

# The Geopolitics of Religious Liberty

Written by Nilay Saiya

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## The Geopolitics of Religious Liberty

<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/12/23/the-geopolitics-of-religious-liberty/>

NILAY SAIYA, DEC 23 2015

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The world is currently witnessing three trends related to religion.[1] The first is the so-called 'global resurgence of religion'. Recent scholarship has shown that religion is gaining in strength worldwide and is more politically engaged today than it has ever been. Thanks to processes like modernisation, globalisation and democratisation—the very developments that the secularisation thesis predicted would kill off religion—the major world religions have experienced newfound relevance in today's world.[2] The second trend involves the concurrent attempts on the part of states to restrict religious practice in the face of this resurgence. A 2011 report by the Pew Research Center found that between 2006 and 2009, one-third of the world's population experienced rising restrictions on religion, and over two-thirds of the population lived in countries characterised by 'high' or 'very high' religious restrictions. Incredibly, the report also found that only 1 per cent of the world's population lived in countries where religious liberty was increasing.[3] A follow-up report issued in 2014 revealed that religious persecution had reached its highest point in six years.[4] The convergence of these two antithetical trends—religion's revival and simultaneous regulation—has given rise to a third development: resistance. Religious believers who find the practice of their faith stifled by government actions are likely to resist those efforts. Sometimes this resistance takes the form of non-violent protest, as in Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union. At other times, the reaction to repression can turn violent, even to the point of tearing countries apart and threatening the stability of their neighbours.

When one thinks about geopolitics, religious liberty (or religion more generally) is probably not the first thing that enters the mind. Guided by the 'secularisation thesis', the field of international relations has been slow to recognise religion's growing importance and, until recently, tended to ignore it altogether. For this reason, little attention has been paid to the effect of religious factors, including religious liberty, on conflict and political stability. Some might see religious liberty as a normatively good idea but not centrally related to power politics. This chapter argues that this conventional wisdom is incorrect; religious liberty is connected to political stability in profound ways. Where religious liberty is threatened, the chances of a state experiencing sectarian violence increases, as does the likelihood that violence will spread to neighbouring countries.

### Religious Liberty and Geopolitics

Religious liberty encompasses both the *religious* rights of individuals or communities to manifest religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance and the *political* rights of these persons to run for office and otherwise participate in politics. This freedom has long been recognised as a central human right and been enshrined in various international laws, charters, treaties and national constitutions.[5] How, then, does religious liberty help shape geopolitics? Because religion is such an innate component of human identity, efforts to restrict its legitimate manifestation understandably meet with resistance from believers. If this resistance turns violent, it can have an effect on domestic and international security.

Religious repression commonly stems from state leaders who fear an independent and active religious citizenry.[6] Such leaders often attempt to control religious bodies that could potentially threaten the state's official ideology,

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public order, cultural identity or the regime itself. Depending on the context, these leaders may attempt to suppress religion across the board, as in the case of countries that are officially atheist like the former Soviet Union or China, or they may form an alliance with a particular (usually dominant) religious group in the cause of enhancing political stability, domestic legitimacy and ideological amenability, while suppressing the other (usually minority) religious groups in society that do not abide by the dominant state-endorsed religious framework. States often do this in response to intense social and religious pressures from their populations.[7] In fact, in certain countries, religious regulation arises from social persecution and a general climate of religious intimidation that emanates from the general populace as much as from the government. Such patterns can be seen today in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Russia.

Repressive environments like these that choke religious liberty and independent thinking serve as a natural breeding ground for extremism.[8] In addition to suppressing the positive contributions that religion can make to society, they also silence the voices of liberalism and moderation and empower the narrative of extremists who claim that the state is acting unjustly towards people of faith.[9] Violence occurs because religious restrictions both create grievances on the part of targeted groups and sometimes encourage dominant religious groups to undertake violence themselves against religious communities not favoured by the state. In the former case, embattled religious communities strike out against those perceived to be responsible for their marginalised and suppressed status as happened in Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia.[10] Religious militants may also attack government targets or citizens of another state believed to be complicit in their subjugation: witness the terrorist strikes of 11 September 2001. The state may use the threat of violence as a pretext for further repression and, in the process, invite more retaliatory violence.[11] In the latter pathway, groups that are empowered as a result of governmental repression against other faith communities seek to impose their worldview throughout society and eradicate alternative religious voices. This may even happen with the active support or non-interference of the state, as seen during the 2002 pogroms in Gujarat, India.[12] It is not uncommon for religious bloodshed to spread to neighbouring countries as civil or military leaders leverage extremist organisations as part of their foreign policies, as in the cases of Iran and Pakistan.[13]

Conversely, religiously free countries allow for the development of a wide range of diverse perspectives, religious practices and cross-cutting cleavages.[14] The freedom of thought and exchange of ideas part and parcel of religious liberty serve to create a marketplace of views that can empower liberal and moderate voices who challenge the claims made by religious extremists, thus diminishing the prospects of religious strife. In such countries, individuals belonging to different religious communities tend to see each other as legitimate, even if they disagree on matters of faith and practice.[15] Freedom thus has the effect of levelling the playing field among the different religious groups in society. Furthermore, the political openness part and parcel of religious liberty allows potential extremists to work through alternative and legitimate channels—electoral participation, grassroots activism and civic engagement—by which they can seek to shape religion, politics and society.[16] Finally, regimes tolerant of religion promote stability through the social activities in which they allow religious bodies to engage. Religious groups can use their energies towards the betterment of their societies: running schools, hospitals, orphanages and charities; reducing poverty; and promoting faith-based reconciliation practices. Illiberal religious groups holding radical theologies may well exist in religiously free countries, but the environment of freedom can serve to deprive fringe groups of the legitimacy they need to thrive.[17]

All this has tremendous implications for political stability. Where religious liberty does not exist, the potential for domestic stability and freedom will be greatly compromised. In other words, religious restrictions induce the very conflict they aim to thwart. Take, for example, the issues of religious persecution and terrorism. In their path-breaking work *The Price of Freedom Denied*, sociologists Brian Grim and Roger Finke found that government regulation of religious practice was the strongest predictor of religious persecution. At times, persecution of people of faith resulted in displaced or exiled faith communities, assaults on physical integrity rights and refugee crises. Recent work has also shown that countries restrictive of religious liberty are far more likely to experience religiously motivated terrorism. My analysis of religious terrorism since the end of the Cold War, for instance, shows that religiously restrictive countries are about nine times more likely to experience religiously motivated terrorism than countries that are religiously free. Furthermore, virtually all religious transnational terrorist organisations originate from religiously restrictive places.[18] Contrariwise, Grim and Finke have unearthed powerful evidence indicating that the relaxation of religious restrictions and protection of religious liberty nurtures peaceful competition between religious groups in

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society, thus contributing to a wide array of positive externalities that come from widespread freedom.

## The Case of Iraq

Iraq is a prime case regarding the intersection of religious liberty and geopolitics. In 2014, Iraq descended into a new round of religious violence and terrorism. Nearly three years after American troops left the country, the radical Islamist terrorist group ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), a terrorist group believed to be more extreme and powerful than Al Qaeda, made rapid progress in gaining control over Iraqi territory, armoured vehicles and weapons stockpiles that had been abandoned by the Iraqi armed forces. ISIL's goals involved a fundamentalist Islamic takeover of Iraq and Syria and the setting up of an Islamic caliphate in the broader Middle East. In early July, the group announced the official creation of a new religious state in Iraq and Syria, and has even been able to establish some institutions of governance in the areas under its control.[19] The recent violence in Iraq is reminiscent of the cycle of violence that gripped the country 2006–2008 and saw a brutal sectarian war between Sunni extremists who targeted Shiite sacred spaces and equally ruthless Shiite militias who responded by torturing and executing Sunnis.

How did this state of affairs come to be? One could point to a number of factors: the bungled American occupation, the collapse of the Iraqi security forces, the civil war in Syria, and the backing of Sunni militants by certain Gulf States. Perhaps the greatest blame lies, however, with the brutal and arbitrary treatment of Iraq's minority religious communities by the state.

The American-led invasion and occupation of Iraq unleashed two processes, both centrally related to the issue of religious liberty, which ultimately led to a sectarian war along religious lines. The first process, 'de-ba'athification', was the official policy adopted by the George W. Bush administration and involved the forced disbanding of the Iraqi army, the dismantling of the bureaucracy, and the general purging of Ba'athism from Iraqi society. In one fell swoop, hundreds of thousands of Sunni Iraqi civil servants who had been nominally aligned with Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party found themselves jobless and barred from holding any government position in the future. Systematic discrimination along religious lines served to create a sense of desperation and angst among Sunnis who believed they would have no place in the new Iraq. Indeed, the government of Shiite strongman, Nouri al-Maliki, pursued a punitive policy towards Iraq's Sunni community, including using the security forces to suppress opponents and bully rivals. For example, when peaceful Sunni protests broke out in the Anbar province in 2012, Maliki responded with an intense crackdown, leading to the shelling of villages and the arrests of hundreds of Sunnis. This, the second process—what I call 'Shiaification'—witnessed the Shiite takeover of the state; the systematic discrimination and persecution of religious minorities via the army, police and militias; and the refusal of hardline Shiite parties to enter into a power sharing agreement with Sunnis that would bring them into the structure of the government.

These twin processes of de-ba'athification and Shiaification unleashed a religious and sectarian civil war between militant Shiite groups who had long been repressed under Saddam (but now had an opportunity to gain unilateral control over the new Iraq) on one side, and angry, dispossessed and armed Sunnis on the other. Maliki's authoritarian turn directly fuelled the insurgency by creating an environment of impunity, continuing to marginalise the Sunni population and fostering a sense of fear among the country's minority religious populations. Threatened and insecure, Iraqi Sunnis turned to extremist groups for protection. The Iraqi civil war not only worked to tear that country apart but also spread into the neighbouring states of Syria and Lebanon, producing a humanitarian nightmare. Nearly two million refugees fled Iraq after 2003; half of Iraq's Christian population left the country, never to return.[20] Moreover, Sunni co-religionists in neighbouring Syria also became radicalised and joined the Iraqi insurgency. For his part, Maliki was more than willing to allow his country to become a corridor for thousands of Shiite warriors to enter Syria and fight on behalf of the embattled Syrian regime. It is unlikely that the situation in Iraq will lead to an official redrawing of borders, though for all intents and purposes the border between Iraq and Syria has all but disappeared.

Some might argue that the case of Iraq shows precisely why straightforward repression of religion works. These individuals might claim that though Saddam was an undeniably brutal tyrant, at least his heavy-handedness was able to keep the forces of religious extremism at bay. Two points are worth mentioning. First, repression may provide the illusion of order but only fuels the underlying rage among the people. Eventually, the brewing discontent under the

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surface can no longer be contained. Second, the stability of regimes such as Saddam's is far less certain than once believed. Just 15 years ago it seemed unthinkable that the firmly entrenched Arab dictatorships in Libya, Iraq, Egypt and potentially Syria could be overthrown. Yet when the regimes of Muammar Qaddafi, Saddam Hussein and Hosni Mubarak fell, the groups which filled the power vacuum were highly illiberal ones that had been suppressed or banned for decades.

## Conclusion

The relationship between religious liberty and political stability is of particular importance as pro-democracy revolts and religious violence continue to wash over large swathes of the Arab world. Governments in the Middle East and North Africa have historically used the potential for social conflict as a justification for restricting religious rights. Indeed the conventional wisdom has been that restrictions on a wide range of freedoms—including religious liberty—may be a necessary evil in order to realise the goals of order and stability. The result has often been the exact opposite of that which was intended: more sectarian strife and violence.

This chapter has argued that religious liberty and security are not mutually exclusive categories. In fact, religious liberty *is* a security issue. There are steps that governments can take to lessen the likelihood that ordinary religious individuals will subscribe to the narrative of extremism. Such steps might include allowing religious groups to carry out activities distinctive to their faith including establishing houses of worship, publishing literature, fundraising, building hospitals and schools, and celebrating holy days. Furthermore, states in which religious organisations also enjoy full political rights such as voting, lobbying and staging protests will also experience less religious conflict. The denial of such rights only serves to create resentment and increase the appeal of radicalism. Though some might argue that repression serves to quash extremism, this tends to be only a short-term gain that hardens opposition to the state. The international community therefore ought to pay greater attention to religious liberty both as an important value in its own right and as an important instrument in countering extremism.

## Notes

[1] By 'religion' I mean the sets of beliefs, practices, or rituals that seek knowledge of and harmony with supernatural realities.

[2] See José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Peter L. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999); Monica Duffy Toft and Timothy Samuel Shah, 'Why God is Winning', *Foreign Policy* July/August (2006): 39-43; Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

[3] Pew Research Center, 'Rising Tide of Restrictions on Religion', *Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life*, available at <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/08/09/rising-restrictions-on-religion2/>, accessed June 1, 2014.

[4] Pew Research Center, 'Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High', *Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life*, available at <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/>, accessed June 1, 2014.

[5] For example, Article 18 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights asserts: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom...to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance'.

[6] Ani Sarkissian, *The Varieties of Religious Repression: Why Governments Restrict Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[7] Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-*

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*First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[8] William Inboden, 'Religious liberty and National Security', *Policy Review* 175 (2012): 55-68.

[9] This is not to suggest, of course, that religious extremists strive for religious tolerance, but that such radicalism is often incubated in environments of religious repression. Lisa Anderson, 'Fulfilling Prophecies: State Policy and Islamist Radicalism', in *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform?*, ed. John L. Esposito, (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers), 17-31.

[10] Mohammed Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2003); Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

[11] Max Abrahms, 'Why Democracies Make Superior Counterterrorists', *Security Studies* 16(2): 223-253; James I. Walsh and James A. Piazza, 'Why Respecting Physical Integrity Rights Reduces Terrorism', *Comparative Political Studies* 43(5): 551-557.

[12] Parvis Gassam-Fachandi, *Pogrom in Gujarat: Hindu Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Violence in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[13] Husain Haqqani, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005).

[14] Chris Seiple and Dennis R. Hoover, 'Religious liberty and Global Security', in *The Future of Religious liberty: Global Challenges*, ed. Allen D. Hertzke, (New York: Oxford, 2013): 315-330.

[15] Anthony Gill, *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[16] Alfred C. Stepan, 'Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations'', *Journal of Democracy* 11(4): 37-57.

[17] Thomas Farr, *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty is Vital to American National Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 243-272.

[18] Nilay Saiya, *The Roots of Religious Terrorism* (PhD dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2013).

[19] Michael Crowley, 'The End of Iraq,' *Time*, June 19, 2014, available at <http://time.com/2899488/the-end-of-iraq/>, accessed July 1, 2014.

[20] Aryn Baker, 'Unholy Choices', *Time*, April 10, 2014, available at <http://time.com/57277/unholy-choices>, accessed June 26, 2014.

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