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**The Role of United States Policymaking in
Advancing International Religious Freedom for Everyone,
Everywhere, All the Time**



International Religious Freedom Summit 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A historic challenge and opportunity lies before the International Religious Freedom movement. On one hand, religious persecution has metastasized to segments of the world's population regarded in the past as safe havens from such conduct. On the other hand, there has been a concerted international effort by governments and civil society to counter violent extremism as well as other expressions of religious intolerance through creative governmental actions and innovative efforts by civil society.

The gains have been impressive. Instances of intolerance are now tracked and highlighted by a number of rights-respecting governments around the world, and have resulted in sanctions and other deterrent policies issued against bad actors. The press and other civil society actors spotlight malevolent conduct and its perpetrators. Bipartisan and multi-party advocacy for international religious freedom is now the norm in many countries, including the U.S.

Yet, the expanding scale of such positive activity has not matched the even more rapid expansion of intolerance and extreme conduct. The purpose of this paper is to identify bold actions that the incoming Administration could take to stem this rising tide. The ideas presented here represent input from an array of faith-based and human rights organizations involved in the annual International Religious Freedom (IRF) Summit whose daily work is to advance religious freedom for religious minorities across the world.

This paper will describe existing tools already in place that can be more effectively utilized to hold abusers to account, whether governments, non-governmental entities, or individuals. However, as important as accountability is, it alone is not a panacea for the problems that exist. Attitudes need to change, priorities need to be reordered, and values supportive of religious freedom need to be boldly cultivated and articulated from the level of the head of state down to the village cleric and the elementary school teacher. No such global endeavor can be undertaken successfully by the United States alone, but it is unlikely that success can be achieved without American leadership.

This paper sets forth proposals that (a) directly engage government officials in support of religious freedom, (b) build upon international initiatives already in place to promote religious freedom at key levels of society, and (c) provide support to willing partners abroad who are dedicated to the promotion of societal unity and equal rights of citizenship among a diverse set of faith and belief traditions.

Summary: IRF Summit 2025 Partner Recommendations

Partners of the IRF Summit have collaborated to provide recommendations to the incoming Trump Administration that will bolster International Religious Freedom. The following recommendations offer a short summary of the IRF Summit 2025 White Paper.

Prioritize Explosive Regions

- Increase focus on Syria and Iran.
- Appoint Regional Special Envoys for Nigeria and Near East & South Central Asia, as well as the Orthodox Church.

Demonstrate Leadership Through Multilateral Engagements

- Return the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom to the U.S. and have the President actively participate.
- Help expand the Article 18 Alliance.

Reestablish IRF as National Security Objective

- Appoint a Special White House Advisor on IRF, serving on the National Security Council.
- The formal return of the protection of religious freedom to the National Security Strategy.

Strengthen State Department and USAID Engagement

- Act quickly to make Country of Particular Concern, Special Watch List, and Entity of Particular Concern designations under the International Religious Freedom Act.
- Appoint a new Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and increase their profile.
- Have State and USAID initiate or upgrade public diplomacy programs to support religious freedom.
- Encourage partnerships with local, vetted NGOs well positioned to provide immediate assistance.
- Place greater emphasis within the Refugee Admissions Program on persecuted religious minorities.

Enhance Global Monitoring Efforts and NGO Coordination

- Create special Task Forces with USG officials and NGO personnel to engage at-risk communities.
- Maintain the operations of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

Implement Deterrence Efforts on behalf of Religious Prisoners of Conscience (PoCs)

- Place greater emphasis on efforts to release religious PoCs and deter the regimes that take them, including having the President meet periodically with former PoCs and victims of religious persecution.
- Expand the use of available sanctions on perpetrators of human rights abuses in the form of religious persecution.

Issue High Profile Executive Orders and Presidential Proclamations & Consider Legislative Action

- Reissue and codify the 2020 Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom.
- Issue a proclamation calling on all nations to give equal citizenship to people of every faith or belief.
- Support the reintroduction of legislation such as the Transnational Repression Policy Act, proposed as H.R. 3654 in the 118th Congress.

U.S.-LED IRF MOVEMENT MILESTONES

The last decade has brought a bold and vigorous approach to the promotion of international religious freedom. Not since the period immediately following the enactment of the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998 has there been such a leap in progress in addressing this key concern. Specifically, during the last decade the U.S. government took the following actions:

- President Trump signed the first Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom on June 2, 2020.
- Helped launch the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) which now includes 38 member nations. The coalition has recently been officially renamed as the Article 18 Alliance.
- Hosted the first ever Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in July 2018, gathering leaders from around the world to examine the challenges of religious persecution and promote greater respect for religious freedom. These Ministerials have continued to take place annually, hosted by the countries belonging to the Article 18 Alliance.
- Directed tens of millions of USG funds to be spent on programs that advance international religious freedom.
- Determined that the Chinese government committed genocide against the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang.
- Implemented the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA) to prevent goods made with forced labor in China's Xinjiang region from entering the US market.
- Imposed sanctions, visa restrictions, and export controls on actors and entities that are responsible for serious human rights abuses like religious persecution, including against the Turkish officials responsible for detaining American pastor Andrew Brunson, who was subsequently released.
- Elevated the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism to Ambassador level.
- Collaborated with civil society in the formation of international religious freedom roundtables in dozens of countries, so that faith groups would have a forum to find common cause with traditional rivals and mitigate ongoing disputes.
- Encouraged the formation of other groups, both within nations and across nations, dedicated to the expansion of religious freedom internationally; one example is the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB).
- Coordinated release and/or refuge for high profile religious prisoners of conscience including Nguyen Bac Truyen, released from a Vietnamese prison, and Dennis Christensen, released from Russian prison.

Collectively, these actions elevated the promotion of international religious freedom from an ancillary goal of U.S. foreign policy to a central policy tenet. This not only reflected the American values enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution but also recognized that religious conflict is a key security concern of the U.S.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM IRF CIVIL SOCIETY

Despite the many positive milestones in IRF over the last decade, it is clear that more needs to be done. Every corner of the planet is touched by the scourge of extreme religious intolerance and persecution. We therefore call upon the new Administration to redouble efforts to protect this essential freedom. We urge the adoption of several actions, which are summarized below:

Prioritize Explosive Regions

- Increase focus on Syria, where the Administration should be proactive in publicly calling on the new regime to ensure equal rights under the law for all citizens, including Christians, Druze, Alawites, and other ethnic and religious minorities, as well as equal rights for women.
- Increase focus on Iran, where the dramatic weakening in 2024 of its international geopolitical position and the increased public disaffection with the regime could cause it to take even more extreme measures to suppress perceived domestic enemies including religious minorities. The Administration should condemn such measures at an early stage and publicly signal its support for any emerging peaceful process in pursuit of democratic governance, the rule of law, and religious freedom.
- Assist the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom through the appointment of Special Envoys, additional to the legislatively mandated Special Envoy for the Near East and South Central Asia, to engage in intensive diplomatic efforts in regions of concern. We specifically recommend the following appointments:
 - A Special Envoy should be appointed to the Orthodox Church and the dominantly Orthodox countries of the world.
 - A Special Envoy should be appointed to address religious freedom concerns in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region.

Demonstrate Leadership Through Multilateral Engagements

- Return the IRF Ministerial to the U.S. and have the President actively participate in it. Annual IRF Ministerials originated and were held in the U.S. in 2018 and 2019 during the first Trump Administration but have since moved around Europe. A new US-based Ministerial could underscore greater multilateral commitments to address the worst violators of religious freedom and could enhance coordinated action among countries that are part of the Article 18 Alliance. Additionally, the U.S. mission should consider hosting an event on global religious persecution during the UN General Assembly.
- Ongoing diplomatic engagement with parliamentarians has proven effective. The President should instruct the Secretary of State to prioritize the expansion of the Article 18 Alliance, founded by President Trump and Secretary of State Pompeo in 2020, to include countries who ensure strong protections for religious freedom in their domestic borders and promote religious freedom in their foreign policy. In particular, Japan and South Korea should be encouraged to move from “friends” status to full-fledged alliance members, while France, Belgium, Italy, and Spain should be encouraged to join the alliance as full-fledged members or friends.

Reestablish IRF as National Security Objective

- The immediate appointment of a Special Advisor on International Religious Freedom to serve on the National Security Council staff. In this role, the Special Advisor would monitor persistent or systematic violations of religious freedom and report directly to the President about conditions of severe religious intolerance that threaten U.S. national security, as well as vulnerable religious minorities, and make recommendations to mitigate these threats. As reiterated in the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016, this position is also intended to assist the Ambassador at Large to coordinate IRF policies and strategies throughout the executive branch.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM IRF CIVIL SOCIETY (cont.)

- The formal return of the protection of religious freedom to the National Security Strategy. In coordination with the U.S. Department of State and Department of Defense, the White House should request that the language on pages 41 and 42 of the 2017 National Security Strategy, which begins with “The United States also remains committed to supporting and advancing religious freedom – America’s first freedom” be included in the 2025 National Security Strategy.
 - Dispel ignorance and challenge negative stereotypes about religious communities,
 - Promote tolerance based on the universal human values articulated in Article 18 of the UDHR,
 - Promote a sense of community among all people of a nation, or an international region, or the world as a whole,
 - Promote joint grassroots service projects among people of different religions designed to benefit the community at-large.

Strengthen State Department and USAID Engagement

- Act quickly to make Country of Particular Concern (CPC), Special Watch List (SWL), and Entity of Particular Concern (EPC) designations under the International Religious Freedom Act; no designations were made in 2024, although the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommended nearly 30 countries receive such designations.
- Appoint a new Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom within the first month following Inauguration Day with a broad mandate to carry out recommendations in this paper.
- Bolster the impact of U.S. diplomatic efforts in support of international religious freedom by increasing the profile of the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom through significant promotional efforts in advance of country visits.
- Charge the State Department and USAID with the initiation or upgrading of specific programs to support religious freedom in all countries willing to participate through television, radio, and social media advertising and public service announcements, as well as pedagogical materials in schools, and grassroots community-based activities that:
 - Identify commonalities among religions and faith traditions,
- Implement a process to guarantee that funds for humanitarian relief and recovery efforts targeted towards specific religious communities are, to the extent practicable, channeled through NGOs with a strong local presence, community ties, and a demonstrated capacity for performance. This should include the recognition of immediate needs for religious minorities in dire circumstances and the continued provision of or, as necessary, increase in material assistance to those communities abroad.
- Restore, as soon as practicable, the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and place greater emphasis on the admission of religious minorities in accordance with U.S. law that prioritizes religious minorities subjected to “systematic, pervasive, [and] organized” persecution. Encourage regular audits of local UNHCR staff and similar bodies to ensure strict adherence to international laws and regulations, preventing discrimination in refugee processing.

Enhance Global Monitoring Efforts and NGO Coordination

- Create special task forces consisting of U.S. Government officials abroad and personnel of NGOs abroad to engage continuously with severely at-risk communities to monitor their status, especially through indigenous, grass roots civil society organizations and other reliable sources of information, and to quickly communicate recommendations to correct dangerous developments and avert violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM IRF CIVIL SOCIETY (cont.)

These task forces should have direct access to the Special White House Advisor on International Religious Freedom.

Maintain the operations of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, established by President George W. Bush in 2001. Use this office to engage with civil society and religious institutions, strengthen interfaith collaboration, and advance international development work.

Implement Deterrence Efforts on behalf of Religious Prisoners of Conscience

- Place greater emphasis on diplomatic efforts to seek the release of religious prisoners of conscience (PoCs) and to robustly publicize their plight until their release. To underscore this effort, the President should meet periodically with former PoCs and victims of religious persecution.
- Expand the use of sanctions on perpetrators of human rights abuses in the form of religious persecution, available in various pieces of legislation such as the visa restriction provision of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 and the Global Magnitsky Act. At present, a number of officials known to be involved in systematically implementing religious persecution have largely gone untouched by such sanctions. In 2023, for example, only one judge was sanctioned under the Act. In many, if not most, countries with widespread violations of international religious freedom, judges are an integral element of the system of religious persecution.

Issue High Profile Executive Orders and Presidential Proclamations

- Reissue the Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom. The original Trump Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom, dated June 2, 2020, set a new precedent for executive action on protecting religious freedom abroad and pledged \$50 million per year towards that end. The

updated Executive Order should include a clause added to Section 3 providing, with respect to funds programmed for advancing international religious freedom, that “[a]t least 50% of such funds shall be designated for use among small to medium-sized entities.”

- Issue a Presidential Proclamation calling on all nations to give equal citizenship to people of every faith or no faith at all. This will build on the work being done in the Marrakesh Declaration of 2016. This will be particularly meaningful for religious minority groups in majority Muslim nations that face regular persecution for their faith.

Consider Legislative Approaches

- The Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom, dated June 2, 2020, should be drafted with bipartisan input into statutory form, passed by the Congress, and enacted into law.
- The Administration should utilize any best practices that have been developed to counter the rising level of transnational harassment and intimidation on U.S. soil of foreign advocates of religious freedom by their foreign governments, most notably China, Russia, Iran and Turkey. The Ambassador at Large for IRF, in coordination with Homeland Security and the FBI, should create a blueprint for action to utilize these best practices. Serious consideration should be given to support legislation such as the Transnational Repression Policy Act, proposed as H.R. 3654 in the 118th Congress, to systematize the response to this rising threat.
- In addition to the legislative actions proposed here, the IRF Summit Partners have also prepared a legislative agenda targeted towards direct action in the U.S. Congress. These can be found at irfsummit.org.

CONCLUSION

The above recommendations comprise the core of our objectives. We feel confident that, if implemented, these measures will have a demonstrable impact on both protecting and advancing the fundamental right of freedom of religion or belief throughout the world. It will be essential to have clear, persistent, public reminders from the highest levels of the Administration articulating the essential importance of international religious freedom.

Religious intolerance manifests in a number of ways, some obvious and others more subtle. Obvious examples include: constitutional and statutory provisions that explicitly elevate or subordinate a particular religious group or groups; the destruction of holy and cultural sites such as places of worship, monuments, and cemeteries; the criminalization of teaching one's faith; the banning of peaceful religious gatherings; the prohibition on changing one's faith;

forced conversions; forced renunciations of faith; blasphemy laws; prohibitions on the production and distribution of religious literature; and restrictions, based on religious affiliation, on government or civil service.

However, there are also other forms of intolerance that can quietly compound repression, including the denial of equal rights to women, human trafficking, social and political marginalization of ethnic groups, racism, barriers to education, and a culture of violent impunity. All of these manifestations must be considered and confronted.

In closing, the incoming Administration should remain alert to how religious intolerance interacts with and is exacerbated by these other abuses and seize opportunities to address both, especially when they are closely intertwined, utilizing the resources and expertise of both government and civil society.

