



Religious Engagement: The Role of Persecuted Religious Minorities in U.S. Foreign Policy

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The [Egyptian Coptic Church celebrated Easter in quarantine this year](#), echoing the aftermath of [the 2017 ISIS bombings on Palm Sunday](#) which barred communal worship inside church buildings. Now, as in 2017, churches are forced to find alternative ways to congregate while in mourning over lives lost. Despite 2,000 years of trials and tribulations, the Egyptian Coptic community has found a way to maintain its values despite the lack of government support.

Resiliency makes religious communities an essential aspect of diplomatic affairs. Persecuted religious communities, experienced in operating under political and social limitations, have proven resilient in their ability to foster sustainable communities and continue development without government and societal support. This makes them a low-risk investment as a vehicle for U.S. interests. Partnering with private sector entities leaves diplomatic interests vulnerable to the whims of a profit-driven organization. Wherein working with mission-driven entities such as religious communities and institutions secures a sustainable method for the pursuit of government interests, guarded by thousands of years of consistent virtues and values.

Standing U.S. foreign policy has used non-state actors as leverage within the international state system framework, undervaluing their significance in international affairs. For example, U.S. support of the Uighurs is seen as not only protecting religious freedom, but primarily as a [tool in the U.S. foreign policy toward China](#). However, non-state actors possess transnational qualities that enhance their overall value in foreign policy. Therefore, the U.S. must learn how to treat them as valuable partners in foreign policy. Specifically, persecuted religious groups are ideal to engage with in this way, due to their ability to maintain values, mobilize communities, and often mold society.

Unlike private-sector corporations motivated by profit, or ethnic minorities that might lack political unity and moral cohesion, religious communities operate with inherent and constant morals and virtues that guide their actions. Religious communities follow their mission and virtue, sustained even without government support and even throughout prolonged persecution. This makes such groups the perfect diplomatic investment, as it is safe to assume that they will maintain a steady ideological course. These groups are natural partners in such endeavors, as they are frequently in dire need of external support that they do not receive from local governments.



The COVID-19 pandemic would have been a perfect opportunity for the U.S. to utilize the value of strategic engagement with these communities around the world. While the Department of State stood behind the value [of international religious freedom worldwide, condemning religious community scapegoating during the peak of COVID-19](#), diplomatic engagement was confined to the state level. While [China successfully leveraged the pandemic as part of an extensive, global disinformation and propaganda campaign](#), U.S. foreign policy failed to include religious communities besieged by both persecution and disease. These communities were in dire need of support and would have allowed the U.S. to nurture cooperation and strategic engagement in places ordinarily beyond Washington's reach. Due to the resilient nature of these communities, such partnership would have been sustainable far beyond the end of the pandemic.

Understandably so, American commitment to separation of church and state has made American diplomats very cautious about supporting faith communities and organizations abroad. Nevertheless, as global [religiosity intensifies around the world](#), it is vital that the State Department learn how to communicate and nurture collaborative relationships with these communities. Especially during global crises, these communities are in dire need of assistance that the U.S. is able to provide. However, this approach requires diplomats to lean on their ability to recognize where they can gain support without upsetting the majority public that is necessary to appeal to in diplomacy. This route requires a calculated degree of how to support the minority without antagonizing the majority and undermining state sovereignty.

Such faith communities are dynamic yet consistent; resilient, yet still in need of support. This makes them the ideal candidates for U.S. diplomatic strategic engagement. In a globalized and interconnected world, the identity of religious communities is transnational, and the U.S. must adapt. Whether its Christians in China, Muslims in India, or Baha'i in Iran, extending support to these resilient communities can build new diplomatic ties and strengthen liberal values across the globe.