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The violent death of Osama bin Laden ends the life of a terrorist who had blazed a terrifying trail of murder and other atrocities. His notorious life provides a cautionary tale. It highlights not only what can happen when nations let down their security guard, but when they ignore the worst violations of a fundamental human right – the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Much has been written about how, prior to the September 11 attacks, the United States failed to take seriously the security threats posed by bin Laden and like-minded extremists and the bloody trail of attacks that began with the first assault on the World Trade Center in 1993.

Yet there was another trail that was being carved at that time – the trail of nations harboring bin Laden and other violent religious radicals. Each of these nations was a serial abuser of the human rights, and particularly the religious freedom, of its people.

In Afghanistan, especially under the Taliban and in religion's name, the regime deprived women of dignity and educational access and drove them from public life; installed religious courts which imposed public beatings, amputations, and executions for offenses large and small; and punished conversion from Islam by death. In Saudi Arabia, the government punished

all public religious expression other than its own interpretation of Sunni Islam, while exporting virulent religious extremism around the world. In Sudan, the Khartoum regime slaughtered more than two million southern Sudanese Christians and animists in its attempts to impose its own radical version of Islam. In Pakistan, religiously discriminatory laws repressed religious minorities while creating a climate exposing them to violent attacks from extremists and others.

In short, every place where Osama bin Laden fled had either perpetrated or tolerated world-class violations of religious freedom and other human rights.

Indeed, bin Laden was born and educated in one of these places -- Saudi Arabia.

The association between religious repression and terrorism is undeniable. Nations that trample upon basic rights, including freedom of religion, provide fertile ground for poverty and insecurity, war and terror, and violent, radical movements and activities. In contrast, research finds that religious freedom in countries that honor and protect this right is associated with vibrant political democracy, rising economic and social well-being, diminished religious tension and violence, and greater stability.

The reason for this association is obvious. Across the world, religion remains an integral part of human identity, and the right to practice it without fear is paramount. In such societies, government suppression of religion or tolerance of violent attacks launched by private actors often drives some who are being persecuted to drastic action, including support for extremist

organizations and potentially violent behavior.

What does this mean? Taking a stand for religious freedom and related human rights abroad isn't just a legal or moral duty, but a practical necessity. Simply stated, freedom of religion or belief is central to our own national security and the security of the world.

This was an important premise behind the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), which created the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), on which we serve, as well as an Office of International Religious Freedom in the U.S. State Department and the position of Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom.

Make no mistake: If we want a safer and more secure world, one that does not create more bin Ladens and other threats to our future, and if we wish to counter the ideology of hate and the spreading of violence in religion's name, the path we must take is that of freedom, especially religious freedom. In a post-bin-Laden world, let us make the promotion and protection of religious freedom a national and foreign policy imperative.

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