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INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ADVOCACY
IN A TIME OF DISRUPTION:

A ROADMAP

FOR CIVIL SOCIETY & FAITH ACTORS

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STANDING WITH THE PERSECUTED.

ADVOCATING FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM.



INTRODUCTION

Conflict, mass migration, the weakening of global standards, the retreat of Western nations from human rights, and the rise of authoritarianism have led to unprecedented disruption. These global circumstances have contributed to widespread religious persecution affecting Christians and other faith communities worldwide. Disruption of international relations is the new normal in our young 21st century.

This disruption places the international religious freedom movement at a perilous moment. Over the past 20 years, an array of institutions and networks have emerged to protect and promote religious freedom for everyone, everywhere, all buttressed by an interlocking network of international and regional standards. Efforts to advance international religious freedom (IRF), also referred to as freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), achieved unprecedented gains. While a remarkable development, the movement now faces extraordinary challenges. Global instability is increasing, institutional and financial support is declining, and unrelenting persecution continues to impact every faith community somewhere. At the same time, political priorities in the United States and Europe are shifting back towards hard interests, reverting to the historical norm in foreign affairs.

In this moment of disruption, our report explores how advocates for religious freedom should respond and move forward. Global relations as we knew them are giving way to something else, yet to be determined. Given the multifold challenges, relying on past approaches will not arrest the rising tide of persecution impacting Christians and others around the world. New ideas are needed. We must not wait until the entire system collapses. Hoping the situation will get better is not a plan.

Not long ago, the circumstances felt different. During the second half of the 20th century, respect for human rights expanded. Spurred by the horrors of the Holocaust and the industrial murder of Jews and others because of their religion and ethnicity, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in December 1948. It was a unique moment in history. No longer were people subjected to the whims of their rulers, but holders of enumerated rights that governments were duty bound to protect.

With the UDHR, nations of the world recognized the “inherent dignity” and “equal and inalienable rights of

all members of the human family” as “the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” It explained how “disregard and contempt for human rights ... resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind.” For the first time, countries pledged “universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,” to create a world “in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want.”

The UDHR established freedom of religion or belief as a foundational human right. Article 18 proclaimed that, “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.” The definition set forth a capacious understanding of religious freedom beyond worship, encompassing the right to pursue truth as one’s conscience leads, to change faith, to share faith, and to teach faith.



The UDHR and international human rights agreements that followed have played an invaluable role by defining right from wrong. Certainly, the standards proclaimed more than 75 years ago have often been respected only in the breach. But we can identify violations because of these benchmarks, as without the UDHR, everything becomes relative. It is, as its drafters wrote, “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations.”

At the dawn of the 21st century, the arc of the universe seemed to be bending towards justice, to borrow from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The disruption of

the past quarter century has undermined pillars that felt unshakeable. Conflicts in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia have distracted policymakers and lessened resources. All the while, religious persecution daily victimizes people of every faith and none somewhere. Escalating human rights violations have led some to question the effectiveness and necessity of the UDHR and its progeny.

The United States played a pivotal, if not indispensable, leadership role to advance religious freedom globally, of which Americans should be proud. Advocates developed an array of tools to prevent or deter persecution, thus empowering U.S. diplomacy to set captives free and encourage reform of oppressive systems. Yet these changes have not been transformative, and persecution has continued or found new victims. For many Americans, exhaustion with global turmoil has bolstered calls for withdrawal. However, the pullback from religious freedom promotion by the U.S. and other Western governments further accelerates dangerous trends of violent persecution on account of religion or belief.

To prevent these achievements from becoming historical anomalies, we convened a series of conversations to explore proactive actions civil society can take to advance religious freedom for all. We interviewed a wide array of advocates, academics, and former government officials in Washington DC, London, and virtually. Conversations explored how to salvage what's been undermined, stabilize what's worth keeping, and build to meet expanding challenges.

Broad interest in international religious freedom is cause for hope. Religious freedom has often been the entry point for Christians in general, and Baptists in particular, into human rights work. As we mark the 250th year of the United States, many of the key religious freedom protections established during the time of America's founders involved Baptists, who advocated for broad religious freedom and church-state separation. Baptist advocates were involved with the UN as well: in 1943, Baptist leader J.M. Dawson brought petitions of 100,000 Baptists to San Francisco to urge the inclusion of religious freedom guarantees into the UN Charter. While unsuccessful, a few years later, the UDHR included expansive protection of the right.

Baptists are not alone in this commitment to religious freedom for all. The protection and promotion of religious freedom at home and abroad is an American value, shared across the political and belief spectrum. This broad support led the United States to champion this issue worldwide, working alongside other nations that also value this foundational right.

Religious freedom matters because it reflects our values, but also because it reflects our national interests. When nations respect the right of their citizens to believe (or not believe) as their conscience leads, they are more stable, more entrepreneurial, and better partners. When discrimination or violence on account of faith is allowed, it can cause unrest, drive people towards extremism and violence, and trigger mass migration. Studies indicate that societies that provide religious freedom are less likely to create violent terrorists bent on destroying human rights standards and minority protections. In our integrated yet fractured world, what happens overseas doesn't stay overseas.

Our goal in this report is to help international religious freedom advocates navigate this turbulent moment. We write as Americans wanting our country to revive its commitment and reinvest with diplomatic, political, and financial support. But we also write to a global audience of like-minded supporters of freedom of religion or belief. Mindful of these audiences, we asked our interviewees a series of open-ended questions: how can we proactively steward the various IRF/FoRB networks established over the last decade, so they can survive, if not thrive? How can we ensure they are properly positioned, resourced, and structured to be effective? What tangible acts or changes can we bring about with limited resources and political support?

The following pages will recap the growth of the movement to advance religious freedom for all, encapsulate our interview findings, and provide a roadmap of principles, instead of policy recommendations, that advocates should consider to move forward in a positive direction.

*In this moment of disruption, new ideas are needed.
We must not wait until the entire system collapses.
Our report explores how advocates for religious
freedom should respond and move forward.*

THE TRAJECTORY OF THE IRF MOVEMENT

Today's global movement to advance international religious freedom took years to develop. It started in 1998, when, spurred by a diverse coalition of civil society and religious actors, the U.S. Congress enacted the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). This innovative measure required the U.S. government to promote religious freedom abroad. The law established an Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and an Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF Office) at the State Department. It required the State Department to issue an annual report on conditions in foreign countries (the IRF Report) and to impose consequences on violators, including annual designations of "countries of particular concern" (CPCs). It also specified that religious freedom concerns be incorporated into U.S. government training, programs, refugee resettlement, and multilateral diplomacy. Additionally, IRFA established a bipartisan advisory body, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), to monitor conditions, evaluate U.S. IRF policy, and make recommendations. IRFA defined religious freedom in accordance with international standards, as set out in documents such as the UDHR.

The Early Years

By the law's fifteenth anniversary in 2013, it was clear that U.S. IRF policy needed improvement. Although every administration since 1998 had highlighted religious freedom to varying degrees in its reports, national security strategies, and senior officials' statements, none had implemented IRFA to its full potential. The Ambassador-at-Large and IRF Office sat lower in the State Department's bureaucracy than other ambassadors and offices with global mandates, with a small staff and little program money. IRF training for U.S. diplomats was available, but optional. The State Department issued the IRF Report each year, but CPC designations had become sporadic. Until 2006, the Department generally named CPCs annually, and it used designations, or the threat thereof, to spur improvements, including policy changes and prisoner releases in Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, and Turkmenistan. From 2007 to 2015, however, it issued only three sets of CPCs (in 2009, 2011, and 2014). When issued, the designations rarely carried policy consequences; instead, the State Department, across administrations, relied on pre-existing sanctions or waivers (a practice that, regrettably, has continued to this day). The CPC list also had stagnated, with few additions or removals, and the disparity between the State Department's CPC designations and USCIRF's CPC recommendations grew.

Complex Problems and New Partners

Meanwhile, the global landscape of religious persecution had become more complicated. Violations through government action or inaction, which were IRFA's focus, remained all too common, particularly in authoritarian states and illiberal democracies. In addition, nonstate actors posed increasing threats, especially in situations of conflict, instability, or state failure. Beginning in 2009, annual Pew Research Center studies, based on data from the IRF Report and other sources, showed that the number of countries with very high or high restrictions on religion, or with very high or high social hostilities involving religion, generally climbed. In 2014, ISIS's rampage through northern Iraq served as a horrific reminder of the impact of religiously motivated violence and how challenging it is to prevent or punish.

In this context, governments, legislators, and civil society actors in multiple countries, including Canada and European states, embarked on or enhanced their own efforts to promote religious freedom abroad. Several countries and the European Union appointed religious freedom ambassadors or special envoys and allocated funding to the issue. Working with USCIRF and a group of non-governmental organizations, a diverse group of parliamentarians founded a global network, the International Panel of Parliamentarians on Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB). Other civil society networks emerged, too, out of efforts launched in Washington, DC. Multifaith, multiparty groups of NGOs working on IRF/FoRB issues in various cities, including Washington, London, and Brussels, grew and became more active.

Improved U.S. Policy and Emerging International Collaboration

During 2015 and 2016, U.S. IRF policy began to take a more positive trajectory, and multilateral coordination among like-minded governments increased. The Obama administration resumed an annual CPC process following each IRF Report. The designations restarted in 2016, including Tajikistan as a new CPC. After that, designations were made annually until 2023, although their record in motivating improvements has remained mixed. 2016 also saw the State Department announce that ISIS was responsible for genocide and crimes against humanity against Yazidis, Christians, and Shi'a Muslims in areas it controlled in Iraq and Syria—the first new U.S. genocide determination since 2004. During this timeframe, Congress increased the IRF Office's funding, allowing it to expand its staff, programs, and training. IRF program funding more than doubled, to \$10 million annually.

Additionally, to capitalize on various governments' heightened interest, in 2015 Canada established the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (Contact Group) as a forum for information-sharing and collaboration, and invited the United States to co-chair it in 2016. This led to greater joint or coordinated activity on shared IRF concerns, including at the UN Human Rights Council and on individual cases.

This period also brought important U.S. legal changes. In December 2016, the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act (Wolf Act) amended IRFA to address implementation concerns and update the law's tools. This included requiring that the Ambassador-at-Large report directly to the Secretary of State; setting deadlines for CPC designations and limiting the use of indefinite waivers; adding a "Special Watch List" (SWL) designation for governments and an "Entity of Particular Concern" (EPC) designation for nonstate actors; and mandating IRF training for all foreign service officers. In addition, the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, enacted the same month, created new targeted sanctions (asset freezes and visa bans) that could be used against individual religious freedom violators.

The United States played a pivotal, if not indispensable, leadership role to advance religious freedom globally, of which Americans should be proud.



The Peak Years

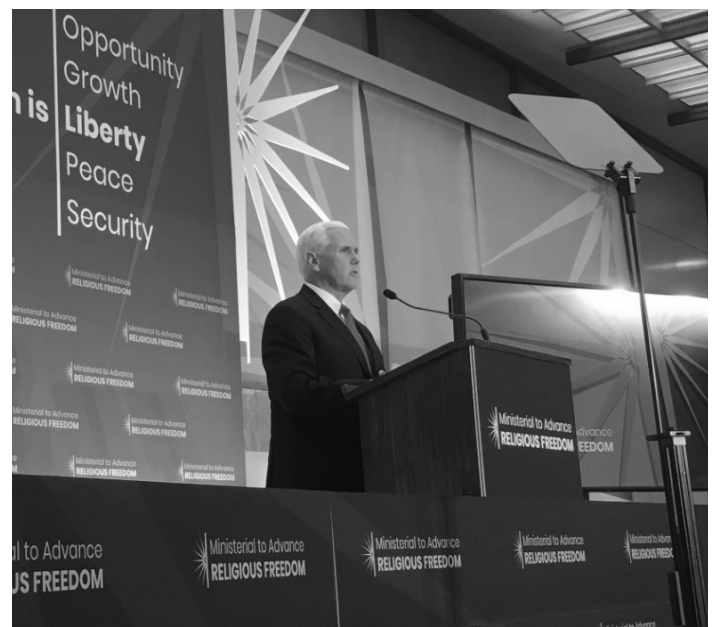
From this foundation, the first Trump administration took U.S. IRF policy to unprecedented levels. Its 2017 national security strategy, a [2020 executive order](#), and various public statements emphasized the administration's prioritization of religious freedom abroad. It elevated the IRF Office within the State Department's [bureaucracy](#) and appointed senior officials focused on IRF at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the National Security Council (NSC). Congress provided increased funding for the IRF Office, raising it to \$25 million per year, and USAID began dedicating \$25 million annually to IRF-related programs. The 2020 executive order on IRF mandated that this level of program funding continue. USAID also expanded humanitarian aid for persecuted religious communities abroad and entered into new partnerships with religious groups. At the same time, however, the administration initially suspended and then progressively reduced the U.S. refugee resettlement program, leading to fewer vulnerable refugees receiving this protection, including fewer [persecuted Christians](#).

IRFA designations continued annually, with 2017 bringing the first SWL designation (Pakistan) and 2018 the first EPC designations. There were two long-overdue additions to the State Department's CPC list: Pakistan in 2018 and Nigeria in 2020, albeit with waivers in both cases. In addition, reforms after new leaders took office in two longtime CPCs resulted in the State Department moving Uzbekistan to the SWL in 2018, Sudan to that list in 2019, and removing both from the list in 2020. Meanwhile, the administration began imposing individual sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act and a related [executive order](#), including against egregious religious freedom violators in several countries. Additionally, the State Department reiterated the genocide determination relating to [ISIS in Iraq](#) and later [determined](#) that the Chinese government had committed genocide and crimes against humanity against the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

The first Trump administration also heightened international collaboration on IRF issues. The United States launched and hosted Ministerial conferences on advancing religious freedom in [2018](#) and [2019](#), convening government leaders, civil society advocates, and survivors, as well as a [high-level event](#) at the UN General Assembly in 2019. In 2020, it founded a new governmental network, the [International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance](#) (IRFBA), later renamed the [Article 18 Alliance](#) (Alliance), which the IRF Office supported as secretariat. Yet at the same time, the Trump administration withdrew from the

UN Human Rights Council, where prior administrations of both parties had worked to advance initiatives to promote religious freedom, oppose harmful measures, raise concerns in specific countries, and support the work of the [UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#).

The Biden administration maintained many of these IRF policies. The 2022 national security strategy and senior officials' statements cited religious freedom as a human rights priority, and the IRF Office remained in its elevated position. IRF programs through the State Department and USAID continued, including those initiated during the Trump years, with funding at the level set by the 2020 executive order. The United States also continued to provide significant humanitarian aid to displaced religious communities. Building on the prior administration's efforts, USAID released its first [policy on strategic religious engagement](#). As a steering committee member and through the IRF Office's role as secretariat, the United States actively participated in the Alliance, which held additional Ministerials and increased its focus on individual cases. Additionally, the Biden administration resumed U.S. participation at the UN Human Rights Council, where it sponsored and supported initiatives on religious freedom generally and on specific countries. It also restarted and began to rebuild the U.S. refugee program and included persecuted religious minority communities among its resettlement priorities.



The State Department made annual IRFA designations during the Biden administration's first three years. Although it released the IRF report as usual in mid-2024 (covering conditions in 2023), it failed to issue designations that year or before the administration left office in early 2025. In its three sets of designations, the administration added Russia as a new CPC in 2021 and Cuba and Nicaragua in 2022. However, it removed Nigeria's CPC designation in 2021 and did not name it as a CPC or a SWL country thereafter, despite no improvement in country conditions. The Biden administration used targeted sanctions authorities against egregious religious freedom violators from various countries, in some cases in coordination with allies with similar sanctions programs. In addition, the Biden administration recognized three genocides with direct or indirect religious connections: genocide and crimes against humanity committed by the Burmese military against the Rohingya community, the Ottoman genocide of Armenians during World War I, and the genocide in Sudan by the Rapid Support Forces.

This timeframe also saw robust civil society engagement. The activities and membership of the U.S.-based civil society forum, the IRF Roundtable, grew, and a formal organization, the IRF Secretariat, was established to lead and staff the previously informal network. The Roundtable's meetings increased in frequency, with the Trump and Biden administrations' IRF ambassadors participating regularly during their tenures, along with IRF Office staff. Through virtual meetings during and after the pandemic, the Roundtable's participation expanded to include NGOs based outside Washington and the United States. The IRF Secretariat assisted NGOs in a range of countries in setting up local roundtables, established an academic advisory panel, and sought to build partnerships with businesses and media organizations. Additionally, a group of NGOs launched an annual civil-society-led conference, the IRF Summit, chaired by the bipartisan duo of former IRF Ambassador-at-Large Sam Brownback and former USCIRF Chair Katrina Lantos Swett.



Current Challenges

While the IRF movement's peak years saw real successes, advocates for IRF and other human rights also faced increasing headwinds that continue to this day. Globally, authoritarianism was rising and democracy declining. Intolerant ideologies were gaining influence. Religious nationalism was spreading in diverse contexts. New and longstanding conflicts caused human misery and economic and geopolitical disruption. Displacement and migration reached unprecedented levels, while the willingness to welcome refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants decreased in North America and Europe. In the face of these pressures, international institutions struggled to fulfill their mandates to address transnational problems and advance peace, security, and human rights.

When President Trump took office again in January 2025, many observers expected that IRF policy would remain a key U.S. focus, given his first administration's record and his appointment of Marco Rubio, a leader on IRF issues in the Senate, as Secretary of State. Instead, it quickly became apparent that the second Trump administration's foreign policy would center on U.S. military force, economic power, and territorial security, and deemphasize the alliances, values, and soft power tools relied on by prior administrations of both parties in the years since World War II. The 2025 National Security Strategy discussed religious freedom as a core right of Americans, not a universal right prioritized in U.S. foreign policy, and expressed skepticism toward human rights and democracy promotion abroad. Although some senior officials highlighted IRF's importance, including at the 2025 and 2026 IRF Summits, the administration's religious freedom activity was largely focused domestically, including through a new White House Religious Liberty Commission and a Task Force on anti-Christian bias.

To implement its vision of America's role in the world, the second Trump administration reshaped the institutions and practices of U.S. foreign policy, including those relevant to IRF policy. Within its first several weeks, it halted U.S. foreign assistance, including the State Department's and USAID's IRF programs; began dismantling USAID as a standalone agency; suspended the U.S. refugee resettlement program (which it later restarted for Afrikaner South Africans only); limited other avenues to access humanitarian protection; effectively closed the United States Institute of Peace; and withdrew the United States from the UN Human Rights Council. Thereafter, it rapidly reduced USAID's functions and staff to the minimum level required by statute, which

it incorporated into a reorganized and downsized State Department. The administration cut the functions and staff of the State Department's human rights bureau and shifted responsibility for human rights issues to its regional bureaus, which lacked relevant expertise and typically prioritized relationship-maintenance over rights concerns. The reorganization demoted the IRF Office into the human rights bureau, where it sat before its elevation in the first Trump term, and cut some of its staff.

As the largest financial supporter of international religious freedom efforts, the U.S. government's abrupt halt and subsequent cuts to its IRF-related assistance harmed the programs' beneficiaries and implementers, and undercut the IRF advocacy community. The administration did not disclose how many and which IRF programs it terminated, but USCIRF reported that it was a "a significant portion" and included programs to counter restrictive laws; support early warning systems for religious violence; promote interfaith dialogue; document violations; provide emergency assistance to religious freedom activists; and provide humanitarian aid to persecuted communities. The State Department did not issue any public notices of new funding opportunities for IRF programs in 2025, but did issue one for an emergency assistance program in January 2026, and two focused on Nigeria in May 2026. Meanwhile, various European states, grappling with security concerns and the changed transatlantic relationship, reduced their own foreign assistance spending on development, humanitarian aid, and human rights. Among them were countries funding IRF activities, including Alliance members, further shrinking the institutional support available for advancing religious freedom abroad.

The second Trump administration has also left a leadership vacuum at the State Department due to the absence of an Ambassador-at-Large. After the Senate failed to act on former Congressman Mark Walker's nomination for the position, President Trump in January 2026 appointed Walker as the State Department's Principal Advisor for Global Religious Freedom, a new role without ambassadorial rank, which Mr. Walker held for three months. As of the time of publication, a second nominee for Ambassador-at-Large had not yet been named, leading to what will likely be the second longest vacancy since the position's creation in 1998. The administration did not appoint an official on IRF within the NSC staff, which it downsized as part of its reorganization efforts. In addition,

the Administration has not filled the three White House seats on USCIRF, one of which has been vacant since May 2025 and the other two since May 2026.

For the first time since the passage of IRFA, the State Department failed to release an annual IRF Report in 2025, thus missing an entire year. As of our writing, the IRF Reports covering conditions in 2024 and in 2025, due on or around May 1 of 2025 and 2026, respectively, had not been issued. No other organization documents global religious freedom conditions as comprehensively, and the Report's absence was felt by the officials, journalists, lawyers, academics, activists, and others who rely on its information. A unique but underappreciated tool of U.S. diplomacy that engages every country in the world has been seemingly ignored. These trends were also documented by the non-partisan Congressional Research Service in its review of IRFA implementation. Overall, missing two years is unprecedented.

As of our writing, the State Department had also not made IRFA designations, continuing the trend from the last year of the Biden administration. President Trump, however, designated Nigeria as a CPC in October 2025 and threatened to withhold U.S. assistance and take military action. The designation itself was merited and prompted the Nigerian government to engage with the U.S. government about needed actions, but the selective

and belligerent framing, citing violence against “our CHERISHED Christians” and not IRF standards, was problematic. Although the second Trump administration has not used the Global Magnitsky Act or the related executive order to impose sanctions on any religious freedom violators, it announced a new policy to deny U.S. visas to “individuals who have directed, authorized, significantly supported, participated in, or carried out violations of religious freedom and, where appropriate, their immediate family members.” However, the scope of its application is unclear.

The United States remained an IRFBA member, and the IRF Office served as its secretariat. By June 2026, the Alliance had grown from its initial 27 members to 38, though a smaller number actively participated. Members' enthusiasm seemed to wane in recent years, as their foreign policies increasingly focused on other global issues. The chair's term was due to end in January 2026, but the Czech Special Envoy continued in the position while members worked to identify a successor. The cuts to IRF-related spending by the United States and others also did not bode well for maintaining an active Alliance. Meanwhile, the IRF Secretariat faced its own financial challenges; its five-year grant from a private foundation had ended, leaving it to seek other funding sources. This, too, had implications for IRFBA, because the IRF Secretariat had supported and assisted with some of its work.

While the IRF movement's peak years saw real successes, advocates for IRF and other human rights also faced increasing headwinds that continue to this day.

INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Within this context, our interviews, held in late 2025 and early 2026 in Washington DC, London, and virtually, sought to understand the concerns of a wide array of experts, academics, activists, and former government officials. Overall, there was broad agreement that diminishing political and financial support threaten to reverse or stall recent gains, while religious persecution continues at crisis levels. Several points of inflection emerged not as isolated challenges but as structural shifts that constrain avenues for the IRF movement. Despite these obstacles, opportunities also emerged for creating new or refined approaches that advance IRF goals.

Both the first Trump administration and the Biden administration placed a high priority on assisting individuals unjustly imprisoned or otherwise targeted for their religion or belief. The State Department's engagement was often accompanied by advocacy from the U.S. Congress, USCIRF, IRFBA and its members, IPPFoRB, and civil society actors. These efforts led to positive outcomes in several cases, including releases and, at times, relocations to safer countries, including the United States. These hard-won victories were lifesaving for the individuals involved and deserve celebrating. Even so, case-by-case efforts, important as they are, do not address the root causes of persecution and discrimination, which are complex, context-specific, and difficult to change.

To meet today's challenges, we asked discussants for ideas on how to salvage and stabilize what remains, as well as how to take new efforts forward. The interviews sought diverse perspectives and insights. The sentiments and ideas were rooted in experience and expectation, largely motivated by a shared sense of urgency to adapt and rebuild.

Impact of the U.S. Retreat

Interview participants on both sides of the Atlantic bemoaned the leadership vacuum created by the second Trump administration's withdrawal of the United States from its traditional role in promoting religious freedom. They noted the IRF movement's diminished priority in U.S. foreign policy, especially compared to the first Trump administration, as seen in (1) the reductions in U.S. government funding and staffing and the gaps in long-standing annual IRF documents and designations; (2) the absence of an Ambassador-at-Large and uncertainty around leadership in multilateral bodies; and (3) weak congressional and executive prioritization of IRF. They saw these shifts as problematic not just in and of themselves, but because of how heavily the global movement has relied on the United States' institutional architecture as a central organizing and funding force.

Interviewees noted that the abrupt changes left advocates with fewer allies at a time of consistent persecution and disempowered groups on the front lines. Many saw traditional U.S. diplomatic efforts and assistance as advancing both American values and interests. As one said, "U.S. exceptionalism came from American generosity." While some believed that the United States, even at a reduced level of engagement, is still a major player, the reliance on U.S. leadership was felt most

acutely in its absence. As one noted, "if IRF is not a priority for the U.S., why would it be for Europe?" Another pointed out that religious freedom is "not a dispensable freedom or a luxury," but governments are acting as if it is. Many questioned how the international human rights movement would recover from the changes spurred by the United States. One surmised, "there is no going back after the second Trump presidency."

Participants wanted to see Congress and USCIRF undertake more vigorous oversight of the administration's failure to uphold IRFA. Neither has consistently highlighted these IRFA shortcomings. In addition, the 2025 appropriations bill provided roughly \$40 million for IRF, but it is unclear how it will be spent. Oversight is needed. Tied to this was a recurring frustration that the IRF world as a whole lacks coherent plans to meet this moment. One participant compared the IRF agenda's drift against the long-term approach of climate change activism.

IRFBA as an Example

Interviewees often cited IRFBA as emblematic of decreased U.S. interest. A priority initiative of the first Trump administration, U.S. engagement with IRFBA lessened over time, a trend that started in the Biden administration and accelerated in the second Trump term. Even as the Alliance remains one of the IRF movements' key diplomatic achievements, participants questioned whether it has realized its potential, noting declining momentum, diminished institutional support, and broader questions surrounding the absence of U.S. leadership.

Participants debated ways to enhance IRFBA's effectiveness. Many wanted to see IRFBA become more action-driven, moving beyond releasing statements and organizing events. Some asked whether a more distributed model of stewardship is necessary, focusing instead on IRFBA member embassies in countries of concern. While its internal structure is stable, there was shared skepticism that it has turned that strength into collective, coordinated action. Interviewees felt that the Alliance must be clearer about its purpose and must act. Greater dedication among IRFBA members is needed too. IRF advocates explaining its value as a unique multilateral tool for diplomatic action to member state foreign ministries could help revitalize participation.

The concerns about IRFBA raise a deeper question: has the IRF movement become better at building institutions than at deploying them? The IRF community cannot be just about creating networks and forums and releasing statements. If structures cannot deliver sufficient policy outcomes and demonstrate improvements in country conditions, they must be reevaluated and refitted. They should not exist just for the sake of existing. With resources and funding increasingly scarce, future IRFBA work must demonstrate impact, not merely participation or good internal dialogue.

Who Will Step Forward?

The conversations considered whether European actors or regional institutions might assume greater responsibility for sustaining engagement. This would include nontraditional partners and civil society networks. Over-reliance on the United States, or the perception of it, has fostered domestic mistrust of international institutions and alliances. There was consensus on the need to cultivate broader partnerships and develop regionally grounded leadership within the IRF movement.

The United States has led many of the multilateral IRF efforts for years, with European partners doing more in the last decade. Yet, participants noted that declining confidence in international institutions make it more difficult to generate meaningful collective action. Many governments continue to affirm religious freedom, but this has not always translated into coordinated policy responses. There was a sense that the various existing forums have become overly focused on statements or declarations rather than practical solutions.

This opened conversations about how to revive these spaces as legitimate actors in promoting and protecting religious freedom on the ground. Some felt this could begin by articulating religious freedom not as a separate, specialized concern but part of a bundle of interconnected rights (including freedom of expression, movement, assembly, and more) that reinforce each other. Many saw a need to demonstrate more concretely how freedom of religion or belief contributes to the broader human rights framework and the protection of human dignity and flourishing. The case is compelling that religious freedom promotes peace, democracy, and social cohesion, but IRF champions must articulate it.

"We've seen the IRF agenda take off and then tail off, but we are not at a standing start."

Religious Nationalism and Divisions at Home

Participants viewed religious nationalism as both an internal and external challenge for the IRF movement. Religious nationalism turns the agenda from “religious freedom for all” to “religious freedom for mine.” President Trump’s language, for instance, in naming Nigeria as a CPC focused almost exclusively on Christians and was framed paternalistically, rather than as based on individual human rights. One participant worried about this trend accelerating: “What if the religious freedom world is no longer aligned with the U.S. government? Will the United States be helpful or work against religious freedom for all?” Employing the language of religious nationalism leads to perceptions of selective advocacy, which undermines credibility and makes building coalitions more difficult. The administration’s decision to respond to legitimate concerns about violence against a particular group does not indicate abandonment of the commitment to defend all religious communities who suffer on account of belief. If a Christian is persecuted for their beliefs, the United States should speak out, just like it should if a Yezidi, Hindu, or Muslim is persecuted. But when one group is exclusively emphasized, regardless of the legitimacy of the need, while others who are suffering are not elevated, the selective advocacy narrative rings true.

Interviewees also raised concern about blurred lines between U.S. domestic religious liberty and international religious freedom. The negative portrayal of certain groups at home can affect the understanding and willingness to advocate for persecuted groups abroad. Prejudice, misinformation, hateful statements, and ignorance about other communities can drive discrimination and violence. In addition, the risk of false equivalences between nuanced domestic debates and life-or-death situations abroad further muddies the waters. Similarly, domestic immigration debates, both in the United States and Europe, now center on questions of migration, security, and governance, rather than human rights concerns. Asylum protections and refugee resettlement are no longer seen as a tool to assist people persecuted for their beliefs, but in the context of border management and societal cohesion.

Thus, several interviewees mentioned the need to explain why IRF matters to a broader domestic audience. There was a sense that human rights generally, and religious freedom in particular, are seen as elitist concerns irrelevant to the challenges families and communities face every day. With this, participants observed growing skepticism towards international human rights frameworks across the political spectrum, and in certain contexts, international religious freedom has become entangled in this skepticism, rolled within broader debates over social and cultural issues. The misapplication of religious freedom as a tool to advance a particular political agenda harms understanding of the human rights framework as a whole. At times, neither the political right nor left has been inclusive of the other side due to philosophical differences on broader issues.

The conversations also discussed the inconsistent application of norms as another reason for increased skepticism of the international human rights system. Standards become discredited when a state-based system fails to hold states accountable. Some felt the answer is working to localize these norms, but did not identify a clear path for doing so. Even so, many participants emphasized that these shared concerns indicate that the IRF movement’s future cannot depend on the political will or actions of a single government.

Case-by-case efforts, important as they are, do not address the root causes of persecution and discrimination.

Emerging Opportunities

Many of the IRF movement's tools and institutions were developed to respond to official action: governments restricting religious practice, imprisoning religious leaders, or targeting religious minorities. While government abuses persist, religious communities also face pressure from criminal organizations, armed groups or militias, and extremist movements, resulting in extreme insecurity and fewer options for redress. Indeed, in parts of the world, religious leaders and communities are often targeted because they are the sole remaining institutions standing against corruption or violence. This raises questions as to whether diplomatic pressure or even legal reform can adequately address persecution.

Considering the enormity and complexity of the problems, interview participants noted the need to intentionally consider intersectional approaches. There are ways for advocates who share a common interest to build new bridges between the IRF community and the broader human rights community. And given the connections between religious freedom and societal human rights health, greater collaboration with groups working on issues like atrocity prevention, human trafficking, democratic resilience, or women's rights would provide new areas of engagement, and importantly, new sources of support. Finding common ground and actionable items is imperative.

Corporate Responsibility

Several participants identified corporate due diligence as an emerging opportunity. For many years, the IRF movement has primarily focused on governments, multilateral institutions, and civil society. But business operations also implicate human rights: engaging national and local governments, managing supply chains, and drawing employees from local communities. Indeed, mandatory human rights due diligence requirements are expanding across Europe and other areas. An opportunity exists to ensure businesses understand and incorporate religious freedom into their strategic operations and human rights due diligence processes.

As businesses evaluate risks related to forced labor, trafficking, or indigenous rights (land, culture, ancestral sites), religious persecution must be a part of their considerations. Corporate due diligence requires stakeholders to understand the perspectives of affected communities and workers. And indeed, human rights defenders, local NGOs, and religious leaders often possess knowledge and credibility that outside actors may lack. This is especially true in a region like Latin America, where disputes involving mining, energy projects, and indigenous lands implicate religious rights. Advocates have an opportunity to engage both corporate actors and policymakers to ensure IRF is an integral component of business decision-making and conduct.

Sacred Sites

The destruction of sacred sites by terrorists or state authorities victimizes religious minorities or disfavored religious communities. While robust frameworks of protection for freedom of religion or belief and cultural heritage exist, the provisions are distinct, rarely reinforcing each other. Practitioners from both fields should work in closer collaboration, as the protection of historical heritage sites of global significance will assist the worship rights of communities that venerate these places. In addition, collaboration will encourage besieged religious communities to maintain their historic presence and preserve their cultural practices and ancient spiritual rites.

Efforts to leverage the power and influence of sacred sites to promote peaceful religious pluralism provide another area of opportunity. Sacred sites carry deep spiritual meaning, sometimes to multiple religious communities, thereby recalling interfaith harmony and revealing an overlooked pathway to promote peace, tolerance, and respect. An emerging body of literature is highlighting this overlooked avenue to advance religious freedom through a different lens. Conventional human rights approaches, while important and necessary, often face opposition in traditional societies where international human rights documents are seen as foreign impositions. While some religious leaders work to promote interfaith understanding, many do not utilize holy sites as a tool. By expanding appreciation of shared histories, sacred sites can encourage pluralism, cultivate understanding, and counter contemporary narratives of exclusion.

Women's Rights

Countering religious persecution against women provides another area for strategic engagement. Women and girls experience religious discrimination and coercion differently from men, often through forced conversion or marriages, trafficking, restrictions on education, targeted violence, or legal requirements to wear, or not wear, certain forms of religious dress. Participants reiterated how religious freedom and women's rights can intersect in positive and mutually reinforcing ways. Yet the IRF community and women's rights activists have generally not worked in tandem and are sometimes portrayed as in opposition (particularly when international religious freedom is viewed as a conservative matter only).

Participants suggested that strengthening partnerships between IRF advocates and women's rights advocates, particularly in anti-trafficking initiatives, could help address overlooked forms of persecution. This would also help better integrate both IRF concerns and faith actors within the human rights framework. Religious organizations play a key role in anti-trafficking efforts: operating shelters, providing social services to victims, supporting survivors, and in some circumstances advocating for legal reform. Religious freedom, reframed as enabling faith communities to contribute to protecting vulnerable people, could help expand the IRF movement's relevance and impact.

Atrocity Prevention and Religious Actors

As many instances of mass atrocities in the 21st century have targeted religious communities, involving religious leaders in prevention and recovery is crucial. Religious actors can help create social norms that make atrocities less acceptable and thus less likely. Rather than responding only when violence escalates, religious institutions can contribute to prevention by strengthening social cohesion, reducing prejudice, fostering empathy, and creating habits of cooperation across communal lines. In this, local interfaith networks play quiet but important roles in preventing escalation, both by engaging traditional religious elites and ensuring the inclusion of women, youth, and minority communities.

In addition, unlike many governments, international organizations, or humanitarian actors that may have limited access during crises, religious leaders often remain present before, during, and after conflict. Religious actors can thus also contribute to atrocity prevention through faith-based humanitarian organizations. Humanitarian assistance, such as trauma care for survivors, reconstruction efforts, and support for the displaced, often begins during or after atrocities, but can help prevent future violence by supporting recovery, reducing grievances, rebuilding communities, and demonstrating solidarity across religious and ethnic lines. Faith actors providing assistance impartially across communal boundaries can challenge extremist narratives and foster reconciliation.

Documentation

With abuses still widespread, the IRF Report absent, and official support for private documentation efforts reduced, the need for reliable reporting is pressing. This creates both an opportunity and a challenge: NGOs are well placed to bring to light situations in which people are suffering for their beliefs, but the work is laborious and funding is scarce. These stories need to be told carefully, to limit further risk or trauma; concisely, to be understood by audiences; and correctly, with solid facts and nuanced analysis that recognizes the differences between societal intolerance, legal restrictions or discrimination, violent persecution, and mass atrocity crimes.

Documentation creates opportunities for intersectional collaboration, as this is an area where quality matters. Well-founded reporting is more likely to garner public attention and policymaker response, and more difficult for violators to deny. It is also key to understanding global and national trends. However, because frontline groups rarely have the resources or expertise, collaboration with outside groups is crucial. Civil society efforts to document the details, outcomes, and lessons learned from the government-funded IRF-related programs carried out during the movement's peak years would also be worthwhile, to preserve that information for any private or public institutions interested in supporting such projects in the future. Additionally, with technology providing greater access than ever to information about abuses, that information can become overwhelming. Opportunities

exist to deploy artificial intelligence to gather information for policymakers, but advocacy groups need assistance to harness this resource.

Education

Multiple interview participants highlighted the vital need for increased education about this essential human right. Even today, more than 75 years after the adoption of the UDHR and more than 25 years after the enactment of IRFA, too many people still misunderstand the right to religious freedom, question its importance, or doubt the value of human rights generally. Educational efforts are key to address illiteracy about religious freedom, and about religion, among government officials and policymakers. Doing so can persuade distracted or hostile government officials and other skeptics that religious freedom for everyone, everywhere, should be a priority, not only because it is a fundamental right, but because it is a necessary component of a more peaceful and prosperous world. Training current and future leaders takes time, but like planting trees, its fruit will emerge eventually.

Education about the meaning, application, and importance of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief is also essential to reaching new audiences, including young people, to expand and strengthen the IRF movement going forward. Long-term viability depends on the new generation of advocates, scholars, and faith leaders who understand freedom of religion or belief. Providing classroom instruction about international religious freedom principles and practical research opportunities can encourage the next generation to get involved. In addition, efforts to teach tolerance at schools by emphasizing the rights of individuals to pursue truth freely without discrimination or violence can help prevent the mentality that leads to human rights abuses.



A ROADMAP FOR IRF ADVOCACY IN A TIME OF DISRUPTION

In the face of these dynamics and disruptions, civil society and faith based IRF advocates need to be both pragmatic and idealistic. How do we act as the conscience of U.S. foreign policy on issues related to religious freedom? How do we operate in a way that ensures our credibility and effectiveness without being pulled into political battles?

We need a roadmap.

Changing policies requires changing the narrative winds. For policymakers to appreciate the need for a long-term commitment, it must be grounded in support from organizations and individuals of all faiths and none. As one interview participant advised, “we are tempted to check out, but this is the moment to check in.” Another exhorted that we must “be hopeful but not delusional.” One longtime observer encouraged reflection on the remarkable growth over the past decade that created an unprecedented IRF ecosystem among governments, civil society, religious groups, and, increasingly, academia. As another said, while “we’ve seen the IRF agenda take off and then tail off, we are not at a standing start.”

Our Roadmap for IRF Advocacy in a Time Disruption focuses on four points of navigation: Reaffirming Core Principles; Stabilizing Existing Structures; Broadening Interest; and Equipping for Durable Success. These points derive from our experience that international religious freedom efforts are most successful when they are comprehensive, consistent, credible, collaborative, and tailored to the context. While these considerations should also guide government actions to advance religious freedom, given the current realities of diminished official interest and support, it will be up to civil society to carry the movement forward. We do not have answers for all the challenges identified, but these four guideposts can help ensure long-term success.

Reaffirming Core Principles – Religious Freedom for All, Not Just for Mine

Long-term success depends on the movement advocating for everyone. Certainly, many advocates take up the work because of connections to persecuted individuals, either through family ties or bonds of faith. This is a natural entry point. But IRF advocates must not forget that the fundamental right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief belongs to all human beings. People of all faiths, and of no faith, are experiencing violations of this right across the globe. The most effective advocacy emphasizes the universal nature of religious freedom and acknowledges the wide range of individuals and groups who suffer deprivation. Such an approach does not preclude efforts focused mainly on a specific community or country; instead, it embeds them in the broader global context and helps defuse accusations of neglect or bias. And when an entire society enjoys religious freedom, so too will individual communities who have suffered in the past.

In the same way, IRF advocates must prevent religious nationalism from polluting the work. This means recognizing that freedom for some faiths but not others is not religious freedom, but rather favoritism inconsistent with the equal dignity and humanity of all. Comprehensive and consistent religious freedom advocacy is especially important as a counterweight when exclusionary ideologies seeking to discriminate based on religion are gaining political or social traction. It is particularly powerful when advocates speak up for those whose beliefs differ from their own.

Stabilizing Existing Structures – Speaking Truth to Power

Civic and religious activism was essential to human rights progress in the 20th century and the early years of the 21st, including the adoption of the UDHR, the enactment of IRFA, the push for the U.S. government to improve its IRF policy, and the expansion and internationalization of the IRF movement. In the face of today's challenges, advocates must be clear-eyed and consistent voices for the protection of this fundamental right for all, without fear or favor.

During the movement's peak years, activists could justifiably praise various governments for their efforts to advance religious freedom at home or abroad and productively cooperate with them on the issue. With that progress having now largely stalled or regressed, credible advocacy requires that civil society and religious actors candidly call out governments that are falling short on religious freedom and actively press them to do better—including governments that activists may have worked with in the past or whose policies on other issues they may support. This entails a principled and fact-based approach that offers praise and cooperation when appropriate and criticism when warranted, even when the latter can be uncomfortable.

Such an approach includes calling out the Trump administration for deprioritizing religious freedom and other fundamental human rights in its foreign policy and failing to fulfill IRFA's core requirements. We call for, at a minimum, the State Department to release the 2024 and 2025 IRF Reports, redesignate the 12 longstanding CPCs last named in 2023, and designate other countries and entities that meet IRFA's threshold. The lack of reports and designations signals a troubling disregard not only of legal mandates, but of a key American value. We also urge the prompt nomination and confirmation of a well-qualified Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, as well as the appointment of well-qualified USCIRF Commissioners. In addition, to address immediate cases of persecution, we urge the resumption of a refugee resettlement program to assist individuals outside their country of origin and in need of international protection because of a well-founded fear of persecution on account of their religion or belief. We hope that other civil society and faith actors in the IRF space, as well USCIRF and members of Congress on both sides of the aisle, will also support these calls.

Broadening Interest – Expanding the Tent

The religious freedom movement's diverse character as a multifaith, multiparty effort has been a major source of its strength. Over time, however, hardening religious and political divides in the United States and elsewhere have made cooperation across differences more difficult, including in the international religious freedom space. At this perilous moment, activists must not let ideological disagreements, partisan disputes, or competition for resources derail their ability to work together to advance this fundamental, universal human right. With today's challenges, the broader the coalition, the better the chances of success. To that end, advocates should strive not only to maintain the existing movement but also to expand it. A multiprong strategy with different constituencies that thinks beyond election cycles is needed.

Religious persecution does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it occurs within complex contexts that include a mix of governance issues, other rights violations, conflict, poverty, and exclusionary attitudes. This creates a strong basis for common ground between religious freedom advocates and those working to promote democracy, the rule of law, human rights, atrocity prevention, peace, development, societal tolerance, or pluralism, all of whom are grappling with the same global trends. In today's world, actors in these different sectors can no longer afford to stay within their own silos. A large civil society tent—one that also houses the intersectional approaches noted above—facilitates information-sharing, encourages complementary efforts, and helps avoid unproductive duplication. As long as all partners are committed to the standard of UDHR Article 18 and agree on the specific issue at hand, diverse groups should be able to join forces even when they disagree on other issues. Situations of the most severe religious persecution provide fertile ground for cooperation, as they present compelling needs and are typically of shared concern to a wide range of activists, experts, and academics.

Equipping for Durable Success – Cultivating Private Sector and Faith-based Funding

In this time of disruption, civil society and religious actors must think creatively about how they can best use their talents and resources, individually and collectively, to make a difference on religious persecution. While civil society cannot replace the prior levels of government assistance, organizations with connections to those experiencing religious persecution should assess their ability to provide direct help. Depending on the situation, this could be short-term support, particularly to address emergency needs arising from cases of persecution, or longer-term capacity-building efforts. Direct assistance from civil society actors with the means and skills to provide it could help mitigate some of the harmful effects of government funding cuts on vulnerable individuals and communities, as well as on those working to defend their rights. Asking faith communities, denominations, and religious-based NGOs to fund advocacy for all is needed.

Engaging with Congress also remains crucial, to urge them to appropriate funds to support U.S. government IRF work and to focus on the topic in other ways. Enthusiasm about IRF issues has faded in the halls of Congress, but creating local communities of engagement can help revive it. The small Baha'i community in the United States, fewer than 200,000, have successfully passed resolutions in both houses of Congress about the religious freedom situation in Iran. Other communities could mirror such efforts. Still, for this advocacy to be effective, precise terms are crucial. Activists must recognize the different types and severities of violations and describe them accordingly. Not everything is persecution, but all religious freedom violations are worthy of engagement.



CONCLUSION

Advancing religious freedom globally requires constant effort. Steady support from the United States over the quarter-century since IRFA's enactment has been transformative. Although the IRF movement has not ended persecution, it has prevented worse conditions. Progress remains possible, and lives can be saved from immediate crises. However, IRF advocates must recognize durable change will require determination over decades, involving many actors, institutions, and patient, long-term investments. Quick fixes do not exist.

Consequently, we must learn to manage decentralization and disruption. We need to comprehensively appraise and evaluate the United States' and other governments' goals related to human rights and religious freedom, and determine how best to advance them. We should not concede that the international order is over, despite many announcing its demise. Indeed, as we stated earlier, the future success of the IRF movement cannot depend on the political will, or resources, of a single government. The work of religious freedom for all will be a bottom-up effort, more than top-down.

We must dedicate ourselves to a long struggle towards a day when people of all faiths and none no longer face discrimination or violence for their beliefs. Great leaps can happen, but we should be ready for a generational effort. Grand gestures are exciting, but the ongoing, day-to-day work beforehand and afterward is what brings lasting results. Despite the current challenges, participants in our conversations were not despondent but saw opportunities, and so do we. We hope this report and roadmap provide useful guidance to other civil society and religious actors grappling with how to credibly and effectively advocate for religious freedom for all today and into the future. And stir us on toward action.

