The Ignored Foundation: 
Promoting Religious Freedom in the Middle East

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1. Introduction

The promotion of religious freedom in the Middle East should be made a greater priority in U.S. foreign policy for the protection of American interests. Democracy and stability can never be fully realized in the Middle East without freedom of religion and neither can human rights, civil liberties, limits on state power, and an improvement in the status of women. Several Middle Eastern countries are among the world’s worst violators of freedom of religion. Violations can be seen in the establishment of Muslim constitutions, blasphemy and apostasy laws, the application of Sharia Law, and governmental discrimination against certain religions and religious sects. The United States and the world at large are threatened by the harsh restrictions on freedom of religion found in the Middle East, as violence against those who “insult” Islam has spread beyond the Middle East and Muslim-majority countries. Furthermore, there is continuing pressure from Muslim states for worldwide restrictions on insulting Islam. It is in the national security interests of the United States to promote religious freedom in this region. The U.S. State Department should better prepare its Foreign Service Officers to promote freedom of religion in Middle Eastern countries.

The promotion of religious freedom in the Middle East is made complicated by regional and U.S. policy obstacles. There is the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran and the question of how the United States should guard against such a scenario. Additionally, the U.S. has oil interests in the region, as a significant percentage of U.S. petroleum imports come from Persian Gulf countries. There is also the difficulty of negotiating peace and a two-state solution between the Palestinian people and Israel. The newest threat and complication is, of course, ISIS. The Middle East is by
no means a simple region for U.S. foreign policy, and promoting religious freedom has been overlooked while other interests are emphasized.

To be clear, the policy recommendations made in this paper cannot resolve all the instability in the Middle East—not by any means. This region has long been turbulent and violent. A new emphasis on promoting religious freedom through U.S. foreign policy is not a comprehensive solution. However, if the United States can better encourage the integration of religious freedom into states in the Middle East, it should absolutely take steps to do so. Freedom of religion allows for other fundamental freedoms and democracy to exist. Without freedom of religion, these cannot be fully realized. Furthermore, promoting religious freedom is important to combatting terrorism and encouraging peace in the region. If the United States can encourage and spread religious freedom in the Middle East, it will be protecting its own interests as well as those of Middle Eastern countries.

2. Religious Freedom in a Middle Eastern Context

a. The United States’ Definition of Religious Freedom

The tradition of religious freedom in the United States stretches back to before our founding. Religious freedom was the reason many people journeyed and settled here. The Pilgrims, of course, came to America to be free from the religious tyranny of the English Crown and the Church of England. Freedom of religion as a core principle set the United States apart from much of the world. Europe was characterized by religious turmoil. Although the United States has not upheld a flawless standard of religious freedom, it has been a place of religious refuge for the sum of its history.
The American Founders wanted to make sure that government could not infringe on the God-given right to freedom of religion or establish a state church. In 1791, the Bill of Rights was passed and amended the Constitution. Its First Amendment states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof…” The Bill of Rights officially recognized man’s natural right to worship freely in the United States.

Having freedom of religion in the United States does not mean that any religious practice is acceptable and above reproach. The U.S. Supreme Court has affirmed this. For example, in *Employment Division of Oregon v. Smith*, the Court held that religious beliefs do not excuse an individual “from compliance with an otherwise valid law prohibiting conduct that government is free to regulate,”\(^3\) such as the consumption of peyote. However, within reason, the First Amendment protects the right of U.S. citizens to follow their consciences. According to Black’s Law Dictionary, “[The First Amendment] embraces not only the right to worship God according to the dictates of one’s conscience, but also the right to do, or forbear to do, any act, for conscience sake, the doing or forbearing of which is not inimical to the peace, good order, and morals of society.”\(^4\) Freedom of religion is carefully protected in the U.S., but this does not mean that any religious action is outside legitimate governmental regulation.

Freedom of religion is practiced in a unique way in the United States. No country in the history of the world has secured this freedom to a greater degree or in the same way. Religious freedom in the Middle East does not need look exactly how it does in the United States. Freedom of religion in that region may not mean a “First Amendment,” but there should be governmental protection of religious choice and practice.
b. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

There are several international agreements on human rights, one of them being the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (see Appendix). This paper will use Article 18 of the ICCPR as an aid in defining religious freedom. The ICCPR was passed in 1966 by the UN General Assembly, and one hundred sixty-seven countries have since signed and ratified the covenant. In conjunction with two other documents—the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—the ICCPR is considered the International Bill of Human Rights. The UN Human Rights Committee oversees its implementation. The ICCPR has not been universally accepted—there are several Middle Eastern countries that have yet to sign. These are Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The definition of religious freedom found in the ICCPR is consistent with that of the United States found in the First Amendment, but it is more detailed. Although this definition is far from perfect and has been abused by some countries, it nevertheless provides an internationally applicable standard.

Article 18 upholds the right of people to think and believe what they will. It declares that people may choose what religion to trust and to practice. Religion and beliefs may be observed and practiced individually or collectively, either in private or public, by all. The right to choose and practice any religion or belief may not be hinderer except where “public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others” are at stake. Finally, the right of parents and legal guardians to impart moral education to their children should be respected. As mentioned, the practices of religion need not be completely unregulated and unchecked. “The [Human Rights] Committee has explained that article 18 does not permit any limitation
whatsoever on freedom of thought and conscience or on the freedom to have or adopt a religion
or belief of one’s choice, whereas the right to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject to
certain limitations under paragraph 3…” Furthermore, having freedom of religion and freedom
of belief has been given a broad interpretation. Non-traditional religions and atheistic beliefs are
encompassed. Thus, ample protection for freedom of religion is called for by the ICCPR.

c. Religious Freedom in Islam: The Challenges

Freedom of religion is by no means a perfect ideal, and there are challenges to it being
integrated into Middle Eastern countries. Islamic culture is often weary of Western democracy
and freedom, as American and other Western societies are viewed as promiscuous,
overindulgent, and as embracing moral license. Furthermore, Islam, for the most part, is
connected to a certain culture—that of the Middle East (and North Africa). Thus, it is
understandably difficult for Middle Eastern states to unloose their grasp on this religion. Islam,
in general, does not recognize a distinct separation between church and state, as the United States
does. Religion and the state are intertwined. Saudi Arabia, for example, has a religious police
force. Additionally, religion is often not thought of as a choice. Rather, it a matter of birth. For
example, in Lebanon, religious sect is placed on the birth certificate and is used to determine
whether or not a Lebanese citizen can hold a public sector job. The birth certificate in Oman
also includes religion. Thus, there are many difficulties with freedom of religion being accepted
in the Middle East. However, it is this principle that prepares a foundation for other freedoms, for
democracy and for human rights. It is this principle that the United States should better prioritize
in its foreign policy in the Middle East.
The concept of religious freedom does exist in Islam and within the Qur’an. However, there are also clear examples of intolerance and violence both in the Qur’an and in the practices of Muslims, particularly in the Middle East and Muslim-majority countries. One Quranic passage declares, “There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong. So whoever disbelieves in Taghut and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing” (Al-Baqarah 2:256). According to this verse, belief in Islam should not be forced. Rather, the truth of the Islamic faith is something that should be self-evident. Although this hopeful statement can be found within the pages of the Muslim’s holy book, there are many additional hostile commands. Another verse reads, “O you who have believed, fight those adjacent to you of the disbelievers and let them find in you harshness. And know that Allah is with the righteous” (At-Tawbah 9:123). In this passage, the believer is called upon to fight the non-believer. The Muslim is not encouraged to be tolerant towards his neighbor’s non-Islamic faith.

An important concept to understand when the interpretation of the Qur’an is in question is the “law of abrogation.” The law of abrogation allows some verses to be superseded by others. Because the Qur’an has inconsistencies, most Muslim scholars accept this law. “Rather than explain away inconsistencies in passages regulating the Muslim community, many jurists acknowledge the differences but accept that latter verses trump earlier verses…Because the Qur'an is not organized chronologically, there has been a whole subset of theological study to determine which verses abrogate and which are abrogated.” Thus, a mixed message comes out
of the Qur’an, but the concept of religious freedom does exist within its pages. The question is how it will be interpreted.

*d. Religious Freedom is Theoretically Compatible with Islam*

Religious freedom does not have to be at odds with Islam. There have been Muslim societies that were able to live in relative peace alongside religious minorities. The Ottoman Empire and the Umayyads in Spain are examples. In fact, according to several influential Muslims, punishing blasphemy and apostasy threatens the Islamic faith. Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, the fourth president of Indonesia, in his essay *God Needs No Defense*, wrote that those who force Islam are themselves blasphemous. They are presuming to understand Allah’s will, pushing it on others and “are essentially equating themselves with God” (xvii). Wahid argued that because Allah is all powerful, he does not need humans to defend him. Thus, those who condemn blasphemy are “either deluding themselves” or working towards their own political agendas. Furthermore, Islam does not need to feel threatened by other viewpoints because other religions and cultures have historically enriched it. “Indeed, the greatness of classical Islamic civilization—which incorporated a humane and cosmopolitan universalism—stemmed largely from the intellectual and spiritual maturity that grew from the amalgamation of Arab, Greek, Jewish, Christian, and Persian influences” (xix). The sad reality of today is that religious intolerance in Muslim-majority countries swallows up the very people who are trying to reconcile the Islamic faith with peace and tolerance. Blasphemy and apostasy laws, rather than protecting Islam, are a hindrance to it. Wahid’s encouragement was for Muslims to be guided by the word’s of the Qur’an which declare that, “There shall be no compulsion in religion” (Al-Baqarah 2:256).
Freedom of religion is not the same as freedom from religion. Middle Eastern countries do not have to become completely secularized in order to gain the benefits of being religiously free societies. They do not have to reject Islam. If Middle Eastern countries can recognize the right of all their citizens to freely worship and practice religion, then there is hope for democracy, increased human rights and other freedoms. Freedom of religion is foundational to all of these. Muslims do not have to be glad that others have disgraced or abandoned Islam, but they should not punish these behaviors and choices. Muslims do not have to celebrate other religions, but they cannot discriminate against them. As Thomas Farr, director of the Religious Freedom Project at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs said, “You can’t kill people because they leave your faith. You don’t have to be happy about it. You don’t have to celebrate it. But you can’t use the force—the police powers of the state—to prevent people from leaving Islam…”

While any true Muslim will probably always be offended by an action that disrespects their religion, this is an unavoidable reality. People will always do and say things that offend someone else. The difference in America is that people are not punished by law and by the courts for such “offenses.” We value freedom more.

The future of freedom of religion in the Middle East, given the reality of radical Islam and institutionalized religious persecution, can appear quite grim. However, Religious freedom does not have to be contrary to Islam. In fact, it only stunts and radicalizes it. The United States needs to understand the critical importance of this freedom and should promote it in the Middle East through our foreign policy.

The American Founders clearly recognized the importance of religious freedom and the harm in over-regulating it. The practice of religion is highly personal and should not be dictated
by the state. Thomas Jefferson affirmed this in his famous letter to The Danbury Baptist Association\(^\text{15}\) (see Appendix). The Founders also realized that laws were not needed to keep people religious. Rather, government force is harmful to religion. In a letter to Edward Everett, James Madison explained,

“The settled opinion here is that religion is essentially distinct from Civil Government, and exempt from its cognizance; that a connexion between them is injurious to both; that there are causes in the human breast, which ensure the perpetuity of religion without the aid of the law; that rival sects, with equal rights, exercise mutual censorships in favor of good morals…”\(^\text{16}\)

The tethering of religion and government is harmful to both. This is what can be seen in the Middle East. Restriction on religion has lead to radicalization and also to the smothering of those who want to nourish Islam, intellectually and in practice. It has led to numerous conflicts, such as that between the Sunnis and the Shiites, and has produced antagonism against religious minorities such as Christians, Hindus and Baha’is.

If there is to be any successful movement toward freedom, civil and human rights and democracy in the Middle East, there must be a foundation of religious freedom. The Arab Spring proved that there were people who are tired of the old way of conducting government and society. This movement essentially failed, however, and most states are now worse off than they were before.

3. The Status of Religious Freedom in the Middle East

a. The Arab Spring

In 2011, news outlets were bursting with stories and updates about the Arab Spring. Protests and demonstrations were spreading across the Middle East. Citizens of the awakening Arab states stood for and expected change. They wanted to throw-off the old way of doing
things. They wanted more freedom. There was so much hope early on. Something admirable and exciting was afoot in the Middle East, and the West was taking notice. The revolutionaries wanted a new system of leadership, wanted more rights, and were fed up with the corruption of the status quo. One of them in Egypt expressed his sentiments thus:

“…our country's condition was getting worse and worse. There was corruption, torture, injustice, inequality and no freedom. Someone had to stand up and say "enough is enough" - and that is why I decided to take part in the revolution… To build a new Egypt, you have to remove corruption first. Power must be handed over to civilians and a new constitution must be made as soon as possible which must respect human rights.”

Arabs across the Middle East recognized the problems with their governments and countries and were pressing for change.

The change that so many people anticipated and pressed for, for the most part, never came to fruition. The states that took part in the Arab Spring have not seen an increase in human rights and democracy. In fact, in many cases, circumstances are even worse than they were before. Authoritarian governments have strengthened and freedoms have been further smothered. There has been an increase in religious discrimination and restrictions on religion in the Middle East as a result of the Arab Spring. “[E]xamples of new restrictions include bans against preaching, conversions, or preferential treatment of one religious group over another. Governments also often ignore religious minorities suffering sectarian violence.” For example, after the Arab Spring, Coptic Christians in Egypt became targets of increased violence and the Egyptian military refused to intervene. Discrimination against Muslims in the Middle East was also a result of the Arab Spring. The government in Bahrain destroyed Shia shrines, religious centers and mosques. The Arab Spring seemed to be a move toward democracy and freedom,
two stabilizing elements that are conspicuously lacking in the Middle East. However, it all but completely failed and religious freedom has decreased.

Regardless of the particular state, the Middle East has grown more radical in recent years. While the U.S. has certainly been involved in this region and continues to have policy objectives there, it does not appear that any lasting impact has been made for religious freedom. The United States has done little to prioritize this highly important freedom in its foreign policy. Restrictions on religion are a threat that continues to fester in this region.

\textit{b. Blasphemy and Apostasy Laws}

The degree to which Islam is integrated into the state, constitution, government and society varies throughout the Middle East and Muslim-majority countries (19). There are various punishments for blaspheming, ranging in severity. Severe punishment for producing offensive religious material, for speaking ill of a religion, for renouncing religion, or for being a member of a minority religion might seem antiquated, however, it is not in the Middle East. Blasphemy and apostasy laws, while they do exist around the globe, are most highly concentrated in the Middle East and North Africa. In fact, the majority of the Muslim world criminalized blasphemy. “It isn’t just ultra-rigid Saudi Arabia or the Iranian theocracy that, with the full force of the law, still put blasphemers to death. Ridiculing the faith and its prophet is considered a serious crime in most of the Muslim world.” As of October of last year, there were seventeen people in Pakistan who had been sentenced to death for blasphemy.

A blasphemer can be Muslim as well as non-Muslim. It is not uncommon in the Middle East for Muslims to be punished for blasphemy. In 2000 in Iran, a Muslim cleric named Hojjatoleslam Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari was tried for “apostasy, corruption on earth, waging
war against God, conduct unbecoming a clergyman, insulting Islamic sanctities, and spreading lies” (35). In a press interview, he had criticized the forced veiling of women and supported the separation of religion and state. He served several years in prison. Again in Iran, in late 2014, Mohsen Amir-Aslani, a Muslim, was executed on apostasy charges. His crime was that he interpreted the Qur’an differently from the Islamic Republic.

Blasphemy and apostasy laws also condemn the non-religious and religious minorities. Early this year, an unnamed man in Saudi Arabia was sentenced to death for renouncing Islam, ripping a Qur’an and hitting the copy with his shoe. He filmed these brazen acts and in the video reportedly cursed Allah, Mohammed and Mohammed’s daughter. Religious minorities such as Baha’is, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians and Hindus are also discriminated against in the Middle East. In Pakistan, a Christian man was accused of hanging “verses from the Qur’an in a charm around a dog’s neck” (93). Although later acquitted, the man was originally condemned to two life sentences. He served over four years in prison. In Afghanistan, after being revealed as a Baha’i by his wife, a man was kept in jail for over four weeks, despite never being charged (106).

The conflict between the two main branches of Islam continues as it has since their split took place. The Sunnis and the Shiites are bitter enemies and are victims of each other’s religious restrictions. In Saudi Arabia, Sunnis have been accused of witchcraft and given the death sentence (29). The government of Afghanistan destroyed Shiite texts because they insulted Sunnis (109). These two sects of Islam continue to punish each other for their religious practices and convictions.
Restrictions on freedom of religion essentially threaten everyone in Middle Eastern depending on where one lives. Where Sunni Islam is the majority, Shiites are persecuted, and where Shiite Islam has the majority, Sunnis are victimized. Other religious minorities regularly suffer under discrimination. The Middle East is replete with punishments for religious practices and beliefs that are contrary to Islam. This region cannot flourish while restrictions on religion continue.

4. The Foundational Importance of Religious Freedom

Religious freedom is the most important and essential freedom for a society to posses. Without freedom of religion, democracy cannot be sustained, government power cannot be checked and other freedoms and humans rights are trampled. Without this freedom, quality of life is decreased. Religious freedom is not a positive addition to other freedoms, it is foundational to them.33

There is a decisive link between freedom of religion and democracy. Having freedom of religion allows for authentic and free expression. The suppression of religious freedom, on the contrary, is a means of suppressing dissenting ideas and opinions. Those Middle Eastern countries that have established Islam as their state religion or have laws against blasphemy and apostasy, have effectively drown out dissenting voices. Freedom of religion protects and supports democracy. “Without freedom of religion authentic political expression, dissent, and other democratic values are jeopardized. In other words, freedom of religion is the first freedom because it typifies and safeguards democratic values.”34 Democracy cannot be separated from religious freedom.
Furthermore, laws that curtail freedom of religion are used to further political agendas. In the Middle East, restriction on religion is used to suppress unwanted political or private expression. It is used a mechanism to control the populous and withhold additional freedoms. This is one of the reasons that some Middle Eastern leaders have been in power for so long. “Even secular or less devout leaders refuse to grant religious freedom, in part to keep hardline clergy and their followers happy, and in part to extend their totalitarian rule into their subjects' private lives.” Restricting religious freedom means that other freedoms are withheld or minimized as well. Restricting religious freedom allows government power to be expanded and go unchecked. Muslim scholars and academics have reason to fear blasphemy charges if they present ideas that are contrary to those in power. This is what happened to the man in Iran, mentioned earlier, who spoke out against the mandatory veiling of women and the entanglement of religion and state. He challenged the status quo, for the betterment of his country, but his attempts were labeled blasphemous. If the United States hopes to promote freedom and peace in the Middle East, it must also promote religious freedom. Religious freedom allows for other freedom to exist, and its absence means that other freedoms are subdued.

Almost all Muslim-majority societies use Sharia law to govern family matters. Sharia is interpreted differently by different Muslim scholars, but women are not given the same rights as men. Women must have her husband’s consent to divorce. Some scholars permit the husband to beat his wife. Thus, it is the implementation of Sharia law and the restriction of religious freedom that justifies the unequal treatment of women in Muslim-majority societies. Freedom of religion is foundational to democracy, it is a check on states power, and without it, other freedoms are hindered. This freedom is important for the Middle East, as it can
increase human flourishing in the region. However, it is also important to U.S. interests for the Middle East embrace freedom of religion.


The United States has the moral obligation to stand in defense of those who are persecuted. Beyond this, however, there are practical reasons for the United States to desire religious freedom for the people in the Middle East. A broad sweep of more recent history finds that those countries that withhold religious freedom are the same countries that threaten the national security of the United States (and other countries). For example, one of top current threats in the region is ISIS. This movement is able to exist because it was born in a region that severely limits religious freedom. Islamic radicalism has lead to ISIS’s existence. Iran and its pursuit of nuclear weapons, are also a threat. Ahmadinejad, a radical muslim, made threatening and anti-American statements. Furthermore, this region is where many Muslim terrorist groups are based, including Al-Qaeda, the organization responsible for the 9/11 attacks. The lack of religious freedom in the Middle East has lead to radicalization that threaten the United States.

The harm that stems from religious intolerance in the Middle East has not remained confined to that region. Other parts of the globe are being impacted by this intolerance. The Charlie Hebdo attack on January 7, 2015 is one of the most recent examples. Radical Muslims murdered 12 employees of the satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo, because of the religiously offensive material it published. In 2006, a similar event took place with much wider effects. Twelve Danish cartoons were published in a private paper. These were considered blasphemous by many muslims and became the reason for wide-spread outcry. Encouraged by Islamic
governments and leaders, people took to the streets in protest of these cartoons. So much strife and backlash was produced that this event can be called “the widest-reaching international crisis regarding blasphemy in recent history.”

In both of these instances, there were Muslims who found certain material offensive to their religion and they took it upon themselves to punish the offenders.

Again, in 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini called for the execution of Salman Rushdie, a British author. Rushdie had written and published a novel titled *Satanic Verses*. Among other “offensive” content, this book suggested that the Qur’an had been dictated to Muhammad by Satan, not the angel Gabriel. Ayatollah Khomeini encouraged Muslims to kill Rushdie and others who had helped in the publication of his book for their offense against Islam.

Perhaps most frightening, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) has tried to “silence UN criticism of Islamic practices and values in their own countries and have used the UN human rights mechanisms as instruments for suppressing anti-Islamic speech generally.”

The OIC has fifty-seven state members. This organization introduces resolutions in the UN which denounce the “defamation of religions.” It has also established the Observatory on Islamophobia which hopes to encourage other countries to create laws which will counter and punish Islamophobia. Middle Eastern countries continue to try to suppress religious freedom outside of their region by fighting against the “defamation” of Islam.

The subduing of religious freedom is not remaining contained in the Middle East. Because of the threat posed to our country and the world at large, the United States should make promoting religious freedom in the Middle East a greater priority.
6. The United States and religious freedom abroad

The United States carefully protects the right of its citizens to practice religion as they themselves see fit. This right is not perfectly protected, but America has been a shining standard of freedom to the world at large. However, U.S. foreign policy has emphasized other issues while marginalizing religious freedom.

Furthermore, the United States has failed to recognize the importance of religious freedom in its foreign policy. Despite its importance to peace, counterterrorism and to democracy, the United States has not made promoting religious freedom an emphasis in its policies toward the Middle East. Promoting religious freedom in this region is important for U.S. national security:

“Religious freedom has been a blind spot in US foreign and national security policy. The State Department, for much of the last 15 years, has ignored the role of advancing religious freedom in order to conduct effective counterterrorism, conflict prevention, and democracy promotion. The need to do so is particularly acute in the national security area. One needs to look no further than the past year’s headlines to see the religious freedom-security connection. Events in Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Egypt underscore the urgency of formulating national security policies that promote religious freedom and related human rights as part of a broader strategy to secure US national interests.”

a. The Obama Administration’s Policies in the Middle East

The Obama Administration has lacked clarity in it policy toward the Middle East. This administration has not made promoting religious freedom in the Middle East a priority. In fact, it can be questioned whether or not the president has a comprehensive foreign policy strategy in the Middle East at all. According to the State Department’s website, the “regional topics” are: stabilizing Iraq; working toward a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; combating terrorism, state sponsors of terrorism and WMDs; and supporting Economic and
political reform. Religious freedom is certainly not a priority or significant emphasis. Furthermore, the United States has done nothing in recent years which has increased freedom of religion in the region.

Religious freedom in the Middle East is foundational to long-term stability and peace in the region. Furthermore, it is extremely important to counterterrorism, and the promotion of democracy and human rights. The United States has failed to elevate it to its proper importance. The U.S. State Department has failed to treat the advancement of religious freedom as a national security, foundational and priority issue.

There is a practical importance to promoting religious freedom in the Middle East. The U.S. should prioritize the promotion of religious freedom in its policies towards the Middle East. However, there are also biblical reasons to support such policies.

8. Biblical implications

a. The Golden Rule

Perhaps the best biblical support for freedom of religion is a portion of Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount. What is now called the “Golden Rule” can be found in Matthew chapter 7. When a crowd had gathered to hear him, Jesus instructed all those assembled to “Always treat other as you would like them to treat you; that sums up the teaching of the Torah and the Prophets” (verse 12). The Torah and the Prophets are full of instructions from God. All these instructions were given so that the Israelites might have rightly-ordered lives and have a correct relationship with God. Jesus, in his teachings, expanded on the Old Testament laws, emphasizing the personal conviction of the heart. Jesus said that the Law and Prophets could be
encapsulated by a commitment to do to others as you would desire them to do to you. This is how to truly follow the Law.

The Golden Rule is not an exclusively a Judeo-Christian concept. A similar rule is found across many cultures and religions. The Mahabharata, an important text in Hinduism, says, “This is the sum of duty: do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.” In Jainism, the axiom is stated thus: “A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated.” Finally, even Islam contains a similar admonition: “Not one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” The Golden Rule is a universal concept and is helpful for the structuring of any relationship or society. Adherence to this law allows communities to live together in increased peace.

If the Golden Rule is applied to religious freedom, it can be easily understood that if one person would not want their religious beliefs to be regulated and discriminated against, that person should not punish the religious beliefs of another. Applying the Golden Rule in the Middle East would mean that if any Muslim would like to avoid being persecuted for his or her faith, he or she should not persecute anyone else. This would mean that blasphemy and apostasy laws must not be established or enforced. Middle Eastern governments should not create regulations that punish those outside of the religious majority. If these Muslim-majority countries would not want Islam to be banned or chastised, they should not be aggressive towards other religions or Muslim “heretics” within or without their borders.

b. Is Freedom of Religion in the Bible?

Freedom of religion is not directly addressed in the Bible, but the concept is assuredly there. In the Old Testament, God gave his people—the Israelites—the choice of following him or
not. He gave them his Law to order their lives, but he allowed them to choose whether or not they would live according to it. In the last chapter of the book named after him, Joshua tells the Hebrews to choose the god they will serve:

“But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15).

Joshua had made his own personal choice and he challenged the rest of the Jewish assembly to do the same. They did not have to serve God just because He chose their descendant Abraham and lead them all out of Egypt. Whether or not to follow God would be their own decision.

Freedom is an important concept in the New Testament as well. Paul writes about it often, speaking about the freedom that comes through having faith in Christ. This freedom should be exercised. Believers are no longer slaves to sin because they have been set free by the Son. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). This freedom that is spoken of is specific to Christians, but the many New Testament verses that mention it make it clear that freedom is important to God.

c. Justice and Mercy in the Bible

There are commands throughout the Law and the Prophets to be just and to defend the oppressed. These commands apply to governments and leaders, suggesting how they should treat their own people. Furthermore, they apply to all in regards to all. People everywhere should defend the oppressed, enact justice, and pursue compassion. Isaiah 1:17 says, “Learn to do right;
seek justice. Defend the oppressed.” Zechariah 7:9 says something similar: “This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another.’” The United States should encourage this behavior in other states when it is possible for us to do so, and the U.S. should defend those who oppressed. Ignoring the persecuted in the Middle East is not acceptable.

9. Policy Recommendations

Given the lack of religious freedom in the Middle East and the impact this has on the United States, there are several steps that our country can take. These policy recommendations are will aid in emphasizing the importance of religious freedom and in promoting it in the Middle east.

1. Make the promotion of religious freedom a priority in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

The importance of religious freedom must be recognized in U.S foreign policy towards the Middle East. There are other legitimate concerns that have taken priority in our Middle Eastern policies, however, if there is to be lasting stability or hope for democracy in that region, there must be freedom of religion. Freedom of religion sets the stage for other freedoms and for more peaceful societies. “Studies show a positive correlation between this freedom and civil and political rights, economic liberty, and personal and national security -- and a negative correlation with social conflict and state violence and repression.”46 The United States should include the promotion of religious freedom among its current focuses in the region.
Caveat to This Policy Recommendation

This policy recommendation does not rule out military intervention as a valid response to threats or human rights violations in the Middle East. Although the focus of the above policy recommendations is diplomacy through U.S. foreign policy, military intervention should not be ruled out. Romans 12:18 says “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” The United States, in its foreign policy, should be committed to peace. Of course, peace is not always possible without conflict. The United States must be ready to take up arms in defense of its citizens and in defense of what is right. However, as far a comprehensive policy towards the Middle East, the United States should seek solutions that emphasize religious freedom as foundational to peace. Promoting religious freedom through our foreign policy is extremely important because this freedom allows for democracy, humans rights and stability.

2. Elevate the importance of the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom within the State Department.

Although the promotion of religious freedom in the Middle East is exceedingly important to American interests, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom is not recognized as having a high level of importance in the State Department. When this position was vacated in 2011, it took the current U.S. administration nine months to nominate a candidate to fill the gap. Before that, it was vacant for two years before this administration chose the previous ambassador. If the U.S. is to make promoting religious freedom in the Middle East a greater priority, the Ambassador of Religious Freedom must be given greater importance and higher recognition.
3. There should be mandatory training of the U.S. diplomats engaged (or to be engaged) in the Middle East

Currently, the State Department does offer a course, through the Foreign Service Institute, that includes teaching on religious freedom for diplomats. However, this class is optional and lacks substance on promoting religious freedom. If the United States is to promote religious freedom in the Middle East, its front-line personnel should have a thorough understanding of what it means to have religious freedom and why religious freedom is such an important foundation. The training of U.S. diplomats is an undertaking that is supported by Thomas Farr, director of the Religious Freedom Project at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs. He says that this type of education for diplomats should occur at three stages: “when they enter the Foreign Service, when they receive “area studies” training prior to departing for post, and when they become Deputy Chiefs of Mission and Ambassadors.”

Furthermore, “this training should tell them what religious freedom is, why it is important for individuals and societies, why advancing it is important for America’s national interests, its status in the country and region to which they have been assigned, and how to advance it.” With an understanding of religious freedom and why it is important, U.S. diplomats will be better prepared to promote this freedom in the Middle East and help establish it as a priority in our foreign policy in the Middle East.

4. Clearly differentiate between “Radical Islam” and those Muslims who encourage a peaceful Islam

There is a difference between the Muslim religion and radical Islam, although the first often inspires the second. There are voices that want Islam to be tolerant and peaceful.
Unfortunately, they are drowned out in the Middle East. Appalling violence and harsh punishments are carried out in the name of Islam and they are inspired by Islam. However, this is radical Islam. The United States should not be afraid to condemn radical and intolerant Islam, but it should recognize that there are also those who want to live out this religion in a different way. The Obama Administration has not been able to clearly differentiate. Rather, the President has affirmed the peaceful side of Islam and refused to name the radical side. For example, President Obama has been hesitant to call ISIS a radical Muslim group. This is what they claim to be. The United States must be willing to recognize both radical Islam and peace-seeking Islam. Neither of these extremes should completely characterize Islam. Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayd, former Academic Director of the International Institute of Qur’anic Studies, said it this way:

“It is imperative that Muslims and non-Muslims alike free themselves from the framework of the fundamentalist’ monolithic discourse on Islam. Otherwise, we will either misjudge Islam by conflating it with the dominant discourse of the radicals…or we will adopt an unrealistic and apologetic stance, decontextualizing Islam from past and present circumstances, so as to convince ourselves that it is “purely a religion of peace,” divorced from the violence so often committed in its name.”

5. Participate in strategic alliances with regional actors to safeguard religious freedom

It is important for the United States to form and maintain strategic partnerships with states in the Middle East that are more committed to religious freedom and that oppose radical Islam. Israel is an extremely important regional ally. Arabs and Jews are both represented in Israel’s legislative body, the Knesset. It is a secular state where the rights of citizens of all religions are protected by law and upheld in the courts. It has only been recently that our close relationship with Israel has been called into question. In a region as turbulent and bereft of religious freedom as the Middle East, it is important that the United States maintain a good
connection with Israel, the only stable democracy. Another strategic parter in the fight against radical Islam is President el-Sisi of Egypt. He stands in opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS and has spoken against radical Islam. Finally, King Abdullah of Jordan is another strategic ally. While there is discrimination against religious minorities, the UN has found Jordan to be “a safe haven and voice of religious moderation.” The United States should be committed to strategic partnerships with countries and leaders who can help with the promotion of religious freedom in the Middle East.

Conclusion

Religious freedom is a foundational freedom that is significantly lacking in the Middle East. The Middle East (and North Africa) have a higher concentration of restrictions on region than any other region. People in Middle Eastern countries, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, continue to be punished for blasphemy and apostasy. Restrictions on religion hinder democracy, freedom and human rights. They serve to further political agendas and snuff out opposition. The lack of religious freedom in the Middle East has an effect on the United States and the world at large. Radical Muslims have taken it upon themselves to punish people outside their region for “insulting” Islam and want to restrict other states from speaking against their religion. The United States should do more to encourage religious freedom in the Middle East, as this is in our direct interest. Although this is not a comprehensive solution to all the conflicts and difficulties in the Middle East, it is important to the stability of that region. It is in the U.S.’s interest to promote freedom of religion in the Middle East for peace and for national security. The United States must not continue to ignore religious freedom as a irreplaceable foundation in the Middle East.
End Notes


37. slkdjf


Bibliography


Appendix

**Article 18 of the ICCPR**

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.

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.”

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**Excerpt from Thomas Jefferson’s letter to the Danbury Baptists, 1802**

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.