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“The State of Political and Religious Freedom in the Middle East”

**Gary L. Ackerman
Chairman**

In some places, and particularly, in the Middle East, people may wonder about the sincerity of American concern about religious freedom. Skeptics, especially in the Arab world, may suspect that our professed interest in the freedom of belief, thought, and worship is merely a cudgel we use to beat our political opponents when convenient.

Such thinking is not only completely wrong on the facts, but utterly misunderstands our national character, which has always held to the belief in universal rights, and the hope that these rights would spread throughout the world. Among the founders, Thomas Jefferson put it best in letter sent only days before the 50th anniversary of our independence.

Referring to that great July 4th, he wrote:

“May it be to the world, what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all,) the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government. That form which we have substituted, restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion.”

Whatever his other failings, Jefferson understood and expressed better than any other of the founding generation the ideals that have set the United States apart, and won for us a special destiny.

And in fact, that unique drive to share the blessings of freedom pervaded even the earliest years of American diplomatic engagement with the Middle East. Though even few Americans recall or learn little of our nation’s involvement in the Arab world before the 20th Century, the fact is, among our nation’s very earliest foreign policy struggles and successes, the Middle East played a very prominent role. In addition to seeking to protect American ships from piracy in the southern Mediterranean, from the very start, American diplomats and envoys took it upon themselves to seek protection for religious minorities. And this work continues to this day.

It's probably true that our relations throughout the region would be considerably simplified if we chose to regard religious discrimination and repression in other countries as purely internal matters. Many other states have taken this approach. But such an abdication of our most fundamental beliefs is not within the character of this country, not now, and not in the future. For better or worse, we are called to be witnesses.

It is not within our power or desire to shape the affairs of other states. But we are not blind to the suffering and misfortune which is meted out daily throughout the world, and particularly in the Middle East on the basis of religion, even among our close allies. So as we are not blind or deaf, we must not also be mute.

There are several reasons for this obligation. First, we must be true to our own values. Religious freedom is a core American value and remaining silent in the face of evil is to become complicit with that evil. Secondly, as we maintain our belief in the rightness of our values, we must also maintain hope that others will recognize and come to accept what we have always held to be self-evident truths. And finally, both the victims and the perpetrators of religious bias, discrimination and violence should know that we are watching and are aware and concerned. However certain the perpetrators of these acts may be of their authority, they rarely like to have their deeds exposed. Power can not dispel shame.

And we are not without misdeeds ourselves. Our own history is sadly rife with long years of oppression and outbreaks of brutality. But while our history may be flawed, the ideals to which we are ever struggling to come closer are not.

The right to believe, or not, and to exercise that belief in worship and religious practice, is not a different thing here in the United States than it is in the Middle East or in any other place.

Some of our allies will complain that behind the façade of religion lie threats of the utmost urgency to their states, and to the well-being of their publics. Maybe so. But the obligation to distinguish between legal association and criticism, and illegal conspiracy and treason lies with the state. The responsibility to protect the weak and the helpless from the strong and the powerful lies with the state. The boundary between the religious character of a nation and the secular aspect of a government must be maintained by the state.

We do not expect every, or any, nation to become cookie-cutter copies of the United States. But we do expect that states will adhere to their own international commitments and treaty obligations.

Jefferson's letter concluded "All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God. These are grounds of hope for others. For ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them."

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