

## Remarks to the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief

United Nations Headquarters

March 1, 2019

Thomas F. Farr\*

Thanks to the NGO Committee for inviting me to speak this morning.

Two decades ago, when I began working in the new office of international religious freedom at the US State Department, there were very few civil society organizations fighting for international religious freedom. There were even fewer governments engaged in that fight.

Today, happily, that situation is changing. In 2019 there are literally scores of civil society organizations working in the field. And more governments are incorporating religious freedom into their respective foreign policies.

The reasons for this increased attention are clear. For some years we have been witnessing a global crisis in religious freedom. All the signs are there, and the data confirm them. The scourge of religious persecution is spreading. In virtually every region of the world, religious minorities are facing violent repression.

In many societies, disfavored members of the religious majority are also under persecution. In some countries, non-religious people are being persecuted for religious reasons -- a less-remarked but nonetheless toxic form of religious persecution. And the rise of religion-related terrorism has made the crisis all the more deadly, and all the more urgent.

Most of the violent persecution occurs outside the West. But the data show that religious freedom, which first emerged in the West, is increasingly at risk in Western democracies. This phenomenon does not get as much attention as it should, both for its own sake, and because the health of religious freedom in Western democracies has an impact on the effectiveness of religious freedom advocacy by Western foreign policies and civil society organizations.

My task today is to tell you how one civil society organization attempts to address this crisis. The Religious Freedom Institute where I work is just over three years old, but it is the product of decades of work by our leadership team, which is composed of four scholars with significant civil society experience. Two of us also served as senior government officials.

One of our key goals is to support other NGOs and governments that are engaging in this fight. Indeed, even though they are growing in number, we need more of them. Those of us who advocate for religious freedom for all have many adversaries, and much work to do. In short, we need all the help we can get.

---

\*Thomas F. Farr is President of the [Religious Freedom Institute](#). As an American diplomat, Farr was the first Director of the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom (1999-2003). He was an associate professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service (2007-18), and Director of the Religious Freedom Project at Georgetown's Berkley Center (2011-18).

## **The Nature of the Problem and Its Consequences**

Let's begin with how we at the Religious Freedom Institute define religion and religious freedom. We see religion as the search for religious truth natural to every human being. Religious freedom, then, means the right possessed by every person, and every religious community, to believe and live in accord with religious truth, while recognizing and protecting that right for all others. Because it is indispensable to human flourishing, the right of religious freedom must be protected in law and valued by culture.

We believe the terrible consequences of denying this right fall into two general categories. The first is vast human suffering -both physical and mental. Violent religious persecution is arguably the most destructive of assaults on human dignity. For one thing, it regularly manifests itself in acts of torture, rape, disappearance, unjust imprisonment, and murder.

But even non-violent denial of the right of religious freedom constitutes a profound harm to the human person. In a very real sense, the denial of religious liberty is to deny a person the right to live a fully human life. As a new member of our team put it to me earlier this week, it's like requiring that a person be "half human." Precisely so.

The second consequence of religious persecution is the shattering of justice and peace -- inside families and communities, within entire societies, and internationally. Religious persecution causes conflict and war, stimulates violent extremism and terrorism, destabilizes political systems, and stymies economic development.

## **How RFI Addresses the Global Crisis**

At RFI we support other efforts to reducing persecution, for example, the public identification of persecutors through reports, speeches, conferences and other vehicles. We engage in these efforts ourselves. We also enthusiastically support the heroic efforts of those groups who advocate for the persecuted and for the release of prisoners. We endorse the actions of governments who carefully consider the use of sanctions. When any of these approaches work, we applaud them.

But our years of working in this field have convinced us that these methods fall short of addressing the underlying causes of persecution, and are therefore unlikely to have a lasting impact. We have concluded that the only long-term, sustainable solution to this international crisis is to convince the stakeholders in persecuting societies of the value of religious freedom to them, that even moving in the direction of greater religious freedom can help virtually any society protect its own interests and achieve its own goals.

Over the past decade our leadership, working at Georgetown and Baylor universities, has led research by teams of scholars around the world on the meaning and value of religious freedom. We have built a substantial body of empirical and theoretical evidence, and have helped generate a new cohort of young scholars working in the field.

For example, our work in the field of violent extremism provided evidence that religious freedom can undermine religion-related terrorism. That work inspired a young scholar named Nilay Saiya, who has just published an outstanding book entitled: *Weapon of Peace: How*

*Religious Liberty Combats Terrorism.* We are hoping that Professor Saiya and his work will be featured this July at the second annual U.S. Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom.

Our work produced and confirmed other evidence of the social goods that religious freedom fosters. For example, religious freedom is good for economic growth. Over time it enhances social harmony and political stability. The evidence shows that permitting people to convert from one religion to another is good for societies. It is even good for religions themselves. It turns out that permitting your religion to be criticized and debated, so long as you respond with debate and not violence, makes your religion more vibrant and dynamic.

In 2016 we decided to take this mounting body of evidence out of the universities and into the world. The Religious Freedom Institute, or RFI, was the result. We continue the research. For example, we have just won a three-year grant from the Templeton Foundation to conduct a three-year study of the effects of religious freedom for institutions, rather than individuals alone.

But now we are employing our research “on the ground,” as it were, to make fact-based, empirically defensible arguments in target regions around the world, including the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, and North America.

We have Action Teams dedicated to each of these geographic areas, as well as functional Action Teams focused on Islam and Religious Freedom, and International Religious Freedom Policy.

Finally, RFI is standing up this year a new Center for Religious Freedom Education in the United States.

In each of these areas we begin our work with a careful study of the landscape. What are the obstacles to a full embrace of religious freedom? Who are the stakeholders and opinion shapers, inside government and in civil society? Who are the skeptics, and who the natural allies?

After assessing the landscape, we develop action plans across key sectors, including government, civil society, schools, business, and religion. We develop coalitions of stakeholders who see the advantages of religious freedom.

Let me end by giving you four brief examples of our work.

First, our Middle East Action Team is active in Iraq, where we are working to convince Iraqis that religious freedom for all their citizens is necessary for their own peace and stability. This means achieving equality between Shia and Sunni. But, of profound importance to the future of Iraq, it also means the return of non-Muslim Iraqi minorities who were put to flight by ISIS, including Christians and Yezidis.

These groups have suffered terribly and are much diminished. But if they are not induced to return to Iraq in greater numbers, and integrated into Iraqi society as equal citizens, the possibility of stabilizing pluralism in Iraq will disappear. That outcome would be catastrophic for Iraq, for the Middle East, and for international peace and security.

RFI’s role is to urge governments, especially the United States, to channel more of its assistance directly to these minority communities. Kent Hill, who heads our Middle East Action Team and

was a senior official in the US Agency for International Development, is heavily engaged in this effort. Within a year we hope to open an office of the Religious Freedom Institute in northern Iraq, and are working to help establish an Iraqi Center for Religious Freedom in Irbil.

The Middle East Action Team is also working with our Islam and Religious Freedom Team to conduct a series of consultations with stakeholders from Muslim-majority countries to explore the Islamic case for religious freedom for all their citizens. Next week, we will hold the second in an ongoing series of discussions designed to define and disseminate the Islamic case. Among other things, we will present the findings of a book by one of our affiliated scholars, Dan Philpott of Notre Dame, entitled *Religious Freedom in Islam*.

Second, our South and Southeast Asia Action Team, which established its offices in Bangalore India last summer, has already convened three major regional conferences of stakeholders to consider the advantages of religious freedom for their respective societies, and to work for its adoption. These conferences included representatives from governments and civil society, and drew upon the rich spectrum of religions in the region, including Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Christians.

This team is led by Timothy and Rebecca Shah. Tim is one of our founders, and one of the best and most dynamic minds in the field. Rebecca's research on the value of religious freedom for Dalit women, and the positive effects on India of their empowerment, has had a dramatic and salutary impact. Again, note our model. Study the subject. Develop evidence. Find stakeholders who see they have a problem and are looking for solutions. Provide the evidence in ways that can be heard and, ultimately, accepted.

Third, our International Religious Freedom Action Team is producing a religious freedom training program for diplomats, parliamentarians, and civil society groups. That effort is being led by the head of our Canadian affiliate -- the Religious Freedom Institute of Cardus -- former Canadian Ambassador for International Religious Freedom Andrew Bennett. Many of you know Andrew. He is among the outstanding diplomatic minds and diplomatic practitioners in the field.

Finally, I mentioned that the data show religious freedom in decline in the West. That includes my own country, the United States, where the problems include growing anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Christian bias. We are confronting this problem in several ways.

You may have read of the Supreme Court case heard earlier this week about whether a Christian memorial built to honor America's dead in World War One could remain on public land. The head of our Islam and Religious Freedom Action Team, Ismail Royer, provided the Court an Islamic argument for why that cross should be permitted to remain.

More broadly, our Center for Religious Freedom Education is developing curricula and other programs for high schools and universities across our country. Our goal is to educate the next generation of American leaders concerning their nation's historic commitment to religious freedom for everyone. We aim to remind them why it is necessary -- not only for individual citizens and groups, religious and not, but for the health of American society.

The Center's programs include a four-year project called the *American Charter of Freedom of Religion and Conscience*, led by another of our founders, Baylor University professor Byron

Johnson, director of Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion, and one of the leading sociologists of religion in the world. That Charter restates the principles of religious freedom as understood at America's founding. It has been endorsed by a wide variety of Americans across the political and religious spectrum. We are adapting it into curricula for secondary and university level schools in the United States. Over the long-term, we hope to induce other nations to develop their own charters, drawing upon their own respective histories and understandings of this universal right.

In conclusion, let me repeat the premise on which the Religious Freedom Institute bases its work. Religious freedom for everyone is not a boutique issue, a nice-to-have, optional human right. It is *necessary* for each of us, and for each of our societies, to flourish.

Without religious freedom for all of us, none of us is truly free.

Thank you.