



Functional Bureau Strategy

OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FOR PUBLIC RELEASE

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1. Executive Statement and Mission Statement

The Office of International Religious Freedom (J/IRF) promotes and defends the right of every person in the world to live in accordance with their conscience. Established by congressional statute, J/IRF is guided by the principles enshrined in the First Amendment as well as in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: that individuals are free to believe or not believe, to change their beliefs, speak about their beliefs, and to manifest their beliefs through teaching, practice, worship, and observance. While driven by American values, these efforts represent a vital national security imperative. The absence of religious freedom weakens social cohesion and alienates citizens from their government, in turn fomenting inequality, resentment, and unrest. Conversely, expanding religious freedom and bundled rights (such as assembly, association, and expression) fosters political stability, economic growth, and human security, including here at home.

In his March 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG), President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. articulated this imperative:

“[L]eading the world isn’t an investment we make to feel good about ourselves. It’s how we ensure the American people are able to live in peace, security, and prosperity. It’s in our undeniable self-interest... When we defend equal rights of all people — of women and girls, LGBTQI individuals, indigenous communities, people with disabilities, and people of every ethnic background and religion — we help ensure that those rights are protected for our own children here in America.”

The INSSG further notes that we defend democracy, the rule of law, and the equal rights of all people and will work hand-in-hand with our allies and partners to address authoritarianism, bolster democratic institutions abroad, promote transparent and accountable systems responsive to their citizens. We will utilize available diplomatic and assistance tools to defend human rights and address discrimination and inequity. To these ends, J/IRF leads the Department’s strategic engagement of – and partnership with – religious actors, organizations,

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and institutions as part of equal and broader civil society outreach to achieve U.S. foreign policy objectives.

J/IRF liaises extensively with domestic and international civil society – including religious groups and secular rights advocacy organizations – to understand their circumstances, to ensure their views and recommendations are effectively incorporated into all aspects of U.S. foreign policy, and to amplify their voices and expand opportunities for them in international and multinational fora.

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken laid out his policy vision for advancing international religious freedom as follows:

“Religious freedom is a human right; in fact, it goes to the heart of what it means to be human – to think freely, to follow our conscience, to change our beliefs if our hearts and minds lead us to do so, to express those beliefs in public and in private. ... Religious freedom, like every human right, is universal. All people, everywhere, are entitled to it no matter where they live, what they believe, or what they don’t believe. ... Religious freedom can’t be fully realized unless other human rights are respected, and when governments violate their people’s right to believe and worship freely, it jeopardizes all the others. And religious freedom is a key element of an open and stable society. Without it, people aren’t able to make their fullest contribution to their country’s success. And whenever human rights are denied, it ignites tension, it breeds division.”

J/IRF builds diverse and dynamic partnerships with the broadest range of civil society, with equitable and meaningful inclusion of faith actors globally, and trains and equips fellow foreign policy practitioners to do the same. To enable more effective foreign policy, the Department must effectively include the views and insights of religious actors from diverse communities around the world. Within the State Department and the U.S. government, J/IRF leads in direct engagement, cross-cutting collaboration, and awareness raising of the value of effectively partnering with religious actors in the course of diplomatic outreach and activities, to advance shared objectives in U.S. foreign policy.

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J/IRF accomplishes the whole of its mission by engaging in public, private, bilateral, international, and multi-stakeholder diplomacy; supporting the work of religious freedom and human rights defenders, faith leaders, and faith-based organizations; monitoring reports of abuses and discrimination by both governments and societal actors; developing and implementing policies and programs to address these challenges; and messaging solidarity with and standing publicly for the rights of individuals marginalized and persecuted on account of their religion or beliefs.

This Functional Bureau Strategy (FBS) addresses these risks and challenges and articulates U.S. policy for and J/IRF's approach to advancing universal respect for religious freedom, combatting abuses and violations of this right, promoting human security and inclusion, and engaging religious actors to advance U.S. foreign policy. J/IRF is committed to careful stewardship of limited taxpayer resources and performs annual assessments to review progress made on the goals and objectives established in this FBS.

J/IRF MISSION STATEMENT:

To strengthen U.S. national security by enabling more inclusive, equitable, and rights-respecting societies and institutions around the world, J/IRF advocates for freedom of religion, belief, or non-belief for every person and promotes the inclusion of civil society, including members of religious communities and organizations, in U.S. diplomacy and policymaking.

2. Bureau Strategic Framework

Bureau Goal 1: Freedom of Religion or Belief and Rights Advocacy: More governments fully respect freedom of religion, belief, and non-belief as part of inclusive, equitable, and rights-respecting societies.

- **Bureau Objective 1.1:** Foreign governments take meaningful steps to bring their laws, policies, and practices into conformity with international human rights obligations and commitments and advance religious freedom globally.
- **Bureau Objective 1.2:** The U.S. government and our government partners more frequently use unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral tools, such as sanctions, visa restrictions, public statements, and collective actions, to hold governments, non-state actors, and individuals accountable for religious freedom abuses and violations.
- **Bureau Objective 1.3:** U.S. government personnel are more aware and increase the deployment of the full range of tools at their disposal to advocate for freedom of religion, belief, and non-belief and related freedoms (including the freedoms of expression and assembly) and how to ensure full inclusion of civil society.

Bureau Goal 2: Inclusive and Strategic Civil Society Engagement: The U.S. government achieves policy goals more effectively through expanded, diverse, and dynamic partnerships with the broadest range of civil society, with equal and meaningful inclusion of faith actors.

- **Bureau Objective 2.1:** J/IRF facilitates increased and more regular consultation and collaboration with civil society, particularly faith actors and organizations and representatives of diverse, historically excluded, and marginalized populations, in vital U.S. government and international discussions on matters of shared interest.
- **Bureau Objective 2.2:** Nascent multilateral, multinational, and international alliances and networks that advance J/IRF policy interests are more effective and impactful and become sustainably semi-independent.

Bureau Cross-Cutting Management Goal 1: Build and equip a more diverse, inclusive, resilient, and dynamic workforce empowered with the resources and support needed to foster growth and success.

- **Management Objective 1.1:** Expand and strengthen inclusive and equitable standard practices that increase recruitment, hiring, retention, and promotion of historically underrepresented groups.

Bureau Cross-Cutting Management Goal 2: Ensure accountability to the American taxpayer.

- **Management Objective 2.1:** Increased use of evidence in decision-making, building partner capacity, and exploring innovative approaches strengthens the effectiveness of our expenditures.

3. Bureau Goals and Objectives

Bureau Goal 1: More governments fully respect freedom of religion, belief, and non-belief as part of inclusive, equitable, and rights-respecting societies.

- **Bureau Goal 1 Description:** The right to exercise one's freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is a human right and is enshrined in the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment. The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, which created the Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF) and the position of Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, affirms and institutionalizes this commitment to promoting religious freedom around the world.

J/IRF continues to prioritize the integration of religious freedom into the U.S. government's broader foreign policy objectives. IRF monitors religious persecution and discrimination worldwide, recommends and implements policies in respective regions or countries, and produces the annual International Religious Freedom Reports. The Department identifies egregious religious freedom violators and recommends their designation by the Secretary as "Countries of Particular Concern" (CPCs) or "Entities of Particular Concern" (EPCs), or Special Watch List (SWL) under the International Religious Freedom Act, as well as the consequent sanctions policies toward those countries.

Bureau Objective 1.1: Foreign governments take meaningful steps to bring their laws, policies, and practices into conformity with international human rights obligations and commitments and advance religious freedom globally.

- **Bureau Objective 1.1 Justification and Linkages:** Respect for religious freedom is both a core American value and a universal human right reflected in numerous international instruments, such as the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Helsinki Accords. Governments who are parties to these agreements are expected to abide by their obligations and commitments regarding freedom of religion. However, far too many of

these governments have imposed significant restrictions on the right to adopt a religion or belief of one's choice and to the freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching. In these countries, significant societal intolerance of, and violence against, members of religious minority groups also undermine religious freedom and in some countries is condoned or encouraged by the government.

- **Bureau Objective 1.1 Risk Considerations:** Anti-democratic forces use misinformation, disinformation, and weaponized corruption to exploit perceived weaknesses and sow division within and among free nations, erode existing international rules, and promote alternative models of authoritarian governance. The standard tools of advocacy, including the very act of highlighting religious freedom cases and conditions sometimes generates unintentional negative attention that places victims and/or their families and colleagues at even greater risk of threats, detention/arrest, or physical harm, including death.

Bureau Objective 1.2: The U.S. government and our government partners more frequently use unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral tools, such as sanctions, visa restrictions, public statements, and collective actions, to hold governments, non-state actors, and individuals accountable for religious freedom abuses and violations.

- **Bureau Objective 1.2 Justification and Linkages:** Accountability for the worst offenders of religious freedom among government officials with command responsibility, or other complicity, in the commission of religious freedom abuses, atrocities, war crimes, or genocide can serve as a powerful deterrent to other would-be perpetrators. While individual U.S. government sanctions, including those under the Global Magnitsky Act, are reserved for the most egregious offenders and often take a whole-of-government effort to enact, a simple visa ineligibility determination by J/IRF for religious freedom violations under the Immigration and Naturalization Act represents an efficient and effective tool for moderating abusive behavior.

- **Bureau Objective 1.2 Risk Considerations:** As accountability mechanisms increase, the worst offenders of religious freedom could increasingly allow or encourage miscellaneous members of society to use abusive behavior or utilize proxy forces – in the form of paramilitary, militia, or non-state armed actors – to gain distance from and conceal their abusive behaviors. In a global economy, unilateral sanctions could impose greater costs on American firms or influence than on the target, which can find substitute sources of supply, financing, or access.

Bureau Objective 1.3: U.S. government personnel are more aware and increase the deployment of the full range of tools at their disposal to advocate for freedom of religion, belief, and non-belief and related freedoms (including the freedoms of expression and assembly) and how to ensure full inclusion of civil society.

- **Bureau Objective 1.3 Justification and Linkages:** J/IRF's mandate includes ensuring the Department is informed by and able to engage with all members of society and advocates consistently for religious freedom as a U.S. foreign policy priority. Under passed Congressional legislation, the Department expanded training on religious freedom issues for Department personnel. This effort aligns with Joint Strategic Plan goal of revitalizing the diplomatic and development workforce as well as upholding universal values and promoting human dignity.
- **Bureau Objective 1.3 Risk Considerations:** Despite training, Department officials may fail to deploy these tools in any situation. Changing international power dynamics, including the rise of malign actors and changing spheres of influence, could make some tools less effective.

Bureau Goal 2: The U.S. government achieves policy goals more effectively through expanded, diverse, and dynamic partnerships with the broadest range of civil society, with equal and meaningful inclusion of faith actors.

- **Bureau Goal 2 Description:** To most effectively and efficiently advance U.S. policy interests and augment the diplomatic toolkit, U.S. diplomatic engagement and cross-cutting collaboration should include all key players in a vibrant civil society, including faith actors and other underrepresented groups, and understand the role they play in local, regional, and global affairs. For example, while people of faith make up over 80% of the world's population, their voices, experiences, and contributions are often undervalued or siloed, with religious leaders engaged only on "religious" issues. Faith leaders from diverse communities around the world are underrepresented in the halls of political and economic power yet have valuable insights and influence. Effective diplomacy requires American representatives to incorporate into all our diplomatic activities consideration of the impactful role played by religion, religious leaders, and religious communities in domestic and international affair.

Bureau Objective 2.1: J/IRF facilitates more regular consultation and collaboration with civil society and religious actors and faith-based organizations, including diverse, historically excluded, and marginalized populations, in vital U.S. government and international discussions on matters of shared interest.

- **Bureau Objective 2.1 Justification and Linkages:** Religious actor engagement, as part of an equal and broader engagement with civil society, is a vital component in U.S. efforts to achieve its foreign policy goals. Expanding the space for underrepresented voices across societies worldwide is consistent with the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance's commitment to partnerships with diverse and dynamic civil society and complements IRF's statutory mandate to advance universal respect for religious freedom by encouraging more open, vibrant, and inclusive political and social systems. To meet the needs of contemporary diplomatic initiatives, U.S. foreign affairs

professionals benefit from guidance on the influential role of religion and religious actors in linking to and developing effective foreign policy and in implementing those policies.

- **Bureau Objective 2.1 Risk Considerations:** Without sufficient understanding of the role that religious actor engagement can play in support of shared policy goals, diplomats may fail to consider religious and ethnic dynamics which may be critical factors in our success. Worse still, improper use of religious actor engagement can lead to perceptions of U.S. instrumentalization or tokenism of religious figures.

Bureau Objective 2.2: Nascent multilateral, multinational, and international alliances and networks that advance J/IRF policy interests are more effective and impactful and become sustainably semi-independent.

- **Bureau Objective 2.2 Justification and Linkages:** Efforts by the United States – or of any one government – are much more likely to succeed when we join with likeminded partners to advance a common vision rooted in international principles and shared interests. Innovative initiatives and strategic partnerships with multilateral, public, and private organizations and individuals are necessary to promote U.S. foreign policy priorities most effectively. J/IRF risks not being able to accomplish its performance goals if it operates in isolation. Supporting collaborative approaches and seeking and leveraging broader stakeholder buy-in will contribute to accomplishing JSP goals of upholding universal values and promoting human dignity as well as mobilizing coalitions to address the global challenges. It will be more possible to achieve these goals using innovative methods developed with these partnerships and networks.
- **Bureau Objective 2.2 Risk Considerations:** Informal, consensus-based organizations are often plagued by inertia, inaction, or ineffectual pronouncements and this could undermine ultimate impact of these alliances and networks. Current members may prefer to be free riders rather than active participants and unwilling to act. In an increasingly multipolar system with threats from malign actors, members of civil society may be reluctant to engage with the U.S. directly or participate in U.S.-driven initiatives.

Alternatively, these groups could choose to pursue initiatives that contradict U.S. policies or priorities. In addition, failure to build sufficiently broad and globally diverse networks may hinder our ability to achieve strategic prevention of religious freedom violations, pursue religious conflict resolution, and inspire durable societal change.

4. Bureau Cross-Cutting Management Goals

Bureau Cross-Cutting Management Goal 1: Build and equip a more diverse, inclusive, resilient, and dynamic workforce empowered with the resources and support needed to foster growth and success.

- **Bureau Cross-Cutting Management Goal 1 Description:** The effectiveness of the J/IRF Office depends on its ability to address talent management issues, including equity and inclusion, knowledge management, change management and capacity building. An appropriate level and quality of human resources is necessary for proper oversight of foreign assistance, domestic operations, and other office priorities. The Office requires a data-driven approach that outlines the human resources and skills required for it to meet its stated goals and objectives.

Bureau Cross-Cutting Management Objective 1.1: Expand and strengthen inclusive and equitable standard practices that increase recruitment, hiring, retention, and promotion of historically underrepresented groups.

- **Bureau Cross-Cutting Management Objective 1.1 Justification and Linkages:** The effectiveness of the J/IRF Office depends on its ability to address talent management issues, including knowledge management, change management and capacity building. An appropriate level and quality of human resources is necessary for proper oversight of foreign assistance, domestic operations, and other office priorities. The Office requires a data-driven strategy that outlines the human resources and skills required to meet its stated goals and objectives as well as advancing the Department's Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan.
- **Bureau Cross-Cutting Management Objective 1.1 Risk Considerations:** Long delays in obtaining security clearances and centrally managed and often onerous hiring procedures impede prompt implementation of decisions, a key element in modernizing

recruitment. Lack of upward mobility, particular for civil servants, could make a long-term position in the office less compelling for highly competitive individuals.

Bureau Cross-Cutting Management Goal 2: Ensure accountability to the American taxpayer

- **Bureau Cross-Cutting Management Goal 2 Description:** In furtherance of the FY 2023 Mission Resource Request (MRR) Guidance of March 16, 2021, J/IRF must be an effective, careful steward of U.S. resources. The office continues to conduct programs that further critical U.S. statutory requirements utilizing digital diplomacy, technological platforms, and public-private partnerships to contain expenditures.

Bureau Cross-Cutting Management Objective 2.1: Increase use of evidence and data in decision-making regarding direct diplomatic engagement and foreign assistance resources to strengthens the effectiveness of our expenditures.

- **Bureau Cross-Cutting Management Objective 2.1 Justification and Linkages:** Program evaluations help the office better understand which programs are more appropriate for achieving a particular policy goal. Many programs that work in closed societies and/or on very sensitive political issues demand flexibility and an ability to adapt to changing political contexts, in many cases involving repression. Effective program design is grounded in a qualitative analysis of the context and issue, supplemented – where possible – by empirical evidence. Learning from ongoing work allows for the expansion of successful work to new contexts. Moreover, evaluations help ensure programs abide by the “do no harm principle.” Increased monitoring and evaluation ensure that programs have a positive impact, are cost effective, and do not result in negative unintended consequences.
- **Bureau Cross-Cutting Management Objective 2.1 Risk Considerations:** Failing to recruit, train, and retain the proper level of highly motivated staff, and to build critical partner capacity and skills, would reduce the ability of IRF to support the mission of the Department and implement its duties under the Interim National Security Strategic

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Guidance. Time horizons for program evaluations may be quite lengthy. Limited availability or official authorization of data collection and management tools can undermine efforts to collect information most effectively. Other organizational units in the Department could refuse to provide needed formation or lack required bandwidth or resources to track.