, the different legal tools and frameworks that can deploy are going to be very important.

So I would argue that IRF is not just religious freedom as a sort of abstract concept, but to actually activate it and make it meaningful it requires those other things as well.

Sean Nelson: I think that pointing to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 18 is absolutely one of the right starting points with the current and useful definition of international religious freedom. I do want to add that this is religious freedom, right? This is in our DNA as Americans. UDHR, that's the 20th century. For us as Americans, this was the 18th century and it's right there in our First Amendment. And with two aspects of it: the state's not going to establish a church and force you to be part of that, and you'll be able to freely exercise your faith. I also want to read Article 18 of the UDHR because it gives this very comprehensive idea of what religious freedom means.

And I think there's this idea now that the U.S. is somehow an outlier internationally, and has too broad of an idea of religious freedom. But just listen to what Article 18 says. First, "Everyone," Not just a couple people: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom either alone or in community with others and in public or private to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance."

That's broad, right? That is your religion, those are your core beliefs. That is being able to both worship freely in your own house of worship, and then to live it publicly. To be able to go out and

practice, be able to teach about that. To be able to observe that in public. And when you see a lot of restrictions throughout the world there are some restrictions on the ability to worship, but a lot of repressive countries allow you to worship as long as you stay within your own officially sanctioned and recognized church. And outside of that, you don't talk about it, you don't put religious symbols up or anything like that. The actual definition in the UDHR agreed to internationally in the ICCPR says freedom of worship isn't enough. That is not religious freedom. That's a core component, but that's not it.

Jeff King: Yeah. You started with the founders there, and the UDHR—that's where you hear the echo of the founders, right?

Those ideas are so potent and that's why they became universal. They're inalienable rights from God. And I think we're so used to it. It has rattled through the West. It has made deep penetration in the West. But I think we've lost a little perspective that that's the moral high ground. And these rights are universal. So just think of three countries. Think of Iran, China, and North Korea. And the discussion there always devolves into national security, just thinking about missiles. When you think about North Korea, it's like the moral high ground is that they're running a nation-sized slave camp that rivals somewhat what the Nazis did. And yet the discussion devolves. It devolves down to missiles.

The architect of their system, their ideology, he defected and he said, “this is their Achilles heel.” And he designed it. He designed it as a

binding framework to capture people's minds. And he said, this is the Achilles heel of this country and this system, this is how you take them down. And I think of the old Soviet Union, and the guys sitting in prison for freedom, for conscience. And when Reagan came out and called the Soviet Union an evil empire both those in prison and the intelligentsia said that's when they knew the war was over. They said that's when we knew it was going to fall, when someone finally called a spade a spade. Someone had spoken the truth. All these countries spend so much time on propaganda and on creating this lie of who they are, arguing that they are a utopia. But with China, just think about what they've gotten away with. I think we've lost some of the moral high ground because of our adventure wars.

It's such a potent tool in the war for truth and for identity in the war of ideas.

Jeremy Barker: One of the ways we've talked about this is to say that religious freedom is good for everyone except for tyrants and terrorists. And I think Nathan, Sean, and Jeff, all three of you did this. Linking it back to the historical architecture to this, and even coming out of the UDHR which emerged at the out of World War II, having seen massive atrocities because of, in part, identity issues around religion. These questions were coming up. If you listen to Representative Chris Smith or Frank Wolf or a number of others who talk about when they first got into this, it was Soviet dissidents who were oppressed. There's a whole range of ways in which the

oppression was happening, but religious freedom was one of those tools. Promoting religious freedom is not the only thing that will address this repression. It is not a panacea. It's not the sole ill for everything in the world, but it's a way for exerting control by these authoritarian regimes. Often their repression of everything shows up on this core foundation of what you believe in and what it looks like to live that out in the most basic elements of life.

And so Matias, even as you're saying this, we look at grand strategy and great power politics. This is relevant. And the hearing earlier this week, almost every one of us really zeroed in on China, which is, in the grand scheme, a U.S. rival. But on this level of ideas and identity, this religious freedom is relevant to that competition in the world of ideas. And how can you let a country get away with blocking out billions of their own citizens and this idea of fragmentation and religious freedom as a way to put that forward, on a universal level in response to these grand challenges?

Within the national security strategy, this is something we would have loved to see not just as an add-on as a side footnote in the value section, but more thoroughly integrated throughout. But at a certain level, it's a principle that needs to flow into other things. So we'd love to see it elevated out of more of just an idea to inform national security strategy in a more robust way, the architecture of it.

Matias Perttula: Something that you brought up was the NGO framework and the institutional framework that are the core components. I think, in terms of the institutional piece, something

that we can't ignore is the level (or lack thereof) of development in a lot of the countries and regions that are dealing with IRF issues and how much of the development of the population as a whole—the education, the societal advancement of individual cultural context—plays into how religious freedom can actually thrive in a country. And I feel like I'm dancing around the point a little bit, but religious freedom is greatly expanded through development. The more people are growing in their career, the more they're educated, the more they find they have political voice and individual value, the more they find that they are an intricate part of the society, the more engaged they become in developing a holistic perspective. This paves the way to cultivating and accepting pluralistic ideas for the society as whole.

And I think one of the big things that's driving this thought for me was my recent trip to Pakistan, and seeing the religious minority community that is so marginalized from the majority community and how poverty stricken they are and how institutional issues in Pakistan continuously isolate their religious minority communities. Whether it's through job advancement, political disenfranchisement, societal biases and so on the reality of religious minority in Pakistan looks bleak. It's even ingrained into the main framework of governance where a religious minority, Christian, Hindu and so on, cannot be Prime Minister, cannot be President, cannot be Army Chief of Staff. What kind of a precedent does that kind of leadership set for the rest of society?

Peter Burns: So something I'll throw in here on the grand strategy idea. The U.S. has traditionally, and I'll just go back to Bush because that's really all I feel comfortable speaking to, had non-security related interests. In our foreign policy obviously the Bush administration had democracy promotion, the Freedom Agenda was a big idea that we pushed a lot and we spent a lot of energy on. Then the Obama administration, something that has kept coming bubbling up from conversations is that the gender issues were something that they raised a lot in discussions with other countries, concerning LGBTQ communities and minorities.

So what's interesting to me is that both of those are issues that I think did not translate well to the people, the audiences that we were pushing them towards. I think that religious freedom is a lot more universal and a better message for the U.S. to have as our flag, our forward facing value proposition. It seems like every administration has some sort of values-proposition they're making in their foreign policy. I think that religious freedom as a value proposition is something that other countries can find much more space to engage with and usually be more receptive to. Also, it is probably more representative of the international community, since America is one of the more postmodern states in the world, one of those trending away from religion being part of civic life as opposed to the rest of the world where it's still deeply ingrained in civic life.

So I think it could be the antidote to some of our mistaken attempts to thrust our values on other countries, and lately people would be

really anxious about America running in and trying to clamp our values down on everyone we meet. It's almost an antidote to that. We're going in and we're not rushing in with a foreign value set. We're basically saying, "Hey, we recognize the importance of religious freedom to civic life all over the world. Your religion is important to you. There are other communities that are not receiving the same sort of opportunities to express that." I think that, as a grand strategy interest, the concern that I hear is this, "Well America can't run around the world, pushing its values on everyone." Well, this isn't necessarily doing that. This is more just carrying the standard on something that is already an internationally-recognized value.

Jeremy Barker: Yeah. I think that's a really interesting point. I've been thinking about it for a couple of reasons. One, in regards to the UDHR—one of the criticisms of it from some people (my colleagues and perhaps myself as well) is that there are these really useful propositions of human rights, but they're not tethered anywhere. Part of the debate in the drafting of the UDHR was whether to explicitly ground this in something or do we get as close as we can, and leave that hanging out there. You had Eleanor Roosevelt on one side and Charles Malik from Lebanon on the other. Charles Malik wanted to explicitly ground these in a theistic tradition. Now, Roosevelt ended up being persuaded to back off a little bit and leave that as close to grounded as she could get, but still leaving it universally accessible.

To Peter's point, there is an element to where we're not saying you have to agree with this principle entirely, but, and Ambassador Brownback says this often, "You should be free to do with your own soul as you want." You should not be restricted in this. So as a Burmese Buddhist, be Burmese and Buddhist, just don't kill or coerce your Muslim neighbor. Don't coerce them, don't kill them.

Yet it cultivates these values and you have these trends of growing populism and nationalism, and a resurgence of national identity, even tied into the America First concept. Religious freedom isn't calling for an abandonment of the principles of what it means to be an American or a Brit or a good Hungarian or a good Indian. It's not saying, "Stop being that." It is a principle that lets you be fully that and also presses for equality for your neighbor and for others around them. So toward this idea that it's a useful value proposition to advance, that is it's assertive against injustice, but it promotes equality. There's something to that and it is, I think, an idea worth championing.

Nathan Wineinger: I do think that IRF actually is this thing that can be an antidote. But it's also a really big threat to the various people who are attempting to become tyrants or already are. We talk about religious nationalism, which I think is something that has surfaced in ways that really challenge religious freedom for minorities, but not just them. Religious nationalism challenges the faith communities that it claims to champion in those countries. If you look at what the Indian nationalists have been doing to

Hinduism versus the many strands of Hinduism that exist there, you can see this very clearly.

But I also think it's important not to just blame "religion" in these contexts. After all, there are obvious examples of it that aren't religionationalism. Indeed, anti-religionationalism exists. For example, China is probably the most egregious example of persecution in the world today, at least on sheer number of the oppressed. China's nationalism is anti-theistic. Remembering what Peter said. They're using identity, "You can't come in here, that's not Chinese. You can't have that idea, that's not Chinese." Or in Pakistan, "You can't say that, that's not Pakistani." So this isn't true Pakistan, this isn't true India, this isn't true China. Oppression exists across the theological board. We see it in Christian communities, very unfortunate. As a Christian, I find that very unfortunate. We see it in Hindu communities, we see that in Muslim communities, and we see that in atheistic communities.

I think that while IRF does have this helpful antidotal quality, because it is assertive about justice but also tolerant and expansive about recognizing human dignity, I think that there are people for whom human dignity is a stumbling block. Those people are tyrants.

Peter Burns: Maybe just piggyback really quickly and agree. One of the things that you raised is the fact that we do see those tyrants grabbing this and realizing it's a flag they can wrap themselves in, and use to win points in the international community without actually making any substantive change.

Steven Howard: I was actually interested in looking at the second part of this question and talking about national security. I think that, when we talk about U.S. national security and religious freedom, the two weaknesses have been that we haven't really defined it, and we haven't really dictated to other countries what our terms are for this issue. Both the Obama Administration and the Trump Administration had certain countries it was trying to deepen ties with and, as a consequence, they tended to overlook the issue of religious liberty to a certain extent in these countries. They also would tend to highlight religious liberty violations in countries with whom they did not share close relations.

The Obama administration was initially concerned with the way that the U.S. was dialoguing with the Islamic world after the Bush administration. There was a look to Turkey. The president sincerely thought that Turkey was the model that could be a symbol for what a moderate and inclusive Muslim country could look like. Then when push came to shove, although President Obama campaigned on recognizing the Armenian genocide, he bowed down to Turkish pressure. When he went to Istanbul he did not visit the Ecumenical Patriarchate as American political leaders customarily do. He instead invited the patriarch to visit him in his hotel.

The international religious liberty advocacy community should recognize the dangers of over-embracing these regimes and wholeheartedly endorsing their reforms. On one hand, it's good they're making steps to make their societies more tolerant.

Coexistence and tolerance are better than their opposing values. But we also need to be dictating to these countries, "We appreciate the fact, United Arab Emirates, that you want to build a church next to a synagogue next to a mosque, but your on-the-record punishment for apostasy is still death. Although you don't implement it, that's not exactly sending a good message to people around the world about what religious freedom means."

Secondly, it's in U.S. interest international security interest to have values-based relationships. This is not my idea. IDC has always held that our allies should share our values and we should not be doing whatever the UAE or Saudi lobbies us to do here in D.C. We shouldn't be basing our foreign policy based on Turkish interests either. Our organization always emphasize investing in countries that value this. When it comes to the Middle East, we really highlight Jordan and Lebanon as Middle Eastern countries who share American values.

Benjamin Harbaugh: I would like to expound on Lebanon as an example where IRF could be an issue critical to U.S. national security. Hezbollah has co-opted the state, arguably controlling most of the levers of power. If they were to steer Lebanon towards an identity as an explicitly Shia state, as opposed to the current sectarian system, the results would be catastrophic. If Lebanon were to become wholly Shia, I think you would see the exodus of many religious minorities, similar to the current situation in Iraq. In northern Iraq, according to a USCIRF report this last week, only 30-

50% of religious minorities have returned to the area since the territorial defeat of ISIS.

If minorities continue to be pushed out of countries in the Middle East, it's likely that the region would become more intolerant, increasing the risk of conflict with Israel and by default the US. I think Lebanon is a very solid example of how IRF, or the absence of IRF, can have massive implications for our national security.

Matias Perttula: In majority of the rest of the world religion and faith play a dynamic role in the way people conduct life every single day. We would be remiss as Western Americans to undervalue that component, which is something that I think that we too often miss in the policy stratus, when people are crafting foreign policy. When the U.S. is creating relationships with these countries the power of religion, the power of faith and how this plays a dynamic role in everybody's life, has to be prioritized and intentionally considered.

Then, coupled with the tradition of cultural religiousness in these countries, what does religious freedom look like in that context? We've seen various manifestations of this, especially in the populist leadership types that are coming to the stage. When religion is ingrained with a national identity and within the national culture — whether good or bad — it begs the question, how do we communicate religious freedom into a dynamic like that? A dynamic where being of a minority faith is seen as a threat to the state as a whole, to the culture, to the norms?

Nathan Wineinger: It's not a threat. I want to repeat: It is not a threat. Religio-Nationalism (and anti- religio-nationalism) is actually a tool to distract the majority population from very real challenges.

The actual issues that the governments are responsible for: development, justice, accountability, basic fairness among citizens.

Anyway, but it is not a threat. It is described as a threat because it either A), distracts from issues that to solve would induce costs or decrease various privileges for the elite, or B) is a source of alternative identity that exists outside of the sinews of control that the established and insurgent autocratic leaders have worked to establish, or instance in China.

Ajit Sahi: I represent the Indian American Muslim Council. I myself am not Muslim, I am Hindu. I happen to be the only full-time Hindu professional working for a Muslim organization, which is a great talking point which I use every day. What Nathan said is absolutely 100% correct. In India, which is a big problem right now on the global map, there are 200 million Muslims. The second largest population of Muslims in the world outside of Indonesia is in India. In India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, the number of is roughly one-third of the world's Muslim population. India has more Muslims than Saudi Arabia—three times more Muslims than Saudi Arabia. More than twice the number of Muslims in Egypt, the largest Muslim-populated countries.

I think that with the U.S. administration, we are seeing a very interesting situation where the U.S. administration is, in the case of Pakistan and India, taking an approach that needs to be switched.

Just last month in India, we saw 31 people killed in police shootouts and 16 people killed in one single day. The U.S. government has not said a word. What I have been telling people in the State Department, what I tell the members of Congress when I meet them is there is a need for you to speak up as an administration, as a government, as Congress, for a very simple reason. Because whatever you want from India, is not going to happen if India goes up in flames in socialist territory.

Saying that the U.S. should think in altruistic terms and that our allies should share our values, forget all of that because the only goal that America has from India is the containment of China. If you look up the website of the Department of State on, I think 12th of November, they uploaded a document called Indo-Pacific Policy. It has a separate chapter on India. In the entire region, the subcontinent and the Far East, there is no country that is standing shoulder to shoulder with America like India is, not even Pakistan. Pakistan is great friends with China. Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Maldives, Thailand, even the Philippines, Indonesia, even Australia, none of these countries are willing to work as closely with the U.S. as India is.

That should be an opportunity, and that should also be a threat for America, because if India is allowed to go up in flames that is bad

for America's regional goals. I find this argument gets quite a great response. So it is in America's interest to advance IRF issues around the world.

The one last thing that I want to say is that Indians are very, very mindful of how America looks at them, how the American news media talks about them. For some very strange reason, they have this tremendous fixation with a white Western world. They are constantly looking for validation.

Jeremy Barker: I know there are different views on how the previous administration handled religious engagement at the State Department. You had these approaches previously embodied in two different offices. One was the IRF Office that was far more of the critical, a name and shame approach, in addressing the issue and the human rights dimension in a more critical approach. Then the Office of Religion and Global Affairs, that was more a sense of the broader role of religion in public life and taking a more positive but less confrontational approach to the issue. I think we've often tried to make that case; religious freedom is good for your economy. At the same time also criticizing where there are shortcomings and to be able to in the same breath or at the same meeting say, "The social hostilities that are tearing apart your country apart."

Or we say, "We're trying to help you address that." We're saying, "You need to do your job and stop people from killing each other on the streets and this will help." So the tension emerges in how to structure that, how to balance those approaches because we've often

seen in many cases the value is tied to make evidence-based arguments that embracing religious freedom is good for your economy. It'll help you address these social hostilities. It'll help increase economic outcomes. So making that in a positive way while also being honest about the shortcomings and valence, it creates this tension or cognitive dissonance that I think we have to take into account whether it's a good cop, bad cop approach and who can do it, whether one office can do it, whether civil society does one role and the government the others.

I think that's part of the challenge that we may need to turn to as we get to policy actions or ways forward. But as we were talking about it the jump from both resonates with me, but how to bring them together is a question still in my mind.

Even statements from the U.S. president will not work as well as sanctions because the enablers, especially in the context of India, are the bureaucrats and the police officers. The bureaucrats and police officers just love to be in America. If America cuts them off, Europe cuts them off. Not just them, but their children, their sons and daughters. If we get them, if one or two people are sanctioned it's going to drive the fear through the entire ranks.

Sean Nelson: Matias, you had asked, "How does that system interact with the domestic and national component where the dynamics of faith are far more potent?"

You could say that, in local areas, the reticence in Western internationalist policy discussions to discuss religion, to think that

religion was a motivator of people's actions, that instead it was the material basis of things that were really driving people. Now certainly poverty, lack of economic development, corrupt political institutions are important things and they even interact with religion. But in any case you can't just exclude religion—you can't do it, just like you can't talk about religion isolated from all these other things.

We talk about different situations. You think of China where it's a communist atheist regime that wants to make sure everybody else puts the state before their religion at the same time that they are promoting this as a nationalist thing. Or you think of India, where you have this particular kind of hyper nationalism, even though all the religions that are there have been there for centuries. You think of Nigeria where there's been a long period of coexistence between indigenous religious groups, Muslim groups, and Christian groups, and now it's a very unique situation because there's almost an even split between Muslim and Christian populations in Nigeria. But I think that at the international sphere there was, until the last decade or so, a reticence to talk about religion.

So, it felt like this on- size-fits-all thing, and that some of the values were being imposed without real warrant. And that isolated these more religious countries. Recently, and especially with the U.S. administration but you also see it in Brexit, there's this return of the import of the nation and this feeling that by having more robust nation-to-nation discussions that don't just get channeled through one international system you can actually get to some of those more

specific things, those areas that had been blocked off because they weren't in line with one particular set of contested values and procedures. So, I think that's going to be really interesting as it goes forward.

Nathan Wineinger: Many diplomats have diminished the role religion plays because they've made personal choices for themselves that it doesn't matter, or maybe they secretly hope that it doesn't matter for the future because they don't believe in it. When they show up with that perspective that's been inculcated in the West, it is a form of intellectual neocolonialism. To confront this, within our frameworks, we must learn to recognize and segment our audiences. Are we talking to the Defense Department? Are we talking with the State Department? Of course, we're going to talk about different policy structures for different agency audiences, but we also, in the same way that Sean was bringing up the possibility through bilateral relationships to have more granular conversations that are more and more locally contextualized. We also have to recognize logical contours of ideology and use frames that are recognized by the different ideological spheres.

Steven Howard: I just wanted to add this: it's very important to realize that most of the competing powers of the world use religion as a part of their foreign policy and they play a bigger role in their foreign policy than ours does. It's an excellent paper, but in the middle East, in particular, if you're talking, Saudi and Turkey are vying for influence in Sunni countries. If you're looking at Iranian

engagement with Shia communities. Even if you're looking at Russia, literally in Syria when Russian forces are occupying Sunni towns, they're using Chechens as their local security force because they can engage with the people in a better way.

So, I think that our competing powers are using religion as statecraft and they're not nearly as altruistic as we are about religion or foreign policy. So, I think, really forming an ideology that does not use one exclusive religion as statecraft, but that uses religious freedom as a form of statecraft is crucial.

Jeremy Barker: Yes, it taps into that historical narrative that America was founded by people who saw the impact of religious oppression. Madison and Jefferson were writing these foundational documents on religious liberty because they were talking to the Baptists who were getting horsewhipped down the street.

And, in promoting religious freedom as an American ideal, it's not that there's some golden age of religious freedom that we're going back to. It is that we've seen the chaos, we saw this happen in our own tradition and that's why we care about this principle. As Americans our religion as statecraft is religious freedom as statecraft.

Key Policy Recommendations

- The U.S. needs to reassess when and for how long it grants exemptions from the consequences of CPC status. The exceptions act as enablers to continued discrimination against religious

minorities. The consequences of a CPC designation are intended to deter further persecution and encourage broader behavior change for the state in question.

- The U.S. should employ more mechanisms like the Global Magnitsky Act to keep violators of human and religious freedom rights accountable. Both governmental and non-governmental perpetrators should be singled out by these sanctions.
- The United States should leverage existing aid to put pressure on countries known for religious persecution. Foreign aid is a key U.S. diplomatic export, and behavior change is unlikely as long as it flows to offending countries.
- Greater institutionalization of the international religious freedom structure in the background of the U.S. foreign policy structure. While the 1998 Religious Freedom Act ensures some degree of institutionalization there is need for more progress, including in the training of U.S. foreign diplomats to identify persecution issues.
- The U.S. should deepen partnerships with a broad array of civil society, faith-based, non-faith-based, and human rights groups on the issue. By doing so, the U.S. will be able to respond better and more proactively to the situation on the ground facing religious minorities and other believers when their rights are violated.

CLASSIFYING RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION TO IMPLEMENT MEANINGFUL CHANGE

John Cosenza

In 1998 the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) was signed into law to combat the growing concern of religious persecution across the globe. The bipartisan legislation aimed to promote greater religious freedom in countries that engage in or tolerate systematic violations of religious freedom and to advance the rights of individuals persecuted for their religious beliefs. The IRFA constructed modern standards of religious freedom and redefined religious persecution to include:

- (A) torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment;
- (B) prolonged detention without charges;
- (C) causing the disappearance of persons by the abduction or clandestine detention of those persons; or
- (D) other flagrant denials of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons¹

The Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom

Despite these efforts, authoritarian and militaristic regimes continue to persecute religious minority communities, including the Christian

¹ 105th Congress of the United States of America, "*The International Religious Freedom Act*" (1998).

community. In a renewed effort to advance religious freedom, the Trump Administration and the U.S. State Department hosted the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in July 2018. The three-day Washington, D.C.-based event attracted delegates from over 80 nations with the goals of identifying global challenges to religious freedom and developing innovative responses to persecution based on religion.²

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback led discussions at the Ministerial event. Both advanced the event's mission by participating in panels and addressing large congregations of ministers, human rights, NGO, political, and think tank leaders. Ambassador Brownback's inspiring remarks concluding the event was greeted with applause.

"We believe these conversations are essential to promoting and defending religious freedom around the world, and I am certainly encouraged. I believe the Iron Curtain prohibiting religious freedom is coming down around the world. I think it really starts with this meeting. And proceeding forward from here, we can bring that down so religious freedom can be a reality for people around the world. Not just merely words that we have said but an actual reality."³

² United States State Department, "The Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom" (2018).

³ Brownback, Sam. United States State Department, "The Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom" (2018).

The Ministerial event highlighted the Administration's unwavering commitment to international religious freedom with the release of the Potomac Declaration and its accompanying plan of action. Each document set the tone for the Administration's foreign policy on religious freedom by reinforcing the ideals of the IRFA and establishing methods to hold nations accountable. During a roundtable discussion at the event, Pompeo stated, "The Potomac Declaration is a formal affirmation that says right up front that the U.S. takes religious freedom seriously, that we will work with others around the world to help those under attack for their beliefs, and that we expect leaders around the world to make it their priority as well."⁴

The event was well-received by political figures from both aisles as well as individuals like Knox Thames, the U.S. State Department's special adviser for religious minorities in the Near East, South, and Central Asia. According to Thames, "this field is starting to understand that, of course, you advocate for those in your community, but the way to ensure your community's long-term success is if everyone in society has religious freedom. I'm encouraged to see this evolution."⁵ Although encouraging, the Trump administration must first identify where and why religious persecution exists to safeguard religious freedom.

⁴ Pompeo, Mike. United States State Department, "The Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom" (2018).

⁵ Green, Emma. "The Trump Administration Convenes the 'Super Bowl' of Religious Freedom." *The Atlantic* (2018).

Accurately identifying religious persecution can be a difficult task. Although religious communities face persecution, their religious beliefs may not be the inherent reason. Indeed, religious communities across the globe are often persecuted for reasons other than their faith, such as ethical, political, or socio-economic reasons. The following analysis provides specific examples where religious persecution is intertwined with a variety of political, ethnic, social, and economic positions that could be responsible for acts of persecution. As world leaders demonstrate a recommitment to religious freedom, understanding the context and origins of each reported instance of persecution is essential to implement meaningful change. Creating a solution to the wrong problem will not solve anything.

Afghanistan and the Hazara Community

Modern-day Afghanistan is frequently cited as a nation that systematically persecutes religious communities that do not adhere to Sunni Islam. Yet, it is important to note that 1) Afghanistan has a constitution that grants religious freedom to all citizens and adheres to international religious agreements, 2) Afghanistan remains a pluralistic society with dozens of communities that speak their own languages, have their own set of customs and practice their own religions relatively undisturbed, and 3) Afghanistan is a conflict zone home to various terrorist organizations. The Hazara community is an ethnic and religious minority with a long and contentious history in Afghanistan. The Hazara community and

their supporters believe they are frequently attacked or persecuted due to their religious faith. However, solely attributing religious beliefs to these attacks can be misleading. The origins of Hazara persecution has a long and complex history but can be equally attributed to their ethnic and socio-economic values. Indeed, "one of the main factors in Hazaras' continued persecution is their Shi'a religious faith, their distinctive ethnic origins, as well as their having separate economic and political roots."⁶

In addition to their faith, Hazaras are considered a political and cultural threat to the mainstream Sunni Afghani establishment. Unlike most ethnic groups, the Hazara community promotes education and is more progressive concerning women's rights. Educated Hazara women, "in particular, those who returned from exile in Iran are often as active as men in civic and political arenas. Hazara families are eager to educate their daughters."⁷

Melissa Chioventa is a Doctor in Anthropology at Emerson College, whose research focus is Afghanistan. Melissa works particularly with the Hazara ethnic group and similarly concludes, "Even open-minded non-Hazaras with a high degree of education have admitted to me that they feel a certain discomfort when they encounter Hazaras in certain positions of authority in Afghanistan."⁸

⁶ Minority Groups International, "Afghanistan Profile – Hazaras", (2018).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Hucal, Sara. "Afghanistan" Who are the Hazaras?" *Al Jazeera*, (2016).

Conflict zones compound the difficult prospect of assessing religious persecution, primarily because all communities are likely to be persecuted. The recent presence of terrorist organizations such as ISIS in Afghanistan has inevitably resulted in larger-scale violence across all religious and ethnic minority communities.

Ukraine and the Eastern Orthodox Community

Another example of the misidentification of religious persecution is the targeting of Ukrainian Orthodox churches in both Crimea and the Donbas. In 2014, Russian forces invaded the Crimean Peninsula in southern Ukraine and seized key military and governmental institutions. Unexpectedly, Russian forces targeted another institution - the branch of the Ukrainian Christian Orthodox Church, located in Kyiv. Targeting Ukraine's Kyiv-based religious institutions appears to be an example of religious persecution at first glance. However, contextualizing Russian aggression over the last decade and their specific actions in Crimea may paint a different picture.

Vladimir Putin is an authoritarian with ambitious goals to spread Russia's political sphere of influence. In 2008, Russian forces invaded Georgia. In 2014, a Russian-backed region in Moldova, known as Transnistria, voted on a referendum to join the Eurasian Economic Union. Consequently, Russia has since enjoyed strong influence over the region. In 2014 and 2015, the invasion of Crimea and military intervention in the Syrian civil war confirmed Putin's ambitions to annex portions of Eastern Europe and undermine the

United States in the Middle East. This begs the question; are Ukrainian religious leaders persecuted for their religious beliefs or because they refuse to subscribe to Russian authority?

An interview with Archbishop Yevstratiy Zorya, an official spokesman of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, suggests the latter. According to Archbishop Zorya, "the Russian occupation authorities have done everything so that the religious atmosphere on the peninsula is similar to theirs (Russia); that is, loyal and controllable." Moreover, those demonstrating fealty to Moscow enjoy religious freedom in Crimea, according to a leading Ukrainian-based human rights group.⁹

The treatment of Ukrainian Orthodox Christian Church leaders of the Moscow Patriarchate supports this argument. After the 2014 invasion, Russian authorities demanded all religious organizations in Crimea re-register under Russian law. Ukrainian religious leaders belonging to the Moscow Patriarchate were "offered any and all aid by the local de facto authorities," according to Archbishop Yevstratiy. "Their priests were even honored for their role in the annexation of the peninsula," he adds.¹⁰ By contrast, those who refused to acknowledge or re-register under Russian law were subject to varying consequences.

⁹ Wesolowsky, Tony. "Struggling to Believe: Ukrainian Orthodox Church Under Pressure in Crimea." *RadioFreeEurope*, (2018).

¹⁰ Ibid.

Thomas J. Reese, then chair of the United States Commissions on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), traveled to Crimea to investigate the conditions of religious freedom. According to Reese, "what we saw and heard confirmed the reality of Russian persecution and harassment of religious minorities", specifically regarding Crimea's Tatar ethnic and religious minority.¹¹ Russian authorities have co-opted the spiritual life of the Muslim Crimean Tatar minority and arrested or driven into exile its community representatives." Although Russian repression of Crimean Tatars is mainly motivated by political rather than religious concerns, it disrupts Crimean Tatar religious activities and institutions."¹² In other words, Russian forces may be targeting disobedient Orthodox Christians and Tatars to enforce political assimilation rather than entirely quell Christian and Tatar beliefs or practices.

El Salvador and the Christian Community

In recent years El Salvador has surpassed Honduras and Venezuela as the most murderous nation-state on earth.¹³ With over 60,000 gang members in a country with a population of just 6.5 million, gang violence has infiltrated all levels of society.¹⁴ According to

¹¹ May D., Clifford; Reese J., Thomas. "Op-Ed: Another Missed Opportunity: Russia Evades Designation for Religious Repression." *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom* (2017).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Glader, Paul. "Christianity is Growing Rapidly in EL Salvador – Along with Gang Violence & Murder Rates." *The Washington Post*, (2015).

¹⁴ Martines, Oscar; Lemus, Efren; Martinez, Carlos; Sontag, Deborah. "Killers on a Shoestring: Inside the Gangs of El Salvador." *The New York Times*, (2016).

John L. Allen Jr, editor at *Crux*, a magazine focusing on Vatican and Catholic affairs, El Salvador has an interesting love/hate relationship between churches and gangs.¹⁵ Both gangs and churches compete for the lives and souls of the population. Analyzing this complex relationship challenges the notion that gang members persecute Christian communities in El Salvador solely for their religious beliefs.

On the one hand, Roman Catholic and Evangelical churches are the natural enemies of El Salvadorian gangs. Gang members and religious communities frequently clash, leaving innocent civilians caught in the crossfire.¹⁶ Moreover, religious leaders openly "oppose the drug trade that's the financial bread and butter for the gangs, the use of violence, and other forms illegality" that sustain their operations.¹⁷ On the other hand, "the gangs also demonstrate remarkable respect for the churches. Members say there are only two ways to leave a gang - death, or a genuine decision to change your life that almost always involves religion."¹⁸ It is frequently reported that many gang members will seek an alternative lifestyle by turning to Christian churches or a devoted life to God.

¹⁵ Allen L. John Jr. "In El Salvador, There's a Love/Hate Relationship Between Churches & Gangs." *Crux*, (2015).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Author Sarah Maslin of *The Economist* reports, "Over the past year, the church has become a refuge for recently released prisoners who are trying to leave the Barrio 18 gang and pledge themselves to God."¹⁹ This interesting relationship between these organizations reveals two important facts. First, gang members, who seemingly choose to devote themselves to God to escape their circumstances, clearly do not denounce the worship of or religious practice of Christianity. Secondly, any attacks against Christian communities are likely motivated by economic and operational reasons more so than religious reasons. El Salvadorian gangs must operate their large criminal organizations efficiently and are likely to persecute any individual or organization that opposes them; even Christian communities and leaders.

Conclusion

In each of these situations, additional analysis is required to make a final determination as to whether the religious community was persecuted based on their religious beliefs or other factors such as politics or economics.

The ideals outlined in the IRFA and the Potomac Declaration may provide the right context to differentiate religious persecution from other co-located factors. In each example discussed, persecuted individuals did not typically meet the criteria outlined in the IRFA

¹⁹ Maslin, Sarah. "Can Religion Solve El Salvador's Gang Problem?" *The Economist*, (2017).

or the Potomac Declaration. If they did, it was more linked to social, economic, or political reasons.

It is not the purpose of this paper to make a final determination on how each of these scenarios should be categorized but rather to point out that each happened in a complex situation where co-occurring factors of the population could be a reason for persecution. If we are to advance the religious freedom of communities in these situations, we must understand why they are being targeted. Without proper context, the solutions that we devise will address the wrong problem.

PERSECUTION DOES NOT GO UNNOTICED

Benjamin Harbaugh

On December 18th, 2019, the U.S. Department of State released its annual list of countries that engage in “systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom,”¹ called Countries of Particular Concern (CPC).² They also released their Special Watch List (SWL), which designates countries that commit serious offenses below the level of a CPC offender. This year, there were two interesting developments noticeable in the release: one country was downgraded positively from a CPC to the SWL, and four countries were added to the SWL.³

The movement on these two lists sends an important signal to other countries; persecution does not go unnoticed. When the International Religious Freedom Act was passed in 1998, one of its goals was to call out countries that committed serious acts of religious persecution in hopes that international pressure would instigate positive change.⁴

¹ U.S. Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom. United States Takes Action Against Violators of Religious Freedom, Press Statement (2019).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Eric Patterson, *Politics in a Religious World: Building a Religiously Informed U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011) 113.

Over the two decades that the Office of International Religious Freedom has delivered its annual list, a handful of countries have not responded to their CPC designation and have continued to persecute religious adherents year over year. This year, Sudan's downgrade from CPC to SWL status is an excellent example of the fact that the U.S. pays attention not only to violations but to positive change as well.

Sudan had quite the year in 2019. Their ruthless septuagenarian leader, Omar al-Bashir, was deposed in widespread protests in the spring of 2019.⁵ Al-Bashir led an authoritarian state that allowed no dissension from his proscribed form of Islam. Christians and other religious minorities were regularly persecuted, and Sudan remained a staple on religious persecution indices.^{6 7}

With al-Bashir deposed hopes ran high and prayers were offered that Sudan's repressive laws would be repealed and replaced.⁸ Positive signs began to emerge within months of al-Bashir's ouster. In October, the transitional ruling Sovereign Council appointed the

⁵ BBC. "Omar al-Bashir ousted: How Sudan got here," April 11, (2019).

⁶ Open Doors. Sudan Report, (2019).

⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. Annual Report, page 58 (2019).

⁸ Crux Now. "There is 'hope' for Sudan's Christians after al-Bashir's ouster, advocate says," April 17, (2019).

first Coptic Christian to the council, an unthinkable act only months earlier.⁹

Growing tolerance towards Christianity was on full display after the State Department’s announcement that Sudan had moved down to the SWL. Within a week of the statement, Sudanese Christians were walking through Khartoum, Sudan’s capital, wearing shirts that read “I Love Jesus.”¹⁰ The State Department’s recognition of Sudan’s increased religious freedom was an empowering force for the Sudanese Christians who have endured decades of suffering.

Unfortunately, repression is growing worse elsewhere. Three other countries were upgraded to SWL status: Cuba, Nicaragua, and Nigeria.

Of these, Nigeria was particularly worrying. Open Doors, a Christian human rights monitor, lists Nigeria as the twelfth worst persecutor of Christians in the world.¹¹ Violence is seemingly non-stop, with close to 2,000 Christians being killed by radical Islamic groups in 2019.¹² In addition to ongoing violence from non-state actors, tribal discrimination and unwilling government officials often exacerbate religious persecution.

⁹ Voice of America. “Sudan’s Copts See Hope in Appointment of First Christian,” October 9, (2019).

¹⁰ Christianity Today. “Sudan Lets Christians March for Jesus Again,” December 28, (2019).

¹¹ Open Doors. Nigeria Report, (2019).

¹² International Christian Concern. “Over 1,000 Nigerian Christians Killed in Religiously Motivated Attacks in 2019,” December 19, (2019).

The State Department's designation of Nigeria as a SWL merely recognizes the harsh reality for Christians living under constant threat. If Nigeria continues down its current path, it could be designated as a CPC and face severe economic sanctions and increased international pressure.

Observers hope that Sudan will become an example for newly minted SWL countries like Nigeria. By improving Sudan's status and lowering Nigeria's, the State Department is signaling that countries will reap what they sow. If countries like Nigeria, Cuba, and Nicaragua address the violation of their citizens' rights, they too could improve their standing.

Just as Christians are now openly celebrating in Khartoum, one hopes that the progress they are enjoying today will be soon seen all around the world, from Abuja to Havana to Managua and beyond.

HUMAN RIGHTS AT THE FOREFRONT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE AGENDA

Dana Stancavage

Though currently in the minority, House Republicans on the Foreign Affairs Committee have rolled out an extensive foreign policy plan to address American interests globally.

Over the course of 50 days, Members of the committee introduced more than 50 pieces of legislation aimed to promote human dignity, including human rights, democracy, and life, among other initiatives. 10 of the 50 bills introduced specifically work towards promoting human rights, spanning from issues in Cambodia, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Kosovo, and beyond.

House Foreign Affairs lead Republican Rep. Michael McCaul of Texas said in a statement that these bipartisan policy solutions would better project American strength worldwide, protect shared global interests, and respond to today's emerging threats.

The committee holds a broad jurisdiction in advancing legislation to the House floor on foreign affairs and has six subcommittees specializing in regional issues. While several hearings and markups are taking place in the committee, one particular piece of legislation bears highlighting.

H.R. 1383, the Vietnam Human Rights Act, aims to protect internationally recognized human rights and development of the rule

of law in U.S.-Vietnam relations. This bill was introduced by Representative Chris Smith of New Jersey in late February of 2019. Representative Smith has introduced similar legislation in previous years and remains a strong advocate in promoting religious freedom and human rights as critical components of U.S. national interests. Specifically, the Vietnam Human Rights Act supports a robust, prosperous, and independent Vietnam that promotes and protects human rights, embraces the rule of law, and creates open space for civil society, media, and independent religious institutions and labor unions.

Why is legislation like this important? The U.S. established diplomatic relations with Vietnam in 1950, and throughout the years Presidents have sought to strengthen the Comprehensive Partnership.

For years, the rights of the Vietnamese people have seen little progression as issues like sex and labor trafficking, media suppression, and religious persecution has been on the rise. In 2017, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommended that Vietnam be designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” for severe religious freedom restrictions.

Earlier this year, International Christian Concern (ICC) reported that over 30 Christians in the Phá Lóm village were threatened by the Vietnamese government and told to renounce their faith. ICC also reported on the raids made by local authorities and the arrests of Hmong Christians.

Because of these egregious human rights offenses, H.R. 1383 calls for an annual results-based dialogue focused on human rights issues with senior officials of the Government of Vietnam, informed by prior consultation with the Vietnamese-American community, human rights groups, and other experts and nongovernmental organizations about issues of concern.

In its call for transparency and relief to the citizens of Vietnam, H.R. 1383 has garnered the support of seven Democratic co-sponsors and one Republican. It currently awaits further action in the House and is widely expected to pass when it receives floor time.

Representative Smith has introduced legislation similar to H.R. 1383 in previous sessions of Congress on which the U.S. Senate failed to act.

Now is the time for the Senate to quickly adopt the legislation or to offer a companion bill. There is overwhelming support for advancing the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific region, and the Vietnam Human Rights Act will help ensure greater freedom to the people of Vietnam.

According to the committee, other goals of the 50 plus bills introduced include enhancing American security, combatting human and drug trafficking, strengthening partnerships and alliances, countering China's malign influence, confronting threats from Iran, increasing diplomatic effectiveness and efficiency, and championing economic growth and development.

DEATH OF A DEMOCRACY

Linda Burkle, PhD

The US Commission of International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) released its 2019 Annual Report, listing Syria as a “country of particular concern.” While ISIS was ostensibly defeated in 2017, it continued to be a threat to religious minorities; along with the growing presence of Hay’at Tahrir al Sham, there is an emerging a-Qaeda affiliate in northwest Syria. The Syrian government itself continued to repress and marginalize religious minorities, most notably Sunni Muslims. Furthermore, the report states:

“Turkish-backed rebel forces exploited a United Nations-brokered ceasefire in the northern district of Afrin to persecute and displace religious and ethnic minorities in that area. Religious and ethnic minorities in Kurdish-controlled areas of the country’s northeast, where they have generally experienced a relatively high degree of religious freedom, also faced mounting concerns at the close of 2018 regarding potential ramifications of the pending withdrawal of U.S. forces from northeastern Syria. Those concerns included the possibility of a large-scale Turkish offensive against Kurdish forces in that area and the threat of an ISIS resurgence.”¹

In anticipation of U.S. troop withdrawal, USCIRF’s 2019 Annual Report recommendations to the U.S. government included ensuring “that the planned withdrawal of U.S. forces from northeastern Syria

¹ <https://www.uscifr.gov/countries/Syria>

is conducted in such a manner that will not negatively impact the rights and survival of vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities.”²

The northeast region of Syria is unique in that Kurds, and a variety of other ethnic and religious minorities, have established an autonomous democratic self-governing region, living together and enjoying freedom from persecution. In an October 21 article, entitled *Interview: Christian Leader Cries Out for Help from Northern Syria* Metin Rhawi, who represents Christians in Northeastern Syria, estimated that 100,000-120,000 Christians were living in northern Syria.

Karin Heepen, an analyst from Germany, describes this unique region.

“In 2014, Kurds established a “Democratic Self-Administration in North-East Syria under the name Rojava (West Kurdistan) with the participation of all ethnic and religious groups. Since then, 4 million Kurds and Yazidi, Arabs and Alevis, Christian Assyrians, Aramaeans and converts, Armenians, and Turkmen have lived and worked together here largely peacefully as nowhere else in Islamic countries in the Middle East. In the years of the Syrian civil war, the region received about 1 million internally displaced persons. Most of the Pro-Assad government troops withdrew from northern Syria in 2012. The Syrian Democratic Forces, led by the Kurdish YPG

² Ibid.

fighters, took control of the region and, with the support of U.S. defense forces, defeated the Islamic State in North-East Syria.”³

U.S. President Trump ordered the withdrawal of troops from northeast Syria in early October of 2019 in accordance with his earlier campaign promises. The announcement was met with condemnation by Congress and outcry by those living in the region as well as humanitarian organizations worldwide. The Kurds, who had previously fought with U.S. forces to defeat ISIS, expressed betrayal. One of the primary concerns is the resurgence of ISIS in the wake of U.S. withdrawal as well as the continued oversight of ISIS prisoners, some of whom have escaped. Although only 50 to 100 U.S. special operations forces were withdrawn from northeast Syria and moved to other locations within Syria, their presence in the region had played a critical role.⁴

As predicted, Turkish airstrikes and ground attacks began on October 9th just two days after the United States withdrew its troops. The Turkish offensive, code-named Turkey Operation Peace Spring, was conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces and the Syrian National Army SNA against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Syrian Arab Army. With overwhelming bipartisan Congressional support, heavy sanctions were imposed on Turkey beginning October 14 but lifted on October 23 following assurances

³ “November First Friday Global Prayer Call”, info@globalprayercall.org

⁴ <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2019/10/07/how-the-us-troop-withdrawal-from-northern-syria-could-create-an-isis-resurgence/>

from Erdogan to Trump that the Turkish offensive on the Kurds had stopped. In a televised message, President Trump announced that a “permanent ceasefire” had been achieved.⁵

Despite the announced ceasefire, the attacks and killings continued into early November. By that time, at least 120 Syrian civilians had died, and 176,000 people had fled their homes during the previous weeks of violence. Dave Eubank and his volunteer Free Burma Rangers have been on the ground rescuing wounded and providing practical aid. Sadly, one of his volunteers was killed by Turkish artillery. He told CBN Middle Eastern Bureau Chief Chris Mitchell, “There’s no ceasefire, and I wish the world would finally admit it.”⁶

Turkish troops pushed back the Kurdish SDF fighters who fought valiantly but incurred heavy losses. The Turkish invasion advanced and strategically took over villages, such as Tel Tamer and Ras al Ain, conducting “soft ethnic cleansing.” Christians and other minorities have been forced from their homes and livelihoods.⁷

Not only are those in the region under attack from Turkey, but fears of an ISIS resurgence have been realized. According to Rojava Information Center, the Turkish invasion has provoked a 48%

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/oct/23/donald-trump-syria-ceasefire-permanent-lifts-sanctions-turkey>

⁶ <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2019/october/theres-no-ceasefire-and-i-wish-the-world-would-finally-admit-it-medical-mission-team-comes-under-fire/>

⁷ <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/israel/2019/october/lsquo-soft-ethnic-cleansing-rsquo-turkey-rsquo-s-jihadist-forces-are-stealing-christian-land-in-syria>

increase in ISIS sleeper cell attacks. The report states: “Turkey’s invasion undoes years of work by the SDF, first defeating in ISIS on the battlefield and then in sweeping anti-ISIS raids which have brought hundreds of sleeper cell members to justice. If the international community wants to stop this ISIS resurgence, there is only one solution: to stop the Turkish invasion of North and East Syria.”⁸

Within hours of Trump’s “permanent ceasefire” announcement on October 23rd, Russian President Putin and Turkish President Erdogan had brokered a deal in which Russia would fill the peace-keeping role previously held by the U.S. The region has been divided between Russian and Turkish control and Russian troops now occupy posts previously operated by the U.S.⁹

One tragic result of these recent events is the dismantling of a fledgling democracy, the Democratic Self Administration (Rojava) of northeastern Syria. Retired Marine Captain Brandon Wheeler is an expert in the region. He told CBN’S Chuck Holton: “What I can tell you for sure is whether it’s Putin or Assad or the Salafi Islamists or Turkey, the one thing they all agree on is that self-governance,

⁸ <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2019/11/new-data-turkish-invasion-provokes-48-rise-in-isis-sleeper-cell-attacks/>

⁹ <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2019/11/03/joint-turkish-and-russian-patrols-begin-in-syrian-region/>

individual freedom is a threat to all of them. So they will exterminate this project at all costs.”¹⁰

¹⁰ <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/israel/2019/November/freedom-is-a-threat-to-all-of-them-russia-turkey-and-islamic-terrorists-unite-to-kill-democracy>

**NEW STATE DEPARTMENT REPORT SHOWS
PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN EGYPT GETTING
WORSE**

Peter Burns

The State Department recently released its major annual International Religious Freedom report documenting the status of religious freedom in nations around the world. The chapter on Egypt is particularly grim, stating, “Attacks continued on Christians and Christian-owned property, as well as on churches in the Upper Egypt region.” The report also cited a terrorist attack in Minya, Upper Egypt, that killed seven and left nineteen wounded as well as an incident in which seven Christians were injured while defending their church from an attack by Muslim villagers.

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has spoken well about the place Copts have within Egyptian society, yet Christians in Egypt and abroad have been disappointed to see his rhetoric fall flat with little real change in attitudes towards the Coptic community.

The Coptic Church in Egypt has been a target of radical Islamic terrorism for over six hundred years. Radical groups like ISIS have perpetrated horrific acts of violence against Copts in recent years. Sadly, Copts are not only the victims of radically motivated attacks but are also persecuted by their own neighbors.

El-Sisi has regularly spoken out against Islamic terrorism and attacks targeting the Christian community, claiming that these

actions are a misrepresentation of Islam. He has called upon his Muslim brothers and sisters to act peacefully towards their Christian neighbors, even telling them to wish the Christians peace and happiness during their religious feasts and holidays. In 2017, el-Sisi commissioned the building of the Middle East's largest church. He made an appearance at the church's inauguration during Christmas mass on January 7th, 2019, even shaking the hand of the Egyptian Pope Shenouda.

El-Sisi's rhetoric emphasizes Egyptian nationality as a unifying factor for all Egyptians, regardless of religion. When a church was bombed in 2016, el-Sisi issued a three-day mourning period for all of Egypt, saying, "I'm not just giving my condolences to the Christians, our brothers, or the Pope and the priests. I am giving my condolences to all Egyptians."

Yet the reality on the ground is that Christians still suffer under terrorist attacks, church bombings, stabbings, and shootings. The State Department's International Religious Freedom Report provides evidence of the excessive violence that the church is facing. For example, on February 22, the corpses of two local Christians, Saad Hanna and his son Medhat, were found on the roadside in al-Arish. Saad's body showed gunshot wounds while Medhat's showed signs of having been burned alive. On another occasion, veterinarian Bahgat William was shot in the head, neck, and stomach while leaving his clinic. All three of these men were

killed simply for professing faith in Jesus and practicing Christianity.

The oppression of Christians is deeply rooted in the Egyptian government, society, and administrations. On July 19th, Josef Reda Helmy, a Coptic Christian, was tortured and murdered at Mubarak Training Camp. Nearly four hours after arriving to serve his country, he was killed because of his Christian heritage. This is not an isolated occurrence for the Egyptian military. In 2016, Michael Gamel Mansour was shot and killed by his comrades, and in 2015 Bishoy Nataay Boushra was found strangled to death in his barracks.

The military is not the only place that Copts face persecution. According to the State Department report, churches are indiscriminately shut down due to unfair building regulations and strict licensing laws that are only enforced on churches. The report states, “Local authorities also closed churches on the grounds that they were unlicensed, despite provisions in the law guaranteeing Christians the right to use the buildings for worship pending licensure.” Up to 70 towns were reported to be without churches even though they had applied for building licenses. Given that the church is the center of the Coptic community, much of their daily activities have been stifled.

Weddings, funerals, mass, and other communal practices are either delayed or forced to take place in private homes. Although the Egyptian Constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion,

the law is not enforced. As terrorist attacks continue to ravage the Coptic Church, the government encourages “customary reconciliation.” Essentially, ignoring the law and hoping that Christians will simply drop charges and move on. There is little justice for the Copts who are victims of Islamic terrorism and religious persecution. As President el-Sisi reassures the world that he is positively changing the Coptic situation in Egypt, the reality paints a bleak picture.

RADICAL CHANGES TAKING HOLD IN NEPAL

John Cosenza

Nepal's King Gyanendra, often dubbed the 'world's last Hindu King,' abdicated his throne in 2006 following a bloody civil war and widespread protests. Nepal's civil war, also known as the Maoist Conflict, was an internal struggle waged between Nepal's Communist Party and the ruling government from 1996 to 2006 in response to the encroaching power of the constitutional monarchy.

Throughout the latter half of the conflict, King Gyanendra sought to fully control over Nepal's constitutional monarchy in order to subdue the Maoist rebellion and, though he vowed to restore democracy, his period of direct rule was defined by repression and dissent. Indeed, Nepal's phone service was disrupted, flights to the capital were suspended, and the nation's media faced "total censorship with armed troops stationed in television newsrooms."¹ Moreover, student protestors "were fired on in one town, and numerous arrests of potential demonstrators" took place across the country.

Ultimately, King Gyanendra's oppressive tactics received nationwide disapproval and led to his abdication. In 2006, King Gyanendra surrendered his autonomy and transitioned his power to

¹ BBC News (2005). "Nepal's King Declares Emergency." *BBC News*, (February 2005).

Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala.² During peace talks with the Maoist rebels, Koirala’s new government decided to dissolve parliament and form an interim administration that included rebel leaders. However, due to political differences, the assembly “failed to draw up a new constitution” and would not officially come to an agreement until 2015 following the election of a new assembly.³

The new constitution declared Nepal a federalist Republic, established states, and attempted to represent Nepal’s diverse people, who speak over 100 languages and subscribe to a variety of religious faiths and cultures. Although many Nepalese are satisfied with the new constitution, “some, for varying reasons, remain deeply unhappy with it.”⁴ Indeed, Nepali society has since become polarized on whether the states should be ethnically delineated, leaving many members of traditionally marginalized groups in fear that “the constitution will work against them as it’s been rushed through by established parties – which including the Maoists – are dominated by high-cast, mostly male, leaders.”⁵ Such fears are well-founded, especially in the realm of religious freedom.

Since 2017, radical organizations and Nepal’s government have actively targeted religious minorities—particularly Nepal’s

² Al Jazeera (2008). “Timeline of Nepal’s Civil War: A Chronology of how the Maoist war Began and the March Towards Peace.” *Al Jazeera*, (April 2008).

³ Haviland, Charles (2015). “Why is Nepal’s new Constitution Controversial?” *BBC News*, (2015).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Christian community, which includes 400,000 individuals or 1.4% of Nepal's 29 million citizens.⁶ Radical Hindu organizations are currently campaigning to restore Hinduism as the official state religion of Nepal. While the constitution does enshrine secularism, it specifically requires the state to protect ancient Hindu religious practices and also makes the cow, sacred to Hindus, the national animal.

According to B.P. Khanal, General Secretary of the Christian Janjagaran Party, Hindu extremists pushed to return Nepal to a Hindu state during post-conflict negotiations. Indeed, Khanal says, "When we were trying to promote that constitution, there were so many voices. Even unnecessary voices that the country should go back and remain as a Hindu nation. So, now they are even more focused to prohibit conversion and that is penalized as a criminal offense."⁷ In October 2017, the Nepalese government successfully enacted legislation "criminalizing religious conversion which states that no one should be involved in, or encourage 'conversion of religion.' Those found guilty of violating the law can be sent to prison for five years and fined the equivalent of \$500 USD."⁸

⁶ The number of Christians living in Nepal is debated. Organizations including Open Doors USA estimate the Christian population to include approximately 1,279,000 individuals.

⁷ Lane, Gary (2018). "Christians Forced out of Nepal; Persecution Intensifies." *CBN News*, (2018).

⁸ *Ibid.*

Nepal's anti-conversion laws have directly impacted the Christian community in several ways ranging from social isolation to violence. In *Persecution Ramps up in Nepal After Anti-Conversion Legislation*, Alex Anhalt discusses the social and political impacts of Nepal's anti-conversion laws. According to Anhalt, "attempting to convert someone to another religion can lead to fines, prosecution, and even imprisonment. Whether you're Muslim or Christian or Hindu or Buddhist or anything else, you're expected to stay that way."⁹ Nepalese pastors have been arrested, and the laws have been applied to foreigners as well. Missionaries from India "have been arrested and are facing trial. An Indonesia pastor has already been deported, and anti-Christian groups are growing in boldness and aggression."¹⁰

Nepalese Pastor Sagar Baiju warns his followers that Nepal's police and politicians are targeting Christians. One such follower named Cho Yusang was arrested on July 23rd, 2019, for carrying a Bible and allegedly forcing Nepalese locals to take Christian literature. After the arrest, Nepalese authorities raided Yusang's residence and confiscated his collection of Christian literature. B.P. Khanal rushed to Yusang's defense and called the confiscation of his Bible and personal belongings "an offense and crime."¹¹ Khanal continues,

⁹ Anhalt, Alex (2018). "Persecution Ramps up in Nepal After Anti-Conversion Legislation." *Mission Network News*, (2018).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Prescott, Emily (2019). "Elderly man Jailed in Nepal for Handing out Bibles." *Keep the Faith*, (2019).

“anyone can have a Bible. In this case the law is discriminatory, because it is not an offense to have Bibles in your room.”¹² Christians increasingly experience discrimination in Nepal’s education system as well. According to Pastor Baiju, Christians are being ghettoized like criminals. In Hindu-run schools, Christian children are required to perform the “Saraswati Vandana [a common Hindu mantra] in their morning devotion, and nobody objects to it.”¹³

International Christian Concern (ICC) recognizes this growing threat and is taking efforts to combat Christian persecution in Nepal. Over the last two years, ICC has investigated and reported on social and political injustices involving Christian community members across Nepal. In May of 2019, ICC reported the arrest of five Christians in Nepal on April 23rd of that year after being “accused of attempted proselytization.”¹⁴ Among those arrested included Pastor Dilli Ram Paudel, General Secretary of the Nepal Christian Society, Gaurav Srivastava, an Indian citizen, and an American named Leanna Ciquanda.¹⁵ The five individuals were arrested after meeting with local Christians and church leaders in the Dang District of midwestern Nepal. Although everyone has been released

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Miller, Olivia (2019). “Recent Arrest of Five Christians in Nepal a Worrying Sign for Religious Freedom.” *International Christian Concern*, (2019).

¹⁵ Ibid.

from prison, each faces a court proceeding in connection to the proselytization charges.¹⁶ A month before the arrests, a Christian pastor was attacked and beaten by an angry mob after being accused of proselytization in Sarlahi, Nepal.

Despite efforts to transform Nepal into a secular republic, radical organizations and members of the government are actively persecuting religious minority communities socially and politically across Nepal. In December 2019 and January 2020, ICC published two additional pieces highlighting the increasing threat to Christians in Nepal. In a recent piece, ICC reports that, in 2019 alone, “17 Christians were arrested and charged under Nepal’s blasphemy and anti-conversion law. This has included several foreigners, including two Americans, who were arrested and deported because they allegedly shared their faith.”¹⁷

ICC is working to investigate and address the anti-Christian religious persecution in Nepal. As it regularly does with victims from around the world, ICC plans to bring members of Nepal’s Christian community to Capitol Hill and the State Department to share their personal, first-hand testimonies in the near future.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Miller, Olivia (2020). “New Challenges to Christianity’s Growth in Nepal.” *International Christian Concern*, (1/02/2020).

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