

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ROUNDTABLE

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM & MULTI-FAITH POLICY ROUNDTABLES A Model for Sustainable Peace and Prosperity

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BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

- Religious freedom is a key to sustainable peace and prosperity. It is a universal value, strongly affirmed in international norms and law as an issue of justice and protection of minorities. Advancing it should be a national and international security imperative for all countries and regions.
- Religious freedom strengthens cultures and provides the foundation for stable democracies and their components, including civil society, economic development and growth, and social harmony. As such, it is also an effective counter-terrorism weapon as it pre-emptively undermines divisiveness, polarization, balkanization, tribalism, nationalism, radical ideologies, religious extremism, conflict and violence. History and modern scholarship make it clear that where people are allowed to practice their faith freely, participate in the public square, and love and help “the other,” they are more likely to be good citizens and less likely to be alienated from each other and the government.
- Such conclusions are increasingly bolstered by empirical research:
 - Dr. Brian Grim, a noted expert on society and religion, has found a strong correlation between government restrictions on religion and religiously-motivated violence.¹
 - Further, an exhaustive 2011 study by academics from Harvard, Notre Dame and Georgetown found “that religious communities are most likely to support democracy, peace and freedom for other faiths, and least likely to take up the gun or form dictatorships, when governments allow them freedom to worship, practice and express their faiths freely and when religious communities in turn renounce their claims to permanent offices or positions of policy-making authority.”²
 - Finally, a Religious Freedom and Business Foundation study examines and finds a positive relationship between religious freedom and ten of the twelve pillars of global competitiveness, as measured by the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Index. The study, however, goes beyond simple correlations by empirically testing and finding the tandem effects of government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion (as measured by the Pew Research Center) to be detrimental to economic growth while controlling for 23 other theoretical, economic, political, social, and demographic factors.³
- A multi-faith policy roundtable is a means to bring faith communities together to discuss and inform policy and coordinate actions to foster sustainable peace and security, discredit

¹ Brian Grim, “The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century.” (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

² Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott and Timothy Samuel Shah, “God’s Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics.” (New York: Norton, 2011), p. 18.

³ <https://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/religious-freedom-business>

radical ideologies and extremism, deepen stability and enable economic development and prosperity.

- A multi-faith roundtable would empower a country's efforts to initiate dialogue at all levels for the purpose of achieving greater unity and solidarity, and promoting goodwill, neighboring cooperation and peaceful co-existence amongst its people, promoting peace, security, democratic principles and popular participation of citizens in the pursuit of good governance; and thereby strengthen the capacity coordinate development programs in the areas of peace building, as a prerequisite to any development, and all aspects of economic and social life.
- Ideally, all majority and minority religions will work together and coordinate with the government on policy matters related to peace, security and good governance.

THE MODEL

The multi-faith International Religious Freedom (IRF) Roundtable in Washington, D.C., is a proven platform for bringing people together—despite deep political and theological differences—and building mutual understanding, respect, trust and reliance among groups and citizens. In fact, it is a model of good citizenship and governance that will contribute to the long-term security and economic interests of all countries and regions.

1. The Multi-Faith International Religious Freedom (IRF) Roundtable Model.

- **Goal:** The goal of the Roundtable is to reverse the rising tide of restrictions on religious freedom that has been spreading across the world. According to the Pew Research Center's latest annual study on global restrictions on religion, 79% of the world's population lived in countries with high or very high levels of restrictions and/or hostilities in 2015 (up from 74% in 2014; and 68% in 2007).
- **Purpose:** Bring faith communities together in continuous and ongoing dialogue, engage civil society and government leaders in the process, identify and focus on issues of common interest and multi-faith consensus, practically integrate religious freedom into foreign and national security policy, reduce restrictions on religion, undermine radical ideology and deter violent extremism and terrorism, and increase stability, security, peace and prosperity.
- **Influence:** In its seven years, the Roundtable has become the premier space for practical policy discussions and coordination between civil society, government and multilateral organizations; has attracted representatives of more than 225 organizations and launched close to 100 multi-faith policy initiatives; and has earned wide respect from across the theological and political spectrums.
- **Coordination with the U.S. Government:** First, the Roundtable continues to organize quarterly meetings on Capitol Hill in Washington and attract senior staff members of the White House, National Security Council, Defense Department, State Department, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and Congress to participate in the ongoing dialogue and share information. Second, as soon as he was sworn into office, the U.S. Ambassador for International Religious Freedom, Sam Brownback, asked the Managing Co-Chair of the Roundtable to organize weekly coordination meetings for him. Every Tuesday morning, Ambassador Brownback now meets with 70-100 participants of the Roundtable to learn of specific situations and discuss ideas for joint multi-faith

actions, U.S. government actions, and how the two might be coordinated to increase our impact on policy and score victories.

- **Practical Effects:** Lasting relationships are built, creating mutual understanding, respect and trust (the coin of the realm in complicated contexts); practical actions are taken together as citizens of the same country, despite deep theological and political differences; the Roundtable itself has become a model of citizenship and governance—every faith has a seat at the table, a voice in the process, and an equal opportunity to speak up, propose policy initiatives and invite others to support them; nobody is alienated or marginalized, and the platform is accepted and respected by governments.
- **Results:** Mutual reliance, multiple policy victories and greater social cohesion as the idea is lived and practiced—religious freedom is a non-partisan issue that serves everyone’s interests. Further, the Roundtable succeeded at getting the Trump administration to prioritize international religious freedom in the *National Security Strategy of the United States*, which states that the U.S. “will advocate on behalf of religious freedom and threatened minorities. Religious minorities continue to be victims of violence. We will place a priority on protecting these groups and will continue working with regional partners to protect minority communities from attacks and to preserve their cultural heritage.”
- **The Emerging Model:** While participants of the Roundtable engage the U.S. government and coordinate actions with the State Department and Congress when and where it can help, they do not rely exclusively on it to achieve the goal. Rather, participants also reach out directly to other governments. The meaningful dialogues they have opened with ambassadors, embassies, and delegations are designed to grow into results-driven partnerships. Indeed, they are manifestations of “bottom-up” civil society engaging the “top-down” of governments, something participants want to model in the context of multiple bilateral relations. To borrow from the lingo of diplomacy, the Roundtable represents a creative intersection of “Track 1” (governmental) and “Track 2” (civil society)—its emerging model is a true demonstration of “Track 1.5” engagement in action, through which strategic partnerships, collaborations, and consultative relationships between governments and civil society organizations might advance peace and prosperity.

2. **Expanding into a Global Interlocking Network of Multi-Faith Roundtables.** The IRF Roundtable has emerged as a multi-confessional, inclusive, equal citizenship and governance model that could be replicated around the world. In alignment with the *National Security Strategy of the United States*, a global network of multi-faith Roundtables that intentionally interfaces across countries and continents—because we are all minorities somewhere, and because terrorists can be home-grown anywhere—could support stronger and more stable states and societies. The Roundtable has been replicated (to a degree) in Europe and among Vietnamese Diaspora groups, and has been recommended for the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, India and Vietnam. This bottom-up effort could coordinate with the top-down initiative of the International Contact Group (of governments/foreign ministries) for Freedom of Religion or Belief and the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB).

- 3. Establishing a Multi-Faith Roundtable in multiple countries and regions.** We can offer technical assistance to countries and regions to help create multi-faith policy roundtables with the leadership, support and participation of religious and other civil society leaders. This initiative could institutionalize honest conversations about differences but focus and build on points of multi-faith consensus and agreement, which will form the basis of long-term stability, security, peace and prosperity. In this way, countries will set the right example for their regions and continents, and will be able to coordinate their actions with the IRF Roundtable and the U.S. government in Washington, D.C., in alignment with the *National Security Strategy of the United States*. In addition to uniting the religions and constructing a lasting peace and prosperity, countries have an opportunity to join the growing network of institutions that are eager to partner with the U.S. to advance international religious freedom.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Based on the Lessons of the IRF Roundtable in Washington, D.C.

In General, the Roundtables should be based upon three basic principles:

- Multi-faith/confessional:
 - The Roundtable is made up of leaders and representatives of all faiths and none (non-believers, atheists, humanists).
 - While there is very little we agree on theologically or politically, we all agree on the importance of religious freedom, and we work together on the basis of mutual understanding and respect.
 - And we all share common goals and interests with each of the governments we engage—stability, security, peace and prosperity—which allows us to harness their self-interest in these relationships.
- Inclusive:
 - The Roundtable is open to everyone who is willing to work with others in multi-faith fashion.
- Equal citizenship:
 - Everyone has a seat at the table and equal opportunities to speak up, launch multi-faith initiatives, and invite others to opt-in.
 - Everyone is welcome to opt-in to support the initiatives of others.

Specifically, the Roundtables should be:

- Informal:
 - The IRF Roundtable is an informal group of individuals from non-governmental organizations—including Churches, religions, faith-based groups, atheist and humanist groups, and human rights organizations—and governments who gather regularly to discuss IRF issues.
 - It is made up of participants rather than members.
 - While there is a common goal and purpose everyone agrees on, there are no requirements for participants to endorse a specific agenda or formal policy statements.
- A safe space:
 - The IRF Roundtable is simply a safe space where participants gather regularly and speak freely in sharing ideas and information.

- The Chatham House Rule applies— these discussions are off the record and any information disclosed during these meetings may be reported by those present, but the source of that information may not be explicitly or implicitly identified.
- While pictures can be taken and posted, NO video or audio taping is allowed.
- Participant-driven:
 - Each individual participant has a standing invitation to serve on the steering committee.
 - Each participant has an open and equal opportunity to sponsor meetings (pay for catering), place specific items on the agenda, and speak at meetings.
- Action-oriented:
 - The IRF Roundtable began to grow when it began taking multi-faith actions.
 - Each individual participant has an open and equal opportunity to design and launch joint, multi-faith initiatives and advocacy actions regarding the protection and promotion of freedom of religion, conscience, and belief in the U.S. and abroad.
 - Further, each participant can establish or join multi-faith working groups to organize and coordinate these advocacy actions.
- Opt-in basis:
 - In response to various participant-led initiatives, all participants can self-select into coalitions of the willing and participate in joint advocacy actions.
 - But participants are under no obligation to take any action whatsoever.
 - Each joint, multi-faith advocacy action is undertaken solely by, and on behalf of, the individual participants who self-selected into that specific coalition of the willing.
- Continuous and ongoing:
 - Finally, the continuous and ongoing nature of the IRF Roundtable makes it more effective than any one-time, annual or periodic congress, summit, conference, forum, seminar or training sessions.
 - The Roundtable has been holding these practical policy discussions and coordinating multi-faith actions continuously for more than seven years.
 - Working together—taking actions together, side by side—over time is the only possible way for leaders and representatives of all faiths and none to move beyond mere acquaintance and tolerance to strong relationships that grow into mutual understanding, mutual respect, mutual trust and, finally, mutual reliance.
 - Stereotypes crumble early in the process.

Logistics:

- There should be one Chair or two or more Co-Chairs who are the visible leaders of the Roundtable and run the meetings.
- One person must be the designated coordinator who manages and coordinates the actions of the Roundtable. This can be the Chair, one of the Co-Chairs, or an Executive Director. Ideally, this coordinator will have at least one assistant to help him/her.
- An email list of all participants should be created, maintained and continuously expanded as the Roundtable grows, and the coordinator should keep all Roundtable participants in the loop and regularly updated by email.

- There should be a “kitchen cabinet” or “brain trust” that helps the Chair, Co-Chairs and/or Executive Director develop a strategic vision and ideas that inform the development of strategic plans and roadmaps for action.
- A Steering Committee of participants should serve as a “sounding board” for all strategic ideas and plans before they are shared with all Roundtable participants.
- A goal and purpose statement should be drafted and circulated to all participants for inputs. Once everyone has had the opportunity to provide their inputs, the statement should be finalized and published. This multi-faith statement will serve as the common purpose that unites and channels the energy of all participants.
- The Roundtable should meet in person on a regular basis: weekly, monthly or quarterly.
- The first half of each regular meeting should be reserved for civil society leaders (representatives all the faiths and human rights organizations, scholars, practitioners, etc.) only, while the second half of each regular meeting should include government leaders, legislators and staff members.
- Special Roundtable meetings can also be organized to discuss specific topics in greater detail.
- Working groups should meet in between the larger meetings to design, organize, launch and coordinate specific multi-faith initiatives and actions.
- Multi-faith initiatives and actions usually begin with sign-on letters and participants opt-in by adding their signatures.
- Multi-faith meetings can then be organized with government leaders and all signers of the letters can be invited to attend.

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