

Former Trump ambassador launches international religious freedom conference

by [Jack Jenkins](#) in the [August 11, 2021](#) issue



Sam Brownback speaks at an event commemorating the 20th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act on November 9, 2018, in Washington. (RNS Photo by Adelle M. Banks)

Sam Brownback, former US ambassador for international religious freedom in the Trump administration, helped launch a conference on international religious freedom in Washington, DC, on July 13, bringing together an array of faith and political leaders with the goal of tackling discrimination around the globe.

The three-day IRF Summit 2021 “is about relationship-building,” said Brownback, who previously represented Kansas in the US Senate and then served as governor. “We really need to have civil society and religious leaders building relationships to stand up for each other’s religious freedom.”

Brownback touted the conference's relatively diverse group of presenters, which included House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (via video), along with sponsors such as the National Council of Churches and HIAS, a Jewish refugee group that sued the Trump administration in 2019.

Sen. Chris Coons of Delaware and Rep. Henry Cuellar of Texas, both Democrats, were listed with two Republicans, Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma and Rep. Chris Smith of New Jersey, as honorary congressional cochairs of the privately funded event.

Brownback, who cochaired the conference with former US Commission on International Religious Freedom chair Katrina Lantos Swett, said he hoped to create a bipartisan, multifaith coalition to champion what the summit website described as the "cause of religious freedom around the world."

To achieve a bipartisan presence at the conference, Brownback—whose former ambassador post has not yet been filled by the Biden administration—gave the meeting an international focus. "We didn't pick domestic because we've got a lot more division on domestic religious freedom," he said. "That was intentional at the outset."

The event's international purview drew several prominent religious freedom advocates from home and abroad. The Dalai Lama, Muslim American actor Mahershala Ali, and New York's Cardinal Timothy Dolan also addressed the gathering, with Ali and the Tibetan Buddhist leader appearing by video.

Brownback said his experience at the State Department showed him the common interest Republicans and Democrats have in international religious freedom in an era otherwise defined by partisan rancor.

"In 2019, we probably held the only event in America where Nancy Pelosi and [Donald Trump's secretary of state] Mike Pompeo both got a standing ovation," he said.

Brownback said he remains optimistic that support for international religious freedom can be bipartisan, so long as such alliances receive appropriate "care and nurturing." He praised the Biden administration for taking a hard-line position against China's treatment of Uyghurs and expressed hope that his conference could further encourage the foreign policy community to take religion seriously.

“I think it’s a blind spot, particularly for foreign policy experts in the West, not to see the real need to engage religious leaders,” he said. By way of example, he pointed to the success of the Abraham Accords, a multinational peace agreement in which Morocco, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and the Republic of Sudan normalized relationships with Israel.

The accords are a rare example of a Trump policy achievement embraced by the current administration, and Brownback argued that the title—a reference to the shared religious connection to the figure of Abraham found in the scriptures of Muslims, Jews, and Christians—recognized an undeniable “religious aspect” of foreign policy.

While Brownback said it’s too early to give President Joe Biden an overall grade on religious freedom, he expressed frustration with the president’s decision to “walk away” from an unalienable rights commission created by Pompeo, which argued that freedom of religion and right to property were the two most important rights.

Current secretary of state Antony Blinken derided the commission’s findings in March, declaring, “There is no hierarchy that makes some rights more important than others.” He also criticized his predecessor’s work, alleging that defenders of human rights “heard only silence” from the United States in recent years.

Brownback added that he hopes participants in the IRF summit will recognize the power of defending the free expression of faith, and he warned that failing to do so could have dire consequences.

“Religion can be manipulated by enterprising politicians or clerics alike,” he said. “It’s not something you want to see abused, and we have seen it abused in very deadly ways.” —Religion News Service