

**Empowering U.S. International Religious Freedom Policy  
to Contribute to American National Security**

Testimony before the National Security Sub-Committee of the  
House Government Reform and Oversight Committee, September 18, 2014

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Sub-Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify at this important hearing.

Let me begin by commending you for holding your second annual hearing on the operation of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). In the sixteen years since the passage of IRFA, this is – to my knowledge -- the only Committee of Congress that has held hearings solely on the question of how the Department of State has implemented that law. I heartily endorse the recommendation of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, made in its 2014 Annual Report, that Congress hold *annual* oversight hearings on IRFA.

I hope this Committee's action is a sign of increased Congressional interest in how the State Department is doing its job, or not doing it, as the case may be. Events in the Middle East and elsewhere certainly warrant Congressional oversight of US religious freedom policy, especially its potential role in the increasingly urgent question of defending American national security.

I will address three questions today. First, given the status of religious freedom in the world, how has the current administration implemented IRFA during its approximately six years in office?

Second, how can US IRF policy be employed to advance American national security?

Third, the President has nominated Rabbi David Saperstein as the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. How can Rabbi Saperstein be empowered to succeed in a field where others have had precious little success? In particular, what can the Congress do?

***Implementation of IRFA by the Obama Administration (2008-14)***

Let me begin by giving credit where credit is due. There are in the State Department officials who care deeply about U.S. International Religious Freedom policy, and who have worked assiduously to support and improve it. Their efforts have not been unavailing.

They have succeeded in creating a course on religion and foreign policy at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) and it includes religious freedom. They have made funding available in the Human Rights and Democracy Fund for grants to religious freedom civil society advocates. The Department of State has established a civil society Working Group on Religion and Foreign Policy, including a sub-group on International Religious Freedom, Stability, and Democracy. I

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have been invited to be a member of that sub-group, joining other civil society representatives in providing counsel to the State Department.

Perhaps most importantly, the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom – the office created by IRFA to carry out US policy in this area, headed by the Ambassador – contains highly intelligent, dedicated Foreign Service Officers and civil servants who work behind the scenes within the Department to raise the profile of the issue, and urge the regional bureaus to integrate religious freedom into their respective strategies and programs.

I cannot overstate my admiration for these men and women. Their work is exceedingly important because of the dramatic rise in religious persecution worldwide and the impact of that phenomenon on America's national interests, including its national security.

Unfortunately, their work is compartmentalized, marginalized, and isolated within the State Department. The course at FSI is voluntary and, in any case, does not train diplomats in how to promote religious freedom. Funding levels are tiny and are not controlled by the person responsible for U.S. policy – the IRF Ambassador. State's working group on religion and foreign policy is made up of civil society representatives; we need a working group on international religious freedom made up of senior U.S. foreign policy officials.

The key point, however, is that each of these efforts is ad hoc. None is part of an integrated strategy to advance international religious freedom. Such a strategy has not existed for the five years and nine months of this President's tenure and it does not exist today.

As a consequence, the United States has had virtually no impact on the global rise of religious persecution. While American diplomats have helped in individual cases, we have had no comprehensive policy in place to help the millions who suffer because of their faith.

Equally important, we have missed opportunities to employ IRF policy as a means of undermining the development of violent religious extremism, encouraging economic growth, and helping struggling democracies to stabilize.

The evidence for this stark assessment is compelling. When testifying before this committee in June of last year, I could not identify a single country in the world where the United States under this administration has advanced religious freedom or reduced religious persecution. That remains true today. Meanwhile, we have seen an explosion of violent Islamist extremism, and the continuing decline of struggling democracies in highly religious societies such as Iraq, Pakistan, and Egypt.

Not long after that hearing the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom -- the position established by IRFA to develop and implement U.S. IRF policy – resigned. The President's nominee, Rabbi Saperstein, should be confirmed immediately. But when he steps into the job, the post of Ambassador at Large will have been vacant for almost a full year since the departure of the previous incumbent, and vacant for *over half the tenure* of this President.

Compare the administration's treatment of this position with another similar job -- that of Ambassador at Large for Global Women's Issues. Someone has been in that position for virtually the entire tenure of this administration. Why? Because women's issues are a priority, as they should be. On the other hand, it is difficult to conclude that the office of the IRF Ambassador at Large, or the issue it represents, are perceived as important at State.

To cite but one example: if you peruse the Department's listing of "Assistant Secretaries and Other Senior Officials" on its website you will find Coordinators, Special Advisors, and Special Envoys for a host of issues, including Global Food Security, Global AIDs, Global Youth Issues, the Arctic, Muslim Communities, the Organization of Islamic States, and many others.

But you will not find listed the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom.

The reason for that omission is clear. If religious freedom is not a priority for the administration, there is little reason to label that Ambassador a "senior" official with an important portfolio. The sad fact is that he is *not* considered senior, nor his job of any real significance, by this State Department or this President.

I would note that the IRFA established this Ambassador as a "principal advisor to the President and Secretary of State" on religious freedom abroad. Whatever Congress intended that phrase to mean, under this administration it has meant very little.

You can be sure that the Department of State's marginalization of the Ambassador and U.S. international religious policy is not lost on America's diplomats, who fully understand the low priority that policy has been given. Nor is it lost on foreign governments and those who persecute on the basis of religion.

When I testified last summer I explored some of the reasons for this bizarre sidelining of international religious freedom policy. In my view, the most important reason is the loss of a sense that religious freedom is "the first freedom" -- necessary for the success of individuals and societies everywhere. That proposition, central to the American founding, is today highly contested among our political elites, including many within this administration.

But out there in the world the status of religious freedom continues to decline. According to the Pew Research Center, *seventy six percent of the world's population* lives in nations where religious freedom is highly or very highly restricted. Millions are subject to violent religious persecution either because of their religious beliefs and practices or -- as in the case of the recent barbaric beheadings of American and British citizens -- because of the religious beliefs and practices of their tormentors.

The causes are many, but the key sources of the decline of religious freedom outside the West are violent Islamist extremism, the totalitarian remnants of Communism (which we still see in China, North Korea, Vietnam, and Cuba), and religious nationalism (which emerges in places like India, Burma, and Russia).

Inside the West, religious freedom is under assault in different ways from an aggressive secularism that has, it should be noted, contributed to the failures of U.S. IRF diplomacy.

*Employing IRF to Enhance National Security*

Mr. Chairman, I believe there are two powerful reasons for a coordinated, comprehensive American strategy to advance religious freedom. The first is a moral imperative.

Last year in Rome, Georgetown's Religious Freedom Project, in partnership with Baylor University, sponsored an international conference on Christian contributions to freedom. Our keynote address was given by the Iraqi Patriarch of the Chaldeans, Archbishop Louis Raphael Sako – a good and holy man who is now in the eye of the storm.

As the Patriarch looked out at our audience, he said something that still haunts me: “If they kill us all, will you do something then?”

We have a responsibility to that man, and to the others of Iraq and Syria – Christian, Yazidi, and Muslim – who are fending for, or fleeing for, their lives.

But Patriarch Sako said something else that day. The title of his speech was: “What Happens to the Middle East if Christians Flee?” The answer was twofold: terrible suffering for the Christians, but also increased instability and harm to the societies themselves.

Here lies the second reason for a coordinated, comprehensive U.S. strategy on religious freedom. Religious freedom is not simply a “nice to have” human right, consisting mainly of the right not to be tortured or killed, or a right to private worship. It is a fundamental human right that has distinct and inevitable public dimensions. As such it is utterly *necessary*, not only for individual human flourishing but for the success of any state -- especially highly religious nations like Iraq, Pakistan, or Egypt.

Indeed, ample research has shown what common sense suggests: democracies cannot consolidate without religious freedom. Economies cannot develop without religious freedom. And – perhaps most important for American national security – religious freedom is a counter to religion-based terrorism.

For all these reasons I believe the President should issue a *Presidential Policy Directive on International Religious Freedom and U.S. National Security*. This Directive would be preceded by a *Presidential Study Directive* coordinated by the National Security Council with guidance from the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. The Study Directive would have significant input from the Department of State (including representatives from the Under Secretaries for Political Affairs, Public Diplomacy, Economic Growth, and Civilian Security, Human Rights, and Democracy); the Department of Defense; all foreign policy intelligence branches; the Department of Commerce; the U.S. Trade Representative; and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The purpose of the *Study Directive*, drawing on history, modern research, and common sense, would be to lay out what religious freedom means, why its advancement is in the interests of the United States, and how an integrated policy would be implemented in U.S. foreign policy. Based on these findings, the *Presidential Policy Directive* would mandate a coordinated U.S. initiative to advance international religious freedom, and direct the involvement of all U.S. foreign policy agencies under the leadership of the Ambassador at Large. It would direct mandatory training for American diplomats and all other officials involved in carrying out the new initiative.

I would note one additional rationale for such an approach. Since the events of September 11, 2001, our military forces have been required to spend the precious blood of America's young men and women to defeat the scourge of Islamist terrorism. It has also spent huge sums of money, contributing to fiscal deficits that both harm our national security and place our children's future at risk. Awareness of these realities has quite naturally fueled among the American people a weariness with war, and an intense desire not to send our young into harm's way. Until recently, it has also provided a rationale for the administration's withdrawal of American troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.

In my view, those withdrawals were ill-considered. A continued American troop presence in Iraq could well have forestalled the devastating growth of ISIS and its movement into Iraq. It might also have provided an opportunity to advance religious freedom. After the success of the surge in 2007, we had the chance to convince the majority Shiite community that a failure to integrate Sunnis and other minorities into the political system would ensure the failure of Iraqi democracy. In short, they needed to move toward religious toleration (and, ultimately, religious freedom) if they were to succeed as a state that would be stable, free of religious violence and conflict, and economically dynamic.

We did not do that and the consequences have been catastrophic. It is no accident that ISIS announced itself to the world by its efforts to eradicate Yazidis and Christians – this vicious group defines itself by its religious intolerance. And now we see that ISIS poses a serious and direct security threat to the United States. Surely we can learn from our past neglect and failure that religious freedom can contribute to the long-term solution. Military action is now necessary to defeat ISIS. But integrating religious freedom into our overall strategy can reduce the need for future military action. At a fraction of the cost, and without loss of blood, a diplomatic counter-terrorism offensive can increase American national security.

### *Empowering Saperstein to Succeed*

I urge the Senate to confirm David Saperstein this month before it adjourns. His presence is sorely needed now, and he will be critical to integrating U.S. International Religious Freedom policy into our national security strategies.

Let me quote from his excellent testimony last week before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee:

“I will seek to engage every segment of the State Department and the rest of the U.S. Government, to integrate religious freedom into our nation's statecraft: counter-terrorism,

conflict stability efforts, economic development, human rights – all these foreign policy goals need the stability, the security, the contributions of members of religious majorities and religious minorities, in every country, to further our nation’s values, interests and agenda.”

Precisely so. I believe that a *Presidential Study Directive*, followed by a *Presidential Policy Directive*, would facilitate the achievement of Rabbi Saperstein’s goals, and – as he puts it so well – “to further our nation’s values, interests, and agenda.”

But mark my words. David Saperstein is a very talented man. But if he is not given the tools to succeed, tools that were denied his predecessor, he will fail.

To increase the chances of success and decrease the chances of failure, I urge the Congress to amend the International Religious Freedom Act. In testimony last week before the House Foreign Affairs Committee – the authorizing committee for the International Religious Freedom Act – I asked the Committee to amend the law in five areas. I urge members from both parties in this Sub-Committee on National Security, and in the full Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, to work with their colleagues to ensure that these amendments move forward.

1. Require the State Department to treat the IRF Ambassador as it does the Ambassador at Large for Global Women’s Issues, i.e., to report directly to the Secretary of State, rather than the Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. This will increase the status and authority of the IRF ambassador and help overcome the perception – among American diplomats and foreign governments alike – that this issue is not a priority.
2. Give the Ambassador the resources he needs to develop strategies, and to implement them, in key countries around the globe. This need not involve the appropriation of new monies, but the reallocation of portions of appropriations for existing programs such as democracy promotion and counter terrorism.
3. Make training of American diplomats mandatory at three stages: when they enter the Foreign Service, when they receive “area studies” training prior to departing for post, and when they become Deputy Chiefs of Mission and Ambassadors. This training should tell them what religious freedom is, why it is important for individuals and societies, why advancing it is important for America’s national interests, its status in the country and region to which they have been assigned, and how to advance it.
4. Amend the IRFA to *require* that the list of particularly severe violators (the “countries of particular concern”) be issued annually with the Report. In addition to describing any economic sanctions that might be levied against these countries, *require* the State Department to provide a comprehensive analysis of other policy tools being applied in each country, including programs that target democratic stability, economic growth and counter terrorism.
5. Require the State Department to respond in writing to recommendations by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. At the same time, require the Commission to pay greater attention to the question of why the United States is not succeeding in advancing

religious freedom, as gauged by objective reports such as those of the Pew Research Center. The Commission should recommend concrete steps for the State Department that will result in increasing the status and authority of the ambassador at large, increasing the resources allocated to religious freedom policy, achieving permanent, effective training for all diplomats, and integrating religious freedom into US strategies for democracy promotion, economic growth, and counter terrorism.

Such changes will not work overnight. But without steps like this, and without the commitment of the President, the Secretary of State, and the Congress to support the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and the policy he leads, the remaining Christians and other minorities of the Middle East will face violent persecution into the indefinite future. And the United States will face a permanent threat from the ever spreading phenomenon of violent Islamist extremism. For all these reasons, I urge you to act.

Thank you for having me here today.

## Thomas F. Farr

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A graduate of Mercer University, with a PhD in history from the University of North Carolina, Dr. Farr has served in both the U.S. Army and the American Foreign Service. As an Army officer he taught history at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, and served as Adjutant General of the Army's Transportation Command in Europe. As a diplomat, Farr specialized in strategic nuclear policy and arms control. He participated in US-Soviet arms control talks in Geneva and led an interagency task force to draft verification provisions for the START II Treaty. He also taught international relations at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

In 1999 Farr became the first director of the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom, in which capacity he led American diplomatic efforts to promote religious liberty. He has served as director of the Witherspoon Institute's [Task Force](#) on International Religious Freedom, a member of the Chicago World Affairs Council's [Task Force](#) on Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy, and a member of Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's Working Group on Religious Freedom. He is currently a consultant to the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference.

Dr. Farr has testified on several occasions before the U.S. Congress and addressed the conference of American Roman Catholic Bishops. He has spoken on religion and foreign policy at government agencies, universities, law schools, think tanks, and gatherings of religious groups here and abroad. He teaches regularly at the U.S. Foreign Service Institute in Washington DC.

Farr is a contributing editor for the *Review of Faith and International Affairs* and has [published widely](#) on religious freedom and its implications. His work has appeared in many edited volumes, law journals, magazines, and newspapers, including the *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*, *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*, *Houston Journal of International Law*, *Drake Law Review*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *First Things*, *Weekly Standard*, *National Review*, *America Magazine*, *National Interest*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and many others.

Farr has appeared on PBS, America Abroad, Book TV, Al Jazeera, Alhurra, Fox News, EWTN, CBN, and many radio outlets. His first book, *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty is Vital to American National Security*, was published by Oxford University Press. His second (with Dennis Hoover), *The Future of U.S. International Religious Freedom Policy: Recommendations for the Obama Administration*, was published by the Berkley Center.

Dr. Farr serves on the Board of Trustees of the First Freedom Center, the Board of Advisors of the Alexander Hamilton Society, the Administrative Board of Aid to the Church in Need, and the Boards of Directors of the Institute on Religion and Democracy and Christian Solidarity Worldwide-USA. He is a recipient of the Jan Karski Wellspring of Freedom Award, presented by the Institute on Religion and Public Policy for contributions to religious freedom. His wife, Margaret McPherson Farr, is a watercolor artist. They are Roman Catholics and have three daughters and nine grandchildren.