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## Obama's interfaith dialogue: Let's talk persecution

By **Doug Bandow**  
Commentary by  
Tuesday, June 02, 2009

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President Barack Obama plans to call for an improved dialogue with Islam in his upcoming speech in Egypt. All faiths would benefit from greater understanding. Yet no conversation will be complete if it does not address Islam's ubiquitous persecution of Christians, Jews and other religious minorities.

Western efforts to reach out to Islam are increasing. However, many Muslim states want to end all Western criticism of Islam. At their behest, last November the United Nations General Assembly denounced the "defamation" of religions, complaining that "Islam is frequently and wrongly associated with human rights violations and

terrorism." Nations were enjoined "to take all possible measures to promote tolerance and respect for all religions and beliefs."

Let us stipulate that some US government policies offend Muslims. And that most Muslims do not support terrorism. Nevertheless, rather than promoting religious tolerance, most Islamic governments routinely persecute minority faiths.

For instance, six of the 10 top persecutors making up the "Hall of Shame" created by International Christian Concern (ICC) have largely Muslim populations. Of 27 countries targeted for religious persecution by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), 17 had Muslim majorities.

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Islamic states are not monolithic, but those which largely leave religious minorities alone are the exception. Of Morocco, reported the State Department last year: "The Government places certain restrictions on non-Islamic religious materials and proselytizing." State added, "There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination toward those with different religious beliefs, and converts from Islam to other religions." Moreover, the regime "generally confiscates Arabic-language Bibles and refuses licenses for their importation and sale despite the absence of any law banning such books."

Last year the State Department reported on Jordan's declining religious liberty, reflected in "[t]he government's handling of apostasy cases, expulsion of approximately thirty foreign Christian religious workers, and instances of individual and organizational harassment based on religious affiliation." Moreover, "[m]embers of unrecognized religious groups and converts from Islam face legal discrimination and risk the loss of civil rights, including threats to their person and/or family."

Recently, Obama visited Turkey, where two years ago Islamic extremists tortured and murdered three Christians. The State Department warned: "Violent attacks and continued threats against non-Muslims during the reporting period created an atmosphere of pressure and diminished freedom for some non-Muslim communities." Converts from Islam "sometimes experienced social harassment and violence from relatives and neighbors."

ICC places Egypt in its Hall of Shame, noting pervasive mistreatment of Coptic Christians, who "are widely discriminated against as a result of the discriminatory policies of the country and the bias of Muslim officials. There have been many instances in which, in some localities, Muslim extremists looted and burned down Christian owned businesses and homes, maiming and killing Christians."

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In Afghanistan discrimination and persecution are also increasing. USCIRF warns that "Conditions for freedom of religion or belief in Afghanistan have become increasingly problematic." Three years ago a Muslim convert to Christianity, Abdul Rahman, barely avoided execution.

Pakistan treats Christians "as second-class citizens," reports ICC. The State Department has written that "[l]aw enforcement

personnel abused religious minorities in custody. Security forces and other government agencies did not adequately prevent or address societal abuse against minorities. Discriminatory legislation and the Government's failure to take action against societal forces hostile to those who practice a different religious belief fostered religious intolerance, acts of violence, and intimidation against religious minorities."

In Iraq "there have been alarming numbers of religiously-motivated killings, abductions, beatings, rapes, threats, intimidation, forced resettlements, and attacks on religious leaders, pilgrims, and holy sites," explains the USCIRF. The smallest religious minorities have suffered the most. Roughly half of Christians have been driven from their homes.

As for Iran, the State Department reported that "Government rhetoric and actions created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shi'a religious groups, most notably for Baha'is, as well as Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians, and members of the Jewish community." The USCIRF reports on deteriorating religious freedom, "including intensified physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrest, and imprisonment."

The State Department explained that "[t]here is no legal recognition of, or protection under the law for, freedom of religion, and it is severely restricted in practice" in Saudi Arabia. The Commission says that the Saudi government has been "engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief."

The list goes on.

Obviously Obama cannot center American foreign policy on promoting religious liberty abroad. However, the freedoms of conscience and religious faith are



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critical aspects of human rights. Any genuine dialogue with Islamic states must address the fact that many of them routinely and sometimes savagely repress religious minorities.

Let's continue to encourage dialogue with Muslim nations. But let's put all issues on the table, including religious persecution.

**Doug Bandow** is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of "Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics." He wrote this commentary for **THE DAILY STAR**.

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