

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM UNDER PRESIDENT-ELECT BIDEN

INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN FELLOWS BRIEF

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On November 13, 2020 International Christian Concern convened a group of Washington, D.C.-based experts to discuss how best to advance international religious freedom (IRF) in the upcoming Biden administration.

The panelists began by considering the rising attention that IRF has enjoyed over the past several decades and, in particular, under the Trump administration. From the passage of the IRF Act under President Clinton in 1998 to the annual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in 2018, the IRF issue has enjoyed wide bipartisan support in Washington, D.C., something that all the panelists agreed should continue under Biden.

Participants focused on the benefits that Biden will bring to the IRF issue and proposed ways that civil society could positively engage with his team going forward, including the potential for putting pressure on countries that have received little attention under the Trump administration.

Key Takeaways

- *There is good reason to believe that Biden and his team will take the IRF issue seriously and continue to use the weight of the United States' influence abroad to push for the rights of religious minority communities*
- *Civil society should devote time and resources to studying the issue of religious freedom and presenting it in an academic and impartial manner, facilitating the integration of IRF as a cross-cutting issue into other issue spaces, including development and the broader human rights movement*
- *The Biden administration has great potential to move the dial on international religious freedom. Both parties have expressed widespread support for the issue for decades, and he comes to office on the tail of a historic rise in the role of IRF in multilateral relations*
- *By continuing the pressure campaign on countries like China, Iran, and Russia and putting new pressure on countries like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and India, Biden can take great strides towards ensuring religious freedom for all*

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 to join this discussion this morning.

I've had the pleasure of interacting with most of you before, but by way of introduction, my name is Manus C and I've been at ICC for a year and a half, where I work under Matias in the Advocacy department. I've taken on a project manager role—I am currently working on sanctions research, ICC's Fellows program, and a few other projects for the department and the organization. So, just trying to assist Matias and advance IRF all around the world but specifically in Africa, where I have a regional focus.

And with that, if we could introduce ourselves alphabetically by last name:

John Cosenza: It's really nice to see you all here. I've met a couple of you guys before, but for all the new individuals, it's very nice to meet you. My name is John Cosenza, I work full time as a consultant for a pharmaceutical consultancy firm, but on the side, for over five years now, I've also worked with a couple of different firms in the Washington, D.C. area, especially in regards to international religious freedom and international human rights. I've been an ICC fellow for the past year and a half now.

So, I've been doing a lot of research for ICC in terms of international religious freedom and international human rights across the world, and have been publishing articles for ICC for a while now. I have also stayed in touch with a couple of other organizations in the D.C. area and provided similar services in terms of research and writing and policy recommendations, etc. Again, happy to be here, nice to meet everyone, and looking forward to the conversation.

Andrew Crane: Hello—for those of you who I have not met yet, I am Andrew Crane. I work with Manus and Matias over at ICC. I serve as an Advocacy Associate, focusing mainly on the Middle East. I am excited for everyone to have this discussion.

Colton Grellier: Hey everyone. My name is Colton Grellier. I'm currently a research fellow with ICC looking into religious freedom abuses in South and Central Asia. This past May, I graduated from Liberty University School of Law with a specialization in international law, researched civil and ethnic unrest in South America, and then looked into the Coptic church and how their rights were violated. I'm really excited to be a part of this dialogue.

Steven Howard: Hi, Steven Howard, National Outreach Director with In Defense of Christians. The first two conversations were really beneficial and enjoyable, so I'm looking forward to today's, and again, thank you guys, Matias and Manus for hosting. It's a great opportunity, a great venue. So thanks for all you do to make it happen.

Emilie Kao: I'm Emily Kao. It's great to be with you guys again. I'm the director of the DeVos Center for Religion and Society at Heritage Foundation. I've worked on religious freedom at the State Department, at the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and a law firm called Jus Cogens. At the State Department, I was the director of the East Asia team and the Office of International Religious Freedom. When I worked for Jus Cogens, I worked on religious freedom in the Middle East. I'm really looking forward to today's discussion.

Matias Perttula: My name is Matias Perttula, and I work at ICC. I serve as the Director of Advocacy. I've been with ICC for about three years now. Prior to that, I worked at the Brookings Institution in the foreign policy program. Before that, I was Executive Director for the Office of the President at a university in

central Florida. At ICC, we love doing these discussions with our Fellows and special guests. Especially in a time like this, when there's a contested election and things are a little bit tumultuous at the political spectrum, it's an excellent opportunity for us to start processing some thoughts on what the future for international religious freedom may look like under a Biden/Harris administration. I am confident that we can come together and work on this most crucial issue and push it forward. So thank you all for being here, and thank you, Manus, for leading us through today's discussion.

Ajit Sahi: My name is Ajit Sahi. I work as Advocacy Director with the Indian American Muslim Council. IAMC has worked as a nonprofit in Washington, D.C. for the last 18 years. Even though this organization is founded by Muslims, it advocates for all minorities in India. I am a full-time professional employed by the organization, and I am not Muslim myself.

We do a lot of work with the Department of State, on Capitol Hill, and with Indian American civil society groups as well as non-Indian American groups. International Christian Concern is a very close partner. I look forward to working together with the other organizations here on the call today. I was honored to be invited by ICC to be part of the previous two editions of this conversation, and I look forward to today's discussion.

Sara Salama: Hi, I'm Sara Salama. I'm very excited to join this conversation. I'm the Co-founder and President of CopticVoice, which is a community diaspora organization that seeks to help construct the Coptic diaspora's identities and also make use of the political agency in the diaspora.

Nathan Wineinger: Hi, my name is Nathan Weininger. I'm Director of Policy and Coalitions at 21Wilberforce.

Manus C: Thank you everybody for those introductions. As I said, we're honored to have all of you. We appreciate you all taking the time to join us this morning.

Just to frame this discussion, this is the third in a series of conversations that we've had this year. The first was in January, where we asked, "What is international religious freedom, and how does it fit into the broader context of D.C. our foreign policy context?"

And then, in August, we gathered again to discuss the importance of framing IRF as an apolitical issue and distinguishing it from domestic political issues that use much the same terminology.

So now, in the context of the election, we wanted to continue both of those discussions and consider how we can push IRF, specifically in a Biden administration.

How can we maximize our impact as a community, as individuals? How can we push the issue of religious freedom for those abroad most effectively in the Biden administration? In part one, we're going to talk about the accomplishments of the last four years, about who the key actors are that will continue into a Biden administration.

Then, in part two, we're going to look at ourselves and our community to talk about the strengths that we have as the IRF community and the potential for expanding into the broader human rights world. And then, in part three, we're going to try to combine both of those and talk about how we can advance IRF in a Biden administration, what the areas of greatest opportunity are and what are the areas of particular potential resistance.

PART ONE

Manus C: Let's start with Part One—how do we take the accomplishments of the last four years and expand them for the next four? Who are the key actors in D.C. that will remain most open to the IRF issue?

Matias Perttula: I can begin on the first part of the question here, on how we can take the accomplishments of the last four years and expand in the next four. I think you can look at this from two different perspectives. You can take the government perspective in terms of the Office of International Religious Freedom at State, the National Security Council (NSC) at the White House, and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). I would consider those three as a part of the government piece. And then there's the civil society piece: all of us NGOs and the IRF Roundtable that is now becoming an international institution. I think most of us who have participated in all of this community would agree that it has grown exponentially over the last four years.

I believe there are about 30 or so IRF Roundtables now around the world that are multi-faith, composed of numerous different organizations, activists, and human rights leaders who all participate in this community. Now the Roundtable from the D.C. side is beginning to coordinate global action on persecution-related issues, and that's something that we really haven't seen before. It's also something that the government in the U.S., especially with Ambassador Brownback, has leveraged quite a bit over the last four years. He is participating in the D.C. Roundtable actively every week when it meets. He gives us briefings, and we brief him, so it's been a very robust time of growth in that sense, and the attendance has gone up exponentially from what it was even three or four years ago. At its inception, the organization was a couple of dozen organizations and individuals. Now it is between 100 to 160 different participants on the D.C. side.

So we've seen that grow quite a bit. I think part of why there's been so much interest in it has a great deal to do with the political will coming from the executive on this topic (the Trump Administration). That includes Mike Pence, Ambassador Brownback, obviously, and then, of course, Secretary Pompeo, who have all innovated and pushed this issue. We've seen this with the Ministerial becoming the largest human rights event in State Department history, now twice in D.C. and this year in Poland in a virtual capacity. But still, this event is evolving and growing into an international institution.

And then, we look at all the other multilateral institutions that have been born on the government side, including the International Religious Freedom Alliance, which I believe has almost 30 different countries, at this point, as members. Expanding on these elements, I've been thinking, what does this Alliance do specifically? How can they push this issue forward multilaterally? A few things come to mind when I think about that question, coordinating individual or targeted sanctions efforts on human rights violators, but mainly targeting international religious freedom violators in these countries to keep in step with the perceived mission of the Alliance. So when the United States (or another country) leads with sanctions on particular individual violators, it can be developed into a coordinated action that could be integrated with the Alliance as a whole.

The other thing that I see as a feasible action point for the Alliance is creating an intentional plan for the Ministerial to establish itself even more so internationally and take it beyond the Western countries. Another way forward is hosting the Ministerial in regions in the world where we know persecution is happening.

If that's possible, that would be a pretty powerful signaling mechanism for the rest of the world. The other piece that the Alliance could do is make joint statements on issue areas around the world. Obviously,

there's plenty of issues with international religious freedom and persecution, which most of these countries will agree are egregious—but being more active in engaging through public statements and coming up with a roadmap of multilateral advocacy between the governments. Using the ministerial and the Alliance as a U.N. type multilateral institution to pressure countries that we know are persecuting would be an excellent next step.

Nathan Wineinger: Regarding the sort of opportunities for engagement going forward, I think some of those opportunities have been really outlined within the notion of really nesting religious freedom within the core human rights agenda. Of course, religious freedom is an Article 18 right under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the current administration, the Trump administration has really elevated it and brought a lot of attention and done a lot of work around it. So it's not just in the sort of corner, it's not in the broom closet, I think the IRF office space was called that when it was first started, a basement room closet, and it's not there anymore.

It's on a much higher floor within the State Department that's unlikely to move anytime soon, and so then the question is, all right, now we've elevated it, now how do we integrate it within those other issue spaces? I think that's incredibly important. One way is through legislation. My organization does the international religious freedom scorecard every year and there are numerous pieces of legislation that referenced religious freedom within the whereas statements, within the resolved statements when it's a resolution, and also in the policy statements. These are one way of integrating IRF into other issues spaces just as any other cross cutting issue would be elevated.

Those are extremely important, those allow people within the bureaucracy, within the various agencies to recognize that this issue has an impact on the work that they do, and it's in legislation, it's in the mandates from Congress. It's not just IRFA, it's not just the International Religious Freedom Act. The International Religious Freedom Act recognized that IRF is a priority for US foreign policy and mandated from Congress that it's a priority for US foreign policy, but then that has to show up in other foreign policy areas, and of course it does. It shows up in food insecurity in Nigeria, it shows up in gender based violence in Burma, it shows up in forced labor in China. So it shows up in all these different areas and we need to continue to recognize it and push that and help since it's now been so elevated because of the amazing work of Ambassador Brownback, then help integrate it within the broader frame.

Colton Grellier: And Nathan, I think you hit the nail on the head there. Suppose we can sum up the accomplishments of the last four years. In that case, it could probably be access and legitimacy, where religious freedom is no longer the redheaded stepchild of the human rights world. In a way, recognized as a universal declaration right, if you will, it's almost like, "Oh, hey, religious freedom, it's actually part of this fundamental framework?" So, I would agree, legitimacy is a huge thing. And of course, access with the amazing work with Ambassador Brownback and USCIRF and the fact that Secretary Pompeo as well, now, the accessing is a political thing that will shift and even though it's one of the great things we've gained, administrations come and go all the time.

So I think the big thing is how do we take the legitimacy that we've gained over the past four years, and how do we stand on our own? We don't need to be bolstered by the goodwill and favor of anyone in any political institution. We're able to assert ourselves just like Reporters Without Borders or Amnesty International. We're able to stand as a coequal right among the International Bill of Rights. So I think asserting our legitimacy outside of any need for political bolstering is where we can take strength and make it our own so that we can become as apolitical as possible.

Steven Howard: I agree that these are key accomplishments that are important moving forward. Merely executing the executive order from the summer is going to be really important moving forward. There's no reason not to pursue that executive order; there is nothing remotely partisan about it, so that's

something that we should push the new administration to do. I would also point to faith-based aid to genocide survivors in Iraq and Syria, to Christians in the Middle East, and fortunately as well, through the Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act, HR390, that passed unanimously in the Senate, overwhelmingly in the House. That's something that we could easily meet with the administration and say, "Vice President Pence did a good job. We also want you to be aware that there's been bipartisan support for this aid for years."

H.Res. 1062 - Affirming the nature and importance of the United States-Iraq bilateral relationship, including security and economic components of the relationship, was introduced by Colin Allred and Guy Reschenthaler on US-Iraq bilateral relations. In the resolution, to Nathan's point, it specifically mentions that there was bipartisan support for genocide survivors in Iraq. So I think that that is really important as well because when you can go and meet with the new administration, you can "We understand that you have a very different philosophy than the previous administration, but we want you to know that there are multiple resolutions, overwhelmingly bipartisan that support this aid." I think it makes a very compelling case, so those are, I think, two big things that we want to continue. The resolution is expected to pass the House on November 16 or 17, which will reflect that a Democratic House supports this assistance

I think we need to do a better job of applying our stated priorities to bilateral relations. I think that's an area where the Trump administration struggled at times; there were a few specific alliances where it seemed like countries with whom the U.S. had a close relationship. This issue just wasn't brought up, and I mean it might be that Secretary Pompeo met with the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, that must've been yesterday or earlier today. I'm happy that he ruffled some feathers in Turkey, but doing it in this kind of lame-duck period is probably a little bit too late. It would have been helpful if this was done much earlier. I think there are several countries bilaterally where this issue should have been more prominent and where we can push the new administration to be more prominent as well.

I remember reading, even on a lot of these Turkish issues, our assumption that President-Elect Biden has the opportunity to apply more pressure on Turkey. We're encouraged by statements he's made, but we're also not naive in that we know that President Obama had campaigned on recognition of the Armenian genocide and that there were even failures from that administration when it came to Turkey as well. So, we're still going to monitor that, but we think that just increased pressure bilaterally is important.

And then lastly, I would say, let's take into consideration U.S. national security interests. Sometimes we need to push back on these for sure. People will tell you, "Oh, the U.S. can't pressure Saudi Arabia on religious freedom because of national security." Or "The U.S. can't pressure Egypt or Turkey because of national security." We do need to push back on it, but we want to be very, very careful that in our advocacy, we don't play into the hands of foreign players, foreign actors who would try and use religious freedom as a pretext for undermining the U.S. interests abroad.

For example, even for our issues, I've had people like Russia Today reach out and say, would you be willing to talk about the work that Russia does to protect Christians in Syria. It's a 10% truth, 90% propaganda dynamic, where it's important to bear in mind that "No, this is not in the interest of the U.S.," to be contributing my organization's voice or input into this type of outlet. So I think that we want to be mindful that the U.S. does have partnerships and alliances that matter and that we don't want to somehow play into anyone's greater geo-strategic game in our advocacy. So we should just bear in mind that the U.S. has alliances, and that we should try and work with them to promote this.

John Cosenza: Steven, you made an excellent point. In regards to International Religious Freedom, I don't think a Biden presidency will reverse many of Trump's policies, but I am fearful that a Biden

administration may not prioritize International Religious Freedom as aggressively as the Trump administration. This could negatively impact all of the progress the Trump administration and Secretary Pompeo and Ambassador Brownback have made over the last four years.

So I think, Steven, you made an excellent point when you say we really should encourage and emphasize the bilateral support both Democrats and Republicans shared in this issue. I think that is something that we need to emphasize and say, "Listen, we understand that you have a different philosophy from the Trump administration, but this is something that all Americans are behind, whether you're Republican or Democrat. I think all Americans are behind the fact that this is a welcoming country and that we are willing to welcome those who have been so horrifically afflicted by international religious persecution." So I do just want to emphasize that, and I think you made an excellent point, Steven.

Emilie Kao: Biden was in the Senate when the International Religious Freedom Act passed, and I think he voted for it. So, I mean, this is part of his historical record. He is on record helping to create this infrastructure that we have in the U.S. government. And he is the president; I hope that he will lead from the top because I think when you look at the Trump administration, so many of the initiatives that have been very successful in his administration from Ambassador Brownback and Vice President Pence were because of the priority that the president himself put on international religious freedom. The fact that he nominated Sam Brownback to this position and had him confirmed pretty early in the administration, the fact that it wasn't the national security strategy, the fact that there are these Executive Orders and that Vice President Pence's office has this initiative and they have a fund to promote international religious freedom. So, leadership from the president himself is very important. I hope that that will continue in a Biden administration.

I think that it's essential that a new ambassador be appointed early in the administration. I was at the State Department under the Obama administration, and there were several years of a vacancy in that position before Suzan Johnson Cook was appointed to be the first IRF ambassador under President Obama. And that vacancy sends a strong message to those violators of international religious freedom that this is not one of the president's highest priorities. So I would hope that a new administration would do that and that Congress would help ensure that this stays among our human rights priorities and our national security priorities. I think that one thing that's become more and more well understood over multiple administrations from Bush to Obama to Trump is that national security and international religious freedom are intrinsically connected.

And I think when you look at what's happening right now in Europe, which we might be able to talk about more later, with the increased terrorist attacks and response to the Mohammad cartoons, I mean, this is directly related to the repressive blasphemy laws and just the kind of culture that the blasphemy and apostasy laws create in Muslim majority countries where there's total intolerance of public discourse that includes a dissenting viewpoint. And that has now spilled over. It's not contained within the borders of the Muslim majority countries. It has spilled over to the rest of the world with global terrorism. Hopefully, that kind of understanding of the intrinsic relationship between these issues would also continue in a Biden administration.

Sara Salama: I agree with that statement. And I just want to talk about what Steven and Nathan said as well. Some of the real strengths of this current administration were expanding aid to religious minority groups through USAID and elevating the issue to make it more visible, and provide direct access for government officials to actual religious minority groups. So I think that that was well done. I completely agree with what Nathan said about how it has been elevated, and now it needs to be integrated. I think part of the elevation is building alliances and coalitions with non-religious freedom organizations. Part of what the administration has done is elevate IRF, but it also politicized it, right? Trump attached a lot

of political connotations to religious freedom.

And I think that might be where the fear comes in with the next administration undoing that work because of that kind of political connection with the issue. It's important to be thinking in a more mainstream way using more mainstream human rights language. This might be a little bit out there, but rather than using words like "persecution," maybe using more mainstream language, and then also making the connections between religious freedom as Nathan and Steven pointed out between religious freedom and other rights that are elevated on the other side like women's rights, refugee rights, and the migration issue in general, which I think is going to be a big priority for the next administration.

And that leads to the second question: Who are the key actors and institutions that will remain open? I think that depends on us and our framing and civil society's framing of the issues to open doors to key actors and institutions to make them remain open to the IRF issue.

Ajit Sahi: Thank you, everybody—these are excellent views. I just want to briefly touch on how a Biden administration can change the Trump administration's decisions and initiatives. For example, let's start with Israel. I don't think that the Biden administration will reverse Trump's initiative in getting some of the Arab countries to start diplomatic relations with Israel. I don't think the Biden administration will pull the American embassy from Tel Aviv and bring it back to Jerusalem. It would need very ideological and dogmatic thinking to take those steps. I don't think that's who Biden is.

And we also have the experience of almost 22 years of the IRF Act and the Ambassador for International Religious Freedom. We saw two people appointed by Barack Obama—Suzan Johnson Cook and Rabbi Saperstein. Neither of them showed a lack of interest in the issue of global religious freedom. And we have seen the various appointments to USCIRF by Democrats, which has not given us any cause for alarm. So I would not be worried about what shape and form this might take.

Of course, the best thing would be if someone can convince the Biden administration that Ambassador Brownback should be allowed to continue in his position because he's done such excellent work over the last four years. He's been genuinely nonpartisan, he's been very focused on his work, and the work has expanded beyond anyone's imagination in four years. At the same time, because of the energy and the momentum that the work has gained—especially in this unique partnership between the IRF Roundtable and the Department of State—I think somebody will have to be very deliberately anti-IRF to undo that work.

I think the only reason for us to worry might be if a marginal lack of interest gradually and slowly decelerates the momentum and the passion and the expansion of the work. And that's where all of us in civil society need to keep pushing back. We need to keep reaching out.

We have very good partners in the Department of State, especially the mid-level officials who have now four years of working very closely with the IRF Roundtable on the issue. So that should work very well. Of course, nobody can know the future, but it seems reasonable to assume that there's not going to be much of a change. And if there is a change of the Ambassador, we should hope that the new Ambassador has a solid resume on this issue.

It's a significant point that Steven raised about this bogeyman of Saudi Arabia and how we need to scale back on the idea of religious freedom if we have good relations with a country. This is something that civil society groups need to focus on in the next four years. For the last four years, we have built strong ties and relationships with the Department of State, and we now need to replicate that approach with the Department of Defense.

The Department of Defense has a much larger budget and much more significant influence on America's foreign policy than even the Department of State—we all know that. And the fact that you will not

serve America's national security interests if you allow dictatorships to proceed unchecked is something we see with China. China's behavior towards its religious minorities has been coterminous with its expansion of totalitarianism and authoritarianism, and its authoritarianism has come in direct conflict with America's national security interests.

There's a direct correlation between a fall in religious freedom in a specific country and its failure to serve America's national security interests. We've seen this in the last several years, with Saudi Arabia and the war in Yemen. And it's about time that the United States government starts paying attention because one of the biggest reasons that the Middle East is destabilized right now is the war carried out by Saudi Arabia in Yemen. Similarly, the situation in Libya is entirely due to Turkey.

As civil society, we need to focus on the Department of Defense, the intelligence community, and other national security interest stakeholders like the NSC and the NSA. We need to start meeting with these people; we need to reach out to people in the Eisenhower building; we need to invite them to the IRF Roundtable. And we need to replicate this conversation with the Department of Defense.

A feature of both Barack Obama and Donald Trump is that they ignored religious violence in India. Even as religious violence was happening in India, in Delhi, President Trump was there, and he held a joint press conference with Prime Minister Modi. And President Trump said that Mr. Modi is bringing freedom to all of its citizens. And just as Mr. Trump left India, the violence escalated. So these things matter because, for us, it's just another day's work, but for these countries, they take it as America's indulgence, and that emboldens them.

Number one, we should not worry too much about the Biden administration altering the U.S.'s approach to religious freedom. Number two, we should start reaching out to the Department of Defense.

PART TWO

Manus C: Great. Thank you all for your thoughts on that first section of our conversation. For the second part, I want to talk about us internally. Maybe an introspective look at the IRF community and what we can do to push the issue forward in a Biden administration. And to Sara's point, how does the IRF community make roads in the broader human rights world?

Matias Perttula: In terms of making inroads to the broader human rights community, many of the comments already have touched on this. I think a lot of it has to do with Nathan's comments regarding integrating it across the different agencies and institutions within the government itself. And I think the E.O., the Executive Order, does a pretty good job of laying out a roadmap of work for that, but it can be even expanded beyond that. And looking back at the last three to four years, all of the precedent that has already been set up through the ministerial, through the Alliance, through the civil society partnerships with the Roundtable, through the Executive Order- all these different action points set up a history that will only set the stage for it to be built on even more. And I think it's set up very well now in terms of the government and civil society, all of us NGOs that work on this issue to make the argument that religious freedom is a major component of broader human rights and delivering humanitarian aid. Something that came to mind immediately was human trafficking. When I think of Nigeria, many of

the trafficked women are religious minorities. That identity piece plays a major role as to why they are trafficked or targeted for trafficking. We've seen this in Nigeria, Pakistan, and the Middle East while ISIS was still ravaging the area. There's been a number of instances where there's overlap with these issues.

The other thing is when religious freedom does not or is not promoted by the government or by the society of any country there is a major disparity in the economic, political, and social life of the religious minorities of those countries. So the argument can also be made that as this freedom expands, so does economic rights, political rights, gender rights, women's rights, and so on. So that's a broader issue that we can start pushing on, and now we can take countries and communities case by case to start highlighting this issue. And I think that that's been one of the reasons why it's been broadly overlooked, they've been focusing on the gender right or women's rights, or they've been focusing on economic development or something.

Many western NGOs have overlooked the fact that the real underlying issue in a lot of these cases is religious identity. And the fact is that individuals from religious minority communities are not given the opportunities or are not encouraged with the opportunities that many other Western countries have for all populations in terms of religious freedom. And I think there are other pieces that play into this on how to counter that. First of all, it's identifying that religious identity plays a significant role in these issues and human rights in general, but it's developing mechanisms within those countries like civil society forums (like the Roundtable) whether it's government or non but creating religious literacy around these issues and individuals and knowing that by reinforcing a lot of the constitutional freedoms that are already afforded in many of these countries that continue to persecute based on religious identity.

Colton Grellier: I think one of the things is that anything religious in a lot of intellectual circles and human rights is looked down on, secularism is raised, and any religious affinity is like, oh, you're old fashioned, or to borrow a Christian term, you're a Bible thumper or something, you don't have the level of sophistication.

And I think one of the big things that we can do is to refute that. One of the first ways is to assert our legitimacy in a way is to remind that unlike a lot of newer niche rights like the rights to internet access, as some people like to say, or even the right to certain amenities. The right to religious freedom is one of those UDHR freedoms that is going on 70 years now after the end of World War II. IRF is part of the original canon of human rights, and there is a reason for that.

The second is to develop our arguments intellectually and legally in a way that we can say, "Look, we're going about this from a logical, even scientific, sociological approach. We're not just looking out for people in our own corner, we're approaching this like every other human rights organization does; from an objective, from a data-driven position."

And to your point, Matias, religious freedom is a bundle of rights. I mean, religious freedom is not isolated. It touches on the right of assembly, the right of identity, the right of social freedoms, the right of collective ownership. Well, right there, you have the rights in Article 17 of the UDR for other rights right off the bat in religious freedom. So by being able to develop our argument saying, "Look, we're not just a bunch of people who want to look out for our own." No, if you look at the broader scheme of things, there are a lot of other rights connected to IRF. So further developing our position, coming from a more intellectual and developed legal position. I think that we can cement our legitimacy with other human rights organizations, and they will look at us like, "Oh, okay, you've done your homework, and you know what you're talking about. You have the best data-driven reason for these positions. We will give you the time of day."

Emilie Kao: Well, I think that the foundation of the entire human rights movement is rooted in conscience,

and that is in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It's not only in Article 18, but Article 1 talks about how all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. So if conscience is this human faculty that we have along with reason that is evidence of our human dignity, then religious freedom isn't just one right. Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion protect part of what it is to be human and it is intrinsically related to human dignity and the foundation of the entire universal human rights movement. So anyone who would try to minimize or compartmentalize the role of religious freedom would really be undermining the foundation of the international human rights movement.

But perhaps that understanding is something that we need to popularize more because times have changed and people's views have changed a lot since the UDHR was drafted in 1948. But religious freedom, as I've said before, borrowing from professor Robert George, religious freedom is the right of every individual to be able to seek the truth and live according to that truth in every area of their lives, live according to their consciences. And when we see that violated today just as we saw it violated in 1948, there are terrible consequences that have already been mentioned, the suffering of the victims of discrimination or persecution, the economic effects, the social instability, and the threats to national security. So in many ways, religious freedom should be seen as part of the solution to these problems.

And in order for the U.S. government to address some of the root issues that are contributing to problems like economic development or global terrorism, the U.S. government needs to make sure that religious freedom is part of its diplomacy and part of its strategy to address these issues. Many of you probably saw there was just the beheading of 50 people by ISIS in Mozambique. We can't simply address ISIS with more economic opportunity because ISIS is the result of a political theology that is extremely repressive. It's also a result of societies that repress religious freedom through blasphemy and apostasy laws. And we know from the Pew Forum's research that the societies where there are more government restrictions of religious freedom are the societies in which there are greater social hostilities towards religious minorities.

And it's in the Middle East and North Africa where we see the prevalence of these blasphemy and apostasy laws that we see this fertile environment for terrorist groups like ISIS to grow. As the civil society community advocating for international religious freedom, we are on the side of the facts. We just need to continue communicating those facts and those arguments to the next administration.

Sara Salama: I want to echo Emilie what you said as well, and kind of combine that with what Colton said about getting the time of day with the new administration and the new gatekeepers. I try in my work to stay away consciously from the term religious freedom, just because again, going back to kind of the political connotation and then the domestic religious freedom issues in the United States. And so I try to use the broad terms in UDHR; freedom of thought, conscience, and belief.

And I think that might be the next wave. I think we need to get used to speaking about it like that, just to keep making the distinction. As you were saying, Emilie and Colton, we have the research, we have the data, and especially over the last four years, there have been so many more publications and data at our fingertips that may just need to be a little bit repackaged to appeal to the broader audience.

So I think that is a strength that we have. We have the data, and we have the research, we have the know-how. Maybe what we don't have as of yet are the connections and the network, because maybe some of our networks will become a little bit obsolete in the next four years, but building on that capability to reach out to different groups of people will serve us well.

Steven Howard: It's definitely admirable, and it's a good thing when politicians speak about the good that they do about religious freedom internationally. But it would be very harmful if it were to be weaponized

against others. And during this presidential campaign, it was. There was an op-ed from Paula White in Christian Today that politicized the issue by stating a Biden Administration would not stand up for international religious freedom. That type of approach is what can make something nonpartisan into something very partisan.

One area that we need to hop on real quick is refugee resettlement. There was over a 90% decrease in persecuted Christians getting resettled into the United States from the Obama administration to the Trump administration because of the refugee cuts.

Now that we know those are going to be reversed, this should be a green light. We can use this to help hundreds of people, maybe thousands of persecuted Christians that need resettlement. So that's something that we all should be able to work on together.

And then the third thing was I know there was some talk about the possibility of who would fill this IRF role. We could consider some kind of initiative, maybe a letter to the transition, to the Biden transition team with recommendations. Certainly no one in this group, but someone had mentioned the possibility of retaining a cabinet-level official, and I don't think that would happen. But someone like Brownback maybe would be lower enough that it could be possible.

I think Brownback and Biden served together in the Senate, so I don't know what the relationship is, but it could be a good one. And if not Brownback, maybe we can come up with someone else who is a realistic person who could be nominated for that role. It could be someone like Gayle Manchin from USCIRF.

I think getting a USCIRF Commissioner and putting them in that ambassador role would be ideal because we know they've been appointed before, we know they have connections and influence. I think that would be solid. I think that would be much better than just plucking someone that doesn't have a working background, that doesn't know the community. I think that's something that we should consider.

Ways that we can reach out to the broader community: I think that we have not given the broader human rights community and mainstream media the credit that they do deserve on this issue. We live in some tough times. We are getting very, very polarized when it comes to what organizations advocate for, what issues, what newspapers, magazines, and T.V. channels cover which issues.

I want to share a fun story. One time I was even traveling for work for IDC, and I was in an airport, and I went to the Hudson News stand. And I found an issue of Harper's Magazine, The Plight of Christians In The Age of Intolerance, right there in the newsstand.

I went and bought the magazine and found IDC mentioned in the article. And this is not even something I was even aware of until I was just traveling. So it's one of those things where I think we should be careful. It's very good that we monitor and we're very involved in faith-based media. I read it all the time, whether EWTN, The National Catholic Register, Christian Post, Christianity Today.

We should also be very practical and realize that those organizations and publications do have their own leanings. They're going to be more likely and more inclined to cover the issue when it favors their leanings. Whereas, these mainstream publications are going to cover it when it favors their leanings. I think we should be open to both, but I think that the issue does get covered. We should just be mindful of the fact that in the very polarized society we live in that it's going to look a little bit different depending on who's covering it. I've had some great relationships built with both faith-based and more mainstream outlets and thinkers.

I have had the opportunity to get to know the woman, Janine di Giovanni, who wrote the piece. She's

writing an entire book on the vanishing of Christianity from the Middle East, so it's encouraging. Also, I'm working to build a solid relationship with a woman from the Wilson Center and the Council of Foreign Relations. So I think that mainstream coverage is out there and maybe we haven't given it the credit that it deserves, but we certainly can do more to build coalitions. And I know that ICC is committed to that, and I commend you for it.

Just some other thoughts. I would say one of the big things about the Biden administration is it seems like, at least from rhetoric, he's prioritizing governing by consensus. And I couldn't think of a better issue that you can book consensus on than this, so it just kind of fits in perfectly to his stated themes.

Something else to bear in mind is that many countries that have egregious human rights records have tried to use religious freedom as a tool of statecraft to appease the U.S. government, given that this is a priority. We shouldn't always take the bait for that.

And when we do so, it can undermine the existing efforts and priorities of other human rights organizations. And even to Emilie's point, this is the last thing I'll say, is that she's right on for calling out these countries for blasphemy and apostasy laws, but the root problem there is not just freedom of religion but freedom of speech issue as well.

And so we should bear in mind that we do need to have a strong voice for other human rights. So we should never dichotomize the right to worship against anything else.

Matias Perttula: Thank you, Steven, great points there. And as you were all speaking, I was doing some Googling here on the side, and this is very relevant to our conversation today because President-elect Biden did have a call with His Holiness Pope Francis yesterday. The transition there issued a statement, which I will read for all of us right now. It's just one paragraph.

"President-elect Joe Biden spoke this morning with his Holiness, Pope Francis. The president-elect thanked His Holiness for extending blessings and congratulations, and noted his appreciation for His Holiness's leadership in promoting peace, reconciliation and common bonds of humanity around the world. The President-elect expresses desire to work together on the basis of shared belief in the dignity and quality of all humankind, on issues such as caring for marginalized and the poor, addressing the crisis of climate change, and welcoming and integrating immigrants and refugees into our communities."

I think that's a pretty encouraging readout from that call. If we take President-elect Biden at his word, his commitment to religious freedom will be significant. And thinking through all the accomplishments of the last few years it would be extremely counterproductive for the Democratic administration to work against these accomplishments.

I consider some of the comments that he made when he became President-elect. He made it clear that he would be a President for all Americans, and I think we can hold them to that. And I think the tone in his remarks was pretty unifying in that sense, but this is something that would be a very unifying factor for the incoming administration. To build on what has been accomplished already is more within their interest than to not.

Nathan Wineinger: If I can just add quickly to that. I think we have to explain how it's unifying. We see it as unifying because we're all here. One of the questions is what are the strengths of the community in D.C.? It's really that it's incredibly and shockingly multi multi-faith, and that many of the people on this call are going to disagree very strongly about various issues regarding theology, but we continue to work in a multi-faith capacity.

I think we have to tell that story, it's not a story that you see very often. I love going into a congressional office with a secular person, a Christian group, a Scientologist. I love going in with these people and just

sort of blowing the mind of the poor staffer.

It's fun, but we have to tell that story more convincingly and we have to make it clear. I think that statement that you read from Biden and Pope Francis sort of demonstrates the opportunities for it. Of course, the phrase, "Religious freedom," was not issued in that statement, although no real other human rights within the framework of UDHR were mentioned either, but we have to pivot, right? Ambassador Brownback allowed us to start with religious freedom and then go into all sorts of different kinds of work, prisoner release, blasphemy reform, et cetera. We're going to have to start at those other things and bridge back into religious freedom as a theme to help people recognize it. I think another strength of our space here is that we're incredibly scrappy. We pull things together quickly and we move fast.

And I think as we try to integrate that's useful, but it also comes at costs. It comes at some professionalism costs, it comes... Someone earlier mentioned that we have a lot of data, we do but we don't... If I can be heterodox here for a moment in a religious freedom group. If I can be heterodox, I don't think we have data that proves the links that we make.

We say religious freedom drives national security, I don't think we've proven that. We say religious freedom drives prosperity, I don't think we've proven that. I think we have great arguments for why that is likely to be true and we can see really strong associations with it, but I don't think we've actually demonstrated in a robust way.

Now, all sorts of other issues and other issue spaces, if you have people in important positions who believe it, you don't actually have to prove it as much, but we're still a little bit on the outside. We don't have massive organizations that are working on this, we are all small organizations, we are small NGOs, we are the religious freedom staffer at a religious denomination or religious body.

So we have a lot of work to do I think, on figuring out how to talk about data, figuring out how to talk about information. As well as, we're grateful for the New Partnership Initiative from USAID. That's a procurement reform issue, that's not a religious freedom violations issue, but the infrastructure of bureaucracies and especially procurement matters. It is important that the people within the bureaucracies recognize religious communities, especially when marginalizations stack and increase risk factors. We need to recognize that. So, who knows anything about procurement? So we have to figure these things out, we have to figure out how the structures work.

And I think we can, but it's going to take a lot work. It's going to take partnering with people we haven't partnered with before. It's going to take building relationships with entities like Chemonics and DAI and FHI 360. If we're talking USAID funding, it's going to take talking to consulting firms and military and defense contractors, if we're talking about the defense department.

It's going to take reaching out to economists and financial experts, if we're talking about sanctions implementations. So there's lots and lots and lots of work to do, and it's going to take that scrappiness and getting out of our comfort zones a little bit, while we continue to mutually reinforce the multi-faith and multi-sector work.

We're also going to have to figure out how to bridge that sector work into other spaces, and not just as a sort of policy attitude and taking advantage of the really fantastic words that we're hearing, and messages on comity, tolerance, and mutual respect that we're hearing coming from Biden, but also taking advantage of the infrastructure that's here.

There's a grinding infrastructure, there's a military industrial complex, there's an aid industrial complex, there's a financial industrial complex, and those structures exist after and before this administration or the next administration. So how do we integrate within those as well?

Colton Grellier: I love how you articulated that because, for bigger human rights organizations, they're waiting for us to do our homework. And once we get to that point, I think that's a lot of what they're waiting for. They're waiting for us to do that heavy lifting and groundwork first. And once we've earned our place in the circle, then they'll be like, "Okay, you have a seat at the table along with all the other human rights." So I just really appreciate how you articulated that.

Nathan Wineinger: I even don't think we actually need to actually prove... I hope we do continue to do the academic work and the research, and encourage academic work to establish causal links with tools such as regression analysis as well as other models and modes of social scientific research. But I think as long as we're accurately reflecting the information that we see, as long as we don't say, "Religious freedom causes social stability." We can say, "I think it causes it, but in the research that we do have, it is strongly associated with it."

And then you don't have to get into debates about reverse causality or not. You've been circumspect—you haven't spoken beyond the weight that the evidence can bear. So I think that we do have to dot our i's and cross our t's, but if we don't have all of the ink in the inkwell, we can just point out, "Well, we're still working on dotting those I's and crossing those T's. I know those aren't done yet, but the associations are incredibly strong."

Ajit Sahi: Alright, so how does the IRF community make inroads to the broader human rights world? We earlier spoke about how the human rights issue is much more fundamental and broad. I think the one thing that we need to do is broaden the scope of religious freedom.

Up until now, it seems to have been restricted to attacks on people who are being attacked or persecuted for their religious identity. Many people around the world are being attacked and persecuted for their religious identity but not in the name of their religious identity.

Many extrajudicial killings are happening in the name of national security, but that's just a smokescreen for the real reason: they are being attacked and persecuted for their religious identity. We just saw this in the highly unfortunate war between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

It's been terrible. If you read the reports, even in respected journals like The Economist of London, they have framed the story as if this was simply a war for territory between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and Azerbaijan has won this time, compared with the nearly 30 years ago when Armenia had won.

So the territory is now shifting, but that's not the full story. The whole story is that the Armenian Christians there are facing a full-on onslaught from the Azerbaijani government, which is supported by Turkey. And therefore, it has become something like Christians versus Muslims in that part of the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Even in India, we see a lot of this being done in the name of national security. India is 80% Hindu and 20% non-Hindu minorities. 14% of the 20% are Christians, so about 2.5 to 3% are Christians. That makes them just a little over 30 million people. That sounds like a large number, but in a population of 1.4 billion, that's a small number.

Most Christians are concentrated in the Northeast of the country, where Christians are in the majority in most of those places. Those are the parts of India that have seen a relentless assault on civil rights for more than 60 years. There are martial laws that have been in place in that part of India for more than 60 years.

The Indian army works in Kashmir and in the Northeast of India, where the Hindus are in the minority and torments and traumatizes and persecutes the minorities. And this is the story the world over.

The second point that I want to make is this: I have been with the IRF Roundtable for two years. It's been

an incredible experience for me. I just love the Roundtable— it's an enormously useful platform. Going forward, I think one of the suggestions I would like to make is that we need to start being a little more open about the U.S. government in our conversations at the Roundtable.

There has been a hesitation in speaking up about the acts of commission and omission of the United States government that, wittingly or unwittingly, further religious persecution and hurt the cause of religious freedom.

For example, the Trump administration supported the Saudi regime regarding the Washington Post journalist's brutal assassination in Turkey, which largely went unpunished.

Yes, some officials were sanctioned by the U.S. Department of State, but not Mohammed bin Salman, the Crown Prince, who was the person responsible for it. And President Trump openly said in an interview, "I got his back, I saved him on that issue."

So I think we need to start speaking out more at the IRF Roundtable in the presence of whoever the Ambassador is and Department of State officials. We also need to start calling out the structural issues, how things happen.

In 1997, the United Kingdom handed over Hong Kong to China. Today we see Hong Kong as one of the most disturbing places as far as human rights violations are concerned. And it is such a pity that the United Kingdom had Hong Kong for 150 years. It had a succession of maybe about 40 governors of Hong Kong. Until 1997, till the last Governor of Hong Kong, there was never a Hong Kong native appointed as Governor of Hong Kong.

The U.K. government never held elections in Hong Kong. Now that the Western world wants elections in Hong Kong, China starts saying, "You don't tell us what to do because you didn't do it yourself." So I think that the way Western governments behave today is very important.

In recent years American foreign policy has become better, that's true, but when we do things like what we did in Bolivia in the last year, it doesn't go down well with the people of the world. It robs the legitimacy, the power of the American state, the American values, and ideals.

And I think that's something we see ourselves in Washington D.C. The IRF community should call out other states for their religious persecution, but we should also start calling out the failure of U.S. policy and the U.S. government on an ongoing basis. This is not to say that we seek conflict with the U.S. government. That's not going to lead us anywhere, and at some point in time, if it gets really bad, the Ambassador will stop participating in our meetings. And that's not what we want, but we want to have a constructive conversation and engagement, where we can talk about these things and hopefully move the conversation a little bit forward on these issues.

And I like Nathan's idea about engaging with other organizations. I would say we should add think tanks to it. In my organization, I'm talking about how we should do a bit of fundraising so that we can ask the new IRF organization, and Greg Mitchell, to host an intern there to work on South Asian issues. So we need to raise funds to strengthen the IRF Secretariat. I think we need to have an overall representative body with full-time professionals. The more there are full-time professionals, the more focused they will be over the next two, three years to do the kind of work required to be done in D.C.

PART THREE

Manus C: Great. Thank you. I appreciate all of those thoughts, and they're all right on the money. Let's move on to part three. And in the interests of time, let's keep our thoughts a little bit shorter. And specifically, what I'm going to do is I'm going to take the two next questions at once. For now, just one or two specific issues that you think would be easy to push in the Biden administration. I say easy with air quotes, but easier. And where do you think they might be more difficult, facing more political or otherwise resistance, in the Biden administration?

Matias Perttula: I can begin again if that's all right. One space that I see with a lot of political will would be in China, specifically with the Uyghur Muslim situation in the Xinjiang region. Just tracking legislation that has already passed on the house side and even is getting close to it and being a part of the congressional working group, this was an issue that was an extremely unifying piece.

IRE, in general terms, tends to be a very unifying piece, but this is where I think that we can make inroads in terms of expanding religious freedom in the Biden administration. And I think in a broader perspective, it's going to take a little bit more calculation on our end in making sure that the issue is very digestible to the Biden administration. Still, as we've already kind of established, I don't know that it's going to be that big of a shift for us. In fact, I think they're going to take the issue very seriously and keep pushing it forward. But if we're looking for an immediate piece, I think China is an excellent place to start.

John Cosenza: So I will be happy to add to that. Matias, I couldn't agree more. I mean, I think this has kind of a dual-pronged approach. Because we've had our issues with China in the past, and we've been attempting to under the Trump administration, reign them in for several different reasons, not just necessarily related to international human rights or religious persecution. So I think this is one more thing that we can leverage, for lack of a better term, to pressure China. You guys mentioned earlier that the possibility of sanctions is not utilized enough in a lot of circumstances. I think this is one of those circumstances. I think the U.S. can take non-threatening measures to put more pressure on China to address the issues we've had with them in the past and given all the new evidence we see regarding the Uyghur Muslim population.

I mean, there is new evidence to suggest that they have at a very minimum around 800,000 Uyghur Muslims detained in large-scale detention centers. There are even some estimates of up to three million when you also throw in other Muslim minorities and other ethnic minority communities in Xinjiang province. So I do agree. I think China has been on our radar for a long time. I think the Trump administration enhanced the radar on China. And I think this is just one other thing, which is probably more important than other issues and is only another justification to punish them economically speaking and advocate other types of sanctioned-based policies.

Steven Howard: President-elect Biden has relationships with the Hellenic American and the Greek church that go back decades. Their campaign was pretty good in terms of their statements on issues relating to Turkey. If we push Turkey, just policies to confront Erdogan pretty aggressively would work well. One of the authors that I built a relationship with, Amy Austin Homes with the Council on Foreign Relations, did an entire project on the ceasefire that the Trump administration had reached with Turkey in northeastern Syria.

I don't know if anyone else has read this, but what she had found was that based on Turkey's actions in Northeast Syria, sanctions were applied against Turkish officials for eight days, and then they were lifted. In the last calendar year, Turkey violated the ceasefire over 800 times, including over 120 times in

Tel tel Tamar, a cluster of Christian villages. So I've connected Manus to this scholar here, but I think that is pretty shocking if you take that in conjunction with what's happened in Azerbaijan. And so certainly, I think pushing for a stronger policy on Turkey makes complete sense. From what I can tell, they're really licking their chops to do something on Saudi Arabia, primarily because of the war in Yemen. That's gotten a lot of attention and outrage from the progressive foreign policy community.

When I tell the staffers that it's great that you want to do something on Saudi Arabia, I want to include that if you're looking to do something bipartisan that would stir things up, you should advocate for religious freedom. If you do that, you're going to take an issue that you know fits in with where your progressive passion is that many conservatives care about as well. And if you push them on religious freedom, you're going to get in a situation here where you will win converts. That's how you govern by consensus, right? So I think that would be a brilliant thing to do. And I think that he should put some pressure on Egypt.

And I know that there are people here that can talk about Egypt better than I. However, while the consensus from many folks in our community has been that while Sisi is better than the Muslim brotherhood, I think that we may have praised him disproportionately for the good that he's done. And a more realistic and practical approach with him when it would make more sense. And then just areas for concern.

I mean, we'll just have to look at staffing. And I think that even in the Trump administration, there were some people on staff who were good on this issue, some who were not as good. In the Biden world, I know there are people that would be good on this issue. If you get someone like Chris Coons for Secretary of State, that would be very good, but some people are edging for positions and influence that would be counterproductive. So I think there is a role that we can play in staffing and advising in that process.

Ajit Sahi: I work for an organization which is founded by Muslims from India. And as with most immigrant groups, they have been largely supportive of the Democratic party. The Democratic party seems to be a natural home for progressive and liberal people who lean towards human rights. In 2016, about 86% of Indian Americans voted for Hillary Clinton. One thing that very few people understand and know is that, just as with any other immigrant group, Hindu Americans who are supportive of the anti-minority, right-wing Hindu nationalists are also overwhelmingly in the Democratic party. And they carry substantial influence.

So that is something that we need to watch. In 2009, when Barack Obama became president, he appointed Sonal Shah in a junior position in his White House. And it turned out that her family had been lifelong members of this anti-minority right-wing Hindu extremist organization in India and the U.S. Her family quickly released a statement saying, "Oh, we are sorry. We didn't know the past." She herself had volunteered with that organization called World Hindu Council. Its work is very ominous; it's the vanguard of anti-minority ground action in India.

Sonal Shah disavowed her connections with the World Hindu Council, but that didn't mean anything. These are families that have been in this movement for generations. It's a hundred-year-old movement in India. It's a formal organization founded in 1925, so it's 95 years old.

Similarly, there's another woman named Nisha Biswal. She was an Assistant Secretary of State in Obama's second term. She's from a family closely connected with the RSS, an organization I've discussed. U.S.-based Hindu organizations go all out to defeat S.members of Congress who've spoken out against India's nationalism, such as Ro Khanna from California and Pramila Jayapal from Washington.

These Hindu right-wing organizations even put up a candidate, the Republican, against Ro Khanna.

They pumped in a lot of money to these elections. So they're definitely going to try. They are almost a single-issue advocacy bloc. The Hindu Americans in the U.S. have a single advocacy interest, which is to protect the interests of the Hindu right wing in India. And therefore, they're definitely going to try and get into the Department of State. I would not be surprised if they have already started trying. And a lot of Muslim organizations that I know have already begun resisting that. I stay out of it because I'm not an American citizen, and I work for a 501(c)3, so I don't participate in domestic politics.

It's a little sad that the influence that the Christian organizations had on the Trump administration will quite obviously diminish because the American Christian organizations don't have as much pull with the Democratic party as they have with the Republican party. So that's going to be a double loss, especially on the India issue, because the Hindu right-wing influence in America is going to increase. That should worry us.

CONCLUSION

Manus C: Good. Thank you for your thoughts on all that. Finally, we can go to the concluding remarks. In particular, keep in mind the idea of speaking to the next administration. What would you say to somebody handling the IRF portfolio in the new administration? What could you encourage them to do or not do? What are your thoughts for them there?

Sara Salama: I would say to quite literally keep the faith. All is not lost. It's a simple repackaging, reframing. It will remain to be an important issue. Just know your audience, know where their interests are, and use strategic communications to your advantage. And I do believe that we are going to make significant inroads with this administration as well. That's my little positive message there.

Matias Perttula: I think one thing that I would recommend is to keep the perspective on the issues themselves and don't allow international religious freedom to be mired by any kind of political polarization. We need to keep it in terms of a political human right that has a significant role in the world, building on everything that has already been established. Utilize the Alliance, utilize the civil society and roundtables, utilize all these existing mechanisms in place, and build on the work that is already taking place because there's been a lot of good stuff that's happened. And especially with the ministerials, we would love to see that continue to keep giving a public forum for many of these issues. And it gives voice to victims of religious oppression. This is one of the greatest things that the ministerial achieved: hosting victims of persecution and having them share their stories on what life really looks like as a religious minority in some of these countries.

And that's something that we, as the United States, should always champion. I always say this: the U.S. should lead with its values, and religious freedom is one of our country's core values. And we should champion that.

Colton Grellier: First, to address Ms. Kao's statement on religious freedom striking at the very essence of human dignity and human rights, the right of conscience to merely have a conviction about something and to be able to follow through with that genuinely. In this way, religious freedom goes to the essence and foundation of humanity. And also, on a practical level, religious freedom is a bundle of rights that

does not exist in isolation. If you want to promote, if you truly want to promote human rights broadly as an agenda, religious freedom brings many other rights with it. You neglect religious freedom or allow people to run roughshod over it, likewise, those related other rights will follow suit, whichever way religious freedom goes.

Ajit Sahi: I would say that I think the future is very bright for us, for our advocacy work here in Washington, D.C. I think the strengths that we have gained as a community have brought us a long way. We need to build on this. It might not be a bad idea for all of us to put our thoughts together. Write an open letter published on Medium or elsewhere to President-elect Joe Biden, if he indeed sets up the next administration, and outline our agenda for international religious freedom. It could become a document for us to build on for the next four years.

Steven Howard: Yes, I would just add keeping it distinct. We don't want to dichotomize religious freedom against other human rights, but we also want to understand that this is a challenging time. Conservatives and liberals have very, very fundamental differences about what even constitutes a human right. So let's just keep IRF distinct. Let's keep our legislation apart from all of that as much as possible. Let's encourage the administration to take that same approach. There's going to be some very nasty fighting about many things that are debatable regarding what should be defined as a human right. Let's stay very, very far away from all those culture wars. And just tell them, as the president did with the 1998 IRF Act, just build on that, keep it distinct, keep it bipartisan. If you want to govern based on consensus, if you want to work with Republicans, this is a great place to start.

Manus C: Great. Thank you all for those remarks. With that, we come to the end of our conversation. My thanks to each of you for participating. It was a really wonderful conversation.

Matias Perttula: I want to echo everything Manus said. We appreciate everybody taking the time to participate in this. Some of you are now veterans of these conversations and have done it a few times. It's something that we find very useful, not just for ourselves, but for the movement as a whole. And we want to keep doing it and keep doing them even better. And we'll see where this goes from here, but I want to thank you all. You're all brilliant, amazing people with some amazing thoughts to contribute to this thing that we're all working on together. Thank you, everybody.
