

Degree Program in Politics: Philosophy and Economics

Course of International Relations

**Faith, Security, and Freedom: Assessing the Impact of  
U.S. Religious Diplomacy on Minority Religious Rights in  
Arab Conflict Zones**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>1. COUNTERTERRORISM: TOWARDS A STANDARD DEFINITION</b> .....	<b>8</b>
1.1 Evolution of Counterterrorism in U.S. Policy.....	9
1.2. Counterterrorism's Interface with Religion.....	12
1.3. Critiques of Counterterrorism's Impacts on Religious Freedoms .....	14
<b>2. RELIGIOUS DIPLOMACY</b> .....	<b>16</b>
2.1 The Concept of Religious Diplomacy in International Relations .....	16
2.2. Religious Diplomacy in Practice: Examples.....	17
2.3. Efficacy and Critiques of Religious Diplomacy .....	19
<b>3. U.S. FOREIGN POLICY</b> .....	<b>20</b>
3.1. U.S. Foreign Policy's Historical Stance on Religious Freedom.....	22
3.2. Policy Instruments: The International Religious Freedom Act.....	23
3. 3. U.S. Foreign Policy in Arab World's Conflict Zones .....	24
<b>4. INTERCONNECTIONS AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS</b> .....	<b>26</b>
4.1. Interplay Between Counterterrorism, Religious Diplomacy, and U.S. Foreign Policy .....	26
4.2. Theoretical Approaches to Religious Freedom in Conflict Zones .....	28
<b>5. SUMMARY AND DIRECTION FOR EMPIRICAL INQUIRY</b> .....	<b>30</b>
5.1. Research Questions and Hypotheses Leading into Methodology.....	<b>30</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGICAL ANALYSIS</b> .....	<b>32</b>
<b>1. DESCRIPTION OF ANALYTICAL TOOLS – RESEARCH QUESTION AND VARIABLES</b> .....	<b>32</b>
1.1 Research Question.....	32
1.2 Variables.....	33
<b>2. ANALYSIS OF THE HYPOTHESES</b> .....	<b>34</b>
2.1 Description of the hypotheses .....	35
2.1.1 First Hypothesis .....	35
2.1.2 Second Hypothesis.....	38
2.2 How were the hypotheses formed, and why are they carried out .....	42

<b>3. LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS</b> .....	43
<b>CHAPTER 3: CASE STUDIES, IRAQ AND SYRIA</b> .....	<b>44</b>
<b>1. IRAQ</b> .....	44
1.1 History of the Internal Issues .....	44
1.1.1 Rise of ISIS and Counterterrorism Efforts of the US .....	46
1.2 Impact on religious minorities .....	48
<b>2. SYRIA</b> .....	52
2.1 History of the Internal Issues .....	52
2.1.1 Rise of ISIS and Counterterrorism efforts of the US .....	54
2.2 Impact on the Religious Minorities.....	55
<b>3. COMPARATIVE AND LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS OF THE TWO CASE STUDIES</b> .....	56
3.1 RISE OF ISIS SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES.....	56
3.1.1 Counterterrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy.....	58
3.2 Religion and Terrorism .....	60
3.3 Answering the Hypothesis .....	63
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>68</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>70</b>

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the intersection between U.S. foreign policy, counterterrorism, and religious diplomacy to impact religious freedom in the Arab world's conflict zones, focusing on Iraq and Syria. By analysing historical contexts, the study explores how U.S. religious diplomacy within counterterrorism efforts affects minority religious freedoms. It argues that adapting counterterrorism strategies to fit local cultural and religious contexts, rather than imposing Western ideologies, could improve outcomes.

The research will aim to investigate three key variables, U.S. Foreign Policy, which includes strategic actions in the Middle East; Counterterrorism, involving measures to prevent and respond to terrorism; and Religious Diplomacy, which uses religious leaders and institutions to achieve foreign policy goals and protect religious freedoms. Through case studies, the thesis provides insights into the effectiveness of U.S. strategies and suggests recommendations for future policy improvements, aiming to enhance the protection of religious freedoms and foster sustainable peace

**Keywords:** U.S Foreign Policy, Counterterrorism, Religious Diplomacy, ISIS, Minorities, Conflict Zones, Syria, Iraq, Middle East, Islam

## Introduction

The ever-so-different and changing world, comprised of thousands of cultures, millions of peoples, and even more beliefs, cannot be enclosed in a simple box and made to follow simple lines. In a world of international relations beyond the ordinary explanations plausibly found in a textbook, one must question what factors work in the relationships between countries—the ones between people or between beliefs? Moreover, how can everything be bound to work together?

Terrorism is an abundant issue that has been ever-growing, often using religion as an “excuse” or “reasoning” behind these attacks or extremist ideas<sup>1</sup>. However, the root of the problem lies not within the religion itself but in the distorted interpretations of its teachings. For example, groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda claim to act in the name of Islam, yet their actions are widely condemned by the vast majority of Muslims around the world<sup>2</sup>. These extremist groups selectively interpret religious texts to justify their violent agendas, often taking verses out of context to suit their needs<sup>3</sup>. This manipulation of religious doctrine is not unique to Islam; throughout history, various groups have similarly exploited religious texts to further their ends, such as the Crusades<sup>4</sup> in Christianity or the persecution of certain groups by the Ku Klux Klan in the United States<sup>5</sup>. It is crucial to recognise that the actual victims of these extremist groups are not only those affected by their attacks but the faithful adherents of all religions, who suffer for their beliefs despite having committed no harm<sup>6</sup>. For instance, Muslim communities often face increased scrutiny and discrimination in the wake of terrorist attacks, even though they overwhelmingly reject and condemn such violence<sup>7</sup>. These individuals bear the unjust burden of association with violence that they seem to neither support nor condone. Efforts to combat terrorism must, therefore, focus on distinguishing between the peaceful majority and the violent few utilising it as a scapegoat, addressing the underlying causes of radicalisation, and promoting a more nuanced understanding of religious teachings<sup>8</sup>. This approach could help to ensure that innocent believers are not wrongfully penalised for the actions of extremists who falsely claim to represent them.

The intersection of U.S. foreign policy, counterterrorism, and religious diplomacy forms a complex and possibly controversial framework that has significant implications for the religious freedom of minorities

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<sup>1</sup> Coady, C. A. J. (2021, May). Religion, War, and Terrorism. Oxford Academic Journals.

<sup>2</sup> Campbell, J. (2015, November 23). ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Boko Haram: faces of terrorism. Council on Foreign Relations.

<sup>3</sup> Muslims against ISIS Part 1: Clerics & Scholars. (2014, September). Wilson Center.

<sup>4</sup> The Crusades were a series of religious wars initiated, supported, and sometimes directed by the Christian Latin Church in the medieval period.

<sup>5</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2024, May 17). Ku Klux Klan. Encyclopedia Britannica.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell, J. (2015, November 23). ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Boko Haram: faces of terrorism. Council on Foreign Relations.

<sup>7</sup> Shahbaz, H. (2021). Islamophobia in the Mainstream. Council on American-Islamic Relations Report.

<sup>8</sup> Coady, C. A. J. (2021, May). Religion, War, and Terrorism. Oxford Academic Journals.

in the Arab world's conflict zones. This thesis will explore how U.S. religious diplomacy within its counterterrorism efforts impacts religious freedom, mainly focusing on Iraq and Syria as case studies. It will analyse the history of the two countries, Syria and Iraq, and their counterpart's effects on the variables. It will further delve into a realisation of analysis to demonstrate how a slight change in the methods used towards fighting terrorism could be fixed to fit better the country they are applied to and not simply take Westernized ideologies and apply them. By examining these dynamics, the study will provide insights into the past effectiveness of U.S. strategies, like the effects seen in the case studies, and perhaps offer recommendations or ideas for future policy improvements.

The primary variables that will be analysed in this thesis are U.S. Foreign Policy, Counterterrorism, and Religious Diplomacy. These variables will be thoroughly explained and compared to understand their interactions and outcomes with each other. U.S. Foreign Policy encompasses the strategic objectives and actions taken by the United States in international relations, particularly in the Middle East; these strategies will be analysed and set to determine whether they truly portray the best outcome for all sides. Counterterrorism involves the measures and initiatives aimed at preventing and responding to terrorism, a critical aspect of U.S. involvement in the region. And lastly, religious diplomacy refers to using religious leaders, institutions, ideologies, and dialogue as tools to achieve foreign policy objectives, foster peace, and protect religious freedoms. Woven together, the variables may aim to form a possible diplomatic tactic, which could potentially be used in future situations, mostly ones like the examples provided by the case studies, where the country's population relies heavily on their beliefs, religion and culture.

After analysing the variables and thoroughly explaining them, the methodological framework will be presented by examining how each variable interacts with one another and the hypotheses formed. The hypothesis, aiming to find a result, encompasses the prioritisation of security interests instead of the freedom of religious minorities in conflict zones and the possible impact of the utility of religious diplomacy on these minorities. This framework will explain how the hypotheses were formulated, and a longitudinal analysis will be presented to track changes and trends over time.

Lastly, the third chapter will provide historical background on both case studies, Syria and Iraq, and will seek to apply the variables. Additionally, it will discuss whether the hypotheses adhered to the case studies of Iraq and Syria and aim to demonstrate how U.S. religious diplomacy within counterterrorism efforts has impacted the religious freedom of minorities in these conflict zones. By analysing historical data, this thesis seeks to uncover patterns and outcomes of U.S. strategies in Iraq and Syria. It will aspire to assess whether past policies were successful or failed and potentially propose ways to enhance the

protection of religious freedoms while effectively countering terrorism. The ultimate goal of this thesis is to contribute to a better understanding of how U.S. foreign policy has worked up until now as a counterterrorism effort and how it can be designed to support both security and human rights, mainly in the complex and volatile context of the Arab world.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

### 1. Counterterrorism: towards a standard definition

The definition of this term has been debated by many, and one with various possible variables. To reach the essence of the word, it can be broken down into its prefix and root. Firstly, the prefix “counter-”<sup>9</sup> in this context indicates opposition or resistance, as a result of its Latin root “*contra*”, meaning “against” or “opposed to”. Secondly, terrorism is an international political term whose definition hasn’t been agreed upon among scholars.

Indeed, Becker (2006) alluded to the diffused difficulties in finding a clear definition of the term within his paper alluding “toward a definition of terrorism”<sup>10</sup>, where Terrorism was defined as being characterised by its long history and variety of forms, with even the legal definitions holding no exception. In the words of Becker (2006), “*It remains popular to say that the international community has yet to agree on a legal definition of terrorism. It is more accurate to say that while there is growing consensus in what terrorism is, there is also a complex debate about what it is not.*”<sup>11</sup> It is clear then that the need to stipulate this definition emerges precisely, as said, not only for what it is but for what it is not. Additionally, while the scope of terrorism is widely discussed, the lack of an appropriate definition allows doubt to set in when it comes to the analysis of cases: lacking a definition enables a more expansive and open-minded approach to achieving justice but could, however, limit the power law could have on said occurrences that are needed.

Hoffman (2018), similarly dubious of a commonly accepted definition, compared terrorism to the Internet, where people have a vague idea of the term but still lack a more “*precise, concrete and truly explanatory definition*”.<sup>12</sup> He refers to the dictionary definition of the term as “wholly unsatisfying”, believing that rather than learning what terrorism is, one needs to find empirical and historical examples. The definition he refers to as “*slightly more helpful*” is a politically endorsed one, precisely seeing terrorism as a “reign of terror”.<sup>13</sup>

Similar to the definition of counterterrorism, understanding a term does not mean taking the word as a whole. A more accurate approach could be dissecting it, as Sandler proposed (2014)<sup>14</sup>. The author asserts that there are two critical ingredients to terrorism: violence and a social or political motive<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Vocabulary.com. (n.d.). Counterterrorism. In *Vocabulary.com Dictionary*.

<sup>10</sup> Becker, Tal. (2006) *Terrorism and the State: Rethinking the Rules of State Responsibility*. Hart Publishing, pp. 84-86.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 86.

<sup>12</sup> Hoffman, Bruce. (2018) *Inside Terrorism*. Columbia University Press. pp.1- 40.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5

<sup>14</sup> Sandler, T. (2014). Terrorism and counterterrorism: an overview. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 67(1), pp.1–20.

<sup>15</sup> Sandler, T. (2014). Terrorism and counterterrorism: an overview. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 67(1), p.1.



Additionally, according to the author, counterterrorism can be seen as the intention to lead to intimidation to reach the intended objective<sup>16</sup>. Using a defining statement as such could allow terms and scopes to be set to accommodate this challenging term and its connotations. Sandler proceeds to describe counterterrorism, simply describing it as “*corresponding to actions to ameliorate the threat and consequences of terrorism*”<sup>17</sup>. By using this definition, Sandler believes there are multiple ways to achieve counterterrorism, one of the most representative ones being the ideologies expressed by Carter<sup>18</sup>. Sandler proposes Carter’s interpretation of Counterterrorism, which is presented in two varieties: defensive and proactive measures.<sup>19</sup> Depending on the intention, the country applies the measure. Proactive measures are an offensive tactic; a government directly confronts a terrorist group or its followers. These measures may assume various forms, like infiltrating a group, destroying a terrorist’s resources or resource line, and “*gathering intelligence to foil terror plots.*” At the same time, it can be economical; proactive measures generally entail military action.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast, defensive countermeasures are more docile and allow for the protection of possible targets to reduce the possibility of the success of a terrorist plot; the reactive methods list is not exhaustive but entails measures from being screened at the airport to issuing terrorist alerts and first-responder capabilities.<sup>21</sup> Defensive counterterrorism measures are strategies and actions taken to protect against and mitigate the impact of terrorist attacks. Unlike proactive measures that aim to prevent attacks before they occur, defensive measures focus on enhancing security, resilience, and response capabilities to minimise the harm caused by terrorist incidents. They aim to strengthen security, resilience, and response capabilities to mitigate the impact of terrorist attacks and protect against future threats.<sup>22</sup>

Understanding the difference between the possible counterterrorism strategies we illustrated in the previous section helps us understand the cases that will be analysed in our thesis.

### **1.1 Evolution of Counterterrorism in U.S. Policy**

The evolution of counterterrorism in U.S. policy has been marked by vigorous shifts in response to changing political weights, emerging threats, and evolving strategies. Following the devastating attacks

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ivi*, p.12.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>19</sup> Carter, D. B. (2014). When terrorism is evidence of state success, it secures the state against territorial groups. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 67(1), 116–132

<sup>20</sup> Sandler, T. (2014). Terrorism and counterterrorism: an overview. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 67(1), pp.1–20.

<sup>21</sup> Carter, D. B. (2014). When terrorism is evidence of state success, it secures the state against territorial groups. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 67(1), 116–132

<sup>22</sup> Sandler, T. (2014). Terrorism and counterterrorism: an overview. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 67(1), pp.1–20.

of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the United States embarked on a comprehensive and aggressive campaign to combat terrorism both domestically and abroad. This period saw the implementation of the USA PATRIOT Act, "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act",<sup>23</sup> enacted in October 2001 following the attack in September at the World Trade Centre. The U.S. legal response to the attack aimed at enhancing the government's ability to prevent and respond to terrorist activities by expanding the powers of law enforcement and intelligence agencies. The Department of Homeland Security was established in 2002 as a cabinet department of the United States federal government responsible for protecting the territory of the United States from terrorist attacks and responding to natural disasters. Additionally, the U.S. began their military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq under the banner of the "War on Terror"<sup>24</sup>, a term coined to describe the global campaign launched by the United States and its allies to combat terrorism, which President George W. Bush initially created. Naming these actions as "War on Terror" was meant to encapsulate the government's commitment to aggressively confront terrorist organisations and those who support or harbour them.

Over the following years, the U.S.'s counter-terrorism approach evolved to encompass a broader range of tactics and initiatives. Game theoretic models were considered to display counterterrorism interactions between terrorists and governments<sup>25</sup>. Following the 2001 attack, the US's interest in diverse methods to invest in security and counterterrorism increased; the development of said methods was an issue due to two factors: the lack of empirical data on terrorist attacks and the nature of said attacks. However, it was noted that game-theoretic and reliability methods in counterterrorism and security helped assess strategies for how nations could allocate expenditures for terrorism deterrence and the resulting implications of their attacks<sup>26</sup>. In her excerpt on "Game-Theoretic and Reliability Methods in Counterterrorism and Security", Vicki Bier delves into the possible application of advanced mathematical and statistical techniques to address these complex challenges of counterterrorism<sup>27</sup>. She elucidates using game-theoretic models to dissect the strategic interactions between terrorist groups and security agencies. Through these models, Bier explores how adversaries make decisions within a competitive environment,

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<sup>23</sup> USA PATRIOT Act, Pub. L. No. 107-56, 115 Stat. 272 (2001).

<sup>24</sup> U.S. counterterrorism since 1945. (n.d.). World From the Council on Foreign Relations.

<sup>25</sup> Carter, D.B. (2015) When terrorism is evidence of state success: securing the state against territorial groups, *Oxford Economic Papers*, 67, pp. 116–32.

<sup>26</sup> Bier, Vicki. (2006) "Game-Theoretic and Reliability Methods in Counterterrorism and Security." *Statistical Methods in Counterterrorism*, Springer, New York, NY, pp. 23–40.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*

aiming to understand the dynamics of attack and defence strategies<sup>28</sup>. Furthermore, Bier discusses integrating reliability methods into counterterrorism strategies, focusing on assessing critical infrastructure vulnerability and resilience<sup>29</sup>. By employing probabilistic modelling and risk analysis techniques, she elucidates how these methods aid in identifying potential weaknesses in infrastructure systems and prioritising security investments to mitigate risks effectively. Bier's insights underscore the importance of leveraging mathematical and statistical methodologies to enhance counterterrorism efforts<sup>30</sup>. In her section of the book “Statistical Methods in Counterterrorism”<sup>31</sup>, Biers offers valuable perspectives on how these analytical approaches can inform strategic decision-making and bolster security measures in the face of evolving threats<sup>32</sup>.

Parallel with these kinetic efforts, a growing recognition of the need for preventative measures to address the root causes of terrorism and extremism—a need for defensive counterterrorism—emerged.<sup>33</sup>

Throughout these various phases, U.S. counterterrorism efforts have intersected with religious diplomacy, as policymakers sought to engage with religious leaders and communities in Muslim-majority countries as part of their broader counterterrorism strategies. Governments’ approaches have noted the need to discount the “complexity of religion” to diminish an “us versus them feeling”<sup>34</sup>. Yet, the impact of such efforts on the religious freedom of minorities in the Arab world's conflict zones remains a complex and often contested issue, raising questions about the effectiveness of the U.S. engagement in promoting religious tolerance and pluralism amidst the backdrop of ongoing conflicts and sectarian tensions, mostly when they first are fighting against organisation that proclaim religion as a motive.<sup>35</sup>

However, these long-term implementations had consequences that proved to be complex and multifaceted. While the initial military campaigns succeeded in dismantling terrorist safehouses and disrupting operational capabilities, they also gave rise to unintended consequences, which included protracted conflicts, sectarian tensions, and the emergence of new terrorist groups like ISIS. In

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<sup>28</sup> Bier, Vicki. (2006) “Game-Theoretic and Reliability Methods in Counterterrorism and Security.” *Statistical Methods in Counterterrorism*, Springer, New York, NY, pp. 23–40.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> Wilson, Alyson G., et al. (2006) *Statistical Methods in Counterterrorism: Game Theory, Modeling, Syndromic Surveillance, and Biometric Authentication*. Springer.

<sup>32</sup> Bier, Vicki. (2006) “Game-Theoretic and Reliability Methods in Counterterrorism and Security.” *Statistical Methods in Counterterrorism*, Springer, New York, NY, pp. 23–40.

<sup>33</sup> Carter, D. B. (2014). When terrorism is evidence of state success, it secures the state against territorial groups. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 67(1), 116–132

<sup>34</sup> Jafari, S. (2007). LOCAL RELIGIOUS PEACEMAKERS: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY. *Journal of International Affairs*, 61(1), 111–130.

<sup>35</sup> Prodromou, E. H. (2008). U.S. Foreign Policy and Global Religious Pluralism. In Oxford University Press eBooks (pp. 297–324).

subsequent years, the U.S. grappled with adapting its counterterrorism strategy to address evolving threats and changing geopolitical dynamics.

## 1.2. Counterterrorism's Interface with Religion

The interface between counterterrorism and religion is complex and multifaceted, with religion often playing a central role in motivating, legitimising, and sustaining terrorist ideologies and actions. Similarly, religion can be a powerful force for peace, reconciliation, and resilience in countering extremist narratives and promoting tolerance and understanding, allowing religious minorities to believe without fear.<sup>36</sup>

Terrorist groups, such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban, manipulate extremist interpretations of religion to justify their violent actions. Whether motivated by jihadist ideology or supremacist beliefs, the groups often use religious rhetoric and symbolism to recruit followers and legitimise their attacks are ones that utilise religion as a rationalisation. Addressing these underlying religious motivations of terrorism is therefore essential for counterterrorism efforts: to do so, diplomats or foreign policy agents need to understand the religions or have what can be categorised as “religious literacy”<sup>37</sup>. Allowing intermediaries to have a basic overview of major world religions, the different roles that religions play in societies, and the practical skills to engage with religious leaders would entail a more incentivised “safe” outreach towards these religious groups.

Agents need to be able to communicate and understand the religious population: indeed, effective counterterrorism strategies often involve engaging with religious leaders, communities, and institutions in efforts to counter violent extremism and promote alternative narratives based on peace, tolerance, and coexistence. Religious leaders and organisations can play a critical role in challenging extremist interpretations of religion, providing positive role models, and offering support to individuals vulnerable to radicalisation<sup>38</sup>. Andrew P.B. White,<sup>39</sup> the CEO of the Foundation for Reconciliation in the Middle East, exemplified the importance of what we have illustrated above. Standing as vicar in a church in Baghdad, White gained the trust and respect of the diverse religious communities throughout Iraq. The

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<sup>36</sup> Toft, M. D. (2012). Religion, terrorism, and civil wars. In Oxford University Press eBooks (pp. 127–148).

<sup>37</sup> Mandaville, P., & Silvestri, S. (2015, January 29). Integrating Religious Engagement into Diplomacy: Challenges & Opportunities. Brookings.

<sup>38</sup> Jafari, S. (2007). LOCAL RELIGIOUS PEACEMAKERS: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY. *Journal of International Affairs*, 61(1), 111–130.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*

Shia community<sup>40</sup> referred to him as the “Shia Christian”, and White was able to meet with the Iraqi religious and political leaders frequently, all to aim to reduce the violence in Iraq. According to Jafari (2007), it is essential to “[...] *engage with the religious and tribal leaders. We realise that much of the violence and insurgency has religious and tribal background; in fact, [it] is instigated by them. And so, we're working very hard to find ways to move forward on the Sunni-Shia engagement.*”<sup>41</sup>

Through White’s understanding of religion and the respect and trust earned with the community, he could analyse the critical situation and stipulate how best and most efficiently a tactic would be utilised in that context. White strongly believed reaching the victim and perpetrator regarding conflict transformation is essential. Similarly, in Afghanistan, Sakena Yacoobi, a religious peacemaker, founded the Afghan Institute of Learning, where she aimed to reach women and girls through literacy; all her lessons were based on the Quran to establish better relationships. Jafari (2007) addressed her contribution by describing how “*Yacoobi reached thousands of women and girls by using Islam's principles and traditions to transform the role of religion in their lives from restriction to empowerment.*”<sup>42</sup>

Building bridges between different religious communities and people and fostering interfaith dialogue and cooperation is critical to promoting understanding, tolerance, and mutual respect in the fight against terrorism. Interfaith initiatives can help by promoting common values and shared humanity, and they have demonstrated the ability to counter divisive narratives and foster resilience against extremist ideologies.

Upholding religious freedom and protecting the rights of individuals to practice their faith without fear of persecution or discrimination is essential for countering terrorism and promoting social cohesion. Religious freedom can raise hackles<sup>43</sup>. Thomas Farr suggests advocating for the reality that religious freedom may stir up resentment, defensiveness, or hostility among some individuals or groups due to differences<sup>44</sup>. Farr highlights the complexities and sensitivities surrounding the issue of religious freedom, particularly in diplomatic contexts where different countries and cultures may have varying perspectives on the role of religion in society. While religious freedom is a fundamental human right, its

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<sup>40</sup> Shia Islam is one of the two major branches of Islam, alongside Sunni Islam. The primary difference between Shia and Sunni Muslims lies in their beliefs regarding the rightful succession of leadership after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Shia Muslims believe that leadership should have remained within the Prophet's family. They recognize a line of twelve Imams, and believe in the concept of Imamato, which asserts that the Imams possess special spiritual and temporal authority, serving as guides for the community. Overall, the main distinction between Shia and Sunni Islam lies in their historical and theological perspectives on leadership succession, which has led to differences in religious practices.

<sup>41</sup> Jafari, S. (2007). LOCAL RELIGIOUS PEACEMAKERS: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY. *Journal of International Affairs*, 61(1), pg.120

<sup>42</sup> *Ivi*, pg.121

<sup>43</sup> Farr, Thomas F. (2012) *Religious Freedom and International Diplomacy*, Oxford Academic, p.2.

<sup>44</sup> *Ivi*, pp.2-28

promotion can sometimes be perceived as an imposition of Western values or interference in internal affairs by governments or religious authorities who may fear losing control over religious matters<sup>45</sup>. Henceforth, this elucidates the need for well-expressed policies. Discriminatory policies and practices that target religious minorities or restrict religious expression can exacerbate grievances and fuel radicalisation, undermining efforts to build inclusive societies resilient to extremism. If the West oppresses religious minorities, they are less likely to believe in the help that is posed for them towards their liberty.<sup>46</sup>

Fundamentally, the interface between counterterrorism and religion underscores the importance of addressing religious dimensions of terrorism while also leveraging the positive potential of religious actors and institutions in promoting peace and tolerance: effective counterterrorism strategies require nuanced and context-specific approaches to recognise the diverse religious landscapes and dynamics that shape extremist ideologies and behaviours. Comprehending the contextual factors at hand is imperative for alleviating the situation and mitigating any escalation, the challenges and nuances involved in promoting religious freedom on the international stage, where it can be a contentious issue that requires careful navigation and diplomacy.

### **1.3. Critiques of Counterterrorism's Impacts on Religious Freedoms**

Critiques of counterterrorism's impacts on religious freedoms generally highlight the potential for measures aimed at combating terrorism to inadvertently infringe upon fundamental rights and liberties, including the freedom of religion. The issue when it comes to the decree of counter-terroristic essence to fight sure "terrorists" is all the bias that affects it and how it leads to the potential harm of innocent religious minorities<sup>47</sup>.

Counterterrorism measures may disproportionately target individuals or communities based on their religion or ethnicity, leading to profiling and discrimination. Additionally, counterterrorism measures may restrict certain religious practices or customs under the guise of security concerns. For example,

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<sup>45</sup> Farr, Thomas F. (2012) *Religious Freedom and International Diplomacy*, Oxford Academic, p.2.

<sup>46</sup> Franc, R., & Pavlović, T. (2021). Inequality and radicalization - Systematic review of quantitative studies. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 35(4), 785–810.

<sup>47</sup> Khaitan, T., & Norton, J. (2019). The right to freedom of religion and the right against religious discrimination: Theoretical distinctions. *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 17(4), 1125–1145.

policies banning religious attire (such as hijabs<sup>48</sup> or turbans<sup>49</sup>) in public spaces, restrictions on building mosques<sup>50</sup> or religious schools, or limitations on religious gatherings and ceremonies can infringe upon individuals' rights to religious freedom and cultural expression. The importance of an individual's right to religious liberty is clearly defined under the UNDOC decree: "*States should not violate freedom of religion in the context of counter-terrorism responses.*" Drawing from the same basis, counterterrorism's impacts on religious freedoms reveal how such measures can intersect with and potentially infringe upon fundamental rights, such as the right to practice religion<sup>51</sup>. Khaitan's (2019) theoretical framework sheds light on the delicate balance between safeguarding religious freedoms and addressing security imperatives. The author argues that there is an excellent potential for counterterrorism efforts to perpetuate religious discrimination through profiling and surveillance tactics<sup>52</sup>. The author's analysis highlights the importance of distinguishing between legitimate security concerns and discriminatory practices that disproportionately target individuals or communities based on religion or belief: not allowing bias to take over the decision-making instances and allowing rationality to be the base of them is a crucial element. In counterterrorism, religious freedom must be considered; *forum internum* and *forum externum* dimensions help elude the complexity of the impediment that could arise in an individual's ability to practice their religious beliefs freely.

*Forum internum* is characterised as the 'belief' and "*allows religious traditions that invite belief without demanding faith to be included in the concept*"<sup>53</sup>. On the other hand, *forum externum* entails the practical or performative side of religion. In this sense, religious commitment is diverse worldwide and should be recognised as such.

Scholars who critique such ideologies state how restrictive policies, such as bans on religious attire or limitations on religious gatherings, can infringe upon the positive dimension of freedom of religion by inhibiting individuals' ability to express their religious beliefs in public or private settings<sup>54</sup>. Not allowing for the expression of one's belief would be to go against a *forum externum* and deny religious freedom.

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<sup>48</sup> Hijab is a headscarf worn by some Muslim women to cover their hair, neck, and sometimes parts of their face as a symbol of modesty and privacy. It is a form of religious and cultural expression practiced by many Muslim women around the world.

<sup>49</sup> A turban, also known as a *dastar*, is a headwear worn by people in various cultures worldwide, particularly associated with Sikhism and certain regions of South Asia. They often symbolise dignity, honour, spirituality, and sometimes social status.

<sup>50</sup> Mosques are Islamic places of worship where Muslims gather for prayers, community events, and religious education. They serve as centres of spiritual and social life for Muslim communities.

<sup>51</sup> Khaitan, T., & Norton, J. (2019). The right to freedom of religion and the right against religious discrimination: Theoretical distinctions. *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 17(4), 1125–1145.

<sup>52</sup> *Ivi*, pp.1136-1144

<sup>53</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 1125–1145

<sup>54</sup> Hurd, E. S. (2015). *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion*. Princeton University Press. pp. 85-110.

Policymakers must take a comprehensive approach that upholds the principles of tolerance, diversity, and respect for human rights—not only for what they understand but also for what others believe. By carefully considering the implications of counterterrorism measures on religious freedoms and religious discrimination, governments can strive to strike a balance between security imperatives and the protection of fundamental rights in multicultural societies.

## **2. Religious Diplomacy**

As defined by Khaitan & Norton (2019), “*religious freedom is best understood as protecting our interest in religious adherence (and non-adherence), understood from the committed perspective of the (non)adherent.*”<sup>55</sup> More generally, religious diplomacy can be described as using religious beliefs, leaders, and institutions to foster dialogue, understanding, and cooperation between nations or religious communities<sup>56</sup>. In this practice, religion's significant role in shaping individuals' identities, cultures, and worldviews is recognised, and it seeks to leverage this influence to promote peace, reconciliation, and mutual respect. While diplomacy tends toward the collaboration of nations, applying it towards religion would be an attempt to collaborate between beliefs<sup>57</sup>. Indeed, religious diplomacy plays a crucial role in conflict resolution efforts, involving religious leaders and institutions in peace negotiations, seeking to address the root causes of conflicts. By acknowledging the significance of religious beliefs and values in shaping individual and collective identities, diplomatic efforts can be more nuanced and effective in addressing underlying tensions<sup>58</sup>. This form of diplomacy would take various forms, such as interfaith dialogue, where representatives of different religions could come together to discuss common values, shared concerns, and ways to address global challenges. It can also involve engaging religious leaders in conflict resolution efforts, utilising their moral authority and influence to mediate disputes and promote reconciliation. First, one must understand the concept they are trying to implement such diplomacy.

### **2.1 The Concept of Religious Diplomacy in International Relations**

In international relations, religious diplomacy is a relatively new term that needs to be worked on. The most arduous task is recognising and understanding religion's role in many societies worldwide. In

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<sup>55</sup> Khaitan, T., & Norton, J. (2019). The right to freedom of religion and the right against religious discrimination: Theoretical distinctions. *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 17(4), p.1125.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas, Scott. 2010. *Diplomacy and Religion*. Wiley-Blackwell, International Studies, pp. 1097-1103.

<sup>58</sup> Khaitan, T., & Norton, J. (2019). The right to freedom of religion and the right against religious discrimination: Theoretical distinctions. *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 17(4), p.1125.



"Diplomacy and Religion,"<sup>59</sup> Scott Thomas (2010) delved deeply into this proposed interplay between religion and diplomacy, shedding light on the concept of "religious diplomacy", which we have introduced in the previous section and the significance it could have in the realm of international relations. The author postulates that religion is not merely a peripheral factor in global affairs but a potent force that shapes states' foreign policies, influences diplomatic strategies, and impacts interactions between nations, one as strong as personal ideas or political standings<sup>60</sup>. The new concept of religious diplomacy holds a central role and is defined as the deliberate engagement with religious beliefs, institutions, and actors to further diplomatic objectives.<sup>61</sup> As the world systems continue to change, what we base alliances and stakes on changes as well. Likewise, mutual understanding and respect stem from knowledge of beliefs. Also, merely linguistically speaking, when Thomas Scott refers to the new concept of "faith-based diplomacy", it allows for it to entail more respect. Indeed, "being religious" can have several meanings, and faith does not necessarily lead to religious adherents.<sup>62</sup> The author emphasises the role of religious actors as influential stakeholders in international relations, highlighting their ability to shape discourse, mobilise constituencies, and influence policy outcomes. Relating to this aspect, we will propose a series of examples in the following section of the thesis. Neglecting the possible engagement with religious actors regarding global aspects and international relations would lead to disregarding crucial dimensions and limiting the potential effects of diplomatic efforts. Throughout his discussion, Thomas Scott advocated for a nuanced understanding of the role of religion in international relations. He called for greater integration of religious perspectives into diplomatic discourse and practice, allowing for a more open-minded approach to the ever-evolving world. Embracing religious diplomacy, states and international organisations can harness and allow for a more positive aspect of religious identity and expression to foster understanding, cooperation, and peace among nations in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

## **2.2. Religious Diplomacy in Practice: Examples**

Religious diplomacy, in practice, takes various forms and has been utilised by governments, international organisations, and religious institutions to address multiple global challenges.

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<sup>59</sup> Thomas, Scott. 2010. *Diplomacy and Religion*. Wiley-Blackwell, International Studies, pp. 1097-1103.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas, Scott. 2010. *Diplomacy and Religion*. Wiley-Blackwell, International Studies, pp. 1097-1103.

<sup>62</sup> Farr, Thomas F. (2012) *Religious Freedom and International Diplomacy*, Oxford Academic, pp.1-30.

Numerous faith-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play an active role in international diplomacy, leveraging their religious affiliations to address humanitarian crises, promote development, and advocate for human rights<sup>63</sup>.

Organisations like the International Centre for Religion and Diplomacy<sup>64</sup>, a non-profit organisation based in Washington, D.C., promote peace, reconciliation, and conflict resolution through religious engagement and diplomacy. This organisation was founded in 1999 by Douglas M. Johnston, a former U.S. State Department diplomat; the ICRD operates at the intersection of religion, conflict, and diplomacy, employing a unique approach to address some of the world's most intractable conflicts. ICRD's mission is to harness the positive potential of religion to mitigate and resolve disputes, build bridges between communities, and promote sustainable peace.<sup>65</sup> The organisation collaborates with religious leaders, scholars, policymakers, and grassroots organisations to develop innovative strategies and practical initiatives for conflict transformation. Interfaith dialogue initiatives bring together practitioners from different faith traditions to promote mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation. The organisation is running programmes in many countries: Afghanistan, Iran, Kashmir, the Middle East, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and the United States<sup>66</sup>. The U.S. government is beginning to support interfaith dialogue initiatives, primarily in conflict-affected Arab countries, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and others, to foster understanding and cooperation among religious communities while working towards counterterrorism efforts.

Another example demonstrating religious diplomacy's efforts and efficiency is the United States Institute of Peace (USIP)<sup>67</sup>. It can serve as an exemplary model of religious diplomacy in practice due to its commitment to promoting peace and conflict resolution through engagement with religious communities and actors. USIP recognises religion's influential role in many conflicts worldwide and seeks to harness religious values and teachings as resources for peacebuilding efforts<sup>68</sup>. One notable project in the Middle East that exemplifies USIP's approach to religious diplomacy is the "Religion and Peacebuilding in the Middle East"<sup>69</sup> initiative. This initiative aims to facilitate dialogue and collaboration among religious leaders, scholars, and practitioners from different faith traditions in the region to address sources of

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<sup>63</sup> Thompson, L. (2015). Religion and Diplomacy. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 10(2), 197-214.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>65</sup> ICRD (2024) "ICRD - International Center for Religion & Diplomacy."

<sup>66</sup> Thompson, L. (2015). Religion and Diplomacy. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 10(2), 197-214.

<sup>67</sup> United States Institute of Peace. (n.d.). United States Institute of Peace.

<sup>68</sup> Frazer, O., and Owen, M. (2018). Religion in Conflict and Peacebuilding Guidelines. United States Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C.

<sup>69</sup> Hayward, S. (2012) Religion and peacebuilding: Reflections of Current Challenges and Future Prospects. United States Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C.

conflict and promote reconciliation. As part of this initiative, USIP has organised workshops, seminars, and conferences bringing together religious leaders and practitioners to explore common ground, identify shared values, and develop strategies for building peace<sup>70</sup>. These gatherings provide a platform for interfaith dialogue, conflict resolution training, and capacity-building among religious communities in the Middle East. Furthermore, USIP has supported research and publications on the role of religion in peacebuilding, providing insights and recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and religious leaders<sup>71</sup>. By fostering understanding and cooperation among religious communities and promoting their involvement in peace processes, USIP contributes to advancing religious diplomacy in the Middle East and beyond.

### **2.3. Efficacy and Critiques of Religious Diplomacy**

Religious diplomacy has emerged as a significant aspect of contemporary international relations, reflecting the growing recognition of the potentially influential role that religion may play in shaping world affairs. From conflict resolution and peacebuilding, humanitarian aid and development to cultural understanding and interfaith dialogue, religious diplomacy encompasses diverse initiatives to harness the power of religious beliefs and institutions to address pressing global issues.<sup>72</sup> However, while there are many positive aspects, Religious Diplomacy excelled in its intricacy and impositions. Some challenges and complexities are posed, and among those, we refer to the ones considered by author Thomas Scott: the navigation of sensitive religious issues, addressing divergent religious perspectives, and managing the potential risks of instrumentalising religion for political ends<sup>73</sup>.

While one may be at peace considering our world as just and diverse, the truth is another: being a religious person and advocating for religious diplomacy brings with itself a lot of obstacles, ones mostly posed by bias. As Durham et al. (2010) addressed, *“Because of the reality of conflicting religious claims in a pluralistic world, it has been understood that the right to freedom of religion is not unlimited. These limitations have been carefully spelt out in treaty language at the international level, and a large body*

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<sup>70</sup> Hayward, S. (2012) Religion and peacebuilding: Reflections of Current Challenges and Future Prospects. United States Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C.

<sup>71</sup> Frazer, O., and Owen, M. (2018). Religion in Conflict and Peacebuilding Guidelines. United States Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C.

<sup>72</sup> Sangalli, Samuele. (2016) Religion and Politics: Religious Liberty and Confronting New Ethical Challenges: What Is the Public Role of Faith in Today’s Globalized World? Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, pp 55-75.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas, Scott. 2010. Diplomacy and Religion. Wiley-Blackwell, International Studies, pp. 1097-1103.

*of case law analyses boundary questions*<sup>74</sup>. While being accessible to believe and have faith is a human right declared by the United Nations, it does not come liberally. There are limitations, and the challenge is understanding if these limitations are ones for righteousness or fear. Due to the bias, based on secularism and, in some stances, racism, that follows many religions, mainly in today's ever-evolving world, the reactions to this "modernity" come with extremism and fundamentalist followers ever evolving and growing<sup>75</sup>. This phenomenon leads to an "us vs you" rather than a proposed "openness to the other"<sup>76</sup>. Religious Diplomacy has opened a possible new way to unite different peoples and cultures. However, it has aided in the use of religion as an 'excuse'. Due to secularisation and discrimination, many terrorist organisations have used religion as the reason behind their actions. These groups assert their exclusion from mainstream society, claiming never to be included, and hence will make them included. This assertion could be a highlight of a paradoxical dynamic wherein marginalised groups seek recognition through acts of violence, believing that their actions will compel attention and inclusion in societal and diplomatic processes. Navigating this delicate balance is essential, as unchecked religious freedom can inadvertently fuel violence and extremism, while restrictions on religious liberties may breed feelings of repression and further exacerbate tensions<sup>77</sup>. Therefore, for there to be effective religious diplomacy, there must be a careful consideration of the complexities of religious identity and freedom while addressing the underlying grievances that contribute to extremism and violence. As will be demonstrated in the following section, it is a delicate matter that must adhere to the legislature of the country it comes from and the countries it influences.

### **3. U.S. Foreign Policy**

The history of U.S. foreign policy is extensive and complex, shaped by various factors, including geopolitical interests, economic considerations, ideological beliefs, and domestic politics. The country was founded on settlers, interventions, and colonisation; hence, there were mixed ideologies. In its early years, the United States, a nation that followed a policy of isolationism, largely avoided entanglement in European conflicts.

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<sup>74</sup> Durham Jr. W. Cole, Matthew K. Richards, and Donlu D. Thayer. 2010. "The status of and Threats to International Law on Freedom of Religion and Belief" in the future of Religious Freedom, ed. A.D. Hertzke. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 41.

<sup>75</sup> Sangalli, Samuele. (2016) Religion and Politics: Religious Liberty and Confronting New Ethical Challenges: What Is the Public Role of Faith in Today's Globalized World? Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, pp. 65-68.

<sup>76</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>77</sup> *Ivi*, p. 67.

The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 declared that the Americas were off-limits for further European colonisation, asserting regional hegemony for the U.S. while maintaining distance from European affairs<sup>78</sup>. Which, in hindsight, is an ironic view, noting their continuous interference in other countries' internal affairs. U.S. foreign policy can be marked by the tension between isolationism and interventionism within the nation, oscillating between periods of greater engagement with the world and periods of retrenchment. However, U.S. foreign policy needs to be revised; in times such as these, where relations with multiple cultures and religions are becoming ever more ordinary, the U.S. needs adaptation<sup>79</sup>.

While there are diverse stances on the implication of placing religion within diplomatic relations, the reason may be different for all. Sangalli (2016) asserts that “*particularly in the United States—the aversion to mixing religion and diplomacy arises not out of an ideological commitment to secularism but more from concerns about the need to respect the legal sense of secularism embedded in the US Constitution*”<sup>80</sup>. Thus, the aversion to mixing religion and diplomacy in the United States stems from concerns about respecting the legal sense of secularism, which can be found in the Constitution, particularly the First Amendment.

In today’s world, policymakers and diplomats must move beyond a superficial grasp of religion, particularly one that solely highlights the negative aspects of religious extremism. Instead, they need to recognise the profound influence of religion on global affairs and the complex nature of identity-driven conflicts today. To achieve this, U.S. foreign policy must acknowledge the intricate connections between communities and their religious beliefs, understanding how these are deeply entwined with historical, cultural, and political factors at the grassroots level<sup>81</sup>. It proposed incorporating religion into the State Department, establishing a specialised group of religious affairs officers integrated within regional and other bureaus<sup>82</sup>. Creating such a “religion office” could allow the leaderships of other bureaus to avoid having to take up some issues regarding religion: this could help highlight the importance religion could have in diplomacy.

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<sup>78</sup> Monroe doctrine (1823). (2022, May 10). National Archives.

<sup>79</sup> Sangalli, Samuele. (2016) Religion and Politics: Religious Liberty and Confronting New Ethical Challenges: What Is the Public Role of Faith in Today’s Globalized World? Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, pp. 50-75.

<sup>80</sup> Mandaville, P., & Silvestri, S. (2015, January 29). Integrating Religious Engagement into Diplomacy: Challenges & Opportunities. Brookings, p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> Jafari, S. (2007). LOCAL RELIGIOUS PEACEMAKERS: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY. Journal of International Affairs, 61(1), p.116.

<sup>82</sup> Mandaville, P., & Silvestri, S. (2015, January 29). Integrating Religious Engagement into Diplomacy: Challenges & Opportunities. Brookings, p. 6.

### 3.1. U.S. Foreign Policy's Historical Stance on Religious Freedom

Historically, as described in Vaughn's article, the trajectory of U.S. foreign policy towards religious freedom (data) acclaims this, analysing the early days and highlighting how various factors have influenced the history of U.S. foreign policy on religious freedom<sup>83</sup>. It is rooted in the ideals of the Founding Fathers<sup>84</sup>, who sought to escape religious persecution and establish a society where individuals could worship freely. The early years of American foreign policy can be seen as a cautious approach towards the engagement with religious issues, mostly abroad, as the 'young nation' focused primarily on establishing its sovereignty and expanding its territorial boundaries<sup>85</sup>. From its early days, the United States has grappled with the tension between promoting religious freedom as a fundamental human right and advancing its geopolitical interests on the global stage<sup>86</sup>. In his article, Vaughn highlights how this tension has often led to the "politicisation of religious freedom"<sup>87</sup>. It must be emphasised how these diverse factors affect the U.S. approach to religious freedom, leading to instances where religious considerations have been subordinated or avoided due to more 'urgent' political needs. Despite these challenges, Vaughn argues that there is potential for the United States to reclaim the moral high ground on religious freedom and depoliticise its approach to this vital human right. He suggests that by adopting a more moral and equitable stance, the United States can advance its foreign policy goals while promoting religious freedom more consistently and impartially, proposing various strategies for achieving this objective, including prioritising multilateral engagement, promoting religious pluralism and tolerance, and integrating religious freedom into broader human rights and democracy promotion efforts. By depoliticising religious freedom and treating it as a universal human right rather than a tool of geopolitical advantage, the United States can contribute to a more just and equitable world order. If it were possible to lead to this, the U.S. would not only be able to advance its internal policy with the workings of its religious minorities but also advance various international and diplomatic relations throughout the world. U.S. foreign policy has consistently emphasised the importance of religious freedom as a universal

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<sup>83</sup> Vaughn, Jasper. "Reclaiming International Religious Freedom: How the United States Can Depoliticize an Important Human Right and Advance Equitable Foreign Policy Goals." *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, *Yale Journal of International Affairs*

<sup>84</sup> The Founding Fathers were a group of prominent American leaders who played crucial roles in the American Revolution and the establishment of the United States as an independent nation. They were instrumental in drafting and signing key documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

<sup>85</sup> Vaughn, Jasper. "Reclaiming International Religious Freedom: How the United States Can Depoliticize an Important Human Right and Advance Equitable Foreign Policy Goals." *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, *Yale Journal of International Affairs*

<sup>86</sup> Weber, M. A. (2020). Congressional Research Service. *Democracy and Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Policy: Tools and Considerations for Congress*.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*.

human right and has sought to advance this principle through diplomatic, legislative, and multilateral means; one of the instruments utilised to do so will be analysed in the following paragraph.

### **3.2. Policy Instruments: The International Religious Freedom Act**

The International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) is a pivotal piece of legislation shaping US foreign policy, particularly regarding religious freedom worldwide. It was enacted in 1998, the IRFA aimed to promote and protect religious liberty as a fundamental human right. Its provisions include establishing the Commission on International Religious Freedom and the designation of "countries of particular concern" where religious freedom violations are severe.<sup>88</sup> The IRFA brought about significant changes in US foreign policy by institutionalising the prioritisation of religious freedom in diplomatic relations. It mandated the integration of religious freedom concerns into the State Department's annual human rights reports and required the President to take action against countries identified as violators. It allowed for Religious Freedom to be one of the crucial variables when considering diplomatic acts.

The IRFA has multiple functions, two extremely important to highlight<sup>89</sup>. Firstly, regarding religious freedom designations, the U.S. government designated certain countries as "Countries of Particular Concern" 90 (CPCs) or placed them on a Special Watch List based on their record of religious freedom violations. These designations serve as diplomatic tools, enabling the U.S. to exert pressure and implement sanctions to encourage improvements in religious freedom practices. Secondly, the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, where the U.S. appoints an Ambassador-at-Large 90 for International Religious Freedom within the Department of State, is tasked with leading diplomatic efforts to promote religious freedom worldwide. This ambassador plays a pivotal role in coordinating U.S. government initiatives on religious liberty and advocating for its protection on the global stage.

Although the idea of the "required need to take action" may not sit well with all states, mainly those that have deep-rooted differences with the US, the act's effects on US relations with Arab states have been complex, leading to tensions and diplomatic confrontations with some of the Arab countries accused of religious persecution. However, it has also prompted dialogue and engagement to improve conditions of religious freedom. In cases where US interests intersect with those of Arab states, such as in counterterrorism efforts, the implementation of IRFA has occasionally faced challenges. It has influenced

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<sup>88</sup> Lavery, Kirsten, and Elizabeth Cassidy. (2021) "FACTSHEET INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT (IRFA)." UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM. USCIRF, Washington, USA.

<sup>89</sup> Thames, K., & Mandaville, P. (2022). Maintaining International Religious Freedom as a Central Tenet of US National Security. US Institute of Peace. pp. 2-15.

US policy by emphasising the importance of addressing religious persecution as a root cause of extremism. By promoting religious freedom and tolerance, the act seeks to counter narratives used by extremist groups to recruit followers<sup>90</sup>. It has also provided a framework for the United States to engage with religious leaders and communities globally, fostering partnerships to promote religious tolerance and pluralism. This diplomatic outreach aims to advance stability and peace by addressing religious tensions and conflicts. Overall, the International Religious Freedom Act has become a cornerstone of US foreign policy, shaping engagements with Arab states, influencing counterterrorism strategies, and promoting religious diplomacy to advance human rights and global stability.

### **3.3. U.S. Foreign Policy in Arab World's Conflict Zones**

U.S. foreign policy in the conflict zones of the Arab world can be seen as a multifaceted endeavour shaped by an interplay of geopolitical interests, regional dynamics, and global security concerns. Due to the region's intricate conflicts, ranging from the Iraqi political and religious issue disputes to the civil wars in Syria, significant challenges and opportunities are presented for the U.S. One of the primary objectives of U.S. foreign policy in Arab conflict zones is to promote stability and security<sup>91</sup>. This often involves diplomatic efforts to broker peace agreements, support political transitions, and facilitate negotiations between conflicting parties. Additionally, the U.S. seeks to counter extremist ideologies and combat terrorism, which pose significant threats to regional and international security. Military interventions have also been a prominent feature of U.S. foreign policy in the Arab world's conflict zones. From the Gulf War in 1991 to the ongoing military operations against terrorist groups like ISIS, the U.S. has deployed its military resources to address security threats and protect its interests in the region. However, military interventions have been met with mixed results and have sometimes demonstrated possible results to tensions and instability. This is possibly due to their traditional route of utilising what can be considered “Westernised” engagement methods, like diplomatic negotiations, military interventions, and humanitarian aid<sup>92</sup>. The U.S. tends to rely on these “westernised” engagement methods as part of its foreign policy approach in addressing conflicts in the Arab world, in cases such as Afghanistan or Iraq. This approach is seen as traditional, implying that it has been consistently utilised.

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<sup>90</sup> Lavery, Kirsten, and Elizabeth Cassidy. (2021) “FACTSHEET INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT (IRFA).” UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM. USCIRF, Washington, USA.

<sup>91</sup> Middle East - U.S. foreign policy. (2017-2024). World From the Council on Foreign Relations.

<sup>92</sup> Rahman, K. (2010). US Middle East Policies and their Consequences. *Policy Perspectives*, 7(1), 33–60.



Instead, it could be noted that they should attempt to understand and engage with certain zones through their religious leaders and communities. Jafari (2007) stated as much and posed the fact that “*it is not enough for our policymakers and diplomats to act upon a peripheral understanding of religion, especially a perspective that only focuses on the negative force of religious extremism.*”<sup>93</sup> Proposing that more knowledge of the locality and its beliefs would, again, lead to building bridges, facilitating dialogue, and promoting reconciliation. Throughout his article, it can be noted that this theory was attempted in diverse places such as Northern Ireland, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and even Iraq. In Iraq, as discussed earlier, we saw how Andrew P.B. White gained the trust and respect of a smaller community, leading to the work towards finding a way to resolve or move forward with the Sunni-Shia hostility.<sup>94</sup> This respect that White earned led to more harmonious reciprocity and work and the opening of important information towards White. During this time, White was able to pass along a message to the British Special Forces, a message from “an Al-Qaeda leader who forewarned the attacks of bombings”. This allowed not only whites but also scholars and the diplomatic community toward the ability to receive and access pertinent information<sup>95</sup>. In Afghanistan, Sakena Yacoobi founded the Afghan Institute for Learning for women and girls, where she could reach them through their religion. As Jafari (2007) stresses, “*The women would say to their husbands, "You are a good Muslim, aren't you? Then look: The Quran says that husbands must be fair with their wives [...] Traditionally, men did not want their wives to learn, but now...they can see the result of the workshops, and they say, 'Islam has taught you this'.*”<sup>96</sup> Through their religion, it was easier to reach them. The wives and Yacoobi could change societal norms through their beliefs without using methods that made them feel like they were imposed. U.S. foreign policy in the conflict zones of the Arab world, particularly in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, has been a central focus of global attention and debate for decades. Each of these countries presents unique challenges and complexities, yet they share a common thread of U.S. involvement shaped by strategic interests, regional dynamics, and evolving geopolitical landscapes. It is important to highlight the need for extraordinary methods, not what one could consider "typical ones, " to try to achieve peace. However, this will not be achieved with religious diplomacy but by how it works with other effects of the diplomatic world.

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<sup>93</sup> Jafari, S. (2007). LOCAL RELIGIOUS PEACEMAKERS: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY. *Journal of International Affairs*, 61(1), p. 116

<sup>94</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ivi*, p.121.

#### 4. Interconnections and Theoretical Underpinnings

*“The reality is that religion has power. And that power can either be used creatively or destructively... I do believe that religion is indeed the major cause of much conflict in the world today. And I would say if it is a cause, it must also be the cure.”*<sup>97</sup> Andrew P.B. White (2015) used these words to address the idea that while religion may hold power, knowledge is power. Knowing diverse cultures and faiths allows one to navigate and communicate with diverse people, which is powerful. An ability to unite communities that are so diverse yet similar would be to run a world of peace and serenity. Many scholars have proposed and implied the variety of benefits that would come from diplomats and individuals who communicate on behalf of a country towards an entity of religion. In the subsequent sections, an analysis will be conducted on the variables: Counterterrorism, Religious Diplomacy, and U.S. Foreign Policy, exploring their intricate interplay and mutual influence.

##### 4.1. Interplay Between Counterterrorism, Religious Diplomacy, and U.S. Foreign Policy

The interplay between counterterrorism efforts, religious diplomacy, and U.S. foreign policy is a varied and ever-changing relationship that shapes how global security works, the functioning of diplomatic engagements, and strategic alliances within and between countries. This nexus underscores the intricate challenges inherent in addressing terrorism while simultaneously promoting religious tolerance and advancing not only U.S. interests but also effective communication and collaboration with religiously diverse nations, with a keen eye on safeguarding the rights of religious minorities. An essential initial step towards achieving this delicate balance lies in equipping diplomats with comprehensive and accurate knowledge of religious beliefs and practices<sup>98</sup>. It has been suggested that integrating courses on religion and its global implications into diplomatic training programs is imperative, as such training and religious literacy are deemed *“crucial to building an awareness of religion and the many ways it bears on foreign policy and national security objectives into the systems and curricula used for training and preparing professional diplomats.”*<sup>99</sup> This can all be linked to understanding<sup>100</sup> religions to work with them. As Thomas Farr (data) states, “Religious freedom is today a highly contested human right and is staunchly resisted by a wide variety of governments, individuals, and groups worldwide.”

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<sup>97</sup> Andrew P. B. White, (2005) discussion session, Tanenbaum Peacemakers in Action Retreat, New York.

<sup>98</sup> Farr, T. F. (2012). Religious freedom and international diplomacy. In *Oxford University Press eBooks* (pp. 331–349).

<sup>99</sup> Mandaville, P., & Silvestri, S. (2015, January 29). Integrating Religious Engagement into Diplomacy: Challenges & Opportunities. Brookings, p. 7.

<sup>100</sup> Jafari, S. (2007). LOCAL RELIGIOUS PEACEMAKERS: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY. *Journal of International Affairs*, 61(1), 111–130.

When contemplating the context of the United States' counterterrorism efforts in the Arab world's conflict zones, religious diplomacy can emerge as a strategic tool for navigating complex religious circumstances. While counterterrorism initiatives may primarily focus on addressing the security threats posed by "extremist ideologies", religious diplomacy should acknowledge the importance of engaging with diverse religious communities to mitigate the risk of further radicalisation and violence, as proposed by various scholars. Religious diplomacy may promote peace, tolerance, and mutual respect by cultivating relationships with religious leaders and their institutions and communities. However, the implementation of this religious diplomacy within counterterrorism efforts must raise necessary inquiries regarding the impact on the religious freedom of minorities in these conflict-affected regions of the Arab world. As the U.S. begins to seek and bolster alliances with governments and religious authorities in the fight against terrorism, there is the inevitable risk of inadvertently marginalising or exacerbating the persecution of religious minorities. The prioritisation of certain religious narratives or the reliance on authoritarian regimes to combat extremism may undermine efforts to protect the rights of vulnerable religious communities. Additionally, religious diplomacy must contend with the complexities of religious identity and sectarian tensions that often fuel conflicts in the Arab world, even between religious minorities<sup>101</sup>. There are a few examples that underscore the intricate interplay between religious narratives, authoritarian governance, and sectarian tensions in shaping U.S. foreign policy and diplomatic efforts in the Arab world<sup>102</sup>. An instant to illustrate this could be Iraq's Sectarian Divide; the U.S.'s invasion and subsequent occupation exacerbated sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Despite efforts to promote religious tolerance and inclusivity, the prioritisation of certain sectarian narratives by political actors has perpetuated divisions and marginalised religious minorities such as Yazidis and Christians. The complexities of spiritual identity and sectarianism continue to pose challenges to stability and reconciliation in post-conflict Iraq. Similarly, one can analyse Syria's Civil War, marked by competing religious and sectarian narratives, presents significant challenges for religious diplomacy<sup>103</sup>. The involvement of regional and international actors supporting different religious and ethnic groups has fuelled sectarian tensions and complicated efforts to negotiate a resolution. The prioritisation of certain religious narratives by external powers, coupled with the complexities of religious identity within Syria, has hindered diplomatic efforts to protect

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>102</sup> Humud, C. E. (2020) "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response." Congressional Research Service. Defense Technical Information Center, pp. 2-50

<sup>103</sup> *Ibidem*.

the rights of vulnerable religious communities and mitigate sectarian violence. Both these cases will be further explained, analysed, and examined in Chapter III of this thesis.

To address these challenges, religious diplomacy within counterterrorism efforts must adopt a nuanced and context-specific approach to prioritise the protection of religious minorities' rights. This would require engaging with a range of religious actors, including representatives of minority communities, and helping to amplify their voices and ideas in diplomatic discussions and policy-making processes. Religious diplomacy should promote initiatives that address the root causes of religious extremism, such as socio-economic inequality, political marginalisation, and religious discrimination, and not try to blame the religion itself. By embracing the principles of inclusivity, dialogue, and respect for religious pluralism, religious diplomacy can build more peaceful and resilient societies in the face of extremism and conflict.

#### **4.2. Theoretical Approaches to Religious Freedom in Conflict Zones**

In conflict zones, primarily ones reduced by wars, there are high stakes and tensions often fuelled by religious differences. If one were to address religious freedom through theoretical approaches in these scenarios, it would require nuanced ones that can balance individuals' rights with the complexities already faced due to the conflict dynamics. One approach could be Liberal Pluralism, which emphasises individual rights and freedoms as central to a just society. Liberal Pluralism argues for protecting religious freedom as a fundamental human right, advocating for state neutrality towards different religious beliefs and practices<sup>104</sup>. Galston's<sup>105</sup> liberal pluralism emphasises protecting individual rights; this entails safeguarding the freedom of religious expression and ensuring individuals can practice their faith without fear of persecution or discrimination. Galston also praises advocacy for state neutrality, particularly in conflict zones where religious affiliations may influence state policies or exacerbate divisions. Tolerance and respect for diverse religious beliefs and practices are crucial in conflict zones. By possibly incorporating Galston's reasoning of liberal pluralism into approaches to religious freedom in conflict zones, policymakers and diplomats can prioritise the protection of individual rights, advocate for state neutrality, promote tolerance and respect, enact legal protections, and facilitate dialogue and reconciliation efforts. In conflict zones, liberal pluralism would suggest promoting tolerance, respect, and equal treatment of all religious groups to mitigate tensions.

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<sup>104</sup> Azam, G. (2016). Justification of Galston's liberal pluralism. *SpringerPlus*, 5(1), pp.1-9.

<sup>105</sup> Galston, W. A. (2002). *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.3-12.

Although more ‘radical’, another approach to be considered is Secularism<sup>106</sup>. While secularism does not have an agreed-upon definition, it can be regarded as advocating for the separation of religion and state, aiming to create a neutral public sphere where individuals can freely practice their faith without state interference. However, there are opposers, Islam being one of them, stating that “Secularism is antithetical to Islam”<sup>107</sup> and could never be able to succeed in Muslim societies, ideally for their use of religion in the front of laws. Nonetheless, the issue behind those who oppose secularism is the understanding of it; many see it as ‘anti-religion’ while it is merely a separation. For it to be utilised, it would have to be understood by all cultures, but most of all, those with a religion close to their laws. In conflict zones where religious identities are often politicised, secularism can help prevent the dominance of one religious’ group over others and reduce the likelihood of religious persecution or discrimination. Lastly, a relatively young yet well-known theory is Human Security<sup>108</sup>. This theory expands the concept of security beyond the traditional military or state-centric approach to focus on the well-being and protection of individuals themselves. In conflict zones, human security advocates for safeguarding religious freedom as a crucial aspect of individual security, ensuring that people can practice their faith without fear of violence or persecution. The UN demonstrated how this theory functions in the post-conflict areas, having an “added value”. It reshapes the conventional perspective by prioritising individuals and communities, placing local dimensions at the forefront. This shift in focus enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions by enabling more nuanced assessments and inclusive planning.

Moreover, the Human Security approach recognises conflicts' complex and interconnected nature and advocates for integration strategies that directly address the root causes. It emphasises balancing national security concerns with comprehensive peacebuilding efforts that address underlying inequalities and tensions. Seeing its efficiency, it may be even more efficient and meaningful if it were to be applied sooner<sup>109</sup>. This approach prioritises the protection of religious minorities and can help promote comprehensive policies that address the underlying drivers of conflict<sup>110</sup>.

These theoretical approaches, separately or even together, may be able to inform policies and interventions aimed at promoting religious freedom in conflict zones. However, their effectiveness depends on various factors, mainly each situation's specific context and dynamics, as no two are alike.

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<sup>106</sup> Berlinerblau, J. (2021). *Secularism: The Basics* (1st ed.). Taylor & Francis, pp.1-12

<sup>107</sup> *Ivi*, p.2.

<sup>108</sup> “Human Security in Theory and Practice.” (2009, September) United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, Human Security Unit, p.27-40

<sup>109</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibidem*.

Combining elements of these approaches and adapting them to local realities is essential for effectively addressing religious freedom issues in conflict-affected areas to create a strategy that would best work for each scenario.

## **5. Summary and Direction for Empirical Inquiry**

This chapter meticulously examined the multifaceted dimensions of three pivotal variables: Counterterrorism, Religious Diplomacy, and U.S. Foreign Policy. Each variable holds its distinct significance and implications, yet their true complexity emerges when we scrutinise their interplay with one another. When confronting such intricate matters, it is imperative to contextualise them within the broader landscape. Counterterrorism efforts are not isolated endeavours but are deeply entwined with the strategies and policies of nation-states, particularly in this case, the United States, as a preeminent actor in global affairs. Likewise, religious diplomacy emerges as a critical tool in the fight against extremism, leveraging the influence of faith leaders and institutions to promote peace and tolerance. However, overlooking the intricate dynamics between these variables would mean paying more attention to a fundamental aspect of our contemporary security environment.

Religious diplomacy plays a significant role in counterterrorism as it seeks to engage religious leaders and institutions to promote peace, tolerance, and understanding among faith communities. This approach can be seen to recognise the importance of religion in shaping individuals' worldviews and motivations and thus aims to harness religious narratives for countering extremist ideologies. By fostering dialogue and cooperation between religious groups, religious diplomacy seeks to undermine the ideological appeal of terrorist organisations and promote social cohesion. US foreign policy also serves as a crucial independent variable in counterterrorism efforts. As a global superpower, the United States wields significant influence over international affairs and plays a central role in shaping global counterterrorism strategies. US foreign policy encompasses diplomatic, military, economic, and ideological dimensions, all of which impact the effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts. Military interventions, diplomatic negotiations, foreign aid programs, and ideological campaigns are all tools employed by the US government to combat terrorism and address its root causes. These variables are interconnected and often interact with each other in complex ways.

### **5.1. Research Questions and Hypotheses Leading into Methodology**

While numerous scholarly works have delved into these variables individually or in pairs, our analysis seeks to illuminate their interconnectedness comprehensively. Analysing the effect on the freedom of

religion in the Arab world, focusing on the two case studies, keeping in mind counterterrorism efforts inside U.S. foreign policy's religious diplomacy.

Moving forward, Chapter 2 will engage in an exhaustive exposition of the analytical tools to be employed, delineating the identification of independent and dependent variables pivotal for the analytical framework. Furthermore, three hypotheses regarding the potential effects of these variables on conflict zones will be scrutinised to shed light on the intricate interplay between various factors. This chapter will further provide a detailed research design. The methodology and approach we will utilise to investigate our hypotheses rigorously will be elucidated. Through a comprehensive examination of analytical tools, hypothesis analysis, research design, and longitudinal analysis, Chapter 2 will provide a robust framework for our subsequent exploration into the dynamics of conflict zones with a specific focus on the selected case studies of Syria and Iraq. A longitudinal analysis will be proposed, underscoring the significance of tracing temporal patterns and changes within these cases through the variable lenses.

## Chapter 2: Methodological Analysis

### 1. Description of Analytical Tools – Research Question and Variables

The description of analytical tools within a research framework serves as the cornerstone for understanding the investigation dynamics, guiding the exploration of intricate relationships between variables and research questions<sup>111</sup>. This section will delve into the fundamental components that make up the investigative process of this thesis: the research question and variables. By drafting research questions and identifying the variables pertinent to them, a strong foundation can be established upon which to apply analytical methodologies, ultimately aiding in insights into the topics and possible analysis.

#### 1.1 Research Question

A research question is the guiding compass for an investigation, directing a study's focus and scope of inquiry<sup>112</sup>. It encapsulates the core inquiry that the research seeks to address, providing a clear and specific query around which the investigation revolves<sup>113</sup>. A well-formulated research question is concise, relevant, and open-ended, prompting critical analysis and exploration while allowing for systematic investigation. It serves as the foundation for the research methodology, guiding the selection of data collection methods, analysis techniques, and interpretation of findings. Our research question is rooted in the literature we conducted and the knowledge gaps we located, driving the advancement of scholarly discourse and contributing to the broader understanding of the subject matter.

Understanding the intricate dynamics between U.S. religious diplomacy and counterterrorism efforts unveils a complex interplay between global politics and religious freedom. In the context of the Arab world's conflict zones, this nexus raises pressing questions about the implications for minority religious groups. Delving into this topic necessitates a critical examination of how U.S. interventions, ostensibly aimed at combating terrorism, intersect with the rights and liberties of religious minorities in these volatile regions. Thus, the research question of our thesis is the following:

*“How does U.S. religious diplomacy within counterterrorism efforts impact the religious freedom of minorities in the Arab world's conflict zones?”*

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<sup>111</sup> Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. pp 125 -136.

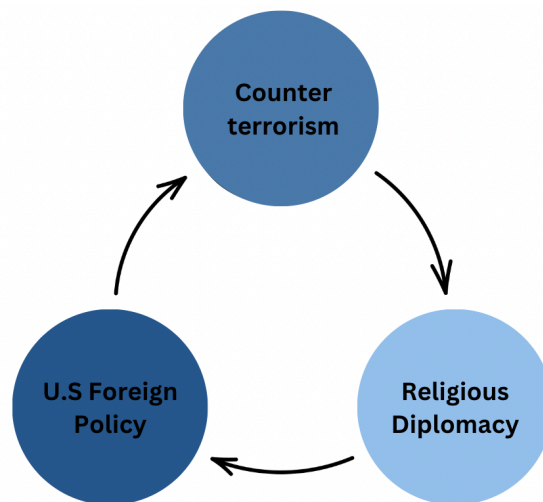
<sup>112</sup> Haynes, R. B. (2006). Forming research questions. *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology*, 59(9), 881–886.

<sup>113</sup> Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. pp 125 -136.



This exemplar is a “qualitative central question”<sup>114</sup>, where a case study is designed to explore the intricacies of a particular case, delving into the context, experiences, perspectives, and meanings associated with it. The questions will guide our qualitative investigation by focusing on understanding the complexities of the case from the viewpoint of those involved, allowing researchers to uncover rich insights and nuances within the study's context. The following section will explore and delve into the variables underpinning the research question, elucidating the key components that will be analysed to unravel the complexities of U.S. religious diplomacy and its impact on religious freedom in conflict zones.

## 1.2 Variables



A variable in research is a characteristic, attribute, or phenomenon that can vary or take on different values; it is a fundamental building block for understanding and analysing relationships within a study<sup>115</sup>. Variables can be classified into two main types: independent variables, which are factors that are manipulated or controlled by the researcher, and dependent variables, which are outcomes or responses that are observed or measured. Variables allow researchers to investigate how changes in one factor may influence another, thus uncovering patterns, associations, and causal relationships.

In examining the research question on the impact of U.S. religious diplomacy within counterterrorism efforts on the religious freedom of minorities in the Arab world's conflict zones, it's essential to define the variables at play. The independent variable represents the factor manipulated or controlled in the

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<sup>114</sup> Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, p.127.

<sup>115</sup> Buddies, S., & Buddies, S. (2023, August 17). What are Variables? Science Buddies.

study: *U.S. religious diplomacy within counterterrorism efforts*. This variable encapsulates the various diplomatic strategies, policies, and interventions implemented by the United States to address religious extremism and promote stability in conflict-ridden regions.

On the other hand, the dependent variable, which is the effect being studied or measured, pertains to the *religious freedom of minorities in conflict zones*. This variable encompasses the extent to which individuals belonging to minority religious groups can practice their faith without interference or discrimination amidst the complexities of conflict. By examining the relationship between these variables, the thesis uncovers how U.S. actions in religious diplomacy within counterterrorism efforts may be influenced by the religious freedoms of minorities in the Arab world's conflict zones.

In exploring how the two variables interact and influence each other's outcomes, it's essential to consider how the effectiveness and scope of U.S. religious diplomacy initiatives can directly impact the level of religious freedom experienced by minorities in these regions. For instance, diplomatic efforts prioritising dialogue, inclusion, and protection of minority rights may improve religious freedoms, fostering a more inclusive and tolerant society. Conversely, if diplomatic strategies neglect or undermine the rights of minority religious groups, it can exacerbate religious tensions and restrict freedom of worship, potentially leading to increased discrimination and persecution. Therefore, the success or failure of U.S. religious diplomacy within counterterrorism efforts can significantly shape the extent to which religious minorities in Arab conflict zones can exercise their rights and freedoms. Examining the interplay between these variables, we gain insights into how diplomatic actions influence religious freedoms and contribute to broader discussions on conflict resolution and human rights protection in these regions. In the following section, we propose our research hypotheses to draw attention to each variable's issues or positive aspects when working intricately with the other.

## **2. Analysis of the Hypotheses**

This section will delve into the intricate landscape where theory intersects with practical application to unravel the complexities underlying U.S. counterterrorism efforts within the Arab world. At the core of the inquiry lie three hypotheses, each offering a distinct lens through which to examine the dynamics of religious diplomacy, minority rights, and strategic security imperatives.

## 2.1 Description of the hypotheses

“*Hypothesis, putting under, the Latin equivalent being supposition.*”<sup>116</sup>

A hypothesis follows a process of decision-making and outcome expectations. When planning a course of action, individuals often encounter situations where they need to weigh different options and anticipate potential outcomes.<sup>117</sup> When considering alternatives, individuals systematically analyse each option, examining its details and ramifications, delving into the specifics of each alternative, and assessing the feasibility, risks, and possible benefits.<sup>118</sup> The methodology systematically considers hypothetical scenarios or alternatives; however, the initial conditions must be either observable or capable of being replicated in an experimental setting, while the resultant outcomes should also be observable<sup>119</sup>.

### 2.1.1 First Hypothesis

**H1: The intersection of U.S. foreign policy, counterterrorism, and religious diplomacy tends to prioritize strategic security interests over the religious freedoms of minority groups.**

The first hypothesis sheds light on potential tensions inherent in converging U.S. foreign policy objectives, counterterrorism imperatives, and religious diplomacy initiatives. It suggests prioritising strategic security interests over the protection of minority rights, prompting us to explore the implications of such prioritisation. As well as the convergence of U.S. foreign policy objectives, counterterrorism initiatives, and religious diplomacy may inadvertently prioritise security concerns over the rights and freedoms of marginalised religious groups. In exploring the interplay between U.S. foreign policy, counterterrorism strategies, and religious diplomacy, it becomes evident that these intersecting domains often face competing priorities and objectives. While the promotion of religious freedom and protection of minority rights may be espoused as core principles of U.S. foreign policy, the imperative to address security threats, particularly in regions plagued by terrorism and instability, frequently takes precedence<sup>120</sup>. Indeed, U.S. foreign policy, particularly in conflict zones within the Arab world, is heavily influenced by strategic security imperatives aimed at safeguarding national interests, combating

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<sup>116</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. (2024, March 8). Hypothesis | Definition & Examples. Encyclopedia Britannica.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>120</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). (2023).

terrorism, and maintaining regional stability<sup>121</sup>. In pursuit of these objectives, the United States may prioritise alliances with authoritarian regimes or non-state actors perceived as instrumental in counterterrorism efforts, even if they have a track record of suppressing religious freedoms and persecuting minority groups<sup>122</sup>. The imperative to disrupt terrorist networks and prevent the proliferation of extremist ideologies often eclipses concerns about religious freedom violations, leading to a de facto prioritisation of security over human rights considerations<sup>123</sup>.

Counterterrorism initiatives, while ostensibly aimed at combating violent extremism and promoting stability, can inadvertently exacerbate religious tensions and marginalise minority communities<sup>124</sup>. Military interventions, drone strikes, and security operations targeting terrorist organisations may result in collateral damage, displacement, and the erosion of social cohesion within affected populations. Moreover, counterterrorism measures often rely on intelligence-sharing and cooperation with authoritarian regimes, which may exploit counterterrorism partnerships to suppress dissent and perpetuate human rights abuses, including the persecution of religious minorities<sup>125</sup>.

Religious diplomacy, characterised by engagement with religious leaders, institutions, and narratives, offers a unique avenue to promote peace, foster interfaith dialogue, and address the root causes of conflict<sup>126</sup>. However, instrumentalising religious diplomacy to serve strategic security interests can undermine its potential to advance religious freedoms and protect minority rights. Diplomatic overtures to religious leaders may prioritise short-term geopolitical objectives, such as securing alliances or countering extremist ideologies, at the expense of addressing systemic discrimination and persecution faced by religious minorities<sup>127</sup>. In light of these dynamics, the hypothesis posits that the intersection of U.S. foreign policy, counterterrorism, and religious diplomacy prioritises strategic security interests over the religious freedoms of minority groups<sup>128</sup>. The imperative to confront security threats and advance geopolitical goals often leads to policy decisions that overlook or downplay human rights considerations, including the protection of religious minorities. As a result, religious freedoms may be marginalised or

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<sup>121</sup> Reid, Jennifer. *The Clash of Civilizations?* Samuel P. Huntington. London, England; New York, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. Print.

<sup>122</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). (2023).

<sup>123</sup> Reid, Jennifer. *The Clash of Civilizations?* Samuel P. Huntington. London, England; New York, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. Print.

<sup>124</sup> PAPE, R. A. (2003). The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism. *American Political Science Review*, 97(3), 343–361.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>126</sup> Philpott, D. (2007). Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion. *The American Political Science Review*, 101(3), 505–525.

<sup>127</sup> Philpott, D. (2007). Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion. *The American Political Science Review*, 101(3), 505–525.

<sup>128</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. (2020). *Annual Report 2020*. US Government Printing Office.

sacrificed in pursuit of broader security objectives, perpetuating cycles of violence, marginalisation, and religious persecution in conflict-affected regions<sup>129</sup>.

In the face of persistent conflicts and the limitations of traditional diplomatic approaches, there has been a growing recognition of the need for innovative, grassroots initiatives to address the root causes of violence and promote sustainable peace<sup>130</sup>. As Bauwens and Reyhler (1994) aptly point out, the failure of governmental and intergovernmental organisations to prevent conflicts has underscored the urgency of exploring alternative approaches to diplomacy. Moreover, while crucial for providing immediate relief, the proliferation of peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts has highlighted the inadequacy of reactive measures in addressing underlying grievances and preventing the escalation of violence<sup>131</sup>.

The emergence of what can be termed 'field diplomacy' represents a response to these challenges, reflecting a shift towards decentralised, community-based approaches to conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Unlike traditional diplomatic endeavours, which often operate from a top-down, state-centric perspective, field diplomacy prioritises local actors' empowerment and culturing trust-based networks within conflict-affected communities<sup>132</sup>. This approach recognises the inherent limitations of external interventions and seeks to leverage the knowledge, agency, and resilience of those directly impacted by conflict. Central to the ethos of field diplomacy is the deployment of non-governmental teams to conflict areas for extended periods, with a mandate to facilitate and support local initiatives for conflict prevention<sup>133</sup>. These teams serve as mediators, facilitators, and advocates, working closely with community members to identify early warning signs, assess needs, and explore pathways towards peace. Crucially, their effectiveness hinges on establishing rapport and credibility with local stakeholders, earning their respect and trust through genuine engagement and empathy. Field diplomacy entails various activities, from maintaining open communication channels between conflicting parties to fostering a constructive conflict culture and providing expert advice on peace proposals<sup>134</sup>. It requires a nuanced understanding of local dynamics, cultural sensitivities, power structures, and a commitment to long-term engagement and capacity-building<sup>135</sup>. While field diplomacy is still nascent, its potential to catalyse

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<sup>129</sup> Reyhler, L. (1997). RELIGION AND CONFLICT. *International Journal of Peace Studies*, 2(1), 19–38.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>132</sup> Philpott, D. (2007). Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion. *The American Political Science Review*, 101(3), 505–525.

<sup>133</sup> Reyhler, L. (1997). RELIGION AND CONFLICT. *International Journal of Peace Studies*, 2(1), 19–38.

<sup>134</sup> *Ivi*, p.7.

<sup>135</sup> *Ivi*, 19–38.

transformative change at the grassroots level holds promise for advancing sustainable peace in conflict-affected regions.

The hypothesis attempts to underscore the need to critically examine the trade-offs and unintended consequences inherent in the intersection of U.S. foreign policy, counterterrorism efforts, and religious diplomacy. By acknowledging and interrogating how strategic security imperatives shape policy priorities, stakeholders can work towards a more balanced and holistic approach that upholds national security interests and fundamental human rights, including the religious freedoms of minority groups.

### 2.1.2 Second Hypothesis

**H2: U.S. counterterrorism efforts which engage with religious diplomacy have a significant impact on the religious freedoms of minorities in conflict zones within the Arab world. With the possibility of three effects, null, positive and negative on the religious minorities whether it may be wanted or unwanted.**

To analyse the following hypothesis, it is essential to note and analyse the two parts that form it.

#### 2.1.2.1 The Impact

The first part of the hypothesis to analyse is the impact, which posits a direct correlation between U.S. counterterrorism strategies infused with religious diplomacy and the status of religious freedoms among minority populations dwelling in conflict-ridden regions of the Arab world. This hypothesis prompts scrutiny of the extent to which diplomatic engagements influence the rights and liberties of marginalised religious groups amidst the backdrop of ongoing conflict, underscoring the potential significance of diplomatic engagements in shaping the landscape of religious tolerance and freedom within conflict zones. Indeed, as argued by scholars in the field, “religious organisations can also influence conflict dynamics by abstaining from intervention. As most conflicts are 'asymmetrical,' this attitude is partial in its consequences. It implicitly reinforces the 'might is right' principle.”<sup>136</sup>

The quote highlights the pivotal role that religious organisations can play in shaping conflict dynamics through active intervention and abstention. Religious institutions and leaders hold significant moral authority and social influence in many conflict zones over their respective communities<sup>137</sup>. When these organisations choose to remain neutral or refrain from engaging in efforts to mitigate conflict, their

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<sup>136</sup> Reychler, L. (1997). RELIGION AND CONFLICT. *International Journal of Peace Studies*, 2(1), 19–38.

<sup>137</sup> Gopin, M. (2003). Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East. *Pro Ecclesia*, 12(3), 374-375.

inaction can have profound implications<sup>138</sup>. In asymmetrical conflicts, where one party possesses significantly more power, resources, or military capabilities than the other, the neutrality of religious organisations may inadvertently reinforce the perception of imbalance and injustice. By abstaining from intervention, religious institutions may inadvertently signal tacit acceptance or surrender to the status quo, thereby legitimising the dominance of one party over the other<sup>139</sup>. This implicit endorsement of the "might is right" principle undermines efforts to peacefully resolve the conflict<sup>140</sup>.

Moreover, the partial consequences of religious organisations' abstention from intervention extend beyond the immediate conflict context. By failing to uphold principles of justice, peace, and human rights, these institutions risk eroding their moral authority and credibility among their followers and the broader international community<sup>141</sup>. Furthermore, their neutrality may exacerbate divisions within their communities, as some members may perceive their leaders' inaction as betraying their moral responsibilities. A complex interplay exists between religion, conflict, and power dynamics. Religious organisations significantly influence perceptions, norms, and behaviours within conflict-affected societies. Therefore, their decisions regarding intervention or abstention carry weighty ethical and strategic implications that reverberate far beyond the immediate context of the conflict.

### **2.1.2.2 The types of impact**

The second part of the last hypothesis introduces a nuanced perspective, acknowledging the effects of U.S. counterterrorism efforts facilitated through religious diplomacy and the types of impact possible. This hypothesis recognises the variability in outcomes, ranging from the possibility of neutral effects to positive or negative consequences for religious minorities, underscoring the complexity of diplomatic interventions in conflict zones. It also acknowledges the complexity of the interaction between diplomatic interventions and the religious landscape, highlighting the multifaceted nature of their effects. In examining the intersection of U.S. counterterrorism strategies and religious diplomacy, it becomes apparent that the dynamics at play can yield a spectrum of outcomes for religious minorities in conflict zones. This hypothesis posits that these outcomes can broadly be categorised into three potential effects: null, positive, or negative, each of which influences the status and experiences of religious minority groups, albeit in varying ways. The null effect refers to situations where U.S. counterterrorism efforts,

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<sup>138</sup> Gopin, M. (2003). Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East. *Pro Ecclesia*, 12(3), 374-375.

<sup>139</sup> Jerryson, M., Juergensmeyer, M., & Kitts, M. (Eds.). (2013). *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>140</sup> Reychler, L. (1997). RELIGION AND CONFLICT. *International Journal of Peace Studies*, 2(1), p.7-9.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibidem*.

despite engaging with religious diplomacy, fail to produce discernible impacts on the religious freedoms and rights of minority communities<sup>142</sup>. This outcome may occur due to various factors, including insufficient engagement with relevant religious actors, ineffective implementation of diplomatic initiatives, or prioritising security objectives over human rights considerations. In such cases, religious minorities may experience little to no change in their socio-political status or levels of religious freedom, as the underlying drivers of conflict and persecution remain largely unaddressed<sup>143</sup>. Conversely, U.S. counterterrorism efforts can also yield positive outcomes for religious minorities through the strategic deployment of religious diplomacy. Positive effects may manifest in several ways, including increased protection of minority rights, enhanced interfaith dialogue and cooperation, and promotion of religious tolerance and pluralism within conflict-affected societies<sup>144</sup>. By engaging with religious leaders and institutions as partners in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, the United States can help foster environments conducive to the empowerment and inclusion of religious minorities, thereby mitigating the risks of violence and discrimination they face.

It is important to note that the way in which the effect occurs may not be fixed or linear. An effect can be reported as initially positive, negative, or null and may change as time progresses. There may be not only evidence of one remaining result but also of many<sup>145</sup>. These relationships may be “U”- shaped. “U”-shaped relationship can be seen in this hypothesis wherein counterterrorism efforts initially yield effects that suppress religious freedoms, followed by a subsequent resurgence, potentially even fortifying these freedoms more forcefully than before. This resurgence could be due to the diplomatic channels opened by counterterrorism efforts, leading to increased dialogue, understanding, and, ultimately, more robust protections for religious minorities. Therefore, instead of a linear progression, the relationship between counterterrorism efforts, religious freedoms, and U.S Foreign Policy follows a “U”-shaped curve, with the potential for a positive outcome after an initial null/negative impact.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the potential for U.S. counterterrorism efforts to inadvertently exacerbate vulnerabilities and challenges faced by religious minorities, resulting in adverse outcomes. Negative effects may stem from various sources, such as the stigmatisation of specific religious communities as security threats, the erosion of civil liberties and due process rights in the name of counterterrorism, or the reinforcement of sectarian divisions and grievances through misguided

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<sup>142</sup> Byman, D. L. (2006). Friends like These: Counterinsurgency and the War on Terrorism. *International Security*, 31(2), 79–115.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>144</sup> Marshall, K. (n.d.). Section I: Religious NGOs and International Development Politics. In *Religious Engagement in Development Work: A Continuing Journey*.

<sup>145</sup> Lansford, T. (2011). *9/11 and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq* (1st ed.). Bloomsbury Publishing. pp. 80-100



diplomatic interventions<sup>146</sup>. In these instances, religious minorities may find themselves further marginalised, targeted, or displaced as a consequence of counterterrorism measures that prioritise short-term security objectives over the long-term protection of their rights and freedoms<sup>147</sup>.

In the delicate balance between national security and individual rights, religious minorities often bear the brunt of counterterrorism efforts that prioritise immediate safety concerns over safeguarding their long-term freedoms. As elucidated in the OHCHR factsheet on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism, these communities frequently face heightened marginalisation, targeting, and even displacement because of such measures<sup>148</sup>.

While the imperative to ensure public safety is undeniable, the collateral consequences of hastily conceived or disproportionately applied counterterrorism policies cannot be ignored. Rather than offering comprehensive protection, these measures can exacerbate existing tensions, deepen societal divisions, and erode the fundamental rights and freedoms of religious minorities. As governments grapple with the complex task of addressing security threats without compromising human rights, adopting a holistic approach that upholds the principles of equality, non-discrimination, and respect for diversity becomes imperative<sup>149</sup>. By prioritising the long-term protection of the rights and freedoms of all individuals, including religious minorities, societies can better navigate the challenges posed by terrorism while upholding the universal values of justice and human dignity.

In the following chapter, the thesis will aim at finding a possible answer or result to the hypothesis through the analysis of the cases proposed. This thesis holds that and seeks to prove or disprove US counterterrorism efforts through religious diplomacy that have harmed the religious minorities in both Iraq and Syria. The focus extends beyond specific religious groups like Sunnis and targets any minority whose religious beliefs are not aligned with or supportive of terrorism. Essentially, it aims to examine how individuals belonging to minority religious communities who neither endorse nor engage in terrorism have been adversely affected by discriminatory practices stemming from their faith and geographical circumstances. Additionally, it will explore all potential advantages behind religious diplomacy and suggest ways in which it could be more effectively utilised in future endeavours to mitigate the negative repercussions of past actions.

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<sup>146</sup> Amnesty International. (2021, September 27). Amnesty International Report 2020/21: The state of the world's human rights – Amnesty International.

<sup>147</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2023). World Report 2023. Human Rights Watch.

<sup>148</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (n.d.). Human rights, terrorism, and counter-terrorism Fact Sheet No. 32, pp 19-29.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibidem*.

## **2.2 How were the hypotheses formed, and why are they carried out**

These three hypotheses are formulated based on an analysis of the intersection between U.S. counterterrorism efforts, religious diplomacy, and the protection of religious freedoms, particularly within conflict zones in the Arab world.

*H1* aims to propose that there is a tendency at the intersection of U.S. foreign policy, counterterrorism, and religious diplomacy to prioritise strategic security interests over the protection of religious freedoms for minority groups. This hypothesis arises from how military considerations and security imperatives often precede human rights concerns, particularly in regions marked by instability and terrorism<sup>150</sup>.

*H2* posits the concept aimed to propose that U.S. counterterrorism strategies involving religious diplomacy can significantly impact the religious freedoms of minority groups in conflict-ridden regions. This hypothesis stems from observations and readings of how diplomatic engagements, particularly those focused on religious dynamics, can influence the treatment and status of religious minorities amidst the complexities of conflict. And how a way can be paved for a more peaceful engagement in the future. Additionally, it seeks to introduce the notion that U.S. counterterrorism efforts conducted through religious diplomacy may have a range of effects on religious minorities, which could be neutral, positive, or negative. This hypothesis acknowledges diplomatic engagements' diverse and potentially unpredictable outcomes, suggesting that while they may aim for positive outcomes, they could also inadvertently exacerbate existing challenges for religious minorities. As deliberated in the initial chapter, this hypothesis underscores the necessity of employing appropriate methodologies to attain favourable results.

To prove or disprove these hypotheses, the following chapter examines two case studies, Syria and Iraq, within this framework, looking for evidence that supports or challenges these hypotheses. It will aim to analyse how U.S. counterterrorism initiatives, coupled with religious diplomacy, have influenced the religious freedoms of minority groups in these conflict zones. They explicitly investigate instances where strategic security interests appeared or intended to take precedence over protecting religious freedoms (supporting *H1*) or cases where possibly diplomatic efforts led to tangible improvements or deteriorations in the situation of religious minorities (supporting *H2*). Through a detailed case analysis, the complexities of the relationship between counterterrorism, religious diplomacy, and the rights of minority groups in conflict-affected regions can be better understood and emphasised.

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<sup>150</sup> Chesterman, Simon. (2002). *Just War or Just Peace? Humanitarian Intervention and International Law*. Oxford Academic Journal, pp.

### 3. Longitudinal Analysis

Longitudinal analysis involves examining data collected at multiple points, allowing for exploring trends, patterns, and changes over the study period<sup>151</sup>. The aim of employing longitudinal analysis in the following chapter will be to provide a comprehensive understanding of how certain phenomena or factors have developed and influenced one another over time<sup>152</sup>. Analysing data longitudinally can assess the current state of the variables under investigation and their trajectory and dynamics across different time points. A longitudinal analysis will serve as a powerful methodological tool to explore the nuanced relationship between U.S. religious diplomacy within counterterrorism efforts and the religious freedom of minorities in conflict zones within the Arab world, focusing on the cases of Syria and Iraq. The longitudinal analysis will begin by collecting relevant data spanning several years, including historical background, diplomatic actions, counterterrorism strategies, and indicators of religious freedom within Syria and Iraq. The longitudinal analysis will also allow for identifying critical turning points, policy shifts, and contextual changes that may have influenced the relationship between religious diplomacy and religious freedom in the studied conflict zones. Tracing the trajectory of U.S. interventions over time allows a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which diplomatic initiatives impact the rights and freedoms of religious minorities.

Furthermore, the longitudinal analysis will enable the researcher and the reader to assess the durability and sustainability of any observed changes in religious freedom resulting from U.S. religious diplomacy within counterterrorism efforts. Such as the International Crisis Group, CSIS, UN security and OHCHR reports; over an extended period, it can be determined whether the effects of diplomatic interventions persist or diminish over time and identify factors that contribute to their longevity or transience. These two case studies aim to emphasise the possibility of one of the abovementioned hypotheses and demonstrate how to better the interactions and existence of such. These two case studies seek to underscore the significance and impact of the variables outlined in the inaugural chapter: counterterrorism, U.S. foreign policy, and religious diplomacy, and their manifestations within the case studies. The subsequent chapter will delve into the hypotheses, examining their presence and functionality and finally will conclude.

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<sup>151</sup> ARNOLD. (2011). Longitudinal Studies. In Encyclopedia of Creativity (pp. 62–67).

<sup>152</sup> *Ibidem*.

## Chapter 3: Case Studies, Iraq and Syria

### 1. Iraq

#### 1.1 History of the Internal Issues

During Saddam Hussein's<sup>153</sup> reign, Iraq experienced an era marked by oppression, brutality, and systematic human rights abuses. As the leader of the Ba'ath Party<sup>154</sup>, Hussein centralised power within his regime, establishing a totalitarian state that brooked no dissent. From the late 1970s until 2003, his rule was characterised by a pervasive atmosphere of fear and intimidation, where any form of opposition was swiftly and ruthlessly crushed. Under Saddam's authoritarian grip, Iraqis endured widespread political repression and persecution; dissidents, intellectuals, and members of ethnic and religious minority groups faced arbitrary arrests, torture, and execution. Members of religious minority groups, such as Shia Muslims<sup>155</sup> and Assyrian Christians<sup>156</sup>, also faced persecution under Saddam's regime. Saddam, a Sunni Muslim<sup>157</sup>, viewed Shia Muslims with suspicion and suppressed their religious practices and political aspirations. Assyrian Christians, who have a long history in Iraq, also faced discrimination and harassment. There were “*tensions between Sunni Muslims and Shi'i Muslims*”<sup>158</sup>, which had and have been described as existing since the days of the first century of the Islamic era. When Iraq became a nation-state in 1920-1921, these tensions became a part of Iraqi politics. Like its predecessors in modern Iraq, Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime is based mainly on the robust Sunni Arab minority community at a cost to both the majority Shi'i Arab community and the Sunni Kurds.<sup>159</sup>

Saddam's regime employed a vast network of secret police and intelligence agencies, such as the infamous Mukhabarat<sup>160</sup>, to survey, infiltrate, and suppress dissenting voices. The regime's use of torture chambers, such as the notorious Abu Ghraib prison, became symbols of its brutal tactics to maintain control. Furthermore, Saddam's policies exacerbated existing ethnic and sectarian tensions within Iraqi society: the Ba'athist regime favoured Sunni Arabs, Saddam's ethnic group, granting them privileged

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<sup>153</sup> Saddam Hussein was an Iraqi politician and revolutionary who served as the fifth president of Iraq from 1979 to 2003 and the prime minister from 1979-1991 and 1994-2003. He was a leading member of the revolutionary Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party.

<sup>154</sup> Ba'ath Party followed an Arab nationalist ideology which promoted the creation and development of a unified Arab state through the leadership of a vanguard party over a socialist revolutionary government.

<sup>155</sup> Shia Muslims' definition derives from a term that stems from shi'atu Ali, Arabic for “partisans of Ali,” believing that Ali and his descendants are part of a divine order.

<sup>156</sup> Assyrian Christians are an indigenous ethnic group native to Mesopotamia and are almost exclusively Christian, with most adhering to the East and West Syriac liturgical rites of Christianity.

<sup>157</sup> Sunni Muslim's definition means followers of the sunna, or “way” in Arabic, of Mohammed, which are opposed to political succession based on Mohammed's bloodline.

<sup>158</sup> Baram, A. (1998). *Between Impediment and Advantage: Saddam's Iraq*. US Institute of Peace, p.1.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>160</sup> The Arabic term for intelligence, as used by an intelligence agency. In most of the Middle East, the term is colloquially used in reference to secret police agents who are believed to spy on civilians.

positions in government, the military, and other vital institutions<sup>161</sup>. Meanwhile, Kurds, Shia Arabs, and other minority groups faced systemic discrimination and marginalisation. Saddam's regime systematically targeted these groups, committing atrocities such as the Al-Anfal campaign against the Kurdish<sup>162</sup> population in the late 1980s, which included the infamous chemical attack on the town of Halabja in 1988<sup>163</sup>. However, this notorious retailing of the internal aspects of Iraq did not go unnoticed. In the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, the administration of President George W. Bush embarked on a global campaign to combat terrorism and confront perceived threats to international security<sup>164</sup>. Central to this agenda was the identification of Iraq, under Saddam Hussein's rule, as a rogue state posing an imminent danger to regional stability, the population, and the global order. The Bush administration made the case for pre-emptive military action to disarm Iraq and remove Saddam from power. The link between Saddam Hussein and the alleged possession of WMDs served as the linchpin of the justification for the invasion by the US. The belief that Saddam's regime possessed chemical, biological, and potentially nuclear weapons, coupled with concerns about his regime's ties to terrorist organisations, galvanised the international support needed for military action.

*"When Saddam refused to leave Iraq, U.S. and allied forces launched an attack on the morning of March 20<sup>th</sup>"*<sup>165</sup>. The 2003 invasion of Iraq by a coalition led by the United States marked a pivotal moment in the nation's history, reshaping its political landscape and unleashing a cascade of consequences that continue to reverberate across the region to this day. Ostensibly launched under the pretext of eliminating weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and fostering democratic change, the invasion thrust Iraq into a maelstrom of chaos, sectarian violence, and protracted conflict.

The beginning of the conflict was horrifying. The US and "British forces—which had deployed around the southern city of Basra—faced similar resistance from paramilitary and irregular fighters"<sup>166</sup>. After a strenuous fight on April 9<sup>th</sup>, both forces secured the cities.

Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit, the final major stronghold of his regime, was quickly captured with minimal resistance on April 13<sup>th</sup>. Despite sporadic fighting by isolated groups of loyalists in the following days, the U.S. president at the time, George W. Bush, declared an end to primary combat

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<sup>161</sup> Baram, A. (1998). *Between Impediment and Advantage: Saddam's Iraq*. US Institute of Peace, pp.1-17.

<sup>162</sup> The Kurdish population is an Iranic ethnic group native to the mountainous region of Kurdistan in Western Asia, which spans southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, and northern Syria.

<sup>163</sup> Israeli, O. (2023). *US Invasion of Iraq, 2003: Indirect Link of ISIS Rising*. *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 10(2), 188-201.

<sup>164</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia (2024, April 17). *Iraq War*. Encyclopedia Britannica.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibidem*.

operations on May 1<sup>st</sup>. Iraqi leaders, including Saddam Hussein, went into hiding, prompting a widespread search by U.S. forces. Saddam was eventually captured on December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2003, five months after his sons, Uday and Qusay Hussein, were killed in a confrontation with American troops. After being convicted of crimes against humanity, Saddam was executed on December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

Although this main event is not precisely what this thesis aims to highlight, everything that happened during and after to the religious minorities that had nothing to do with the Ba'ath party or Saddam Hussein, not only them since the Ba'ath party was made up of mainly Sunnis', but the whole community also received backlash and continues to receive so. The invasion of the US was seen all over the world as a “controversial war”<sup>167</sup>; there were mixed views from all over the globe, some even stating that it seemed like an “anti-Arab and anti-Islamic imperialism”, and many Middle Eastern countries and their Arab leaders condemned the presence of foreign forces in an Arab nation<sup>168</sup>.

The aftermath of this invasion witnessed the swift downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime, yet it also unravelled the fragile social fabric that had long held Iraq together. The decision to disband the Iraqi army and implement de-Ba'athification policies, ostensibly aimed at rooting out Saddam loyalists, inadvertently exacerbated existing sectarian tensions and fuelled a burgeoning insurgency against the coalition forces. Sectarian fault lines, which had been long suppressed under Saddam's iron-fisted rule, burst forth with renewed ferocity in the power vacuum<sup>169</sup> left by his ousting. Sunni and Shia militias, fuelled by grievances and competing visions for Iraq's future, plunged the country into a vortex of violence and reprisal attacks. The bombing of the revered al-Askari Mosque in Samarra in 2006 served as a grim harbinger, igniting a wave of sectarian bloodletting that engulfed the nation in its wake and being considered “the point of no return”<sup>170</sup>. Amidst the chaos, insurgent groups such as al-Qaeda in Iraq (later morphing into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS) exploited the power vacuum to seize territory, sow terror, and impose their brutal brand of extremism upon swathes of Iraqi soil.

### **1.1.1 Rise of ISIS and Counterterrorism Efforts of the US**

Various Sunni militant groups united to resist the new Iraqi government and the presence of foreign troops. These groups capitalised on widespread anger and disillusionment, portraying themselves as

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<sup>167</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia (2024, April 17). Iraq War. Encyclopedia Britannica.

<sup>168</sup> Israeli, O. (2023). US Invasion of Iraq, 2003: Indirect Link of ISIS Rising. *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 10(2), 188-201.

<sup>169</sup> Zinn, C. M. (2016). Consequences of Iraqi De-Baathification. *Cornell International Affairs Review*, 9(1), p.1.

<sup>170</sup> Wehrey, F., Kaye, D. D., Watkins, J., Martini, J., & Guffey, R. A. (2010). The Iraq War and the Future of Terrorism: Lessons Learned and New Strategic Trends. In *The Iraq Effect: The Middle East After the Iraq War*, RAND Corporation, p.14.

defenders of Sunni interests against perceived Shia domination and Western intervention<sup>171</sup>. The absence of effective governance and security forces in many areas allowed these insurgents to establish strongholds and gain popular support among disenfranchised communities.

Initially, US policymakers upheld Middle Eastern dictators as guarantors of stability, reflecting an implicit belief that Islam and democracy were incompatible. However, subsequent events revealed the complexity of this perspective, as less intervention often correlated with more excellent regional stability. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 can now be perceived as an "indirect"<sup>172</sup> catalyst for the emergence of ISIS in Iraq and later in Syria, marking a pivotal moment in the region's turbulent history. "After the end of World War II, US foreign policy aimed to democratise major countries around the world,"<sup>173</sup>, a paradigm that shaped subsequent interventions, including the invasion of Iraq. This intervention, led by figures like Paul L. Bremer, sought to establish democratic governance in Iraq through initiatives such as the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), an interim government structure<sup>174</sup>. "The CPA had three main goals that Ambassador Bremer wished to accomplish before initiating the ultimate goal of handing the Iraqi government back to the Iraqi people."<sup>175</sup> These objectives encompassed enhancing national security, rebuilding infrastructure, and fostering representative governance. However, driven by an American-centric perspective, these objectives ultimately failed to yield the intended outcomes. Instead, they arguably exacerbated the situation, leaving Iraq in a more precarious state than before the intervention.

The emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) cannot be attributed solely to the religious ideology of Islam. While Islam undoubtedly played a role, it is insufficient to explain this significant event's complexity fully. Mainly after seeing the U.S.'s motivation and method through which they aimed to stabilise a country outside their own. The removal of governmental leaders through the De-Baathification order significantly impacted Iraq's administrative landscape. Many high-ranking officials, who had long been entrenched in Iraq's ministries, were ousted from their positions. This abrupt disruption left a void in civil administration, jurisprudence, and governance, which had already been severely distorted by decades of tyranny under Saddam Hussein's regime<sup>176</sup>. Elections and the rule of law, touted as symbols of

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<sup>171</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia (2024, April 17). Iraq War. Encyclopedia Britannica

<sup>172</sup> Israeli, O. (2023). US Invasion of Iraq, 2003: Indirect Link of ISIS Rising. Contemporary Review of the Middle East, 10(2), p.190.

<sup>173</sup> Ivi, p.189.

<sup>174</sup> Zinn, C. M. (2016). Consequences of Iraqi De-Baathification. Cornell International Affairs Review, 9(1), pp.82-85.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>176</sup> Israeli, O. (2023). US Invasion of Iraq, 2003: Indirect Link of ISIS Rising. Contemporary Review of the Middle East, 10(2), pp.189-195.

democracy, were mere facades in a system rife with corruption and oppression. Paul L. Bremer,<sup>177</sup> who had been tasked with spearheading Iraq's transition to democracy, faced monumental challenges, mainly on the side of religious peoples. As conditions in Iraq continued to deteriorate, the power vacuum created by the CPA's interventions expanded rapidly<sup>178</sup>. Alienated former Baathist members, stripped of their positions and livelihoods, found common cause with emerging terrorist networks. These alliances grew more robust over time, culminating in the rise of ISIS.

In 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq, rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and launched a ruthless campaign to seize territory in both countries. Exploiting sectarian divisions, grievances, and the breakdown of state authority, ISIS swiftly captured large swathes of territory, including major cities like Mosul, and declared the establishment of a self-styled "caliphate"<sup>179</sup>. The rise of ISIS can be seen as a direct consequence of the power vacuum and instability that followed Saddam Hussein's downfall and the U.S.-led invasion<sup>180</sup>. By exploiting sectarian tensions, governance failures, and grievances among Sunni communities, ISIS was able to assert its control and unleash a reign of terror that would have devastating consequences for Iraq, Syria, and the broader region<sup>181</sup>.

## 1.2 Impact on religious minorities

Something that must be understood is that ISIS is not a nationalist party; they do not believe in the nation or wish for it to continue. They are radicals, led by religious thought. It's crucial to acknowledge that ISIS operates on a fundamentally religious basis, as stated in a speech by former US President Barack Obama, "ISIL was neither "Islamic" (on the basis that no religion condones the killing of innocents) nor was it a "state" (in that no government recognises the group as a state)"<sup>182</sup>. Instead, it is driven by radical interpretations of religious ideology, which are pivotal in shaping its actions and objectives. This religious fervour has significant ramifications for religious minorities in Iraq, as ISIS's extremist agenda and response to the US counterterrorism efforts often target individuals and communities perceived as deviating from its narrow interpretation of Islam. The motives behind terrorist attacks, including those

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<sup>177</sup> Zinn, C. M. (2016). Consequences of Iraqi De-Baathification. *Cornell International Affairs Review*, 9(1), pp.82-85.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>179</sup> Israeli, O. (2023). US Invasion of Iraq, 2003: Indirect Link of ISIS Rising. *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 10(2), pp. 188-201.

<sup>180</sup> Zinn, C. M. (2016). Consequences of Iraqi De-Baathification. *Cornell International Affairs Review*, 9(1), p.96.

<sup>181</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia (2024, April 17). Iraq War. *Encyclopedia Britannica*

<sup>182</sup> Hamming, T. (2016). Is the Islamic State Islamic or Not? The discursive Struggle to Define the Islamic State. *St Antony's International Review*, 12(1), 38–52.



perpetrated by ISIS, are multifaceted and might be something that we, as a world unit, will never be able to discern<sup>183</sup>. While some attacks may stem from grudges against US cultural influences or economic and political presences overseas<sup>184</sup>, others are deeply rooted in religious extremism and the desire to establish a theocratic caliphate<sup>185</sup>. In response to the threat posed by groups like ISIS, the US promoted specific foreign policies that have been characterised by efforts to combat terrorism and promote stability in the region<sup>186</sup>. However, implementing national security measures to pursue these objectives has sometimes resulted in unintended consequences, including violations of fundamental human rights. The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, has highlighted how counterterrorism measures have led to numerous abuses, particularly about the right to freedom of religion or belief. “Terrorism and violent extremism pose direct threats to the enjoyment of human rights, and States must protect all individuals [...] States must also uphold human rights obligations while pursuing these measures if they are to make sustainable inroads in challenging the narratives of violent extremists and if they are to prevent these atrocities effectively.<sup>187</sup>” Shaheed emphasises that while states protect individuals from terrorism and violent extremism, they must also uphold human rights obligations in the process of all possible parties involved. Failure to do so not only undermines the credibility of counterterrorism efforts but also risks perpetuating cycles of violence and extremism. Upholding human rights is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity in effectively challenging the narratives of violent extremists and fostering sustainable peace and stability, mainly when it concerns minorities who are unable to fight for themselves<sup>188</sup>. Hassan Ali's (2022)<sup>189</sup> clearly described the plight faced by ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq, particularly in these disputed territories. An aspect to highlight is the role of sectarian tensions and identity politics in fuelling violence and displacement, one for the sake of the analysis can be attributed to the US efforts<sup>190</sup>. In his words, “According to the Pentagon's Defense Science Board, a strong correlation exists between U.S. involvement in international situations and an

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<sup>183</sup> Eland, I. (1998). DOES U.S. INTERVENTION OVERSEAS BREED TERRORISM?: The Historical Record. Cato Institute, p.5.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>185</sup> the political-religious state comprising the Muslim community and the lands and peoples under its dominion in the centuries following the death (632 ce) of the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>186</sup> Zinn, C. M. (2016). Consequences of Iraqi De-Baathification. *Cornell International Affairs Review*, 9(1), pp.80-98.

<sup>187</sup> OHCHR. (2018). *Fight against terrorism no excuse to ignore freedom of religion or belief, says UN rights expert*.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>189</sup> Ali, M. H. (2022). The Forced Displacement of Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Disputed Areas in Iraq: A Case Study of the Post-2014 Yazidi Minority. *AlMuntaqa*, 5(1), 76–89.

<sup>190</sup> Ali, M. H. (2022). The Forced Displacement of Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Disputed Areas in Iraq: A Case Study of the Post-2014 Yazidi Minority. *AlMuntaqa*, 5(1), 76–8.

increase in terrorist attacks” was noted in a report on the intervention of the US overseas<sup>191</sup>. In Iraq, where ethnic and religious identities are deeply intertwined with political allegiances and territorial claims, minorities often find themselves caught in the crossfire of broader geopolitical struggles. This volatile environment not only subjects them to targeted attacks by extremist groups like ISIS but also exposes them to discrimination and marginalisation by state actors and rival ethnic or religious communities; this also leads to internal disputes and issues to add to the stress of being in a war zone.

### The Disputed Areas

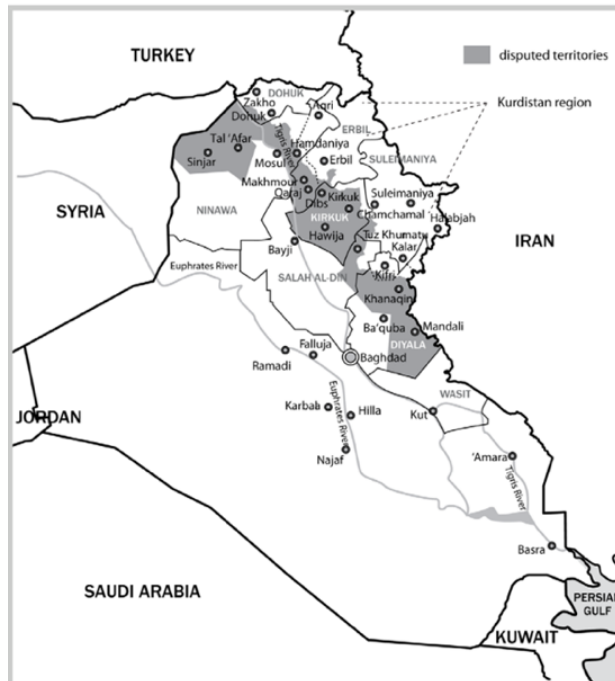


Figure 1: International Crisis Group (2009).

Moreover, Ali's paper underscores the complicity of state institutions and security forces in perpetuating the displacement of minorities; indeed, "The nature of the conflict in Iraq has imposed itself on the political landscape; non-Muslim religious minorities have become victims of the ongoing conflict due to increased religious and sectarian militancy."<sup>192</sup>

In some cases, governmental policies and military operations have directly contributed to the forced expulsion of minority populations from their ancestral lands. This illustrates the complex interplay between state power, sectarian dynamics, and the erosion of minority rights in Iraq. This can be connected and analysed through the idea that US foreign policy aims merely at placing the concept of

<sup>191</sup> Eland, I. (1998). DOES U.S. INTERVENTION OVERSEAS BREED TERRORISM?: The Historical Record. Cato Institute, pp.1-24.

<sup>192</sup> Ali, M. H. (2022). The Forced Displacement of Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Disputed Areas in Iraq: A Case Study of the Post-2014 Yazidi Minority. *AlMuntaqa*, 5(1), 76–89.

democratisation onto anyone<sup>193</sup>, not considering the effects it could have, and without attempting to utilise tools such as religious diplomacy. The democratisation imposed by the US, through tools like the CPA, had consequences that exacerbated the stability in Iraq. Instead of fostering sustainable governance and stability, the abrupt removal of existing power structures led to the collapse of state institutions, leaving Iraq in a state of political chaos. This power vacuum<sup>194</sup> created fertile ground for extremist groups like ISIS to thrive, exploiting sectarian divisions and exploiting grievances to bolster their ranks. The ensuing rise of ISIS unleashed a wave of persecution against religious minorities, which plunged Iraq into what we can only describe as a humanitarian crisis. The resulting forced displacement is not merely a consequence of random violence or isolated incidents; instead, it is symptomatic of deeper structural issues related to governance, territorial control, and the failure to protect minority rights<sup>195</sup>. The mechanisms through which displacement occurs, such as land seizures, property destruction, and intimidation tactics<sup>196</sup>, when connected to the impact of US foreign policy and counterterrorism efforts in Iraq, highlight that the displacement of minorities is not a peripheral issue but rather a central consequence of the region's complex dynamics<sup>197</sup>. Clearly, “terrorism is a social virus that gnaws at a society's social fabric and human dignity. If religion is seriously a celebration of life over death, then religious leaders dare not allow their ideology to be co-opted into ideological excuses for the creation of violence”<sup>198</sup>. Tarlow's (2017) characterisation of terrorism resonates deeply with the pervasive impact it has on societies and human dignity. His call for religious leaders emphasises faith's critical role in promoting peace and harmony. However, his questioning of whether terrorism arises from religion, or the imposition of Western ideologies challenges conventional narratives. It prompts the reflection on the complexities of extremism that we can see are also posed when looking through the conventions used throughout US foreign policies, helping to understand and know that it may not stem solely from religious doctrine but also from the clash of cultural values and the imposition of foreign ideals on societies with different lifestyles. The broader context of sectarian strife and political instability facilitates the targeting of religious and ethnic minorities by extremist groups like ISIS. At the same time, counterterrorism

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<sup>193</sup> Zinn, C. M. (2016). Consequences of Iraqi De-Baathification. *Cornell International Affairs Review*, 9(1), pp.82-85.

<sup>194</sup> *Ivi*, p.1.

<sup>195</sup> Ali, M. H. (2022). The Forced Displacement of Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Disputed Areas in Iraq: A Case Study of the Post-2014 Yazidi Minority. *AlMuntaqa*, 5(1), 76–89.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>198</sup> Tarlow, P. (2017). The interaction of religion and terrorism. *International Journal of Safety and Security in Tourism/Hospitality*, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas, pp.1-23.

measures and military interventions have sometimes exacerbated the vulnerability of these communities and can be seen in more than just the case of Iraq.

## 2. Syria

### 2.1 History of the Internal Issues

Between 2006 and 2010, Syria endured one of the most severe droughts in contemporary history; the confluence of this drought and the existing economic inequalities exacerbated under the Assad administration set the stage for the initial nonviolent pro-reform demonstrations in 2011, echoing the enthusiasm of the Arab Spring movements<sup>199</sup>. Additionally, the societal gap between the Sunni majority and the entrenched 'Alawite ruling class played a significant role. In the boisterous wake of the Arab Spring<sup>200</sup>, Syria emerged as a crucible of dissent against decades of authoritarian rule under President Bashar al-Assad. Inspired by the successes of popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere, Syrians from all walks of life took to the streets in March 2011, demanding an end to government corruption, greater political freedoms, and socioeconomic reforms.<sup>201</sup> What began as peaceful demonstrations soon escalated into a full-blown uprising as Syria's government faced an unprecedented challenge to its authority when pro-democracy protests erupted throughout the country. In January, before the beginning of the uprisings, The Wall Street Journal had interviewed Assad and asked about the protest. "The onset of antiregime protests, coming just a few weeks after the interview, made it clear that Assad's situation had been much more precarious than he was willing to admit."<sup>202</sup>

From the outset, the uprising against Assad's regime took on a sectarian hue, with the country's Sunni majority leading the charge against the entrenched rule of the Alawite Assad family. The stark divide between the ruling minority and the protesting majority underscored the deep-seated tensions that had long simmered beneath the surface of Syrian society. And as the conflict escalated, sectarian fault lines hardened, exacerbated by Assad's efforts to portray the opposition as Sunni extremists and foreign-backed conspirators<sup>203</sup>. As the conflict progressed, the Sectarian divisions were ever more apparent, and Assad aimed at using public statements to portray "the opposition as Sunni Islamic extremists in the mould of al-Qaeda and as participants in foreign conspiracies against Syria. The regime also produced propaganda stoking minorities' fears that the predominately Sunni opposition would carry out violent

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<sup>199</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2024, April 8). *Syrian Civil War | Facts & timeline*. Encyclopedia Britannica.

<sup>200</sup> The Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests, uprisings and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Arab world in the early 2010s.

<sup>201</sup> Yassin-Kassab, R., Al-Shami, L. (2018). *Burning Country* (2nd ed.). Pluto Press, pp-10-25.

<sup>202</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2024, April 8). *Syrian Civil War | Facts & timeline*. Encyclopedia Britannica.

<sup>203</sup> Yassin-Kassab, R., &#38; Al-Shami, L. (2018). *Burning Country* (2nd ed.). Pluto Press, pp-15-25.

reprisals against non-Sunni communities.”<sup>204</sup> The United States initially supported the opposition to Assad's regime diplomatically and economically, condemning the government's violent crackdown on protesters and providing humanitarian aid to rebel-held areas<sup>205</sup>. The U.S. refrained from direct military intervention against the Assad regime; it provided covert support to select rebel factions, including training and arms supplies, “under Obama, the CIA began funnelling an estimated \$1 billion worth of arms annually to anti-Assad forces”<sup>206</sup> in a bid to bolster the opposition's capabilities. This assistance, intended to tip the balance of power in favour of the opposition, underscored Washington's strategic interest in fostering a transition to a more democratic and inclusive government in Syria. In the UN Security Council, whenever there was a Resolution cast, it would be vetoed by “Syria’s long-standing allies Iran and Russia continued their support. An early indicator of the international divisions and rivalries that would prolong the conflict.”<sup>207</sup>

As the Syrian conflict evolved, the United States underwent a strategic reassessment, shifting its focus away from supporting regime change to prioritising the defeat of ISIS. Recognising the threat posed by jihadist groups operating in Syria, notably the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the U.S. initiated airstrikes against ISIS targets as part of a broader campaign to defeat the terrorist organisation. Leading a coalition of Western and regional allies, these airstrikes aimed to degrade ISIS's capabilities and dismantle its infrastructure within Syrian territory. This recalibration reflected the recognition of the complex realities on the ground and the limited prospects for a swift overthrow of the Assad regime by moderate opposition forces. “By 2014, however, Washington's focus was instead on eliminating a resurgent Islamic State, which had joined the fight against Assad but by then was carrying out attacks on the U.S. and other Western nations. Within a year, the U.S. had boots in Syria.”<sup>208</sup> This strategic realignment underscored the pragmatic imperatives guiding U.S. policy in Syria, as Washington sought to balance its counterterrorism objectives with broader regional stability concerns and the humanitarian imperative to address the plight of the Syrian people. However, here it is again: whether the intervention on the side of the US was beneficial or led to a worsening state. As if repeating itself, once again, the US intervention was not seen positively; the Kremlin, which is to be considered an ally of Syria, declared the attack on behalf of the US “outrageous”<sup>209</sup>.

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<sup>204</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>205</sup> Pradhan, R., & Sing, A. (2024). Humanitarian Intervention in Syria: A Critical Analysis. *International Studies*, 61(1), 73-91.

<sup>206</sup> Sherlock, R. (2021, March 15). Syria’s civil war started a decade ago. Here’s where it stands. NPR.

<sup>207</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2024, April 8). *Syrian Civil War | Facts & timeline*. Encyclopaedia Britannica.

<sup>208</sup> Sherlock, R. (2021, March 15). Syria’s civil war started a decade ago. Here’s where it stands. NPR.

<sup>209</sup> Sherlock, R. (2021, March 15). Syria’s civil war started a decade ago. Here’s where it stands. NPR.

### 2.1.1 Rise of ISIS and Counterterrorism efforts of the US

The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Syria can be seen in the civil war, which marked a significant turning point in both the conflict and U.S. foreign policy. Initially, the U.S. aimed to support opposition groups seeking to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad's regime, as was discussed earlier<sup>210</sup>. However, as ISIS began to seize large territories in Syria and Iraq, demonstrating brutal and extremist behaviour, the focus of U.S. policy shifted significantly<sup>211</sup>. The birth of ISIS could be seen and attributed to the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), following an offshoot in Iraq led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Following Zarqawi's death in 2006, AQI was weakened but not eliminated<sup>212</sup>. The U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and the subsequent sectarian policies of the Iraqi government under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki created a fertile ground for extremist groups<sup>213</sup>. Disenfranchised Sunni communities, marginalised by the Shiite-dominated government, were particularly susceptible to ISIS's radical ideology<sup>214</sup>. Consecutively, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 can be seen as providing ISIS with an unprecedented opportunity to expand its influence in territory<sup>215</sup>. The conflict, characterised by a brutal crackdown by President Bashar al-Assad's regime and a fragmented opposition, created chaos and a power vacuum, much like the one in Iraq, in large parts of Syria<sup>216</sup>. This led to ISIS, under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, capitalising on this chaos, moving fighters and resources into Syria to establish a foothold. By 2014, ISIS had proclaimed a caliphate, capturing key cities like Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq<sup>217</sup>. The group's rapid expansion and extreme violence, including public executions and mass atrocities, drew international attention and heightened concerns about regional and global security<sup>218</sup>. ISIS's ideology, a radical interpretation of Sunni Islam, combined with its sophisticated use of social media for propaganda, attracted thousands of foreign fighters from across the globe. The group exploited grievances among marginalised Sunni populations, presenting itself as a defender of Sunni Islam against perceived oppression by Shiites, Western powers, and secular Arab regimes. Its brutal tactics, including public executions, slavery, and systematic persecution of religious minorities, were intended to instil fear and consolidate control over its territories<sup>219</sup>.

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<sup>210</sup> Humud, C. E. (2022, November 8). *Armed conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. response*. Congressional Research Service.

<sup>211</sup> Glenn, C. (2016, April 27). *Timeline: US policy on ISIS*. Wilson Center.

<sup>212</sup> Humud, C. E. (2022, November 8). *Armed conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. response*. Congressional Research Service.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>214</sup> Yassin-Kassab, R., & Al-Shami, L. (2018). *Burning Country* (2nd ed.). Pluto Press, pp-11-45.

<sup>215</sup> Jones, S. G. (2022). *America's Counterterrorism Gamble*. CSIS: Center for Strategic & International Studies.

<sup>216</sup> Humud, C. E. (2022, November 8). *Armed conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. response*. Congressional Research Service.

<sup>217</sup> Glenn, C. (2016, April 27). *Timeline: US policy on ISIS*. Wilson Center.

<sup>218</sup> Jones, S. G. (2022). *America's Counterterrorism Gamble*. CSIS: Center for Strategic & International Studies.

<sup>219</sup> Blanchard, C. M. (2024, January 8). *Syria and U.S. policy*. Congressional Research Service in Focus.

This alarming growth of ISIS is what eventually led the US to change its priorities. This radicalisation on both sides is the ‘vacuum’ where religious minorities were lost and, unfortunately, most affected.

## 2.2 Impact on the Religious Minorities

The fight against ISIS was an international one and one that dismantled Syria. The efforts against ISIS began with the US military aiming against jihadists “as well as the civilians unlucky enough to be in the way.”<sup>220</sup> However, in Syria’s case, the displacement and dismantling of the country cannot be merely attributed to US foreign policy but to Russia and the international community as well. It is essential to analyse the Russian effect on minorities and Syria, for we can see how Westernization as a whole affects countries with different beliefs. In late 2015, Russia launched a significant intervention in Syria, primarily targeting communities that opposed both ISIS and Assad rather than ISIS itself. Before this, Assad had lost substantial territory, and rebels were advancing. Russia’s bombing campaign, “certainly with CIA permission”<sup>221</sup>, which began on September 30, 2015, using Saudi-supplied TOW missiles, resulted in numerous civilian casualties and extensive destruction of infrastructure, including schools and hospitals.<sup>222</sup> The use of banned weapons like cluster munitions and incendiary substances exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, leading to mass displacement, all of which was not aided. All these interventions on behalf of the international community led to at least half of the Syrian population being “displaced from their homes.”<sup>223</sup> And this was not well seen; it was considered that “most obviously Russia and Iran, but also the United States, Turkey and others, threw their enormous weight against Syrian democracy, sovereignty and peace”<sup>224</sup>, primarily due to the lack of humanitarian aid that was given to the people and these religious minorities. Initially, some religious minorities in Syria, particularly Christians and Yazidis, perceived the U.S. and international intervention as a source of protection against persecution by extremist groups like ISIS<sup>225</sup>. The U.S.-led coalition's efforts to combat ISIS and support local forces, including Kurdish-led groups, have helped prevent the further persecution and displacement of these minority communities<sup>226</sup>. However, U.S. and Russian airstrikes and military operations targeting ISIS have also resulted in civilian casualties, including among religious minority populations. In some cases, airstrikes have inadvertently caused harm to civilian infrastructure, including churches and other

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<sup>220</sup> Yassin-Kassab, R., Al-Shami, L. (2018). *Burning Country* (2nd ed.). Pluto Press, p. 223

<sup>221</sup> *Ivi*, p. 224

<sup>222</sup> *Ivi*, pp.220-245

<sup>223</sup> *Ivi*, p.222.

<sup>224</sup> *Ivi*, p.223

<sup>225</sup> Darke, D. (2021, April 12). Is Bashar al-Assad really the guardian angel of Syria’s minorities? Middle East Institute.

<sup>226</sup> Calabrese, J. (2012, December 21). The regional implications of the Syria crisis. Middle East Institute.

religious sites, leading to resentment and anger among affected communities. Some religious minorities, particularly those who have remained neutral or aligned with the Assad regime, have expressed concerns about the broader destabilising effects of U.S. intervention<sup>227</sup>. They fear that regime change, or prolonged conflict could further exacerbate sectarian tensions and result in increased violence against minority groups<sup>228</sup>. These fears are not unfounded, as historical instances of sectarian violence, such as the Damascus massacre in 1860, have shown how economic and social inequalities can erupt into sectarian conflict, exacerbated by foreign intervention.

It's essential to note that the effects of U.S. intervention on religious minorities in Syria are not uniform. Different minority groups have varied experiences and perspectives based on their interactions with local actors, their relationship with the Assad regime, and their geographical location within the country. But it can be noted that all Syrians, both Christians and Muslims, were and are “the victims of a tyrannical regime on the one side and radical Islamist terrorists such as ISIS and al-Qaeda”<sup>229</sup> and of violence from those that supposedly want to save them.

### **3. Comparative and Longitudinal Analysis of the Two Case Studies**

#### **3.1 Rise of ISIS Similarities and Differences**

When looking at the cases of Syria and Iraq and the birth of ISIS in their lands, we can highlight quite a few similarities<sup>230</sup>. Initially, the roots that allowed the settlement of the terroristic organisation were the same; both countries experienced political instability and power vacuums.

Both Iraq and Syria experienced significant political instability and power vacuums that facilitated the rise of ISIS. In Iraq, the 2003<sup>231</sup> U.S.-led invasion and the subsequent fall of Saddam Hussein's regime led to a fragmented and weakened state. Similarly, in Syria, the civil war that began in 2011 significantly destabilised the country, creating an environment ripe for extremist groups<sup>232</sup>. Following this sectarian divide, which was deep-seated, played a crucial role in the internal conflicts of both countries<sup>233</sup>. In Iraq, the Sunni-Shia divide was exacerbated post-2003, with Sunni disenfranchisement contributing to the rise

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<sup>227</sup> Darke, D. (2021, April 12). Is Bashar al-Assad really the guardian angel of Syria's minorities? Middle East Institute.

<sup>228</sup> Calabrese, J. (2012, December 21). The regional implications of the Syria crisis. Middle East Institute.

<sup>229</sup> Yamin, B., Moubayed, S., Barq, M., & Stifo, G. (2017, May 11). Don't be fooled: Assad is no friend of Syria's Christian minorities. *The Hill*.

<sup>230</sup> Cordesman, A. H., & Toukan, A. (2019). The return of ISIS in Iraq, Syria, and the Middle East. Center for Strategic & International Studies.

<sup>231</sup> Glenn, C., Rowan, M., Caves, J., & Nada, G. (2019, October 28). Timeline: The rise, spread, and fall of the Islamic State. Wilson Center

<sup>232</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>233</sup> College of Liberal Arts Holocaust and Genocide Studies. (2024). Mass violence and genocide by the Islamic State/Daesh in Iraq and Syria. University of Minnesota.



of ISIS<sup>234</sup>. In Syria, the predominantly Sunni opposition fought against the Alawite-dominated Assad regime, providing a fertile ground for ISIS to gain support among disaffected Sunnis<sup>235</sup>. Another predominant similarity, which will be more profound in the following subparagraph, was the foreign involvement<sup>236</sup>. Both of these conflicts saw significant foreign involvement, which could have influenced the rise and operations of ISIS. In Iraq, U.S. military presence and later coalition forces aimed to combat ISIS. In Syria, various international actors, including Russia and the United States, were involved, either supporting the Assad regime or opposition forces, complicating the conflict and indirectly affecting ISIS's rise and territorial control<sup>237</sup>. Another critical similarity resides in the humanitarian impact and refugee crisis created by this conflict and the interventions. Millions of Syrians were displaced internally and externally, with a considerable number seeking asylum in Europe and neighbouring countries<sup>238</sup>. Iraq also experienced substantial displacement, but the scale and international impact were less pronounced compared to Syria. The initial roots of the conflicts were very similar, as were their subsequent developments<sup>239</sup>. ISIS's territorial ambitions capitalised on the porous borders between Iraq and Syria to establish a self-declared caliphate. The group's control of large swathes of territory in both countries facilitated its operations and allowed it to exploit resources and populations across a contiguous area. While there may be a similarity between the beginnings of the two conflicts, the origins to which the two pertain are distinct. Iraq's instability stemmed primarily from the U.S.-led invasion and the toppling of Saddam Hussein, leading to a power struggle and sectarian violence. In contrast, Syria's conflict began with a popular uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's regime, which quickly escalated into a full-scale civil war with multiple factions. So, while they were both internal conflicts of political instability, how they stemmed was quite different. However, this is an excellent example of how something so other can be similar; both lead to political instability and power vacuums while originating quite differently. Another relatively significant difference can be seen in the government responses. The responses of the Iraqi and Syrian governments to the rise of ISIS were quite different. In Iraq, the government, despite its weaknesses, actively sought international assistance and cooperated with coalition forces to combat ISIS.

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<sup>234</sup> Cordesman, A. H., & Toukan, A. (2019). *The return of ISIS in Iraq, Syria, and the Middle East*. Center for Strategic & International Studies.

<sup>235</sup> Yassin-Kassab, R., Al-Shami, L. (2018). *Burning Country* (2nd ed.). Pluto Press, pp-15-25.

<sup>236</sup> Cordesman, A. H., & Toukan, A. (2019). *The return of ISIS in Iraq, Syria, and the Middle East*. Center for Strategic & International Studies.

<sup>237</sup> Yassin-Kassab, R., Al-Shami, L. (2018). *Burning Country* (2nd ed.). Pluto Press, pp-15-25.

<sup>238</sup> Glenn, C., Rowan, M., Caves, J., & Nada, G. (2019, October 28). *Timeline: The rise, spread, and fall of the Islamic State*. Wilson Center

<sup>239</sup> Cordesman, A. H., & Toukan, A. (2019). *The return of ISIS in Iraq, Syria, and the Middle East*. Center for Strategic & International Studies.

Conversely, the Syrian government, while fighting various opposition groups, including ISIS, prioritised its battle against other rebel factions and benefitted from support from allies like Russia. While both Iraq and Syria experienced the rise of ISIS, their internal conflicts diverged significantly in origins and government responses. Iraq's conflict stemmed from a foreign invasion and subsequent sectarian governance, leading to a reliance on international and local military support to combat ISIS. In contrast, Syria's conflict arose from an internal uprising against an authoritarian regime, with the Assad government prioritising its survival and receiving substantial international support that shaped its approach to ISIS. These similarities and differences highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of each country's struggle against ISIS and the broader regional implications of their respective conflicts. However, looking at their origins and evolution, whether foreign aid was a mediator or instigator must be questioned.

### **3.1.1 Counterterrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy**

The US intervention and counterterrorism efforts in Iraq and Syria amid internal conflicts have spurred significant debate regarding their effectiveness and impact on the region's stability. Did the US counterterrorism effort truly help with the conflicts, particularly concerning the plight of religious minorities? While proponents argue that these actions were necessary to combat terrorist groups like ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and protect vulnerable communities, others contend that they exacerbated existing tensions and worsened the situation for religious minorities<sup>240</sup>. On one hand, proponents of US counterterrorism efforts highlight the significant military gains made against ISIS and other extremist groups. Through airstrikes, military assistance to local forces, and targeted operations, the US aimed to degrade terrorist networks and prevent the spread of their brutal ideology. These efforts were often portrayed as essential for safeguarding not only American interests but also the lives and rights of religious minorities, such as Christians, Yazidis, and Kurds, who faced persecution and violence at the hands of extremist factions. However, critics argue that US intervention inadvertently fuelled sectarian tensions and contributed to the displacement and suffering of religious minority communities<sup>241</sup>. The military campaigns, while successful in dismantling ISIS strongholds, also led to widespread destruction of infrastructure, loss of civilian lives, and displacement of millions of people.

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<sup>240</sup> Eland, I. (1998). DOES U.S. INTERVENTION OVERSEAS BREED TERRORISM?: The Historical Record. Cato Institute, pp.1-24.

<sup>241</sup> Thompson, A., & Suri, J. (2014, October 1). How the United States Helped ISIS. The New York Times.

Additionally, some argue<sup>242</sup> that the US support for certain factions within the conflicts further polarised communities and empowered groups with their agendas, exacerbating divisions and insecurity for religious minorities<sup>243</sup>. Moreover, concerns have been raised about the long-term consequences of US intervention, including the potential for insurgent resurgence, continued instability, and the perpetuation of cycles of violence. Some terrorist attacks are being seen and ‘excused’ through the explanation that “they may be protests against U.S. culture”<sup>244</sup>, again aligning with the idea that an imposition of Westernised culture on one completely different is non-compatible. Eland's insights shed light on the broader impact, highlighting a historical correlation between US involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks. Eland (1998) emphasises that “recognising the link [between US intervention and terrorism] is even more important now.”<sup>245</sup> Underscoring the efficacy of adopting a policy of military restraint overseas, suggesting that “the large number of terrorist attacks that occurred in retaliation for an interventionist American foreign policy implicitly demonstrates that terrorism against U.S. targets could be significantly reduced if the United States adopted a policy of military restraint overseas.”<sup>246</sup> Despite efforts to provide humanitarian aid and support for stabilisation initiatives, the underlying socio-political grievances and power struggles remain unresolved, posing ongoing challenges for the region's religious minorities and broader populations<sup>247</sup>. Military interventions, including airstrikes and support for local forces, were intended to degrade ISIS strongholds and prevent the spread of extremism. However, these actions also resulted in significant collateral damage, including the destruction of infrastructure and civilian casualties. The indiscriminate nature of some operations led to the displacement of millions of people, including religious minorities such as Christians, Yazidis, and Kurds, who faced persecution and violence from both ISIS and other factions involved in the conflicts. Furthermore, US support for certain factions within the conflicts, sometimes driven by short-term strategic interests, contributed to the region's fragmentation and further polarised communities<sup>248</sup>. This empowerment of various armed groups often led to increased instability and insecurity for vulnerable populations. Despite these efforts, ISIS persisted and even exploited the chaos and grievances resulting

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<sup>242</sup> Eland, I. (1998). DOES U.S. INTERVENTION OVERSEAS BREED TERRORISM?: The Historical Record. Cato Institute, pp.1-24.

<sup>243</sup> Thompson, A., & Suri, J. (2014, October 1). How the United States Helped ISIS. The New York Times.

<sup>244</sup> Eland, I. (1998). DOES U.S. INTERVENTION OVERSEAS BREED TERRORISM?: The Historical Record. Cato Institute, p-5.

<sup>245</sup> *Ivi*, pp.3-5.

<sup>246</sup> *Ivi*, p-5.

<sup>247</sup> Thompson, A., & Suri, J. (2014, October 1). How the United States Helped ISIS. The New York Times.

<sup>248</sup> Jones, S. G. (2015, April 30). Historical Lessons for the Wars in Iraq and Syria.

from US interventions to recruit more fighters and expand its influence<sup>249</sup>. The failure to address underlying socio-political grievances and provide sustainable solutions only perpetuated the cycle of violence and instability in the region. Recognising the issue that falls under the interventions of the United States in these conflicted countries, the compelling reason or variable that leads to them must be found. This is not only to be understood for an explanation but, as Eland noted, is now more critical. To understand the roots behind such occurrences and the need to know how to answer them. In an article, Connable, Lander, and Jackson (2017)<sup>250</sup> underscore the importance of addressing underlying socio-political factors contributing to ISIS's resilience and appeal and recognising the necessity to devise a comprehensive strategy beyond military actions<sup>251</sup>. To this line of thought, the possibility of Religious Diplomacy must be aligned. Where and when can it be used?

### 3.2 Religion and Terrorism

The nexus between religion and terrorism has been brought and argued on for hundreds of years. Does religion truly lead to terrorism? Do specific circumstances lead to a more radicalised version of religion? Is religion the problem, or those who believe in it? Is there even a connection?

To analyse the relationship between these two variables, one must comprehend them both individually<sup>252</sup>. The Merriam-Webster definition of religion allows for three definitions, “(i) the state of a religion, the service and worship of God or the supernatural or commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance; (ii) a personal set or institutionalised system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices; (iii) a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardour and faith.”<sup>253</sup> This is the Westernised version of the description of the relationship between a human and their belief in an entity outside earthly powers. However, “political Islam” notes that: “Islam is a cultural, religious and political system.”<sup>254</sup> Ever since the beginning of the religion, Islam has based its religion and politics on the same person, the caliph, a representation of their belief in a person. Historically, Islam began dividing the political and religious

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<sup>249</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>250</sup> Connable, B., Lander, N., & Jackson, K. (2017, May 8). Beating the Islamic State: Selecting a New Strategy for Iraq and Syria.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>252</sup> Tarlow, P. (2017). The interaction of religion and terrorism. *International Journal of Safety and Security in Tourism/Hospitality*, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas, p.10.

<sup>253</sup> Definition of the term "religion". (2024). In Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

<sup>254</sup> Tarlow, P. (2017). The interaction of religion and terrorism. *International Journal of Safety and Security in Tourism/Hospitality*, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas.

aspects with the Umayyads<sup>255</sup>, only to become theocratic with the Abbasids<sup>256</sup> again. One could say that the proper division came along with the Seljuks<sup>257</sup>, Turkish peoples, who kept Abbasid Caliphates<sup>258</sup> merely as a religious symbol but reigned as Sultans<sup>259</sup>. There is no doubt about these divine-oriented ideologies' power over their followers<sup>260</sup>. They commonly act as social measurement tools for determining correct and incorrect behaviour and “the good” from “the bad”<sup>261</sup>. Religion allows for the creation of a community and the stability of a people. This is a crucial ideology when it comes to Islam; Islamic fundamentalists believe that there is no separation between politics and religion. Islam is, in essence, both religion and regime (din wa-dawla), and no area of human activity is outside its remit. Be the nature of the problem as it may, "Islam is the solution."<sup>262</sup> This ideology of a closing of community and a tightening of beliefs towards one movement in life is what can lead to religion being used in terms it isn't supposed to be.

The definition of terrorism was briefly introduced in the first chapter when the definition of counterterrorism was evaluated. Looking back, there is yet to be a specific definition agreed upon by the international society of the term; Becker had proposed that the closest was the politically endorsed definition of “reign of terror.”<sup>263</sup> However, its actions and effects have quite a firm hold on the effect of the populations they impose on. Terrorism, according to diverse sociological perspectives, can be seen in two ways: as political violence or as communication<sup>264</sup>. From the lens of political violence, terrorism is viewed as a response to oppression and exploitation, often seen as the last resort of the deprived and desperate<sup>265</sup>. This perspective encompasses various ideologies, such as anarchist objections to regimentation, communist or socialist critiques of capitalism, or liberal objections to excessive

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<sup>255</sup> The Umayyads was the second caliphate established after the death of the Islamic prophet Muhammad and was ruled by the Umayyad dynasty.

<sup>256</sup> The Abbasids was the third caliphate to succeed the Islamic prophet Muhammad.

<sup>257</sup> The Seljuks were a medieval Turkic dynasty that founded a major empire in the 11th and 12th centuries, spanning from Central Asia to the eastern Mediterranean. Famous for having defeated the Byzantine Empire a, and for their cultural and administrative contributions, heavily influenced by Persian traditions. They played a crucial role in the Islamic world, particularly in Iran, Iraq, and Anatolia, and their rule laid the groundwork for the later development of the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>258</sup> Abbasid Caliphates were Islamic states led by a caliph, considered the political and religious successor to the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>259</sup> Sultans are sovereign rulers of Muslim states, in the medieval Islamic world, they primarily exercised political and military power.

<sup>260</sup> Corrao, F. (2017). *Islam, religion, and politics*. Luiss University Press.

<sup>261</sup> Tarlow, P. (2017). The interaction of religion and terrorism. *International Journal of Safety and Security in Tourism/Hospitality*, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas, pp.1-23.

<sup>262</sup> Bar, S. (2004). The religious sources of Islamic terrorism. *Policy Review*, (125). ProQuest Research Library.

<sup>263</sup> Becker, Tal. (2006) *Terrorism and the State: Rethinking the Rules of State Responsibility*. Hart Publishing.

<sup>264</sup> Turk, A. T. (2004). *Sociology of Terrorism*. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 30, 271–286.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibidem*.

individualism<sup>266</sup>. Critical theories suggest that political and economic inequalities are the root causes of collective violence, as seen in the case studies. Terrorist acts are strategically aimed at weakening the opponent's will to persist in a political conflict rather than as expressions of psychopathology or material deprivation<sup>267</sup>. Evidence suggests that terrorism is associated more with relative affluence and social advantage rather than poverty or lack of education. Many terrorists come from relatively well-off parts of the world and are motivated by political-ideological resentments rather than economic distress<sup>268</sup>. Alternatively, terrorism can be understood as a form of communication where the perpetrators seek to convey a message through their actions<sup>269</sup>. The media plays a crucial role in framing perceptions of terrorism, often depicting terrorists as deranged, bearded bombers or lone, disturbed individuals. This portrayal reinforces the idea that political violence is criminal and irrational<sup>270</sup>. People choose terrorism when they are trying to right what they perceive to be a social, political, or historical wrong—when they have been stripped of their land or rights or denied these. Consequentially, terrorism can be seen as “a social virus that gnaws at the social fabric of a society and of human dignity.”<sup>271</sup> The belief that violence or its threat will be effective and usher in change is commonly expected and seen too often. Another way of interpreting it is the belief that violent means justify the ends. Many terrorists in history said sincerely that they chose violence after long deliberation because they felt they had no choice. However, we could also use this to talk about the interventions of foreign actors<sup>272</sup>. Their ideas of fighting violence with violence and imposing ideologies on those who cannot fight back could also be seen as an attempt to justify the means to reach their wanted end.

In the words of Tarlow (2017), “The issue then is not one of religion, but of the misuse of ideologies and the refusal to permit alternative thought processes.”<sup>273</sup> In the realm of terrorism that has been seen, religion often emerges as a deceptive cloak used by extremist groups to veil their true motivations and justify their violent acts. This exploitation of religious beliefs not only tarnishes the reputation of entire religious communities but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes, fostering division and mistrust and potentially leading to violence towards those who simply believe<sup>274</sup>. Terrorist organisations, like ISIS,

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<sup>266</sup> Turk, A. T. (2004). *Sociology of Terrorism*. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 30, 271–286.

<sup>267</sup> *Ivi*, pp.273-274.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>269</sup> *Ivi*, pp.274-276.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>271</sup> Tarlow, P. (2017). The interaction of religion and terrorism. *International Journal of Safety and Security in Tourism/Hospitality*, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas, p.19.

<sup>272</sup> Turk, A. T. (2004). *Sociology of Terrorism*. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 30, 271–286.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>274</sup> Pape, R. A., Kirby, J., & Mumford, R. (2005, October 21). In God's Name? Evaluating the Links between Religious Extremism and Terrorism [Interview]. Pew Research Center.

whose ideology is rooted in a fundamentalist and extremist interpretation of Sunni Islam seeking to establish a caliphate governed by a strict interpretation of Sharia law, frequently wield religious ideologies as a potent tool for recruitment and radicalisation<sup>275</sup>. These groups exploit the expressive power of religion to galvanise support for their political agendas, using religious rhetoric to cloak their true objectives of power, control, and destabilisation. Terrorists' misuse of religion as a scapegoat perpetuates harmful stereotypes and prejudices, particularly against Muslim communities<sup>276</sup>. Innocent individuals find themselves unfairly stigmatised and marginalised, facing suspicion and hostility solely based on their religious affiliation. Individuals who exploit religion to justify terrorist actions are not genuine believers, nor do they possess a deep understanding of religious principles. Religion is a motivator but will never be a motive for conflict<sup>277</sup>.

### 3.3 Answering the Hypothesis

In chapter two, I proposed two hypotheses to understand the relationships between all the variables proposed in this thesis. Firstly, the initial hypothesis states that the intersection of U.S. foreign policy, counterterrorism, and religious diplomacy tends to prioritise strategic security interests over the religious freedoms of minority groups. To better understand this hypothesis, first, we must briefly understand its proposed variables and their interactions with one another. U.S. foreign policy refers to the strategies and principles that guide the United States' interactions with other countries and international organisations. U.S. foreign policy sets the framework for counterterrorism efforts and religious diplomacy to operate<sup>278</sup>. It helps to determine the priorities, resources, and approaches used in engaging with other nations, including those concerning security and ideological influence. Counterterrorism involves measures taken to prevent, deter, and respond to terrorism, including intelligence gathering, law enforcement, military actions, efforts to counter radicalization and extremism, and so on.<sup>279</sup>. Counterterrorism can be seen as a critical component of U.S. foreign policy, particularly in regions prone to terrorist activities<sup>280</sup>. Effective counterterrorism strategies rely on international cooperation and can

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<sup>275</sup> Coady, C. A. J. (2021, May). Religion, War, and Terrorism. *Oxford Academic Journals*.

<sup>276</sup> Pape, R. A., Kirby, J., & Mumford, R. (2005, October 21). In God's Name? Evaluating the Links between Religious Extremism and Terrorism [Interview]. Pew Research Center.

<sup>277</sup> Stueland, E. (2013). Religion is a motivator, not a motive for conflict. [Research report]. Air Command and Staff College, Air University.

<sup>278</sup> Sangalli, Samuele. (2016) Religion and Politics: Religious Liberty and Confronting New Ethical Challenges: What Is the Public Role of Faith in Today's Globalized World? Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, pp. 50-75.

<sup>279</sup> Sandler, T. (2014). Terrorism and counterterrorism: an overview. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 67(1), pp.1–20.

<sup>280</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (2018, October 22). PRESS RELEASES SPECIAL PROCEDURES: Mr. Ahmed Shaheed statement. Religion.

be enhanced by diplomatic efforts, including religious diplomacy, to address the root causes of terrorism and build resilience within communities. Religious diplomacy refers to using religious leaders, organisations, and principles in diplomatic efforts to promote peace, mutual understanding, and conflict resolution; it is a 'newer' recognised diplomatic method<sup>281</sup>. It acknowledges the influential role of religion in many societies and seeks to engage religious actors in dialogue and collaboration. Religious diplomacy can support counterterrorism by addressing ideological motivations behind terrorism, promoting interfaith dialogue, and fostering environments less susceptible to radicalisation. Religious diplomacy can build alliances, resolve conflicts, and enhance cultural understanding within U.S. foreign policy, complementing broader security and diplomatic objectives. U.S. foreign policy integrates counterterrorism and religious diplomacy to create comprehensive strategies for global engagement<sup>282</sup>. The U.S. could address immediate security threats by aligning these variables while fostering long-term stability and cooperation. Additionally, religious diplomacy could strengthen counterterrorism efforts, undermining extremist narratives and building local support for anti-terrorism measures. Conversely, successful counterterrorism operations can create conditions conducive to effective religious diplomacy, as we saw an example in Chapter 1, where in Afghanistan, Sakena Yacoobi founded the Afghan Institute for Learning for Women and Girls, where she could reach them through their religion<sup>283</sup>. Through the understanding of the religion accomplished, it was easier to get them. It allowed the wives and Yacoobi to form a bond, thereby changing societal norms through their beliefs without utilising methods that make them feel like they were imposed on them. Indeed, a holistic approach to U.S. foreign policy that includes both counterterrorism and religious diplomacy can address both the symptoms and causes of terrorism. This approach would promote sustainable peace by combining hard security measures with soft power strategies that engage religious and cultural dimensions. Essentially, U.S. foreign policy provides the overarching framework, counterterrorism addresses direct threats, and religious diplomacy engages underlying cultural and ideological factors, creating a synergistic effect in promoting national and global security; the aim would be to learn and navigate through all three with balance.

Examining the cases proposed by this chapter, we deduce a correlation between the prioritisation of security interests and the present minority groups. A perfect example of this was the U.S.'s counterterrorism strategies utilising missiles, which not only displaced hundreds if not thousands of

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<sup>281</sup> Khaitan, T., & Norton, J. (2019). The right to freedom of religion and the right against religious discrimination: Theoretical distinctions. *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 17(4).

<sup>282</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>283</sup> Jafari, S. (2007). LOCAL RELIGIOUS PEACEMAKERS: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY. *Journal of International Affairs*, 61(1), p. 116



people but also maimed and killed many<sup>284</sup>. U.S. foreign policy and counterterrorism strategies often prioritise stability and suppressing extremist threats in pursuing national security objectives. This can involve partnerships with governments or entities that may not prioritise or uphold religious freedoms, especially for minority communities. In some cases, regimes with poor human rights records have received U.S. support or cooperation in exchange for intelligence sharing or military assistance in counterterrorism operations. Moreover, the emphasis on security considerations in diplomatic engagements and negotiations can overshadow the promotion of religious freedom as a core component of U.S. foreign policy, as seen in the OHCHR report. Where UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, stated that “national security measures have resulted in “countless violations and abuses of fundamental human rights”, including the right to freedom of religion or belief.”<sup>285</sup> In his debrief in the UN General Assembly, Shaheed proposes and urges States to use “various tools developed by the United Nations system in the context of freedom of religion or belief and the prevention of mass atrocities”<sup>286</sup>, an example of which could be religious diplomacy, to help build “resilience against violent extremism”. Religious diplomacy would foster dialogue and cooperation on religious freedom issues; it may take a back seat to broader security concerns in high-stakes negotiations or engagements with strategically important allies or partners. They are aiding in the fight against terrorism and against the persecution of religious minorities.

The second hypothesis that was proposed was that U.S. counterterrorism efforts which engage with religious diplomacy have a significant impact on the religious freedoms of minorities in conflict zones within the Arab world. U.S. counterterrorism efforts that incorporate religious diplomacy could wield considerable influence on the religious freedoms of minority groups residing in conflict-ridden regions across the Arab world. The ramifications of such engagement, as using religious diplomacy, have the potential outcomes spanning the spectrum from null to positive or negative impacts on religious minorities, whether intended or unintended. It must be considered that for this thesis, the following analysis must be understood to be merely theoretical. This is because analysing such a spectrum quantitatively is only feasible in some ways, primarily considering conflict zones where differing opinions and the chaotic nature of the environment make it impossible to gather reliable data to assess the effects materially.

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<sup>284</sup> Yassin-Kassab, R., Al-Shami, L. (2018). *Burning Country* (2nd ed.). Pluto Press, p.220-245.

<sup>285</sup> OHCHR. (2018). *Fight against terrorism no excuse to ignore freedom of religion or belief, says UN rights expert*.

<sup>286</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (2018, October 22). PRESS RELEASES SPECIAL PROCEDURES: Mr. Ahmed Shaheed statement. Religion.

At first glance, the notion of a null effect seemed plausible, suggesting that U.S. counterterrorism efforts have no discernible impact on the religious freedoms of minority communities. However, it becomes apparent upon closer examination that even the absence of a perceived effect can carry consequences. The mere presence of U.S. involvement in counterterrorism operations may inadvertently shape the landscape, influencing the treatment of religious minorities by local actors or altering the dynamics of interfaith relations. The engagements that have been 'used' up to now have shown negative consequences resulting from U.S. counterterrorism actions in conflict zones. Military interventions and security operations, while aimed at combating terrorism, inadvertently exacerbated sectarian tensions, leading to the displacement and loss of life among religious minority populations.

Moreover, heavy-handed tactics or support for authoritarian regimes have been shown to marginalise vulnerable communities further, perpetuating cycles of violence and discrimination. Conversely, religious diplomacy can have positive outcomes stemming from U.S. engagement in religious diplomacy within counterterrorism frameworks. By promoting dialogue, tolerance, and respect for religious diversity, such efforts can contribute to the protection and enhancement of religious freedoms for minority groups. Through advocacy and capacity-building initiatives, the United States can empower local communities United States can empower local communities through advocacy and capacity-building initiatives to safeguard their rights and resist extremist ideologies that threaten religious pluralism, as proposed at the UN General Assembly<sup>287</sup>. By balancing security imperatives with respect for human rights and religious diversity, U.S. counterterrorism efforts can foster stability and inclusivity in conflict-affected regions of the Arab world.

As articulated by McCauley (2016)<sup>288</sup>, the challenge now lies in navigating the complexities of post-conflict transition and fostering sustainable peace and stability. We need to learn from past mistakes and address the underlying grievances and divisions that fuelled the rise of ISIS, advancing a comprehensive approach that includes political, economic, and social reforms alongside efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and reconciliation. By tackling root causes and fostering inclusive institutions, Iraq and Syria can lay the groundwork for a more peaceful and prosperous future. Religious leaders and institutions are crucial in shaping societal norms and attitudes, making them essential partners in promoting peace and coexistence. By engaging with religious communities and facilitating dialogue among different faiths, diplomatic efforts can help bridge divides, counter extremist ideologies, and foster mutual understanding

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<sup>287</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (2018, October 22). PRESS RELEASES SPECIAL PROCEDURES: Mr. Ahmed Shaheed statement. Religion.

<sup>288</sup> McCauley, C. (2016). What Comes After ISIS? A Peace Proposal. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10(4), 62–66.

and respect. Additionally, it is important to highlight again the UN General Assembly<sup>289</sup> has emphasised the importance of dialogue and perspective-taking in addressing conflicts rather than solely relying on unilateral action or imposition.

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<sup>289</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (2018, October 22). PRESS RELEASES SPECIAL PROCEDURES: Mr. Ahmed Shaheed statement. Religion.

## Conclusion

This thesis sought to explore and answer the research question: How does U.S. religious diplomacy within counterterrorism efforts impact the religious freedom of minorities in the Arab world's conflict zones? Throughout the chapters of this thesis, we examined three critical variables: Counterterrorism, U.S. foreign policy, and religious diplomacy, analysing each in isolation and conjunction with the other. Our investigation revealed that these elements either inherently interact or have the potential to collaborate for more effective diplomatic policies. Following the presentation, two hypotheses were posited: *(i)* the intersection of U.S. foreign policy, counterterrorism, and religious diplomacy prioritises strategic security interests over the religious freedoms of minority groups, and *(ii)* U.S. counterterrorism efforts that engage with religious diplomacy have a significant impact on the religious freedoms of minorities in conflict zones within the Arab world, potentially yielding null, positive, or adverse effects, whether intended or unintended.

To test these hypotheses, case studies of Syria and Iraq were presented, detailing their historical backgrounds and the rise of ISIS within these nations. A comparative analysis highlighted similarities and differences, allowing for applying and assessing the variables and hypotheses. The first hypothesis that can be concluded was supported by the findings, illustrating that U.S. foreign policy in counterterrorism often places strategic security interests above the religious freedoms of minority groups. This prioritisation manifests through various policy decisions and actions taken in conflict zones, such as the deployment of military forces, alliances with local regimes, and support for counterterrorism measures that may inadvertently suppress minority religious practices. For instance, the U.S. frequently prioritises counterterrorism collaboration over advocacy to protect minority rights. Additionally, military operations and drone strikes aimed at eliminating terrorist threats have resulted in collateral damages to communities, including religious minorities, further exacerbating their vulnerability and marginalisation. However, the second hypothesis, demonstrated later in the research to demand a more quantitative analysis, remained largely theoretical due to limitations in the study. Despite this, the qualitative insights suggested that religious diplomacy holds the potential for positive outcomes when integrated into U.S. counterterrorism efforts. This approach could improve relations with Middle Eastern countries by respecting cultural and religious differences and avoiding the imposition of Western ideologies. By acknowledging and engaging with these societies' deeply rooted religious identities and practices, U.S. foreign policy can foster greater mutual understanding and trust. Practically, incorporating religious diplomacy means actively involving religious leaders and communities in dialogue and decision-making. This could include initiatives such as interfaith dialogues, support for religious education promoting

tolerance, and partnerships with local religious organisations with credibility and influence within their communities. These efforts can help to counter extremist narratives that exploit religious sentiments and can provide a platform for moderate voices that advocate for peace and coexistence.

Moreover, religious diplomacy can enhance the cultural competence of U.S. diplomats and military personnel, enabling them to navigate complex religious landscapes more effectively. Training programs that focus on the religious and cultural contexts of conflict zones can improve the implementation of policies sensitive to local dynamics and reduce the likelihood of actions that might be perceived as disrespectful or hostile. By aligning counterterrorism efforts with promoting religious freedom and pluralism, the U.S. can demonstrate a commitment to human rights and dignity values, bolstering its reputation and influence globally. This strategy can help address radicalisation's root causes by promoting social cohesion and resilience against extremist ideologies. In conclusion, while the prioritisation of security over religious freedom is evident, the integration of religious diplomacy into counterterrorism strategies could mitigate adverse effects on religious minorities. This thesis underscores the need for further empirical research to substantiate theoretical findings and refine policies that balance strategic interests with protecting religious freedoms. Adopting a more culturally sensitive and inclusive approach could enhance the effectiveness and acceptance of U.S. foreign policy in the Arab world.

So how does and has U.S. religious diplomacy within counterterrorism efforts impacted the religious freedom of minorities in the Arab world's conflict zones? Up to now, it can be definitively concluded that the results have been either null or negative. Efforts often lack the necessary cultural sensitivity and understanding, leading to policies that do not adequately protect, or may even harm, the religious freedoms of minority groups. There is significant potential for positive change if the U.S. shifts its approach from imposing its own beliefs and values to genuinely understanding the cultural and religious contexts of the populations it seeks to assist. By adopting a more empathetic and inclusive strategy, the U.S. could design policies more attuned to local communities' needs and realities. But not only for the U.S. but also for all countries worldwide. This would involve collaborating closely with local religious leaders, scholars, and community members to gain a deeper insight into their perspectives and challenges. Such an approach would enhance the effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts and promote the protection and respect of religious freedoms. This culturally informed strategy could lead to more sustainable peace and stability by addressing the underlying issues contributing to radicalisation and conflict. Therefore, it can be concluded that integrating religious diplomacy into U.S. counterterrorism policies with a focus on mutual understanding and respect has the potential to significantly improve outcomes for religious minorities in the Arab world's conflict zones.

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