

Religious Freedom and American National Security
A Hearing of the National Security Subcommittee of the
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, September 5, 2017
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Chairman DeSantis, Ranking Member Lynch, and members of the sub-committee, thank you for holding this important hearing and for inviting me to testify. I have had the privilege of appearing twice before the full committee, but it is especially encouraging that your sub-committee on National Security is taking up the issue of U.S. international religious freedom policy. This is a subject vital to the nation's security.

My message is straightforward: advancing religious freedom successfully in our foreign policy can help the victims of religious freedom abroad and increase the security of the American people.

Let me begin by congratulating two important entities that are vital to this process. The first is the Office of International Religious Freedom, headed by Dan Nadel, for its splendid Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, just out last month. The second is the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, whose own report was, I thought, equally effective.

When Islamic terrorists, led by an imam steeped in the theology of ISIS, killed and maimed 140 people in Barcelona last month, much of the analysis focused on the failures of law enforcement.

But there was another failure, far less understood and potentially far more important: the role of U.S. foreign policy in preventing such attacks. [Evidence](#) is mounting that religious freedom, including for majority Muslims in the Middle East, can help save endangered religious minorities. But it can also help prevent future attacks on Europe and the United States.

In my view U.S. international religious freedom policy should be made a central diplomatic tool of our national security strategy. I believe that the President's nominee for ambassador-at-large Sam Brownback, will be perfectly placed to lead that effort, one that is consistent with the spirit and the letter of the 2016 Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act.

A brief bit of background. I was privileged to serve as the State Department's first director of the office of international religious freedom. I worked with two splendid ambassadors-at-large, one, Bob Seiple, appointed by President Clinton and the second, John Hanford, by President Bush. It was then that I met a future ambassador, Rabbi David Saperstein, who was the first chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

I learned a great deal from each. In 2003, after four years in that job, I left the Department and the foreign service to research and write about religious freedom in our foreign policy. I believed then, as I do now, that if America could succeed in advancing religious freedom in places like

the Middle East, we would help the victims of religious persecution, the societies where persecution exacts such profound moral, political and economic costs, and the national security of the American people.

As you know, our religious freedom policy was mandated by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. It's been in effect for almost 20 years, over three administrations and four ambassadors at large. Each of those men and women made vital contributions and laid important tracks. But the data show that our best efforts have not reduced persecution anywhere. The reports of the non-partisan Pew Research Center show that persecution has been high for at least decade, and that religious terrorism is increasing.

At the same time, evidence is mounting that religious freedom acts as an antidote to the incubation and flourishing of religious violence, Islamic or otherwise.

Both history and modern research demonstrate that the absence of religious freedom encourages religious violence, Islamic or otherwise. It does this in various ways in the Middle East, such as the silencing of moderates through blasphemy laws.

In 2008 [a Muslim student](#) in democratic Afghanistan distributed an internet article arguing that the prophet Muhammed did not support the oppression of women. This earned the student a blasphemy prosecution and a death sentence. Middle Eastern blasphemy laws ensure that extremists dominate public discourse about Islam. Terrorist attacks occur almost six times more often in countries that enforce blasphemy laws than in countries without them.

But the reverse is also true. A number of studies show that religious freedom undermines religious violence and terrorism and encourages stability. Despite its difficulties with Hindu radicalism, India's success as the world's largest democracy, with a huge and largely peaceful Muslim minority, stems in large part from its history of religious tolerance. The same can be said of Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country. Despite its own Islamic extremism, Indonesia's pervasive and tolerant Islamic civil society helps keep that nation democratic and stable. Both nations have a long way to go, but neither is a net exporter of terror.

There are other reasons why Middle Eastern Muslims, saddled with economic stagnation and political dysfunction, might pay attention to political and economic arguments for religious freedom. Research shows that religious freedom fosters economic development and the kind of pluralism that is the linchpin of social stability.

Some Muslim leaders in the Middle East already understand this. The disappearance of Christian and other minorities from the region will weaken the possibility of pluralism, while ensuring perpetual majoritarian religious tyranny, economic backwardness, and religious conflict.

Of course, advancing religious freedom in the Middle East will not be easy. But in a world of growing religious persecution, conflict-inducing instability, and Islamic terrorism, ignoring the

advantages to American security of a more effective religious freedom policy is foolish. We are facing a long war against an Islamic ideology that cannot be won by law enforcement and military force alone. Even modest success in advancing religious freedom would increase our security at a much lower cost in American blood and treasure.

Most U.S. religious freedom ambassadors have understood this, but have lacked the high-level support, the authority, or the resources to succeed. President Obama left the position vacant for over two years. Diplomats are not systematically trained to advance religious freedom. The U.S. *National Security Strategy* does not include religious freedom.

However, the last Obama ambassador – Rabbi David Saperstein – moved forthrightly to change the institutions and the zeitgeist at Foggy Bottom. Saperstein fought and won battles for more staff, resources, and training. In December 2016 he supported the passage of the Wolf Act, an amendment to the 1998 law that exhorts (but does not require) the State Department to incorporate religious freedom into U.S. national security strategy.

Saperstein set the table for his successor. Fortunately, President Trump has already nominated Kansas Governor and former Senator Sam Brownback to be his ambassador. A champion of religious freedom in the Senate, Brownback has the knowledge and the gravitas not only to advance religious freedom for everyone, but to make it a national security priority for the nation.

Here are some ways that an Ambassador Brownback could strengthen U.S. foreign policy so that it will have a greater impact on persecuted minorities while, at the same time, increase the security of the American people.

He can work with the NSC to ensure the U.S. *National Security Strategy* incorporates religious freedom, and school national security agencies on its importance. He can provide all senior U.S. foreign policy officials with persuasive political, economic, and security arguments to make with their foreign counterparts, and ensure they make those arguments.

Ambassador Brownback can also deploy US funding to support Muslim groups seeking religious freedom for all in the Middle East, and urge the Senate to pass HR 390, which targets U.S. aid to resettle Christian and other minorities back into Iraq. He can ensure American diplomats are trained to understand the value of religious freedom and how to advance it in the Middle East and elsewhere. He can encourage the rising interest in religious freedom among Western nations, offering them knowledge and training about the value of religious freedom.

For all these reasons the Senate should confirm Brownback immediately. The White House, the national security agencies, and Secretary of State Tillerson should support him, as should all Americans who wish to achieve peace and security in a violent world.

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Let me applaud the report produced by the State Department's office of international religious freedom. I was honored to be the first director of that office, and to have had a hand in setting up that report. I can remember internal fights over xxxx. The director of that office xxx and the entire staff are to be congratulated for the high quality etc.

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