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## The Intersection of U.S. National Security Strategy and Religious Freedom

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Religious freedom and national security are closely intertwined. Far from being a boutique human rights issue, the advancement of religious freedom can play a major role in advancing national and international security. There is an increasing recognition of this link as evidenced in the development of language in the National Security Strategy, statements and activities led by high-level officials across the U.S. Government, and emerging academic research.

While religion-based terrorism has steadily increased worldwide since 1980, only recently has a link been recognized between religious freedom and security, stability, and peace. Over the last two decades, the National Security Strategy (NSS) of the United States has begun to acknowledge this critical link. A review of international news and contemporary research shows how the presence of religious freedom contributes to security and stability.

Earlier iterations of the NSS, issued from 1987 to 1996, did not mention the role of religious freedom. The first reference appeared in President Clinton's 1997 NSS, and eight of the nine ensuing Strategies (from 1997-2017, spanning two Democratic and two Republican Administrations) included principles of religious freedom (the NSS of 2010 was the only exception).

The current NSS states that the United States will continue to champion American values and rights to include our first freedom, religious freedom:

“The United States also remains committed to supporting and advancing religious freedom - America's first freedom. Our Founders understood religious freedom not as the state's creation, but as the gift of God to every person and a fundamental right for our flourishing society.” (2017 NSS, 41)

It continues:

“We will advocate on behalf of religious freedom and threatened minorities. Religious minorities continue to be victims of violence. We will place a priority on protecting these groups and will continue working with regional partners to protect minority communities from attacks and to preserve their cultural heritage.” (2017 NSS, 42)

### *Recent High-Level Attention to the Link*

In July 2018, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, hosted a Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom. During the event, Vice President Mike Pence stated: “The right to believe or not believe is the most fundamental of freedoms. When religious liberty is denied or destroyed, we know that other freedoms — freedom of speech, of press, assembly, and even democratic institutions themselves — are imperiled. That’s why the United States of America stands for religious freedom yesterday, today, and always. We do this because it is right. But we also do this because religious freedom is in the interest of the peace and security of the world. Those nations that reject religious freedom breed radicalism and resentment in their citizens. They sow the seeds of violence within their borders — violence that often spills over into their neighbors and across the world. And as history has shown too many times, those who deny religious freedom for their own people have no qualms trampling upon the rights of other people, undermining security and peace across the wider world.”

Furthermore, in November of 2018, Admiral Phil Davidson, the Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, echoed the NSS in his speech to the Halifax International Security Forum. He stated that, “security and prosperity of all of our countries depend on the stability of the Indo-Pacific.” To ensure stability, there must be a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” Admiral Davidson enumerated the factors necessary to create security and prosperity within the region, noting that free societies protect their citizens’, “freedom to openly practice their religion; free societies promote good governance; and free societies adhere to the shared values of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” He emphasized that, in addition to moral and ethical abuses, the suppression of religious beliefs runs counter to the idea of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. In March of 2019, Admiral Davidson wrote a letter to alumni of the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, stating: “We will defend American interests and values consistently and forthrightly, including in the areas of trade and economics, human rights, including the freedom of religion and belief, the South China Sea, and Taiwan. We remain committed to this strategy as first articulated in the President’s 2017 National Security Strategy.”

### *Empirical Research Demonstrating the Link*

Current research and analysis by sociologists and political scientists provide empirical evidence of the value of religious freedom as a deterrent to terrorism, and as necessary to a stable and peaceful government. RFI senior fellow, Dr. Nilay Saiya, is emerging as the lead scholar in this field. Saiya’s 2018 book, *Weapon of Peace: How Religious Liberty Combats Terrorism* (Cambridge University Press) is a groundbreaking work that offers empirical support and insight to the proposition that religious freedom is an essential element of any nation’s security.

Dr. Saiya’s detailed analysis of every terrorist attack in the world from 1990-2014 documents the following:

- *83% of the world’s population* lives in a country where the practice of religion is either significantly limited or prohibited altogether.
- Countries with “low” levels of restrictions on religion experience an *absence of religious terrorism 99 percent of the time.*

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- States that *enforce blasphemy laws experience almost six times as many terrorist attacks* as states where such laws do not exist.
  - *Religiously-restrictive countries experience more than 13.5 times as many religious terrorist attacks* as their religiously free counterparts.
  - Nine of the ten countries hit hardest by *homegrown religious terrorism impose serious restrictions on religious freedom*.
  - The vast majority of *international religious terrorist groups originated from religiously oppressive settings: 88% emanated from religiously-restrictive countries, 8% from moderately-restrictive countries, and slightly more than 3% from religiously-free settings*.

Dr. Saiya offers five reasons why religious freedom results in more peaceful societies: pluralism, politics, peacebuilding, primacy of transcendence, and policing.

**Pluralism:** “In religiously-free settings, radicals will have their views challenged and critiqued in the marketplace of ideas and have to defend them.” A diversity of voices that can freely express their beliefs not only enriches societies, but also creates an environment where radical views are rarely received or enforced as truth since they are subjected to the same standard of public examination as all other views.

**Politics:** “In free countries, religious actors, by and large, do not react against political institutions but instead use them to their advantage, making it less likely that they will feel the need to turn to violence.” Religious freedom empowers minority groups to promote their beliefs and causes through social and political means, regulated by the standard of law, rather than resorting to violence. In short, their access to public life is equal to all others.

**Peacebuilding:** “Freedom of religion thus unlocks the ‘spiritual capital’ of faith-based actors. In many parts of the world, religious communities have been instrumental in increasing literacy, reducing poverty, promoting development, providing access to potable water, administering healthcare, running counseling centers, and leading peace and reconciliation processes.” Restricting religion impedes social development and progress, which can serve as an aggravating factor for violence or terrorism.

**Primacy of Transcendence:** “The free exercise of religion works against forces of authoritarianism and tyranny--political characteristics which tend to fuel terrorism in the first place.” As French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville noted, “despotism may govern without religion, but liberty cannot.” As America’s founders understood, religious freedom limits the power of government.

**Policing:** “Religious freedom contributes to counterterrorism efforts... History teaches and many studies confirm, that religious restrictive counterterrorism policies which discriminate against entire religious groups work at cross purposes...religious terrorist are much more likely to find a receptive audience to their message that their faith is under siege and that violence is justified.” Building trust in communities with law enforcement and the military is an essential key to stability and enduring peace.

In short, the evidence is clear: advancing religious freedom in U.S. national security policy, both via diplomacy and military strategy, will increase security, stability, and peace. The NSS and other

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documents have set the stage for next steps: making IRF policy a central element of U.S. national security strategy, and implementing that strategy in the field.

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The Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) is committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, a source of individual and social flourishing, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a driver of national and international security

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