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Scholars to press Obama on religious freedom

by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON

A group of scholars has urged U.S. religious communities to persuade President Barack Obama that the promotion of international religious freedom in his diplomatic policies is vital to national security.

During a panel discussion on the effectiveness of the U.S. international religious freedom policy at Georgetown University April 15, the scholars agreed the U.S. State Department has underused the International Religious Freedom Act in the decade since it was passed. They also said diplomatic efforts would flourish if U.S. diplomats reached out to foreign religious leaders more often.

"There is this erroneous notion that it's unconstitutional if we are talking to religious leaders around the world," said Thomas F. Farr, a former U.S. diplomat and visiting associate professor of religion and international affairs at Georgetown.

For decades, the State Department has operated on the philosophy that religion must be kept out of U.S. diplomatic policy, Farr told about 100 students, faculty members and visitors at Georgetown's Riggs Library.

"We need to change this," he said, as he and the other three scholars plugged his new book, "World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty Is Vital to American National Security."

"This is a landmark book. It's an account of U.S. policy -- or lack thereof -- on religious liberty," said Allen Hertzke, presidential professor of political science at the University of Oklahoma. "It shows the diplomatic blinders of our diplomatic corps to religious liberty."

In the book, Farr declared that every trouble spot in the world has some kind of a religious element, and pointed out the religious liberty struggles in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Israel, the Palestinian territories,

Turkey, India, Pakistan, Russia and China.

U.S. foreign policy is critically compromised in its inability to grasp the role of religion either nationally or globally, he told his scholastic audience.

"The freedom to practice one's own religion in private and in public is an essential prerequisite for a stable, durable democratic society," Farr said. "If the Obama administration wants to foster democracy that lasts, it must focus on fostering religious liberty."

Even during the administration of President George W. Bush -- considered one of the most religious U.S. leaders in recent times -- American diplomats still failed to consider religious factors as part of the problem or the solution in troubled foreign nations, he said.

"The world is not a secular society," said Akbar Ahmed, the Pakistani-born Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University in Washington. "We must protect religious freedom here and abroad."

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Though Washington and many U.S. intellectual circles tend to embody a secular attitude, America is a very religious society with a proud history of religious liberty, said Andrew Natsios, a professor of diplomacy at Georgetown's School of Foreign Service and a former administrator for the U.S. Agency for International Development.

"Our diplomatic corps needs to learn how to engage with religious leaders, because these are the people who influence the citizens of these countries," Natsios said. "It needs to become a standard practice at the State Department. You can't just say it once. You have to reinforce it over and over again."

A change in philosophy at the State Department won't happen overnight, but must be nurtured organically over a long period of time, he said.

"Religious communities need to raise this issue and gain public (support) to get the attention of President (Barack) Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to begin to change the philosophy at the State Department," Hertzke said.

"We need a top-down approach to this, with the understanding that countries with religious freedom are countries with more stable governments, and that is a matter of national security for the United States," he said.

Farr also said the American model of religious liberty should be emphasized.

"We are a religiously friendly country," he said. "We have a story to tell and we have been mute on the subject."

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