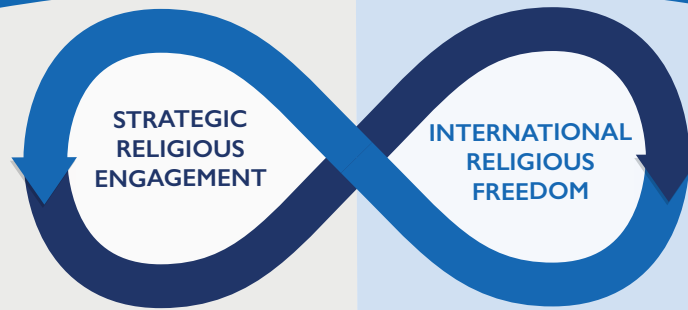


# Strategic Religious Engagement in Practice



**Strategic Religious Engagement** is the process of collaborating and partnering with religious communities and faith-based organizations to advance shared development and humanitarian goals.



**International Religious Freedom** is the promotion and protection of universal respect for freedom of religion or belief for all as a core objective of U.S. foreign policy.

*Religious freedom enables religious engagement. Religious engagement promotes religious freedom.*

## Reference Guide on the Relationship Between Strategic Religious Engagement and International Religious Freedom

Freedom of religion or belief is guaranteed by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and in the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.<sup>1</sup> The willingness to safeguard religious freedom is an indicator of a country's commitment to the principles outlined in these documents and a country's capacity to realize those values and rights in practice.

Efforts to promote international religious freedom (IRF) are linked to strategic religious engagement (SRE), but vary in key ways. IRF efforts are focused on a specific individual right: the realization – in law and practice – of the full enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief for every individual, everywhere. Advancing IRF is a U.S. foreign policy and national security priority,<sup>2</sup> and a central tenet in securing human rights and fundamental freedoms around the world. Religious freedom programs focus on ending the violation of the right and addressing discriminatory practices and societal intolerance. The bipartisan [International Religious Freedom Act of 1998](#) requires the U.S. government to promote religious freedom abroad.

Religious freedom advocacy focuses on the rights and inclusion of members of persecuted religious communities as well as other vulnerable groups and individuals facing systemic discrimination and/or marginalization. Nations can never

achieve their fullest potential when some are excluded from education, healthcare, jobs and other essentials on account of their innermost beliefs or how they choose to manifest those beliefs. Countries that effectively safeguard this and other human rights are more peaceful, stable, prosperous, and more reliable partners of the United States than those that do not. Research shows that certain types of religious freedom violations correlate with political instability at the national level and economic harm at the local level.<sup>3</sup>

Advancing international religious freedom in development varies by context. USAID Bureaus, Missions, and Independent Offices can promote this right with efforts to prevent atrocities and attacks against people due to their beliefs; protect the ability of communities to document and promote accountability for the perpetrators of attacks; ensure equal rights and legal protections; improve the safety and security of houses of worship and public spaces for all faiths; and protect and preserve the diverse cultural heritage of religious communities. SRE, the process of collaborating and partnering with members of religious communities to advance development goals can include, but is not limited to, the promotion of international religious freedom as a human right. Though distinct from one another, religious freedom and religious engagement are mutually reinforcing priorities that help to advance USAID's vision for a free, peaceful, and prosperous world.

<sup>1</sup> [International Standards: Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)

<sup>2</sup> For the United States, the freedom of religion, belief, and conscience is enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, supporting the rights of every citizen to freely practice the religion of their choice – or no religion at all.

<sup>3</sup> Jason Klocek, Ph.D.; Scott Bledsoe. "Global Trends and Challenges to Protecting and Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief." United States Institute of Peace, 2022. This project was supported by USAID's Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.