

Promoting Religious Freedom During the Campaign Against Terrorism": Amy Hawthorne Prepared Testimony

Promoting Religious Freedom in the Middle East, Post-September 11 November 27, 2001 To win the war against terrorism, the U.S. government must pursue with equal vigor the short-term imperative to eradicate terrorist groups and their international support networks and the longer-term objective to advance a positive vision for the Arab world, one that provides an alternative the destructive ideology of the terrorist. Both efforts are essential; focusing on the former at the expense of the latter will almost surely prove self-defeating. Specifically, this means that the United States will need to shed its reluctance to engage Arab leaders on the highly sensitive issues of political reform, rule of law, and the spread of democratic values. The widening of religious freedom must be a cornerstone of this effort. This is not merely a humanitarian objective: it is essential to the promotion of U.S. interests in a stable, productive, peaceful Middle East that is anchored in the global economy of the twenty-first century. Of course, tolerance and the freedom to worship can never be imposed from the outside. Ultimately, as is true with democratic development more broadly, the responsibility for building institutions to protect religious freedom and for fostering a culture of tolerance rests within the region itself. U.S. efforts can affect local processes only on the margins; we must always respect genuine national sensitivities. Nonetheless, the United States has a critical role to play; its voice and leverage do matter. Indeed, to stand any chance of success, any conceivable international effort to promote religious freedom must have America in a leading role.

Religious Freedom Policy, Post-September 11 In the period since September 11, there has been no clear change in U.S. policy toward the promotion of human rights (or religious freedom, more specifically) as regards the Arab world. There are, however, factors influencing an evolution in the policy. In the Arab world, the state of freedom for religious minorities still ranges from fragile to nonexistent. September 11 made another dimension of religious freedom in the region more apparent than ever: the often-precarious position of moderates squeezed between extremist Islamist ideologies on one side and undemocratic regimes on the other. Osama bin Laden's message of intolerance and violence toward non-Muslims has placed the issue of religious freedom and tolerance on center stage in the Arab and wider Muslim worlds. He has given voice to some of the most reactionary instincts in the Middle East, with a message that threatens the region's religious minorities, its millions of moderate, peace-loving Muslim believers, and its millions of other citizens who, while personally pious, do not wish to live under strict religious governments. Al-Qaeda's brand of hatred -which also feeds anti-American, anti-Christian, and anti-Jewish trends in the region- too often finds a receptive ear in the undemocratic societies prevalent in the Arab world, even if most people strongly reject bin Laden's violent means. Meanwhile, some Arab governments may feel emboldened to launch overly broad security dragnets -with the stated goal of clamping down on terrorists- that also target "opponents" of the regime, including religious moderates and human rights groups monitoring religious freedom. The net effect will be a worsening of democratic values, including religious freedom, precisely at the time when they are already under siege from bin Laden sympathizers. A third development after September 11 is the unprecedented level of interest among the American public in internal conditions in the Arab world, including the issue of the political repercussions of religious extremism within such key U.S. allies as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Bolder U.S. initiatives to promote humanistic values -especially those of religious tolerance- may be particularly welcome at this time by many Americans dismayed that the cacophony of Muslim radicals seems to drown out the voices of Muslim moderates. Taken together, the need, motive, and opportunity are all present for an enhanced and invigorated U.S. effort to advance American values of tolerance, religious freedom, human rights, and, more generally, democracy. Recognizing the urgency of security cooperation from local governments in prosecuting the war against terrorism, it is still not too early for the United States to articulate and sustain a bolder approach toward these key issues. Indeed, waiting for the "right moment" may mean waiting forever.

Regional Issues Immediately after September 11, the region experienced intensified anti-American feelings, with some appearing to endorse, directly or tacitly, bin Laden's radical call for establishing a fundamentalist Islamic state across the Muslim world and the expulsion -or extermination- of Westerners and non-Muslims. Anecdotal reports suggest that this popular reaction may now be subsiding. Among some religious and political figures, a fragile counter-trend -still in its infancy- seems to be developing, reflected in intra-Muslim soul-searching about how to combat extremism and intolerance. This is very positive. Some religious minorities also privately welcome crackdowns by Middle Eastern governments against extremists as a signal that regimes may no longer look the other way towards their intolerance of minorities, as has too often been the case. In general, however, one cannot argue that the climate for tolerance and religious freedom has improved in the wake of September 11. The same problems of inadequate legal protections to safeguard religious freedom, inadequate enforcement of existing laws, and inadequate educational systems that contribute to popular ignorance and intolerance, persist. Within the region, the U.S. should pay particularly close attention to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan. Each of these countries faces problems with religious freedom, yet, at the same time, Washington is seeking intelligence and security cooperation from their governments in the campaign against terrorism. The administration may therefore be tempted to sideline religious freedom issues in pursuit of such cooperation. Saudi Arabia: Until September 11, the Saudis' dismal record on religious freedom issues -including the apparent wide appeal of extremist ideologies in the Kingdom, the discrimination against the Shia minority, and the total absence of religious freedom for millions of foreign workers- was viewed as an issue of humanitarian concern to the United States. After September 11, these are issues of national security. A top priority for U.S. efforts should be educational reform inside Saudi Arabia, not to force open a closed society but to help make that society more tolerant to its own people, and, eventually, of the outside world. Rather than trying to impose a U.S. educational model on the Kingdom, the best approach would be to show Saudi leaders examples of other nations where successful educational reform has occurred. In addition, the U.S. government needs to bolster its

engagement with Saudi leaders on protecting private religious practice throughout the country, especially as pertains to foreign workers in the Kingdom. As a point of entry into this admittedly thorny situation, the U.S. should energetically, if privately, pursue dialogue with both political and religious leaders inside Saudi Arabia on issues of religious tolerance.

Egypt: After years in which issues of religious tolerance were addressed sporadically with the Egyptian government, Washington must pursue a consistent dialogue at high levels. Recent improvement in policies toward Coptic Christians are promising, e.g., increased issuance of church renovation and building permits. But the United States must be willing to speak up more loudly and more firmly than in the past. Maintaining a keen interest in the retrial of the al-Kosheh case is critical. Key issues beyond Christian-Muslim relations include the sufferance of wide-scale anti-Semitism in government-backed media and the regime's potential for using the campaign against terrorism as an opportunity to persecute non-terrorists. More generally, the United States needs to recognize that the Egyptian government's restrictions on civil society, and peaceful political activity have had a deleterious impact on religious freedom. The imprisonment of rights activist Saad ed-Din Ibrahim, who has worked to improve Coptic-Muslim relations, is illustrative of this problem.

Sudan: No country better exemplifies the need to avoid compromising long-term goals like religious freedom for the sake of potential short-term benefits in security and intelligence cooperation. Indeed, Sudan is a test case for how religious tolerance objectives will fare in the campaign against terrorism. The U.S. should evaluate Khartoum's recent progress in terrorism issues on its own merits. Yet the U.S. should also not take steps, -such as appointing an American ambassador to Sudan -, that would prematurely reward Khartoum before progress in critical issues such as religious freedom has been registered. The difficult recent mission of Senator Danforth to Sudan demonstrates that Khartoum is not yet serious about resolving its internal conflict peacefully -a key prerequisite to religious freedom in Sudan.

While focusing on these allies and would-be allies, it is important to keep in mind that egregious violations of religious freedom in the region occur in countries long inimical to U.S. interests, especially Ba'athist Iraq and non-Arab Iran. The absence of religious freedom is a key element of the repressive nature of these two governments and deserves higher priority in U.S. public diplomacy about both. This is particularly important with respect to Iran, whose president's calls for a "dialogue of civilizations" has not yet spurred tolerance within his own country, as evidenced by the continued persecution of the country's its Bahai population and the ongoing harassment of elements of the Jewish population as well as of liberal figures.

Policy Tools TThe most important policy tool that the U.S. can deploy to promote religious freedom in the Arab world is sustained political engagement at high (sometimes the highest) levels. Such engagement will be most meaningful if it is part of a broader policy of democracy promotion, one that emphasizes U.S. values like tolerance and free expression.. Encouraging the expansion of political space and the creation of genuine avenues for political participation will help create more room for moderate Muslim leaders, along with beleaguered liberals, to express their views.

The invigorated U.S. public diplomacy campaign now underway is critical to reinforcing these themes. In our public diplomacy, we should remember that the most appropriate U.S. role is not to try to explain "what Islam is" to Middle Easterners; that is the job of Muslims themselves. The task for the United States is the clear projection of American values in U.S. foreign policy, in order to help Middle Easterners make informed choices about how best to order their own societies.

Some are reluctant to "pressure" our Arab friends on human rights issues, particularly one as touchy as religious freedom, lest it exacerbate instability that many believe is lurking beneath the surface of many governments. This is the wrong analysis. By and large, these regimes are stronger than we give them credit for; it is self-evident that the reason bin Laden, Ayman Zawahiri, and their ilk are in Afghanistan is because of the success of Egypt and Saudi Arabia in rooting them out of their own societies and pushing them to the margins of the Middle East. These regimes' absorptive capacity for U.S. engagement on issues of religious tolerance and the overall democracy agenda is greater than is widely believed; their systems have learned the lessons of Iran in 1979 and can be more flexible than a generation ago. Given how unassuming any U.S. pro-democracy effort is likely to be anyway, Washington need not fear that it will be risking instability in these countries by pursuing a modest agenda.

In the cases of many Arab governments, especially Saudi Arabia and Egypt, with whom the U.S. has especially close relationships, some religious freedom issues may best be addressed privately. Yet judicious public criticism is crucial at times; what the U.S. government says publicly matters a great deal. Governments will most likely always resent it and publicly reject it, but it does make a difference. It is likely, for example, that sustained international attention on last February's problematic al-Kosheh verdict in Egypt contributed to the Egyptian court's decision to hold a retrial. A 2000 Washington Institute Research Note on religious minorities in Iran presented cases where international pressure had no effect and cases where it had positive effects, but no cases where it worsened the situation of those being persecuted -thus, the worst that can result from international pressure is that it will be ignored.

Of course, the U.S. should also commend positive regional developments, such as in Bahrain, where treatment of the country's Shia population has improved recently. Highlighting Bahrain can help provide a demonstration effect for elsewhere in the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia.

Some argue that an activist approach to religious freedom in the Arab world will increase the vulnerability of specific minorities (e.g., Christians) by opening them up to charges of "protection" by foreign powers. This risk will be mitigated if the United States pursues a broad regional policy that encourages religious freedom for those of all faiths and emphasizes values and principles over specific individuals and groups.

Indeed, our voice carries far more weight than we realize. When the United States rewards good behavior and criticizes bad behavior, people in the region listen and take note. And when the United States turns a blind eye to the excesses of its friends in the pursuit of "strategic interests," people in the region listen and take note, too.