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Behind bars for their faith in 20 countries

China and Iran are the two countries in which the Brussels-based NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l has identified the highest number of believers imprisoned for exercising their basic rights to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

EU Today (03.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/22V0nwf> - The violations are detailed in the NGO's last annual prisoners' list "Behind Bars for their Faith in 20 Countries" published on 4 January.

The list comprises more than 1,500 names of believers of 15 religious denominations, including atheists, who were imprisoned for activities protected by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration and Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights: freedom to change religion or belief, freedom to share one's religion or beliefs, freedom of association, freedom of worship and assembly, or conscientious objection to military service.

Some 20 countries in all were identified by HRWF for depriving believers and atheists of their freedom in 2015.

They are Azerbaijan, Bhutan, China, Egypt, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Laos, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

In China, five religious denominations are particularly persecuted, says the report.

It says, "Hundreds of Falun Gong practitioners, whose movement was banned in 1999, are put in prison by the masses but Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestants belonging to the mushrooming network of underground house churches outside of state control also pay a heavy toll. A dozen Catholic priests and bishops arrested by the police many years ago for being faithful to the Pope and their failure to swear allegiance to the Communist Party are still missing to date. Uyghur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, systematically suspected of separatism and/or terrorism, are also particular targets of the regime.

"In Iran, seven denominations are victims of harsh repression. The Baha'is, whose movement is considered a heresy of Islam, provide the highest number of prisoners. They are followed by the Sufis, the Sunnis, as well as home-grown Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians who extensively carry out missionary activities among their fellow citizens despite the risk of imprisonment, torture and execution. Shia dissidents, members of Erfan-e-Halghe and Zoroastrians are also repressed by the theocratic regime of Tehran."

The report goes on, "It is worth mentioning that North Korea remains a black spot on the map of religious persecution as access to information about North Korean prisoners of conscience is impossible. What is known however is that in 2015 four foreign Christians (one Canadian and three South Korean pastors) were serving a prison term for attempting to carry out missionary activities in North Korea. Hyeon Soo Lim from Toronto

was sentenced to life imprisonment in December 2015 and Kim Jeong-Wook to hard labour for life.

Commenting on the report, HRWF director Willy Fautre said, "These cases are only the tip of the iceberg but North Korean Christians belonging to underground house churches are also regularly arrested."

According to the 400-page report of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) into Human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (DPRK), "Countless numbers of persons in North Korea who attempt to practice their religious beliefs have been severely punished, even unto death."

HRWF has also identified 15 religious denominations that are victims of state repression.

In 2015, 555 Jehovah's Witnesses were in prison in South Korea for refusing to perform military service and there were 54 more in Eritrea.

Falun Gong practitioners and Baha'is can be said to hold the record of the highest number of prisoners in

one and the same country: respectively China and Iran.

Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestants were behind bars in at least 12 countries: Bhutan, China, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Laos, North Korea, Russia, Sudan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam. Sunni Muslims belonging to various sects, in particular Tablighi Jamaat and Said Nursi followers, are also serving long terms. Members of other minorities are also detained: Ahmadis in Saudi Arabia, atheists in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Buddhists in China and in Vietnam, Copts in Eritrea, Zoroastrians in Iran.

HRWF has been monitoring freedom of religion or belief as a non-religious organization for 25 years. In 2015 it covered in its daily newsletter over 60 countries where there were incidents related to freedom of religion or belief, intolerance and discrimination.

Fautre added, "The purpose of our data collection project about faith or belief prisoners is to put an instrument at the disposal of the EU institutions for their advocacy in favor of freedom of religion or belief in the world as requested by the 2013 EU Guidelines.

"Our best wish for the New Year is that the EU and its member states, as well as the international community in general, extensively use our Prisoners' List 2015 to obtain the early release of the prisoners of conscience identified and documented by our NGO."

The lists of prisoners per country can be consulted via <http://hrwf.eu/forb-intro/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list>.

EPRID Celebrates Human Rights Day with a Conference on “Religion, Security and Human Rights” at the European Parliament



EPRID (15.12.2015) - On 10 December 2015, the occasion of International Human Rights Day, the European Platform against Religious Intolerance and Discrimination (EPRID) organized a conference at the European Parliament on “Religion, Security and Human Rights” along with Elmar Brok MEP, Chair of the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee. U.N Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Prof. Heiner Bielefeldt was among the key note speakers.

The event was co-chaired by Andrew Lewer MPE, member of the EP Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance, and attended by MEPs and staff, diplomats, officials from EU institutions, religious leaders and human rights defenders from the EU and Asia.

EPRID board member Penelope Faulkner emphasized the timeliness of the event: “At a time when religion is becoming the focus of discourses on the security of states, it is fundamental to ensure that the concept of the freedom of religion or belief is correctly understood and that its importance is not downplayed.”

Rachel Bayani, who moderated the event on behalf of EPRID, said in her opening remarks that “At the heart of the work of EPRID lies the understanding that human conscience distinguishes itself through the possibility to search for meaning, and as such to hold a belief of one’s choosing. We believe that without this possibility, the capacity inherent in each individual cannot find expression and that as a result any society-building process is hampered.”

Prof. Heiner Bielefeldt stressed that the issue was not “religious violence” but “violence committed in the name of religion”. “It is a dangerous misconception to assume that violence stems from the centre of the religious beliefs themselves. There is a connection between violence and religion. But this connection is brought about by human beings.” He added that certain political environments provide fertile grounds for such expressions of violence and that trust building at the level of public institutions and communication are among the key steps that need to be taken to counter such violence.

Dr. Kishan Manocha, OSCE/ODIHR Senior Adviser on Freedom of Religion and Belief underlined that "Within the OSCE, the Freedom of Religion or Belief (FORB) is conceived in very dynamic terms. It's broad, it's rich, it should not to be understood as a concession by States, as an "act of mercy" on the part of states... FoRB is not to be advanced in isolation, it must be advanced alongside all other human rights. Advancing all human rights together is part of the OSCE's holistic approach to ensuring human security."

Prof. Cole Durham, Director of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies, USA, drew attention to the limits of security policies saying that "No security policy can ultimately be effective if it does not take freedom of religion or belief into account. Because religious convictions are among the few things that people care about more than life itself. Thus, unless situations can be defused with assurances that people can live their beliefs in peace, there is little hope for achieving lasting peace, stability and security".

Ms. Kalpna Devi, a human rights defender from Pakistan, described her own experiences as a Hindu, a woman and a lawyer: "They came to my house with kerosene and matches. They said, "Burn her, she is the head of the Hindu community, so she has no right to live here... People come to burn us, to point their fingers at us simply because we are a minority".

Dr. Liviu Oleanu, Secretary General of the International Association for the Defense of Religious Liberty (AIDLR) and EPRID member asked the audience to observe one minute of silence for the victims of recent acts of violence. He asked "what should prevail, freedom or security? I say that both freedom and security should prevail. National security is often used as a pretext to suppress religious minorities, dissidents and political opponents".

Defending Freedom of Religion or Belief for minorities in Asia

EP Intergroup on FORB (26.10.2015) - On Wednesday 21st October 2015, Peter van Dalen MEP hosted a conference in the European Parliament, Brussels, with Susan Kerr from Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), on Defending Freedoms of Religion and Belief for Minorities in Asia.

The conference audience heard detailed reports from civil society organisations regarding the state of religious pluralism in China, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and India. These described how minorities in China and Vietnam are suffering restrictions through excessive government intervention aiming to control societal forces; while in India and Sri Lanka, we are witnessing a rise in religious extremism which is inspiring societal hostility and structural biases.

Peter van Dalen MEP made clear his determination to ensure the EU responds to these injustices "Our Intergroup exists to ensure that the EU promotes and protects freedoms of religion or belief in all its external relations, including in trade negotiations. Most recently, for example, I formally requested that the European Parliament Delegation for Relations with India examines the state of pluralism in India. Because India is the world's largest democracy and wields such significant influence in the region, I believe India deserves special attention. It is time that the rights of India's religious minorities are defended."

Sophia Kuby of ADF International presented extensive evidence on India at the meeting, including a case from November 4 2014, in which Pastor Harikishan Rana and six other Christians were attacked in the town of Bhopal by a mob of 250 people, led by local Hindutva fundamentalists who demanded he close his Church. He refused, and their homes were broken into; they were stripped naked and their belongings were stolen.

A 2015 Pew Research Centre report found that India scores "Very high" in the social hostilities category facing religious minorities, and in the "High" category on government restrictions.

Five Indian states have already adopted Anti-Conversion laws which restrict the freedoms of religious minorities to share their faith. UN special rapporteur Heiner Bielefeldt critically described the "high penalty of three years imprisonment based on loosely defined terms" in the state law of Gujarat. In September an Anti-Conversion laws were also tabled in the state of Maharashtra, and at India's National Parliament by way of a Private Members Bill.

Also at the conference was EEAS representative Ms. Nicole Reckinger, who - referring to the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief, of which Mr. van Dalen MEP is co-Chairman - said at the event "The EEAS shares the Intergroup's dream that all people should enjoy freedoms of religion or belief. This should not be called just a European value, but a universal value." She also described the concrete actions being taken to implement the EU Guidelines in country delegations, and expressed her anticipation at continuing to cooperate with the Intergroup, and civil society toward fulfilling this dream.

Altogether, the event propelled discussion and concrete strategies - particularly between the European Parliament and the EEAS, with the support of civil society - toward defending and promoting access to FoRB in the region.

International Religious Freedom Report for 2014 Executive Summary

US State Department (15.10.2015) - <http://1.usa.gov/1cFZGfi> -

Introduction

In Mosul, Iraq and nearby towns, shortly after the takeover of the area by militants of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Christians who had been given the choice to convert, pay a ruinous tax, or die, gathered their families and what few possessions they could carry, and sought all possible means to escape. Their community, having been a part of the rich culture and history of this city for more than a thousand years, was being threatened. Three-year old Christina Khader Ebada boarded a crowded bus with her mother to leave when suddenly one of the fighters guarding the checkpoint tore Christina from her mother's arms. The panicked mother followed him, pleading with him to return the girl. "Shut up," he responded. "If you come close to this little girl you will be slaughtered; we will slaughter you." And she was forced back on the bus, leaving her baby behind, never to know what became of her. Christina and her family were also victims of ISIL's brutal persecution, which has targeted all those, including religious and ethnic minorities, who oppose or do not fit in with ISIL's ideological vision and its categorical and violent opposition to religious freedom.

David Saperstein, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom (IRF) has said, "There is an absolute and unequivocal need to give voice to the religiously oppressed in every land afraid to speak of what they believe in; who face death and live in fear, who worship in underground churches, mosques or temples, who feel so

desperate that they flee their homes to avoid killing and persecution simply because they love God in their own way or question the existence of God.”

The International Religious Freedom Report, now in its 17th year, attempts to give voice to those oppressed people and to document when and where the universal human right to religious freedom was violated. Congressionally-mandated and comprising almost 200 distinct reports on countries and territories, this report continues to reflect the United States’ commitment to, and advancement of, the right of every person to freedom of religion or belief. This year’s report details the actions of Non-State Actors, including rebel and terrorist organizations, who committed by far some of the most egregious human rights abuses and caused significant damage to the global status of respect for religious freedom. In some cases, government failure, delay, and inadequacy in combatting these groups and other societal actors had severe consequences for people living under dire religious freedom conditions. Anti-Semitism continued to be a major problem around the globe with increases in anti-Semitic incidents recorded in many countries. In May 2014 the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) released the results of a survey conducted in 102 countries between July 2013 and February 2014, which sought to measure support for 11 common anti-Semitic stereotypes among national populations. Other concerning trends over the year included increasing use of combatting terrorism and extremism as an excuse for unreasonable religious restrictions.

Government Failure to Protect Against IRF Abuses Committed by Non-State Actors

In the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and throughout Asia, a range of non-state actors including terrorist organizations, have set their sights on destroying religious diversity. Members of religious groups were disproportionately affected, often suffering harsh and hateful treatment of non-state actors. In these regions, religious intolerance and hostility, often combined with political, economic and ethnic grievances, frequently led to violence. Governments stood by, either unwilling or unable to act in response to the resulting death, injuries and displacement.

Stability in Iraq declined precipitously this year as the collapse of government security structures in parts of the country prevented leaders from stopping ISIL’s territorial offensive and subsequent atrocities. Likewise in Syria, the effective control by various non-State groups of portions of the country’s territory contributed to a precipitous decline in religious freedom. On both sides of the border, ISIL sought to eliminate members of any group it assessed as deviating from ISIL’s own violent and destructive interpretation of Islam. It has forcibly displaced hundreds of thousands of people, conducted mass executions, and kidnapped, sold, enslaved, raped and/or forcibly converted thousands of women and children—all on the grounds that these people stand in opposition to ISIL’s religious dogma.

Shia militias in Iraq also committed abuses, targeting some Sunnis with abductions, execution-style killings, torture, and threats, as well as destruction of homes and businesses. In some instances, these militias reportedly prevented internally displaced Sunnis from returning home. The Prime Minister has emphasized a zero-tolerance policy for human rights violations and abuses and called for the protection of religious minorities, but the government’s capacity to protect civilians from the ongoing conflict was limited.

In Syria, the group al-Nusra Front also controlled significant territory, conducting targeted executions of religious leaders including seven Druze clerics in Dara province and Jesuit priest Frans van der Lugt in Homs. Al-Nusra Front also kidnapped priests and nuns on multiple occasions, and engaged in bombings and other religiously-motivated attacks.

People living in northern Nigeria, the Far North Region of Cameroon, and southern Chad and Niger were subject to terror and destruction as a result of Boko Haram's quest to impose its religious and political beliefs throughout the region. Civil society groups estimated that Boko Haram killed more people in 2014 than the previous five years of the conflict combined. In addition, many of Boko Haram's vicious attacks were targeted against civilians, government officials, and military forces. The group deliberately targeted Christians, as well as Muslims who spoke out against or opposed their radical ideology. As West Africa's most active terror group, Boko Haram claimed responsibility for scores of fatal attacks on churches and mosques, often killing worshipers during religious services or immediately afterward. One of many such incidents occurred on April 14, when Boko Haram kidnapped more than 200 mostly Christian girls from Chibok, Borno State, sold them into slavery, and forcibly converted them to Islam. Conflict in the northeast has displaced some 1.5 million Nigerians inside the country and forced some 200,000 refugees to flee to neighboring countries.

In Pakistan, organizations designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations by the U.S. government intimidated religious groups through attacks or threats of attacks. Lashkar i Jhangvi claimed responsibility for a January 21 suicide bomber attack on a bus carrying Hazara Shia pilgrims in Balochistan's Mastung District, killing 24 and injuring 40. Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) released a video on February 2 threatening two minority groups in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Kalash and the Ismailis, with death if members refused to convert to the TTP's interpretation of Islam. Additionally, sectarian, violent extremist, and terrorist groups attacked houses of worship, religious gatherings, and religious leaders, causing hundreds of deaths during the year. Police often failed to prevent such attacks and authorities failed to investigate, arrest, and prosecute those responsible for the religiously-motivated attacks.

During the summer of 2014, countries such as France and Germany witnessed a wave of anti-Israel sentiments that crossed the line into anti-Semitism. The surge in anti-Semitism in Western Europe during 2014 left many pondering the viability of Jewish communities in some countries. Although most anti-Semitic incidents consisted mainly of hate speech and the desecration of institutions, monuments, and cemeteries, others turned violent. On May 24, Mehdi Nemmouche, a French Muslim national from the northern town of Roubaix who had been radicalized in prison, entered the Jewish Museum of Belgium and shot dead two tourists and a woman. The fourth victim, a museum employee, also succumbed to his wounds. Nemmouche had a camera attached to his chest so he could film his murders, and a white sheet with the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) penned in Arabic. He had previously spent 11 months training with ISIL in Syria.

In Burma, continued deficiencies in the respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom included societal violence against religious minorities, including Rohingya and other Muslims and Christians, the destruction of religious buildings in areas of conflict, policies prohibiting or impeding Muslim land ownership and property occupation in some areas, and the proposed "Protection of Religious and Race Laws" which, if enacted, could be enforced in a manner that would significantly undermine religious freedom. The anti-Muslim sermons of the 969 monks, other prominent monks, and the Buddhist Committee for Protection of Race and Religion (MaBaTha) were circulated widely via print journals, DVD, and the internet. The sermons denigrated Muslims and sometimes Christians and Hindus, called for a national boycott of all Muslim-owned businesses, and cautioned Buddhists against interaction with Muslims. Journalists and activists received death threats for covering and speaking out against anti-Muslim hate speech and religious-based violence.

Societal Tensions and Discrimination and Governmental Lack of Response

Governments have the obligation to protect the human rights of all their citizens and should promote an environment of tolerance and non-discrimination. In both principle and action, where people are endangered, threatened, or face discrimination, it is the responsibility of governments to safeguard universal human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to life and the freedom of conscience, belief, practice, worship, and to explain and change one's faith. The right to freedom of religion is found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and in states' own domestic laws. When governments fail to respect those laws, obligations and standards, whether by deed or inaction, they legitimize and facilitate non-state actors who persecute and discriminate against members of vulnerable religious communities, nurture an environment of intolerance, and weaken the ties that support peaceful and resilient societies.

Though Bashar al-Asad tried to claim the mantle of protector of Syria's religious minorities, he promoted a sectarian narrative to describe the country's ongoing conflict while allowing ISIL and other violent groups to flourish in some areas. This created an untenable situation where religiously motivated attacks targeted Syrians across the political and religious spectrum. In many situations, the lack of regime action to try to stop ISIL's and other groups' advances and attacks on specific religious groups and communities laid bare Asad's cynical political calculations in daring to claim the title "protector" of any of Syria's people.

In Nigeria, containing Boko Haram and preventing or quelling religiously motivated violence and discrimination remained a daunting task for the Nigerian government. At state, federal, and local levels the government failed to investigate, prosecute, and punish perpetrators of violence or other abuses of religious freedom. Security forces remain inadequately equipped and trained to combat Boko Haram. Residents reported the military fleeing their posts during or in anticipation of an attack, and some attacks lasted hours without any response to pleas for military intervention.

In June, after a Boko Haram attack in Borno State, reports indicated that soldiers fled and many deserted, saying they were outgunned by Boko Haram. Especially in central regions, where there were long-standing disputes between Christians and Muslims, the government did little to ensure the implementation of recommendations put forth by numerous government-sponsored panels and interfaith dialogues.

In Pakistan, the government's general failure to investigate, arrest, or prosecute those responsible for religious freedom abuses promoted an environment of impunity. This environment fostered further intolerance and acts of violence. Government policies also failed to protect members of majority and minority religious groups. In addition, the persistent use of discriminatory legislation, such as blasphemy laws, including the government's failure to address false accusations of blasphemy and laws designed to delegitimize the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, meant that minorities were often afraid to profess freely their religious beliefs. The Supreme Court announced a detailed judgment regarding minorities' rights on June 20, in accordance with which the government created a National Commission for Minorities with representatives of various faith groups. However, other recommendations from the judgment have yet to be implemented, such as establishment of a police task force to protect minorities, revision of school curricula to promote religious and social tolerance, and steps to discourage hate speech in social media.

Burma's constitution states, "Every citizen is equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practice religion subject to public order, morality or health and to the other provisions of this Constitution." However, this protection and other antidiscrimination laws do not, by their terms, apply to members of ethnic groups not formally recognized under the law as citizens, such as the Muslim Rohingya in northern Rakhine State. Even where members of other groups are recognized, the

promise of non-discrimination is often not enforced. After dozens of Rohingya Muslims were allegedly killed by military, police, and paramilitary security forces in retaliation for the death of a police officer, the government did not grant access to independent forensic experts to examine the scene. This made a credible, independent investigation impossible.

The government continued to subject public events, including religious ceremonies and festivals, to security regulations and other controls. It remained extremely difficult for Muslims and Christians to acquire permission to repair or construct new mosques or churches. The State Sangha Monk Coordination Committee and Ministry of Religious Affairs restricted the political expression and association of members of the monastic community.

In Sri Lanka, it was reported that under the governmental regime of former President Rajapaksa, local police and government officials sometimes appeared to be acting in concert with Buddhist nationalist organizations to attack members of religious minorities. On January 12, a Buddhist mob attacked two evangelical churches in the southern town of Hikkaduwa during services, causing thousands of dollars of damage, burning Bibles, breaking windows, and smashing musical instruments. A film of the attack showed police standing idly by while protesters continued their acts of destruction. In addition to church attacks, under the regime of former President Rajapaksa, police continued to use a revoked 2011 government circular to coerce unregistered churches to register or be shut down. On June 15, at least three Muslims were killed and more than 80 people were injured in clashes with the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS, "Forces of Buddhist Power"), a hardline violent ethnic Sinhala Buddhist organization with links to the government, during a rally in Aluthgama and Beruwalla. The BBS held a large rally in the streets of Aluthgama to condemn a reported assault of a Buddhist monk by three Muslim youth. During the rally, BBS leaders led a procession through the streets of Aluthgama chanting anti-Muslim slogans. Some 900 policemen on duty in the vicinity failed to act to stop the resulting violence.

In the eastern Ukrainian oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk, Russian-backed separatists proclaimed the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. In the areas they control, the separatists have kidnapped, beaten, and threatened Protestants, Catholics, and members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate, as well as participated in anti-Semitic acts.

Religious Freedom Violations, Abuses and Restrictions Involving Governments

In every region during the year, discriminatory laws, repressive policies, marginalization, and discriminatory application of laws had a negative impact on the ability of groups and individuals to practice their faiths.

People cannot enjoy religious freedom unless they have both the right to express their beliefs freely and change their religion without facing persecution, violence, or discrimination. The threat and enforcement of blasphemy and apostasy laws during the year had a significant impact on the ability of individuals to exercise freedoms of expression and religion and resulted in deaths and imprisonment.

Individuals accused of violating Pakistan's blasphemy laws continued to face societal harassment, discrimination, and violence. On May 8 in Multan, Punjab, an unidentified gunman shot and killed Rashid Rehman, an attorney representing Junaid Hafeez, a university lecturer accused of blasphemy. On November 4, in Kot Radha Kishan, Punjab, an mob of some 1,500 villagers accused a Christian couple of blasphemy and burned them alive in a brick kiln. Media, government, and civil society organizations reported the kiln owner accused the couple of desecrating a Quran after the couple failed to repay a loan, and locked them in a room while announcements from local mosques rallied the

crowd. On October 16, the Lahore High Court upheld the death sentence of Aasia Bibi, a Christian woman convicted of blasphemy four years ago. Bibi has been on death row since November 2010, after a district court found her guilty of making derogatory remarks about Prophet Mohammed during an argument. Her lawyers submitted an appeal on November 24 to the Supreme Court.

On May 15, a local Sudanese court sentenced Meriam Yahia Ibrahim Ishag to 100 lashes and death by hanging for allegedly committing apostasy and adultery by marrying a Christian man, in a case brought against her by her family. Separate charges were pursued against her in a Muslim family affairs court. Ishag said she had been raised as Christian by her mother and identified herself as a Christian. The government released Ishag from custody after a higher court overturned her original sentence in June following significant international pressure, but prevented her from departing Sudan until a month later.

Raif Badawi, a young Saudi Arabian blogger and activist for reform was charged with apostasy. Eventually, after months of court proceedings, he was convicted of the lesser charge of "insulting Islam," sentenced to ten years' imprisonment, and given a penalty of 1000 lashes. What he had done was simply speak his mind about his country, his government, and his religion. Badawi remains a prisoner of conscience, jailed for his beliefs and for speaking his mind.

The 2014 report notes a continuation of many restrictive policies affecting religious freedom including laws criminalizing religious activities and expression, prohibitions on conversion or proselytizing, and stringent registration requirements or discriminatory application of registration requirements for religious organizations.

Executions and arrests in Iran: The government of Iran executed, detained, harassed, and discriminated against members of religious minority groups as well as Muslims professing beliefs at variance with state-approved doctrine on charges of moharebeh (enmity against God) and anti-Islamic propaganda. On September 29, authorities executed Mohsen Amir-Aslani for making "innovations in the religion" and "spreading corruption on earth." Human rights groups reported that charges against him included insulting the prophet Jonah and promoting his own interpretation of the Quran. At the end of 2014, several hundred Baha'is, Christians, Sufi and Sunni Muslims, Yarsanis, and Shia Muslims professing unapproved doctrine were in detention because of activities related to the peaceful practice of their religious beliefs, many arrested during raids on religious gatherings.

Crackdown on state-sanctioned Christian churches in China: The government sentenced Zhang Shaojie, a prominent state-sanctioned Christian pastor, to 12 years in prison on charges connected to his advocacy on behalf of his church community. Local authorities also shuttered many churches under the pastor's jurisdiction as head of the district Protestant organization. Numerous international media sources reported that local authorities ordered the removal of hundreds of Christian crosses from churches in Zhejiang Province throughout the year.

While most incidents involved the removal of crosses and steeples, a handful of prominent churches were demolished, including the Sanjiang Church in the city of Wenzhou that was leveled in April despite efforts by its parishioners to form human shields to protect it. Zhejiang officials stated that crosses and churches needed to be "demolished" as "illegal structures" that violated local zoning laws. Unofficial "house" church members continued to face harassment and detention. Security officials frequently interrupted outdoor services of the unregistered Shouwang Church in Beijing and detained people attending those services for several days without charge. Reports indicated the average length of these detentions increased from hours to days. Several

members of the church's leadership, including Pastor Jin Tingming, remain under periods of extrajudicial detention since leading open air services in 2011.

Restrictions on Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists in China: The Chinese government increasingly cited its concerns over the "three evils" of "separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism" as grounds to enact and enforce repressive restrictions on religious practices of Uighur Muslims. After disagreements arose in response to stricter government controls on religious expression and practice, police shot and killed Uighur Muslims during house raids and protests, according to a human rights organization. In the months following, the Xinjiang government approved a ban on the practice of religion in government buildings and wearing clothes associated with "religious extremism." Authorities also approved a ban on the wearing of Islamic veils in public in the capital city of Urumqi. In August and September, state newspapers reported hundreds of children were "rescued" and dozens of persons were detained in a sweep of "illegal" religious schools.

Authorities often justified official interference with Tibetan Buddhist monasteries by associating them with separatism and pro-independence activities. On February 28 Authorities detained Tashi Paljor, a monk at Wenpo Monastery in Qamdo (Chamdo) Prefecture of the Tibetan Autonomous Republic, for his alleged possession of politically sensitive writings and recordings by the Dalai Lama. He died after being severely beaten in custody, according to Radio Free Asia.

Restricting free expression on basis of religion in India: Authorities continued to enforce laws designed to protect "religious sentiments" which, according to observers, at times had the effect of limiting free expression related to religion. On September 24, police in Rustapura, Gujarat arrested Mehdi Hasan, a Muslim cleric, on charges of insulting Hindus' religious sentiments after a member of the Hindu community complained about Hasan's comments during an interview with a Gujarati newspaper. During the interview, Hasan reportedly labeled those who honored the nine-day Hindu festival Navratri as "demonic." Hasan remained in judicial custody until serving out his sentence on October 2.

Persecution of Falun Gong in China: Authorities reportedly instructed neighborhood communities to report Falun Gong members to officials and offered monetary rewards to citizens who informed on Falun Gong practitioners. Detained practitioners were reportedly subjected to various methods of physical and psychological coercion in attempts to force them to renounce their beliefs. Reports from overseas Falun Gong-affiliated advocacy groups estimated that thousands of adherents in the country had been sentenced to terms of up to three years in administrative detention. According to the human rights monitoring NGO Dui Hua Foundation, there were 2,201 Falun Gong prisoners as of June 30.

Intensified harassment of unregistered Mennonites in Vietnam: Police, local authorities, and hired men in Binh Duong Province began a campaign of harassment against an unregistered Mennonite group in June, according to their pastors. Church leaders reported government forces throughout the year raided Bible classes, detained and beat congregants, and harassed members of the religious community. Reports also state that hired men prevented the movement of church members, vandalized a Mennonite church, and barred followers from leaving their houses.

In the wake of the Russian Federation's occupation of Crimea, religious minorities, in particular members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP), the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, and Muslim Tatars, have been subjected to harassment, intimidation, detentions, and beatings. Russian occupation authorities ordered all religious groups to re-register with the Russian government or face losing their legal status. The occupation authorities also seized control of UOC-KP religious

property and raided mosques, confiscated literature they deemed "extremist," and formed a Crimean Tatar organization as a rival to the authentic representative body of the Crimean Tatars in order to supplant the local Muslim leadership.

Some religious leaders, including the region's chief reform Rabbi, were threatened and fled in the initial days of the occupation, while many Catholic Priests and nuns and Turkish Imams were denied residency permits and had to leave.

Combatting Terrorism and Violent Extremism as Justification for Undue Restrictions on Religious Practice

In numerous authoritarian countries around the world, regimes have co-opted the language of counter-terrorism and countering violent extremists as a means to neutralize political opposition seen as emanating from peaceful religious individuals or groups. In such countries, authorities have increasingly sought to control the content of mosque sermons and those authorized to deliver them as a central tenet of their efforts to counter violent extremism, in part to counter Islamist discourse they perceived as inciting violence, including acts of terrorism.

Many Central Asian governments used the pretext of violent extremism to crack down widely on peaceful religious activities. In Uzbekistan, the government enforced its policy to broadly ban Islamic groups it categorized as extremist without any reference to violent activities. Authorities continued to detain members of several of these Islamic groups, and according to their family members, some died while in custody. Abdurakhim Tukhtasinov, a prisoner charged with membership and leadership in the banned religious organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, died in custody in June. Similarly, in Tajikistan the government continued to arrest individuals suspected of involvement with banned religious groups labeled extremist by the government, but not specifically on the grounds of violent activities. On August 18, law enforcement officials in Farkhor district announced they had detained five individuals on suspicion they were involved in the banned Salafiya group. The "suspicious behavior" included praying differently at the mosque and ignoring traditional Hanafi Islam rules and procedures.

Positive Developments in 2014

While the IRF report aims to shed light on the world's most flagrant religious freedom challenges, it also seeks to highlight positive actions taken by some governments to provide greater protections for religious minorities and to ensure the human rights of individuals to worship, practice, learn, teach and believe, or not believe, according to their own conscience. Religious and civil society groups took steps to promote greater respect for religious diversity, and there were examples throughout the year and across the globe of interfaith cooperation and dialogue.

Improved status of largest population of Christians in Middle East and largest religious minority in Egypt: Egyptian Christians (Copts) have long suffered from recurrent acts of violence, for which successive Egyptian governments have generally failed to hold the perpetrators responsible. Successive Egyptian governments have also failed to redress policies that discriminate against Christians, especially the onerous discrimination they have faced in church construction and renovation. Under the interim and al-Sisi governments, there have been encouraging improvements in the status of Christians in Egypt. There have been some convictions of perpetrators of violence against Copts, although impunity from prosecution for such crimes remains a serious problem. The new Egyptian constitution provides increased human rights protections as compared to the previous constitution, including a stipulation of equality before the law irrespective of religion. It also requires that parliament pass a new law facilitating the construction and renovation of Christian churches, which is without precedent, and provides for the

establishment of an anti-discrimination commission to eliminate all forms of discrimination.

Release of Religious Prisoners in Turkmenistan: In October, the government granted amnesty to and released from prison eight of nine Jehovah's Witnesses long incarcerated as a result of their religious convictions, including their principled objection to compulsory military service, after their inclusion in a list of religious prisoners presented by the U.S. Embassy.

Societal Response to anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and forms of intolerance in various countries: After the February 14-15 terrorist attacks in Denmark that killed a guard outside a synagogue and a filmmaker at a free speech event, thousands of people of different faiths formed a human ring outside the synagogue in Copenhagen to "send a powerful statement" that "Jews should be able to have their religion in peace." Swedes and Norwegians also formed a human ring around their capitals' main synagogues in an inter-faith show of support.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, along with other national politicians, condemned anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rallies and called for tolerance and understanding of Muslims and foreigners living and working in Germany.

Constitutional Chamber ruling part of religion law unconstitutional in Kyrgyzstan: On September 4, a nine-judge panel of Kyrgyzstan's Constitutional Chamber ruled sections of the 2008 Religion Law unconstitutional, which eased registration requirements for religious organizations with fewer than 200 members.

U.S Policy and Programs in Support of Religious Freedom

Freedom of religion is a first of many inalienable rights enshrined in the U.S Constitution and other laws. We believe freedom of religion is a universal right that governments should neither be able to grant nor withhold. The United States strongly believes that protecting freedom of religion promotes mutual respect and pluralism, and is essential to human dignity, robust civil society, and political and economic development. Around the world, we focus on concrete, positive steps to support government and civil society groups in combatting religious intolerance and promoting respect for religious freedom for all.

During the year most embassies raised the issue of religious freedom routinely and at high levels. Ambassadors, chiefs of missions, and embassy staff in all corners of the globe engaged with government officials, religious leaders, and advocacy groups to promote religious freedom and respect for religious diversity. Where there were new and ongoing cases of repression of members of religious minorities, detentions, and governmental and/or societally driven discrimination and violence, the U.S. engaged officials up to the highest levels, calling for peace and respect for the rule of law. In several countries, the U.S partnered with civil society and faith-based organizations to support religious freedom programs, promote interfaith dialogue, exchange ideas, and work together toward more peaceful and tolerant societies.

Responding to atrocities in Iraq: In August, after ISIL trapped tens of thousands of Yazidis on Iraq's Mt. Sinjar with no food or water, President Obama announced that the U.S. would respond by engaging in military action in the Mt. Sinjar region. He explained that the United States "can act, carefully and responsibly, to prevent a potential act of genocide" against the Yazidis.

The U.S. military conducted seven nightly humanitarian air drops between August 8-13, delivering more than 114,000 meals and 35,000 gallons of water to those displaced on Mt. Sinjar. Targeted airstrikes helped protect the evacuation route as people were

escaping. During that week, most civilians were able to evacuate from Mt. Sinjar, preventing the near extermination of this ancient religious group.

The U.S. government increased its engagement with the government of Burma on religious freedom issues. During his visit to Burma in November, President Obama spoke out against discrimination against all religious minorities, including Muslim Rohingya. Senior U.S. officials have consistently raised U.S. concerns about religious freedom and called for a path to citizenship for members of the Rohingya population that does not force them to self-identify as members of an ethnic group or nationality to which they do not believe they belong.

In April, an interagency team led by the Department of State's Senior Advisor for Faith Based Community Initiatives engaged with faith-based communities in Ethiopia. The interagency team met with leaders from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Muslim community, interfaith organizations, religious charity associations, civil society, and government; to address religious freedom concerns including the ongoing detentions of peaceful Muslims who have protested government interference in religious affairs since 2012.

The Ambassador and other U.S. officials repeatedly expressed to government officials of Brunei the United States belief that full implementation of the Sharia Penal Code (SPC), including the severe penalties in the remaining phases, would undermine several of the country's international human rights commitments, including the freedoms of religion and expression. In May, the State Department Spokesperson expressed serious concerns about provisions of the SPC in comments that generated significant media coverage.

In Pakistan, the U.S. Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation held meetings to discuss the importance of prioritizing religious freedom and the negative impacts of blasphemy laws on members of minority religious communities. With government officials, religious leaders, academics, and civil society leaders from all religious backgrounds, including for minority Muslim groups and Christian communities, he argued that such restrictions on speech are detrimental to Muslim communities and to the country.

Embassy and consulate staff in Indonesia appeared on a number of nationally televised programs to discuss themes related to religious tolerance and diversity. In July, the embassy hosted the three-day Bhinneka Tunggal Ika-E Pluribus Unum Camp and blogging competition for students and youth leaders representing all major religious groups and campus organizations, to promote religious tolerance and pluralism. The event closed with an iftar celebration hosted by the Ambassador for camp attendees, religious leaders, senior government officials, and representatives from NGOs focused on religious freedom issues.

We urged Chinese authorities to take steps to reduce tensions, uphold China's international commitments to protect religious freedom and other universal human rights, and reassess counterproductive policies in Xinjiang and other ethnic areas. The United States also strongly supports the preservation of Tibet's unique religious, cultural, and linguistic traditions and the protection of human rights for Tibetans in the People's Republic of China.

U.S. officials sought out Syrian religious groups and leaders in Syria, the United States, and throughout the world to promote their communities' full inclusion and respect for their human rights in Syria, both currently and in a future free and democratic state. The Special Envoy for Syria and other high-ranking U.S. officials met with members of the Orthodox Christian, Sunni, Druze, and Shia communities, focusing on providing assistance to vulnerable populations and countering sectarian violence. The United States supported the documentation of violations and abuses committed by all sides of the

conflict through the United Nation's Commission of Inquiry and through direct support to Syrian-led documentation efforts.

In Nepal, U.S. embassy representatives addressed concerns regarding the protection of members of religious minorities, caste discrimination, freedom of peaceful assembly for religious groups, and the ban on proselytization. The embassy also provided assistance for preservation and restoration, which improved access to major religious sites. Additionally, an embassy micro-scholarship program for underprivileged youth, including Muslims, promoted religious tolerance.

These illustrative examples demonstrate the U.S. government's commitment to promoting and defending religious freedom around the world. But the creation of a more free and tolerant world cannot be accomplished by any one government or institution. It requires the joint, committed efforts of governments, civil society, and citizens from all cultures and all faiths.

It is our hope that this year's report not only identifies abuses, problems and violations, but also creates motivation for action and accountability. We invite governments, community groups, faith-based and secular organizations, students, activists, human rights defenders, change makers, and every-day citizens to use this report to defend and advance international religious freedom, a universal human right to which we are all entitled. While the violation of religious freedom contributes to instability and economic stagnation, respect for religious freedom paves the way for a more secure, peaceful, and prosperous world.

State Department religious freedom report focuses on terror groups

Religious News Service (14.10.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1MaLvEm> - Secretary of State John Kerry on Wednesday (Oct. 14) released his department's International Religious Freedom Report for 2014, and called terror groups the world's greatest threat to religious freedom.

The report, considered the most comprehensive accounting of religious freedom violations worldwide, studied nearly 200 countries and territories. But it is nonstate actors, Kerry said at a State Department press conference, that are today "the principal persecutors and preventers of religious tolerance and practice."

He called out these groups by name, topping the list with the Islamic State but referring to it as "Daesh," a term with derogatory undertones used by other governments and many Arabs. Kerry continued with similarly violent groups: "al-Qaida, al-Shabab, Boko Haram."

"All have been guilty of viscious acts of unprovoked violence," Kerry said, describing the groups' murder and enslavement of the innocent. "Children have been among the victims."

Kerry released the report alongside Rabbi David Saperstein, the ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, who has been on the job for 10 months and highlighted other worrisome trends.

Saperstein decried blasphemy laws and apostasy laws in countries including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Sudan.

"The United States uniformly opposes such laws, which are used to oppress those whose religious beliefs happen to offend the majority," Saperstein said. "Such laws are inconsistent with international human rights and fundamental freedoms, and we will continue to call for their universal repeal."

He also pointed to governments that abuse their citizens "for simply exercising their faith or identifying with a religious community."

"We see this dramatized by the plight of countless numbers of prisoners of conscience," he said, and spoke of his travels to Vietnam, where he "saw firsthand how religious groups are forced to undergo onerous and arbitrary registration process to legally operate."

The report this year did not include what is often the most anticipated aspect: the listing of "Countries of Particular Concern." The CPCs are not always tied to the report and will be released soon, said a State Department spokesman.

The countries currently on the CPC list are: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

Threats to religious freedom

Philly.com (27.09.2015) – <http://bit.ly/1iHjXsP> - Washington hosted two dramatically different dignitaries last week - Pope Francis and Chinese President Xi Jinping. Both had meetings with President Obama, and the pope became the first pontiff to address a joint meeting of Congress.

These two leaders are on exactly opposite paths: Pope Francis is a stalwart champion of human rights and witness for religious freedom while President Xi heads a regime that is one of the world's most notorious violators of human rights, including religious freedom.

Pope Francis embodies religious freedom's universal message and promise, as cited in Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

In contrast, President Xi symbolizes a world in which more than 75 percent of people live in countries that perpetrate or tolerate serious violations of this liberty.

Despite this global crisis for religious freedom, people who cherish this right are found across the globe. Now, people around the world must speak for the persecuted with one powerful, united voice.

Last weekend in New York, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) took its latest step in promoting that aim, bringing together like-minded people from nearly 50 countries for an unprecedented meeting. Cosponsored by the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPP), the gathering included more than 100 parliamentarians as well as diplomats and civil society and religious leaders. They met next to the United Nations, where the General Assembly is now in its 70th annual session.

Since its launch last November, the IPP has focused on threats to religious freedom from both governments and nonstate actors. Some governments, including China's and North Korea's, are secular tyrannies that suppress religious groups across the board. Other countries, such as Iran and Sudan, elevate a single religion or religious interpretation while persecuting those who embrace alternatives.

These state actors abuse religious freedom in many ways, including by imprisoning people due to their beliefs and actions. In China, for example, Ilham Tohti, a respected Uighur Muslim scholar, is serving a life sentence for alleged "separatism." Iran holds hundreds of religious prisoners, from Baha'is to Christians, from Sufis and Sunnis to Shiite reformers and clerics.

At least one electoral democracy is also a major abuser of religious freedom. Pakistan, which a USCIRF delegation visited for the first time in March, has more people on death row or serving life sentences for blasphemy than any other country. Pakistan's blasphemy law not only violates freedom of religion but also emboldens nonstate actors, including extremist religious groups, to assault and murder perceived transgressors.

In addition, over the last year, nonstate religious actors have fueled some of the worst humanitarian crises of our time. In both Iraq and Syria, ISIS and other violent religious groups have kidnapped and enslaved Yazidi and Christian women and girls, beheaded or crucified men and boys, driven families from their homes, and uprooted 2,000-year-old faith communities that are now threatened with extinction.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram has perpetrated mass killings at churches and mass kidnappings of children.

In Burma, Buddhist extremists have assaulted Rohingya Muslims.

In the Central African Republic, fighting between Christians and Muslims has destroyed nearly all the country's mosques.

And these conflicts have forced millions of people to flee for their lives.

The IPP has written over the last nine months to the heads of state of Myanmar, Pakistan, and Indonesia, to the Sudanese foreign minister, and to the North Korean ambassador to the United Nations. Citing international pressure, Pakistan's government introduced reforms to its blasphemy law; Sudan released two jailed Christian pastors; and the North Koreans invited Brazilian members of IPP to Pyongyang to discuss religious freedom concerns.

Last weekend, the IPP's 100 parliamentarians signed the New York Resolution on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

We applaud them for standing for Pope Francis' way of freedom, not President Xi's path of repression.

Religious freedom network should be as 'outspoken and organized' as the extremists

World Watch Monitor (22.09.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1Ou9Vst> - In the face of rising persecution of people on the grounds of faith or belief, over 100 parliamentarians from almost 50 countries met on 18 September in New York to discuss ways to advance religious freedoms.

One hundred and thirty delegates packed into a room that was booked for fewer than 40. Thirty others had to be turned away from the meeting, which was organized by the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief to coincide with the 70th UN General Assembly.

"It's an idea for which the time is right," said Aykan Erdemir, a Turkish academic and a member of the Turkish parliament until recently, adding that people advocating rights should be as "outspoken, organized and transnational" as the violent extremists.

Delegates signed the New York Resolution for Freedom of Religion or Belief, which pledges them to advance religious freedoms for all, in accordance with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The resolution calls on signatories to encourage and equip more politicians around the world to focus on religious freedoms, including those in countries known to violate Article 18.

The delegates also expressed their commitment to advocacy by sending three letters to heads of states considered to be violating these rights.

The letters, which asked for the state to intervene in cases of people imprisoned for their faith, and expressed concern about new laws that will restrict religious freedom, were issued to Burma's President, the Prime Minister of Vietnam and the Speaker of Iran's parliament. All three countries rank in the top 25 on Christian charity Open Doors' list of the places where Christians face the worst persecution.

The network of parliamentarians launched last year at the Nobel Peace Centre in Norway in response to the rising crisis of religious persecution by terrorist groups and authoritarian governments. The International Panel is led by British peer, Baroness Berridge; Norwegian MP Abid Raja; Canadian MP David Anderson, and Leonardo Quintao of Brazil's National Congress.

Since its inception it has created parliamentary membership groups in Pakistan, Brazil and Norway to add to those already operating in the British, US and Canadian governments and the European Union.

Baroness Berridge (UK), IPP Steering Group member, said: "There is a global crisis for freedom of religion or belief. An international problem requires an international response. Our meetings in New York will bring together parliamentarians, diplomats, civil society and religious leaders to devise strategies to defend this fundamental right. Collective action is needed now more than ever."

Abid Raja (MP, Norway), IPP Steering Group member, said: "The migration crisis facing Europe is fueled in part by religious extremism and persecution. It is positive that what we launched at the Nobel Peace Center last year continues to grow, as the problems continue to grow as well."

Germany, whose Chancellor Merkel threw her European partners into some disarray by announcing last week "If we now have to start apologizing for showing a friendly face in response to emergency situations, then that's not my country," had a high profile at the gathering. German foundation, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, had provided funding to bring them together in New York.

Volker Kauder, one of the leaders of the German parliament, opened the meeting speaking about the plight of religious freedom in the Middle East. He urged the UN to address the matter at the General Assembly, scheduled to discuss international security on 1-2 October.

Katrina Lantos Swett from the US Commission on International Religious Freedom and the daughter of Holocaust survivors, said she felt "so happy to see the way Germany is stepping up on so many fronts".

David Saperstein, the US State Department Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, urged the delegates "not to separate religious freedom from other issues, but to see it as foundational in every kind of policy".

He encouraged them to hold hearings, issue statements, and attend trials for the persecuted, saying that he was encouraged after attending the trial of two South Sudanese pastors who were subsequently acquitted of serious charges and released.

"The history of Europe shows that we have all been refugees," said Peter van Dalen, a Dutch member of the European Parliament, who also heads up the parliament's Intergroup on Religious Freedom. Van Dalen mentioned that his family fled persecution by Huguenots in France and settled in the Netherlands.

Delegates at the meeting also heard from Naghmeah Abedini, an American whose husband, pastor Saeed Abedini, is imprisoned in Iran for his Christian faith.

Parliamentarians from the following countries attended: Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, Canada, Central African Republic, Chad, Chile, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Georgia, Germany; Honduras; India, Indonesia, Iraq, Ireland, Israel, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malawi, Malaysia, Mexico, Nepal, Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, Senegal, Serbia, Solomon Islands, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Taiwan (China), Tunisia, United Kingdom and Uruguay.

The group plans to meet again in 2016 in Berlin.

Parliamentarians' summit ends with action letters and resolution

APPG (21.09.2015) - <http://us8.campaign-archive2.com/?u=cbe8d3ab1c3cb6ca29607bbe2&id=c23aaad740&e=72b9f08105> - In the face of rising religious persecution of people on the grounds of faith or belief, parliamentarians from almost 50 countries concluded an unprecedented summit in New York discussing ways to advance freedom of religion or belief for all.

Focused on concrete actions, the gathering resulted in the issuance of advocacy letters to the President of Burma, the Prime Minister of Vietnam, and the Speaker of Iran's parliament.

In addition, the parliamentarians signed the New York Resolution for Freedom of Religion or Belief, committing them to renewed action to promote this fundamental right.

Text of the New York Resolution for Freedom of Religion or Belief

Cognizant that severe violations of freedom of religion or belief continue to occur around the world, perpetrated by states, state proxies, and non-state actors;

Taking note of studies indicating an increase in restrictions on the free practice of religion or belief, with the majority of the global population living in countries where their freedom to peacefully practice their faith could be or is restricted;

Whereas in response to these violations, a group of parliamentarians gathered in Oxford, England, in June 2014 to discuss ways to confront the abuses;

Recalling that at the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo, Norway, parliamentarians from around the world gathered in November 2014 to pledge to advance religious freedom for all and launched the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief;

Reaffirming the Charter for Freedom of Religion or Belief signed in Oslo that commits parliamentarians to support Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the right of individuals to hold or not to hold any faith or belief, to change belief, to be free from coercion to adopt a different belief, and to peacefully practice the faith of their choice alone or in community with others;

Welcoming the creation of panels in domestic parliaments since the Oslo meeting, including in Brazil, Norway, and Pakistan, and existing bipartisan caucuses in Canada, the European Parliament, the United Kingdom, and the United States;

Taking note of and welcoming the creation of the International Contact Group for Freedom of Religion or Belief networking likeminded governments committed to advancing freedom of religion or belief around the world;

Appreciating the critically important work of civil society organizations, religious leaders, and individuals in academia who are endeavoring to advance freedom of religion or belief with their communities of influence and societies at large;

Now, in New York, on 19 September 2015, the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief commit to pursue efforts that:

Advocate for individuals suffering from persecution because of their religious or other forms of belief and urge greater respect for freedom of religion or belief;

Strengthen and promote freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief as a universal, established and non-derogable human right, as set out in the Universal Declaration, in international customary law and treaties, and in the work of national, regional, and global agencies and political bodies;

Enhance global cooperation by working across geographical, political, and religious lines to mobilize effective responses through regular communications, sharing of information, and endeavoring to meet annually;

Expand the network of parliaments focused on freedom of religion or belief around the world by supporting the creation of new parliamentary platforms or groups that support Article 18 and that are politically and religiously diverse;

Build capacity among parliamentarians committed to advancing religious freedom, both for those in stable countries and those in countries with problematic records on freedom of religion or belief, so as to equip parliamentarians to advocate for change at home and abroad;

Increase the number of governments and international institutions responding to the growing crisis of persecution of believer and non-believers and encourage the commitment of increased resources to ensure greater respect for this fundamental freedom; and

Build stronger linkages between members of parliament and civil society organizations, religious leaders, and members of academia so as to find more impactful ways to advance freedom of religion or belief globally.

Signed by Parliamentarians in attendance at the September, 2015 conference in New York, "Multinational Efforts to Strengthen Freedom of Religion or Belief".

Religious freedom helps tackle "small-p" poverty through "self reliance"

Religious Freedom & Business Foundation (17.08.2015) - Poverty, some argue, can only be effectively tackled by governments enforcing top-down, big-P Poverty reduction policies and programs. But a host of religious groups haven't gotten the memo. Innovative faith-based initiatives worldwide are tackling poverty using bottom-up, small-p poverty alleviation approaches that empower individuals to be resourceful, resilient and self-reliant.

Indeed, a central aspect of religious freedom is that it gives faith groups license to innovate and contribute to the wellbeing of individuals, communities and nations. But where religious freedom is curtailed, so are such innovations. For instance, reform-minded Saudi princess Basmah bint Saud argues, religion "should not be a shield behind which we hide from the world but a driving force that inspires us to innovate and contribute to our surroundings."

In this new installment of an ongoing series on the connection between religious freedom and sustainable development, Brian Grim describes these small-p initiatives and concludes with a case study of how one faith group – The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints – is directly targeting and reducing poverty in its congregations worldwide. Such faith-based activities are facilitated by religious freedom and directly contribute to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 – *Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere*.

Poverty: Big-P vs. small-p

The causes of poverty are complex. On the macro, big-P level, Poverty is sometimes associated with systematic inequality far beyond the direct control of individuals. These can be national or global in scope.

Big-P trends at the *national level* may include such things as caste (e.g., India's Dalits or untouchables), gender (e.g., Saudi Arabia's socio-economic isolation of women), ethnicity/nationality (e.g., poverty among Native Americans) or religion (e.g., economic discrimination against Baha'is in Iran).

National governments try to address such systematic causes in various ways, including the Indian governments' "scheduled caste" affirmative action programs, Saudi Arabia's Fund for the Support of Women's Projects under Prince Sultan Bin Abdulaziz, and the U.S. government's Tribal Law and Order Act.

Big-P trends at the *global level* cited by many include such things as the huge debts owed by developing nations to developed nations, despite earlier forgiveness of billions of dollars of debt. The World Bank Group, the International Monetary Fund and other multilateral, bilateral and commercial creditors try to address globalized symptoms through multiple programs including the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) and the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI). And the United Nations works

through the 2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the proposed 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

On the micro, small-p level, poverty is often explained as a result of individual circumstances and/or characteristics. These include education, skills, connections, experience, intelligence, health, handicaps, age, work orientation, cultural orientation, etc.

From Aid to small-p Enterprise: "They already know how to fish!"

Religious groups are known for their programs to address poverty and/or care for the poor. For instance, almsgiving, one of the five pillars of Islam, is widely practiced by Muslims worldwide according to a Pew Research survey of 38,000 Muslims. And Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and many other faiths have a wide variety of organizations to care for the poor. And earlier this year, global religious and faith-based leaders convened at the World Bank to issue a call and commitment to end extreme poverty by 2030.

Familiar to many is the work of global organizations like Caritas, which shares the mission of the Catholic Church to serve the poor and to promote charity and justice throughout the world. Caritas development initiatives range from investment and training in agriculture and business to building homes and schools. Among other well know initiatives is World Vision, a global Christian relief, development and advocacy organization dedicated to working with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice.

What many people do not know is that faith-based thinking on poverty has moved far beyond just delivering aid or "teaching a man to fish." As Doug Seebeck, president of Partners Worldwide, says, "They know how to fish! The oft-quoted Chinese proverb tells us that if you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day, but teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime. People at the margins know how to fish, but they don't have access to the pond. They aren't able to engage and participate in the economic systems, markets, relationships, networks of support and collaboration and cooperation, tools, and models many of us take for granted."

Such faith-based poverty alleviation programs are using a bottom-up, small-p approach. For instance, PovertyCure, a new faith-based network of some 300+ partner organizations working in 144 countries highlights how people have moved from poverty to prosperity, sharing what faith leaders have learned along the way.

This new wave focuses on "self-reliance" or "self-empowerment" rather than the delivery of aid, or as Alejandro A. Chafuen writing in Forbes puts it, From Aid To Enterprise: How To Intelligently Cure Poverty. Chafuen is a senior fellow with the Acton Institute, which is one of the lead sponsors of PovertyCure. The Acton Institute seeks to propel this approach within faith-based communities by integrating Judeo-Christian teachings with free market principles. While the Acton Institute is not a Catholic organization, it is led by Rev. Robert A. Sirico, Pastor of Sacred Heart of Jesus Roman Catholic parish in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is influencing the thinking of many U.S. Catholics. (See an Acton critique of the recent Papal encyclical on the environment.)

The Economic Principles of Self-reliance

Is poverty and the lack of empowerment it brings inevitable? No, says author Paul Godfrey, Professor of Strategy and Associate Academic Director of the Melvin J. Ballard Center for Economic Self-Reliance at Brigham Young University's Marriott School of Management. In his recent book, More than Money (Stanford University Press, 2013), he

shows how organizations can win the fight against poverty and create prosperity for people at the base of the pyramid in the developing and developed world.

Godfrey argues that small-p poverty alleviation can have a big impact. *More than Money* provides an excellent survey of how five types of interrelated capital — institutional, human, social, organizational, and physical — enable development and sustainable growth. “Little p poverty gives way to individual and family flourishing when self-reliance leads individuals to acquire, employ, leverage, and preserve all five types of capital,” says Godfrey.

Godfrey’s work builds on three key lessons he has learned about the process and promise of eliminating poverty: First, we don’t eliminate poverty; *individuals and families* work themselves out of poverty and into prosperity. Second, eliminating poverty *requires more than money*, which alone often ends up in alleviating the symptoms of poverty but usually fails to create lasting solutions. Third, work, when it is most effective, requires *organization*. An effective organization has the capability to look past the thick branches of poverty and attack the roots. The following short videos by Paul Godfrey outline self-reliance economic principles.

Case Study: LDS Self-Reliance Global Initiative

Perhaps the most widespread and well developed new model of this [enterprise-based, bottoms-up approach to tackling poverty](#) is one carried out by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Religious freedom is a critical element to the LDS Church’s ability to deliver this innovative initiative to their members in countries worldwide, including some of the world’s poorest. Where religious freedom is limited, the LDS Church has greater difficulty in carrying out the initiative, if it can do so at all.

Doctrinal Basis

Theological reasoning is a common element of many faith-based programs to alleviate poverty. For Muslims, it is one of the faith’s [five pillars](#). For Catholics, it is often expressed as a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable based on the basic moral test contained in the story of the Last Judgment ([Mt 25:31-46](#)).

As a Catholic myself, I’ve been particularly struck by the innovative approach to poverty alleviation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as Mormons or Latter-Day Saints (LDS). For members of the LDS Church, attending to the needs of the poor is not only counted as service to God, but seen as essential to retaining a remission of one’s sins and walking guiltless before God (see [Attitudes Toward Poverty](#) by David J. Cherrington in the Encyclopedia of Mormonism).

To help fulfill this mission to the poor and needy, the LDS Church established an extensive Welfare Services program in 1935. Among the many faith-based approaches to poverty alleviation, this program is also animated by the church’s teaching on what Mormons refer to as “self-reliance.” The [purpose of LDS welfare program](#) is to “promote self-reliance and to care for and serve the poor and needy.”

Indeed, work is a guiding principle in the LDS Church’s welfare program, which directly involves promoting self-reliance as a way of life. President Thomas S. Monson, considered by Mormons to be a living prophet, [has taught](#) that self-reliance — “the ability, commitment, and effort to provide the necessities of life for self and family” — is an essential element of human temporal and spiritual well-being. For Mormons, “temporal welfare” is a term that deals with people’s condition on earth, and is intrinsically tied to a person’s spiritual condition.

The Global Initiative

The LDS Church now [reports](#) that it has more members outside the United States (8.9 million) as it has in the U.S. (6.5 million). Much of this growth has occurred recently, particularly in Mexico, South and Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Asia-Pacific region.

LDS Church leaders found that many of its members in these new growth areas struggled with temporal welfare issues, i.e., poverty, jobs, education and business skills. To address this, in just a few years the LDS Church has rolled out a [global self-reliance initiative](#), one that many Mormons in the U.S. don't know about because it has not yet been rolled out in the U.S. The initiative began in sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin and South America, and is only now being rolled out in Europe. The U.S. will be the last region for the initiative.

The reason the initiative was able to be rolled out globally with relatively modest costs is that it is not an independent program, but a voluntary service provided through each congregation. Instead of creating a new infrastructure to offer the self-reliance services, they are provided as a regular program of the congregations, somewhat similar to how Sunday School classes are a standard feature of any congregation. The main difference is that instead of being based in a single LDS congregation (called a ward), a group of LDS congregations (called a stake, usually made up of five to twelve wards) go together to have one ward be designated to host a Self-Reliance Center, where members of any of the congregations in the stake can come for assistance.

What Are Self-Reliance Centers?

Self-reliance centers provide Internet access, mentoring, and other helpful resources to job seekers, the self-employed, and prospective students. Stakes establish self-reliance centers in Church buildings; they are staffed by missionaries and volunteers. A self-reliance center may share a location with existing [family history centers](#), which are also [spread worldwide](#).

Services Offered

Self-reliance centers are places where returning missionaries, unemployed or underemployed LDS Church members, and others struggling with self-reliance can receive assistance. In the centers, members receive guidance that will help them learn practical steps to become self-reliant as well as the doctrines of self-reliance.

The centers have curriculum and offer services on topics such as: How to start or grow your business; How to find employment; How to gain a good education; Personal mentoring; and Networking opportunities.

Defending religion from itself

The biggest threat to religious freedom is religious extremism. The world must recognize this – and act

Foreign Policy (30.07.2015) - <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/30/defending-religion-from-itself> - There is a growing threat to religious freedom around the globe. In an earlier era, the greatest hostility to faith came from secular autocracies or totalitarian regimes. But that has changed. Today, the most active persecutors of religious minorities and dissenters are religious extremists. In this still-young century, the world has

witnessed a sharp rise in the number of extremist groups who attack the religious “other” for perceived transgressions.

The Middle East is not the only region grappling with this new trend. In South Asia, the Taliban (in both its Afghan and Pakistani versions) have struck at Christians and other non-Muslims, while also viciously attacking other Islamic sects for being the “wrong” kind of Muslim. In Burma, the [969 Movement](#) of radical Buddhist monks has incited mob attacks against Rohingya Muslims. And these extremist monks are following the same agenda as like-minded Buddhist extremists in Sri Lanka, who have targeted Christians and Muslims in that small island nation.

In Africa, too, violent religious extremism can be found in a growing number of countries. The terrorist organization Boko Haram has assaulted both [churches](#) and [mosques](#) who speak out against its ideology and attacks. In the Central African Republic, religiously affiliated militias have been responsible for mass violence in Christian and Muslim communities. Extremists in various other parts of the continent have announced the founding of Islamic State franchises.

This new reality presents a vexing challenge to the international community and its commitment to human rights and religious freedom. These groups are often outside the reach of normal diplomatic channels. They don’t care what the world thinks, as they are actively trying to upend the international order.

In response, governments need to develop fresh approaches. There is no single recipe for fighting religious bigotry. Violent religious extremism grows out of many factors and is often situation-specific. So the response must be flexible, comprehensive, and coordinated, not fragmented across different bureaus and agencies. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (of which I am director of policy and research) proposed a [series of changes](#) to U.S. law and policy last year that would better position the United States to engage on these issues. The Commission’s recommendations include expanding the “country of particular concern” designation of worst religious freedom violators to include failed states and non-state actors, increasing funding for fieldwork grants, and including messaging on the importance of religious freedom and tolerance in strategic communications programs.

Concerns about religious freedom are interwoven with many of the greatest foreign policy challenges facing the United States. President Obama recognized this in his speech at the Countering Violent Extremism summit in February, [noting](#) that genuine democracy and political stability require “freedom of religion — because when people are free to practice their faith as they choose, it helps hold diverse societies together.”

Better incorporating promotion of freedom of religion into American efforts to confront ISIS and others extremists can enhance efforts to fight terrorism. Religious freedom is ultimately about freedom of thought — the right of individuals to believe what they want and to act on those beliefs in peaceful and non-coercive ways. Environments that support religious freedom are therefore better positioned to reject violent ideologies. Religious freedom is certainly not a cure-all. But it can make counter-terrorism efforts more durable by protecting civic space for diversity of thought and belief.

But this cannot be the United States’ fight alone. The challenges are transnational, with extremist groups linked across borders through ideology and criminality. To respond effectively, countries that value diversity of thought and belief must, too, work in coalition. Already there are multinational efforts against extremism and terrorism, such as the [Global Counterterrorism Forum](#). But [other efforts](#) are under way to build coalitions of likeminded governments to advance freedom of religion. A network of legislators from around the world has leveraged the political capital of its individual members to [protect](#) religious freedom in places like Pakistan, Burma, and Indonesia. The European Union’s

new human rights [action plan](#) places a greater emphasis on promoting religious freedom and protecting religious minorities, more tightly focusing the 28-nation union on this issue.

And while the United States and other governments need new proactive policies, they must also discourage bad policies by partner governments that fuel extremism. Separate studies by the Pew Forum have shown that, while the world is [overwhelmingly religious](#), government restrictions on the free practice of religion are [increasing](#). This is a recipe for increased violations and instability. In many places, heavy-handed government responses have made martyrs out of extremists and created grievances that fuel insurgencies. The recently released State Department country reports on terrorism noted this dynamic, especially [in reference to](#) several Central Asian states. To name but one example, the report on Tajikistan underscored the “negative impact on religious freedoms” of the government’s efforts to stem violent religious extremism, such as banning women and minors from attending mosques. These abuses can trigger violent reactions. In 2010, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan [killed](#) 25 Tajik soldiers in response to the country’s oppressive religion law, which limits the free practice of Islam. Extremist groups can also find inspiration from regressive laws in the nations where they operate. Take the example of blasphemy laws. When such laws are on the books, extremists often feel emboldened to enforce them through their own rough justice. In Pakistan, which [leads the world](#) in the number of people jailed for this so-called “crime,” the blasphemy law has fueled extremist violence against human rights defenders and instigated mob attacks against Christians and Ahmadi Muslims.

Religious extremists are killing religious minorities and dissenting members of their own faith, and they represent a clear and present danger to diversity of thought and belief. These violent groups will, for the foreseeable future, present a major challenge to the United States and its allies for reasons of national security, humanitarian concerns, and human rights. To be sure, secular authoritarian regimes like North Korea and Eritrea will continue their abusive ways, and the United States and the international community should redouble their efforts to press for authoritarian regimes to reform. But the rise of violent religious extremism requires a new approach — one where governments commit to rights-based pivot quickly and work in coalition to meet this challenge.

Dying for Christianity: millions at risk amid rise in persecution across the globe

Increase in murder, as well as rape, torture and discrimination, has led the pope to warn of a 'form of genocide'

The Guardian (27.07.2015) – Faith leaders warn of a rise in persecution around the world. Here we focus on four countries where Christian believers face official discrimination and threats of attacks by militants – sometimes at the same time
Read more

The scale of attacks on Christians in the Middle East, sub-Saharan [Africa](#), Asia and Latin America has alarmed organisations that monitor religious persecution, with most reporting a significant deterioration in recent years.

On his recent trip to Latin America, Pope Francis said [he was dismayed](#) “to see how in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world many of our brothers and sisters are persecuted, tortured and killed for their faith in Jesus”. He went on: “In this third world war, waged

piecemeal, which we are now experiencing, a form of genocide is taking place, and it must end.”

At Easter, the archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, the leader of the Anglican church, [spoke of Christian “martyrs”](#). Christians were living under persecution in almost half of the 38 Anglican provinces worldwide, [he said this month](#). “They fear for their lives every day.”

The Prince of Wales has described threats to Christians in the Middle East as [“an indescribable tragedy”](#).

According to David Alton, a crossbench peer who campaigns on religious freedom, “some assessments claim that as many as 200 million Christians in over 60 countries around the world face some degree of restriction, discrimination or outright persecution”. That is about one in 10 of the 2.2 billion Christians in the world. [Christianity](#) remains the faith with the most adherents.

“Whatever the real figures the scale is enormous. From Syria, Iraq, Iran and Egypt to [North Korea](#), China, Vietnam and Laos, from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma, from Cuba, Colombia and Mexico to Eritrea, Nigeria and Sudan, Christians face serious violations of religious freedom,” Alton said. Persecution ranged from murder, rape and torture to repressive laws, discrimination and social exclusion.

One consequence was “a form of religio-ethnic cleansing of Christian communities”, said John Pontifex of [Aid to the Church in Need](#) (ACN), a Catholic campaign group that monitors persecution. “The persecution of Christians is at a level we’ve not seen for many, many years and the main impact is the migration of Christian people. There are huge swaths of the world which are now experiencing a very sharp decline in the number of Christians.”

In the past 15 months, a number of egregious attacks have highlighted the targeting of Christians by Islamic extremists in the Middle East and Africa. They include:

- the abduction of more than 270 [Nigerian schoolgirls](#);
- the beheading of 21 [Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya](#), and other attacks by Isis militants in Iraq and Syria;
- the killing of 147 people on a [university campus in Garissa](#), northern Kenya.

In addition, a heavily pregnant woman, [Meriam Ibrahim](#), was sentenced to death in Sudan for alleged apostasy, triggering worldwide protests. She was later allowed to leave the country.

But monitoring groups say the persecution of Christians goes far beyond high-profile cases. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), Christians face harassment in 102 countries – more than any other religion. The US government advisory body the [Commission on International Religious Freedom \(USCIRF\)](#), [recommended this year](#) that eight countries – the Central African Republic, Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, Tajikistan and Vietnam – be added to the State Department’s existing list of nine “countries of particular concern”.

The [2014 report on religious freedom in the world by ACN](#) said conditions had deteriorated in 55 countries, and significantly so in six countries: Iraq, Libya, Nigeria,

Pakistan, Sudan and Syria. Although Muslims “also face terrible and systematic persecution ... and Jewish communities have also suffered increased threats and violence”, Christians were by far the most persecuted faith group, the report said.

[Open Doors](#), a global organisation monitoring Christian persecution, conservatively estimates that 4,344 Christians were killed for faith-related reasons in 12 months up to November 2014, and 1,062 churches were attacked. It says persecution increased in 24 countries last year, with Kenya, Sudan, Eritrea and Nigeria entering the top 10 of its country-by-country league table. North Korea has headed the list for the past 13 years; up to 70,000 Christians are held in gulags, with “tens of thousands of people banished, arrested, tortured and/or killed”, it says.

In general, persecution of Christians is increasing, “and the rate of increase is accelerating”, said Lisa Pearce, chief executive of Open Doors UK and Ireland. The nature of persecution was also changing, she added. “It used to mean several years in a forced labour camp. Now it means watching your loved ones being beheaded.”

The rise of Islamic extremism is driving much of the increase in Christian persecution, said campaigners and church leaders who point to militant groups such as Isis, Boko Haram and al-Shabaab. “One of the 21st century’s major challenges to freedom of religion or belief [is] the actions of non-state actors in failing or failed states,” said USCIRF’s 2015 annual report.

Lee Marsden, professor of international relations, specialising in religion and security, at the University of East Anglia, said the collapse of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East during the Arab spring was a significant factor. “They had many downsides, but they did protect minority faiths. Take them away, and it becomes open season on minorities – that was one of the unforeseen consequences of toppling these people. And the Arab spring was hijacked by Islamists, which was bad news for religious minorities.”

Social media has allowed religious extremists to push their message beyond geographical boundaries. Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi, speaking in a recent debate on religious freedom in the House of Lords, said the internet was “to radical political religions what printing was to Martin Luther. It allows them to circumvent and outflank all existing structures of power. The result has been the politicisation of religion and the religionising of politics, which, throughout history, has been a deadly combination.”

Other forces driving persecution include authoritarian regimes restricting the activities of particular faith groups, tensions between groups coming into contact as a result of migration and displacement, and declining tolerance and pluralism in some parts of the world. Christian leaders this week protested against a [campaign to remove crosses from churches](#) in eastern China.

And there are some unexpected pockets of persecution. In 2014, [five Catholic priests were killed in Mexico](#), prompting the Vatican to say it was the most dangerous country in Latin America for its followers. Powerful criminal groups see the church as a target for extortion and money laundering, and view some priests as standing in the way of their own influence. Attacks on priests in Mexico increased by 80% between 2012 and 2014, local organisations reported.

Some campaigners and church leaders acknowledged the danger of religious persecution being seen as a modern-day clash of civilisations, a titanic struggle between Islam and Christianity, carrying the risk of polarising people of different faiths.

“It is not about Islam and Christianity. It is about the right for everyone to have the freedom to choose, practise, share non-coercively, and change their religion or belief –

and it includes the right not to believe as well as the right for adherents of all religions to follow their beliefs," said Lord Alton.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols, the archbishop of Westminster and head of the Catholic church in England and Wales, said: "It would be a serious mistake to cast this as a Muslim-Christian conflict." He cited a bishop in northern [Nigeria](#), who had told him the most recent killing in his diocese was of 39 Muslims by Boko Haram. "The extremist groups are certainly perpetrating violence, against anyone who does not share their world view. That includes Christians, but it's not exclusively Christians by any means."

According to Marsden, there could be an element of Islamophobia in some Christian campaign organisations, "but there is also an element of victimhood – a view that the church has always been persecuted, which feeds into the martyrdom narrative".

And, in the House of Lords, the archbishop of Canterbury alluded to Christianity's own historical record of persecuting others, saying "the church's sporadic record of compelling obedience to its teachings through violence and coercion is a cause for humility and shame".

In the same debate, Sacks – along with others – pointed to the increasing threat faced by "people of all faiths, and of none". He said: "Christians are being persecuted throughout the Middle East and elsewhere. Jews are facing a new and resurgent antisemitism. Muslims who stand on the wrong side of the Sunni-Shia divide are being killed in great numbers. Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Bahá'í and others face persecution in some parts of the world. Religious freedom is about our common humanity, and we must fight for it if we are not to lose it. This, I believe, is the issue of our time."

Not all agreed with the pope's use of the word genocide. But, said Pearce, "if you look at what's happening in the Middle East, it's being purged of Christians, and there are definitely elements of religious cleansing. So I can see where the pope got that word from."

She drew a distinction between "smash" – extreme violence – and "squeeze", where "life as a Christian becomes inexorably harder. The squeeze inevitably makes the church more vulnerable to the smash when it comes." The groups that were the most violent were not necessarily the worst persecutors, she added.

Campaigners have suggested action such as increased governmental pressure, legal help where there is a functioning judicial system, providing havens for refugees, and supporting NGOs on the ground. Alton would like the prime minister, David Cameron, to appoint a special envoy for religious freedom, as the US and Canada have done.

The archbishop of Canterbury said that attacks on religious freedom were often linked to economic, social and historical circumstances. "If we want to defend religious freedom around the world ... do not sell guns to people who oppress religious freedom; do not launder their money; restrict trade with them; confine the way we deal with them," he told his fellow peers. In addition, said Nichols, "for people of faith, the promise and pattern of prayer is very important; to say you are not forgotten is a crucial and sustaining gift."

Pearce said Open Doors constantly wrestled with how to "make clear we're talking about the impact of extremism, that it's not only Christians that are persecuted, and that the overall goal is to create an environment where people are free to follow any religion, or none. This is not an issue just for Christians, but a human rights issue that affects us all. It's not a problem for the church, but much wider than that."

Under attack

Garissa University – Kenya

On 2 April this year, gunmen from the militant Islamic group al-Shabaab attacked Garissa University in Kenya, killing 147 people and injuring 79. The gunmen released Muslim students and shot those who identified themselves as Christians, in some cases telling the students to call their parents and talk to them as they died. The gunmen held the university in a state of siege for 15 hours, with more than 700 students trapped inside. The siege ended when four of the gunmen were shot by police; the fifth was able to detonate his suicide vest, killing himself and injuring Kenyan commandos. It was the deadliest attack in [Kenya](#) since the bombing of the US embassy in 1998 and one in a series of al-Shabaab attacks on the country, which the terrorist group claimed were carried out in retribution for the “unspeakable atrocities against the Muslims of East Africa by the Kenyan security forces”.

Pregnant woman sentenced to death for apostasy – Sudan

Meriam Ibrahim, a Sudanese Christian, was sentenced to death for adultery and apostasy after marrying a Christian man, with whom she had a young son. Ibrahim was raised as a Christian by her Christian mother after her Muslim father left the family when she was a young child. The Sudanese court said she should have followed the religion of her absent father, which would have prohibited her from marrying a Christian, and found her guilty of abandoning her Muslim faith. Ibrahim was arrested when she was eight months pregnant and held in a Sudanese prison with her 21-month-old son to await hanging after the birth of her second child. She was denied medical care and prison staff refused to take her to hospital when she went into labour; she gave birth to a daughter in prison with her legs shackled. Amid international outrage, Ibrahim was released on the order of the Sudanese appeal court, but was rearrested as she was boarding a plane with her husband and two children the next day. After intense diplomatic negotiations the whole family were allowed to leave and they are now living in the US.

Attacks on Christians by Isis – Iraq, [Syria](#), Libya

Iraq’s Christian population has decreased dramatically since the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, as large numbers have fled because of escalating persecution. Christians, as well as other minority groups, have been targeted by Isis in the large parts of Iraq and Syria under its control. It is believed that more than 100,000 people, many of them Christians, fled Qaraqosh, Mosul and the Nineveh plain in 2014 as Isis swept through. The Islamic extremists present Christians with the choice of converting to Islam, paying a very high tax or being murdered. In February 2015, Isis posted a video purporting to show 21 Coptic Christians being beheaded on a beach in Libya. Two months later, a second Isis video apparently showed another 30 Ethiopian Christians being shot or beheaded.

Kidnapping of schoolgirls by Boko Haram – Nigeria

A group of Boko Haram militants attacked a school in Chibok, a primarily Christian village in Nigeria, on the night of 14 April 2014. They kidnapped schoolgirls who had returned to the school to sit their final physics exam. It is uncertain how many girls were kidnapped, but estimates put it at between 276 and 329 girls, with 53 escaping in the few weeks following the attack. The girls were taken to Boko Haram strongholds and attempts by the Nigerian government and the girls’ families to rescue them have been unsuccessful. Less than a month after the kidnapping, Boko Haram released a video showing 130 of the kidnapped girls, all wearing Islamic dress. It is believed they are being held as sex slaves and have been forced to convert to Islam.

Freedom of Religion and Belief: Debate at the House of Lords

Motion by Lord Alton of Liverpool

See the debate at: <http://parliamentlive.tv/event/index/53d07cde-20ee-4f53-80d3-f4c075deb3d0?in=16:20:35>

To move that this House takes note of worldwide violations of Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the case for greater priority to be given by the United Kingdom and the international community to upholding freedom of religion and belief.

Lord Alton of Liverpool (CB): My Lords, I begin by thanking all noble Lords who take part in today's debate. We have a speakers list of great distinction, underlining the importance of this subject. It is also a debate that will see the valedictory speech of the right reverend Prelate the **Bishop of Leicester**, who has given such distinguished service to your Lordships' House. The backdrop to all our speeches is Article 18, one of the 30 articles of the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights. It insists:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance".

The declaration's stated objective was to realise,

"a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations".

However, with the passage of time, the declaration has acquired a normative character within general international law. Eleanor Roosevelt, the formidable chairman of the drafting committee, argued that freedom of religion was one of the four essential freedoms of mankind. In her words:

"Religious freedom cannot just mean Protestant freedom; it must be freedom of all religious people",

and she rejoiced in having friends from all faiths and all races.

Article 18 emerged from the infamies of the 20th century—from the Armenian genocide to the defining depredations of Stalin's gulags and Hitler's concentration camps; from the pestilential nature of persecution, demonisation, scapegoating and hateful prejudice; and, notwithstanding violence associated with religion, it emerged from ideology, nation and race. It was the bloodiest century in human history with the loss of 100 million lives.

The four great murderers of the 20th century—Mao, Stalin, Hitler and Pol Pot—were united by their hatred of religious faith. Seventy years later, all over the world, from North Korea to Syria, Article 18 is honoured daily in its breach, evident in new concentration camps, abductions, rape, imprisonment, persecution, public flogging, mass murder, beheadings and the mass displacement of millions of people. Not surprisingly, the **All-Party Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief**, in the title of its influential report, described Article 18 as "an orphaned right". A **Pew Research**

Center study begun a decade ago found that of the 185 nations studied, religious repression was recorded in 151 of them.

Today's debate, then, is a moment to encourage Governments to reclaim their patrimony of Article 18; to argue that it be given greater political and diplomatic priority; to insist on the importance of religious literacy as a competence; to discuss the crossover between freedom of religion and belief and a nation's prosperity and stability; and to reflect on the suffering of those denied this foundational freedom.

Although Christians are persecuted in every country where there are violations of Article 18—from Syria and Iraq, to Sudan, Pakistan, Eritrea, Nigeria, Egypt, Iran, North Korea and many other countries—Muslims, and others, suffer too, especially in the religious wars raging between Sunnis and Shias, so reminiscent of 17th-century Europe. But it does not end there. In a village in Burma, I saw first-hand a mosque that had been set on fire the night before. Muslim villagers had been driven from a village where for generations they had lived alongside their Buddhist neighbours. Now Burma proposes to restrict interfaith marriage and religious conversions. It is, however, a region in which **Christian Solidarity Worldwide** and the Foreign and Commonwealth are doing some excellent work with lawyers and other civil society actors, promoting Article 18.

Think, too, of those who have no religious belief, such as Raif Badawi, the Saudi Arabian atheist and blogger sentenced to 1,000 public lashes for publicly expressing his atheism. That has been condemned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights as,

"a form of cruel and inhuman punishment".

Alexander Aan was imprisoned in Indonesia for two years after saying he did not believe in God. Noble Lords should recall that Article 18 is also about the right not to believe.

Later, we will hear from the most reverend **Primate the Archbishop of Canterbury**, who recently said that the *"most common feature"* of Anglicanism worldwide is that of being persecuted. Twenty-four of the 37 Anglican provinces are in conflict or post-conflict areas. Referring to the 150 Kenyan Christians who were killed on Maundy Thursday, the most reverend Primate said:

"There have been so many martyrs in the last year ... They are witnesses, unwilling, unjustly, wickedly, and they are martyrs in both senses of the word".

We will also hear from my noble friend **Lord Sacks**, who offered his prayer on Hanukkah last year for,

"people of all faiths working together for the freedom of all faiths".

My noble friend's brilliant critique, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, is required reading for anyone trying to comprehend what motivates people to kill Christian students in Kenya, Shia Muslims praying in a mosque in Kuwait, Pakistani Anglicans celebrating the Eucharist in Peshawar or British tourists simply holidaying in Tunisia and for anyone trying to understand the dramatic rise in Christian persecution, the vilification of Islam in some parts of the world and, in Europe, the troubling reawakening of anti-Semitism.

My noble friend's insights into the shared stories of the Abrahamic faiths—not least the displacement stories of Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Leah and Rachel, and Joseph and his brothers—and how they can be used to promote mutual respect, coexistence,

reconciliation and the healing of history underline the urgent need for scholars from those faiths to combat the evil being committed in God's name and to give emphasis to the ancient texts in a way which upholds the dignity of difference—the title of another of my noble friend's books. If Jews, Muslims and Christians are no longer to see one another as an existential threat, we urgently need a persuasive new narrative, which is capable of forestalling the unceasing incitements to hatred which pour forth from the internet and which capture unformed minds.

It is not just scholars but the media and policymakers who need greater religious literacy and different priorities. How right the BBC's courageous chief international correspondent, Lyse Doucet, is when she says:

"If you don't understand religion—including the abuse of religion—it's becoming ever harder to understand our world".

It is increasingly obvious that liberal democracy simply does not understand the power of the forces that oppose it or how best to counter them. At best, the upholding of Article 18 seems to have Cinderella status. During the Queen's Speech debate, I cited a reply to *Tim Farron MP—for whom this has been quite a notable day—in which Ministers said that the Foreign Office,*

"has one full time Desk Officer wholly dedicated to Freedom of Religion or Belief".

The Answer also stated that,

"the Head and the Deputy Head of HRDD spend approximately 5% and 20% respectively of their time on FoRB issues".

To rectify this, will we prioritise Article 18 in the **Foreign and Commonwealth Office** business plan and across government departments? Has the FCO considered convening an international conference on Article 18—something I have raised with her? Is it an issue we will raise at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Malta in November?

In May, the Labour Party gave a welcome manifesto commitment to appoint a Canadian-style special envoy to promote Article 18. The Foreign Office resists this, insisting that all our diplomats promote freedom of religion and belief. But that has not been my experience. On returning to Istanbul from a visit to a 1,900 year-old Syrian Orthodox community in Tur Abdin, which was literally under siege, I was told by our UK representative that his role was to represent Britain's commercial and security interests and that religious freedom was a domestic matter in which he did not want to become involved. Self-evidently, there is a direct connection with our security interests, not least with millions of displaced refugees and migrants now fleeing religious persecution.

Paradoxically, if he had studied the empirical research on the crossover between freedom of religion and belief, and a nation's stability and prosperity, he might have come to a very different conclusion. Where Article 18 is trampled on, the reverse is also true, as a cursory examination of the hobbled economies of countries such as North Korea and Eritrea immediately reveals. This is not a marginal concern, as the outstanding briefing material for our debate from many human rights organisations makes clear.

Last month, the noble Baroness, Lady Berridge, and I chaired the launch of a report by Human Rights Without Frontiers. Among its catalogue of egregious and serious violations, it says that North Korea, China and Iran had the highest number of people imprisoned, in their thousands, for their religion or belief. It highlights Pakistan, where in 2011 two politicians who questioned the

blasphemy laws were shot dead; where Asia Bibi remains imprisoned with four other Christians and nine non-Christians, facing the death sentence for alleged blasphemy; and where Shias and Ahmadis have faced ferocious deadly attacks.

When did we last raise these cases and other abuses of Article 18 with Pakistan, or the use of blasphemy laws in Sudan, where two pastors are currently on trial, facing charges that carry the death sentence? Have we urged Sudan to drop the charges against 10 young female Christian students who face up to 40 lashes because of the clothes they were wearing? What of the Chinese Christian lawyers arrested this week as part of a major crackdown? Will Article 18 be on the agenda for discussion with China's President when he visits the United Kingdom?

I am a trustee of the charity **Aid to the Church in Need**, and the noble Baroness the Minister kindly launched its report, *Religious Freedom in the World 2014*, which found that religious freedom had deteriorated in almost half the countries of the world, with sectarian violence at a six-year high, nowhere more so than in the Middle East, where last week Pope Francis said that Christians are subject to genocide. In a recorded message for that launch, His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales condemned "*horrendous and heart-breaking*" persecution, and spoke of his anguish at the plight of Christianity in the Middle East, in the region of its birth, describing events in Syria and Iraq as an "*indescribable tragedy*".

In 1914, Christians made up a quarter of that region's population. Now they are less than 5%. **Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil**, during a meeting that I chaired here in the House, underlined their traumatic, degrading and inhuman treatment, pleading with the international community to provide protection. Two weeks ago the same plea was made by a remarkable Yazidi woman who gave evidence at a meeting organised by the noble Baroness, Lady Nicholson. The Yazidi, a former Iraqi Member of Parliament, told us:

"The Yazidi people are going through mass murder. The objective is their annihilation. 3000 Yazidi girls are still in D'aesh hands, suffering rape and abuse. 500 young children have been captured, being trained as killing machines, to fight their own people. This is a genocide and the international community should say so".

This view has been reinforced this week by reports on "Newsnight" and "Dispatches". How will we answer that woman? Do we intend to use our voice in the Security Council on behalf of the Yazidis and Assyrian Christians? Do we intend to have the perpetrators brought to justice in the ICC? Are we collating and documenting every instance, from genocide and rape to the abduction of bishops and priests, to the burning of churches and mosques, to the beheading of Eritrean Christians and Egyptian Copts by ISIS in Libya? What are we doing to create safe havens where these minorities might be protected?

In 1933, Franz Werfel published a novel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, based on a true story about the Armenian genocide. His books were burnt by the Nazis, no doubt to try to erase humanity's memory, Hitler having famously asked, "*Who now remembers the Armenians?*". The Armenian deportations and genocide claimed the lives of an estimated 1.5 million Armenian Christians. Werfel tells the story of several thousand Christians who took refuge on the mountain of Musa Dagh. The intervention of the French navy led to their dramatic rescue.

A hundred years later, the Yazidis besieged on Mount Sinjar were saved, but their lives are still in the balance. Last week the Belgians made it to Aleppo and brought 200 Yazidis and Christians to safety. For fragile communities facing a perilous future, such as these, could we not do the same? Are we re-examining our asylum rules to reflect the lethal threats faced by families and individuals fleeing their native homelands?

In the longer term, should not the international community have a more consistent approach to Article 18? We denounce some countries while appeasing others who directly enable jihad through financial support or the sale of arms. Western powers are seen as hypocrites when our business interests determine how offended we are by gross human rights abuses. Take Saudi Arabia as one example.

The challenge is vigorously to promote Article 18 through our interventions and our aid programmes, unceasingly countering a fundamentalism that promotes hatred of difference and persecutes those who hold different beliefs. For the future, the three Abrahamic religions and Governments need to recapture the idealism of Eleanor Roosevelt, who described the 1948 declaration as,

"the international Magna Carta for all mankind".

She said that Article 18 freedoms were to be one of the four essential freedoms of mankind. Who can doubt that this essential freedom needs to be given far greater emphasis and priority in these troubled times? I beg to move.

Lord Alton of Liverpool: My Lords, characteristically, the Minister has given the House a considered, detailed, thoughtful and extremely helpful reply to this extremely well-informed debate—characteristic itself of the place that the House of Lords is. That point was made earlier by the noble Lord, **Lord Alderdice**. We have heard from people of all faiths and denominations and none, and all the speeches shed light on the nature of Article 18. The Minister just said that it is part of the answer to extremism and I entirely agree. I particularly welcome what she said about the importance of religious literacy and what she is doing to encourage people to understand better the forces that are driving on these malign forces in so many parts of the world today.

The noble Baroness, Lady Berridge, with whom I work on the **All-Party Group on International Religious Freedom or Belief**, where she does such a wonderful job, talked about my *"uncanny knack"* of coming up in the ballot—a point also referred to by the noble Lord, **Lord Bach**. Perhaps I should try my hand at the National Lottery. More seriously, it makes the point that the House should have an annual debate on human rights in Government time and I hope that the Minister will think about providing that so that it will not be left to the vagaries of the ballot, helpful though it is that we have been able to have this debate today.

Many noble Lords have given me undeserved generosity in the remarks they have made, none more so than the noble Lord, **Lord Avebury**. As we walk in here each day, most of us probably pass the western wall of Westminster Abbey, where, among other things, we can see the statute of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was murdered in El Salvador. Only a week ago the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, was honoured in Mr Speaker's House for all the work he did on behalf of Oscar Romero. Combined with that, the work he has done for human rights over the past 50 or 60 years really is unparalleled. At the age of 17, when I was interviewed by a local newspaper, I was asked if I wanted to go into politics. I said, *"Not really, but if ever I did I hope I would be like Eric Lubbock"*—as he then was. If people are looking for a role model, they could do no better than look at the noble Lord, Lord Avebury.

Fifty years later there are other role models for the rising generation. I was very struck by the remarks of Malala Yousafzai, whom the Taliban tried to murder in Pakistan because she rightly insisted on a girl's right to an education:

"One child, one teacher, one book and one pen can change the world"

Malala's challenge and the fate of the abducted schoolgirls in Nigeria or those denied an education in Pakistan go to the heart of Article 18. It is at the heart of what we have been debating today and it is a theme to which we must persistently return.

It was the most reverend Primate who in his concluding remarks invoked Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Christian theologian who was executed by the Nazis. Bonhoeffer said:

"We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds ... we have learnt the arts of equivocation and pretence ... intolerable conflicts have worn us down and even made us cynical ... What we shall need is not geniuses, or cynics, or misanthropes, or clever tacticians".

We should not become worn down either, whatever price has to be paid. We have enormous privileges, opportunities, liberties and freedoms in this place and we must use them to speak out on behalf of those to whom so much reference has been made today. The theme of conscience has come up again and again, whether in the domestic or international context. That, too, goes to the heart of Article 18. It is about the balance of rights that were referred to in the debate.

The right reverend Prelate the **Bishop of Leicester**, in his valedictory address, enjoined and encouraged us to persist in what he called our defence of freedom of religion and belief. It is a message that we should all take to heart. We should never cease to use our privileges to speak up in the way that he has done for so long and so persistently. One noble Lord said that he could not understand the presence of the Bishops as an established part of your Lordships' House. Others have been declaring interests; my Anglican wife is the daughter of a priest of 60 years' standing in the Anglican Church, as his father was for 50 years. There are eight ordained Anglican clergy on my wife's side of the family. I sometimes feel that it is a little like a family business. It seems to me—I know that my wife will want me to say this—that we are really blessed by the presence of the Bishops in this House, no one more so than the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Leicester. At the conclusion of this debate, we all wish him the very best in his retirement.

Motion agreed.

Also see Justin Welby in The Times:

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/article4499162.ece>

<https://freedomdeclared.org/>

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Religious identity and power: preserving the status quo

By Mark Barwick, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (15.07.2015) - When the freedom of religion or belief has been violated, we typically think of actions that have been taken against *individuals*. This is the lens through which people of Western cultures tend to view human rights, since individuals are normally regarded as the primary right-holders in society. It is also individuals that are held accountable for infractions of the law or for criminal offenses.

However, many people are in prison or are otherwise sanctioned not for something that they have done or for something they believe in, despite the charges that have been made against them. They are there because of their religious or belief *identity* and association with a group.

The freedom of association is a hallmark of any democratic system. And the freedom of religion or belief itself is understood to include the freedom to practice one's religion "either individually or in community with others," as it is stated in Article 18 of the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights. It is this *community dimension* – that is present in most religions and that shapes profoundly religious identity – that can make governments and authorities uneasy. It can trigger actions to monitor, control and even suppress that community. And by implication, that means anyone who is *associated* with that community.

Religious identity can be viewed as dangerous. Much like ethnic or cultural or national identity, religious identity can shape one's worldview, one's ideas and ethics and even one's politics. Moreover, a religion or a belief is not always quiet and submissive. And this does not escape the notice of those who hold power.

Consequently, the repression of religion and belief groups is often as much about *power* as it is about any doctrine that is propagated by the group itself. Governments tend not to be overly concerned with religious doctrine; however, governments become quite concerned over any threat to their power or influence. Here is where religious identity and group politics become very important in understanding the restrictions that are placed on religion or belief groups. It is precisely because they are groups – and therefore perceived as potentially dangerous – that they can come under fire.

State repression of religious groups

It is too simplistic to say that because a prisoner self-identifies as a Christian that the person is necessarily there because of his or her faith. Or if a certain Muslim group is outlawed that it is the group's faith that is targeted. There is usually some threat to existing power structures, real or perceived, stated or left unspoken, that is present in the situation. A wide range of accusations can be evoked to justify state repression. Many are therefore in prison for charges that have little to do with their personal religious beliefs and everything to do with their *religious group identity*.

For instance, under Pakistani law Ahmadis are not permitted to *identify* themselves as Muslims. This is punishable by three years in prison. Ahmadis cannot even call their houses of worship "mosques," as this is a term reserved by law for *true* Muslims and not for any group simply posing as Muslim, as it is said.

In Iran, Baha'is have been designated as an illegal cult, a "deviant sect" that is plotting to overthrow the government and therefore needs to be contained. There are currently more than one hundred Baha'is in Iranian prisons. This includes seven Baha'i leaders, who are serving 20-year sentences for allegedly "disturbing national security," "spreading propaganda against the regime" and "engaging in espionage."

These are ludicrous charges. Like in many situations where undesirable religious or belief groups are accused of threatening state security or public order, even when there is clearly no threat of this sort in view.

Another example of this is the case of Michael Yat and Peter Yein Reith in the Sudan, two Presbyterian pastors who have been accused of "undermining the constitutional system" and spying. These are serious offenses, punishable by life imprisonment or even death under Sudanese law.

This is what happens when those who hold power are threatened by those who carry a religious identity that they consider a risk to the status quo. Presbyterian pastors are accused of spying on Sudan, Baha'is of plotting to overthrow the Iranian government and Falun Gong of doing the same in China. The list goes on. It is sometimes hard to know if these threats are genuinely perceived or if they are rather a sort of collective and politicised paranoia. In any case, the result is the same: the repression of elements that are deemed undesirable or even threatening to the political elite.

When groups become "undesirable"

In this light, it is appropriate to raise alarm over Russia's new law on "undesirable organisations," which went into effect last month. Similar to earlier measures taken by the Russian government, this law aims to empower prosecutors to label foreign organisations "undesirable" if they pose "a threat to the foundation of the constitutional order of the Russian Federation, the defence capability of the country or the security of the state."

The first instalment of blacklisted groups has already been proposed by the Russian Federation Council. The list includes such "threats" as the Open Society Institute and US-based National Endowment for Democracy.

Anyone working for these prohibited groups could face steep fines or jail terms of up to six years. The law also applies to Russian organisations that receive funding or that cooperate with such foreign groups. The ministry of justice is responsible for keeping this list of "undesirables," which will most certainly include some religious organisations.

This is a very worrisome development. It is reminiscent of the Nazi regime that blacklisted not only Jews but a number of other groups it labelled "undesirable" and "enemies of the state," including some religion or belief groups.

Power comes from religious legitimacy

On the other hand, religious identity can also be a source of political power. A religion or belief group can benefit from the status quo and even contribute to the suppression of other religious or belief groups. For instance, some governments state overtly that they are defending the cultural and traditional values of their country when they suppress "unofficial" religious or belief movements within their borders. And on the sidelines there can be a powerful religious or belief entity cheering them on.

Examples of this include Burma, where the dominant Buddhist party has instituted severe restrictions and discriminatory practices against the Muslim Rohingyas as well as some Christian groups, and Russia, where the Russian Orthodox Church tries to impose a complete monopoly over the religious convictions of the nation and beyond. Atheists and agnostics are also targeted in some Muslim majority countries.

Governments may try to legitimise these actions as necessary for the defence of traditional values; however, another reading is also possible. When a religious elite benefits from maintaining the status quo, the presence of competing religious voices threatens to undermine its legitimacy and could ultimately mean a loss of power. Laws are then conceived to protect the religious hegemony of the power-holders, laws that limit basic freedoms of conscience and free association and religion or belief. Legal prohibitions against blasphemy, apostasy and conversion to another religion can also be viewed as attempts to maintain religious legitimacy and the power that comes with it.

In many countries, the result has been not only the political and legal suppression of minority religion or belief groups but also the creation of a toxic environment in which these groups are forced to function. Hostilities are high toward Ahmadis in Pakistan, Christians in India, non-Orthodox Christians in former Soviet countries, agnostics and atheists in Egypt and Indonesia. These hostilities are often encouraged by the state and by those in powerful places, hiding behind supra-narratives that appeal to the popular

imagination. The outcome is intolerance, xenophobia and hatred toward minorities – and the highest ideals of religion are negated.

Global persecution: The price of faith for Christians worldwide

Maranatha (07.07.2015) - This report has been drawn up to present a selection of factual evidence showing the scale of injustices suffered by Christians in many parts of the world during a 14 year period to the end of December 2013.

These injustices continue with increasing ferocity today, with chilling accounts of brutal punishment inflicted on Christians, including the abuse and abduction of their children.

The data has been collated from around 170 sources. It is not in any sense a comprehensive document, but it endeavours to provide, in brief paragraphs, an objective indication of what is happening globally. It is believed that there is now a very urgent need for a far wider awareness of the unacceptable level of suffering and deprivation among Christians worldwide, many of whom are voiceless through the violation of their human rights.

Christianity was born 2,000 years ago in what is now known as the Middle East. Over the past century Christians have gone from making up 20% of the population of this region to under 4% today. Before 2003 there were over 1 million Christians in Iraq. Today, there are as few as 200,000. This is entirely due to the active persecution of Christian communities.

The authors of this document wish to make clear that they have the utmost respect for Muslims worldwide and fully acknowledge the significant contribution made by millions of them to the wellbeing of humankind.

Over many years the Maranatha Community has published a range of Reports and briefing documents on specific subjects and territories of concern. It has arranged many Consultations in the House of Commons and the House of Lords and maintains a research and advocacy facility.

Founded 32 years ago it has worked tirelessly for reconciliation in a broad range of communities and countries where there has been conflict. Its members are drawn from most traditions of the Christian Church; they include Anglicans & Episcopalians, Catholics & Orthodox, Baptists & Methodists, Pentecostals and Salvationists, Presbyterians & members of the United Reformed Church, and the New Churches.

Persecution of Christians around the globe is rising, a special report on a dangerous issue

The Islamic State terrorist attack, in which almost 40 holidaymakers were killed in Tunisia, accompanied by atrocities in France and Kuwait, highlights again the murderous outrages the group is willing to commit. Christians have been in the firing line of the IS terrorists and other terror groups in the Middle East and the rest of the globe.

Lord Alton (01.07.2015) - The Middle East's population of 12 million Christians will be halved by 2020, if current demographic trends continue. Christians made up a quarter of the Middle East's population 100 years ago, now they are less than five per cent and just one per cent of the world's Christians.

Today, Christians are being persecuted from North Korea to Pakistan, from China to Sudan. Britain's heir to the throne, Prince Charles, described threats to Christians in the Middle East as 'an indescribable tragedy'.

Systematic persecution is not a new phenomenon. The Roman Empire outlawed the new growing Christian faith and condemned all Christians to death. Campaigns against Armenian Christians and, in German South West Africa - Namibia - of racial extermination of the Herero and Nama people, were the first genocides of the 20th century 1,600 years later.

Thousands have been killed, churches and ancient monasteries blown up, whole communities forced to flee, bishops and priests - such as Father Jacob Murad, Bishops Hanna Ibrahim and Paul Yazici - abducted, some executed. Torture, beheadings and even 'crucifixion' - by hanging corpses of the executed on crosses - has become commonplace.

Approximately 10 per cent of the two billion Christians in the world suffer persecution, according to Gyula Orban, an official of Aid to the Church In Need, the Catholic relief agency.

Thousands killed

Aleppo's Melkite Greek Catholic Archbishop Jean-Clement Jeanbart's archbishopric in Aleppo has been hit more than 20 times by mortar shells and was under fire again in June 2015. He said Christians had lost their lives, homes and livelihoods and are being traumatised by Syria's civil war.

'ISIS, which has already killed thousands in the region, is terrifying the faithful in Aleppo. After attacks on Maloula, Mosul, Idleb and Palmyra, what is the West waiting for before it intervenes? What are the great nations waiting for before they put a halt to these monstrosities', he said.

There are fewer than 100,000 of the 250,000 Christians left in Aleppo. Thousands have been killed, churches and ancient monasteries blown up, whole communities forced to flee, bishops and priests - such as Father Jacob Murad, Bishops Hanna Ibrahim and Paul Yazici - abducted, some executed. Torture, beheadings and even 'crucifixion' - by hanging corpses of the executed on crosses - has become commonplace.

Syrian Christians living in areas controlled by the Islamic State (IS) are forced to convert to Islam or pay a punitive jizya tax.

Faultlines opening

In the seventh century, Christians - in what is now Syria - had to pay half an ounce of gold to pay for the privilege of living under the protection of the Islamic Caliphate. Failure to pay left two options - convert or be killed. In February 2014, 20 or so Christian families still living in the northern Syrian town of Raqqa faced the same choice. The cost of protection is now the equivalent of US\$650 in Syrian pounds.

Vast tracts of Syria and Iraq have become lawless and ungovernable with faultlines opening between Islamic extremists and moderates, between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and between Sunnis and Shias - with funds and arms flowing in from the Gulf and Tehran.

Law abiding minority communities – mainly Christians – have been caught in the crossfire. They have lived in places like Aleppo and the Nineveh Plains for 2,000 years and continue to worship and speak in the Aramaic language.

Joint Syrian and Kurdish forces have recaptured a number of Christian villages in north eastern Syria from IS recently, although a huge retaliatory attack is underway. Many Christians have attempted to flee Syria, some risking treacherous journeys across the Mediterranean.

Destroying artefacts

The brutality of IS manifests itself in beheadings accompanied by a blitzkrieg on antiquities and ancient artefacts, and the destruction of Christian churches and the defilement of Shia mosques. The fall of Palmyra follows the bulldozing of the ancient city of Nimrud, and demolition of Afghanistan's Bamiyan Buddhas and the Sufi monuments in Mali.

IS is attempting to eradicate the collective memory of humanity, destroying all that is 'different', while cynically smuggling and selling the antiquities which they do not destroy to fund their campaign.

Turkey is turning a blind eye.

IS presents this as a clash of civilisations but the manner in which they debase all that is civilised simply pits civilisation against barbarism. IS is also at war with other Muslims and those of other faith traditions.

Hatred of Christians

It describes itself as the Islamic State, but this is a misnomer. It is certainly not a state and many Muslim scholars challenge the Islamic basis on which it forces Christians to convert or die as the Quran says there should be no compulsion in religion.

This same hatred of Christians has been nurtured by other radical groups from the Taliban to al-Shabaab and Boko Haram.

Jihadist ideology by al-Shabaab-affiliated Islamist militants saw Christian students specifically singled out in an attack where 147 students died at Kenya's Garissa University College.

A Christian couple was burned alive in a kiln earlier in 2015 by a mob of 1,300 people in Pakistan while their young children were forced to watch. This followed the killing of 85 Anglicans who were praying in their church at Peshawar in 2013. British politicians have raised the tragic case of Nauman Masih, a 15 year-old Christian boy, who was beaten, tortured and burnt alive on 9 April, 2015, in Lahore, after he was identified as a Christian.

This follows the murder of Pakistan's only Christian Cabinet Minister, Clement Shahbaz Bhatti, in 2011. Nobody has been convicted for this.

Havoc and fear

Pakistan's first President, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, said at its founding in 1947, 'Minorities, to whichever community they may belong, will be safeguarded. Their religion, faith or belief will be secure. There will be no interference of any kind with their freedom of worship. They will have their protection with regard to their religion, faith, their life and

their culture. They will be, in all respects, the citizens of Pakistan without any distinction of caste and creed.'

Minorities in Pakistan are neither safeguarded or protected with only about 1.5 per cent or three million Christians in 2015 out of a population of 182 million people.

Boko Haram is creating havoc and fear in Nigeria, graphically illustrated by the February 2014 abduction of young girls and the murder of 59 students from the Federal Government College in Buni Yadi, Yobe State, while they slept.

Churches have been bombed, pastors executed, and Christians targeted despite the government's insistence that it is tackling Boko Haram. The terror group, which killed more than 80 people in attacks in June 2015, openly says its interim goal is 'to eradicate Christians from certain parts of the country'.

Massive displacement

Nigeria's north-south conflict is reminiscent of Sudan's civil war, (1983 - 2005), when two million people, mainly Christians, were killed.

Khartoum continues to target whole communities. It has dropped more than 2,500 bombs on its civilian, predominantly Christian, populations in Blue Nile and South Kordofan and has committed crimes against humanity in Darfur with ethnic cleansing by co-religionists.

The unremitting violence has led to a massive displacement and generated vast numbers of refugees. Sudan's near neighbour, Eritrea, is responsible for around 18 per cent of the 200,000 immigrants reaching Europe in 2014, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Boko Haram is creating havoc and fear in Nigeria, graphically illustrated by the February 2014 abduction of young girls and the murder of 59 students from the Federal Government College in Buni Yadi, Yobe State, while they slept

Eritrea is the North Korea of Africa with one of the world's most repressive regimes. Protestors gathered in London to mark the 13th anniversary of the imposition of severe restrictions on churches in Eritrea, the deposing and house arrest of the Eritrean patriarch, Abune Antonnios and imprisonment of other Christians. Fleeing Eritrean Christians braved arduous journeys to reach Libya only to be captured there by IS and beheaded.

Freedom of belief is at the heart of the struggle for the future of whole societies and countries.

Churches attacked

Egypt was horrified in February 2015 by the beheading of 21 Egyptian Copts who were working in Libya. I suggested in 2013 that we should compare the charred husk of the Fasanenstrasse Synagogue in Berlin in 1938, with pictures of the blackened walls of Degla's ruined Church of the Virgin Mary, and why August 2013 represented Egypt's Kristallnacht.

This was one of many churches attacked, along with Christian homes and businesses. The situation has improved under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi but the head of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, Dr Mohamed Abul-Ghar, warned that the forced displacement of Coptic families by customary meetings is contrary to Egypt's Constitution, the principles of citizenship, humanity and justice. These remarks followed

the displacement of a number of Coptic families in Beni Suef because a member of these families was accused of allegedly publishing cartoons of the Prophet of Islam on his Facebook account. The man is illiterate.

Religious renewal

Egyptian writer and novelist Fatima Naaot, in a message to the president, says that the displacement of Christian families from their villages and the burning of their homes in front of security forces is a scandal which undermines the sovereignty of the Egyptian state and indicates an absence of the rule of law and the fall in the prestige of the government and the president.

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi called for a 'religious revolution' in 2015 to re-examine those aspects of Islamic thinking which 'make an enemy of the whole world'. But, despite his calls for religious renewal, 'contempt of religion' and blasphemy charges are occurring more frequently.

These can be an impediment to healthy and constructive religious debate and can encourage vindictive acts.

It against this background – from Syria and Iraq, to Sudan, Pakistan, Egypt, Iran, and many other countries in which Christians and others are persecuted for their beliefs – that June 2015 witnessed a human rights conference in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on combatting intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief.

Human rights

Was it a black sense of humour or an astute move to have asked Saudi Arabia to host this event?

Saudi Arabia is one of the worst violators of religious freedom, and Saudi Wahhabism has fuelled many of these conflicts.

Given the West's oil dependent, arms-providing, symbiotic relationship with Saudi Arabia, it is hard to imagine much being said about the Saudi human rights activist, Raif Badawi, at the conference. He is in prison for the crime of religious dissent and under threat of further public flogging and potential execution

Saudi Arabia ranks sixth on the 2014 World Watch List of most repressive countries for Christians, a list compiled by the charity, Open Doors.

When a country like Saudi Arabia passes legislation defining atheists as terrorists, beheads or tortures its citizens, and refuses to protect the right of minorities to follow their beliefs, or to have no belief, is it any wonder that such actions are mimicked by IS?

Saudi Arabia beheads people in the public square which is routinely practised by IS.

Rule of law

The Jeddah Conference aimed to discuss how to effectively implement UN Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18 on combating religious intolerance, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against people due to their religion or beliefs.

Saudi Arabia, unlike IS, really is an Islamic state and it would be the first place to start heralding an acceptance of pluralism of belief and upholding diversity and difference.

In his opening speech to the Conference, OIC Secretary-General Iyad Ameen Madani said that the international human rights community attached great importance to combating religious intolerance. Mr Madani correctly observed that religious hatred needs to be addressed at all levels, including the need to ascertain the limits of freedom of expression to determine where it ends and transforms into incitement to hatred.

World leaders face the challenge of championing and upholding the rule of law and the protection of minorities – beyond conferences and speeches. That is the antidote to Jihadist ideology, not assassination squads or endless aerial bombardment.

Safe havens

The war lords and regime leaders responsible for persecution and atrocities should face justice. The challenge is to increase the effectiveness of the International Criminal Court, systematically collect evidence, document the atrocities and demand the United Nations Security Council instigates prosecutions.

More safe havens are needed to protect beleaguered groups of Christians, and others, and every foreign minister needs to promote Article 18 obligations.

Dag Hammarskjold, one of the great Secretary Generals of the UN (1953-1961), once said, 'The UN wasn't founded to take mankind to paradise but rather to save humanity from hell.'

It is hard to see that the international community is achieving even that limited objective.

The UN, our Western legislators, policymakers and media need to become literate about religion. The BBC's chief international correspondent, Lyse Doucet, said, 'If you don't understand religion – including the abuse of religion – it's becoming ever harder to understand our world.'

Aid programmes

The central question of how nations learn to live together, tolerantly respecting and rejoicing in the dignity of difference is at the heart of all these challenges. It means emphasising a common humanity; promoting the ability of members of all religious faiths to manifest their religion; and allow all people to contribute openly and on an equal footing to society.

Aid programmes and humanitarian interventions have to reflect values and be used to protect minorities, provide security, and to open the possibility of decent lives for those currently trying to flee their native homelands.

Countries can apply 'soft power' – or smart power – in the way aid is provided and by shutting it off, or threatening to shut it off, where necessary – and in how values are shared through education and the media.

The immediate and over-arching concern remains the plight of Middle Eastern Christians. The international community has to be more consistent in its moral outrage rather than denouncing some countries for their suppression of minorities while appeasing others who directly enable jihad through financial support. Western powers are seen as hypocrites when business interests determine responses to human rights abuses.

Deep questions

This is not about Christians versus Muslims. Religious persecution takes place all over the world and those responsible should be prosecuted. A Pew Research Centre study found that religious repression was recorded in 151 of 185 countries studied in the last 10 years.

The dramatic rise in the persecution of Christians has been accompanied by a vilification of Islam and, in Europe especially, the reawakening of anti-Semitism.

The three Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – need to ask deep questions about what they can do to remedy these issues – and become transformative agents in conflict management, reconciliation and healing.

World leaders face the challenge of championing and upholding the rule of law and the protection of minorities – beyond conferences and speeches. That is the antidote to Jihadist ideology, not assassination squads or endless aerial bombardment.

Can the great faiths motivate their followers to be peace-makers, peace-builders, protectors of minorities, and practitioners of pluralism, tolerance, mutual respect, and the upholding of the rule of law? Could global society devote comparable energy into countering religious extremism as the energy which has been used to spread religious extremism?

Countries have to make the cause of those who suffer for their religion or belief the great cause of our times. Christians, Jews and Muslims privileged to live in free societies have to challenge cold indifference and speak up and defend humanity.

Jailed for their belief

A recent report exposes the laws that suppress, rather than protect, the freedom to believe

Epoch Times (30.06.2015) - Dolkun Erkin, 26 years old of Gulja city, China, was charged with splitting the state and sentenced to 10 years in prison, according to the recently released Prisoners List 2014. His so-called crime? Teaching Islam.

Such poignant breaches of freedom of belief happening now across the world are exposed in a [report](#) and the Prisoners List 2014 launched at the House of Lords on June 24, 2015.

Dr Nazila Ghanea-Hercock said in the keynote speech that the state of the laws in certain countries “are comical if they were not so tragic”.

She ironically spoke of laws that have been around for over 115 years ensuring prison inmates have the freedom of religion or belief. Yet the people highlighted in the report don't even have that freedom outside of detention.

“They did nothing than enjoy one of their human rights,” she said.

Another example of such a tragic case from the Prisoners List is Vahid Hakkani from Iran, who was sentenced to 3 years and 8 months in prison. Charges included propaganda against the system and collusion against humanity. Hakkani's “crime” was attending a Christian house church, an “underground” meeting of Christians outside the closely monitored Christian church in Iran.

"This is the tip of the tip of the iceberg," said Willy Fautre, director of the non-governmental organisation Human Rights Without Frontiers, while giving similar examples.

North Korea, China, and Iran have the highest number of people imprisoned for their religion or belief in 2014 – research found that recorded cases are in the thousands.

North Korea, described by Fautre as a "black spot" on the world map, is said to have the highest number of religious believers behind bars, mainly Christians. Access to information and the language barrier made it very challenging to get information on individual cases, Fautre said.

In Pakistan, insulting the Prophet Muhammed can lead to the death penalty, while the desecration of the Muslim holy book, the Koran, can lead to life imprisonment or 10 years' imprisonment. The law is often used over disputes for personal interest.

For example, Imran Ghafoor was accused of burning the Koran and some holy papers in front of his shop.

Ghafoor's statement reads that the blasphemy allegations arose after business jealousy and rivalry because Imran's business flourished while his accusers' businesses were not doing so well. Ghafoor, 28, was arrested in 2009 and sentenced to life imprisonment.

There has been little progress to amend the blasphemy laws. In 2011, two politicians who questioned the blasphemy law were shot dead in Pakistan.

What can the European Union do?

The cogs that drive changes in law tend to turn very slowly. European Union policy recommendations outlined in the report are one hope for people to regain the freedom to practise their belief or religion. But is the EU likely to take on any of the recommendations?

"We're not going for Utopia. The reality is we are hoping for a middle ground," said Alfiaz Vaiya, project manager for Human Rights Without Frontiers.

He said the EU is set to revise their Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy in July.

While economic stability and prosperity are high on any country's agenda, it's a serious issue if basic human rights are sacrificed.

Unfortunately, this is the case in some countries. In late 2013 the EU signed a law, the GSP+ arrangement, that gave Pakistan greater trade access to EU countries. The EU is Pakistan's most important trading partner, according to the European Commission's website, taking 21.2 per cent of Pakistan's total exports. Vaiya commented that there was "no way" that the EU would sign this agreement if they were serious about human rights.

"It's not the EU per se," said Vaiya in a telephone interview after the event. "If powerful member states like the UK, France, Germany, and North European Union countries all vote in favour for an agreement that is already a semi-majority."

On the topic of China, Vaiya said that the country had "gone quiet on the EU agenda".

China is the EU's second trading partner after the United States and has invested in EU countries. The one-party state, however, has a history tainted with human rights violations.

Just one example is their lucrative organ transplant trade, where organs are often supplied from living prisoners of conscience. Evidence of live organ harvesting was uncovered in an independent report in 2006 by David Kilgour, former Canadian secretary of state, and David Matas, international human rights lawyer.

They found most of these organs are taken for profit from imprisoned practitioners of Falun Gong, a Chinese spiritual practice.

Late last year, the European Parliament axed the intergroup on Tibet on the grounds that no political group had made it a priority. In November 2014, just prior to the vote on which intergroups to continue into 2015, all MEPs received a letter voicing "concern" about the Tibet intergroup from the Chinese Mission to the EU asking them not to re-establish it.

The Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, did not meet with any officials during his visit to the UK over the weekend.

The EU has in the past halted trade agreements with some countries, such as Burma, over human rights concerns. Vaiya says the same pressure could be applied to countries where freedom of belief is stifled.

"The EU can play their role and stall the [trade] agreements," said Vaiya. "More needs to be done at the MEP level to raise human rights."

"This is just a document," he said. "The main thing is to make this document real."

A cross to bear: the vanishing Christians of the Middle East

The Guardian (16.06.2015) <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/16/christians-middle-east-religion-islamic-state-linda-dorigo-andrea-milluzzi> - Father Iyad Twai is the Roman Catholic parish priest of the village of Beit Sahour, a mile or so away from Beit Lechem – or Bethlehem, as it is better known – in the Palestinian West Bank. Last month, we met for a coffee and a smoke at Bethlehem University and chatted about our respective parishes. It's a golden rule that, when two clergy get together to talk, they start comparing numbers. He has about 350 families in his parish – about 1,200 people – as well as involvement from the Orthodox and Arab Maronite communities. And his was the village where the shepherds of the gospel of Luke first proclaimed the good news of Jesus's birth. This is where Christianity began. Some of his parishioners are descendants of those first shepherds, he said. I raised a sceptical eyebrow. Nonetheless, in the game of ecclesiastical top trumps, he had blown me away on all counts.

But, for all of this, Father Iyad is fighting an uphill battle. His community is shrinking, with many younger Palestinian Christians leaving Beit Sahour to find jobs elsewhere in the world. The Israeli occupation has left them with little prospects in their home town. Soon, he says, there won't be any Christians left. People will come here on air-conditioned coaches to look at buildings like the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, but what he calls the "living stones", ie the local Christian community itself (a reference to 1 Peter, chapter 2), are ignored, as if they don't exist.

This book from photographer Linda Dorigo and journalist Andrea Milluzzi, Italians working in the Middle East, give faces to these living stones, away from touristic locations. Their new book – poignantly titled Rifugio ("refuge" or "shelter") – is a visual record of those who have, through poverty or defiance, refused to become a part of the Christian

diaspora and now struggle to live out their faith in an increasingly inhospitable land. "During New Year's evening Mass in 2011, an explosion destroyed the Saints Church in Alexandria [in Egypt]. Twenty-one Christians died. The story appeared in western newspapers and on television, but, after a few days, the media's attention faded. We felt the need to know more. So we left to discover stories, families and villages in their everyday lives. We were looking for the heirs of the evangelists and the first pilgrims," they explain.

When the US launched its invasion of Iraq in 2003, there were 1.5 million Christians living in the country. Saddam Hussein's foreign minister, Tariq Aziz, was a Christian – demonstrating the relative religious tolerance under that regime. But, by igniting sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shias, the US invasion was a disaster for indigenous Christians, who Muslims associated with the hated crusaders. Now Christians are being slaughtered by Islamic State. Between 2003 and now, three quarters of Iraq's Christians have been driven from their homes or killed. It's a story that has repeated itself throughout the Middle East, although, to be fair, it long pre-dates the US invasion. When, a century ago, the Ottomans drove Armenian Christians from Turkey into the Syrian desert to die of starvation, there was a 13% Christian presence in Turkey. Now, they have been all but wiped out. In Egypt, some 600,000 Christians have left during the past 30 years.

Father Iyad is right to be worried. And Dorigo and Milluzzi have done important work showing us their faces and giving us an emotional connection to their struggle for survival. Many of these communities have existed since the first century. Some of them still pray in Aramaic, the language that Jesus himself prayed in. Now they are approaching extinction. Christianity is being driven from the place of its birth.

Coalition of civil society organisations in the Middle East and North Africa to respond to incitement to hatred

Coordination Committee of the Coalition (11.05.2015) -

Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa region has been strongly affected by a spiral of political instability and violence^[1]. The political changes and social movements that have swept the region since 2011 have been accompanied by an increase in incidents of sectarian, ethnic, racial, or religious violence. Indeed, the growth of religious, ethnic and racial hatred has reached what many in civil society perceive to constitute unprecedented levels. There is particular concern that the growth of "terrorism", mass atrocities, violence and hate crimes may be linked to incitement speech^[2]. There is indeed anecdotal evidence directly linking incidents of mass violence and violence (including harming, killings, attacks against places of worship) with incitement speech, including disseminated through the Media and Social Media, in places of education and worship, by public officials, political parties representatives, army representatives, and religious "leaders", amongst others.

^[1] See for instance the Global Terrorism Index report for 2014: <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Terrorism-Index-Report.pdf> and the Conflict and Political Violence Index 2014 <http://reliefweb.int/map/world/conflict-and-political-violence-index-2014>

^[2] Incitement speech is defined as per article 20 of the ICCPR. Hate speech is understood to constitute a larger category of speech that may be regulated under article 19 of the ICCPR or article 4 of CERD, and include the dissemination and propagation of speech based, amongst other things, on notions of racial, ethnic, national, gender, religious superiority.

In all countries of the MENA region, incitement speech alongside blasphemy and other forms of “religious crimes”, are the objects of a multitude of laws. These “crimes” are heavily sanctioned, including through heavy prison sentences. However, these laws and policies are largely abused by a range of actors to curtail legitimate expression, protected under international human rights law, and violate human rights for all, including national, ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities. The legal and policy measures in place have also shown to be ineffective and counterproductive at addressing and responding to the increasing number of incidents of sectarian violence.

Striking the balance between respect and protection of freedom of expression on the one hand, and the prohibition of certain types of incitement speech, including incitement to national, racial, and religious hatred, on the other is at best of times a delicate process. It is even more so in situations of conflicts, post-conflicts, and/or transition where some speech may be inflaming already fragile situations, leading to violence and discrimination, targeting minorities and vulnerable groups. Finding such a balance is a process involving a range of actors, not just governments, the police or justice, and including in particular civil society organizations, which are often best placed to respond effectively to incidents of incitement, prevent violence, and build more resilient and tolerant communities.

This realization led a group of civil society organizations, human rights activists and religious leaders to work towards the establishment of the first civil coalition to combat national, racial or religious hatred in the MENA region and protect freedom of expression in line with article 19 of the universal declaration of human rights.

Objectives

The MENA regional civil coalition against national, racial or religious hatred was established in April 2015, following a long process of consultation detailed below. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) regional offices in Tunis and Beirut supported the initiative throughout its inception phase.

The objectives of the Coalition, through its members and its Secretariat, are to monitor, analyze and report on incitement speech in the region; identify and implement a range of interventions to counter such messages or offer alternative speech^[3]; and promote non-discrimination, pluralism and diversity, tolerance and human rights with the view of contributing to building more tolerant societies within the MENA region.

The coalition will support civil society organizations, and faith driven organizations in the MENA region, including by building their organizational, technical, advocacy and research capacity in line with international human rights standards mainly articles 19 and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Resolution 16/18 on Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against, persons based on religion or belief^[4], and the Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence^[5].

^[3] These may include legal and policy reforms including related to non-discrimination; the development and spread of counter or alternative speech and messages; direct dialogue with speakers and the audience; education reforms, including religious education; etc.

^[4] http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/A.HRC.RES.16.18_en.pdf

^[5] http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/SeminarRabat/Rabat_draft_outcome.pdf

The History of establishing the coalition

1. Amman regional meeting, November 2013: The concrete recommendation of the establishment of the Arab Civil Society coalition against incitement to hatred.

OHCHR Middle East and North Africa Regional Office (ROMENA) convened a Regional Seminar on Policy Options in Promoting Freedom of Expression and Preventing Incitement to hatred, in Amman, Jordan in November 2013. Targeting human rights defenders and media professionals, the seminar sought to identify policy options for promoting freedom of expression while preventing incitement to hatred, and succeeded in raising awareness of the value of the Rabat Plan of Action. The role and responsibility of media professionals, clerics and religious institutions and Institutions was highlighted, with calls on opinion leaders and the media to adopt more responsible attitudes. Participants also agreed on the importance of initiating a dialogue with human rights defenders on legitimate adjustments to freedom of opinion and expression.

At the end of the seminar, participants endorsed the Amman Declaration, by which they agreed to work together towards establishing an Arab Civil Society coalition for Combating incitement to hatred. The coalition aims to address collectively the widespread incitement to hatred by numerous actors in various areas of the Arab world. This Coalition would raise awareness about the Rabat Plan of Action, monitor and analyse cases of incitement to hatred, and develop action plans to counter them or advocate with authorities to discharge their obligations. The Coalition would also develop the "Rabat Index" in order to investigate cases of incitement. Amman declaration recommends also prompting the media to collaborate in developing an Arab information code of conduct to ensure they do not play any role in increasing incitement to hatred and are in conformity with articles 19 and 20 of the ICCPR.

2. Tunis regional workshop, October 2014: A concrete step towards the establishment of the regional civil coalition is made

On 16 to 18 October 2014, OHCHR ROMENA and Tunis organized a regional workshop in Tunis, on "the role of civil society and media in promoting diversity and tolerance in the MENA region". The workshop mainly aimed to outline possible modalities to establish a regional civil society coalition for countering incitement to hatred as outlined in the Amman Declaration, and to develop the six-part threshold test of Rabat Plan of Action into a practical tool to be at the disposal of the CSOs and media regulatory. The event was attended by 129 CSOs participants from 17 countries (Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Kurdistan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrein, Oman, Qatar and Yemen). The main outcome of the workshop was the concrete step towards the establishment of an effective regional civil society partnership against incitement to hatred, to be developed into a structured coalition. The seventeen focal points identified from the 17 participating countries decided to start working together on the modalities of the establishment of a "regional coalition against incitement to hatred in MENA region" within a period of 45 days. A subcommittee of six volunteers among the 17 focal points was tasked with the follow up on the establishment of the civil coalition.

3 Marrakech meeting, November 2014.

The subcommittee held several skype meetings in order to prepare a meeting in Marrakech on 28 November. The subcommittee seized the occasion of the World Forum on Human Rights (FMDH) in Marrakech and initiated contacts with the Morocco National Council for Human Rights (CNDH) and the Morocco Inter-ministerial Delegation for Human Rights, in order to organize a thematic workshop on the role of the civil society to

promote tolerance and diversity. The overall objective of the thematic forum was to bring together the identified focal points from the Tunis October workshop, to develop a roadmap for the establishment of the regional civil coalition. Representatives from OHCHR and experts attended the meeting. Sheikh Maytham Al Salman announced during the event that the coalition will be officially launched in April 2015

During the meeting the participants agreed to set up a preparatory committee of eight members in order to prepare the formal launching of the regional coalition in April 2015 through a general assembly. The preparatory committee decides to set a mailing group that includes OHCHR and experts to discuss the groundwork/logistics for the launch of the coalition.

Some of the members of the preparatory committee initiated a public statement following the recent attack against Charlie Hebdo in France. The statement was adopted by 35 CSOs organizations. It strongly condemned the appalling attack on media workers and police officers, stressed that freedom of expression and opinion are the cornerstone for any democratic society and should be protected and called to uniting efforts to counter incitement to hatred and any restriction to freedom of expression.

4. The inauguration of the coalition: Tunis – April 21st 2015

The inauguration of the coalition began with a statement by the High Commissioner M. Zaid Raad Al Hussein in which he emphasized on the importance of getting non-governmental organizations and figures involved in combating hatred in the Middle East. He also regarded the coalition as a unique initiative that deserves support to face the alarming challenges. The opening session was followed by two days of discussion related to the scope of the Coalition mandate and areas of work, governance system and next steps. The subcommittee was reappointed to implement the objectives for the first year of operation, including the legal registration of the coalition secretariat in Tunisia, the development of a preliminary operational plan for the first year and fund raising. Sheik Maytham Al Salman was commissioned coordinator of the Coalition and its subcommittee.

Relevance of supporting the MENA civil coalition against incitement

While national authorities carry the primary responsibility to respond to and prevent violence and violations of the right to life, and to respect and protect freedom of expression, civil society actors and the media play a very important role as well. For example, civil society can be instrumental in addressing the root causes of intolerance and hate speech by encouraging constructive dialogue and by cultivating skills for peaceful resolution at the community level.

As noted above, the region has witnessed a proliferation of overbroad legal restrictions on hate speech, freedom of religion and incitement to violence, which have negatively impacted on the work of civil societies in the MENA region, considerably limiting their ability to influence legal and policy reform processes related to freedom of expression, diversity and tolerance. For example, men and women Human rights defenders, activists and media professionals remain at risk of stigmatization, intimidation and even reprisals by State and non-State actors, including for their work on the promotion of tolerance and non-sectarian policies. The regional civil coalition, unified and networked, is an essential step towards establishing an enabling environment where civil society can more effectively and safely promote tolerance and diversity in the region, and respond to incitement.

Conclusion

Terrorist attacks, mass atrocities, and sectarian/ethnic violence constitute a global emergency and one of the most formidable threats to peace and security around the globe. The international Community is deeply concerned with the rise of extremist and violent ideologies, which identify themselves as part of specific faith traditions, beliefs or tendencies, or claim to speak on behalf of a part or a whole of a religion. The growth of religious hostility and religious hatred advocacy in the Middle East is a joint concern for the US, EU, UN and the international community. Religious-based mass atrocities and the violent targeting of individuals based on their religion or belief, perpetrated by violent and extremist groups are on the rise in the Middle East and North Africa. The increasing number of reports of incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence, and of "hate speech" worldwide and, in particular, in regions like the Middle East where there are high levels of religious tensions and violence should not only be a matter of concern, it should pave the road for projects and initiatives to counter hatred and extremism.

The coalition is seeking the support of International NGO's and governments to counter incitement that leads to terrorism, violence and mass killings in the MENA region and to build more tolerant societies.

For more information or support, please contact: Sheikh Maytham Al Salman, Coordinator of the MENA coalition for countering hatred that leads to violence and discrimination

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European Parliament Intergroup presents its first Freedom of Religion or Belief World Report

EP Intergroup on FoRB & RT (03.06.2015) - The European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance (EP Intergroup on FoRB & RT) presented its first Annual Report on the 'State of Freedom of Religion or Belief' at an event hosted by the Intergroup in collaboration with United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Speakers included the Chairs of the EP Intergroup on FoRB & RT and USCIRF as well as the Director of Human Rights at the European External Action Service (EEAS).

Peter van Dalen MEP, Co-President of the EP Intergroup on FoRB & RT and co-author of the Intergroup's report said: *"Today is a milestone for the Intergroup since its upgrade by the European Parliament Conference of Presidents. With the presentation of our report, we hope to shed some more light on the violation of this fundamental right and stand up for the many millions of people who are bullied, discriminated, persecuted and even killed because of their religion or belief."*

Dennis de Jong MEP, Co-President of the EP Intergroup on FoRB & RT and co-author of the Intergroup's report said: *"For the report we have made a thorough analysis of all available material. Unfortunately, we can only conclude that violations of freedom of religion or belief have become more frequent and intense. Despite the adoption of the EU-Guidelines on the protection of FoRB, it still depends very much on the individual priorities of embassies and delegations whether the EU and its Member States raise the issue of freedom of religion or belief with third countries and take appropriate action. On the basis of the current report, the Intergroup will closely monitor the developments, especially in the countries of concern, and put pressure on the EEAS and the Member States to take more effective action. To this effect we included both institutional and country specific recommendations in the report."*

The report which was well received by the European Institutions, religious or belief groups and civil society comprises chapters on freedom of religion or belief in five regions of the world and documented violations committed by states, non-state actors or both. The report also has a thematic chapter on violence against places of worship and holy places. The Intergroup included this chapter to raise awareness of the targeting of sites by totalitarian and extremist groups in attempts to eradicate religious or belief communities in certain countries. In its concluding chapters the report lists institutional recommendations for more effective promotion and protection of FoRB in the European Union's (EU) external policies as well as country-specific recommendations regarding identified countries of particular concern.

Report: <http://www.religiousfreedom.eu/file/2015/06/2014-Intergroup-Report-FINAL.pdf>
For more information: <http://www.religiousfreedom.eu/events/>
Press release: <http://www.religiousfreedom.eu/our-work/press-releases/>

1) The EP Intergroup on FoRB & RT is one of 28 official Intergroup in 2014-2019 European Parliament mandate.

2) The European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance is a group of like-minded MEPs dedicated to ensuring the EU, in its external actions, promotes and protects the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Participants at OSCE conference in Vienna discuss ways to counter intolerance, discrimination against Christians

OSCE, (18.05.2015) <http://www.osce.org/odihr/158601> - Representatives from civil society, governments and international organizations explored the challenges, including discrimination and hate crime, Christian communities face in the OSCE region at a conference held in Vienna on 18 May 2015.

The "Conference on Enhancing Efforts to Prevent and Combat Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians, Focusing on Hate Crimes, Exclusion, Marginalization and Denial of Rights" was organized by the OSCE Serbian Chairmanship and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

"We would like to highlight the importance of raising awareness of the value of cultural and religious diversity as a source of mutual understanding and respect for different cultures, ethnicities religious and believes," said Ambassador Vuk Žugić, Chair of the OSCE Permanent Council and Serbia's Permanent Representative to the Organization, adding that Serbia has a special interest in promoting this, given that its Christian heritage has suffered great, and many times irreparable damage throughout the tumultuous recent history in the Balkans.

ODIHR Director Michael Georg Link stressed that ODIHR's annual reporting has illustrated gaps in the information provided on hate crimes committed against Christians, as well as his hope that the discussion at the conference would help provide ways to address these gaps.

"We look forward to the recommendations that will emerge from this conference, which will help efforts to counter intolerance against Christians," Director Link said. "There are

still too many barriers to developing policies and initiatives to challenge intolerance against Christians. ODIHR is ready to continue its efforts to help participating States the recording of data on hate crimes against Christians – data that can then guide policymakers in preparing the most effective response to this problem."

Discrimination and intolerance threaten the security of individuals and can give rise to wider scale conflict and violence, undermining regional and international stability and security, participants at the conference said. At the conference, they examined how co-operation and trust among law-enforcement agencies, criminal justice practitioners and Christian communities can be enhanced, to ensure that there is an effective body of laws, policies and practices that addresses hate crimes and intolerance faced by Christian communities across the OSCE region.

"Hate crimes against Christians are often under-reported," said keynote speaker Massimo Introvigne, Managing Director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) and former OSCE Chairman-in-Office's Personal Representative on Combating Racism, Xenophobia, and Discrimination, also Focusing on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions. "Better co-operation between Christian communities, police, government and ODIHR is needed in order to raise awareness and confront this very serious phenomenon."

OSCE participating States have acknowledged the need to counter specific forms of intolerance, including against Christians and members of other religions. The 2005 Cordoba Declaration by the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office addressed intolerance against Christians specifically, and has been supplemented in subsequent OSCE Ministerial Council Decisions. Today's conference in Vienna builds on the work done during a high-level meeting in Rome, in 2011, on preventing and responding to hate incidents and crimes against Christians.

Invisible atheists

The spread of disbelief in the Arab world

New Republic (23.04.2015) <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/121559/rise-arab-atheists> - Last December, Dar Al Ifta, a venerable Cairo-based institution charged with issuing Islamic edicts, cited an obscure poll according to which the exact number of Egyptian atheists was 866. The poll provided equally precise counts of atheists in other Arab countries: 325 in Morocco, 320 in Tunisia, 242 in Iraq, 178 in Saudi Arabia, 170 in Jordan, 70 in Sudan, 56 in Syria, 34 in Libya, and 32 in Yemen. In total, exactly 2,293 nonbelievers in a population of 300 million.

Many commentators ridiculed these numbers. *The Guardian* asked Rabab Kamal, an Egyptian secularist activist, if she believed the 866 figure was accurate. "I could count more than that number of atheists at Al Azhar University alone," she replied sarcastically, referring to the Cairo-based academic institution that has been a center of Sunni Islamic learning for almost 1,000 years. Brian Whitaker, a veteran Middle East correspondent and the author of *Arabs Without God*, wrote, "One possible clue is that the figure for Jordan (170) roughly corresponds to the membership of a Jordanian atheist group on Facebook. So it's possible that the researchers were simply trying to identify atheists from various countries who are active in social media."

Even by that standard, Dar Al Ifta's figures are rather low. When I recently searched Facebook in both Arabic and English, combining the word "atheist" with names of

different Arab countries, I turned up over 250 pages or groups, with memberships ranging from a few individuals to more than 11,000. And these numbers only pertain to Arab atheists (or Arabs concerned with the topic of atheism) who are committed enough to leave a trace online. "My guess is, every Egyptian family contains an atheist, or at least someone with critical ideas about Islam," an atheist compatriot, Momen, told Egyptian historian Hamed Abdel-Samad recently. "They're just too scared to say anything to anyone."

While Arab states downplay the atheists among their citizens, the West is culpable in its inability to even conceive of an Arab atheist. In Western media, the question is not if Arabs are religious, but rather to what extent their (assumed) religiosity can harm the West. In Europe, the debate focuses on immigration (are "Muslim immigrants" adverse to secular freedoms?) while in the United States, the central topic is terrorism (are "Muslims" sympathetic to it?). As for the political debate, those on the right suspect "Muslims" of being hostile to individual freedoms and sympathetic to *jihad*, while leftists seek to exonerate "Muslims" by highlighting their "peaceful" and "moderate" religiosity. But no one is letting the Arab populations off the hook for their Muslimhood. Both sides base their argument on the premise that when it comes to Arab people, religiosity is an unquestionable given, almost an ethnic mandate embedded in their DNA.

The Arab Spring may have stalled, if not receded, but when it comes to religious beliefs and attitudes, a generational dynamic is at play. Large numbers of individuals are tilting away from the rote religiosity Westerners reflexively associate with the Arab world. In 2012, a wide-ranging WIN/Gallup International poll found that 5 percent of Saudi citizens—more than a million people—self-identify as "convinced atheists," the same percentage as in the United States. Nineteen percent of Saudis—almost six million people—think of themselves as "not a religious person." (In Italy, the figure is 15 percent.) These numbers are even more striking considering that many Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, and Yemen, uphold the *sharia* rule punishing apostasy with death.

Capital punishment, however, is almost never put into practice; the convicted atheists spend varying periods in jail before being granted an opportunity to recant. Arab countries with no apostasy laws still have ways to deter the expression of religious disbelief. In Morocco and Algeria, prison terms await those convicted of using "means of seduction" to convert a Muslim. Egypt resorts to wide interpretations of anti-blasphemy laws to condemn outspoken atheists to jail. In Jordan and Oman, publicly leaving Islam also exposes one to a sort of civil death—a set of legal measures including the annulment of marriages and the stripping of inheritance rights.

Officially sanctioned punishments can be severe. This January, a 21-year-old Egyptian student named Karim Al Banna was given a three-year jail sentence for "insulting Islam," because he declared he is an atheist on Facebook. His own father testified against him. In February 2012, Saudi writer Hamza Kashgari was imprisoned for almost two years without trial over three tweets addressing the prophet Muhammad; the most controversial was, "I will not bow to you. I shall not kiss your hand. Rather, I shall shake it as equals do." The following month, a Tunisian tribunal sentenced bloggers Ghazi Beji and Jabeur Mejri to seven years for "transgressing morality, defamation and disrupting public order," after they posted satirical comments and cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. Last year, Raif Badawi, the founder of Free Saudi Liberals, a blog discussing religion, was sentenced to ten years in prison and 1,000 lashes. And last December, Mauritanian columnist Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mkhaitir was sentenced to death for penning a critique of his country's caste system which traced its mechanisms back to decisions made by the prophet in the seventh century. The sentence is pending appeal.

Despite such draconian measures, the percentage of people who express some measure of religious doubt is higher in the Arab world (22 percent) than in South Asia (17 percent) and Latin America (16 percent). And that 22 percent is only an average; the percentage goes higher in some Arab countries, from 24 percent in Tunisia up to 37 percent in Lebanon. Considering the extent to which the Arab social and political environment impedes the expression of nonbelief, the numbers of doubters and atheists would likely be significantly higher if people felt freer to speak their minds. In January, Egyptian atheist activist Ahmed Harqan told Ahram Online, "If the state preserved and protected the rights of minorities, the numbers of those who reveal they're atheists would increase tenfold."

In the spring of 2011, the Arab world was experiencing a regionwide revolutionary convulsion. In Tunis, Cairo, and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa, thousands of young people took over public squares, demanding new freedoms. At the same time, Waleed Al Hussein was in a jail cell in Qalqiliya in the Palestinian West Bank. The 22-year-old had been arrested a few months earlier in a cybercafé by Palestinian intelligence agents. Al Hussein was at the café because he had decided not to blog from his home because of threats he'd received for posts on his blog *Noor Al Aql*, or the Light of the Mind.

As *The New York Times* reported, Al Hussein had "angered the Muslim cyberworld by promoting atheism, composing spoofs of Koranic verses, skewering the lifestyle of the Prophet Muhammad and chatting online using the sarcastic Web name God Almighty." He told me he was brought before a military court because his online atheism was considered a "threat to national security."

Al Hussein was locked up for ten months, during which he was physically abused and endlessly interrogated. Of the hundreds of questions he was asked, one stuck in his mind: "Who finances your atheism?"

"Posting my thoughts on a blog obviously didn't require any financing," Al Hussein told me. "But the question was an indication of their utter inability to understand that renouncing Islam was my personal choice, just as it could be anyone else's—including them. In their minds, there had to be a foreign conspiracy behind this, preferably led by Israel. That was the only way my atheism could make sense for them."

Al Hussein was eventually freed and fled to Jordan, where he sought refuge in the French Embassy. Today he lives in Paris and has published a memoir, *Blasphémateur! Les Prisons d'Allah* (Blasphemer! The Prisons of Allah). After the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, he wrote an op-ed in the French daily *Libération* defending the slain cartoonists' freedom of speech. The headline the editor put on it was, "I, a Muslim, Commit to Secularism." Al Hussein, who by then had already published his memoir as an atheist and a blasphemer, commented in an amused tone, "They probably thought that putting 'Muslim' and 'secularism' together in the same sentence was bizarre enough to trigger interest."

During a 2014 appearance on HBO's "Real Time with Bill Maher," American author Sam Harris, a pillar of the New Atheism movement, fell into the same essentialist trap when he referred to "Muslims who are nominal Muslims who don't take the faith seriously." One can only marvel at the oxymoronic complexity of that sentence. If these people don't take Islam seriously, why then call them Muslims, "nominal" or not?

Religiously motivated trials like Al Hussein's are always a serious affair, with the accused considered not just an enemy of God, but also of the state. All Arab regimes use religion, to various extents, as a source of legitimacy. The expression of disbelief represents, for them, an existential threat. In 2014, Saudi Arabia went as far as listing atheism and questioning the Islamic faith as terrorist acts. There is an understandable logic behind

the move. "Saudi Arabia depends greatly on religious credentials, since its basic law roots the regime in Wahhabi Islam," Whitaker, the author of *Arabs Without God*, told me. "If you are an atheist in Saudi Arabia, you are also a revolutionary. If atheism is allowed to flourish, the regime won't be able to survive."

It's not just the authorities that consider disbelief a problem. Arab societies as a whole are not wired to accept declared atheists in their ranks. The first reason for Arab atheists to keep quiet is to not upset their relatives. Amid omnipresent religious references, claiming that you don't believe in God is hardly seen as an expression of your singularity. Rather it is considered a challenge to society in its entirety. Religiosity in the Arab world is not just mainstream; it is the norm, to which one is supposed to adhere unquestionably, or else be deemed a "deviant"—the literal translation of *mulhid*, the most-used Arabic term for atheist. And since religion is seen as the cradle of morality, godless people are assumed to be devoid of a moral compass. Whitaker cites Mohammed Al Khadra, a Jordanian atheist and civil society organizer, who said, "The main view is that if someone is ... an atheist then he must be living like an animal. That's how they see us. I have been asked so many times why wouldn't I sleep with my mother?"

It's even more problematic when the nonbeliever is female. "The popular association of atheism with immorality is a particular deterrent for women who have religious doubts, since in Arab society they are expected to be 'virtuous' and not rebellious in order to marry," Whitaker wrote in his book.

In such a milieu, one would assume the vast majority of Arab people are devout religious practitioners. The fact of the matter is, except in relatively small ultrareligious circles, secular lifestyles and attitudes are largely tolerated in the Arab world. For example, though forbidden in Islam, drinking alcohol is commonplace, particularly among the educated middle and upper classes. Until recently in Morocco, a country that produces large quantities of wine (alongside Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan), alcohol was sold in a supermarket chain owned by King Mohammed VI, also known as the Commander of the Faithful. In a recent speech, Nabil Al Fadhl, a Kuwaiti member of parliament, deplored his country's prohibition of alcoholic beverages, in effect since 1964, for driving young people to drink clandestinely manufactured—and thus dangerous—beverages.

Sex outside of marriage, another practice prohibited by Islam, is also unexceptional, especially in urban environments where genders have been mixing in the public space for more than half a century. In Morocco, a study determined that 800 clandestine abortions (presumably prompted by out-of-wedlock pregnancies) are performed on any given day.

Likewise, while Islam requires its followers to pray five times a day at fixed times, including twice during working hours, believers typically skip the prayers while they're at work and perform them once back home. In Saudi Arabia, one of the most zealous Arab countries when it comes to religious protocol, shops have to close for about 15 minutes at each prayer call to allow the customers to perform their religious duty. But you can often see small crowds of people gathered on the sidewalk and waiting idly—some taking a cigarette break—until the shops reopen.

In today's Arab world, it's not religiosity that is mandatory; it's the appearance of it. Nonreligious attitudes and beliefs are tolerated as long as they're not conspicuous. As a system, social hypocrisy provides breathing room to secular lifestyles, while preserving the façade of religion. Atheism, *per se*, is not the problem. Claiming it out loud is. So those who publicize their atheism in the Arab world are fighting less for freedom of conscience than for freedom of speech.

It hasn't always been so. Since the 1960s, larger-than-life Arab intellectuals, such as Palestinians Edward Said and Mahmoud Darwish and the Syrian Ali Ahmad Said Esber, also known as Adonis, haven't shied away from challenging religious orthodoxy. Abdullah Al Qasemi, a Saudi writer who died in 1996 and is considered the godfather of Gulf atheists, famously declared, "The occupation of our brains by gods is the worst form of occupation." Back then, such statements were much less of a problem. As the Associated Press's Diaa Hadid reported in 2013, "In the 1960s and 1970s, secular leftists were politically dominant. It wasn't shocking to express agnosticism. ... But the region grew more conservative starting in the 1980s, Islamists became more influential, and militants lashed out against any sign of apostasy."

Abdel-Samad, the Egyptian historian, experienced this firsthand. Today, at 43, he is a declared atheist, but he was an enthusiastic member of the Muslim Brotherhood in his university days. But while he was attending a summer camp run by the Brotherhood, doubts started to creep in. "It was meant to be some sort of collective physical and spiritual effort," he told me. "We were each given an orange and instructed to walk in the heat for hours. After an exhausting journey in the desert, we were ordered to peel the orange. We were happy to finally get something to quench our thirst. But then, our group leader ordered us to bury the fruit in the sand, and eat the peeling. I felt utterly humiliated. The objective was obviously to break our will. This is how you make terrorists. I left the Brotherhood soon after that." In 2013 an Egyptian extremist cleric appeared on television and issued a death fatwa against Abdel-Samad after he'd asserted that Islam had developed fascist tendencies since the time of the prophet.

Why are more Arabs turning their backs on religion? *The New York Times'* Thomas Friedman argued in a column last December that the horrors committed in the name of Islam by terrorist groups like ISIS are to blame. This reflects the mindset of many American pundits, for whom terrorism is central to all things Middle East. In reality, repudiating terror is rarely the motivation of those who veer from Islam. "While researching my book ... I spent a lot of time trying to find out why some Arabs turn to atheism and none of those I spoke to mentioned terrorism or jihadism as a major factor," Whitaker wrote. "That's not particularly surprising, because atheism is a rejection of all forms of religion, not just the more outlandish variants of it."

For the vast majority of Arab atheists, the road to disbelief begins as it did for Abdel-Samad, with personal doubts. They start to question the illogicalities found in the holy texts. Why are non-Muslims destined to hell, even though many of them are nice, decent people? Since God knows the future and controls everything, why would he put some people on the wrong path, then punish them as if he had nothing to do with their choices? Why is wine forbidden, yet virtuous Muslims are promised rivers of it in heaven? Such questions began bugging Amir Ahmad Nasr, Sudanese author of *My Isl@m: How Fundamentalism Stole My Mind—and Doubt Freed My Soul*, when he was twelve, and he brought them to his sheik, the imam of a mosque in Qatar. The answer he received—that doubting God's commandments is *haram* (religiously illicit) and can only be inspired by the devil—only prompted him to continue digging. As Islam Ibrahim, the founder of an Arab atheist Facebook page, said: "I wanted to secure a spot in paradise, so I started studying the Quran and Muhammad's teachings. But I found a lot of contradictory and bloody things and fantasies in it. ... Anyone who uses his brain five minutes in a neutral way will end up with the same conclusion."

Al Husseini, the Palestinian blogger, recalled his journey after he decided to leave Islam. "I began reading the books I could get my hands on," he said. "The discovery of the elementary notion of evolution was mind-blowing. Books like Dawkins's *The God Delusion* and Darwin's *The Origin of Species* opened my eyes to a whole new paradigm." The 24-year-old Moroccan atheist activist Imad Iddine Habib told me that he read books by American astrophysicist Carl Sagan.

The story of Iman Willoughby illustrates the second-most frequently cited reason, after doubting, for Arab citizens to turn to atheism: The oppression they personally experienced in the name of religion. Willoughby today is a happily married 39-year-old mother of two with her own massage clinic in Nova Scotia. But she went through a two-decade nightmare in her country of origin, Saudi Arabia. Physically abused by a father who broke her bones and a stepmother who chased her with knives, Willoughby was jailed twice by the Saudi religious police. The first time, she was spotted unveiled near a stream outside her hometown Riyadh. "It was an isolated place, I liked to go there and just close my eyes, feel the wind in my hair," she told me. But since females aren't allowed to drive in Saudi, a male driver had to take her. The day the religious police caught her unveiled, they accused her of having an illicit relationship with the driver. She spent three days in a police station before her father came to free her—and then "beat the living life out of me," she said.

The second arrest happened a few years later, while Willoughby was in medical school. The university was a 45-minute drive from home, and one night her driver didn't show up. A male student offered her a ride, and while they were crossing a small desert town, the religious police forced them to stop. They beat Willoughby's classmate unconscious and took her to a police station, where they forced her, under threat of physical abuse, to sign an "admission statement" that she was sleeping with her friend. Three months of imprisonment and "religious reeducation" followed, during which mandatory prayers were the only distraction from the cell she occupied, with nothing in it but a mattress on the floor, persistent cockroaches, and a video camera constantly filming her. She received no word from her family or friends. Willoughby was eventually freed, only to find out that she had been convicted and sentenced to 80 lashes. Her brother interceded before a prince—"not because he cared for me, only to salvage the honor of the family," she said—and she was pardoned.

Before prison, Willoughby had applied for a scholarship to continue medical school in Canada. She obtained it, begged her father to give her her passport (a scene she recalled as her "ultimate humiliation") and left forever. Her atheism? It had felt like a natural calling for a long time. "I never really prayed in my life," she told me. "Even in jail, I was just going through the motions to keep people quiet."

"Religion is a form of surveillance," said Habib. "It's not about God; it's about the power wielded by those who act in his name." Habib, Willoughby, and many others have switched to atheism as an act of rebellion. But their rebellion is less against Islam than against the abuses committed by religiously powered individuals and political systems.

Many Arab atheists weren't political at first. But it seems there is just no way around it. Momen told Abdel-Samad he didn't mean to politicize his atheism. "But when people's faith is political, my lack of it is just as political, by definition," he said. "As long as unbelievers are persecuted, as long as religion encroaches on people's private lives, I can't reject it purely as a private matter." And since politics is around the corner anyway, might as well do it well—and straight-faced. That's the conclusion Egyptian atheist activist Islam Ibrahim shared on the YouTube program "The Black Ducks." Started in August 2013 by another Egyptian atheist, Ismail Mohamed, the program invites atheists from the Arab world to speak their minds. When you're anonymous, you can say silly things and not be held accountable for them, Ibrahim said on the program. "I thought, if we atheists stop being ghosts and materialize, we will be taken more seriously, because our statements will become better thought through. Also, we'll never get what we want if we don't have the courage to claim it with our real names and faces."

As of mid-April, more than 140 "Black Ducks" episodes have been uploaded, and they've received hundreds of thousands of views. The channel has two objectives: Achieving "a secular society in the Middle East and North Africa. ... [and offering] solace and courage

to those who are atheists in secret so they may know they are not alone in the world." In the episode featuring him, Ibrahim said: "Your brother, co-workers, friends, family members might be atheists, just like you, but they'd never dare say, unless they see you come out on Facebook. It actually happened with my neighbor. We became friends in real life, as it happened for many." Toward that end, Ibrahim established a Facebook page where hundreds of Arab atheists posted their stories, including their names, photographs, countries of residence, and the reason behind their atheism.

Being connected to each other is crucial to Arab atheists. After Willoughby started her blog and Twitter feed in 2008, she said, numerous strangers reached out to her, thanking her for sharing her story, and anxiously asking for advice about how to deal with their own personal predicaments. To her, it felt like duty calling. Willoughby said she has helped a dozen atheists get out of Saudi Arabia by giving them access to information, and even sending money in some cases.

In 2007, a now-worldwide network of "ex-Muslims" was established to support refugees, exiles, and anyone from a Muslim background. The first such group was created in Germany at the initiative of Iranian exiles vowing to support the freedom to criticize religion and to end "religious intimidation and threats." There are now chapters in several countries including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Belgium, and New Zealand. There is no central body, and each chapter runs independently, but they collaborate on conferences and advocacy campaigns. Many of the ex-Muslims' activities are conducted online, but a good deal also happen in real life, which elicits security concerns. "If you'll be holding real life meetings, you should screen each person who wants to join for safety's sake," Kiran Fatima Opal, a Canadian--Pakistani active member of the ex-Muslims of North America, told me.

Habib started the ex-Muslims group in Morocco, which has about 20 members, and he has given news conferences alongside other activists. One last summer launched a campaign to gain the right to abstain from fasting during Ramadan (breaking the Ramadan fast in public is a criminal offense in Morocco, punishable by one to six months in prison.) "I created the Council of ex-Muslims so we'd stop saying, 'We are with the atheists,' and start saying, 'We are the atheists,'" Habib told me. "Like for gays, [the] time has come to claim 'atheist pride.'" Habib came to the attention of the public in March 2013. The police were looking for him, apparently to indict him because he had mocked the Islamic creed, "There is no god but God," on his Facebook page by turning it into, "There is no god but Mickey Mouse." Instead of turning himself in, he went into hiding while a support campaign was taking off on the Internet. By the time he resurfaced, the police had apparently given up on bringing him in. His relative international exposure (Western journalists such as *The New York Times*' Nicholas Kristof had interviewed him) may be what has shielded him from arrest so far.

Despite the risks and the social and political challenges they're facing, all the atheist activists I interviewed said they were confident that the future of the Arab world belongs to secularism. Willoughby told me that "atheism is spreading like wildfire" in the Middle East. Brian Whitaker views it as "the symptom of a much bigger thing, which is the battle against oppression." The booming Arab underground music scene is another example of the irresistible impetus for change that is quietly transforming the Middle East and North Africa. A full cultural revolution will probably take some time. Speaking about his country, Abdel-Samad said, "I think secularism is a certainty, not just a possibility, for Egypt's future. All that remains unclear is what price the country will pay first. History tells me blood."

Waleed Al Hussein told me that he's "pessimistic for the next 20 years, but optimistic for what's coming afterwards." He can afford it: By then, he'll be only 46.

Is atheism rampant in the Middle East?

Tribune (27.04.2015) <http://blogs.tribune.com.pk/story/27395/is-atheism-rampant-in-the-middle-east/> - Just recently [Ahmed Harqan](#), an Egyptian human rights activist, stunned television audiences all over Egypt and rest of the Arab Middle East, by claiming his non-belief in the existence of God and his profound disdain to religious scriptures and ideology.

Following this astonishing revelation, a raging debate sparked all over the Middle East, since religion has been the most sacred form of thought in these parts of the world. It was very uncommon to discuss faith and scriptures, as it was [considered blasphemous](#) to question the doctrines of religion, and was even punishable legally. But over the last few years, things have taken new dimensions; largely influenced by social media, blogosphere and YouTube, many young people have started to openly raise questions and criticise faiths and ideologies worldwide.

India and Pakistan are no exception to such scenarios. Although both countries are facing a serious crisis of [religious extremism](#) and the growth of right-wing narratives notably in the middle-class section, it has also triggered a tremendous rise of sceptics and critical thinkers. Many bloggers have started questioning myths, dogmas, doctrines and sacred texts that have been forced on to them as benign faith.

In Pakistan, people haven't showed up in the open as any form of dissent is retaliated [by bullets](#). But, despite threats, Pakistan has hundreds of atheism and anti-religious groups and pages mushrooming on social media. The wave of religious fascism and violence [carried out in its name](#), which has martyred over 50,000 lives including the dire dreadful [Peshawar school attack](#) that claimed 145 lives, has pushed many in Pakistan away from the fold of religion. The pace of the communication revolution in the last decade has [liberated populations](#) from the caged mind-set.

One of the predominant reasons for such a massive rise in religious critics is the incursion of religio-politicism, the blend of religion in politics, which has been a bread-and-butter combination for the political will throughout history. [In India](#), in the post-globalisation era, the chain leap [of god-men](#), Babas, faith healers, [gurus](#), [tele-evangelists](#), peace messengers, new age mullahs and the likes, and their proximity to the country's elite and their million dollar assets has coaxed their fans and followers to suspect.

Many faithful – once devotees of these conmen – have now turned against them. Many religious apologists have used the garb of religion and spirituality as a shield to mask their devious activities. They have [renegaded the innocent](#) and ignorant, and have shamelessly been nabbed red-handed in their mischief and mass duping. The once hardcore devotees are now nursing their wounds, and are incensed and infuriated at the exhibitionistic behaviour of these god-men and tele-evangelists. People have suffered by consuming their impractical, irrational and nonsensical solutions to human problems.

Global Research Index groups like [Pew and Gallop](#) indicate that close to eight per cent of the world population are atheists or non-believers. India has a rich and age-old [tradition of atheism](#), as it is deeply subsumed in Indian culture and heritage. The Indian national census does not explicitly count or lay emphasis on atheists. Moreover, an individual's faith is categorised on the basis of his/her community and not his/her personal inner belief. [Gallop surveys](#) suggest that around 3% of the population in India claims to be atheists. The number could be even more since there are various forms and categories of non-beliefs.

In the [United States](#), one of the most religious countries in the West, 16% of population claims to be atheists. The number is even more [in Great Britain](#) at about [30%](#) and it rises steadily in Scandinavian countries and Western Europe. China is considered to be the population with the [most number of atheists](#) in volume, as a direct result of propaganda from the ruling Communist government. In Middle Eastern countries, such surveys are not conducted legally, but one [recent report on BBC](#) noted that an underground research asserted that as large as three million Egyptians claimed atheism. This is indeed breathtaking, if the survey is to be believed, since Egypt was considered to be one of the most religiously conservative nations, prior to the [2011 revolution](#).

One of the factors driving people away from religion and faith in God is the growing atrocities and savagery witnessed across the world, sworn in God's name. Due to the enormous progress achieved by science, especially in communication technology over the last decade or so, it has propelled people to doubt and question unreason, irrationality, dogmas and myths. The things that were considered to be miracles three decades ago have now become a reality.

Irreligion and atheism are different concepts. Atheism is the absence of belief that any deities (gods) exist, whereas irreligion is the rejection in the sanctity of organised religions or religious beliefs. An irreligious individual can be perceived as a deist (belief in one God only). In many western countries, some attribute themselves as Christian atheists. [Christian atheism](#) is a [theological](#) position in which the belief in the [god of Christianity](#) is rejected or absent, but the moral [teachings of Jesus](#) are followed. Some atheists have doubted the very need for the term 'atheism'. In his book, [Letter to a Christian Nation](#), the renowned American neurologist and author [Sam Harris](#) wrote:

"In fact, 'atheism' is a term that should not even exist. No one ever needs to identify himself as a 'non-astrologer' or a 'non-alchemist'. Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make in the presence of unjustified religious beliefs."

Many new-age atheists believe that the world as they experience cannot be reconciled with the qualities commonly ascribed to God and gods by theologians. They argue that a god that is omniscient, omnipotent, and omni-benevolent cannot be compatible with a world where there is evil and suffering and where divine love is hidden from many people.

As the capitalistic and consumer-based world advances materialistically, the sanctity of religion and faith has been contaminated due to [commercialisation](#). It has become fashionable to exhibit religion on sleeves as a statement against other rival faiths. The ability to appreciate other beliefs and tolerance has almost faded away. People have become increasingly self-indulgent, reluctant to introspect, but animated to point fingers.

The free market world has seen materialistic headway and has waned in intellect. Perhaps this why 19th century German political theorist and sociologist, [Karl Marx](#), criticised religion as:

"The sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the [opium of the people](#)."

Day of Missionary Martyrs: 1,062 missionaries killed in the world from 1980 to 2014

News.Va (<http://www.news.va/en/news/europeitaly-day-of-missionary-martyrs-1062-mission>) - On March 24, we celebrate the "Day of Prayer and Fasting in Memory of the Missionary Martyrs", promoted by the Youth Movement of the Pontifical Mission Societies, on the anniversary of the assassination of Mgr. Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, who will be beatified on 23 May. The initiative aims to remember, with prayer and fasting, all the missionaries who were killed in the world and the pastoral workers who shed their blood to bear witness to the Gospel.

According to information gathered by Agenzia Fides, during the years 1980-1989, 115 missionaries died violently. The summary of the years 1990-2000 presents a total of 604 missionaries killed. The number is significantly higher than in the previous decade mainly as a result of the genocide in Rwanda, which caused at least 248 victims among church personnel. In the years 2001-2014 the total number of pastoral workers killed was 343 people. In the year 2014, 26 pastoral workers were killed: 17 priests, 1 religious, 6 religious women, one seminarian, one layman. These figures are still to be considered in default as they relate only to confirmed cases and of which news was received.

In Prison for their Religion or Belief

20 countries imprison individuals for exercising basic rights guaranteed under Article 18 of the ICCPR, according to the Annual Report of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (19.03.2015) - Twenty Member States of the United Nations have fallen short of their international commitments to protect the free exercise of their religion or belief, guaranteed by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,* according to *Human Rights Without Frontiers International* (HRWF) in its annual world report. **China, Iran and North Korea** hold the record for the highest number of those imprisoned for their religion or belief.

Members of at least **15 minority groups** were targeted by their government last year for this kind of repression of religion or belief.

The HRWF annual report exposes the constitutional and legislative framework of 20 countries of concern and documents various forms of state repression exercised against religious believers and those of non-religious convictions in those countries. Sanctions can include the death penalty, physical punishment and prison terms.

The report covers cases of imprisonment on the basis of national laws forbidding or restricting the right to freedom of religion or belief, such as the case of Meriam Ibrahim, who was imprisoned and sentenced to death in Sudan for declaring that she was a Christian whilst under Sudanese law she was considered a Muslim. In other cases covered in the report, laws were twisted in their application to suit a political end, to silence defenders of freedom of religion or belief or to repress religion or belief minority communities. For instance, in Iran members of religious minorities are routinely jailed on charges of "actions against national security" or attempting to overthrow the government, when all they were doing was meeting peacefully for worship.

Willy Fautre, Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers, commented that "*the purpose of this report is to identify and put on the radar screen those states which criminalise certain activities related to freedom of religion or belief and imprison their citizens for the simple exercise of this freedom which is protected by the Universal Declaration.*"

The report also aims to assist relevant EU institutions and EU Member States with country policy recommendations based on EU relations with each of the countries in question in an effort to strengthen protections for freedom of religion or belief.

To view the report: <http://hrwf.eu/forb-intro/forb-annual-reports/>

*Article 18 guarantees everyone the "freedom of thought, conscience and religion," including the right to change one's religion or to hold atheistic beliefs. The right to conscientious objection to military service is also guaranteed by the Universal Declaration.

En prison pour leur religion ou leurs convictions

20 pays emprisonnent leurs citoyens pour l'exercice de leur religion ou de leurs convictions, d'après le rapport annuel de Human Rights Without Frontiers

Vingt états membres de l'ONU ont emprisonné leurs citoyens pour avoir voulu pleinement jouir de leur droit de vivre selon leur religion ou leurs diverses convictions tel qu'il est garanti par l'article 18 de la Déclaration Universelle (*), selon le rapport annuel de *Human Rights Without Frontiers International*. La **Chine, l'Iran** et la **Corée du Nord** détiennent le record du nombre de croyants emprisonnés pour l'exercice de leur religion ou leurs croyances.

Des membres d'au moins **15 minorités religieuses** ont été la cible de ce type de répression de la part de leur état au cours de l'année dernière.

Le rapport annuel de *Human Rights Without Frontiers International* passe en revue le cadre constitutionnel et législatif ainsi que l'arsenal pénal des 20 pays épinglés et donne des cas concrets très bien documentés des diverses formes de répression qui frappent les croyants et les non-croyants de ces pays : peine de mort, châtiments corporels et peines de prison.

Le rapport couvre les cas d'emprisonnement sur base de lois nationales interdisant ou restreignant le droit à la liberté de religion ou de croyance. Toutefois, dans certains pays, il y a une volonté politique d'instrumentaliser de tout autres lois en vue de limiter les activités des croyants et des non-croyants, de faire taire les défenseurs de la liberté de religion ou de conviction, de dissuader d'autres personnes d'exercer cette liberté, voire même de réduire ou d'éliminer des minorités religieuses ou de convictions.

Willy Fautre, directeur de *Human Rights Without Frontiers International* a précisé à propos de cette répression multi-forme et poursuivant ces divers objectifs : 'Le but de ce rapport est d'identifier, de nommer et de mettre en pleine lumière les états qui criminalisent certaines activités relatives à la liberté de religion ou de croyance, et emprisonnent les personnes qui souhaitent jouir pleinement de cette liberté garantie par la Déclaration Universelle.'

Le rapport recommande à l'intention des institutions de l'Union Européenne et de ses états membres des politiques concrètes fondées sur les relations spécifiques que l'UE entretient avec chacun des pays épinglés afin d'y promouvoir la liberté de religion ou de conviction.

Le rapport est disponible en anglais à: <http://hrwf.eu/forb-intro/forb-annual-reports/>

(*) L'article 18 garantit à chacun « la liberté de pensée, de conscience et de religion », y compris le droit de changer de religion ou de conviction ainsi que de devenir athée ou de

le rester. Le droit à l'objection de conscience au service militaire est également pleinement protégé par la Déclaration.

Latest trends in religious restrictions and hostilities

See report at <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/02/26/religious-hostilities/>

Pew Research Center (26.02.2015) - <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/02/26/religious-hostilities/> - Worldwide, social hostilities involving religion declined somewhat in 2013 after reaching a six-year peak the previous year, but roughly a quarter of the world's countries are still grappling with high levels of religious hostilities within their borders, according to the Pew Research Center's latest annual study on global restrictions on religion.

The new study finds that the share of countries with high or very high levels of social hostilities involving religion dropped from 33% in 2012 to 27% in 2013, the most recent year for which data are available. These types of hostilities run the gamut from vandalism of religious property and desecration of sacred texts to violent assaults resulting in deaths and injuries.

By contrast, the share of countries with high or very high government restrictions on religion stayed roughly the same from 2012 to 2013. The share of countries in this category was 27% in 2013, compared with 29% in 2012. Government restrictions on religion include efforts to control religious groups and individuals in a variety of ways, ranging from registration requirements to discriminatory policies and outright bans on certain faiths.

Looking at the overall level of restrictions – whether resulting from government policies or from hostile acts by private individuals, organizations and social groups – the study finds that restrictions on religion were high or very high in 39% of countries. Because some of these countries (like China and India) are very populous, about 5.5 billion people (77% of the world's population) were living in countries with a high or very high overall level of restrictions on religion in 2013, up from 76% in 2012 and 68% as of 2007.

Among the world's 25 most populous countries, the highest overall levels of restrictions were found in Burma (Myanmar), Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan and Russia, where both the government and society at large impose numerous limits on religious beliefs and practices. Among these populous countries, China had the highest level of government restrictions in 2013, and India had the highest level of social hostilities involving religion. (Click here to see an interactive feature showing the levels of restrictions and hostilities among the 25 most populous countries from 2007 to 2013.)

As in previous years, Christians and Muslims – who together make up more than half of the global population – faced harassment in the largest number of countries. Christians were harassed, either by government or social groups, in 102 of the 198 countries included in the study (52%), while Muslims were harassed in 99 countries (50%).

In recent years, there has been a marked increase in the number of countries where Jews were harassed. In 2013, harassment of Jews, either by government or social groups, was found in 77 countries (39%) – a seven-year high. Jews are much more likely to be harassed by individuals or groups in society than by governments. In Europe, for example, Jews were harassed by individuals or social groups in 34 of the region's 45 countries (76%). (See sidebar on social hostilities and religious minorities in Europe.)

This is the sixth in a series of annual reports by the Pew Research Center analyzing the extent to which governments and societies around the world impinge on religious beliefs and practices. The studies are part of the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures project, which analyzes religious change and its impact on societies around the world. The project is jointly funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and the John Templeton Foundation.

To measure global restrictions on religion in 2013, the new study scores 198 countries and territories on the same 10-point indexes used in the previous studies.

- The Government Restrictions Index measures government laws, policies and actions that restrict religious beliefs and practices. The GRI is comprised of 20 measures of restrictions, including efforts by government to ban particular faiths, prohibit conversion, limit preaching or give preferential treatment to one or more religious groups.
- The Social Hostilities Index measures acts of religious hostility by private individuals, organizations or groups in society. This includes religion-related armed conflict or terrorism, mob or sectarian violence, harassment over attire for religious reasons or other religion-related intimidation or abuse. The SHI includes 13 measures of social hostilities.¹

This year's report also looks at the prevalence of restrictions and hostilities that tend to target religious minorities around the world. The report finds that these types of restrictions and hostilities do not generally exist in isolation but often accompany broader restrictions on religion in society.

The Pew Research Center identified three measures on the Government Restrictions Index and three on the Social Hostilities Index that target groups out of favor with the government or society, which tend to be religious minorities. (The analysis focused on whether or not these restrictions and hostilities were in place, not on how many members of religious minorities were affected by them. For more details on the selection of the measures, [click here](#).)

On the government side, these restrictions include prohibitions or bans on specific faiths; attempts to control or intimidate religious groups through the use of force; and efforts to eliminate a group's presence from the country or a particular area. As of 2013, nearly a third of the countries in the world (59 countries, or 30%) had at least one of these restrictions.

The study also identified three measures on the Social Hostilities Index that tend to target religious minorities. In 2013, 120 countries (about 61%) experienced at least one of these hostilities, which include attempts to impose a particular perspective on religion on the rest of society; attempts by some religious groups to prevent other religious groups from operating; and assaults or other acts of hostility directed at individuals or groups seen as threatening to the majority faith.

In theory, a country might restrict a particular minority group but generally respect the religious rights of others living in the country. In reality, the new Pew Research study finds, countries with restrictions or hostilities aimed primarily at a religious minority are more likely than the rest of the world to have widespread restrictions and hostilities beyond those that tend to target religious minorities.

Among the 59 countries with at least one of the government restrictions aimed primarily at religious minorities, 43 (73%) had high or very high scores on the GRI in 2013.² In the rest of the world, 8% of countries had high or very high scores on the GRI. The study

also found that all of the most restrictive countries – those with very high scores on the GRI – had at least one type of restriction that was aimed primarily at religious minorities.

The same pattern was seen in the case of social hostilities. Among the 120 countries that had at least one of the social hostilities aimed primarily at religious minorities, 53 (44%) had high or very high scores on the SHI in 2013. In places where these types of hostilities were not picked up by the sources used for this study (see Methodology), no countries had high scores on the SHI. The countries with the most extensive social hostilities involving religion – those with very high scores on the SHI – all experienced at least one type of hostility that was aimed at religious minorities.

This suggests that it is relatively rare for countries to have restrictions or hostilities that only affect religious minorities. In general, restrictions on minorities go hand in hand with broader restrictions on religion.

About the Study

These are among the key findings of the Pew Research Center's latest report on global restrictions on religion, which ranks 198 countries and territories by their levels of government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion. The initial report, published in 2009, established a baseline for each country and five major geographic regions. Four follow-up reports looked at changes in the level of restrictions and hostilities in these countries and regions. The new report focuses on countries that had very high restrictions and hostilities in 2013, as well as countries that had large changes in their scores on Government Restrictions Index or Social Hostilities Index from 2012 to 2013. Where appropriate, it also compares the situation in 2013 with the situation in the baseline year of the study.

Readers should note that the categories of very high, high, moderate and low restrictions or hostilities are relative – not absolute – rankings based on the overall distribution of index scores in the initial year of this study. (See Methodology for more details.) As such, they provide a guide for comparing country scores and evaluating their direction over time. However, the Pew Research Center has not attached numerical rankings to the countries because there are many tie scores and the differences between the scores of countries that are close to each other are not necessarily as meaningful as they might appear.

As was the case in the previous restrictions reports, North Korea is not included in this study. The primary sources used in the study indicate that North Korea's government is among the most repressive in the world, including toward religion. But because independent observers lack regular access to the country, the sources are unable to provide the kind of specific, timely information that formed the basis of this analysis.

Five facts about religious hostilities in Europe

See report at <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/02/26/religious-hostilities/>

Angelina Theodorou

Pew Research Center (27.02.2015) - <http://www.pewforum.org/articles/44045/> - While Europe is not the region with the highest level of religious hostilities – that remains the Middle East-North Africa region – harassment and attacks against religious minorities continue in

many European countries. Indeed, according to a new study by the Pew Research Center, hostilities against Jews in particular have been spreading.

Here are five facts about social hostilities – i.e., hostilities perpetrated by individuals or social groups rather than by governments – that tend to target religious minorities in Europe:

1) In 2013, the most recent year covered by the study, harassment of Jews in Europe reached a seven-year high. Jews faced harassment in about three-quarters (34 of 45) of Europe's countries. In France, for instance, three men attacked a teenager who was wearing a traditional skullcap, or kippa, in Vitry-Sur-Seine, reportedly threatening to "kill all of you Jews." In Spain, vandals painted a large swastika on the side of a bull ring in the city of Pinto, along with the words "Hitler was right." And in the town of Komarno in southern Slovakia, metal tiles in the pavement honoring a local Jewish family killed in the Holocaust were destroyed when vandals poured tar over them.

2) Muslims experienced harassment in nearly as many European countries (32 of 45) as Jews. By comparison, the Middle East and North Africa was the only region where Muslims faced more widespread harassment, dealing with hostility in 15 of that region's 20 countries. In Germany, bloody pig heads were found at a site where the Ahmadiyya Muslim community was planning to build Leipzig's first mosque. And in Ireland, several mosques and Muslim cultural centers received threatening letters, with one of the letters stating: "Muslims have no right to be in Ireland."

3) In two-thirds of the countries in Europe, organized groups used force or coercion to try to impose their views on religion in 2013. Sometimes this activity is aimed at dominating a country's public life with the group's particular perspective on religion through means such as online intimidation of minority religious groups. Other times, it is focused on a particular religious group, such as anti-Semitic postings and anti-Muslim rhetoric on online forums. In Italy, for example, four men were sent to prison after they published lists of Jewish residents and businesses on neo-Nazi websites. This type of social hostility was more prevalent in Europe (30 of 45 countries, or 67%) than in any other region.

4) Women were harassed over religious dress in about four-in-ten European countries (19 of 45) – about the same share as in the Middle East-North Africa region (where it occurred in eight of 20 countries, or 40%). This includes cases in which women were harassed for either wearing religious dress or for perceived violations of religious dress codes. In France, for example, two men attacked a pregnant Muslim woman, kicking her in the stomach and attempting to remove her headscarf and cut her hair; she suffered a miscarriage in the days following the attack. And in Italy, two Moroccan men attacked a young Moroccan woman, beating her for "offending Islam" when she refused to wear a headscarf.

5) Individuals were assaulted or displaced from their homes or places of worship in retaliation for religious activities in roughly four-in-ten European countries. In Poland, for example, arsonists set fire to the door of a mosque in Gdansk. And in Greece, arsonists attacked Jehovah's Witnesses' houses of worship and several informal mosques in multiple cities during the year.

The sad state of religious freedom around the world

Washington Post (27.02.2015) - More than three-quarters of the world's population lived in countries with "high" or "very high" levels of restriction on religion in 2013, according to a new Pew Research Center report titled "[Latest Trends in Religious Restrictions and Hostilities](#)."

Pew's Government Restrictions Index measures laws, policies and actions that curb religious beliefs and practices, assigning each country a score. It then combined that score with a Social Hostilities Index that measured acts of religious hostility by private individuals, organizations or groups in society.

When these scores were combined, the overall level of restrictions was found to be "high" or "very high" in almost 40 percent of the countries measured, with populous nations such as China, India and Russia coming near the top of the list. In total, 5.5 billion people (or 77 percent of the world's population) lived in these nations, a steady increase over previous years.

As you can see in the graphic above, there were dramatic variations among the world's largest countries in 2013. Burma, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan and Russia had the highest levels overall. China had the world's highest level of government restrictions on religion, yet India had the highest amount of social hostilities surrounding religion.

Western European nations such as France and Germany came relatively high in both government restrictions and social hostilities.

Pew found that Christians and Muslims faced harassment in the largest number of countries, with Christians facing harassment in slightly more than half of the countries in the world. As the world's two largest religions (more than half the world adheres to one or the other), this makes some sense.

However, they weren't the only ones with problems: For example, Pew also found that global harassment of Jews had reached a seven-year high.

Stephen Fry has every right to call God an evil, monstrous maniac ... says Archbishop

Justin Welby says Christians must stand up for religious freedom of atheists and Muslims as much as themselves

The Telegraph (04.02.2015)

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/11390652/Stephen-Fry-has-every-right-to-call-God-an-evil-monstrous-maniac-...-says-Archbishop.html> - The Archbishop of Canterbury has come to the defence of Stephen Fry who infuriated Christians by denouncing God as "utterly evil", "capricious, mean-minded, stupid" and "monstrous".

The Most Rev Justin Welby insisted that the atheist comedian and writer had a God-given right to express his beliefs and should not be abused by Christians for doing so.

He added that the Church must speak out in defence of religious freedom – but with the humility of a reformed alcoholic who recognises that they once practised the very things they now urge people not to do.

His intervention came as he spoke about the suffering of Christians and other faiths around the world at the launch of a new Religious Liberty Commission set up by a group of charities and campaign groups to highlight the spread of persecution.

The meeting in the chapel of the Houses of Parliament heard harrowing first-hand testimony about brutality meted out to many Christian groups in Eritrea and reports of suffering in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

He said Christians must continue to bring such cases to the eyes of the world but added that churches including the Church of England must also recognise their own history of involvement in oppression and must defend the rights of followers of other faiths now.

"We find it fine to say that a particular church is doing incredibly well and is full every Sunday but at the same time feeling uncomfortable about the Mosque down the road that has people outside because they can't fit them in," he said.

"Well, if we believe in freedom of choice, if we believe in freedom of religion what is good for one is good for all.

"We must speak out for others persecuted for their beliefs whether it be religious or atheistic.

"Taking responsibility for someone else's freedom is as important as my own.

"It is as much the right of Stephen Fry to say what he said and not to be abused improperly by Christians who are affronted as it is the right of Christians to proclaim Jesus Christ.

"That is his freedom to choose that is given to us in creation."

Mr Fry triggered an Internet storm last week when lashed out at the idea of God during an interview with Gay Byrne, the veteran chat-show host, on Ireland's RTE.

Asked what he would say to God if he found himself standing at the gates of Heaven, he said he would say: "How dare you. How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that's not our fault? It's not right. It's utterly, utterly evil."

He added: "The God who created this universe, if he created this universe, is quite clearly a maniac, an utter maniac, totally selfish."

Archbishop Welby went on to detail personal accounts he had been given of religious persecution and told of an email he received on Tuesday from the Anglican Bishop in Peshawar reporting how a school had been raided and attacked.

He went on: "We know about the attacks on Jewish communities, about this atrocious development of attacks on Jewish communities across Europe.

"We know about attacks on Muslims – mosques firebombed in this country – [and] on other faiths.

"But we also know in some countries about the quiet creeping removals of freedom which breed a climate of fear and animosity."

Referring to a reading detailing how members of one German church next to a railway track had sung hymns loudly to drown out the cries of Jews being transported to concentration camps, he said atrocities did not come out of nowhere.

“That breeding of a climate of fear and humility is where we must speak out and we must speak with humility and boldness,” he said.

Emphasising that he was referring to churches when he said “we”, he went on: “Boldness we do but [we also need] deep humility – the humility of the alcoholic who used to do this sort of thing themselves but has learnt right from wrong and stands up and says 'don't be as I was'.”

During a question-and-answer session afterwards he thanked the former MP Evan Harris, a humanist, for his efforts to abolish the blasphemy laws in the UK and said he opposed all restrictions on freedom of speech concerning religion which did not constitute hate speech.

Muslims: The first victims of terrorism

By Mark Barwick, Human Rights Without Frontiers

A recent study suggests that the large majority of deaths related to al-Qaida violence have in fact been Muslims and not Westerners, as it is commonly assumed. This is poor comfort for those who mourn the loss of loved ones in the Paris attacks; however, it is a point well to consider when tempted to demonise all Muslims for the heinous actions of the few. To characterise all Muslims as violent – indeed, to characterise all Muslims as *anything* – is itself an indefensible ignorance. The Muslim world is simply too vast and too diverse to issue such pronouncements.

It is also disingenuous for non-Muslim commentators and political figures to declare what is ‘true Islam’ and what is not. Muslims themselves cannot reach a consensus opinion on the subject, let alone outsiders looking in, however informed they may consider themselves to be.

Instead, particular attention must be focused on protecting the rights of Muslims. Anti-Muslim sentiment runs high in times like these. Muslims become ‘the first victims of terrorism, fanaticism and intolerance,’ said French President François Hollande, because the public backlash is strong and the urge to scapegoat hard to resist. In such an environment, it is crucial that the rights of Muslims be defended as vigorously as the rights of anyone else in our societies. It would be a grave error to roll back precious values of *liberté, égalité et fraternité* in the face of insecurity and fear. These values inspire envy in the hearts of many people the world over, including many in predominantly Muslim countries.

What is clear at this time is that a thoroughgoing debate on the nature and limits of free speech is urgently needed. Sadly, that debate has been waiting to be had well before gunmen rained down death on the staff of Charlie Hebdo. The French media has long provoked negativity toward religious believers of all sorts. Government policies intrude into citizens’ rights to practise their faith freely. Now scores of arrests are being made of people who have expressed sympathy for what occurred in Paris.

Such comments are indeed odious; however, one can obviously question the double standard that is at work when a government defends the right of cartoonists to critique a

religion while at the same time it prosecutes statements that are equally injurious to other religious believers.

Muslims may indeed be the first victims of Islamist-inspired terrorist violence. But unless we bring an unflagging commitment to the principles that undergird our democratic societies – like justice, fairness and the due process of law – we all become victims.

2014: A year of rising hostility toward Christians

World Watch Monitor (07.01.2015) - While the world's eyes were riveted to Syria and Iraq in 2014, life for Christians worsened even more profoundly in Africa, according to an annual report on religious freedom.

The situation deteriorated most rapidly in sub-Saharan Africa, in countries where Islamic extremism is the main source of pressure upon Christians, according to the 2015 World Watch List, released Jan. 7 by Open Doors International, a charity that supports Christians who face hostilities because of their faith.

The list, published annually since 2003, ranks the 50 countries considered to be most hostile to Christians during the 12 months ending Oct. 31, 2014. It surveys religious freedom for Christians in five areas of life: private; family; community; national; and the church. It also measures violence against Christians, and 2014 was a very violent year.

The 4,344 Christians reported to have been killed during the 12-month period are more than double the 2,123 killed in 2013, and more than triple the 1,201 killed the year before that. The majority of the deaths in the most recent period occurred in Nigeria, where 2,484 people were killed, and in Central African Republic, where 1,088 people were killed, according to Open Doors.

Overall, the survey scores assigned to the 50 countries rose by nearly 10 percent compared to the 2014 scores, indicating a generally rising tide of antagonism toward Christians in the 50 countries most hostile to believers.

The report also noted a resurgence of anti-Christian hostility in parts of Asia and Latin America, two regions where conditions had been comparatively favorable in previous years.

And for the first time in three years, Mexico is back on the list, at No. 38.

The main engine: Islamic extremism

In 40 of the 50 countries on the World Watch List, WWL, Open Doors said "Islamic extremism" was a primary source of pressure on Christian life.

"It is fair to say that Islamic extremism has two global centres of gravity. One in the Arab Middle East, but the other is in sub-Saharan Africa, and even Christian majority states are experiencing unprecedented levels of exclusion, discrimination and even violence," wrote Ron Boyd-MacMillan, chief strategy officer for Open Doors UK, in a report supplementing the World Watch List.

Though violence against Christians made headlines throughout 2014, it was largely the same in most countries, with the exception of Iraq, Syria and Nigeria, according to the report. Instead, pressure on Christians increased mostly in less obvious ways: being shunned by family; losing a job and rejection within the community for faith related reasons. Such "squeeze" tactics, the report said, are especially hard on former Muslims who have embraced Christianity.

"It's important to understand this extremism is not only from the violent jihadists like the militant Islamist group Boko Haram, but Islamists who seek to take over cultures by stealth," Boyd-McMillan wrote.

Influence of 'Islamic State'

Daily life for Christians in most of the top 50 countries became more difficult during the past year, but the situation especially deteriorated in the northern provinces of the Nigeria, where the Boko Haram insurgency has followed the lead of the so-called "Islamic State" and proclaimed a caliphate of its own.

Ranking No. 10 on the World Watch List, Nigeria's levels of pressure and violence against Christians are at a record high.

In April, the abduction of the 276 school girls in the Borno State village of Chibok commanded worldwide attention, but the mass abduction was only part of a wider anti-Christian front, one which killed nearly 2,500 Christians across the country. Open Doors said the links between al-Qaeda in the Maghreb and Boko Haram, as well as with other Islamic terrorist groups in the region, make it likely the church will suffer more violent persecution in the near future. The charity said violence from Hausa-Fulani Muslim herdsmen in the country's Middle Belt region is expected to add to the threat, as is pre-election violence later this year.

Tiffany Lynch, a policy analyst for the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an advisory body to Congress, drew a distinction between the apparent expansionist ambitions of Islamic State and the six-year-old Boko Haram uprising in Nigeria.

"ISIL fits in with greater national security concerns in the Middle East, whereas Boko Haram is a domestic Islamic insurgency with regional concerns," said Lynch, using a common name for Islamic State, in an email to World Watch Monitor. "More importantly, ISIL attacks on Christians and other non-Muslims are part of a broader question about the future of these small religious communities in the region and their homeland. "

According to Open Doors, al-Shabaab, a Somalia-based militant Islamist group affiliated with al-Qaeda, and other extremist movements in Eastern Africa also are drawing inspiration from the tactics of Islamic State.

Asia increasingly difficult

With the exception of North Korea, which has been No. 1 on the World Watch List since its inception, Open Doors had been reporting improving conditions for Christians in the Far East in recent years.

The trend reversed course in 2014, when every country on the list but Laos and Sri Lanka received a higher persecution score. China, India and Malaysia registered the largest increases. Twelve countries from East Asia and the Far East are among the top 50.

Open Doors said some fundamentalist Hindu and Buddhist leaders feel threatened by the growth of Christianity.

The score assigned to No. 21 India is the highest ever. "The season of impunity for anti-Christian action in India has started since the world's largest democracy elected a Hindu extremist Prime Minister who has declared open season on Christians," Open Doors said.

In China, which rose to No. 29, scores of churches were attacked, with some being destroyed and about 300 crosses being removed. Open Doors said the fact that the communist government is still undecided about how to deal with the church is good news because it suggests a debate about church liberties is happening within the Chinese government.

Latin America

Mexico is the highest entrant on the WWL this year at No. 38. The report said the growth of organized crime in the country, as well as better reporting of anti-Christian violence, helps to explain the country's return to the list. The sources of persecution are complex in the predominantly Christian country. Open Doors said weak states allow local forces, such as drug traffickers, to hold sway. When Christians stand against the trade, they are targeted.

The World Watch List, the only annual global survey of Christian religious freedom, ranks countries using eight primary "persecution engines" to explain why the Christian community becomes especially targeted in certain circumstances.

The "engines" are not always specifically anti-Christian as they include forces such as "dictatorial paranoia" and "organized corruption," which sweeps up people of all faiths.

Dictatorial paranoia is the second-most prevalent force making life difficult for Christians, and is a primary source of persecution in 13 countries, including North Korea, according to the list. North Korean citizens who are discovered to be Christian face long prison terms or execution.

Against the backdrop of media coverage of violence and beheadings in the Middle East, Open Doors said new co-operative relationships being forged between Muslims and Christians could have long term benefits. The charity said the crisis is forging a new level of inter-faith respect as pressured minorities have been forced to live and work together.
