

DEPOLITICIZING INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN FELLOWS BRIEF

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On August 21, 2020 International Christian Concern convened a group of Washington, D.C.-based experts to discuss the importance of advancing international religious freedom (IRF) in apolitical terms within a highly-charged political environment. The broad support enjoyed by Article 18 of the UDHR and the IRF Act of 1998 stand out as examples of the bipartisan cooperation needed on the issue, and, while it can be challenging to communicate the apolitical nature of IRF in Washington, D.C., all participants agreed that it is vital.

The discussion then looked ahead to the 2020 Presidential Election in November and considered how civil society can best advance the cause of IRF in 2021 and beyond. President Trump has been a vocal supporter of IRF issues since he took office, and the Democratic party platform contains strong language in support of religious freedom around the world.

Opportunity for the advancement of religious freedom exists on both sides of the aisle. Discussion participants considered the positive and negative potential of both candidates in regards to IRF and suggested ways that civil society could positively engage with whichever administration is put in place after the election.

The discussion concluded with the institutionalization of IRF in Washington, a task that is key for the survival of the issue amidst shifting political will in the coming decades. Participants considered the success of the broader human rights community in this regard, and how the international religious freedom community can better communicate the importance of IRF as a human right.

Strong leadership from the United States is crucial for the advancement of religious freedom around the world, and we only get there by putting aside our partisan political differences and uniting on the issue of religious freedom as a fundamental human right.

Key Takeaways

- The topic of international religious freedom must be consistently differentiated from politicized issues of domestic religious freedom*
- U.S. standards on international religious freedom should be enforced on other countries consistently and regardless of our political ties to that country*
- Gains made in recent years should be capitalized on by the next administration, particularly in regards to institutionalizing IRF through things like the Ministerial to Advance International Religious Freedom, the International Religious Freedom Alliance, and various mechanisms for benefiting from civil society input*

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Manus C: I want to start by thanking each of you for joining us today. It's an honor to have you, and I'm looking forward to the discussion. I know Matias and Andrew are too, so thank you for taking the time this morning. To start, let's go around and introduce ourselves

Ajit Sahi: Yes, good morning. Thank you, and hello, everybody. My name is Ajit Sahi, and I work as a human rights defender and a civil rights activist. I'm based in Washington, D.C. I work with several Indian coalitions in American and work on religious freedom and human rights in India. Thank you.

Andrew Crane: My name's Andrew Crane. I am relatively new to ICC. I am an Advocacy Associate here, and I spent my past two summers interning at ICC. I graduated from Georgetown just this past spring, and I'm working here full time now. I'm excited for this discussion as well.

Benjamin Harbaugh: Hello, my name's Ben Harbaugh. I'm newer to D.C.—ICC was actually the first international religious freedom group I met at a graduate job fair last year. I quickly went to interning for the Department of State in the Office of International Religious Freedom, and then straight to the White House, in the Office of the Vice President, working on the same issue. Since then, I've been working with Greg Mitchell on his new IRF Secretariat, where we're working on establishing the global network of Roundtables. So, as long as I have been in D.C., I've worked in the religious freedom space. I'm happy to be here with you all, continuing to do that work and talking about what comes after November.

Emilie Kao: Hi, everyone. My name is Emilie Kao. I am the director of the DeVos Center for Religion & Civil Society at The Heritage Foundation. My work on international religious freedom started at the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty a long, long time ago, when I helped start up their work at the United Nations, then I went to the State Department. I was there under the Bush administration and the Obama administration in the Office of International Religious Freedom, working primarily on East Asia. Then I went to a law firm called Jus Cogens, and we worked on religious freedom in the Middle East during the ISIS genocide, and then I came to Heritage.

Greg Mitchell: Manus, Matias, and the whole ICC team thank you for inviting me to participate. Glad to be here. I'm Greg Mitchell, and I chair the International Religious Freedom Roundtable. The Roundtable's been around for almost ten years now. I think ICC has been a participant since day one, or as long as I've been there. I didn't start it, but I learned about it about six months in and started attending and helping, and ICC has been one of the most active and enthusiastic participants of the Roundtable. It's been great to work in partnership with ICC and the entire team there. Like Ben said, we set up a new NGO called IRF Secretariat to build a full-time team that would finish or complete the job of building out a global network of Religious Freedom Roundtables all around the world, and then keeping them linked and communicating and then coordinating actions all around the world.

I look forward to being a part of the discussion today.

Jeremy Barker: Briefly, I'm Jeremy Barker, work for the Religious Freedom Institute, directing our Middle East work and supporting, as a Senior Program Officer, a lot of our international advocacy.

Matias Perttula: Matias Perttula. I'm the advocacy director here at ICC. So grateful that all of you have

taken some time today to do this discussion with us. We love hosting these talks. We're in a real golden age of religious freedom, so we want to keep doing these and keep feeding into the narrative on how we can build on all the work we've been doing.

I'm looking forward to this discussion and very much looking forward to not piloting it today, so hats off to Manus. Thank you for leading us today.

Steven Howard: Hi, my name is Steven Howard. I'm the National Outreach Director with In Defense of Christians. We represent many of the Christian communities that are historic to the Middle East but also advocate for folks who convert to Christianity and for religious freedom for everyone in that part of the world, in general. Thank you very much for everything, Manus, and it was just a pleasure to speak with you in January on this.

I am looking forward to continuing it. Thank you, Matias, as well. Appreciate all your work on this.

PART 1: IRF AS AN APOLITICAL ISSUE

Manus C: Great. Thank you for those introductions. With that, we can dive right into the discussion. You all have the discussion roadmap that I sent around earlier, so let's start at the top of that list and talk about IRF as an apolitical or nonpartisan issue, and why that's important.

Just to kick us off, I want to set some context for this discussion. One of the key audiences of this discussion are the two campaigns. We all want to get the IRF issue on the table with those groups and ensure that the next administration, whichever one that is, has the groundwork that they need to hit this issue hard and keep up the momentum in D.C. and around the world. As Matias and I talked about this discussion and brainstormed the topic, we realized that one of the significant hindrances to our issue is how it's perceived politically. We work in a political context, yet within the IRF community, we all realize this is a nonpartisan issue.

As far as I can tell, there's not a distinct political leaning within the IRF community. We're all gathered on this issue as an issue of human rights, and politics is secondary to the work that we do, but it's also vitally important to communicate that, to message that to D.C. If you go back to the beginnings of the IRF issue in the modern context, I think you see the nonpartisan aspect of IRF, through Article 18 or IRFA, or how the IRF issue is centered on universally recognized human rights. It isn't a political issue. So, maybe messaging it that way shouldn't be that hard. It's the first freedom, in the sense that the freedom to believe what you believe and follow your conscience is foundational to all the other freedoms. I just want the beginning of this discussion to focus on messaging that issue.

Our challenge is to push an apolitical issue through a political system without politicizing it. We're going to get the chance to discuss a little later how we apply this question to the Trump and Biden candidacies, and at the end we're going to talk about IRF as part of the broader human rights community. But just to start us off here, I'd love to hear each of your thoughts on IRF as an apolitical issue

and why that's so important, why IRF is nonpartisan. Just to get us started with that foundation.

Greg Mitchell: I mean, it's important. The more nonpartisan it is, the more we get done, the more both sides work together. Again, the more results we get, the more positive outcomes we get, and that's why it's important. Politics always screws things up. Politics gets in the way of good policy. Politics gets in the way of results, and we're talking about lives here. We're talking about people who are persecuted for their faith or belief, and that is nonpartisan. It's apolitical. Persecution crosses party lines—it transcends party. It transcends ideology. People are being persecuted all over the world, and every faith is persecuted somewhere, right? And that's Republican, Democrat, whatever party you're in, all over the world. Persecution doesn't stop at that door, so it's important to stand up for everybody. Ideally, it should always be nonpartisan, and we always reach out to both sides, here in America, Republican and Democrat and everybody else. We want everyone working together. We do our best to pull everyone together and get everyone working together. That's how you can maximize our impact on government policies around the world, and that's why it's important.

We don't always succeed because the politics, again, can get in the way, and the issue can be weaponized on both sides and turned into a partisan political item or weapon or whatever you want to call it. We don't get into it. We don't get drawn into politics. We don't get pulled into one side against the other. We just keep doing our job, and that's all we can do. We can always work on messaging and improve our messaging, but we're continually doing outreach on both sides of the aisle. We're continually inviting people on both sides of the aisle to participate in our meetings, to join our multi-faith initiatives, and to engage other governments and persuade them to stop persecuting peaceful faith communities, and that's my first thought.

Benjamin Harbaugh: Yeah, if I could add to that, I agree with what Greg just said. IRF needs to remain as apolitical as possible. I love the way you worded that Matias, we want to push an apolitical issue through a political system. While that's a challenging task, I think it's both worthwhile and possible to a degree.

The most visible success for keeping IRF largely apolitical as long as we have, has been the Ministerials to Advance Religious Freedom. Last year's event had Vice President Pence and Speaker Pelosi address the attendees. Where else is that happening in D.C. in 2019? Both felt that politically it was important and valuable for them to be present at the Ministerial. I think that's the outcome we want from a political system like ours. We can't stop it from being political, but if we keep up the balancing act, we can make it so that IRF is politically useful for both parties.

I think we have to be cautious in mainly one area: those who claim to be religious freedom advocates, but in reality, use the IRF banner to restrict the freedom of others. Unfortunately, I think the use of IRF in this way is increasing alongside its general rise. These "advocates" greatly damage the good work that we're doing. Specifically, I think they give weight to an incorrect perception that IRF is a tool of the political right to help only Christians and provide good PR for their base. Hand in hand with that is when IRF gets affiliated with domestic religious freedom issues, which tend to be right of center. Moving forward, we'll have to watch as these figures subvert the IRF issue and be prepared to explain why we care about more than just Christians and why conflating IRF with domestic issues often doesn't line up.

One of the best ways to fight back against this false narrative is to highlight voices doing good work. I'm specifically thinking of USCIRF, which just got reauthorized, because they pressure administra-

tions of either side of the aisle and add to the issue's bipartisan credibility. I feel the same way about the IRF office and how Ambassador Brownback has worked together very publicly with Democrats. These are the kinds of narratives that we'll want to highlight that will keep IRF an apolitical issue.

Steven Howard: I looked at the prompt that Manus was kind enough to send, and I'm just looking at this, how can the IRF community actively advance IRF as apolitical, and what elements are driving it to be apolitical? So I did have some thoughts on just that. I think that's something that we do need to be cautious of in the IRF community. Some of our leaders—not all of them, but I think we all would acknowledge that some actors in this space do—advocate for this right for some groups at the expense of others. I believe that we all need to be committed to ensuring that we promote this right for everyone. If there's an actor in the space that is not respecting religious freedom as a right, for one particular faith community, we're going to make sure that we need to push back on that, because it's not constructive.

I think that we also need to be very careful in that some of the foreign governments that have been championed as being leaders on international religious freedom have some pretty serious shortcomings when it comes to other human rights. If a government is not respecting the rights of people such as refugees, if it's not respecting its people's freedom of speech, we should recognize that that government's also not truly respecting religious freedom. Because if a Christian is not able to fully exercise their political rights, their speech rights, or even carrying out a simple mandate of—I'm speaking from a Christian organization's perspective—taking care of refugees, there is an issue there. I would also just say that religious freedom domestically is a very intense partisan issue, so the more that we can keep international religious freedom distinct from domestic religious freedom the better because I think international religious freedom is very bipartisan. So, we just want to keep that distinct.

I think that another key part of this is we're going to want to make sure that IRF remains a distinct human rights issue. In conservative circles and thought, I see a dichotomization of rights. So, you've had some people advocate for religious freedom at the expense of other rights, and praise, sometimes, governments for their work on religious freedom or tolerance, when these governments have been very oppressive toward their own people, that's a problem. But if you look on the progressive side, sometimes there's a tendency to try and put all human rights together, despite the fact that there are some very contentious social issues that Americans of goodwill disagree on with one another.

For example, I was speaking with the United States Bishops Conference, and some offices they speak with on the Hill want to loop in all human rights together from a progressive standpoint, so that would include religious freedom, but it might also include something like abortion, in the same bill. This would be harmful because it would drive a wedge in a traditionally unifying foreign policy issue.

The advantage of IRF legislation is that lawmakers can temporarily set aside their disagreements on other human rights issues because it focuses on only this one issue.

There is something we consider when it comes to branding, as well. It's great that we have so many reporters who cover the issue, but many of the reporters who cover international religious freedom usually cover some domestic issues as well. They can be loud voices on platforms such as Twitter and that can, probably unintentionally, result in the conflating of IRF issues with the other subjects they speak on.

On the subject of social media, we all, as leaders in this movement--as individuals, need to rise to a higher standard as well. While we all have our own thoughts on the hot-button issues of the day, we should be careful and not conflate our advocacy for a nonpartisan issue with our partisan preferences. There are notable exceptions when we feel compelled to do this. However, I think we should take a step back and remind ourselves that the people who donate to our various organizations expect us to advocate for the persecuted. They are not donating to help jumpstart our careers as political pundits. I myself have fallen short here and am trying to improve my own social media presence to be more unifying, given what is at stake. I hope others will do the same.

Matias Perttula: I guess I'll jump in too, in terms of just keeping it nonpartisan and apolitical, as an issue, and speaking specifically on the IRF issues, international religious freedom, one thing that ICC has always done is we've exposed decision-makers to the actual victims, that are dealing with the policies on the ground. So, whether it's a letter or a piece of legislation, when the member or their staff is confronted with the actual story of the victim, in person, a lot of times that eliminates the political side of things and drives the value part of what is so essential to the foundation of the United States. That bleeds into the bigger point—that when we let politics lead our values, we begin to lose the momentum behind doing some good work, alluding to what Greg was saying.

Values should be leading our politics, essentially. Too often, the two are reversed. So, oftentimes, even when I speak in different capacities, I always say America should always lead with its values. As a country founded on religious freedom and still believes in that pluralism, we need to lead that way on the international front, ensuring that all individuals are respected, regardless of their religious dispositions, and all should have that freedom to worship as they please. The other point that I wanted to make is that as the United States leads on this issue on the global scale, which they are. I think we can all point around the world, and the U.S. is usually leading on most things, including this issue. But one thing that should be mindful, for the foreign policy apparatus in the United States, which I'm sure they already are, that the countries around the world also understand the U.S. values. They understand U.S. priorities. They're not ignorant, in terms of their way of conducting policy with the United States, so this issue, we need to develop a framework around the issue, in terms of not allowing our values, or our push for international religious freedom in certain regions, to become a point of leverage for a particular country to use against the United States for their benefit. So, knowing that the U.S. appreciates and wants to push religious freedom all around the world, countries will often create situations where they can use IRF as a point of leverage against the United States in different types of bilateral or multilateral conversations.

One thing, I could not help but think, in the case of Turkey, when the Hagia Sophia instance happened, Turkey understands full well that the United States wants to push this freedom, and then the symbolism does a great deal in pushing these issues forward, especially in the domestic context of any country. Still, when the Hagia Sophia was converted, I couldn't help but think that there was some sort of a point of leverage that Turkey was trying to create with the United States. Maybe they are turning this into a mosque now, knowing how the U.S. values religious freedom. It may come up as a point of diplomatic negotiations in the future.

I think we need to be smart in the way we pursue more religious freedom, in that particular context, so that we don't get suckered into these situations where we're not actually expanding the value, but it's actually being restricted because other countries will exploit this value as a point of diplomatic leverage.

Ajit Sahi: Well, I could jump in with a couple of comments in this. Firstly, I would like to congratulate Greg and Matias, especially for the work that you do with the IRF Roundtable. My association with the Roundtable began sometime in September or October of 2018, so it's been almost two years, and I didn't know about its existence before then. I had just traveled from India. I was astounded to find this kind of gathering because the impression that I had, being from outside of the United States, was that the American people are sharply divided along partisan lines in terms of religious freedom. It was so wonderful for me to go there and see how people are around the table. It's just amazing.

I talk about it a lot, with many people inside the organizations that I work with, and even in India, where I come from, that there is this space. You cannot overstate the significance and the potential of a bipartisan, or I should say, multi-partisan, group coming together. I think it has the potential to get a lot done. So, a lot of congratulations in even the two years that I've seen the Roundtable. My impression is that, in the last two years that I've been coming, it has grown even bigger since 2018. I think there are many more people. From the kind of attention that I saw at the Department of State, given back in 2018, and the attention that the Department of State gives it now, I think there's a world of difference in just two years that I have seen.

I think the one thing that I could suggest, and of course, you'll forgive me if this is out of place, because like I said, I've only been associated for two years, so you guys know much more about the Roundtable and the processes than I do. I think we are good, as far as the government and the Department of State is concerned, but two areas where we could extend the influence of the Roundtable is, one, to have a greater engagement as a Roundtable with Capitol Hill, with members of Congress. That is something, I would say, that should be institutionalized, that should be done more, as, again, as IRF Roundtable. Somehow I feel that, back in 2018, I saw that several congressional staffs participating. Maybe not so many of them join the IRF Roundtable now.

I think it's important to get this on the calendar so that the IRF Roundtable is on the Department of State's calendar. It might be beneficial if we can get it on the calendar of human rights organizations, religious freedom, and international relations. These are the three portfolios in any Congress person's office relevant to the work that we do. So, it might be helpful. It might be useful for us to strategically work towards getting the IRF Roundtable on the calendar of the staff of several members of Congress, at least twenty to thirty of them. If they start coming, people who are members of the Tom Lantos, members of the House Caucus, Religious Freedom Caucus, et cetera. The other thing also is, especially internationally, and this is something I'm sure all of you already know, such as the influence of the state department is, as it is, it's very significant.

The Intelligence Community and the Department of State have an enormous influence on policy with foreign countries. So, it might be helpful to think in terms of how we can reach out with our messaging and our narratives to stakeholders in the Intelligence Community, in the Department of Defense, and its various affiliates. Because oftentimes, their influence on U.S. Government policy, and even on the congressional narrative and congressional approach to foreign countries, is profound. Just as we have engaged so wonderfully with the Department of State. With the Department of State, it might be helpful to engage with more principles and more stakeholders from the Department of Defense and the Intelligence Community. Thank you. That's what I wanted to say.

Emilie Kao: Thanks, Ajit, and thanks, everyone, for your comments, and thanks, Matias, for the invitation. This is a very interesting question to start with. To begin with, I think that we go back to the universality of human rights in order to shore up the bipartisan support for religious freedom. As you all

know, the basis of human rights identified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is human dignity, which is intrinsically related to religious freedom. The reason is that religions often provide the basis for understanding that we have dignity as humans. We can think of the Judeo-Christian belief that we are made in the image of God and that directly leads to the belief that humans have a unique dignity. If you look at the recent report of the Commission on unalienable human rights published by the State Department, one of the things they talk about is how important it is to cultivate the seedbeds of human rights, referring to religious, philosophical, and ethical convictions. There is an essential role that religious beliefs play in the human rights movement, and that is that it is the seedbed of the understanding of human dignity, which leads to the basis of all human rights, that human rights are universal.

It's important for us, as religious freedom advocates, to establish the importance of religion and religious freedom to the entire universal human rights movement. It is a critical human right to defend because if you don't have religious freedom and can't defend these beliefs, like the understanding that we are all created in God's image, then that erodes the foundations of the whole universal human rights movement. I think that it is essential to show how human rights are universal. The word expansion was used, and I think that's what we should be doing as religious freedom advocates. We should be trying to expand the reach of our work and bring in as many people from as many different political and religious backgrounds as possible into this advocacy movement.

Unfortunately, I think the reason behind your opening question is that there is a growing politicization of international religious freedom. It has happened in the United States. It has happened internationally. In the United States, you can look at the International Religious Freedom Act, which was passed with completely bipartisan support, signed by President Clinton, an incredibly diverse range of groups supported it, but now we see that there is more division among the groups that initially supported the International Religious Freedom Act. When the Commission on Unalienable Human Rights published its report, there were several attacks on the report because the report said that in the American tradition, religious freedom is one of the foremost unalienable rights along with property rights, which is just a factual statement. The First Amendment clearly shows that, just as a historical matter, religious freedom was foremost to the founders and to the American people.

But even beyond that, I think that religious freedom is special because it protects something extraordinary about human beings, which is that we all want to seek the truth and live according to the truth. That is truly universal. That is not just something Americans want. That is not just something that people in China want or people in Saudi Arabia want. That's something that everybody everywhere wants, but unfortunately, this attack on the Commission's report and what it said about religious freedom is all too common. We saw that that attack was launched by an NGO, Center for American Progress, and it had the signatures of, I think, twenty or thirty religious leaders who said that somehow that the State Department was prioritizing religious freedom above all other human rights. I don't think that there is any basis for saying that that is what the State Department was doing, but again, I believe there is a special role of religious freedom, both to the whole human rights movement and because of what it protects that is so important to being human.

I think that those attacks are rising, very partisan attacks, and not only from civil society. We see from the United Nations the politicization of religious freedom. There was a report in February by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief that was supposed to report on gender equality, but it actually ended up attacking religious beliefs about life and marriage and biological

sex and saying that these religious beliefs were the basis of discrimination against women and the discrimination against people based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

First of all, religious freedom is a fundamental right. It's an internationally recognized human right in the UDHR and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The other rights that the Special Rapporteur asserted, rights to abortion, rights to nondiscrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, those actually are not recognized in any human rights treaties. Those are not internationally recognized human rights. Some Western nations certainly support them, but the danger of turning the priorities of Western nations into human rights simply because wealthy Western nations say they are human rights is more politicization of the human rights movement, which causes the human rights movement to lose credibility. It frankly imposes what the Pope called ideological colonization on the rest of the world that does not agree with the values of certain Western countries.

I think that the threat of politicization is very real. Also, to something that an earlier speaker said, it is essential to defend the freedom to live according to what we believe is the truth for people of every faith. It is also important to defend that freedom for people who believe that life begins at conception or that we are created male and female, and that male and female are created for each other. We cannot defend freedom only for people with whom we agree. If we only defended that freedom, we would have no freedom. We have to defend religious freedom for people with whom we disagree.

My old boss at the Becket Fund, Seamus Hasson, wrote a book called *The Right to Be Wrong*. I think that encapsulates what all of us need to do. We need to defend the right to live out our beliefs, for people who have different faith beliefs, but also for people with whom we have disagreements when it comes to controversial issues like contraception, abortion, sexuality, and even just biological sex.

Lastly, I want to point out an upcoming essay that we have published at Heritage on religious freedom in international human rights law by Daniel Philpott. He's a professor at Notre Dame. It's an excellent essay that points to the important role that religious freedom had in UDHR, and also the natural law basis for religious freedom. It talks about three particular challenges to religious freedom right now. One is the idea that religion is not unique, and therefore there shouldn't be a right to particular religious freedom. There should only be right to speech, right to conscience.

The second threat is that there's criticism that religious freedom is not universal, that it's only for Jews and Christians. He addresses that from his background is a scholar of Islam. He discusses the importance of religious freedom to all communities. Finally, he addresses the issues I mentioned earlier: contraception, abortion, and sexual orientation and gender identity efforts to limit religious freedom when there's disagreement on those issues.

Jeremy Barker: I think Emilie's comments are right on. The Unalienable Rights Commission, touching on how the divergence in responses to something like that shows some of the challenges that exist. I may have a chance to respond to that later, but I think it's interesting, and we looked at this somewhat back in 2016 as we were heading into an election.

On the one hand, you look at persecution and abuses of marginalized, vulnerable communities, that is something that people of every political stripe are motivated by or respond to and competing

visions of justice and what that looks like and how you get there and the frameworks of how do we keep the issue central in advancing the work that we do, and then building coalitions around that?

That's a very brief idea of some of the things we're wrestling with. Even looking through the democratic party platform that they published in the last few weeks, and I was going through that yesterday and highlighted places where there are strong affirmations that ought to be understood, to care about the issues that any of us would care about in working on religious freedom or persecuted minorities. Yeah, lots to address, but those are a few of my scattered thoughts of keeping that issue central and building coalitions around that.

PART 2: IRF IN THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION

Manus C: Thank you all for those comments. I'm going to call an audible here and combine the next two questions, just for the sake of time, talking both about the last four years under a Trump administration and what has been accomplished in that period and then looking forward to the opportunities that lay in either a Trump administration or a Biden administration in the fall. I want to keep us focused on that topic. I think we can look back at history, and Emilie mentioned Clinton signing the IRF Act, and Jeremy mentioned some of the positive aspects of the Democratic platform that was released recently in regards to IRF. Still, I think just looking back to some extent, but mostly focusing this next part of our discussion on opportunities, really focusing on where can we move the IRF issue forward, especially as an apolitical or nonpartisan issue.

Matias Perttula: I think I can start with just recapping some of the last four years under the Trump administration. I think we can probably all agree that it's moved ahead quite a bit in the previous few years. Ambassador Brownback's and Secretary Pompeo's work, especially with forming the Alliance, has been a significant development in making this a leading global issue and something that countries need to be paying attention to.

I think the Ministerials are a huge highlight of the Trump administration's commitment to advancing religious freedom worldwide and making it an issue that it's not something swept under the rug or we turn a blind eye to it in our bilateral, multilateral relations with other countries. Still, we take a serious look at it. While maybe some of the actual firmer accountability measures are still in the development phase or have not entirely been implemented, I think we're seeing a lot more movement in getting those accountability measures placed in some of these relationships that we have countries that persecute the religious minorities.

I think the IRF community has seen engagement with both State and Treasury departments and that it ensures violators of human rights and religious freedom are receiving due measure. Ensuring that we see behavior change in some of these folks who are leading persecutors around the world. I think that's one thing that probably in previous administrations we have not seen as a real forte in terms of keeping people accountable. There was a lot of the naming and shaming, but getting actual accountability measures in place, I think that's been a significant hallmark for us over the last three

years.

In terms of building on these issues, continuing to leverage Global Magnitsky in the future, being more aggressive with the actual CPC sanctions, where too many times countries find loopholes to get out of those, or some other deals evade those accountability measures, closing out those loopholes and holding countries' feet to the fire essentially on making sure that the discrimination ends, that's on the more on the stick side. Still, on the carrot side, I'd say creating opportunities for countries to engage in dialogs within themselves domestically and regionally on what religious pluralism looks like in each of these contexts.

I think with continued conversation and education, especially between different faith groups in these countries, it builds trust amongst the individuals, and you understand the human side of them. Rather than your sometimes misconceived religious identity framework that you view people and groups through, but instead engage with individuals at a human level, you develop that community and trust. I think the Roundtable is an incredible asset and tool in cultivating these conversations, and you begin to see the humanity in others, which creates a whole new debate into the religious pluralism discourse.

Anything that we can do in terms of cultivating those kinds of elements, whether it's through the Roundtable network or maybe some other form of grants or some other forms of carrots in that sense, that the foreign policy apparatus can create, I think that we can see a lot less communally-based violence that's falling on ethno-religious lines. I'm sure others have some other thoughts on this, so I'll stop there for now.

Steven Howard: Just going through pros and cons of Biden and Trump for the two questions, I think when you look at a Biden presidency, the positive potential is with Turkey. Turkey's Neo-Ottoman vision for Middle East Engagement and the persecution of Christians is alarming, and the U.S. government's response thus far has been inadequate. Vice President Biden has had a long institutional relationship with the Greek Orthodox church and the Hellenic American community. You saw the Greek Orthodox Archbishop Elpidophorous even offered the invocation at the Democratic National Convention last night.

We should capitalize on this and hold President Biden accountable for recognizing the Armenian Christian Genocide, which applies pressure on Turkey to respect the Hagia Sophia's status and end their support for Christian persecution in Cyprus, Syria, and Nigeria.

I think he may be willing to apply more pressure on Egypt and Saudi Arabia, two countries we're concerned about because Saudi Arabia is arguably the worst violator of religious freedom in the world. There have been some statements of tolerance, but there are still no churches there. While President Sisi has done some good for Coptic Christians, there is a need to apply more pressure on him because Copts are still targets of persecution and discrimination. For Lebanon, for our issue, that just tends to be bipartisan.

When it comes to a Biden presidency's negative potential, I have two concerns; the first would be staffing. We all know this is a challenge with every administration.

From what I can see, the Biden foreign policy advisors come from a more traditional American foreign policy background. They believe in American leadership and accountability for our allies.

However, there is a division within the Democratic party's foreign policy community.

Many progressive foreign policy folks come from an old school background. If you work with an Eliot Engel or Gregory Meeks, these folks on the Foreign Affairs Committee, their staffs know our organizations and get this issue. They are accustomed to working across the aisle as well.

A new generation of leaders in the progressive foreign policy community is pretty critical of direct aid, especially faith-based aid to Christians. We saw this with a ProPublica piece that hit on the Vice President's initiative to support Christians, Yazidis, and other genocide survivors in Iraq. I can't think of a compelling policy reason why somebody would oppose aid to survivors of genocide. I think it's entirely politically motivated, and it's just reflective of the context that we live in, which is tragic, but that concerns me. It's not clear to me that inevitably the aid would get pulled, but we have seen that sentiment from some in the progressive foreign policy space. I would be concerned if such activists were able to obtain positions in a Biden administration.

I think another negative potential would be a de-emphasis on multilateral engagement. I'm not sure if we would see Ministerials. I don't know if we would see executive orders on religious freedom. Those are two concerns I have.

In terms of the Trump presidency, positive potential things that have been good, strong multilateral engagement. These IRF Ministerials are good events. The executive orders, good. The Vice President's engagement is helpful. I would just say negative potential, lack of accountability. I think Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt need to be held accountable for violations against religious freedom. Especially for our issue, there needs to be more pressure. Many of you are probably also familiar with the sharp declines in Christian refugees from the Obama Administration to the Trump Administration. That remains an issue of concern as well. I would just say again, for our issue, from our organization's perspective, we find the Lebanon thing to be pretty bipartisan. I don't see myself a massive difference between the two candidates when it comes to that issue. They've responded positively to the explosion, but there's so much more to be done. I'll stop there. Thank you.

Emilie Kao: First of all, I hope that both administrations would very clearly push back on what the United Nations is doing by simply stating that there are new human rights when there is absolutely no universal agreement on those human rights, and then even asserting that those new human rights, abortion, and nondiscrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity would trump religious freedom and other recognized, internationally recognized human rights. I would be concerned about either administration not pushing back.

With the Biden administration, we know that they've already said that they look forward to going after the Little Sisters of the Poor to force them to pay for contraception in the domestic context. That is the kind of violation of conscience and religious freedom that the Special Rapporteur at the UN has also really advocated for it in his report. We do not want to see any administration push that kind of aggressive coercion of faith groups to violate their beliefs on life or marriage or add conditions to any grants for faith-based groups working overseas, like with USAID.

Another issue that I think is important for both parties, either administration, to recognize, and again, is that the UN Secretary-General himself is advancing a strategy and a plan of action to fight against "hate speech." I'm using quotes for hate speech because I don't believe that that is a legitimate category that we should have in international law, but this is his response to the attacks on

houses of worship, the attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand and Sri Lanka and the attacks against synagogues all over, including in our country.

While we should all be very concerned about the attacks on houses of worship and the disturbing rise of antisemitism, the way we should combat it is to promote freedom of speech, religion, and the freedom of all faith communities to live out their beliefs very publicly. This includes the communities that have been attacked, particularly the Jewish community in Europe, where they have had hate speech laws for many decades. They've been very ineffective at combating the rise of antisemitism. Jewish people there are afraid to openly display their religious beliefs by wearing a yarmulke or other religious dress in the countries where that's still permitted. In France, they're not even allowed to do so in public anymore because the government bans it. All religious dress is banned. Hijabs, large crosses, yarmulkes—all banned. The U.S. is the strongest defender of free speech in the world. Free speech is very closely related to freedom of religion, and we need to be standing up at the United Nations against any attempts to have a global campaign to pass hate speech policies or laws.

Greg Mitchell: I had something to say, just to contribute to this question on the Matias' and Steven's answers. Matias was talking about carrots, and Steven mentioned the infrastructure. I think the Trump administration, what they've done in the last three years, and this goes back to what Ajit was saying too, how over the last two and a half years, the Roundtable has doubled. The size of the meetings doubled. The size of the Roundtable email list has probably quadrupled. That's because of this administration, Ambassador Brownback, and he deserves the credit for coming and plugging in and meeting with the community weekly. No previous ambassador has ever done that before. Brownback is genuinely committed to advancing religious freedom or belief for everybody.

He's shown that. He has weighed in in support of even small religious minorities. His commitment is there. Everybody who comes to the round table every week sees that. Critics from the outside that lob bombs at the administration, they're not there. They don't see it, but it's genuine. It's real. Then after coming in and meeting with the community regularly, we quadrupled in size. Then there's the introduction of the annual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom. That's a carrot. We've been doing this for ten years. We've been reaching out even before this administration, let's say. We were reaching out to foreign governments directly. I won't name them, but there's a couple that I know for sure that we were engaging directly, and the State Department back then wasn't willing to do any more, so we started reaching out directly and urging them as a multi-faith community to improve. They weren't willing to do it until all of a sudden when the first Ministerial was set up, and the couple of governments that I'm thinking of didn't get an invite, and they wanted to be invited. So that was a carrot, right? Just to get on the invite list to the annual Ministerial, right? They want to be invited. Like China and Iran, not all governments are between the egregious violators and the promising countries on religious freedom. And a lot of them who didn't get invited wanted to get invited, so they were calling the State Department asking, "How can we get invited?"

The second thing, similarly, is the IRF Alliance and the International Religious Freedom Alliance of nations. Again, that's another carrot. And that's an even smaller group. One hundred and six governments got invited to the second Ministerial. It was 84 the first year, but more countries want to be invited. IRF Alliance, I think that it's roughly 30 to 35 or so if you count the participants and the observers. Other countries that are part of that 106 who got invited to the Ministerial, wanted to earn their way into the Alliance, right? So those are two strong carrots.

And the State Department's telling them, "All right, if you want to get invited, we urge you to set up

a religious freedom roundtable. And we urge you to draft a roadmap to reform and work with us to start executing that roadmap to reform.” It includes the few of these countries incentivized to improve because they want to be part of this global network that we’re building, this global movement that’s building. And this administration has taken the lead at establishing that global infrastructure with those carrots.

Ambassador Brownback and his team have gone all in to support us, the civil society side, building this global network of religious freedom roundtables and encouraging these governments to support the establishment of a roundtable in their country. So that’s a huge step forward. And whoever wins in November, we want to retain that infrastructure. Whether it’s Trump and his administration or a new administration, we want to keep building on it and inject their power and influence. Or if Biden comes in, we want him to do the same thing, and we want to institutionalize the Ministerial and the IRF Alliance and this global network of roundtables and make it even stronger. And so it’s important, no matter who wins, that we keep building on that infrastructure because it is incentivizing these countries to improve.

Benjamin Harbaugh: Yeah. If I could piggyback on that just to kind of tie in maybe a little bit of this question with the last one on politicization, because I think that’s key to what a new administration would mean for the issue. I fully agree. I think we’ve seen in the Trump administration, as Matias and Greg here pointed out, unprecedented forward motion on this issue. And so I think with four more years of Trump, we would continue to see that focus and that dedication from the administration on this issue.

I think there’s one notable danger that I mentioned at the beginning. I think there is a prospect of IRF politicization from Trump. I’ve talked with some people in the State Department and elsewhere in government, and I think there is some fear that even if Trump were to be reelected, it might not mean that Brownback stays. Who knows, maybe he gets replaced. Even if he retired for other reasons, he might get replaced by someone who’s more hardline and maybe more in step with other elements of the Republican Party. So, as it stands now, I think the Trump administration would continue to push the issue. There is just a pitfall that I think we should be wary of if he gets reelected.

As it stands with Biden, I think we talk a lot about the institutionalization of IRF. And I believe there is a real opportunity here with the Biden presidency. Whether or not Trump wins reelection, we would be talking about this either now or in four years. Because whatever Trump does, if he’s done here in January or in four years, there’ll be a time where the next president will have to choose whether or not Trump’s IRF work was a one-off or if it’s going to become a part of our foreign policy establishment. And so with that in mind, I think a Biden presidency provides an opportunity as right now, he has kind of a big-tent approach to politics. I think that’s his approach to policy to some degree right now as well. And so I think that if we establish contacts and we’re working with the campaign as they’re ramping up for November, that there’s a potential to convince Biden that this is a bipartisan issue.

It will look like this for us at first because there is less motion on the issue, no matter what. I doubt that Biden is going to come in and focus on this to the extent that the Trump administration has. But that being said, I believe it’s a natural temperature reading of the politics and less like a condemnation of the issue. The pitfall in this is similar to what I said earlier about Trump possibly making the issue more polarized. I think that there’s a chance that Biden would sideline the issue or that he would see it as a Trump administration issue. So really, I think there are great opportunities for

both, but notable pitfalls. With the civil society community on this, we should be approaching both campaigns so that after November, we're prepared to move forward without politicizing the issue, regardless of who wins.

Ajit Sahi: So again, if I may take a couple of minutes in this. I think it's very important what has been said, what Ben said and what Greg earlier said. I think, again, being an outsider who hasn't been involved with the process for longer than two years, I would say, I think I would be reasonably confident that the Ministerials have enough legacy to be institutionalized by now. I don't think either of the two upcoming administrations, whether it is the Trump administration or the Biden administration, will change it. I believe it is important for all of us to know and remember and figure out how to leverage that fact, is that the fact that the Trump administration, because it's a Republican administration, there's a much stronger sense of what religious freedom internationally is than you would typically find in a Democratic administration.

That's also true. I'm not being partisan here. It's not about politics. It is just about how local and domestic politics play out and whom it influences. Many immigrant groups in the United States bring their understanding of their home countries into play, and many of these immigrant communities are part of the Democratic Party. I can speak about India. It is a paradox and a contradiction in terms that whereas the Republican Party is generally assumed to be, by most immigrant groups, predominantly Muslim immigrant groups, more averse to Muslim-related issues or immigrant-related issues. The fact is that it is the Democratic Party, which in the context of India, has a much greater intersection with the anti-Muslim Indian immigrants here in the United States than the Republican Party has.

So, for example, in the last Democratic administration of President Obama, people had at least two government staffers, one in the Department of State and another in the White House, both who were openly aligned with the Hindu nationalist point of view in India, and they have made no bones about it. One of them had to disavow her relationship with an extreme right-wing Hindu nationalist group that carries out attacks against Christians and Muslims in India. So I think that's one of the things that might be expected in a Biden administration. I would say that it's possible, at least in the context of India. Again, India is a unique case because that's one place where Muslims and Christians are both on the same side of the fence. They are both victims. They are both victims of religious violence, bigotry, and hatred by the Hindu nationalist extremist group.

But other than that, I think what Ben just said about Ambassador Brownback is very important. I think all of the pieces fell into place with the IRF Roundtable in the last two to three years. And Mr. Brownback has taken to it like fish to water. I think he's been incredible. He's been like a CEO and a business manager who understands its imperatives and objectives well. So it also remains to be seen. I don't know whether he will retire. He may even get a better position within the next administration if there's a Trump administration, so the next person that comes in. Overall, there is great institutionalization and legacy building with the Ministerial, with the IRF Roundtable process. I don't think that's going to get touched even if there's a Democratic Biden administration. I don't think that's going to get touched.

That's my last point. Before the end of Trump's first term, even before the elections, I would suggest that the IRF Roundtable Secretariat put down a document formalizing the IRF Roundtable processes, how you do it, and what you do. That would come in handy in case other thoughts come into play over the next year or so, depending on whichever administration it is—putting things down in formal writing, preparing a playbook for the IRF Roundtable, for the Ministerial, for the role that the civil

society at the IRF Roundtable plays in conjunction with the government of the United States which would be helpful. Thank you.

Greg Mitchell: On that point, yeah. Ajit, that's a great idea. And we are working on that. That is part of what we're working on, and Ben will help with that. We're going to put together really like a how-to manual, how to run a roundtable from everything, from every little thing, how to set up a Roundtable meeting, how to send out the blast emails, frequency of emails, everything. And then, we're going to lay it all out. And we'll include how we work with these governments and the IRF Alliance and everything else and the International Panel of Parliamentarians, all of that. We're going to lay all that out in the next probably 11 months. And that'll help institutionalize this, going to the next question.

Matias Perttula: I want to say a couple of quick responses because some brilliant thoughts came up from you all participating in the conversation. Steven, you were talking about the accountability side a little bit, and you mentioned a few countries that are kind of in danger of not being dealt with firmly. And I would throw India into that list as well, and I'm sure Ajit would agree with me since we worked so much on India together.

But when we see countries like India that have a history of religious pluralism, and there have been issues but none to the level of what we see today. And when we see trend lines like that happening around the world in these particular countries, there is a duty for us or for the United States and our allies and people or nations that are passionate about these issues and make it a point to call out countries like that as friends do with friends. When there are issues, you want to bring those issues up, and you want to be able to deal with them in a very strong way. But I see India being that area that's going to be a problem spot in the future if we don't start getting serious about what's happening with the fragmentation there in the civil society, communal levels.

But in addition to that, Ben mentioned, and I think Ajit also mentioned, if the Biden administration does come to power, I don't think that we're going to see the Ministerial going away completely. There's no reason why they should get rid of it practically, nor the Alliance. They have become pretty essential for an issue space that has been largely ignored over the years, and there's a significant opportunity here for the potential Biden administration to capitalize on what has previously been built. They've built their whole party platform. And I'm not saying I agree with it or I mean, I agree with the Biden administration or whatever. I'm approaching this in a very non-political way. But if there's a unification message happening in the Biden campaign, this issue is a point that you can unify around. It's one of the most bipartisan issues there has ever been.

But I would say that the political elements should not drive away the good that has been accomplished over the last three or four years. I mean, with all the incredible gains that we made in this issue, it would be the wrong move if a Biden administration came in and wanted to undo all the stuff, all the gains that we've had because the reality is that the work accomplished in this administration has created a lot of good and a lot of momentum in advancing human rights and advancing religious freedom around the world. So I think, with that being in perspective, this is something that the potential Biden administration could build on and continue to expand and grow. So those are a couple of responses to what has been said.

PART 3: THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF IRF

Manus C: Great. Well, I think with that, we could move on to the next question that Greg so helpfully queued up for us, the institutionalization. I think it's something that we've all touched on to some extent today, at least referring to the institutions, if not to the concept of institutionalization itself. But what are the institutions that the IRF community needs to be amplifying? Which ones are at risk? Ben helpfully brought up the dangers to certain institutions in both administrations. And so what are the opportunities and what are the voices that we can amplify? And what are maybe some of the pitfalls that we should be looking forward to as we try to institutionalize this issue?

Matias Perttula: I can speak on this quickly. The Ministerials and the Alliance, which are substantial institutionalization pieces within the U.S. domestic political and governing context, are expanding this issue beyond the State Department as a foreign policy issue. We're seeing that happen even now with the Executive Order that came about, which involves several different government agencies in the human rights sector, the development sector, or whatever sector. The more we can get IRF into these agencies and add to their missions, the more we will see institutionalization. So USAID is putting this into the treasury and maybe even involving elements of the intel community. I don't even know what that would look like really at this point. The more we get into these different agencies and government entities, the lifespan and the prominence of this issue become safeguarded.

I think the natural place where we already see this is through USAID. And I think that the Executive Order does an excellent job of institutionalizing these things. People like to disregard Executive Orders. And they can be undone, but Executive Orders also create a precedent. It creates life on an issue in these institutions because bureaucracies are built around these issues, and it becomes a part of their mandate to advance the issue forward. So the more we can do that kind of work throughout these institutions, the better for IRF.

Greg Mitchell: I agree with that. In addition to strengthening and institutionalizing the pieces of this global infrastructure, the key will be linking them and increasing communication and coordination of actions. I mean, that's going to be vital to the success of the whole movement. And that's one of the things the IRF Secretariat is doing. We're going to be sending out a survey, a questionnaire, probably starting in the second half of September. We'll be surveying experts around the world, including you guys, on how we can achieve that coordination of actions so that we can increase our impact. So I think that's just as important as institutionalizing all these pieces.

Benjamin Harbaugh: Another thing I just wanted to mention that I think we can do is guide the public discussion on this topic. And I'm thinking specifically of the Shaun Casey article, which has garnered a lot of ire, and rightfully so. And I just read a piece by Steven on it, I believe. But I think that we should be prepared to speak to the general public and administrations on IRF topics. Why does USCIRF matter? Why does this office in the State Department matter? And I think this is a good way to tie in when we're looking at future administrations, Biden or Trump, why does this matter to their voters?

And I think there is a lot of opportunity there, and I believe the general voter isn't up to date on these issues. Many of my friends, both Republican and Democrat, haven't heard of the Rohingya or the Uighurs. There is a great potential to reach out to the general public members and explain why this issue is apolitical and important. On the other hand, we have to defend these institutions

to respond to people like Shaun Casey and be thought leaders in that area. And I think a big part of supporting these institutions is how well we can message that IRF is bipartisan and it's important, it matters to you, it matters to the rural farmer in the Midwest, it matters to the urbanite in Seattle. And I think that's going to be vital as we move forward with whichever party is in power.

Greg Mitchell: Yeah. That's a good point, Ben. And then I'll just add one thing, too. Earlier, Emilie mentioned dignity and how universal it is. And so I agree that there could be more inclusive or broader messaging that includes dignity and belief instead of just IRF. Many people outside the U.S. don't like the IRF messaging because they think it's narrow. But we could add dignity and belief for the messaging. But the other thing, kind of going back to what Ben was talking about, is the scholarship, the research and scholarship.

Ben was talking domestically. But internationally, globally, the more religious freedom there is, the more social cohesion, the more stability and security -- and there is increasing scholarship that shows this -- the more economic development and prosperity there is. So that's why religious freedom is important. The more religious freedom you have, the more economically developed and prosperous, and the more economic opportunity for the youth, the more opportunities for developing livelihoods and things like that. And that gives hope to the youth in a foreign country, and they don't feel like they have to leave for lack of economic opportunity. So I think that's vital for what we focus on when we're pushing back when certain people say that we shouldn't be putting any more attention on religious freedom than we are on these other social and economic rights.

Ajit Sahi: So I had a suggestion, and I think the IRF Roundtable is also progressing as we've been talking. Initially, I used to hear you, Greg, say specifically at every meeting something like this is an informal collective and unregistered informal collective, something like that, basically a deliberative mechanism, something like that. And now, of course, as you said, you are registered IRF Secretariat, as an NGO, as a nonprofit. There's a lot more on the plate, on the agenda.

I think the IRF Roundtable is perfectly set to emerge as a much bigger and much wider platform from civil society on International Religious Freedom than just the weekly meetings that we have done over the years. In the last two years, we saw the Ministerials held in July. I think the Ministerial is an annual feature and is controlled and led by the Department of State. It might be worth our while to consider organizing annual conferences from civil society like the Department of State does, but holding it in January, so it's a six-month thing. In January, civil society holds its conference. In July, the State Department holds its Ministerial.

And the benefits of having a sole IRF Roundtable conference, say a two-day conference, much larger, having hundreds of people join in, is that we can control the agenda. We can have so many side events, discussions, conversations, documentary shows, movies, and whatever we want. And that becomes a civil society show. I think that will evolve a life of its own. I don't think funding will be a problem. I think there will be many people and organizations who would like to support this initiative. Again, I think that will go a long way in consolidating the legacy, the strength, and institutionalizing the IRF Roundtable.

And I think it will still be very distinct from the National Prayer Breakfast because National Prayer Breakfast is very different. It's not so much an issue of religious freedom internationally. It's more a reaffirmation of the same that's been going on for a long time. The National Prayer Breakfast doesn't throw up any new issues or any new findings or outcomes or objectives. So I think that's the one

suggestion that I wanted to make.

Greg Mitchell: That's a great idea. I like that. So we'll think about that. And the other thing, too, you just reminded me of, with the Ministerial, to institutionalize that and make sure it survives beyond the Trump administration. I think they're asking other governments to have a rotating host government, so this year it will be Poland. I think next year they've invited the United Kingdom to host. So the U.S. government would only host it every three or four years, and there'd be a different government hosting it each year. And I think that's great. I do like the idea of having a civil society-led gathering, also. So we'll talk more about that.

Matias Perttula: I think I'm going to jump in right now and respond because that's the key to this issue. When you push with people who are non-polarizing figures, you're going to get a more bipartisan and cooperative movement around these issues. And how we work with different faith groups is one of our biggest trophies that makes us distinct. And in many of our meetings, whenever they're Roundtable affiliated or not, when I mention that what we do at the Roundtable, I always say jokingly, "And we just sit around the table and argue about theology all day," and I say, "No, no, that's not what we do. We work on religious freedom. We all agree on the fact that none of us should be persecuted for what we believe in."

But that's the big chip that brings up the bipartisanship of this issue. And I think we need to be playing that up even more and more, and a Roundtable is an excellent vehicle for making that happen. And I think because it's a non-governmental entity although government participates in it, it is a model for the rest of the countries around the world that have religious freedom issues, as a model and a vehicle for mitigating through those issues and creating trust, cohesion, and creating dialogue with other religious groups who, regularly, probably would not interact with each other, otherwise. So it creates that opportunity to do that.

And like I said before, it's through that medium that you begin to build trust and see the humanity in others. Instead of seeing everything through your religious prism or your religious framework, you also see people as people, and that Emilie talked about that before with the human dignity piece. And I think that's something that the Roundtable brings to the forefront. So thank you for making that comment. That was an excellent, excellent point, I thought.

Greg pointed it out, and it was being so powerful, which was the global coordination on these issues. So I mean, if I may, I can kind of pontificate on that a little bit, but the way I see that being is, it's happening through the NGO communities and civil society. But in addition to that, it's also happening at the governmental level. So when the United States is taking action on something, it can coordinate with its allies to take similar action. When it's Germany, the UK, or whatever other countries are taking action on an issue that's IRF related, they will coordinate with the United States and the rest of the countries, maybe even within the Alliance structure, to take that similar action.

So I think that in global coordination, that's the big piece that we need to keep doing. And I think the potential of the Alliance that was created is in that. And even though it's kind of a new beast and they're still trying to figure out what they are and what they're doing, I think amplifying coordinated action as an Alliance on religious freedom issues is going to be one of their first big wins, if they can institutionalize that.

PART 4: IRF IN THE BROADER HUMAN RIGHTS COMMUNITY

Manus C: Great. Thank you all. I think we could now move on to our last question. And then, after we address this, allow everybody to make some concluding remarks, and that should be a day for us. But this last question asks about the broader human rights community and the success that we've seen there, whether it's an Amnesty or Human Rights Watch, or any of those large organizations that have broad appeal and is considered very highly within political circles, because I think they have had a lot of success in pitching themselves as objective, as nonpartisan. And so Steven touched on this a little bit, but what led to their success? How can we emulate it?

And within the IRF community, we see ourselves as human rights advocates because we are, but how can we gain a larger seat at the table? At the broader human rights community level? And Greg, I'd love to hear your thoughts there because I'm sure you've thought about that a lot. How do we advance IRF in the broader human rights community?

Greg Mitchell: On the first question, that's harder. I don't know exactly; I didn't study what they did to make human rights a broadly appealing issue. I mean, Amnesty and Human Rights Watch have established themselves as the big opinion leaders, the big organizations. They get a lot of support. They're big. And they're focused on human rights, the broader human rights like you said, I'm not sure the process on how they got there.

So let me focus on the second part, about getting IRF into the broader human rights community, because we've talked about that at the Roundtable. We've talked about that with Ambassador Brownback, elevating international religious freedom or freedom of religion or belief, along with human dignity, up to that same level. Like human trafficking, human trafficking has gone broad mainstream. It's gotten buy-in from the global community and youth, celebrities. Everybody's jumped in. That's a popular issue to be part of, whereas religious freedom isn't at that level.

You asked earlier what a barrier of religious freedom is, and it's some of the stuff we discussed before, like how it's been polarized and even weaponized. And you have certain people framing it and developing a narrative that religious freedom means the freedom to discriminate against others. That is not helpful. And that's one of the impediments or obstacles to getting religious freedom reform broadly embraced and mainstream at the same level that human trafficking and the broader human rights movement has attained. So I guess just the way around that is, I think if we can improve, and this is one of the things we were talking about two years ago was, improve the way we tell these stories of persecution.

So we tell more and more of these stories of victims of persecution, survivors of persecution, telling those stories, and getting those stories out. Mainstream media won't cover it; we need to tell those stories ourselves and get them out ourselves, which humanizes the issue and makes it real. And again, showing that the persecution is happening to all of us. Every religion is being persecuted somewhere in the world. So really getting those stories out and developing that narrative and again, playing up the universal nature and human dignity, even belief, that it's religion or belief. So I think using new media to tell these stories and using new media to shape the narrative, that I think is the true narrative, it's the accurate narrative to get around that polarized narrative that's out there that religious freedom is just about being free to discriminate.

That's not what it's about. And religious freedom is not an issue where it's religious freedom versus other human rights. That's not what it's about. And that's a politicized narrative. And that narrative is being used against believers and being used against the religious freedom movement. We have to out-create that. And we need to use new media and media productions like web videos, maybe short films, short documentaries, feature-length documentaries, etc. I think we need to start doing that as civil society to get around the weaponized narrative driven by people who want to divide us and separate religious freedom from the broader human rights community. And so those are my thoughts.

And one other thing, I think if we can also make as part of the story and part of the narrative, what we're all doing about persecution, the fact that we all come together like Ajit was talking about and how unique the Roundtable model is. Like people who come into that room and see it in person, they immediately see how special it is, but people who've never been to the Roundtable don't know what's happening. Our efforts now and how we're all pulling together, standing up for each other's freedom of religion or belief, are part of the story. And I think that needs to be told as well, because it is inspiring.

And I think it gives people hope. These people are maybe a bit hopeless and apathetic because of the pounding they've taken on the receiving end of persecution for decades. I think the way we come together and stand up for them gives them hope. And people who have logged into our Roundtable, since we've been doing the virtual meetings, the first week of April, we've had over 700 people now that have logged in from 50 different countries. Some people have said that a certain amount of hope has been restored in them because we're all gathering, pulling together, and we're all standing up for them. And we're all doing what we can, taking multi-faith actions to persuade governments to confront this issue and stop persecuting peaceful religious communities. Right? So I think all this, we need to do a better job, especially next year, as we start coming out of this coronavirus lockdown and we can all start moving around and gathering together. I think we need to start focusing on media productions to tell these stories.

Steven Howard: When I reflected on this, I was thinking of people like Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Jr., St. Pope John Paul II. Although you could say they did have their ideological leanings, these were figures that were able to speak, I think, to such universal truth that all of us today can look to them. And no matter if you're a Democrat or Republican, you would look to these figures and say, "Yes. These people are real heroes."

So I think we should just think about when it comes to our issue who are the people who are attractive, who bring people together. And some of the figures that came to mind, I was thinking of Pastor Bob Roberts. Again, people are very well respected on the left, very well respected by people on the right. And he has, obviously, a constructive relationship with Imam Magid. I think that, no matter who wins the election, that's going to be constructive and useful going forward. I'd point to the Greek Archbishop I mentioned earlier, Elpidophorous. I mean, he's the only person I've seen who will talk to Biden and the next day, go and talk to Trump. And you have no idea whose side he is on, but somehow he manages to work both sides in a way that doesn't upset anyone and is constructive for his community. So I think it's good for our movement to identify these types of champions who don't drive people away but bring us together.

Ajit Sahi: Can I just make a quick point on this, Manus? So I think human rights and religious freedom intersect. Religious freedom is a subset of human rights. I think the only conflict that comes is from

the domestic understanding of religious freedom. It's a very religious and political topic in the United States. There's just one issue that is pro-life versus pro-choice. So the pro-life is religious freedom; the pro-choice is human rights. That's the only place where it is configured like that, it is presented like that, but most else, and in fact, I think from the international perspective, what we should get our cue from, are the two reports that the Department of State releases every year.

One is the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor report that comes out in March every year. That's on human rights violations across the world. And the other is, of course, the religious freedom report that, again, the Secretary releases in June, as he did two months ago. That's on religious freedom. I think it should not be a problem. Greg, this is another idea for you. It is an organic development for the IRF Roundtable from being what it has been till now and providing a model for coming together and talking. I think IRF Roundtable could very well evolve also into being a go-to organization.

You are talking about the media. I would say, not just the new media, but also the old media. For example, we had the Turkish issue just this morning. I think Ben talked about it. Just in the last 24 hours, another former church has been converted into a mosque in Turkey, so any of these things that happen around the world, the news guys, the journalists, the news media, they should automatically turn to people like you, people like Matias for a quote. That's brand building, and it might not be a bad idea to think in terms of in 2021 and retaining a PR agency. I'm saying, just start, maybe you need a separate session to discuss most of these things, these ideas for the future, but I'm saying in terms of going forward, it might be helpful to do a brand building for the IRF Roundtable so that the wider community, the news media community, the civil society community, they know about it.

There's one point that I also wanted to say because I think this is the last bit of the conversation that I wrote to Manus in the morning. I think we also need to look at the countries that we work on and divide them into two categories. It's clear that in some countries where our advocacy for religious freedom aligns with the United States government's political NGO strategic objectives, it's much easier for us to do advocacy for those countries. For example, China. Of course, all our work is legitimate, but anything we do talk about China or to a lesser extent about Pakistan or Venezuela, North Korea, Iran, it gets a lot more attention and response from both Capitol Hill and the U.S. government than say in strategic countries, close partners of the United States.

So for the first category of countries, where we get a good response from the government and Capitol Hill, we should double down on our work. We need to lead those conversations, lead those ideas as the IRF Roundtable is already doing in terms of, let us say China, Vietnam, and Iran, all of these places. But there are also countries where it's not easy to get a murmur out of the government. There was a story in the Washington Post on India about three months ago. And it had one line which said, "Ambassador Brownback declined to offer a comment on that." And one can understand what the imperatives are and how it works. So for those countries, such as India, it will be important for us to build, firstly, build a mass communication program where we take it to the average Americans what's happening in India, because only then the kind of pressure that we expect from the American society to build on the government, that will happen. It's a long term project.

And that's why IRF Roundtable, I would say, needs to engage with civil society, not just the partners, people who come to the table but also go to academia. For example, to organize, in the current times, a webinar and a physical presence, and that's where an organization like mine, which has a

nationwide presence, comes in. And we don't work on just the Muslim issues. We work on all issues. We could be of help. Go to universities, from Chicago to whatever, Yale. And work with academia creates curriculum on that, on religious freedom, that sort of thing over the next two to three years. That's the sort of thing I would say we should work on.

Benjamin Harbaugh: Yeah, I had one quick addition to this. I think as we're looking for how to move the ball on this issue internationally, from the example we have from human rights more broadly is that there's going to have to be U.S. leadership at first. And I think there needs to be an eye towards using our leadership, but with the goal of devolution of authorities shortly. One of the reasons that human rights are compelling to states is that there's buy-in from most of them. It's easier to agree to something if all of your peers are. Obviously, not every state agrees, but there's this buy-in, and with international religious freedom, rightfully so, I think we're recognized as the leader right now. And I think that's a great place to be, but it can't be where we stay.

If the U.S. is the sole or primary leader on this issue, or even if it's Western powers that are leaders on this issue, there is a limit to its acceptance globally. And so I think moving forward, we have great examples, particularly the IRFA. I think the IRFA is a model that if we work hand in glove with other countries, that is a way that we can develop IRF as a priority globally as another human right on equal footing. But we really must be building into these more regional or global views if we want IRF to be seen as an important human right more broadly. Like with the IRF secretariat, we've talked about establishing Roundtables and establishing regional leaders where we're establishing Roundtables. And I think that's the kind of model we want to follow. Allowing other countries to lead alongside the U.S.

Greg Mitchell: And also to build on what you guys were saying, Ajit, especially at the end here, I think it's important to include or bring citizens into this movement and give them a role to play. I think we need a grassroots platform. So what you just said was like, we need to be telling the stories about what's happening to people, real people overseas in India, Saudi Arabia, everywhere. Telling the stories of what's happening in the world and giving the people a way to engage. Like right now, the Roundtable network is all focused on faith communities and civil society organizations and civil society leaders and bringing governments in and coordinating, but that the people aren't given a way to participate and be part of the solutions and be part of these multi-faith initiatives.

I think we should be building towards that in 2021, so when we're telling these stories and getting them out through news media, the people who are viewing them can then immediately participate and be part of the solution. And I think that will help significantly elevate this issue and get it into the mainstream just like human trafficking is big.

Ajit Sahi: Greg, also the news media. We need to focus a lot more on visibility for the IRF Roundtable in the news media.

Greg Mitchell: Yeah. I made a note of that. I have that noted down, too, so that can be part of the plan. See, the IRF Secretariat has received a planning grant from Templeton Religion Trust. And this is what we're going to be doing over the next six months, is serving people and getting your ideas. Like, I've just made notes of the ideas I got from this session today and am building that into our strategic planning for 2021. So over the next six to 10 or 11 months, but really over the next six months, we're going to be doing these surveys and developing a plan to apply for a Templeton Religion Trust grant next year to start implementing and executing that plan next summer. That's the path we're on. So these are great ideas that we can work into that plan.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Manus C: Well, with that we come to the end of our time. Do you have any concluding remarks?

Matias Perttula: Sure. Just to conclude everything, in terms of the elections, I mean, we covered a lot of ground. A lot of it was focused on the future but dependent on the possibility of a Biden administration or the Trump administration's potential continuation. But I would just say, just to conclude that we're dealing with an issue that's not partisan. It's a human right issue. Everybody can get behind it, and they should get behind it. In case there is a Biden administration, I would once again point out not to allow those to die off and make sure that they continue to grow because of the impact on these issues. Not to say political tones undercut the gains already made under the current administration in terms of this issue, and the multilateral institutions we've seen come to pass in the form of the ministerial and the Alliance.

And then continue to partner up with our civil society. I think the ambassadors' participation in the Roundtable is a huge asset and just goes to show the administration's continued commitment to the issues and being in touch with what's happening on the ground with all the religious minorities. I'm sure others have other comments on that, but I'll leave it at that.

Greg Mitchell: Just kind of what we're building on here, we're saying on about the answer to the last question I think, was building up a good wrap-up that we've got this great new global infrastructure and so we have a great opportunity with the infrastructure that's building, like build towards this global movement around religious freedom before, and so we just have to keep going. And again, that for me, I think we have a great opportunity with this planning grant that I just mentioned from Templeton Religion Trust.

And we should take advantage of that and get inputs from you all and get experts around the world from different regions, not just America, not just the West. So get the global viewpoints from a global perspective and develop a strategic plan for 2021 that it really can be the planning document for the entire movement. And we can build in all these great ideas on how we can institutionalize this and how we can tell the stories, get the media involved, and get the people involved. The more the people get involved, I think the more these governments are going to take it seriously, and the more that we're going to get them to engage.

So I'm just looking forward to the formal questionnaire and circulating it to you guys, and then start really digging into the feedback and the inputs we get from the questionnaire, and then developing that strategic plan and working with you all to take things to the next level in 2021. So thank you again. Glad to participate.

Steven Howard: Again, I want to thank Manus and Matias for hosting this important discussion. The IRF movement is lucky to have such advocates as yourselves.

I think, in closing, it is important to praise the Trump Administration when they do good on this issue and criticize them when they fall short. We owe it to our communities to be as principled and apolitical when engaging with these issues. We should also keep all commentary within the scope of the policies we are commenting on as well.

For a potential Biden administration, I would say that just because the Trump administration implemented a policy does not mean that policy should be reversed. Assisting genocide survivors is always a good idea. Nobel Prize Winner Nadia Murad has been very complimentary of the Pence initiative in Iraq and Syria. A Biden Administration should continue this.

For U.S. engagement in the Middle East, across parties, I would say that it's one thing to hold American adversaries such as China, Iran, and Russia accountable for human rights violations. It is another thing entirely to hold allies accountable for human rights violations. For Middle Eastern Christians, holding Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt accountable is vital for Christianity's presence in the region.

A strong response and ushering in a new regime of leaders in Lebanon is crucial.

Benjamin Harbaugh: In closing, we're living in a very exciting time. We just experienced over three years of exponential growth on this issue. And as Greg said, that framework of a global movement has been established. I think that there are real opportunities to move the ball on the IRF issue with either a continued Trump or a new Biden administration. And that moving forward, we need to focus on continuing to institutionalize the issue while building up other countries that are showing leadership and strengthening this partnership that we've built here between civil society and government. Thanks again. I enjoyed this brief.

Ajit Sahi: Well, I just would like to reiterate what I said at the beginning: we need to establish ourselves with the Congressional side also and get much greater participation from them. IRF Roundtable is a brand name that should be there at congressional hearings, on CNN, with foreign governments. If there is a Biden administration, you might see the U.S. returning to the Human Rights Council in Geneva. So Geneva, the UN Special Rapporteur, the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights those are also the places that should also begin to recognize IRF Roundtable as a natural partner. I think those are the places.

Manus C: Wonderful. Thank you. That was a very fruitful discussion. I appreciate you all taking the time to join us today. It was an honor to have each one of you.

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