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# International Religious Freedom Promotion and US Foreign Policy

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**Abstract:** The freedom to practice one's religious belief is a fundamental human right and yet, for millions of people around the world, this right is denied. Yearly reports produced by the US State Department, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Open Doors International, Aid to the Church in Need and Release International reveal a disturbing picture of increased religious persecution across much of the world conducted at individual, community and state level conducted by secular, religious, terrorist and state actors. While religious actors both contribute to persecution of those of other faiths and beliefs and are involved in peace and reconciliation initiatives, the acceptance of the freedom to practice one's faith, to disseminate that faith and to change one's faith and belief is fundamental to considerations of the intersection of peace, politics and religion. In this article, I examine the political background of the United States' promotion of international religious freedom, and current progress on advancing this under the Trump administration. International Religious Freedom (IRF) is contentious, and seen by many as the advancement of US national interests by other means. This article argues that through an examination of the accomplishments and various critiques of the IRF programme it is possible, and desirable, to discover what works, and where further progress needs to be made, in order to enable people around the world to enjoy freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

**Keywords:** international religious freedom; persecution; US foreign policy

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Zumrat Dawut, a Uighur Muslim, was interned along with one million others in Chinese internment camps in Xinjiang between April and June 2017. While there, she was beaten by guards and given unknown/drugs resulting in dizziness and disorientation. Once released, she was forced to renounce her faith officially, raise the Chinese flag each day and live with government-assigned 'Han' Chinese minders. She was eventually able to flee the country, arriving in the United States with her husband and family in April 2019. Zumrat's story is not unusual, either in China or much of the rest of the world. Zumrat was one of eleven survivors of religious persecution who addressed the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019 on the importance of religious freedom.<sup>1</sup> While Zumrat's suffering was at the lower end of the persecution spectrum, it nonetheless highlights an increasing imperative for governments around the world to tackle the issue of religious persecution and encourage religious freedom.

The United States has been at the forefront of promoting religious freedom internationally over the past two decades, with varying degrees of success and commitment to the task. With a Vice President, Secretary of State and Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom (IRF),

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<sup>1</sup> Survivors of Religious Persecution at the 74th Session of the UN General Assembly, 22 September 2019. <https://www.state.gov/survivors-of-religious-persecution-at-unga/> Accessed 1 April 2020.

who are committed Christians and believers in international religious freedom, the policy takes on a renewed salience, which this article seeks to interrogate. The promotion of international religious freedom has proved extremely contentious, and is seen by many as a means of promoting US foreign policy interests by other means. While US foreign policy interests are not unimportant, this article seeks to explore the efficacy of IRF as a means of enhancing religious liberty beyond America's shores. The research was conducted by analysing the policy speeches, statements, remarks, press conferences and writings of the key practitioners in successive administrations, and through the examination of policy documents and legislation as primary source data, while reviewing the extensive literature of critiques of IRF policy. The paper first examines the political background and outworking of IRF policy in the 21st Century, before, secondly, considering IRF as a US foreign policy instrument under successive administrations to the present day. Third, two critiques of IRF policy are explored from the position of those arguing from the viewpoint of IRF advocacy that IRF is ineffective, and those from secularist arguments that it is undesirable. Fourth, the record of IRF and the critiques are used to evaluate the efficacy of IRF promotion arguing, in conclusion, that through an examination of the accomplishments and various critiques of the IRF programme, it is possible, and desirable, to discover what works and where further progress needs to be made, in order to enable people around the world to enjoy freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

## 1. International Religious Freedom the Background

IRF is contentious and contested within the academy, and more importantly within diplomatic communities and the countries they interact with or represent. Contestation involves debate about the extent of religious persecution in countries and, if such persecution exists, what, if anything, should other governments do about it? Further, should this 'anything' include protecting and promoting religious freedom as a universal right? IRF is contested on realist grounds of non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states, and whether what might loosely be regarded as US, or at best Western values, being universalised and imposed on other countries without consideration of the national context, history and cultural background is desirable. Such considerations, though sincerely held, go against a long tradition in the international community of supporting religious freedom as one among many human rights.

The United Nations General Assembly met in Paris in December 1948 to seek to build a new international order, where human rights were to be upheld. Article 18 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted at the assembly stated:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.<sup>2</sup>

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) introduced in 1966 and enacted since 1976 has been ratified by 173 countries and expands on the UDHR:

### Article 18

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

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<sup>2</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Available at <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/> Accessed 2 April 2020.

3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

#### Article 27

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.<sup>3</sup>

The covenant has been ratified by many countries, with well documented human rights abuses including North Korea and signed, though not ratified, by China. In 1981 concerned at the continuing discrimination and persecution of religion a Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief reemphasised the UN's commitment, along with its 182 signatory nations, to protecting the freedom for people to practice their faith individually and in community. The Declaration further emphasised the emancipatory value and role for religion in the aims and objectives of the United Nations:

Convinced that freedom of religion and belief should also contribute to the attainment of the goals of world peace, social justice and friendship among peoples and to the elimination of ideologies or practices of colonialism and racial discrimination.<sup>4</sup>

The enthusiasm for incorporating IRF as an important aspect of US foreign policy has its origins in a growing awareness and concern by initially Christian advocacy groups, and prominent evangelicals of the persecution of Christians around the world in the immediate post-Cold War era. The 'suffering or persecuted church' had been an area of particular concern behind the iron curtain, spearheaded by the work of tortured Romanian pastor Richard Wurmbrand and God's Smuggler Brother Andrew's Open Doors organisation during the Cold War, and attracted much support among American evangelicals (Wurmbrand 2004; Andrew 2015). Amongst this group there was an increasing concern about the continued persecution of Christians in the remaining communist countries, including Vietnam, North Korea and China, and in a number of Muslim-majority countries (Bettiza 2019, pp. 57–58).

Bettiza identifies a coalition emerging about the plight of Southern Sudanese Christians in Sudan's civil war (1983–2005). The group consisted of evangelicals identified with the Christian Right, such as Richard Land (president of the Southern Baptist's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission), Pat Robertson (Christian Coalition), James Dobson (Family Research Council) and Beverly LaHaye (Concerned Women of America). The National Association of Evangelicals released a Statement of Conscience Concerning Worldwide Religious Persecution in 1996, highlighting the importance of the issue. These were joined by anti-persecution and missionary organisations including Voice of the Martyrs, Open Doors, Christian Solidarity International, International Christian Concern and Christian Freedom International. The final part of this coalition were those Christian and Jewish policy analysts in conservative think tanks, including Paul Marshall and Nina Shea at Freedom House and Michael Horowitz at the Hudson Institute (Bettiza 2019, pp. 57–60; Marshall and Gilbert 1997; Marshall and Shea 2011; Marshall et al. 2013).

<sup>3</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx> Accessed 2 April 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ReligionOrBelief.aspx> Accessed 3 April 2020.

The coalition coalesced around support for Congressman Frank Wolf (R-Virginia) and Senator Arlen Specter's (R-Pennsylvania) IRFA.<sup>5</sup> Wolf's original concern had been largely for persecuted Christians, with limited appeal across both houses of Congress, by expanding an anti-persecution rhetoric into a positive affirmation and promotion of religious freedom internationally, the coalition was able to draw in those other faiths or those concerned about them (Bettiza 2019, p. 60; Castelli 2007; Hertzke 2004; Jewish Telegraph Agency 1998). The IRFA brought international religious liberty to the attention of the US foreign policy community, creating the Office for International Religious Freedom (OIRF) in the US State Department, and the position of Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. The Ambassador-at-Large would be a key driver of IRF policy, working closely with the Secretary of State, and being the main conduit for information on IRF to the President.<sup>6</sup> The Act requires the President to designate those nations which commit 'systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom' as 'countries of particular concern' (CPCs), and for the State department to produce an annual report on the state of religious freedom in all the countries of the world. In addition, it created the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent and bipartisan federal government commission made up of five appointees from the President's party, and four from the opposition (three presidential appointments—one selected by the leaders of the House and Senate of the President's party, and two each from the leaders of the House and Senate from the non-presidential party).

Each year, USCIRF produces an annual report on the state of IRF and provides policy recommendations to the US government, in accordance with IRFA. The Act requires the President, who has delegated this function to the Secretary of State, to designate as "countries of particular concern" (CPCs) those nations that qualify as the world's most severe religious freedom violators. The Commission recommends countries that, in its view, meet the CPC threshold (Leo and Argue 2012, p. 67). Under the IRFA both the State Department and USCIRF submit reports annually on international religious freedom. The USCIRF differs from State's by only reporting on selected countries it has particular concerns over. USCIRF's report discuss conditions in those countries, analyses US policy toward them and make policy recommendations. These reports hold the executive branch to account over their implementation of IRFA (USCIRF 2016).

As an indication of the continued traction of IRF as a foreign policy concern, the legislative branch has added two further pieces of legislation: The Near East and South Central Asia Religious Freedom Act of 2014 with a Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in this region, and at the very end of the Obama administration, in December 2016, the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, which strengthened the 1998 act by mandating the US executive to introduce a Special Watch List for those countries not yet deemed as bad as the designated CPCs. The Frank Wolf Act further introduced "Entities of Particular Concern" and "Designated Persons List" for non-state actors abusing religious freedom. The State Department was also obliged to develop an online training course on IRF for all foreign service officers.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. International Religious Freedom as a US Foreign Policy Instrument

The IRF advocacy coalition has developed and grown in confidence since the early campaigns around the IRFA. While it is undeniable that leading supporters of mainstreaming IRF as a US foreign policy strategy are overwhelmingly Christian, they have developed a broad-based coalition across political and religious divides to strongly advocate for IRF as an indispensable component of human

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<sup>5</sup> Freedom from Religious Persecution Act of 1997—Establishes in the Executive Office of the President the Office of Religious Persecution Monitoring. Available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/105th-congress/house-bill/2431/summary/00> accessed 1 May 2020.

<sup>6</sup> H.R. 2431. International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Available at [https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\\_call\\_lists/roll\\_call\\_vote\\_cfm.cfm?congress=105&session=2&vote=00310](https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=105&session=2&vote=00310) accessed 1 May 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act 2016. Available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/1150> Accessed 1 May 2020.

flourishing. The USCIRF has included Muslims, Jews, a Hindu, alongside evangelicals, mainline Protestants and Catholics among its commissioners. The five Ambassadors-at-Large to date have included a Jewish rabbi. For Thomas Farr, who served as the first director of the OIRF and founded the Religious Freedom Institute in 2016, religious freedom has emancipatory potential and is an essential component of stable self-government because it:

... protects the rights of individuals and groups to act publicly in ways consistent with belief. This positive understanding of religious freedom implicates justice for individuals and communities, and the long-term stability of the democratic state. It includes, most importantly, the right to influence public policy within limits roughly similar to those that apply to other individuals and associations in civil society. (Farr 2008, p. 18)

Chris Seiple, of the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE), considers that it is a function of the 'innate dignity' of humans to 'possess the inherent freedom to believe in whatever they want, religious or otherwise, as well as practice and share those beliefs in private and public settings'. As such ... 'religious freedom is the legally-protected and culturally-accepted opportunity to choose, change, share, or reject beliefs of any kind, including religious ones, and to bring those beliefs to public discussions' (Seiple 2012, p. 98). This is interpreted as a universal value, which he argues, with fellow IGE member Dennis Hoover, is necessary for sustainable security, and which Allen Hertzke claims is essential for societies to flourish peacefully (Seiple and Hoover 2012; Hertzke 2012, p. 4).

The linkage of religious freedom and human flourishing is echoed by Brian Grim, formerly of Pew Forum, and author of numerous reports tracking religious harassment and discrimination around the world, before establishing the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation. Grim is one of a number of scholars, including Roger Finks, Daniel Philpott and Alfred Stepan, linking religious freedom to economic prosperity, stable societies and the promotion of other human rights as necessary components for healthy democracies, and therefore an essential component of US foreign policy, to bring about a more prosperous and pacific international order (see (Grim 2008; Grim and Finke 2010; Grim et al. 2014; Philpott and Shah 2016; Stepan 2000).

As the currency of democracy promotion as a US foreign policy strategy has devalued, following the policy failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, so increasingly IRF is presented by its proponents as a necessary tool in the United States' diplomatic box. IRF is presented as national security issue in the same way democracy promotion has been, and attracting similar criticism of universalising American values. Where countries are not persecuting domestic minorities and are accepting of those of other beliefs or no beliefs, then, the argument goes, they are more likely to live peaceably with other countries, and to increase the wellbeing of their own citizens (Chicago Council on Global Affairs 2010; Inboden 2012; Farr 2014). Promoting IRF, it is argued, helps to diffuse the suspicion of religion as a potential cause of conflict and disempowers radical religionists:

Real or imagined security threats emanating from religion inspire overzealous repression of religion, which ironically creates the conditions that genuine religious radicals are seeking: an atmosphere in which the radicals are the only opposition to the state, which builds sympathy for them among those who would otherwise be religious moderates, therefore decreasing the legitimacy of the state. (Seiple and Hoover 2012, p. 321)

Although the IRFA became law in 1998, it was slow to gain traction. Neither the Clinton or Bush administrations accorded the IRFA high priority, US foreign policy misadventures in Afghanistan and Iraq identified the Bush administration as intervening militarily in Muslim majority countries and showing little regard for interfaith dialogue. While the USCIRF continued to highlight religious freedom abuses around the world, and officials within the OIRF worked diligently to try and raise the profile of IRE, it was not until the Obama administration that IRF began to gain momentum as a US foreign policy instrument. Obama's Cairo speech was intended to kickstart a new relationship with the Muslim majority world and engage in interfaith dialogue, in distinction to his predecessor's

more unilateralist approach.<sup>8</sup> In February 2010, the Interagency Working Group on Religion & Global Affairs brought together federal agencies to enhance religious engagement and establish a Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group. Religious education training was developed for foreign service operatives and according to Judd Birdsall, a practitioner serving in the IRF Office it became ‘integrated and respected in ways that were unimaginable in previous administrations’ (Birdsall 2012, p. 37). The OIRF worked with other State Department offices, the White House and US Embassies, in organising inter-faith conferences, in the belief that dialogue and diplomacy could advance the cause of religious freedom more than the blunt instrument of sanctions. Diplomatic efforts by the OIRC working with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and building alliances managed to overturn the OIC’s resolution on Defamation of Religions, which had received majority UN General Assembly backing, seeking to protect and extend blasphemy laws (Birdsall 2012, p. 37). The OIRF received a significant boost when Rabbi David Saperstein was appointed Ambassador-at-Large in January 2015. Saperstein already enjoyed a significant reputation for interfaith dialogue and as lobbyist on Capitol Hill. Saperstein worked closely with the Canadians to develop an intergovernmental contact group bringing together like-minded governments eager to promote religious freedom. Although the annual IRF report and the USCIRF reports provided ample opportunity to castigate countries of particular concern, Saperstein’s style, which enjoyed bipartisan support, was to travel extensively visiting 25 countries to build alliances and win support for religious freedom. He raised concerns with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, Sudan, Burma, Iraq and Nigeria about blasphemy and apostasy laws and laws pertaining to the defamation of religion.<sup>9</sup> Saperstein used diplomacy to persuade governments to make incremental changes to their approaches to IRF, and set piece events, such as the launch of the annual IRF Report, to challenge serial offenders, including Iran, for its treatment of Sunnis, Bahais, Christian converts, Sufis, Yarsanis and Zoroastrians; Vietnam, Burma, Russia, China and Tajikistan. Working closely with Secretary of State John Kerry, the OIRF was better resourced and able to pursue diplomacy in advancing the IRF agenda.

And since my appointment, we have been given significant increases in staff and resources, allowing us to expand our country monitoring work, to increase our visits to country where our religious freedom advocacy can make a constructive difference, and to increase our already robust programmatic work internationally.<sup>10</sup>

Following the 2016 election, the work of the OIRF continued, but waited twelve months to appoint a successor to Saperstein as Ambassador-at-Large. Sam Brownback, an early and enthusiastic supporter of the IRFA and a Catholic, had represented Kansas in the House, Senate and as governor. Democrats resisted his nomination because of his record on LGBT and pro-life issues, and his nomination was secured only with the casting vote of Vice President Mike Pence in the Senate vote. The appointment of Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State in April 2018 added renewed zeal for the promotion of IRF as a foreign policy strategy, in pursuit of US national interests. On 24–26 July 2018, just three months after being sworn in as Secretary of State, Pompeo and Sam Brownback organised and hosted an inaugural Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, DC. The event brought together around 350 faith ministers and activists representing 80 nations to discuss ways to advance IRF. The Secretary of State opened the event, setting out the priority accorded religious freedom in the Trump administration:

<sup>8</sup> Barack Obama speech ‘On a New Beginning’ at Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt. 4 June 2009. Available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09> accessed 2 May 2020.

<sup>9</sup> David N. Saperstein. Remarks at the Release of the 2014 Report on International Religious Freedom. Washington, DC. 14 October 2015. Available at <https://20092017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/10/248201.htm> accessed 2 May 2020. International Religious Freedom Report and Briefing on the Release of the 2015 Annual Report on International Freedom (IRF). Available at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/238390.pdf> 2014, accessed 2 May 2020 and International Religious Freedom Report for 2015. Available at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm>, accessed 3 May 2020.

<sup>10</sup> David N. Saperstein. Briefing on the Release of the 2015 Annual Report on International Freedom (IRF). Washington, DC. 10 August 2016. Available at <https://20092017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/08/260962.htm> accessed 4 May 2020.

The Trump administration recognizes that religious freedom is a fundamental American liberty, and this has been clear from the administration's earliest days and indeed the earliest days of our nation.

The United States advances religious freedom in our foreign policy because it is not exclusively an American right. It is a God-given universal right bestowed on all of mankind. Seventy years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirmed this when 48 nations declared that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion."<sup>11</sup>

Vice President Pence brought greetings to the Ministerial from the President, and assured delegates that 'religious freedom is a top priority of this administration' . . . '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'.<sup>12</sup> The Vice President used his speech to castigate China for its treatment of the Uighur and Tibetan Buddhists, Russia for its treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses, Iran for persecution of Sunni Muslims, Christians, Jews and Bahai, the Nicaraguan government of Daniel Ortega for attacks on the Catholic Church, ISIS abuses of the Yazidis and Turkey for its incarnation of pastor Andrew Brunson. He also announced the establishment of a Genocide Recovery and Persecution Response Program. The most significant outcome of the Ministerial, however, was the launch of the Potomac Declaration.

The Potomac Declaration builds on Article 18 of the UDHR celebrating religious freedom as a universal, God-given right. It affirms the reality of widespread persecution based on religion, and the obligation of all countries to promote religious freedom to contribute towards international peace and human flourishing. There should be no discrimination or coercion in religion to force religious observance or conformity. Individuals should be free to worship, or not, as they chose, and free to exercise their conscience in all things. Further, the Declaration affirms that religious freedom is an individual, rather than a collective right:

Religious freedom applies to all individuals as right-holders. Believers can exercise this right alone or in community with others, and in public or private. While religions do not have human rights themselves, religious communities and their institutions benefit through the human rights enjoyed by their individual members. (OIRF 2018a)

The Declaration was followed by a plan of action for countries around the world to put into practice to promote religious freedom. Sixty-five policy recommendations were divided into seven subsections, including: Defending the Human Right of Freedom of Religion or Belief; Confronting Legal Limitations; Advocating for Equal Rights and Protections for All, Including Members of Religious Minorities; Responding to Genocide and other Mass Atrocities; Preserving Cultural Heritage; Promoting and Protecting Religious Freedom and Tolerance in Schools; Protecting persecuted minorities in conflict and crisis settings; and Strengthening the Response, which calls for greater attention and resourcing in pursuance of religious freedom (OIRF 2018b).

The 2018 Ministerial enabled IRF to gather further momentum, and the following year a second one took place again in Washington DC in July. On this occasion, the first time a Secretary of State has held back-to-back ministerials on the same human rights issue, over one thousand civil society and religious leaders from one hundred countries attended. In his opening address, Pompeo described the countries represented as different, but having the same objective in advancing religious freedom, and to reaffirm the principle that: 'All people from every place on the globe must be permitted to practice their faith openly—in their homes, in their places of worship, in the public square—and believe what

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<sup>11</sup> Michael R. Pompeo, Remarks at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, Washington DC, 26 July 2018. Available at <https://www.state.gov/remarks-at-the-ministerial-to-advance-religious-freedom/> accessed 1 April 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Pence. Remarks at Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, Washington DC, 26 July 2018. available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-ministerial-advance-religious-freedom/> accessed 2 April 2020.

they want to believe'.<sup>13</sup> The delegates renewed their commitment to actively promote IRF around the globe. Rather than positioning the advancement of religious freedom as a uniquely US responsibility or passion, religious freedom must become normative in national and international politics. Poland took responsibility to host a third Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Warsaw July 2020.

In their first two years at the State Department, Mike Pompeo and Ambassador Brownback have been relentless in pursuing and expanding the reach of IRF in terms of raising its profile and bringing together like-minded countries in support. In June 2019, the Secretary of State announced the establishment of a Commission on Unalienable Rights, to advise on the promotion of individual freedom, equality and democracy through US foreign policy, linking this to the principle of religious freedom and an appeal to the Declaration of Independence and natural law (Pompeo 2019; Risse 2020, p. 13). The status of the OIRF has been increased, with additional staffing resources for OIRF, and the Ambassador-at-Large Sam Brownback continues to report directly to the Secretary of State.<sup>14</sup> Brownback has visited numerous countries during his tenure, pursuing diplomacy to seek to bring about internal change on IRF. He has used set piece speeches to bring international attention to the plight of the Rohingya and Uighur Muslims; the treatment of Buddhists by the Chinese authorities in Tibet; and human rights and religious freedom abuses in Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.<sup>15</sup> Brownback has also used Twitter, speeches and remarks to call for the release of Bahai hostages held by the Houthi in Yemen, and to denounce Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen for their targeted persecution of Christians in Nigeria. The ill treatment of religious minorities in Bahrain, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Cuba., Haiti, Russia's Jehovah's Witnesses, Nicaragua and North Korea has also been emphasised. Rather than the United States being a lone voice, diplomatic efforts have brought together a growing number of countries around the world seeking to advance religious freedom. Over the course of the Obama and Trump administrations, IRF policy has become increasingly multilateral and international.

The international momentum for religious freedom has developed with Poland leading a UN initiative to declare an annual International Day Commemorating the Victims of Violence Based on Religion or Belief on 22 August. An event on religious freedom at the United Nations in September 2019 was addressed by President Trump, Vice President Pence and Secretary of State Pompeo. Trump chaired meetings and publicly chastised Iran, Iraq, China, Venezuela and Nicaragua for religious freedom rights abuses.<sup>16</sup> In February 2020, Pompeo and Brownback were able to announce the formation of a 27 nation International Religious Freedom Alliance, committed to advancing the cause of IRF, and based on existing international legislation on human rights and the emphasis on religious belief that critics have found so problematic.

The Alliance intends to advocate for freedom of religion or belief for all, which includes the right of individuals to hold any belief or none, to change religion or belief and to manifest religion or belief, either alone or in community with others, in worship, observance, practice and teaching. (OIRF 2020)

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<sup>13</sup> Michael R. Pompeo. Remarks at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, Washington, DC 16 July. Available at <https://www.state.gov/secretary-of-state-michael-r-pompeo-at-the-ministerial-to-advance-religious-freedom/> accessed 2 April 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Michael R. Pompeo. Remarks at the Release of the 2018 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom Washington, DC, 21 June 2019 available at <https://www.state.gov/secretary-of-state-michael-r-pompeo-at-the-release-of-the-2018-annual-report-on-international-religious-freedom/> accessed 2 April 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel D. Brownback, Special Briefing on International Religious Freedom Report 2018. Washington, D.C. 21 November 2019. Available at <https://www.state.gov/ambassador-at-large-for-international-religious-freedom-samuel-brownback/> accessed 2 May 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Donald J. Trump. Remarks at the United Nations Event on Religious Freedom. United Nations Headquarters, New York, NY 23 September 2019. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-united-nations-event-religious-freedom-new-york-ny/> accessed 1 April 2020.

### 3. Critique 1—Ineffectiveness of IRF

Having set out the case for promoting IRF, I now turn to consider criticisms of successive administrations' lack of willingness to invest in and pursue IRF as a priority for US foreign policy. Writing towards the end of the George W. Bush administration, Thomas Farr lamented that the commitment to IRF by the Bush and previous Clinton administration was 'sporadic in its application and minimal in its effects' (Farr 2008). Four years later, commenting on the Obama administration, he lamented that it was difficult to find any significant progress (Farr 2012a). This has remained an ongoing problem. Successive presidents and secretaries of state, including Madeleine Albright, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Hilary Clinton, John Kerry and Rex Tillerson have all proclaimed the importance of IRF and yet the foreign policy apart from a few prisoner releases have very little to show for their efforts.

A recurring criticism of the implementation of policy concerns the unwillingness of those charged with the responsibility to actively promote IRF because of a secularist approach adopted by foreign service practitioners, where religion is considered a private matter and the first amendment misinterpreted as precluding governmental involvement in promoting religious freedom (Farr 2008, 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Seiple and Hoover 2012; Seiple 2012). While efforts have been made to train foreign service officers, such training has been voluntary and insufficient to change a secularist mindset (Farr 2013; Mandaville and Silvestri 2015). There also remains a lack of clarity among foreign policy practitioners between religious tolerance and religious freedom (Rieffer-Flanagan 2019). The OIRF sits within the Bureau of Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, alongside eight other offices and bureaux and reports to the Under Secretary, rather than directly to the Secretary, signalling that IRF is but one of a number of competing interests within the Department of State, and not a high priority. This is a perception encouraged by the lackadaisical approach in appointing Ambassadors-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, mandated under the IRFA. Barack Obama took over two years to appoint Suzan Johnson Cook, in April 2011, who resigned from the position in October 2013, and a further fourteen months to appoint her successor, David Saperstein. The Trump administration left the position vacant until the appointment of Sam Brownback, an early supporter of the IRFA, in February 2018.

Alongside the relatively low status accorded the office, successive administrations have failed to consider religious freedom strategically in relation to actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to emphasise its importance during the Arab Spring. In countries where the US has invested considerable resources, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt and Pakistan, religious freedom has diminished rather than improved (Farr 2012b). Obama failed to capitalise on his Cairo speech to the Muslim majority world by involving religious freedom in subsequent policy actions in the region, or indeed to include IRF in the 2009 National Security Strategy (Farr 2012a). The rhetoric of IRF has been proclaimed, but this has not translated into action on the ground. The OIRF produces comprehensive reports highlighting abuses of religious freedom and the USCIRF detailed reports on countries of particular concern annually, but countries are not held to account or sanctioned for their behaviour on religious rights, even where these are extreme including imprisonments, torture, judicial killings and destroying places of worship. In over two decades, only Ethiopia has been sanctioned by the United States for abuses of religious freedom (Farr 2013). Presidents are able to waive sanctions in what they consider to be the national interest, usually where there is a strategic or economic interest involved, such as Saudi Arabia or China.

This is not to say that successive administrations have been indifferent to IRF, the recognition of its importance as an innate human right, the development of an IRF infrastructure through the development of the OIRF and USCIRF, the regular reporting to Congress, and training for foreign service officers, all point to a willingness to promote IRF and protect the rights of people, in accordance with Article 18 of the UNDHR. Promoting religious freedom is hard domestically, but even more so internationally, where motives are impugned, foreign service officers are sceptical and governments are unwilling to be held to account by another country pursuing its own national interests. While advocates

of IRF are conscious of the failings of successive administrations in fulfilling the spirit of the IRFA, the appropriateness of promoting and protecting international religious freedom is strongly contested.

#### 4. Critique 2: Secularist Objections

The construction of IRF as a conceptual framework is problematised by critiques of the trend towards mainstreaming IRF in international politics and US foreign policy in particular. Rather than being an outworking of the UDHR Article 18, as advocates claim, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd portrays IRF as a means of control, 'a modern technique of governance, authorizing particular forms of politics and regulating the spaces in which people live out their religion in specific ways' (Hurd 2015, p. 38). Religious freedom advocacy is presented as historically specific and divisive in affording legitimacy to certain forms of religion and not others. Critical approaches to IRF situate religious freedom advocacy as a 'regime', with a Western-centric understanding of religion, which privileges belief as the main designator of what constitutes religion, and which seeks to prescribe what is meant by belief and unbelief (Bettiza 2019; Castelli 2010; Hurd 2015).

Essentialising or privileging religion as a distinct category restricts the appreciation of identity as anything other than a religious one, when identity is inherently multifaceted and multidimensional. If individuals or communities do not neatly fit into such a categorisation of religion, they risk marginalisation or neglect. When religion is the 'official marker of difference', a fixed religious identity eclipses 'other modes of belonging' (Hurd 2015, p. 42). In the religious advocacy regime, all issues and events are problematised as religious, rather than recognising the complexities of all situations in historical, social, economic, political and geographic context (Bettiza 2019; Hurd 2015; Sullivan 2005; Mahmood 2015; McAlister 2019). For Bettiza:

... the regime actively contributes to religionizing world politics through mechanisms of categorization. Its institutions, discourses, and practices regularly (re)present and (re)produce a world dominated by religious categories and realities. (Bettiza 2019, p. 92)

In so doing, the regime is able to deflect 'attention away from caste, class, colonial history, economic justice land rights, and other factors' (Hurd 2015, p. 42).

If people are forced into religious categories, what is to become of those who identify with more than one category, or identify with a non-traditional, unprotected group or with no religion at all? When religion is the main determinant of identity, who gets to speak for a particular religious group? When people are categorised by religious belief, then they are incentivised to frame demands or requests for asylum in the language of religious rights, thereby further strengthening the religious freedom advocacy regime's framing schema (Hurd 2013, 2015, pp. 37–64). This contributes to a desecularising trend in international politics, which secularists consider harmful and particularist, in the sense that it universalises an American or Western interpretation of religion, overlooking other causal explanations for events in international politics, and opens up space for all aspects of international politics to be religionised (Bettiza 2019, p. 95).

Further criticism of religious freedom advocacy centres on a perceived Christian bias in the IRF agenda, particularly in terms of its incorporation within US foreign policy strategy. The demand for IRF as a foreign policy strategy, and as the impetus for IRFA, is traceable to concerns about the persecution of Christians in the post-Cold War environment. The identification of specific areas of concern as the remaining communist countries (Vietnam, North Korea, China and Cuba), and Muslim majority countries dovetailed with countries where the United States has ongoing concerns, leading to accusations that a focus on the persecution of Christians was overplayed and co-opted, in order to pursue other US foreign policy goals (Castelli 2007; Hertzke and Shah 2016; Hurd 2015, pp. ix–xii; McAlister 2018, 2019; Moss 2013). The dominance of Christian actors in promoting IRF as activists, advocates, practitioners and drivers of policy in Congress, the OIRF, and the executive is a cause for concern from secularists seeking to re-establish the privatisation of religion, recontextualise understandings of religion away from a focus on belief to one which includes practice, community and

the ethereal, and to prevent an exclusivist conceptualisation of Christian suffering overshadowing that experienced by other faiths, beliefs and none.

The problem with this argument is that it does not fully account for the prevalence of religious discrimination faced by others, and it promotes a sense of unique victimization in a context in which a broad variety of religious and ethnic groups are under threat. (McAlister 2019, p. 111)

Secularists have legitimate concerns about the active engagement by white evangelicals steering IRF discourse. The intimate relationship between conservative white evangelicals and the Republican Party is a contributing factor in the polarisation of the American polity, which also problematises the IRF agenda. The anti-Muslim sentiments and statements expressed by leading figures in the Christian Right, including those involved in the IRF, such as Trump appointees on the USCIRF Gary Bauer, President of American Values, Johnnie Moore, and also Tony Perkins, President of the Family Research Council and Chair of the USCIRF, who has opposed the construction of mosques and the protection of Islam under the First Amendment (Tashman 2015). Given the prominent position occupied by conservative evangelicals, the concern is that they will pursue an agenda which privileges Christianity, highlighting Muslim majority state human right abuses, while ignoring anti-Muslim discrimination, including travel bans from specified Muslim majority countries, restrictions on refugees and Islamophobia domestically (McAlister 2019, p. 111). The extension of IRF to incorporate Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) is interpreted as a rhetorical device cloaking the less benign motivations of evangelicals to enable Christians to proselytise in Muslim majority and other countries, where religion is a matter of practice, culture and community, and not individual belief, which can be adopted and disregarded at will:

These views collide with other conceptions of religion that tie religious identity and practice to blood, soil, family, and community, notably in Judaism, Hinduism, and Confucianism, as well as in many Asian and African folk religions and traditions. In most Muslim milieus, while conversion into the faith is encouraged, conversions out of it are heavily discouraged. These understandings of what constitutes a religious person and community are hardly reconcilable with views of religion as easily, rightfully, and freely changeable individual belief. (Bettiza 2019, p. 85)

For conservative evangelicals, IRF does not stand as a distinct foreign policy, but rather, one which places US Christians alongside their religious brethren across the world, many of whom are indeed experiencing real persecution, harassment and discrimination. IRF challenges legal interpretations of the separation of church and state domestically, enabling conservative evangelicals and others to portray themselves as being denied religious freedom when facing censure in the courts and wider society for opposing same sex marriage, challenging LGBTQ+ legislation, opposition to abortion and advocating prayer in schools. In reifying religion in international contexts, critics of IRF are fearful of the policy provides succour for countries, under the guise of IRF, to continue to discriminate and deny rights to other marginalised groups including LGBTQ+ and retard progress on women's rights.

In designating IRF as a key component of US foreign policy strategy, religion is being co-opted to serve national security and the strategic objectives of the United States, rather than an altruism based on genuine concern for the plight of those suffering persecution on account of their faith. Hurd's objection is that: 'The United States relies on religious actors to secure access to local populations and garner support for American political and strategic objectives in conflict and post-conflict situations' (Hurd 2015, p. 49). The recent track record of US involvement in these situations has been poor. In Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, US actions have contributed to greater instability and increased religious persecution. Rather than IRF being seen as a necessary precursor to a positive peace, its close association with US foreign policy calls into question the motivation and the willingness of other countries to be selectively judged and held to account by OIRF and USCIRF reports, with action pursued on the basis of US national interests, rather than the legitimacy of the human rights violation investigated.

## 5. Evaluating the Efficacy of International Religious Freedom Promotion

Having considered both the outworking of US IRF advocacy and critiques from IRF advocates and secularist opponents, we are now able to evaluate criticism of IRF and begin to tentatively suggest what an efficacious IRF strategy would look like. The first critique examined was from the standpoint of effectiveness, and presents four criticisms of IRF in practice. The first criticism charges successive administrations with being insufficiently committed to the task, because the State Department operates with a secularist bias and is ill-disposed towards factoring religious belief and practice into US foreign policy decision making. While this may have been true in the early years of the IRFA, during the Obama and Trump administrations, considerable progress has been made. Foreign Service Officers have been provided with online religious training programmes, and serve in an environment where religious freedom is increasingly prioritised (Birdsall 2012). The sense of OIRF being marginalised has been arrested through high profile events centring on the OIRF and Ambassador-at-Large Sam Brownback's close working relationship with Pompeo. The ministerials, the UN event on IRF and the establishment of an International Religious Freedom Alliance have moved IRF centre stage. Second, the lackadaisical approach in appointing Ambassadors-at-Large for International Religious Freedom may reflect a lack of due attention to IRF. Obama did not appoint Suzan Johnson Cook until almost the end of his first term, suggesting a disinterest in promoting religious freedom, but then took a further fourteen months to appoint her successor. However, as we have seen, the appointment of David Saperstein provided a new dynamism to the role, and he was supported in the role by Secretary of State Kerry with increased resources. The rabbi's successor Sam Brownback's nomination was delayed through determined opposition by Democrat senators, and did not reflect a lack of engagement or commitment to IRF by the administration. On the contrary, once the appointment was confirmed, he lost no time in working closely with Secretary of State Pompeo in arranging ministerials to build international support and cooperation in promoting IRF.

Third, the charge that successive administrations failed to consider religious freedom strategically in involving religious actors and encouraging religious plurality in Afghanistan and Iraq when devising constitutions and exit strategies. This criticism is cogent, and reflects a dearth of post conflict planning in both countries, however, this planning failure points to the need for such planning in any future interventions, rather than indicating any ongoing lack of commitment for IRF. Birdsall points out that 'Religious freedom did not receive significant attention in the National Security Strategy or the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review. As the Arab Spring unfolded, the Administration could have more vigorously linked religious freedom to democratic reform' (Birdsall 2012, p. 38).

Fourth, critics point to successive administrations' unwillingness to hold countries to account for their actions or inaction. While rhetoric chastising countries for their violations of religious freedom has continued, there remains a wariness about challenging US allies such as Saudi Arabia or India for their poor records in defending religious freedom. While USCIRF will seek to categorise states it considers egregious violators of religious freedom as CPCs, the OIRF will often avoid this categorisation, especially where US national interests are at stake, or where they are optimistic more subtle diplomacy would produce the desired results. USCIRF's 2020 IRF report highlights religious freedom abuses by Burma, China, Eritrea, India, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Vietnam (USCIRF 2020). Whereas the OIRF has so far not designated India, Russia, Syria and Vietnam as such (OIRF 2019). The State Department did, however, make Pakistan the first new addition since 2016 to its list of CPCs, for severe violations of religious freedom, which had been recommended for such designation by USCIRF since 2002 (USCIRF 2019).

In our examination of the secularist critique of IRF promotion, we observed six specific claims. Firstly, the accusation that IRF is a means of control, a form of governance or regime, which authorises particular forms of politics over others and determines what constitutes legitimate and acceptable religious practices (Hurd 2015; Bettiza 2019). Although it might have been the intention of the IRFA 1998 to make use of US power in a unipolar world to advance US national interests through the imposition of sanctions to control how other countries deal with religion, this has proved impossible to

deliver. Indeed, IRF is a soft rather than a hard power instrument, and in both the Obama and Trump administrations there has been a reluctance to use sanctions to punish IRF miscreants, unless there were other strategic interests at stake. Second, the secularist discourse positing an IRF advocacy regime seeking to essentialise religion with a historically specific Western-centric focus on individual belief and privilege does, if accurate, stand in contrast to more community orientated approaches, where religion is marked by cultural identity, rather than individual beliefs that can be changed or adapted. However, religious freedom as a basic human right for the individual and community is enshrined in the UDHR, ICCPR and Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. This may be a source of regret to secularists seeking to return religion to the private sphere, but here I agree with Robert Joustra that the complaints: ‘against religious freedom seem to me complaints about liberalism and political secularism generally’ (Joustra 2016, p. 131).

Third, essentialising or privileging religion as a distinct category is seen as problematic, obscuring the complexities of multifaceted disputes. Seeing the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar or Uighur in China in religious terms does indeed simplify complex ethnic, economic and social reasons elevating their religious identity as Muslim as the only issue at stake. However, as Brownback explains:

What makes you also want to do it is in the work that I do I see all these conflicts that have religion as a component of them, whether it’s the Rohingya being kicked out of Burma. People say, “Well, that’s ethnic.” And I said, “No. If these guys were Buddhists they wouldn’t be getting kicked out of Burma. But they’re Muslims.” And so you’re just seeing so much of a religious component.

When I was in Nigeria, they’re saying, “No, it’s ethnic and it’s regional and it’s resource-driven.” And all those are pieces to it, but it is also there is a religious component to this.<sup>17</sup>

The real secularist concern is that IRF is part of a process to desecularise international politics and US foreign policy in particular. Religious actors have a vested interest in influencing the policy, and yet this does not negate the efficacy of IRF, but rather is in tune with contemporary acknowledgement of a post secular world, where it is no longer possible or desirable to seek to contain religion in the private sphere.

Fourthly, the criticism that IRF is biased towards the Christian faith and therefore neglects other religions has a very weak evidential base. Although Christians have made up the majority of USCIRF commissioners, Ambassadors-at-Large, members of the OIRF and Secretaries of State since the IRFA 1998, significant emphasis has been placed on those suffering persecution of other faiths, including Muslims, Jews, Bahai, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Yazidis, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Zoroastrians (OIRF 2019). In Brownback’s Special Briefing to the press on IRF in November 2019, the Ambassador-at-Large was accused by a reporter of ‘presenting a world in which Muslims are more vulnerable to government mistreatment than Christians’ to which he replied that he was ‘trying to present a world where you’ve got just a lot of religious-based oppression that’s happening.’<sup>18</sup> A further secularist concern is that IRF is premised on what they believe to be a false notion of Christian persecution, where claims that Christians are the most persecuted religious grouping is rejected. Such persecution is real, however, and overwhelmingly situated in South Asian countries such as India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan, where religious nationalism encourages a Buddhist or Hindu hostility towards other faiths; Muslim-majority countries; residual communist countries, including Vietnam, North Korea and China; and authoritarian states, including, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Myanmar, Uzbekistan,

<sup>17</sup> Samuel D. Brownback, Special Briefing. Washington, D.C. 21 November 2019. Available at <https://www.state.gov/ambassador-at-large-for-international-religious-freedom-samuel-brownback/> accessed 4 May 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel D. Brownback, Special Briefing. Washington, D.C. 21 November 2019. Available at <https://www.state.gov/ambassador-at-large-for-international-religious-freedom-samuel-brownback/> accessed 4 May 2020.

Turkmenistan and Belarus (Allen 2013; Fox 2006, 2016; Marshall 2016; Open Doors 2020; Pew Research Center 2019; Shortt 2013; Wolf 2011).

Christians persecuted in these countries experience churches being destroyed, imprisonment, torture, abduction, forced marriage and even death. While critics of IRF are right to point out that there is no hierarchy of suffering, and that believers of other faiths also suffer persecution, even that there may be multiple causes for suffering persecution, nonetheless, the extensive persecution of Christians, largely overlooked in the media and public discourse, is a growing cause for concern, according to the Bishop of Truro's Independent Review for the British Foreign Secretary (Mounstephen 2019). A further concern for secularists is that IRF enables Christians to proselytise in Muslim majority countries. Successive administrations have been explicit that this freedom also extends to other faiths, and that to seek to dissuade or prevent people sharing their faith leads to the persecution of those dissenting from the norm within that community.

Fifth, the charge that IRF policy is driven largely by white conservative evangelicals is self-evident within the current administration, several, though not all, USCIRF commissioners, and leading supporters in Congress. It is perhaps worth pointing out, however, that the Ambassador-at-Large is Catholic, and his predecessor was Jewish, the President is not evangelical, and previous members of the OIRF would not fit neatly into the designation of conservative evangelicals, and that IRF has been and remains a bipartisan undertaking. However, undoubtedly Mike Pompeo, a committed Christian who openly discusses and shares his faith, has a close working relationship with fellow conservative evangelicals and Vice President Mike Pence. No previous Secretary of State, since the introduction of IRFA, has been as open about their faith while in office, and as committed to promoting IRF as an outworking of not just US foreign policy but as a faith conviction.<sup>19</sup> The Trump administration enjoys a symbiotic relationship with white conservative evangelicals, consistently his chief supporters since winning the Republican nomination in 2016. This is a concern for liberals and secularists alike, fearful that IRF promotion, spearheaded by evangelicals, becomes part of America's on-going culture wars, and threatens progress on reproductive, gender and LGBTQ rights around the world. However, the internationalisation of IRF under Saperstein and Brownback, with backing from Secretaries Kerry and Pompeo, dilutes the Americanness of IRF and incorporates religious freedom alongside other human rights.

Finally, the criticism of IRF being a vehicle to co-opt religious actors to deliver US foreign policy objectives is the most prescient. It is difficult to persuade domestic audiences of the necessity or desirability of spending resources on international affairs for diplomacy, aid or democracy promotion, without it being contextualised as being in the US national interest. Nations are rarely altruistic, and seek different tools to enhance their security, prosperity and influence. IRF as a national security strategy is inherently problematic, as other competing interests can trump concerns over promoting religious freedom. It is far easier to talk and act tough and see positive results on religious freedom with smaller countries dependent on US trade or security, than with regional powers, such as India, China or Saudi Arabia, where trade may well have more importance, and they are less likely to take kindly to interference in their internal affairs (Teater 2020). The US has used CPC status and records on religious freedom to castigate political opponents and rivals, including North Korea, China and Iran. Religious actors have been used to highlight human rights abuses in such countries, undermining them while also projecting American soft power as respecters of religious freedom.

IRF is a long-term project, which, over the past two decades, has brought a few tangible gains, such as Sudan's transitional constitution ensuring the freedom of belief and worship and Uzbekistan, improving religious freedom (USCIRF 2020). Numerous prisoners of conscience have been released through a combination of US pressure and diplomacy, including Pastor Andrew Brunson from Turkey.

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<sup>19</sup> Michael R. Pompeo. Being a Christian Leader. Speech to American Association of Christian Counsellors, Nashville, Tennessee, 11 October 2019. Available at <https://www.state.gov/being-a-christian-leader/> accessed 1 April 2020.

The most significant achievement of IRF advocates, however, has been bringing IRF to the forefront not just of US foreign policy thinking, but also to an international alliance committed to working with all faiths and countries in advancing IRF as a universal value. Religious persecution continues across much of the world, but in establishing a norm of religious freedom and being an effective voice for those suffering religious persecution, there is potential to improve the lived experience of millions of people of faith across the world.

## 6. Conclusions

Over the course of this article I have set out the historical and political background of IRF promotion in US foreign policy, and examined the critiques of this policy from dissatisfied IRF advocates and secularist opponents, to determine what an effective IRF policy would look like. In analysing the critiques, we can now posit what the components of an effective policy would look like:

1. The policy would need to be advanced by those committed to the principle of international religious freedom and appropriately trained to advance religious freedom through diplomacy.
2. The importance of the key role of Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom would be recognised and appointments made in a timely manner. The success of the role is dependent on a close working relationship with, and support from, the Secretary of State, so direct access, close communication and cooperation is essential to advance a common strategy.
3. IRF would be an essential component in strategic thinking about post conflict settlements.
4. Countries which violate religious freedom would be held to account, irrespective of their strategic importance.
5. There would be no hierarchy of religious belief and practice, with religious freedom protected and advanced without favour.
6. IRF would not be used to unilaterally advance US national interests, but be part of an alliance of like-minded states seeking to uphold international norms of international religious freedom enshrined in the UDHR, and subsequent declarations on freedom of religion and belief.

IRF is a vitally important issue for people of faith suffering persecution around the world. US foreign policy does not have a monopoly of interest on this subject but has, over time, garnered significant international support around the religious freedom so clearly articulated in the UDHR, ICCPR and Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. The work of the OIRF and Ambassadors-at-Large Saperstein and Brownback, in particular, in terms of country visits, patient diplomacy, the two ministerials organised by the OIRF and the formation of the International Religious Freedom Alliance, have served to advance IRF as a universal, rather than an American value. As Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, working with Brownback and Vice President Pence, has significantly increased the status of IRF as a component of US foreign policy, and strengthened a multilateralist approach to promoting religious freedom. The status of IRF promotion is greater now than at any time since the passing of the IRFA in 1998. Much work still needs to be done, and the components of an effective policy further developed to bring about real change in the lived experiences of people persecuted for their faith, but progress is being made.

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