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WASHINGTON (RNS)—U.S. foreign policy officials have shown an increased understanding of religion’s importance to American diplomacy, but the government’s activities in that area display a “lack of strategic thinking” that hampers efforts abroad, according to a new report.

U.S. officials do not have “a clear set of policy objectives or tactical guidelines for dealing with emerging religious realities,” said the 92-page report from the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#), a nonpartisan think tank in Washington. “Offices, programs and initiatives are more often happen-stance than coherent.”

The report’s lead author was Liora Danan, a research assistant at the center. Titled [“Mixed Blessings: U.S. Government Engagement with Religion in Conflict-Prone Settings,”](#) the report says the government still needs a policy that can encourage broad public discussion and programs sensitive to religious realities.

“To consider all of the roles religion can play in conflict-prone settings, the government must expand beyond a threat-based, Islam-focused analysis of religion and embrace a broader understanding of world religions,” the report says.

While noting the government’s approach to religion in conflict-prone settings has improved in recent years, the report argues international religious freedom—the most visible religious issue in American foreign policy—“remains marginalized.”

“Government efforts have also belatedly and not entirely successfully considered religion’s role in promoting terrorism, while a public diplomacy campaign has scrambled to assure Muslim communities abroad of shared values, without always listening to the different priorities of various communities.”

Among the failures, the report cites “the U.S. government’s underestimation of the potential for sectarian violence in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraqi invasion.”

And, it adds, while policymakers “are now aware of the pervasive sectarian divisions in the area, they remain at a loss about how to respond. ... The United States continues to try to contain violence without addressing the differences that lead to bloodshed.”

The report argues that countering the appeal of religiously motivated violence requires a deep understanding of the motivation behind the aggression.

In urging the U.S. government to better inform the public and policymakers about the role of religion in international conflicts, the report lists a host of recommendations, including clearer definitions of the legal parameters for engaging with religious issues, expansion of foreign exchange programs and increased government partnerships with faith-based groups abroad.

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