

Executive summary

Religious Intolerance and America's Image and Policies Abroad Institute for the Study of Diplomacy

Religion plays a key role in societies the world over. An individual's right to adhere to any faith he or she chooses, along with the right not to adhere to any, was one of the earliest foundational doctrines of the American revolutionary movement and the nation it created. The recent rise in America of nativist and xenophobic groups and their ideology puts new pressures on these centuries-old core U.S. beliefs. Americans historically have cast themselves as champions for human rights and religious freedom, but this opens the door to criticism abroad for double standards and hypocrisy when we fail to act in accordance with these ideals. The rise in domestic hate crimes against Jews and Muslims and followers of other faiths in America also tarnishes the image of the United States as a human rights champion – and this helps our aggressors to use these acts against us, from a geopolitical and propaganda perspective.

To explore the issue of how domestic religious intolerance affects U.S. diplomacy, in 2018 the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy convened a working group on “Religious Intolerance and America's Image and Policies Abroad.” Experts from the diplomatic corps, academia, non-governmental organizations, and U.S.-based faith communities joined an in-depth discussion of the impact of pervasive domestic religious intolerance and bigotry on America's image and influence throughout the world.

The group also worked to identify ways for government and civil society to mitigate the dangerous consequences. With this in mind, the ISD working group produced a set of **Guiding Principles and Policy Recommendations** for policymakers, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, and other relevant parties to incorporate into their daily policymaking and research priorities. Among these principles:

- **Be faithful to America's core values as such, not because of security implications.** Religious freedom is a core fundamental freedom and a basic building block of the American creed, and safeguarding that essential freedom is essential to preserving our core values as a nation.

SUMMARY BRIEF

CONTACT

Kelly McFarland
Director of Programs and
Research
kmm426@georgetown.edu



/GUDiplomacy



/GUDiplomacy

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF DIPLOMACY

Founded in 1978, the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, an integral part of the Walsh School of Foreign Service, brings together diplomats, other practitioners, scholars and students from across and beyond Georgetown University to explore global challenges and evolving demands of diplomatic statecraft, to better understand the nexus of theory and practice, and to enhance and expand an appreciation of the role of diplomacy as a critical tool in national policy.

Copyright © 2018
Institute for the Study of
Diplomacy

- **Speak out against intolerance, bigotry, and hate crimes.** From public officials, to civil society leaders, to individual citizens, everyone has a role in condemning intolerance. When hatred and intolerance are allowed to flourish, further discrimination and hate crimes ensue.
- **Engage more closely with communities affected by intolerance – as well as those who spread such messages.** We must ensure that we work with those affected by intolerance to ensure their rights, protect them from threats, and demonstrate our concerns. Meanwhile, we must also work with those perpetrating intolerance to learn their motivations, dispel misunderstandings, confront hateful ideologies, and build bridges to a safer and more peaceful world.
- **Reinvest in civic education, a true bulwark against intolerance and extremism.** Learning about America’s fundamental values and the ongoing struggle to achieve equality and justice for all Americans reinforces a sense of civic nationalism and unity, and may help dispel ethnic or racial nationalism. Embracing the American creed also helps to build empathy for those in the United States and elsewhere in the world who do not yet fully enjoy America’s promise of equal rights and freedoms.
- **Enhance religious literacy to promote understanding and to develop more effective policies.** A nuanced and sophisticated understanding of religion, religious teachings, and the role and impact of religion in society are essential for policymakers as well as members of civil society and the media. The increasingly interconnected world places even greater importance on an appreciation for all forms of diversity, as well as an understanding of how our domestic actions can have such a dramatic effect on communities abroad.
- **Create space and an enabling environment for interfaith dialogue and collaboration.** Interfaith collaboration can have a profound dampening effect on incidents of intolerance and this type of collaboration should be expanded when applicable. Governments, too, need to play a role by providing an enabling environment for collaboration.
- **Amplify positive stories of tolerance and partnership.** Positive speech is one of the best antidotes to hate speech, but may not provide the breaking news story that the media wants to highlight. Civil society and government officials must work to promote examples of positive speech.
- **Expand other tools and strategies to combat hate speech.** Technology and social media can be a double-edged sword, and allow hate speech to masquerade as “free speech.” Policymakers and tech companies must work together to build more robust strategies for combating hate speech online.
- **Prepare to respond to provocative and destabilizing incidents.** Acts of religious intolerance may never completely disappear. With this in mind, government officials should learn from past events to develop and implement preventive measures to ensure that protests and acts of desecration or violence do not escalate, both domestically and abroad.
- **Address the disparity in treatment of foreign and domestic terrorism.** The volume of media reporting on foreign terrorism diminishes the public’s understanding of the threat of domestic terrorism, and creates a flawed association of Muslims with terrorism. Interested parties should work with the media to address this biased coverage. At a minimum, government officials and reporters should use the term “domestic terrorism” when talking about **all** acts of domestic mass violence, or refer to any act of terrorism, domestically or internationally, as “mass violence.”