

# MENA: Women empowerment stories – Mervat

SB OverSeas – Mervat is one of the teachers at SB OverSeas, an organisation working to provide education and empowerment programs to refugees in Lebanon. She was also married at a young age, deprived of a childhood. In this story, you will learn about this woman who at the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, found herself in Lebanon where she sought means to find economic independence by learning how to sew leading her to teach classes at SB OverSeas' centres and this platform provided her with a means to help empower other women in her situation.

Mervat was married at the mere age of fourteen. Despite protestations, she found herself married against her will due to her grandfather's wishes. This marriage, along with many other early marriages, signaled an end to her education. Her own dreams were replaced by a child and a life of marriage. Mervat had always enjoyed working with her hands to create beautiful products but was restricted by the responsibilities she bore and was unable to pursue this dream.

Following the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, she found herself, along with her husband and children seeking refuge in Lebanon. In Beirut, she searched for a way to make a meagre earning by learning how to sew. Ignoring the comments of her family, she started classes with SB OverSeas in 2014. Her warm and welcoming personality, along with her natural talent for creating products meant she was a born teacher. Mervat started leading classes in our centre in Bukhara Ahla. With this, she was able to help other women in similar situations to create

products that they could sell in local shops so they could gain a sense of financial independence.

Through this, she found a way to empower herself and use her experiences to empower other women. By teaching classes, she had a platform to talk to many of the young girls about her own experience of being married young. She hopes that she will be able to help those girls who are already married to not feel so alone by always being there to lend a listening ear, and those who are not married, to equip them with the tools to reject marriage.

*Read here about SB OverSeas' [empowerment programs](#) for refugee women in Lebanon.*

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# MENA: Women empowerment stories – Ibtesam

By Madison White, volunteer with SB OverSeas in Lebanon

*Thread of Hope is a campaign in order to raise funds for new sewing machines for refugee women in Lebanon where a sewing machine equals an opportunity to not only earn a source of income, but to build a community. Read more about SB OverSeas' campaign [here](#).*

SB OverSeas – Ibtesam (ابتسام) means smile in Arabic. Befittingly, it is the name of a student enrolled in the SB OverSeas Bukra Ahla Center in Beirut. She not only has the brightest smile, but also the brightest mind.

Ibtesam, 36, was born and raised in Syria. She comes from a family of six brothers and four sisters. She, the youngest of the girls, was unable to finish her studies past the age of 12 because of the cost to her family. Ibtesam married at the age of 21, and is now a mother to six children. At the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, when the tensions of war became too great a threat to their safety, Ibtesam, her husband, and her children sought refuge by relocating to Lebanon.

Relocation came with its own set of problems, as Ibtesam and her husband found it quite difficult to find consistent work. Job security was difficult to guarantee, not only because of their refugee status, but also because they spoke neither English nor French. Eventually her husband found varying forms of work to support the family, but Ibtesam was largely

relegated to her home- as the main caretaker of her children and their home.

About a year ago, a friend of Ibtesam mentioned a school in the Shatila area that not only offered English classes to children, but to adult women as well. Ibtesam immediately sought out this opportunity, and joined us here at the SB Overseas Center, as soon as there was space available.

My first encounter with Ibtesam was on my first day of teaching at the Bukra Ahla. She was the first of the students to arrive in class and sat patiently, with her four year old son seated on her lap, as we waited for the other women to arrive for class. As we sat, in a comfortable silence, I saw her reach into her purse and pull out a sweet treat for her son. She then reached back into her purse and pulled one out for me. Despite my protestation, Ibtesam graciously gave me the treat as if I were no different or older than her own child. This first encounter, is a just a glimpse into the larger picture of who Ibtesam is, and how quick she is to give whatever she has to those around her.

Ibtesam is one of the most active students in the classroom. She does not hesitate in the slightest to ask me questions, to ask me to slow down, to translate for the other women, and ask for extra work. Time and again after class she hands me little scraps of paper with stories scribbled on them, or sentences that she wants tailored so that she might improve. In my first few weeks, I attributed this eagerness to just keenness in the classroom. But what I was missing the larger picture of who Ibtesam was, like when she first gave me that candy treat.

A few weeks ago it came to the attention of SB that Ibtesam was doing something quite special with the lessons she was learning in our centre. Ibtesam was so urgent in her desire to master the English language, not just because she was looking to better her situation with this skill, but more importantly she wants to give it away. To her home of six children, she brings back lessons and instructs her children in a manner similar to the way she was taught in class. The lesson range from the sounds of the letters in the English alphabet, new vocabulary, speaking, reading, and writing. These in-home lessons have gone on to grow beyond her own family as she now teaches an additional 8 children from her housing complex.

Bukra Ahla is the name of the SB schooling centres in Beirut. Bukra Ahla, (بکرا أحلى) translated into English means, A Better Tomorrow. Ibtesam could not be a better embodiment of the name and the mission of this school. The education being given to our students is not limited to the four walls of our centre. The lessons taught in the center, because of students like Ibtesam, have reach, and have depth; reach and depth that bring us one step closer to a better tomorrow. Ibtesam's urgency and eagerness to share, means that one more student is being empowered by education. Who is to say where that child may go, or with whom that child may share their newfound knowledge.

It goes without saying that SB Overseas mission is an important one in the effort to educate and empower those that the world has cast aside in so many ways. More to the point, however, what we are doing here is working. The education being given to our students is not limited to the four walls of our centre. It is reaching out into the greater community in ways that a teacher could only hope for. With students like Ibtesam at the helm, the resilience and vision, of those we

are helping is boundless. It is such a privilege to work in class with each of our students, and to be a part of something so much bigger than I, personally, could have ever envisioned.

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## **ROMANIA: Romanians and Hungarians in Europe – Another type of dialogue**

*Centenary – a chance for dialogue : Presentation of MEP Tókéş László at the conference he hosted at the European Parliament on 16 October*

MEP Tókéş László (17.10.2018) – Today's conference articulates

the goal and hope of a “different kind of dialogue” between Romanians and Hungarians. In order to inform our foreign guests, I would like to clarify that our event is not about the inter-state communication between Romania and Hungary. Rather it concerns the dialogue between the majority Romanians of our common country and the one and a half million Transylvanian minority Hungarians. This dialogue is absent but all the more desirable. Keeping in mind our objective to resolve the situation of our bilateral relations and the situation of Hungarians in Romania, there is an extremely important circumstance to consider, namely that our nations are part of united Europe, whose entire system is based on dialogue and whose basic treaty foresees the protection of minorities in detail. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the case of Romanian-Hungarian dialogue was put on the agenda in Brussels today – since we are asking and expecting help from the European Union and its institutions to resolve our common matters.

Last Friday, in the capital of Transylvania, Romania, in Kolozsvár/Cluj a similar conference took place, entitled Our centenaries. How to go on with the Romanian-Hungarian relations? Our discussion based on trust between the Romanians and the Hungarians is now the sixth in the line in creating a tradition for the mutual understanding of Romanian-Hungarian relations, which are also traditionally bad. By analogy, I could mention the French-German reconciliation, which was the basis of the establishment of the European Union at the time. Following the example of the “fathers of Europe”, in the Carpathian Basin the Hungarian-Romanian reconciliation is equally important.

At our meeting in Cluj, we accepted a joint statement signed by twelve remarkable Romanian and Hungarian political-public

figures on each side. In our resolution published for collecting additional signatures, we made a call for cooperation between the majority Romanians and native Hungarian minority in Transylvania, knowing that the land of Transylvania has been "the field of complementarity and could become once again the model of religious and cultural pluralism for centuries". The Romanian and Hungarian lecturers recalled that Transylvania, once an autonomous Hungarian principality, the land of religious tolerance in 1568 was the first in the world to proclaim the freedom of conscience and religion, thus preceding the whole of Europe by centuries. We are aware and are rightly proud that our Transylvanian religious and spiritual heritage has preceded the universal value system of today's common Europe, namely: European diversity, freedom of conscience and religion, and non-discriminatory tolerance. In our meetings in Kolozsvár/Cluj and Brussels, we also stood for these fundamental Transylvanian-European values, consistently and in a constructive dialogue for mutual understanding, peaceful settlement of Romanian-Hungarian relations, together with the settlement of the oppressed Hungarians' situation.

Our endeavor is extremely timely, for our country celebrates the 100th anniversary of the birth of Great Romania this year. This centenary is, however, two-faced. The Transylvanian Hungarians are mourning this year for the beginning of their seizure away from Hungary, which led to the 1920 Trianon Peace Treaty. Our centenaries are therefore very ambivalent: for one of them – the Romanians – they brought overwhelming gains and for the other side – for the Hungarians – a tragic loss. This anachronistic historical contradiction is the main obstacle to convergence and dialogue of any kind.

In extremis, this opposition has lately gone so far that in my



city Nagyvárad/Oradea, on October 12, the City Day was celebrated – exactly on the day when in 1918 the Romanian National Party of Transylvania accepted the Self-determination declaration of Romanians in Hungary, and in 1944 the Romanian troops following the Soviet invasion occupied the then predominantly Hungarian majority city. The overwhelming Romanian festivities, but also the provocative timing of Oradea's Day itself, are also an open incitement against the Hungarian population of the city. It is a similar situation with the Romanian National Day on the 1st of December, as in 1918 the Romanian People's Assembly of Alba Iulia announced the disengagement of Transylvania from Hungary at the time.

The Transylvanian Hungarians believe that Oradea's day and the national holiday of Romania should not be celebrated on these days, since they represent the painful loss for one and a half million Hungarians of their former country, Hungary, that they cannot be happy about. Therefore, Hungarians in Romania have in many cases demanded that the national and city holidays based on the Hungarian enemy image be changed in a way that they can become a common celebration for all the citizens of the country, both Romanians and Hungarians.

However, the present Romanian centenary is not only offensive and unacceptable in the symbolism of the holidays. The jubilee year of the majority Romanians is also used for the most violent anti-Hungarian attacks and official abuses. It was the climax of verbal aggression when Mihai Tudose, a former Socialist prime minister, threatened with hanging those Szekler Hungarians who dare to set their flags in public places. In Romania this year, anti-Hungarian manifestations and measures followed each other reminding directly of the anti-Hungarian Ukrainian retaliation (abolition of the Hungarian university, the re-nationalization of Hungarian

properties, the imprisonment of political prisoners, etc.). The notorious President of the Romanian Academy of Sciences suggested that the mere mentioning of Hungarian autonomy be sanctioned by law in the name of Romanian national unity. Professor Gabriel Andreescu, present today, noted correctly, that „ This initiative is dangerous. By the academic call for public bodies, they want to achieve as a first step that the centenary of the Great Union become an anti-Hungarian manifestation. (...) Anti-Hungarianism was one of the strong pillars of national communism in Romania. If the founding of the Romanian statehood is celebrated in an anti-Hungarian spirit, then national communism is legitimized, with its former representatives and present followers.”

It is easy to admit that there is no room for dialogue under the current circumstances of the perseverance of the returning national communism and the still operating, although in a new shape, communist secret service –the notorious Securitate.

At the “liberating Christmas” of 1989, Romanians and Hungarians found each other in a miraculous way. Following the popular uprising in Timisoara, the road was opened for the Romanian-Hungarian reconciliation. The renowned Timișoara Declaration exemplified not only the ultimate struggle against communism but also the abolition of all nationalism and the cooperation of the Romanians and the nationalities of the country in the spirit of “tolerance and mutual respect”. But this is all the past. Nearly three decades after the change of regime, the spirit of Ceaușescu continues to haunt us in our country.

It is not enough that during the persisting domestic political crisis, the Romanian Socialist-Liberal government parties and

their opposition are completely incapable of dialogue, but the same applies to the Romanian-Hungarian relations, so that without exception the entire Romanian political class is characterized by irreparable anti-Hungarianism – now, at the centenary. Not even President Klaus Iohannis is an exception, who as a German is seeking the favors of the Romanian nationalism in a compensatory manner, being the first with regard to anti-Hungarian manifestation. The Hungarian National Council of Transylvania and the ally National Szekler Council turned to him at the beginning of this year with the initiative of starting an institutional and representative Romanian-Hungarian dialogue – but our proposal fell on deaf ears at the head of state.

The discriminatory anti-Hungarian Romanian politics is an integral part of the lack of Romanian rule of law, which has even led the European Parliament to put the issue on its agenda. As a whole, the post-communist Romanian political class completely lacks the political will not only to overcome systemic corruption, which is a national peculiarity, but also to settle the traditionally unresolved minority issue, alongside other anomalies. Without this, however, in the long term, the realization of peace and stability in our society can hardly be imagined.

The initiators and supporters of the joint Romanian-Hungarian Centenary Declaration believe that “stable borders and respect for minority rights is a prerequisite for the safety of both national communities.” Accordingly, they stand out for the long-stalling Romanian-Hungarian dialogue, and call on their compatriots and the authorities, as follows: “Honour the Centenary by rejecting nationalist incitement, avoiding conflict, and giving room for hope and construction.”

In the European Parliament's headquarters in Brussels, in a symbolic and political sense, we ask for this and call for strong support from the European Union!

Tőkés László  
Member of the European Parliament

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**ROMANIA: Centenary of the unification of Transylvania**

# with Romania

HRWF (17.10.2018) – On 16 October, MEP Tőkés László hosted an event at the European Parliament about the relations between the Romanians and Hungarian communities. The conference was held on the occasion of the commemoration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Unification of Transylvania with Romania. On 12 October, in Kolozsvà/ Cluj, a joint declaration about the centenary was signed by 12 Romanian and 12 Hungarian prominent personalities of the two communities.

## *Joint Romanian – Hungarian Declaration*

Many celebratory events dedicated to the Centenary of the Unification of Transylvania with Romania had anti-Hungarian overtones and worsened the series of misunderstandings between the two communities. These events started before the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2018 and continued until the last few months. Taking into account the symbolic importance of the moment, adversarial behaviour has the potential to poison interethnic climate for many generations to come. These are the reasons why we, the signatories initiate and support the following declaration:

Transylvania was and may again be transformed into an area characterised by complementarity, thus becoming a model of cultural and religious pluralism. Promoting the identities and traditions peculiar to Transylvania serves both Romanians and Hungarians. The safety of both communities depends on stable frontiers and the observance of minority rights.

Today, there is nothing to set in opposition the interests of Romanians and Hungarians. Hungarian aspirations for cultural and territorial autonomy stem from a desire for better organisation and, hence, are beneficial to us all. Perpetuating the confusion between the concepts of autonomy and independence reflects at times certain misinterpretations, other times ill-willed manipulation.

Today, there is nothing to set in opposition the interests of Romania and Hungary. The leadership of the two states may or may not embody the ideals of the respective societies; and might as well proceed correctly or make mistakes regarding the issue of interethnic relations. The criticisms formulated by domestic or foreign actors and levelled against the two leaderships, respectively, should not affect the long-term relationships between the two peoples. Political leaders do change, as their accession to and ousting from power at specific moments of time is dependent on the nature of the democratic systems in which we live.

Hungarians living in this country are citizens of the Romanian state, having equal and inalienable rights to propose models to rebuild the common state-and-homeland. The distance they kept from the celebrations of the Centenary sheds light on a fundamental topic concerning the history of the last one hundred years, namely: what meaning does the Hungarian community attribute to the last century. Speaking on their behalf, Hungarian political leaders in Romania pointed out repeatedly that almost all Hungarians perceive this period as "100 years without fulfilments". Nonetheless, it is rather natural to treat this year as the year of drafting the balance sheet and meeting the unfulfilled desires of the minority, since these are not in conflict with general societal interests, and allow Hungarians to feel comfortable in Romania

– i.e., in their own country.

The Centenary of the Unification of Transylvania with Romania offers Romanians and Hungarians the opportunity to revive the ideal formulated in 1918, which is: to become – for Romanians, Hungarians and other state-forming minorities – a homeland, devoted to fulfilling the aspirations of all these communities. This goal cannot be achieved overnight; but we can transform this ideal into a project for our country in order to complete it during the next years. We call on our fellow countrymen and public authorities to honour the Centenary by rejecting nationalistic instigation and avoiding interethnic conflict, while favouring constructive behaviour and rising people's hopes.

Only in this manner can the Centenary become a natural celebration of Romanian communities from all over the world as well as of the Hungarian community in Transylvania.

Kolozsvár/Cluj, 12 October 2018.

### ***Signatories***

1. **Gabriel Andreescu**, activist pentru drepturile omului, politolog (R)
2. **Tőkés László**, az EMNT elnöke, európai parlamenti képviselő (H)
3. **Lucian Nastasă-Kovacs**, istoric de arte, director (R)

4. **Szilágy Zsolt**, az Erdélyi Magyar Néppárt elnöke (H)
5. **Marius Tabacu**, director, Filarmonica Transilvania (R)
6. **Bodó Barna**, politológus, egyetemi tanár (H)
7. **Cristian Sandache**, istoric, profesor universitar (R)
8. **Toró T. Tibor**, az Erdélyi Magyar Néppárt ügyvezető elnöke (H)
9. **Radu Răileanu**, coordonator, Active Watch (R)
10. **Bakk Miklós**, politológus, egyetemi tanár (H)
11. **Sabin Gherman**, jurnalist (R)
12. **Dávid László**, egyetemi tanár, a Sapientia Erdélyi Magyar Tudományegyetem rektora (H)
13. **Ramona Băluțescu**, scriitor, jurnalist (R)
14. **Péntek János**, nyelvész, egyetemi tanár (H)
15. **Liviu Antonesei**, profesor universitar (R)
16. **Florin Mihalcea**, președinte al Societății Timișoara (R)
17. **Kolumbán Gábor**, a Civitas Alapítvány elnöke (H)
18. **Mircea Toma**, jurnalist, activist pentru drepturile omului (R)
19. **Molnár Gusztáv**, filozófus, politológus (H)
20. **Ovidiu Pecican**, scriitor, istoric (R)
21. **Szilágyi Ferenc**, egyetemi tanár (H)
22. **Cristian Pîrvulescu**, politolog, profesor universitar (R)
23. **Kincses Előd**, ügyvéd (H)

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## **NORTH KOREA: Co-chairs urge President Trump to include human rights in North Korea negotiations**

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission  
(16.10.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2pVi6GI> – Reps. Randy Hultgren  
(R-IL) and Jim McGovern (D-MA), Co-Chairs of the Tom Lantos  
Human Rights Commission, wrote to President Donald Trump on  
the strategic importance of incorporating human rights  
indicators into the Administration's ongoing denuclearization  
talks with North Korea. To further this objective, the Co-  
Chairs also urged the President to appoint a Special Envoy for  
North Korean Human Rights Issues as provided for in the North  
Korea Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2017. The letter  
follows a September hearing convened by the Commission on  
human rights in North Korea. The full text of the letter is  
below.

The bipartisan Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission was  
established in 2008 by unanimous consent in the United States  
House of Representatives to promote, defend and advocate for  
international human rights. The Commission undertakes public  
education activities, provides expert human rights advice and

encourages Members of Congress to actively engage in human rights issues.

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Dear Mr. President:

We commend your recent efforts to ensure North Korean denuclearization. A wholly denuclearized North Korea is imperative for the preservation of American safety and security and that of regional allies. To that end, the incorporation of human rights indicators into a credible, verifiable denuclearization deal with North Korea is strategic and could facilitate the long-term success of such an agreement.

At a Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing last month, security and human rights experts testified about how to raise human rights objectives in negotiations with North Korea and incorporate them as criteria for improved relations between our two nations. North Korea's steps to address human rights would demonstrate trustworthiness in negotiations with the United States. Follow-through on concrete human rights commitments would lend credibility to North Korea's security commitments in a variety of ways.

As a first step, we urge you to appoint the Special Envoy on North Korean Human Rights Issues provided for in the North Korea Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2017. A Special Envoy with appropriate expertise on both human rights and

national security could provide valuable insight for your administration and could engage directly with the North Korean government on improving human rights conditions.

Second, we recommend including several specific human rights issues and appropriate indicators in your negotiations with North Korea as a measure of good faith. A primary concern is the protection of American citizens who visit North Korea. The North Korean regime's treatment of individual Americans demonstrates a disregard for the safety of the American people and a lack of respect for our nation as a whole. Ensuring necessary protections for American visitors would facilitate increased travel and information sharing between the people of both nations.

Facilitating family reunions for Korean Americans who have long been separated from their relatives in the North would also contribute to increased interactions between North Koreans and the outside world. Reunions should not take place solely in North Korea but should be available to all via a transparent process facilitated by the existence of open and ongoing lines of communication between separated families.

North Korea's verified compliance with international standards for humanitarian aid would provide reassurance as to the appropriate use of United States funds to North Korea and ensure that resources are reaching those who are in greatest need. The illicit diversion of food and aid to the military and the political elite exemplifies the defiant behavior of North Korea. Humanitarian workers must have access and be able to verify that aid reaches those for whom it was intended, including those held in prison and labor camps.

Revenue derived from the export of slave labor and exploitation of labor camps is used to enrich the North Korean government, which reportedly continues to develop military and nuclear capabilities. Verifiable steps to abolish forced labor and human trafficking would directly impact illicit funding sources for North Korea's aggressive military posture.

Lastly, the United States should pursue the termination of North Korea's information blockade against independent media outlets. Recommended actions could include permitting radio broadcasts or other messaging to provide people with useful ways to address problems they face in business, private markets, and agriculture along with information about individual universal freedoms.

In support of these recommendations, we also urge your administration to ensure that this year's United Nations General Assembly resolution on human rights in North Korea maintains the strength and resolve of last year's statement. A Security Council meeting on human rights in North Korea should also be held to continue to highlight the direct ways human rights are linked to security in this situation.

We also strongly urge you to work with the Chinese government to ensure that North Korean refugees are not forcibly repatriated.

As you made clear in your 2018 State of the Union Address, "No regime has oppressed its own citizens more totally or brutally than the cruel dictatorship of North Korea." In this spirit,

we encourage the timely appointment of the Special Envoy so that human rights can be incorporated into denuclearization talks in a way that is both strategic for their success and reflects the universal freedoms that are accorded to all people.

Sincerely,

Randy Hultgren, M.C.  
P. McGovern, M.C.  
Co-Chair, TLHRC  
Chair, TLHRC

James  
  
Co-

Cc: The Honorable Mike Pompeo, Secretary of State  
The Honorable Nikki Haley, United States Ambassador to the  
United Nations

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## **WORLD: Religion & the prevention of violent extremism**

*The authors highlight that one of the more sensitive topics in discussions on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has been the relationship between violent extremism and religion, and the implications for P/CVE programs. In response, our authors here offer five tips for Western governments for a religion-sensitive approach to P/PVE, which include the need to 1) engage with religious viewpoints; 2) address the context-specific social, economic and political drivers that influence extremist groups; 3) avoid linking religious identities and violence, and more.*

By Owen Frazer and Anael Jambers

Center for Security Studies (CSS) (10.10.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2AdnHOV> – The international policy excitement around preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has faded since the latter days of the Obama presidency. However, the fundamental challenges P/CVE seeks to address have not gone away and P/CVE programs and policies continue to be developed and implemented. After more than a decade of

experiences and reflection, and the growth of a veritable P/CVE industry, a number of lessons have been learned and insights gained. One of the more sensitive topics in P/CVE discussions has been the relationship between violent extremism and religion and the implications for P/CVE. In this short piece, we summarize five key insights about this topic that we think governments and policy-makers would do well to remember.

### ***Do Not Ignore Religion***

Although the term “violent extremism” has no agreed definition, it is generally applied to the phenomenon of groups engaged in violent activities in pursuit of a political ideology that is outside of the mainstream, often because it excludes certain groups, cultures or identities. P/ CVE emerged in a post-September 11 policy context largely due to concerns about the threat posed by violent groups who grounded their ideology in Islam. However, with some exceptions, policy-makers and commentators are generally careful to emphasize that extremism is not something specific to Islam, nor indeed to religion in general. The term has been used to describe groups as diverse as Islamic State, the Buddhist nationalist group MaBaTha in Myanmar, right-wing groups in the US and the Provisional Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland. Yet, recognizing that not all extremism is religious should not lead to us ignoring when it is. Religion is a complicated topic and we need to pay special attention to handling the intersection between religion and violent extremism.

The presence of a strong secular culture in Western policy circles leads to discomfort with discussing the links between religion and violent extremism. In some cases, this is for fear of causing offence by implying a causal link between religion and violent extremism. In others, it is based on the conviction that religion has no explanatory value, and only distracts from standard social, political and economic explanations for violent acts. A common opinion is that religion is only being instrumentalized and that violent groups' use of religious language is simply a mobilizing tool. While fears about mishandling the relationship between religion and violent extremism are well founded, ignoring religion is not the answer. Understanding the appeal, motivations and logic of violent extremist groups that adhere to a religious ideology requires genuine engagement with the religious discourses they use. Tackling violent extremism requires a serious analysis of political and social demands expressed in religious language or inspired by religious ideas. This implies a sincere effort to understand and to enter into dialogue with groups using religious language. Only by demonstrating a willingness to engage with religiously-inspired agendas, and to negotiate living together in a democratic space, can the use of violence in the name of religion be delegitimized.

### ***Get the Balance Right***

The danger of labels like "violent extremism" is that they serve to unite often very diverse phenomena into one homogenous category. This encourages a tendency to search for a single cause or explanation. The reality is of course significantly more complex. The constellation of drivers of violent extremism vary from context to context, from group to group, and indeed, from individual to individual. For example,



singling out jihadist ideology as the common denominator linking attacks from France to Mali to Syria, and treating them as all part of the same phenomenon, risks over-emphasizing the role of Islamist ideas and downplaying the role of context-specific social, political and economic drivers.

Religions, just like other belief systems, provide a framework for understanding the world and for acting in it. They can be a source of identity, of language in which grievances can be expressed and actions legitimized, and of social and political ideas about how things should be. However, we must beware of using religion as a shortcut to understanding a particular group's ideology. Religions are open to multiple interpretations. These interpretations vary depending on place and time (the diversity of Christian denominations is telling in this regard – consider the variation in beliefs and practices between the American Amish, the Greek Orthodox, and the Nigerian Pentecostal communities). While understanding these ideologies requires understanding the religion in which they are grounded, these interpretations are invariably contested from within the same religion. So, yes, religions do provide groups with a common framework within which they can develop their political agendas. Yes, they may advocate religiously-inspired "extreme" ideas whose realization is one of their motivations. And, yes, these ideas may need to be challenged. However, over-emphasizing the role of religiously-inspired ideas risks obscuring the important role of other drivers. Most groups also include within their agenda the addressing of grievances such as injustice, corruption, economic inequality and political discrimination. This explains why many recruits to such groups are not religious zealots, but often people who are simply looking for a way to address their marginalization by the political mainstream.[\[1\]](#) Violent extremism therefore needs to be analysed within the

specific social and political contexts where it manifests itself, so that PVE programs achieve the correct balance between responding to ideological and structural drivers.

### ***Avoid Linking Religious Identities and Violence***

P/CVE policies and programs have regularly run into problems when they have directly connected religious identities with violence. The UK's PREVENT program and US CVE policies were heavily criticized for stigmatizing and marginalizing Muslim citizens. President Trump's travel ban on nationals from a number of Muslim-majority countries and the continued channelling of US domestic CVE funding towards programs targeting the Muslim community suggest this false association between Islam and violence continues to influence some policy makers.[\[2\]](#) Not only is targeting individuals or communities on the basis of their religion a violation of the democratic principle of freedom of religion and belief, such policies play into the hands of groups like the Islamic State. It gives credence to their claims that the West is at war with Islam, and that Western governments hypocritically preach liberal values while discriminating against Muslims in their own countries.

Even if many policy-makers do reject a causal link between Islam and violence, some remain sympathetic to more nuanced versions of the same argument. They point the finger, not at Islam, but at Salafism, arguing that the texts and doctrines of this particular current within Sunni Islam make its followers particularly prone to violence. This argument ignores the diversity of violent, non-violent, and apolitical Salafi groups across the world. Similarly, those who condemn Salafism while promoting Sufism as a desirable alternative are

ignoring that some of the strongest critics of groups such as Islamic State are Salafi and that there are many cases of armed groups who have justified their struggle with reference to Sufism. [\[3\]](#)

Policy-makers should disabuse themselves of the notion that it is possible to predict violent behaviour based on religious affiliation. Suggestions that certain currents of a religion are necessarily more violent or more peaceful than others ignore that history is full of examples from across all religious traditions of both violent and non-violent movements for social change. The possibility for multiple interpretations of the same religious doctrines means they are not a reliable guide to behaviour. Judgements about social and political groups should be based on what they say and do, not on who they are.

### ***Engage Religious Viewpoints***

Part of the P/CVE policy-making debate is not about “violent religious extremism,” but about religious extremism more generally – religious extremism being understood as religiously-inspired ideologies that advocate for policies far from the mainstream or in radical contradiction with the status quo. This debate is founded on three concerns. The first is a security concern that non-violent extremist groups can act as a “conveyor belt,” or stepping stone, with some members moving on to join violent groups with similar ideologies. The second is a concern that religious extremist groups threaten the social fabric by promoting ideas that are perceived as contradicting societal values. In Western societies this is often articulated as a fear that non-violent extremist groups pose a threat to liberal, democratic and

secular values. A third concern is that groups may be able to use religious arguments to popularize opposition against the status quo, thus posing a threat to the government in power. Authoritarian regimes in particular that feel threatened by certain religious or political opposition groups have used the “extremist” label, and P/CVE and counter-terrorism discourses more generally, as a means to suppress such groups.[\[4\]](#)

All three of the above concerns can in fact lend support to policies that aim to marginalize or restrict the activities of groups viewed as extreme. Yet, for countries that espouse liberal democratic values, such an approach is not justifiable. The “conveyor belt” theory is disputed, and without proof that groups are engaged in violent activities, restricting their activities on security grounds violates the rights to freedom of association, belief and expression. This year the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief felt the need to remind states that “national security” may not be invoked as a ground for limiting the freedom to manifest one’s religion or belief.”[\[5\]](#) Of course, concerns about threats to the social fabric must be addressed and fears that groups aim to destabilize governments in power may be well-founded. However, these concerns must be met, not with attempts to exclude, but with attempts to engage and debate. Liberal, democratic societies must remain true to their values and uphold democratic principles at home and abroad. At its heart, democracy is a system for managing differing views in society. It is not about changing people’s fundamental beliefs but, through dialogue, finding ways for groups with differing views to live together, while avoiding the development of parallel societies. Irrespective of the religion to which they belong, or how “radical” their ideas are, everyone should have the possibility to participate in social and political life. This is not to say that anything goes. Laws put in place to ensure that all groups in society can participate equally must

be upheld, and groups inciting or perpetrating acts of violence, or engaging in other illegal behaviours that diminish the freedoms of others, should be held accountable. Governments and societies need to resist the urge to restrict the religious “other” – instead, they should seek to engage it.

### ***Leave Theological Interpretation to the Experts***

In dealing with groups that incite or perpetrate acts of violence, legal sanctions have their limits. Therefore, considerable efforts have also been invested in contesting the religious narratives used by violent extremist groups. These activities are important, but such programs get it wrong when they make governments and political leaders the messengers. Governments should challenge narratives they find extreme, not by taking theological positions, but by arguing from the core values on which their societies are founded and about which they have legitimacy to speak. For liberal democratic states core values, including principles of non-discrimination, freedom of expression, freedom of religion and belief, respect for international law and inclusive political participation of all groups, are inscribed in laws and should provide the basis of any argumentation.

Governments do not have the credibility to counter the religious narratives of extremist groups on religious grounds. Apart from their policies often being perceived as part of the problem, they lack religious legitimacy. President Obama’s condemnation of Islamic State as “un-Islamic” undoubtedly did not carry much weight amongst potential sympathisers of the group. The debates of interpretation are intra-religious, and not ones where a secular state has the competence or

credibility to weigh in.[\[6\]](#) Challenging the religious narrative of violent extremists should be left to those with the appropriate religious expertise, who are influential with the people at whom the message is aimed. They should be given the space to do this in their way, including being critical of government actions. Perceptions that they are mouthpieces of governments will only delegitimize them in the eyes of those individuals most at-risk of joining violent extremist groups.

## ***Conclusion***

The topic of religion's relationship to violent extremism is a sensitive one. However, governments cannot afford to ignore it. They must continue to analyse why, and in what way, it is important. Failure to do so risks enabling discriminatory policies that only fuel the problem. Western governments' most effective tools for preventing violent extremism are the liberal democratic principles on which they are founded. Consistently applying these at home and abroad, and calling out others who do not, is the basis for an effective and principled approach to preventing violent extremism. This must include a nuanced approach to promoting an inclusive politics that gives space to religious voices, avoids the development of parallel societies, and reflects on how national identities can be constructed so as to leave space to integrate non-mainstream actors and cultures in a constructive manner.

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2018), [https:// www.international-alert.org/publications/if-victims-become-perpetrators-violent-extremism-sahel](https://www.international-alert.org/publications/if-victims-become-perpetrators-violent-extremism-sahel)

[2] Faiza Patel, Andrew Lindsay, and Sophia DenUyl, "Countering Violent Extremism in the Trump Era," Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, June 15, 2018, [https://www. brennancenter.org/analysis/countering-violent-extremism-trump-era](https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/countering-violent-extremism-trump-era)

[3] "Salafi Violence and Sufi Tolerance? Rethinking Conventional Wisdom Author(s): Mark Woodward, Muhammad Sani Umar, Inayah Rohmaniyah and Mariani Yahya," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no. 6 (2013): 58 – 78

[4] Annelle Sheline, "Middle East Regimes Are Using 'Moderate' Islam to Stay in Power," *Washington Post*, January 3, 2017, sec. Monkey Cage Blog, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/01/middle-east-regimes-are-using-moderate-islam-to-stay-in-power>

[5] United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief," Advance Edited Version, United Nations Human Rights Council (Geneva, February 28, 2018), para. 45, [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/A\\_HRC\\_37\\_49\\_EN.docx](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/A_HRC_37_49_EN.docx)

[6] Peter Mandaville, "The Future of Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy under Trump" (Brookings Institution, July 3, 2017), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-future-of-religion-and-u-s-foreign-policy-under-trump>

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## **CHINA: Twenty banned religious groups**

FOREF (15.10.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2pVeaFS> – On September 18, 2017, the revamped China Anti-Cult (xie jiao) website reiterated the list of banned groups which had been listed publicly in 2014. Of the total 20 groups, eleven were listed as being “dangerous”:

1. Falun Gong (法轮功)
2. The Church of Almighty God (全能神)
3. The Shouters (呼喊派)
4. The Disciples Society (门徒会)
5. Unification Church (统一教会)
6. Guanyin Method (观音法门)
7. Bloody Holy Spirit (血淋淋的神)
8. Full Scope Church (全能神)
9. Three Grades of Servants (三班仆人)
10. True Buddha School (真佛学校)



11. Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station (中国行政代牧站  
站)

See the [full article](#) (25 pages) as published by CESNUR earlier this year: **The Black-Lists: The Evolution of China's List of "Illegal and Evil Cults"** by Edward A. Irons

**Abstract**

In China, departments under the central government have published lists of banned and illegal religious groups since 1995. This practice can be seen as an extension of traditional ways of categorizing heterodox associations dating back to imperial times. Groups on the current list are often identified as xie jiao—normally translated as “evil cults.” The list is thus directly connected to questions of the categorization of religion in China. The study of the lists provides insight into the government's evolving policy on religion, as well as the legal environment for religious activity.

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# **VIETNAM: Leader of banned Vietnam Buddhist sect expelled from Thanh Minh Zen monastery**

Radio Free Asia (08.10.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2ElvSNa> – A high-profile human rights activist and supreme patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) has been expelled from the Thanh Minh Zen monastery in Ho Chi Minh City, where he had been under house arrest since 2003, supporters said.

Thich Quang Do had been under extreme state surveillance while interned at the monastery for practicing his religion and being an advocate of religious freedom and democracy.

In a statement, the International Buddhist Information Bureau (IBIB) said that the 91-year-old patriarch had been asked on Sept. 15 to leave the monastery by its superior monk Thích Thanh Minh as his presence had become a distraction to the daily operations of the monastery.

The Vietnamese government, which does not recognize the church, had been trying to move Thich Quang Do out of the monastery for the past two years, and he vowed to stay unless asked to leave by the superior monk himself.

Once the monk made the request, the patriarch left immediately, moving from one pagoda to another within the city with no long term living arrangements. He then boarded a train for his native Thai Binh province in the north.

Speaking to RFA's Vietnamese service, IBIB director Vo Van Ai explained the various difficulties that the intrusive police presence caused the monastery during the patriarch's house arrest.

"People don't want to visit the monastery because they are afraid of being monitored by the police. They even took pictures of everyone visiting the monastery," he said.

Vo said that life inside the monastery had been "just like a prison" for the elderly patriarch.

"There is a police checkpoint right at the front of the monastery so they can watch him closely. Even when they let him out to visit the hospital, police would follow him," Vo said.

The IBIB is concerned that in the remote northern province, Thich Quang Do will have limited access to communications, health care and visits from UBCV followers.

Vo quoted Thich Quang Do as saying he intended to carry on

with his religious practice in his hometown.

“The church is still the same. It is only when I die that I can’t work for the church. I can’t leave the church,” Vo quoted the patriarch as saying in an Oct. 5 telephone call.

*Reported and translated by RFA’s Vietnamese Service. Written in English by Eugene Whong.*

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**IRAQ: USAID and Knights of Columbus in agreement to help**

# Mid East Christians

Catholic News Agency (12.10.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2CKvHZU> – The Knights of Columbus have signed an agreement with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to cooperate in assisting religious minorities in the Middle East rebuild their communities following the persecution and genocide of the Islamic State.

The joint effort was agreed in a memorandum of understanding announced Oct. 12 and will begin in Iraq, before being rolled out throughout the region.

Andrew Walther, Vice President for Strategic Communications for the Knights of Columbus, said that the agreement was an important advance in helping the Christian communities who had suffered under IS.

“This memorandum is important in itself,” he told CNA. “But it is also illustrative of a wider engagement with, commitment to, and prioritization of persecuted communities in the region by USAID – not only Christians but Yazidis, Shi’a Muslims and others.”

Carl Anderson, the Supreme Knight and head of the Catholic fraternal order, released a statement Friday welcoming the news.

“The Knights of Columbus is pleased to work together with

USAID in the important work being done to stabilize these communities and hope that our joint and combined efforts will bring hope and concrete improvement to the situation confronting minority communities targeted by ISIS," Anderson said.

"Vice President Mike Pence and [USAID] Administrator Mark Green are to be commended for working to ensure that these communities are not overlooked by American government assistance."

USAID plans to work closely with the Knights, and local faith and community leaders, to deliver aid rapidly to persecuted communities, according the memorandum signed Friday.

"Crucially," the document states, "the support will flow directly to individuals and households most in need of help."

In the agreement, USAID recognized "the unique expertise and relationships of trust that organizations like Knights of Columbus has forged with local and faith-based organizations in the region."

According to the memorandum, partnerships with the Knights and similar organizations will form a crucial part of delivering the Genocide Recovery and Persecution Response Program in the Middle East announced last year by Vice President Mike Pence.

Andrew Walther explained that these partnerships had

historical roots.

“Almost exactly 100 years ago there was a real public-private partnership in the United States to help ensure the survival of Christian communities being persecuted throughout the Ottoman Empire,” he said.

“Under the Wilson administration, several organizations including, in a modest way, the Knights partnered with the government to deliver aid to these communities under threat. Reviving this historical cooperation will make our combined efforts that much more effective for the benefit of those Christians struggling to survive in their own land.”

USAID is responsible for delivering the program and currently has more than \$195 million in planned and active efforts to support rebuilding in northern Iraq.

In addition to advocacy work on behalf of persecuted minorities, the Knights of Columbus Charities has committed more than \$20 million in aid to the region since 2014. An additional \$5 million is expected to be committed over the next six months.

Two years ago, the Knights produced a report detailing IS atrocities in the region. That report was instrumental in successive U.S. secretaries of state designating the treatment of religious minorities in the region by Islamic State as genocide.

The memorandum also committed both organizations to “enhance our collective response to vulnerable populations to help preserve and promote pluralism in the Middle East” through assistance to a number of communities hit hard by IS, including Yazidis, Christians, Shi’a Muslims, and other ethnic and religious communities.

“Our work with USAID is intended to help these populations survive and prosper in lands they have called home for centuries, and even millennia. We cannot allow ISIS to succeed in driving them out,” Anderson said.

USAID has partnered with religious communities and organizations in carrying out its work since its establishment in the 1960s.

Aid to the persecuted Christian communities in Iraq was one of the central focuses of the the Knight of Columbus’ annual convention held in August.

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## **EGYPT: Military court sentences 17 people to death for the attack on Coptic churches**

*Sentenced another 19 defendants to life imprisonment or several years in prison. For the judges they are guilty of membership of the Islamic State. Activists and NGOs against the trial in a military court. "Horrible" attacks, but an "unjust" proceeding do not guarantee justice.*

AsiaNews (12.10.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2CIRgdl> – Cairo – A military court in Egypt has sentenced to death 17 people, held responsible for a series of attacks against some Coptic Christian churches in the country, which caused dozens of victims and wounded between 2016 and 2017 to the Cairo, Alexandria and Tanta.

According to Mena State Agency, in the context of criminal proceedings another 19 defendants were sentenced to life imprisonment or sentences between 10 and 15 years in prison.

The Islamic State (IS, ex Isis) had claimed responsibility for the attacks, pointing out that the suicide bombers and assailants who blew themselves up inside the churches were militants or affiliated to the jihadist group.

The cases that were the object of the trial concerned in particular the attacks against three Christian places of worship: the Coptic Orthodox church of Saint Peter's in the Abaseya district in Cairo, which caused 29 victims; the bombings of April 2017 at Coptic churches in Tanta and Alessandria, where 45 people died.

Anonymous sources of the Egyptian magistracy report that the condemned were also found guilty of membership of the Islamic State; some of them also for an attack launched on January 16 last year against a police checkpoint in Naqab, a desert area in the south-west of Egypt.

During the initial stages of the trial, the Minister of Justice Nabil Sadeq had requested the referral of the 48 defendants to the military court, on charges of having created terrorist cells in the governorates of Cairo and Mena. A choice criticized by some activists and NGOs, who judge the whole process "unjust".

There is no doubt that the defendants have committed "horrible crimes," Amnesty International says in a statement, but the death sentence at the conclusion of an "unjust military trial" does not do justice. They deserved a "civil proceeding".

In a nation of almost 95 million people with a large Muslim majority, Coptic Christians are a substantial minority of around 10% of the total population. Between 2016 and 2017 the Land of the Pharaohs recorded a series of bloody attacks, which involved the Christian community itself.

The escalation of violence led to fears of the cancellation of Pope Francis' Apostolic journey to Egypt, April last year. However, the pontiff respected the program by meeting the president of the Republic, the great imam of al-Azhar and celebrating mass in front of tens of thousands of faithful.

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