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How Should the US Government Respond to Global Religious Trends?

February 12, 2024

A report by the Task Force on Religion and US Foreign Policy

In 2008, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs's Task Force on Religion and the Making of US Foreign Policy was formed to "advance understanding of the role of religion in world affairs and to develop a framework to appropriately integrate religion into U.S. foreign policy." In this capacity, it assembles experts in the fields of religion and international affairs to discuss new and more effective ways of thinking about US foreign policy engagement with religious actors and communities worldwide.

Six Trends in Religion and Global Affairs

In its 2010 report, *Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for US Foreign Policy*, the task force points out several trends that signify religion's rising importance in global affairs. These are:

1. The growing influence of religious groups in politics, culture, business, science, and other sectors.
2. Changes in global religious identification.

3. The increasing impact of globalization, both in favor and in opposition to religion
4. The significant role of religion in responding to economic and political situations in which governments lack legitimacy and capacity.
5. The instrumentality of religion by political extremists.
6. The centrality of the struggle for religious freedom in social and political conflict.

Task Force Recommendations:

The task force's report includes a number of recommendations for US foreign policymakers to capitalize on the trends in global religious affairs. They are:

1. Build the US government's capacity to engage with global religious engagement.
2. Mandate religious literacy training for US government officials.
3. Clarify that the First Amendment does not prohibit government engagement with religious groups.
4. The U.S. government should engage with religious political parties even if they oppose U.S. foreign policy.
5. Engage with religious communities on the social level, not just the diplomatic level.
6. Promote US commitment to religious freedom.
7. Promote democracy in religious communities.
8. Work with the United Nations, G8, G20, World Bank, and other multinational organizations in the interest of religious engagement.

A Critical Perspective

President Obama’s historic speech in Cairo on June 4, 2009, with its promise to engage with Muslim communities, was an important step in the right direction. Now, we must develop a strategy to engage religious communities of all faiths when relevant to pressing foreign policy challenges and build the institutional capacity to support it.

—Marshall M. Bouton, Chicago Council President, foreword to *Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for US Foreign Policy*.

While Bouton marks Obama’s speech as an important “step in the right direction” for engaging religious communities after the disastrous US invasion of Iraq, scholars of religion do not universally share this perspective. This is especially true in light of the major foreign policy challenges and missteps by the US government that have unfolded since 2009. As Brookings Institution senior fellow Shadi Hamid wrote in a [2017 reflection](#), “Today, the Cairo speech is discussed, if at all, as a symbol of the gap between what the Obama administration might have been and what it actually was.” Furthermore, in a March 2019 conference held by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Peter Mandaville pointed out that Obama’s Cairo speech showed little of the nuance that would have been necessary to chart a truly effective new course in US Middle East policy. Instead, he argued,

This is essentially the US government projecting “Muslim-ness” of some sort onto a billion-plus people. The United States government is saying...for all intents and purposes in our policymaking and programmatic initiatives...Senegalese, Indonesians, Turkish people, Jordanians, have all been turned into “Muslims” in the US foreign policy gaze.

The continued challenges faced by the US when it comes to religious engagement begs an important questions: Is it enough for the US government to try to capitalize on global trends to serve its own interests? What happens when US policy goals are directly at odds with the interests of other people throughout the world, including religious communities? And what does a foreign policy look like that prioritizes the well-being of humanity as a whole rather than the objectives of a particular government?

You can read the full report by the Task Force on Religion and the Making of US Foreign Policy below.

[engaging_religious_communities_abroadDownload](#)