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## **Fate of religious freedom in former USSR, 25 years after its collapse**

***Commission on International Religious Freedom, State Department provide insight***

By Kelsey Dallas

Washington Times (28.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2j2Osvx> - When the Soviet Union was dissolved on Dec. 26, 1991, the future looked bright for faith groups.

During nearly 70 years of Soviet rule, religious practice had been gradually forced out of public and private life. Faith leaders were sent to labor camps and sacred buildings fell into disrepair.

But 25 years ago, the tide was turning. Newly established constitutions protected religious freedom and sought to create environments where churches and the state could thrive.

Leaders recognized “the positive contribution religion could make to the building of new countries,” said Brian Grim, who worked in what is now Kazakhstan from 1989 until the mid-1990s.

But this optimism soon gave way to paranoia and a protectionist mindset in many post-Soviet nations due to pressure from Orthodox Christian leaders and the rise of religiously motivated terrorism in surrounding countries. Half of the 15 former Soviet countries were called out this year by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for their problematic religious freedom policies.

“Orthodox Christianity views itself very much as the religion of a geographic territory, rather than as a faith of individual people or congregations,” Grim said. Orthodox leaders have become major political players, pushing for policies that can discourage the growth of newer faith groups. In countries like Russia and Uzbekistan, strict registration requirements and other forms of government interference plague religious communities. Officials limit who can own religious buildings and when and where services can be held, said Katayoun Kishi, a research associate at Pew Research Center who oversees the organization’s efforts to track global restrictions on religion.

“It’s sort of an interesting type of state control of religion. It’s not the type of restrictions you see in Iran or Saudi Arabia, where officials seek to promote a specific religion,” she said.

Some countries, especially those with religiously diverse populations, have made notable strides over the last 25 years, encouraging open dialogue between the government and faith groups and supporting religious education, said Grim, president of the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation. However, the major storyline emerging from this part of the world in the 21st century is growing persecution of religious individuals and institutions.

Below is an overview of the contemporary religious freedom climate in the 15 post-Soviet countries, based primarily on research from USCIRF and the U.S. State Department.

### **1. Armenia**

Many faith groups exist in Armenia, which has constitutional religious freedom protections.

However, minority religious communities often languish in the shadow of the Armenian Apostolic Church, according to the U.S. State Department. The AAC is recognized as the national church of Armenia and plays a key role in cultural identity. More than 9 in 10 Armenians (approximately 92 percent) identify with this faith group.

In December 2015, government leaders passed constitutional amendments that partially corrected this preferential treatment for AAC members, expanding access to conscientious objector status. U.S. State Department officials have also observed growing social acceptance of religious minorities, with members of the media becoming more likely to include the perspective of Jehovah’s Witnesses or Muslims in their coverage instead of labeling all minority groups as dangerous sects.

In other words, there are bright spots in Armenia’s religious freedom policy, but it’s still much easier to be a member of the AAC than any other type of believer.

## **2. Azerbaijan**

More than 95 percent of Azerbaijan's 9.8 million citizens are Muslim, but this religion isn't exempt from government control. "In its effort to prevent the spread of Islamic extremism, the government represses Muslim worship," closing mosques and imprisoning imams, USCIRF reported.

Religious freedom is deteriorating in Azerbaijan as members of minority faith groups increasingly find themselves the targets of discriminatory policies, according to USCIRF. Recent developments, such as the passage of a 2009 law increasing government oversight of religious groups and activities, counter the country's early interest in supporting thriving faith communities.

"Independent, pre-Soviet Azerbaijan (1920-1922) was the world's first Muslim-majority secular parliamentary republic with a good record of respect for religious freedom," USCIRF reported. But the USSR years and subsequent rule by leaders with deep Soviet ties erased the country's early gains in this area.

Religious groups are required to register with the government and members of minority faiths can be fined or imprisoned for evangelizing in public or advocating for better religious freedom protections, the U.S. State Department reported. Around 50 religious activists were jailed in 2015.

## **3. Belarus**

Belarus is roughly the same size as Azerbaijan, but it's much more religiously diverse. "Of Belarus' 9.6 million population, an estimated 68 percent belong to the Belarusian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, 15 percent profess no religion and 14 percent are Roman Catholic," USCIRF reported. Jews, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and other Christian groups are also present there.

Belarus is monitored by USCIRF because of its strict regulations governing religious practice. Faith groups and foreign missionaries must register their activities with the government, and most religious expressions are kept out of the public square. Protestant Christians are particularly at risk for fines because they're often viewed as enemies of the state.

Some religious groups practice in secret because they have been denied access to a house of worship or otherwise rejected by registration authorities. Overall, religious practice is closely watched, although some faith leaders report growing opportunities to share their faith in public.

## **4. Estonia**

Only around one-third of Estonia's 1.3 million population is religiously affiliated. As in many post-Soviet countries, religious groups are required to register with the government.

But rather than use this information to limit expressions of faith, government leaders have shown an interest in increasing religious literacy and preventing religiously motivated discrimination and violence by, for example, sponsoring Holocaust education and recognition programs.

In 2015, "the government sponsored educational programs for teachers on best classroom practices for teaching about the Holocaust and consulted with religious groups on such issues as new legislation in response to the refugee crisis in Europe," the U.S. State Department reported.

## **5. Georgia**

The Georgian government is not hostile to religious practice, but policies favor the Georgian Orthodox Church, making it difficult for other religions to flourish.

Like the AAC in Armenia, Georgia's dominant faith community is viewed as part of the country's cultural fabric. More than 80 percent of the country's population belongs to the GOC, and this faith group exclusively provides military chaplains and consults on government policy.

Other religious groups aren't required to register with the government, but doing so brings benefits like tax exemptions and the right to own property. Members of minority faiths, including Muslims, Roman Catholics and Jehovah's Witnesses, are sometimes the target of smear campaigns or physical violence, especially when they're presented as hostile to the Georgian Orthodox Church.

## **6. Kazakhstan**

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan emerged as one of the most liberal post-Soviet states in Central Asia. It developed strong ties to the U.S., leaning on the larger country's insights to help stabilize its surrounding region and improve its economy.

In spite of an ongoing relationship with American leaders, government officials in Kazakhstan have increasingly limited religious practice within their country's borders in recent years, according to USCIRF. They passed a religion law five years ago banning unregistered activity and restricting many aspects of religious life, such as the training of clergy.

"The law's onerous registration requirements have led to a sharp drop in the number of registered religious groups, both Muslim and Protestant," USCIRF leaders noted.

## **7. Kyrgyzstan**

USCIRF does not consider Kyrgyzstan to be a country of particular concern, but it may become one soon. In 2015, the country announced potential amendments to its constitution that would increase government oversight of minority religious groups and further privilege Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church.

The amendments would build on a widely condemned 2008 law governing religious practice, which "criminalizes unregistered religious activity and imposes burdensome registration requirements," such as that a new faith group must recruit 200 Kyrgyz residents as founders, USCIRF reported.

These stricter policies likely stem from growing episodes of religiously motivated violence in the region, according to USCIRF. However, religious freedom experts say stronger religious protections, not stricter laws, are the best way to promote safety and discourage radicalization.

## **8. Latvia**

The Latvian constitution protects religious freedom for all faiths, but it provides preferential treatment for well-established groups. Only the eight religions deemed "traditional" — Lutherans, Catholics, Latvian Orthodox Christians, Old Believers, Baptists, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists and Jews — can lead courses in public schools and send representatives to a government advisory council.

Like other countries in the region, Latvia is struggling with how to respond to the recent influx of refugees, many of whom are Muslim. Government leaders have proposed religiously discriminatory policies, such as a ban on face coverings, in the name of national security.

## **9. Lithuania**

More than three-quarters of Lithuanians identify as Roman Catholic, but the much smaller Jewish community has been the focus of the government's religious freedom work in recent years.

Government funds have been channeled toward youth camps, educational conferences and other Jewish activities in an effort to atone for Jewish persecution during the Holocaust and counter a recent surge in anti-Jewish sentiment, which has been observed across Europe.

The Jewish community, as well as other well-established religious groups including Lutherans, Muslims and Catholics, has also received government financial support to rebuild religious buildings that fell into disrepair during Nazi and Soviet rule.

The Lithuania Constitution protects the right of citizens to practice whatever religion they choose. However, it differentiates between faith groups that have been present in the country for centuries and those that have only been there for a decade or two, limiting the latter category's ability to officiate weddings or lead courses in schools.

## **10. Moldova**

Religious groups of all sizes enjoy governmental protections in Moldova, although the constitution does privilege the Moldovan Orthodox Church due to its historical significance. Around 86 percent of the country's 3.5 million population identifies with the MOC.

Moldovan law encourages faith groups with more than 100 members to register with the government so that they can hire employees, build churches and buy sections of cemeteries, but it's not required. All religious communities can hold services at public facilities, like hospitals and schools, the U.S. State Department reported.

Moldova has a national antidiscrimination council tasked with investigating incidents of violence or prejudice, including those targeting people of faith. It's a meaningful effort, but it hasn't eliminated distrust of minority faiths, including by Orthodox priests, according to some experts.

## **11. Russia**

Russian law includes religious freedom protections such as the right to profess one's faith publicly and prohibitions against faith-based discrimination.

However, starting with the passage of a comprehensive religion law in 1997 that outlined registration requirements, government leaders have shown a willingness to repress religious practice in the name of public safety. Officials from the State Department and USCIRF say the religious freedom climate only stands to get worse.

Russia's anti-extremism law is the crux of the problem, according to USCIRF. It enables officials to label groups as extremist whether or not violence has been conducted in their name. For example, some people have been punished for handing out materials that proclaimed the superiority of their beliefs, USCIRF reported.

Anti-extremism measures also outline when and where proselytism can take place, restricting conversations about faith online, in homes, or in any location not recognized as a religious building, and enabling officials to closely monitor membership records and weekly meetings.

The measures have affected The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and other religious groups that send missionaries to the country, limiting their work to within church buildings. The LDS Church announced in July that elders and sisters serving there will now be called "volunteers."

## **12. Tajikistan**

The post-Soviet period plunged Tajikistan into violence and poverty. To this day, efforts to strengthen religious freedom protections are plagued by government corruption and social distrust.

In 2009, the government passed a series of restrictions on religious practice, increasing the power officials have to punish unpopular faith groups, limit proselytism and oversee the appointment of leaders of the country's largest religious community: Islam.

For these reasons and others, Tajikistan is one of USCIRF's countries of particular concern. Religious freedom advocates are worried that matters only stand to get worse here as religiously motivated violence increases in the region.

"The Tajik government uses concerns over Islamist extremism to justify actions against individuals taking part in certain religious activities," USCIRF reported.

## **13. Turkmenistan**

Turkmenistan is largely a closed country, meaning that it promotes policies that limit foreign influence, including from religious leaders or missionaries. Government leaders strive to control most aspects of life, and strict policies governing faith groups allow them to do just that in the area of religious life.

"The government requires religious groups to register under intrusive criteria (and) strictly controls registered groups' activities," USCIRF reported. The organization has described Turkmenistan as a country of particular concern since 2000.

Although all faith groups suffer in this environment, religious communities that fail to navigate the registration system are particularly vulnerable. "Unregistered religious groups and unregistered branches of religious groups cannot legally conduct religious activities, including establishing places of worship, gathering for services, producing or disseminating religious materials or proselytizing," the U.S. State Department reported.

## **14. Ukraine**

Religious violence and discrimination in Ukraine have increased in recent years due to conflict with Russia over the region of Crimea. Separatists, or those who support Crimea's independence from Ukraine, have targeted Protestant Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews and other minority groups.

Russian interference has derailed Ukraine's efforts to encourage religious tolerance and cooperation. The constitution includes religious freedom protections, but it also requires faith groups to register with the government in order to own property or publish informational tracts.

Registered faith groups are also eligible to receive payouts for damage incurred during Soviet rule, although these funds have been slow in coming. In 2015, "all major religious organizations continued to urge the government to establish a transparent legal process to address restitution claims," the U.S. State Department reported.

Ukraine is home to the first LDS temple built in a post-Soviet country, dedicated in Kyiv in August 2010.

### **15. Uzbekistan**

This Muslim-majority country has laws protecting religious practice and promoting the separation of church and state, but the country's religious freedom environment falls far short of the ideals laid out in its constitution.

Religious groups are required to register, and officials closely monitor worship services and discourage conversion. "The government imprisons and often subjects to brutal treatment individuals, including an estimated 12,800 Muslims, who do not conform to officially prescribed religious practices," USCIRF reported.

Additionally, minors are banned from religious organizations, laypeople cannot wear religious garb in public and the government can edit printed religious materials.

"Independent human rights groups estimated (in 2015) that between 5,000 and 15,000 individuals remained in prison on charges related to 'religious extremism' or membership in an illegal religious group," the U.S. State Department reported.

It's a bleak situation that explains why Uzbekistan is on USCIRF's list of countries of particular concern.

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## **A Christian was killed for their faith every 6 minutes this year**

***A new study has found that Christians are the most persecuted people on earth today. A research conducted by The Center for the Study of Global Christianity shows that every six minutes a Christian loses their life because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Director of Center for Studies on New Religions, Massimo Introvigne, revealed that about half a billion Christians worldwide are not able to openly express their faith.***

By Elisa Meyer

World Religious News (30.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2i5E3BG> - Of the Christians who lost their lives in 2016, 70 percent were in Africa. These Christians were killed in tribal fights. Refusing to take up arms and take revenge on their enemies because of their faith, Christians in Africa received the most brutal treatment at the hands of non-Christians.

The remaining 30 percent of Christians lost their lives in terrorist activities. Most of the terrorist-related deaths were in countries that are ravaged by terrorists, such as Syria and Iraq. One of the biggest perpetrators of these crimes against humanity is ISIS.

Persecution of Christians is so high in Syria that in just five years of the civil war breaking out, the total Christian population has fallen from 1.5 million to a mere 500,000, according to the Bishop of Aleppo. That shows an eradication of two-thirds of the Christian population. Those that are alive are living in pathetic conditions, currently in areas controlled by the Syrian secular government's forces. Their places of worship, however, lie in ruins around them.

The number of Christians killed in 2016 was lower than in 2015. The previous year, the figure was 105,000. However, the fact remains that even now it's the Christians who are the most persecuted people in the world.

The Vatican has considered the possible sainthood of some of the Christians in places of high persecution. These people stayed back in the trouble-stricken areas despite the danger of imminent death only to bear witness to their faith. Having lost their lives for Christ, they may have qualified for sainthood under the Catholic Church.

On Monday, the pope called on all the faithful to remember the sufferings that their fellow Christians are going through in various parts of the world. The pontiff pointed out the example that was set by the martyrdom of St. Stephen, the first Martyr in Christian history. The pope also said that the number of Christians being persecuted today was much more than the early days of Christianity. The pope asked the gathering to take the example that today's persecuted Church is presenting to the world in living a life faithful to the Gospel.

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## **28 Catholic pastoral care workers killed in 2016**

Agenzia Fides (30.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2iuGUQB> - In the year 2016, 28 Catholic pastoral care workers were killed worldwide. For the eighth consecutive year, the place most affected, with an extremely elevated number of pastoral care workers killed is AMERICA, 9 in 2016, more than double the number compared to 2015.

According to information gathered by Agenzia Fides, in 2016 14 priests, 9 religious women, one seminarian, 4 lay people died violently. In America 12 pastoral care workers were killed (9 priests and 3 religious sisters); in Africa 8 pastoral care workers were killed (3 priests, 2 nuns, one seminarian, 2 lay people); in Asia 7 pastoral care workers were killed (1 priest, 4 nuns, 2 lay people); in Europe one priest was killed.

Once again the majority of the pastoral care workers in 2016 were killed in attempted robbery, and in some cases violently attacked, a sign of the climate of moral decline, economic and cultural poverty, which generates violence and disregard for human life.

In these situations, the priests, religious sisters and lay people who were killed, were among those who loudly denounced injustice, corruption, poverty, in the name of the Gospel. Fr. José Luis Sánchez Ruiz, of the Diocese of San Andrés Tuxtla (Veracruz, Mexico) was one of the victims who was kidnapped and then released with "obvious signs of torture", according to a statement from the diocese. In the days before the kidnapping he had received threats, surely for his harsh criticism against corruption and rampant crime (see Fides 14/11/2016). As Pope Francis recalled on the feast of the protomartyr St. Stephen, "the world hates Christians for the same reason it hated Jesus because He brought the light of God and the world prefers the darkness to hide its wicked works". (Angelus 26/12/2016).

They all lived in these human and social contexts, administering the sacraments, helping the poor, taking care of orphans and drug addicts, following development projects or simply opening the door of their home to anyone. And some were murdered by the same people who they helped. Hardly any investigations conducted by the local authorities lead to identifying the perpetrators and the instigators of these killings or the reasons why they were carried out.

There is still much concern regarding the fate of other pastoral care workers kidnapped or have disappeared, of whom we have not had any news.



As it has been for some time, Fides' list does not only include missionaries ad gentes in the strict sense, but all pastoral care workers who died violent deaths. We do not propose to use the term "martyrs", if not in its etymological meaning of "witnesses" since it is up to the Church to judge their possible merits and also because of the scarcity of available information in most cases, with regard to their life and even the circumstances of their death.

The provisional list compiled annually by Agenzia Fides, must therefore be added to the long list of many of whom there may never be news, who in every corner of the world suffer and even pay with their lives for their faith in Christ. Pope Francis often reminds us that "Today there are Christians who are murdered, tortured, imprisoned, slaughtered because they do not deny Jesus Christ" ... "the martyrs of today are more numerous than those of the first centuries".

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## **A new HRWF report documents over 1500 cases of illegal imprisonment of believers in 24 countries**

***Press Release***

***Brussels, Thursday 29 December 2016***

HRWF Int'l (29.12.2016) - In 2016, three countries - **North Korea, China** and **Iran** - have imprisoned thousands of believers on the grounds of laws forbidding or restricting their basic rights to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). This is the conclusion of a report of *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l* (Brussels) identifying 24 countries with FoRB prisoners which was published this Thursday 29th December on its website (<http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>).

"Prison terms are usually imposed on members of religious or belief groups on the basis of laws restricting the individual freedom to change religion and to carry out missionary activities as well as the collective freedoms of association, worship and assembly. However, members or leaders of peaceful and law-abiding religious movements are also imprisoned because of their religious identity and for any of their activities because their group has been banned or unduly denied registration, commented Willy Fautré, director of the Brussels-based NGO *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l*."

It is common knowledge that **North Korea** is by far the country which is keeping the highest number of believers (mainly Christians) in prisons and labor camps. "Countless numbers of persons in **North Korea** who attempt to practice their religious beliefs have been severely punished, even unto death," 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).

In **China**, Falun Gong practitioners, whose movement was banned in 1999, are massively put in prison while a dozen Catholic priests and bishops arrested by the police many years ago for being faithful to the Pope instead of swearing allegiance to the Communist Party have been missing since then. Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestants belonging to the mushrooming network of house churches out of any state control, Uyghur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, systematically suspected of separatism, are also particular targets of the regime.

In **Iran**, the Baha'is, whose movement is considered a heresy of Islam, provide the highest number of prisoners. They are followed by home-grown Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians who extensively carry out missionary activities among their fellow

citizens despite the risk of imprisonment and execution. Baluchi and Kurdish Sunnis as well as Sufis are also particular targets of the repression.

Twenty-four countries in all were identified by *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l* for depriving believers and unbelievers of their freedom in 2014: **Algeria, Azerbaijan (including secessionist Nagorno-Karabakh), China, Egypt, Eritrea, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and Yemen.**

"In 2016, we documented 1500 individual cases of illegal imprisonment of believers belonging to 15 religious minorities and carried out campaigns to get their release. Among all denominations, Christians are in jail in the highest number of countries: 14 in all," according to Fautré.

However, in **South Korea**, 562 young objectors to military service were still serving 18-month prison terms at the beginning of 2016. Since the Korean War, more than 18,000 Witnesses have been sentenced to a combined total of over 34,800 years in prison for refusing to perform military service. Other countries still imprison conscientious objectors: **Eritrea** (54), **Singapore** (13), **Turkmenistan** (2), **Nagorno-Karabakh** (1) and **Azerbaijan** (1).

Since the adoption of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the European Institutions dispose of a mechanism that allows Brussels to defend believers and non-believers outside the EU and to promote FoRB in third countries. EU Delegations have been engaged in close monitoring of restrictions to FoRB in more than 100 countries.

"Our best wish for 2017 is that the EU converts its words into action and fully uses the EU Guidelines toolkit to get the release of many FoRB prisoners of conscience," Fautré hopes.

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

(\* ) *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l* has been monitoring freedom of religion or belief as a non-religious organization since 1989. In 2016 it covered in its daily newsletter 70 countries where there were incidents related to freedom of religion or belief, intolerance and discrimination.

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## **Report warns of global rise of religious 'hyper-extremism'**

***"In parts of the Middle East, including Iraq and Syria, this hyper-extremism is eliminating all forms of religious diversity"***

Aid to the Church in Need (15.11.2016) - Religious Fundamentalism—more lethal than ever before—is unleashing death, destruction, displacement and instability at unprecedented levels, according to a report out today.

The Religious Freedom in the World 2016 report, produced by international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need, warns of the global impact of “a new phenomenon of religiously-motivated violence—‘Islamist hyper-extremism.’” The report points to the Islamic State (ISIS) as the prime example.

Key characteristics of “Islamist hyper-extremism” include systematic attempts to drive out all dissenting groups—including moderates, unprecedented levels of cruelty, global reach and the effective use of social media, often used to glamorize violence.

Compiled every two years, the report, which assesses the situation regarding religious freedom in each of the world’s 196 countries, charges: “In parts of the Middle East, including Iraq and Syria, this hyper-extremism is eliminating all forms of religious diversity and is threatening to do so in parts of African and the Asian sub-continent.

In an introduction to the report, Father Jacques Mourad—a Christian monk who was held by ISIS in Syria for five months before escaping in October 2015—writes that “our world teeters on the brink of complete catastrophe as extremism threatens to wipe out all trace of diversity in society.”

The report, which draws on research by journalists, academics and clergy, records that in the two-year period under review which ended last June, attacks linked to “hyper-extremism” had taken place in one out of five countries worldwide—from Australia to Sweden as well as 17 African countries.

With refugee numbers at a new high of 65.3 million according to the UN, the report describes extremist Islamism as a “key driver” in the massive displacement of people fleeing countries such as Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria. The report also highlights the impact on countries in the West, whose socio-religious fabric is being destabilized by the challenge of having to absorb unprecedented numbers of refugees.

However, the report stresses that not all problems regarding religious freedom are linked to militant Islam—with a “renewed crackdown” on religious groups reported in China and Turkmenistan and an ongoing denial of human rights for people of faith in worst-offending North Korea and Eritrea.

Nor is the outlook universally bleak – looking at Bhutan, Egypt and Qatar, countries notorious for religious freedom violations, the report found that the situation had improved for faith minorities during the period under review.

Bishop Gregory Mansour, who heads the Maronite Eparchy of St. Maron in Brooklyn, NY, and serves on the Advisory Board of ACNUSA, expressed hope that the report will “help the Trump Administration in developing a strategy to step up US support for persecuted religious minorities around the world—in particular the Christians in Iraq and Syria.”

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## **UCAN's Asia religious persecution index**

***This religious freedom project will be the first exhaustive look at the situation facing religions in each country of Asia***

UCA News (13.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2fULNfU> - Asia's most comprehensive Catholic new website, has published a landmark book on religious freedom across the region to be launched in Yangon on Oct. 14.

Building on the work for the book *On the Edge* to be launched by Cardinal Charles Bo of Yangon, the agency in early 2017 will provide an exhaustive look at the situation facing all religions in each country of the region.

The next stage in UCAN's religious freedom project will be the first Asia Religious Persecution Index, a comprehensive and comparative report measuring religious freedom and persecution throughout Asia.

The UCAN index, that will combine analysis, reporting and case studies, will be the first independent, non-governmental report to measure religious freedom across Asia.

"The Asia Religious Persecution Index will be the first of its kind," said Father Michael Kelly, SJ, Executive Director of UCAN.

"The aim of the index is to provide a comprehensive overview of the state of religious freedom in each country; a sense of where each country lies in comparison to its neighbors, and the ways in which things are improving or deteriorating," said Father Kelly.

*On the Edge* is the first step in developing an Asia-wide appreciation of the challenges to religious freedom viewed comparatively. The forthcoming religious persecution index fills a noticeable gap in the commentary on human rights in the region.

A few governments, including the United States, publish annual reports. Yet there is virtually no regular independent documentation on this issue that underpins tensions within and between nations across the Asian region.

Rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch publish occasional reports on particular instances of religious persecution, while religious groups such as Christian Solidarity Worldwide publish reports focused primarily on the persecution of Christians.

UCAN is the first pan-Asian organization to take the step to look broadly at the state of all religions and their denominations with the index.

To create the Asia Religious Persecution Index, independent researchers will liaise with UCAN's Asia-wide network of bureaux where editors and reporters will create a comprehensive dossier on each country.

This will include, but not be limited to, instances of religious persecution, the quality legal frameworks designed to protect religious freedom, the use of judicial power and extra judicial programs, the repression of religious minorities, the separation of the state from each country's dominant religion(s).

In the final report, 22 countries will have a dedicated section that will explain the state of religious freedom within their borders, analyze broader related issues, and highlight specific incidents, within the reporting period.

Interspersed with the individual country reports, will be up to 10 case studies highlighting a particular incidence of progress or decline in religious freedom.

Each country will receive an Asia Religious Persecution Index score measured on an easy-to-understand, seven-point scale. Each country will also be ranked on a scale of 1 (dismal performance) to 7 (outstandingly positive performance) representing the state of religious freedom in each country.

The five overall areas of assessment will be:

1. State of religious and ethnic pluralism
  2. The legal framework for religion and access to remedies and systems of redress in the event of abuses and breakdowns
  3. State of official recognition of the institutional independence of religious communities
  4. Religious tolerance as it occurs in the operation of national cultures
  5. Government accountability.
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## **Freedom of religion or belief 'the defining issue of our time'**

By Claudia Atts

World Watch Monitor (16.09.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2g16tvq> - Over 100 parliamentarians from 60 countries met this week in Berlin for a series of workshops and seminars under the title, "An Embattled Right: Protecting and Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief". The second conference of this size after last year's meeting in New York, it was organised by the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB) and hosted by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

IPPFoRB is an informal network of parliamentarians and legislators from around the world committed to combatting religious persecution and advancing freedom of religion or belief, as defined by Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration for 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."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel opened the last day (14 Sep.), a public symposium with about 300 participants – including NGOs, church representatives and media – held in Germany's Parliament, the Reichstag. She was met with great enthusiasm; many expressed gratitude to Germany for its "welcome" policy, and for sheltering so many refugees from countries where minority Christians are being persecuted – Syria, Iraq and many others. Merkel assured the conference that on her foreign visits she addresses her concerns that human rights are not being upheld – in countries like China, Iran and Pakistan.

She said that in Germany she wants to promote compulsory religious education for every child in school – about every major religion, as well as philosophy and ethics – though it's not in her power to enforce this. Better education is the key to understanding and ensures a productive dialogue between cultures and religions, she said.

"The logical consequence of freedom is a living and kicking plurality," said Merkel.

But she stressed that, for her, the wearing of a full veil in public hinders integration: she said that in public places such as courts, or for government employees such as teachers, this should not be allowed.

Volker Kauder, parliamentary group leader for Merkel's conservative Christian Democratic Union of Germany Party (CDU), who's campaigned against the persecution of Christians for their faith, summarised the global situation: persecution and the violation of human rights have never been worse than at this moment, he said. Whereas in previous years the persecution came from governments, he said it's now coming from non-government forces such as ISIS, Boko Haram and others, and in countries where governments are dysfunctional or where leaders turn a blind eye.

The only positive development he shared was from India's Odisha state, where nationalistically-motivated Hindus have persecuted Christians: he said intervention by the German government and his persistence in talking to leading Indian government figures has helped to ensure victims have been paid compensation and guilty parties have been sent to jail. "No leader wants to be accused publicly of being a persecutor", said Kauder. He encouraged more MPs to join the IPPFoRB and promised to promote it in the Bundestag in the coming week, as German MPs will be debating religious freedom.

According to Johannes Singhammer, Vice-President of the German Bundestag, Coptic Christians in Egypt now have a better measure of religious freedom. He was concerned that the on-going war in the Middle East is destroying the historic Christian heritage of thousand-year-old buildings. Of more than a million Christians in Iraq before the 2003 war, at least 700,000 have fled the country. Quoting information from Open Doors, an international charity that supports Christians under pressure, he said persecution is on the rise compared to recent years. "Persecutors are operating in the dark, so it's our responsibility to bring their deeds to light," said Singhammer. Although the discussion "should not lead to digging trenches between religions", one solution, he said, "could be to cut the money flow to oppressive governments".

Greek MP Theodora Bakoyannis said later: "The time for Europeans' soft politics is over. We won't change anything only by hinting and talking. We are all guilty of putting our economic interests first, and our moral and ethical beliefs second. We have our hierarchy all wrong... Nobody stops Saudi Arabia. They are building and financing mosques in several European countries and installing their own imams there, and nobody dares to do anything against that because of trade relations. And on the other hand no church building is allowed in their country."

Another participant added: "Saudi Arabia is equipping ISIS with German and European weapons". (German media Der Spiegel reports that a German weapons manufacturer sent armed helicopters and machine guns to Saudi Arabia earlier this year, while the UK sent 3 billion Euros' worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia in 2015.)

Ján Figel from the Slovak Republic was introduced as the first Special Envoy for the promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief Outside the EU. While welcoming the creation of Figel's new post, Volker Kauder bemoaned the fact that Figel can give only two days a month to the role and has only one assistant. Kauder promised he would try to change this.

A Macedonian MP pointed out that many other countries should have special envoys. He praised Germany as a role model for debating the issue in Parliament, as did Rabbi David Saperstein, US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. Saperstein said the subject seemed to be a "no-go" in American debates in the Senate.

Asiya Nasir from Pakistan, a founding member of the IPPFoRB, was another speaker. Nasir, a Christian, is in her third term as a parliamentarian in the National Assembly of Pakistan, where she is in the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Party as a minority MP, and said she has earned the respect of Muslim MPs. In Pakistan, she said, churches are allowed to have their own buildings and gather for services, but that they are prohibited from sharing their faith with non-Christians. The blasphemy law prevents Christians from doing so, she said, and it has also been misused to persecute Christians. She cited the example of Shahzad and Shama Masih, a young Christian couple burned alive by a mob after they it was announced from a mosque's loudspeakers that they had burnt a copy of the Qur'an.

It is due to Nasir's work as an MP that mosques are no longer allowed to use their speakers for this purpose. She said her motto is, "You cannot progress in isolation", and that she continues to work with other minorities who are also deprived of their rights.

Another representative was Vian Dakhil, the only Yazidi member of the Kurdish party in the Iraqi parliament. She described the situation of the Yazidis, a Kurdish minority. Since August 2014, she said the Yazidis have been attacked, killed and enslaved by ISIS. Thousands of men have been killed, 6,000 women and girls have been kidnapped and raped, hundreds of thousands live as refugees in tent camps. Sometimes she said they are able to buy back girls from ISIS for US\$1,000, but the girls have been heavily traumatised.

Four advocacy letters addressing specific religious-freedom concerns in Eritrea, Pakistan, Sudan and Vietnam were signed by the parliamentarians and attendees. In them were several names of church leaders who are imprisoned, in detention or under house arrest solely for practising their religion. Also criticised in the letters were: torture of prisoners, the confiscation and demolition of church buildings, and forbidding the distribution of books and scriptures. Volker Kauder announced that delegations would be revisiting these countries to assess whether any progress is made.

Another result of the conference was that an African MP announced that an African IPPFoRB group had begun in conjunction with the meetings in Berlin. Leonardo Quintao, a Brazilian MP, shared that a South American IPPFoRB branch will meet later this year in Paraguay.

David Anderson, an MP from Canada and member of the IPPFoRB Steering Group, said: "Make no mistake, with 74% of the world's population living in countries with high or very high restrictions or hostilities, freedom of religion or belief is an embattled right and the defining issue of our time. Freedom to believe is what shapes our common humanity and, if we are not careful, we risk losing it." Summing up the conference, he reminded MPs that they are "multipliers" responsible for bringing in even more people, and that "the marathon has only just begun".

"We have come far in a short time. Starting with only five MPs three years ago, we are now an ever growing network and have accomplished much," said Abid Raja, MP in Norway, also on the steering committee. Many agreed that one of the biggest strengths of the IPPFoRB is that it's an organic network and not a set, inflexible organisation.

As an example of success, Raja cited a recent visit to the government of Myanmar by MPs of five countries to address human-rights violations. Baroness Elizabeth Berridge, Member of the House of Lords, UK and steering member of the IPPFoRB, noted that the North American team is less likely to address problems in North Korea than, for example, an Asian team; Malaysian MP Charles Santiago confirmed this by reporting a positive dialogue with the North Korean embassy in Malaysia.

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## **Apostasy and blasphemy laws violate human rights and human nature**

### ***Press release***

FOREF & Set my People Free (20.06.2016) - Two international human rights organizations today began a campaign to end laws that make it a criminal offense to change one's religion and "insult" religions.

The *Forum for Religious Freedom –Europe* and *Set My People Free* are meeting delegations to the United Nations and with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva to discuss how to end apostasy and blasphemy laws.

"Nineteen (19) UN member states criminalize apostasy, and in 12 of those states, apostasy is punishable by the death penalty, while almost 25 percent of countries

worldwide have blasphemy laws. Both kinds of laws violate basic human rights standards protecting freedom of religion and freedom of expression," the two organizations said.

An open letter to UN delegations and a list of recent victims of apostasy and blasphemy laws are attached.

For more information: Aaron Rhodes, +49-170-323-8314 and Kamal Fahmi, +46-703 - 419-766

### **Apostasy and blasphemy laws**

<http://bit.ly/28LEVI>

### **Victims of apostasy and blasphemy**

<http://bit.ly/28Ln3dE>

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## **Freedom of religion or belief 'undermined' in corrupt countries**

By Yonas Dembele

World Watch Monitor (02.06.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1UIPgVO> - Corruption is increasingly seen as a factor behind the persecution of minority Christians around the world, and the world leaders who gathered at an Anti-Corruption Summit in London in May showed they are beginning to pay more attention to the effects of corruption on freedom of religion or belief.

Evidence of a link between the two has long been recognised, with countries appearing in lists of both the world's most corrupt places and the worst places to live as a Christian. Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia and Sudan each rank in the top 10 of Transparency International's annual survey of global corruption in 167 countries and in Open Doors' annual World Watch List of the 50 worst places to be a Christian.

Open Doors' World Watch Research has long recognised that many aspects of corruption are a serious threat to freedom of religion, arguing that it is a factor in 18 countries. Libya, Yemen, Sudan, Nigeria, Somalia and Afghanistan are some of the countries where it has also led to the persecution of Christians as an accompanying factor.

For example, in Nigeria, networks of organised corruption have been causing problems for Christians and churches. Abduction for ransom and the lack of diligent investigation of violence against Christians can fairly be attributed to the role played by corruption. This goes to the extent of Nigeria's former defence chief allegedly using money budgeted to fight Boko Haram for personal use.

In two countries, Mexico and Colombia, it is the main factor behind the persecution of Christians.

In Mexico, violence is pervasive, but affects actively practising Christians to a high degree. Churches and other Christian institutions are often seen as revenue centres by drug cartels. The extortion of priests, pastors and Christian business-owners is commonplace. Attending church services increases the threat of kidnapping, and youths are particularly at risk of being recruited into gangs.

One of the main challenges in fighting organised corruption is that it is so organised that most of the corrupt activities are carried out within legal limits. This is often referred to as "crony-capitalism".



In a nutshell, in countries where organised corruption and crime actively contribute to persecution, the Christian community's right to live without fear, right to due process of law and other fundamental rights are undermined in many ways.

### ***What were the aims of the Summit?***

US Secretary of State John Kerry, Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani attended, alongside business executives, leaders of civil society organisations and representatives from G20 nations.

Progress was made when Nigeria and Afghanistan – the two countries the UK Prime Minister described as “fantastically corrupt” – became signatories to an anti-corruption register that exposes the true owners of companies in their territories. (The two countries – along with Kenya, Britain, the Netherlands and France – joined 27 other state leaders who have already agreed to publish the so-called “register of beneficial ownership”).

The Summit wanted countries to agree on practical steps to: “expose corruption so there is nowhere to hide, punish the perpetrators and support those affected by corruption, to drive out the culture of corruption wherever it exists” .

David Cameron said corruption is an enemy of progress, “undermining our security by pushing people towards extremist groups”.

He echoed the official communiqué of the summit, which stated that corruption “may give rise to political and economic grievances that may, in conjunction with other factors, fuel violent extremism. Tackling corruption is vital for sustaining economic stability and growth, maintaining security of societies, protecting human rights, reducing poverty, protecting the environment for future generations and addressing serious and organised crime. No country is immune from corruption and governments need to work together and with partners from business and civil society to tackle it successfully”.

### ***What was the key outcome?***

Britain, Afghanistan, Kenya, France, the Netherlands and Nigeria agreed to publish registers of who really owns companies in their territories. A further 11 countries expressed their desire to join an already existing group of 29 countries that maintain a register of beneficial owners (real owners) of corporations in their jurisdiction and share it with other governments. These measures are seen as essential in combatting money-laundering through the purchase of property or investments abroad.

The US did not sign the pledge.

Anti-corruption advocates were dissatisfied, since some of the participants' overseas territories and Crown dependencies – such as notorious tax havens British Virgin Islands and Jersey – did not sign the pledge.

### ***Which are the world's most corrupt countries?***

Somalia and North Korea are the most corrupt countries in the world, according to the Corrupt Perceptions Index, published annually by Transparency International. (North Korea and Somalia are also currently the 1st and 7th worst places to be a Christian.) However, the report shows that corruption is present in virtually every country.

The scale of corruption varies from country to country and region to region. On a scale of 0-100 (0 being most corrupt) the average global score is 43%. The regional average score for the EU and Western Europe is 67%, for Asia Pacific 43%, for the Americas 40%,

for the Middle East and North Africa 39%, for Eastern Europe and Central Asia 33%, and for Sub-Saharan Africa 33%.

The 10 most corrupt countries, in reverse order:

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Score out of 100</b>
158	Guinea-Bissau	17
158	Venezuela	17
161	Iraq	16
161	Libya	16
163	Angola	15
163	South Sudan	15
165	Sudan	12
166	Afghanistan	11
167	North Korea	8
167	Somalia	8

Most of the countries that are the worst performers on the Transparency International Corruption Index also do badly on the UN Human Development Index. The correlation between corruption and a dismal human development record is also reinforced by a correlation between the prevalence of corruption and lack of freedom and civil liberties. Of the 50 countries and territories designated as "not free" for political rights and civil liberties by Freedom House, an American watchdog dedicated to the expansion of freedom and democracy around the world, Somalia, North Korea, Sudan and Syria also score badly both on the corruption index and on the World Watch List.

With the exceptions of Venezuela and Guinea-Bissau (categorised as "partly free"), all the other countries listed in the above table are categorised as "unfree" in the Freedom House report on political liberties and rights.

These same countries are also among the worst performers in the annual Democracy Index prepared by The Economist Intelligence Unit.

### **Conclusion**

Corruption has led to massive challenges to society, but the pledges made at the London Summit would seem to indicate that world leaders are starting to pay more careful attention to how corruption contributes to poverty, political instability and extremism in the poorest parts of the world. However, it is still doubtful if there is sufficient political will to tackle corruption globally.

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## **Religious freedom is good for business, Elder Christofferson says, so all have a stake in it**

By Tad Walch

Deseret News (20.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1s4eUHK> - Everyone has a stake in protecting religious freedom because it contributes to better economic and business outcomes, Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the LDS Church said Friday.

"Where religious freedom is respected and protected, society overall is more stable, safer and more prosperous," said Elder Christofferson, citing research data during a speech at the Utah Hispanic Chamber of Commerce's annual convention in Salt Lake City.

He referred to a 2014 study of 173 countries by researchers at Georgetown and BYU who found religious freedom is one of only three factors significantly associated with global economic growth.

An analysis of that study by one of the researchers, Georgetown's Brian Grim, found seven ways freedom of religion contributes to better economies and business outcomes. Elder Christofferson shared three of them.

First, he said, the presence of religious freedom is associated with lower levels of corruption, a key ingredient for sustainable economic growth.

Second, a growing body of research demonstrates that religious freedom fosters peace, which removes conflicts that disrupt economic activities and businesses.

Third, there is a strong correlation between the presence of religious freedom and other freedoms that lead to positive outcomes, from improved health care to higher incomes for women.

"Everyone — even those who aren't religious — has a stake in protecting religious freedom for this reason," Elder Christofferson said.

All should therefore be concerned about a rising tide of restrictions on religious freedom around the world, he said. Even Americans can no longer take for granted the existence of their broad religious freedom protections.

He said members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints know from their history that legal protections aren't always enough. To be effective, those protections need the broad support of society.

"The culture ultimately protects through law what it values," he said. "And for more and more Americans, religion is something they value less."

Americans tend to apply religious freedom protections selectively. They place a higher priority on preserving the freedoms of Christians than Muslims, for example, according to a recent poll.

"Whether you're religious or not — whether you initially recognize it or not — everyone has a stake in protecting religious freedom," Elder Christofferson said. "That's because protecting religious freedom protects the space we all need to live according to our most deeply held beliefs and values, where we're free to act according to belief or conscience."

A trained attorney, Elder Christofferson said the rights in the First Amendment work together, and weakening one weakens the others.

He called for less polarization and encouraged earnest engagement, civil dialogue and compromise. He acknowledged that path isn't easy, but he said it is effective.

"This approach runs counter to a troubling tendency — perhaps most evident in social media — for people to reduce others to caricatures when they disagree," he said. "A 'fairness for all' approach goes beyond this — asking people to try to understand the concerns and needs of others. Even when they disagree."

He quoted Elder Dallin H. Oaks, also of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who said "both sides should seek a balance, not a total victory."

Elder Christofferson said the church's practice of sending missionaries around the world teaches them a valuable lesson — that all people are alike.

"Whether through commerce or through religion," he concluded, "we need more of these experiences."

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## **HRWF Annual Report on Freedom of Religion or Belief presented at the European Parliament in Strasbourg**

HRWF (11.05.2016) - Willy Fautré and Mark Barwick of Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) presented the organisation's 2015 Report to the Working Group for the European People's Party (EPP) on Intercultural and Religious Dialogue, meeting on the 10th of May in Strasbourg. The report, entitled "Religious or Belief Groups under State Oppression," documents over 1500 cases of prisoners belonging to 15 minority groups[1] in 20 different countries[2].

Mr Fautré commented that the religious or belief communities that have been targeted by state oppression share one common denominator: "Regardless of the country where they are persecuted or the regime that oppresses them, they are wrongly perceived by the state as a threat to the identity of the nation, a threat to security or a threat to the territorial integrity of the country."

Article 18 of the ICCPR guarantees the freedom to practice a religion or belief of one's choice "either individually or in community with others."

"This community dimension is present in most religions and shapes profoundly religious identity," said Mr Barwick, "and that can make governments uneasy. It can trigger actions to monitor, control, ban and even suppress that community by violent means and consequently anyone who is associated with that community."

Such suppression of religious identity can contribute to radicalization, it was pointed out, especially among disaffected youth of targeted minorities. However, when religious identity is recognised and respected, this can open the door to greater understanding and be a catalyst for building social cohesion.

"If such prejudices could be uprooted," added Mr Fautré, "trust could be restored and the plight of these vulnerable minorities could be dramatically alleviated."

The full report report is available [here](#).

The List of Prisoners country by country and denomination by denomination is available [here](#).

[1] Ahmadis, Atheists, Baha'is, Buddhists, Erfan e-Halghe, Falun Gong, Jehovah's Witnesses, Orthodox, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Said Nursi Followers, Shias, Sufis, Sunnis, Tablighi Jamaat

[2] Azerbaijan, Bhutan, China, Egypt, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Laos, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam

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## **Business can help ease global religious tensions, UN Global Forum**

Religious Freedom & Business (05.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1T7rKPC> - At the recent United Nations Forum in the Azerbaijani capital of Baku, senior business and UN officials stressed the important role the private business sector plays in creating inclusive communities, underscoring that companies cannot operate successfully in societies that fail.

The Symposium convened more than 200 top leaders from business, media and civil society, including (pictured, L-to-R) Rufat Mammadov, President-Azpromo; Scherto Gill, Secretary General-Guerrand Hermes Foundation; Bill McAndrews, Vice President-BMW Group; Stefan Grobe, Euronews Washington Correspondent; Sebastien Crozier, CEO-Orange Horizons; Jean-Christophe Bas, CEO-The Global Compass; Holger Heims, CEO-Falcon Equity Group; and Silvere Delaunay, Vice President-Airbus.

Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, head of the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), a body tasked with promoting harmony among nations, was among the main speakers at a Business Symposium ahead of the official kick-off of the 7th Global Forum.

Addressing business leaders, Mr. Al-Nasser spotlighted the role of the private business sector in dealing with, among others, interfaith issues, the refugee crisis, and the link between corporate diversity and business sustainability.

"The private-sector contributions to interfaith understanding and peace can help unravel many political and economic tensions," he said, emphasizing the urgent need to raise the universal level of understanding and partnership amid the growing political and economic dissonance.

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## **Business contributions to interfaith understanding & peace**

Religious Freedom & Business (05.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1T7rKPC> - Brian Grim, President of the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation, led a roundtable on "Private sector contributions to interfaith understanding and peace," co-chaired by Ms. Sudaba Zeynalova, Chief Adviser to Azerbaijan's President. Roundtable participants identified five key ways – summarized by the acronym EEEEEV – in which businesses can be a powerful support in building interfaith understanding and peace, and thus help unravel many of today's political and economic tensions.

### **1. Employment**

Radicalization feeds on unemployment and economic despair. Businesses have an antidote – meaningful employment and entrepreneurial challenges.

The 9/11 al Qaeda attack on the World Trade Centre twin towers – soaring symbols of development and progress – was not a random choice. In 2004, Osama bin Laden said in a taped speech, “We are continuing this policy in bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy. Every dollar of al Qaeda defeated a million dollars [spent by the US], including the “loss of a huge number of jobs”. And now, as the international community responds to ISIS’s brutal conquest of large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria, it is important to remember its socio-economic context. The Iraqi public’s chief concern in the years leading up to the ISIS offensive was unemployment, according to a Pew Research Center survey from 2012. Indeed, the lack of jobs arguably softened the ground for ISIS’ sudden advance. Although a poor economy does not cause violent extremism, it can contribute to the conditions that terrorists can exploit. So, if violent extremists provoke and take advantage of a bad economy to sow seeds of religious discord and violence, could peacemakers use good businesses to stimulate economic growth and foster interfaith understanding and peace? The presence of so many business leaders from major corporations at this Summit shows the answer is definitely “yes”.

## **2. Example**

Because businesses are at the crossroads of culture, commerce and creativity, their daily workings are a dynamic example of intercultural and interfaith cooperation, making the world more peaceful as people work.

Take, for example, luxury carmaker BMW. For them intercultural understanding is more than just a nice sentiment, it’s “an essential part of our daily work,” says Bill McAndrews, the company’s Vice President for Communications. Indeed, since 1997, BMW has been actively promoting cooperative dialogue between different cultures. One reason for BMW’s emphasis on cross-cultural dialogue and cooperation is the nature of its business. The carmaker may famously be headquartered in Germany, but its business is truly global, with 28 production and assembly facilities in 13 countries and a sales network in more than 140 nations. The importance of intercultural understanding has led BMW to help found the Intercultural Innovation Award. Created in partnership with the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), the award provides financial and other support each year for ten nonprofit organizations that are promoting intercultural dialogue and cooperation around the world. McAndrews says that the award enables BMW “to highlight some of the wonderful cross-cultural work being done worldwide.” The BMW Group’s commitment to the awardees extends beyond financial support and includes other resources, such as helping winning organizations become part of a global network of organizations working for intercultural and interfaith understanding. McAndrews emphasizes that “this can make the crucial difference in turning an idea into a practice that enriches peoples’ lives.”

One example of the impact is that the BMW award inspired the inaugural Global Business & Interfaith Peace Awards to be launched at this summer’s Paralympics in Rio, and then carried forward in conjunction with subsequent Winter and Summer Olympics/Paralympics.

## **3. Equality**

As people work together for a common end in a business setting, the differences they may have entered the door with become secondary to working together to produce a product or service. One of the roundtable participants told a story of how two employees – one Jewish and the other Muslim – came to loggerheads over their differing political and world views, so much to the point that they were failing at their work. However, when management stepped in and let them know that they were both valued employees

and respected both, that led to a mending of the ways. The result was that they became not only supportive colleagues but also successful teammates. Certainly there is some truth to Voltaire's observation:

"Go into the Exchange in London, that place more venerable than many a court, and you will see representatives of all the nations assembled there for the profit of mankind. There [Jews, Muslims and Christians] deal with one another as if they were of the same religion...."

#### **4. Education**

Businesses are masters of education, not only in technical skills but also in the interpersonal and social skills needed to make working toward a common goal a success. This rich storehouse of knowledge and knowhow can be repurposed as an aid in overcoming intercultural and interfaith differences.

At the same time, businesses often lack comfort and the knowledge necessary to navigate religious issues in the workplace and society. Therefore, there is a growing potential for civil society to be a partner with business in navigating such challenges. One example is the Corporate Pledge in Support of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) — which supports religious diversity and freedom in the workplace. The Religious Freedom & Business Foundation developed this as a resource for companies to send two clear messages to current and prospective employees: (1) You can work here without changing who you are; and (2) the company respects all employees and will not favor certain employees over others ... and that's good for the business of all.

#### **5. Vocation**

Some businesses, by their very nature, directly engage in building intercultural and interfaith understanding. Shinework's CEO Jonathan Shen heads a company that has brought intercultural understanding to one billion people by bringing world cinema to the Chinese audience. The Middle East and Justice Development Initiative (MEJDI Tours), is bringing Jews and Arabs together through the promotion of tourism. MEJDI runs the 'Dual Narrative' tour, which is led by Israeli and Palestinian guides who each offer their own perspectives on culture, politics and religion at each tour location. Some news businesses cover religion in ways that bring understanding and insight, not just sensational headlines. For instance, the Religion News Service aims to be the largest single source of news about religion, spirituality and ideas. We strive to inform, illuminate and inspire public discourse on matters relating to belief and convictions. And finally, some companies make religious ethics part of their operating philosophy. For instance, Mexico's largest bread company, the Bimbo Group, roots their company's mission to provide bread in Catholic Social Teaching. Mr. Roberto Servitje Sendra, the company's founder, states:

"Frequently I was asked to which principal causes I attributed the growth of the Group. The answer involves different aspects: service to the client, constant reinvestment, accessible prices, uniform quality, austerity, new technologies and hard work (...) but, invariably, I put ahead the factor that I consider is the fundamental one: our business philosophy with a strong social content, or said in other way, our unchangeable intention to make "an enterprise with soul."

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## **Islamic Minorities, A New Challenge to Religious Freedom**

**See full paper at: <http://bit.ly/1WESrg5>**

**By Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers***

**HRWF (20.04.2016) - Which Muslim groups and their members can claim the protection or not of their religious freedom? Which Muslim minorities and their members should or should not be defended by religious freedom advocacy NGOs and human rights organizations?**

On 15 April, Willy Fautré participated in the conference on "Religions and Human Rights" organized by the University of Padua (Italy) and presented a 10-page paper addressing the challenge to the defense of religious freedom posed by certain Islamic groups whose teachings and agendas lie in a grey area where politics, religion, use or advocacy of violence or not are difficult to disentangle.

The issue is of major importance for FoRB defenders who need to defend individuals and groups whose objective is not

- to undermine the foundations of democracy, the rule of law and human rights, including the equality of citizens
- to promote some form of theocracy or the rule of law by a dominant religion
- to overthrow political regimes
- to weaken and destroy in the short term or long term the international order based on the United Nations.

Several groups were examined through the lens of Article 5 of the ICCPR and Article 17 of the European Convention and in the light of the argument of violence or non-violence. Article 5 of the ICCPR:

Nothing in the present Covenant may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms recognized herein or at their limitation to a greater extent than is provided for in the present Covenant.

Article 17 of the European Convention:

Nothing in [the] Convention may be interpreted as implying for any state, group or person any right to engage in any activity or perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein or at their limitation to a greater extent than is provided for in the Convention.

The paper covered the following issues:

### **Identifying Legitimate FoRB Rights and FoRB Activities**

#### **"Controversial" Muslim Movements**

- Hizb ut-Tahrir: a religiously-rooted political movement challenging the current world order with an Islamic socio-political totalitarian ideology;
- Salafis : an originally pious movement divided between several competing branches: a spiritual one, a spiritual-political one and a violent one;
- Tablighi Jamaat : a pious and missionary movement occasionally and involuntarily providing easy prey to jihadist recruiters;
- Said Nursi Followers : loose and informal groups of individuals inspired by a theologian for their own spiritual development.

### **Conclusions**



Banning totalitarian movements is not a solution as they can pursue their activities underground. Repression is not the right answer either for the same reasons, except in cases of criminal activities. Whether they use violence or not, their common denominator is their ideology. For the sake of democracy, the rule of law and human rights, their ideology must be combated with determination as other political totalitarian ideologies such as fascism neo-nazism or communism have been and are still fought against with democratic means. Human rights organizations also have a major role to play in this regard.

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## **UN Official: Blasphemy laws must be repealed**

Voice of America (10.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1nzPSxB> - The special U.N. investigator on freedom of religion or belief is calling for the universal repeal of blasphemy laws, saying they restrict freedom of expression and promote hatred of and intolerance toward minority religions.

In a report submitted Thursday to the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva, Heiner Bielefeldt said freedom of religion and freedom of expression are mutually reinforcing, allowing both rights to flourish, but that blasphemy laws cast a pall over these basic rights. He said religious minorities suffer most from the chilling effects the laws create.

Bielefeldt said Pakistan is known for its draconian blasphemy laws that even carry the death penalty. Although the ultimate sentence has never been carried out, he said many people accused of blasphemy are on death row.

The investigator said studies show that religious minorities in Pakistan who suffer disproportionately from the laws include Shi'ites, Christians and Ahmadis, who are accused of not being true Muslims; but, he noted numerous countries - in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Central Asia and even Europe - have blasphemy laws on the books.

Bielefeldt said Germany, Denmark, Poland and Greece either have laws that hark back to the old colonial period or, what he calls, post-blasphemy laws. These, he said, are not meant to honor God, but to protect religious feelings. He told VOA that Russia also has tightened its blasphemy laws.

"Russia, also in the U.N. Human Rights Council now, really has taken over the torch from Pakistan to argue for the protection of the feelings of ordinary believers, which means mainly, of course, Orthodox believers. So, usually these blasphemy laws protect majorities... the feelings of majorities, while minorities pay the price," Bielefeldt said.

In the interest of clarity and credibility, Bielefeldt said European countries should clean up the old-fashioned blasphemy laws or post-blasphemy laws as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has demanded.

While the laws are largely associated with Muslim countries, he said they also exist within Hindu, Buddhist and Christian societies. He said they often are used to stifle critical voices and breed intolerance, discrimination and hatred against people based on religious belief.

In Central Asian countries and Russia, Bielefeldt said religious minorities increasingly are being targeted and arrested in the name of fighting extremism. While fighting extremism is a legitimate concern, he said this must not be done at the expense of restricting people's basic human rights.

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## **About the Marrakesh Declaration**

HRWF (28.01.2016) - Under the patronage of King Muhammad VI of Morocco, the scholars, muftis, academics and government ministers from Muslim countries around the world have agreed a significant statement entitled *The Marrakesh Declaration*.

The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs of the Kingdom of Morocco and the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies based in the UAE, jointly organised the conference, which after three days of intense work and exchange of ideas, histories, theological, legal and textual information, has resulted in a remarkable and historic agreement.

In recent years the world has seen brutal atrocities inflicted upon religious minorities in predominantly Muslim countries. Many members of minority groups have been victims of murder, enslavement, forced exile, intimidation, starvation, and other affronts to their basic human dignity. *The Marrakesh Declaration* contends that such actions have no relation to Islam.

An executive summary of the Marrakesh Declaration is below:

### **In the Name of God, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate**

Executive Summary of the Marrakesh Declaration on the Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Majority Communities

25th-27th January 2016

WHEREAS, conditions in various parts of the Muslim World have deteriorated dangerously due to the use of violence and armed struggle as a tool for settling conflicts and imposing one's point of view;

WHEREAS, this situation has also weakened the authority of legitimate governments and enabled criminal groups to issue edicts attributed to Islam, but which, in fact, alarmingly distort its fundamental principles and goals in ways that have seriously harmed the population as a whole;

WHEREAS, this year marks the 1,400th anniversary of the Charter of Medina, a constitutional contract between the Prophet Muhammad, God's peace and blessings be upon him, and the people of Medina, which guaranteed the religious liberty of all, regardless of faith;

WHEREAS, hundreds of Muslim scholars and intellectuals from over 120 countries, along with representatives of Islamic and international organizations, as well as leaders from diverse religious groups and nationalities, gathered in Marrakesh on this date to reaffirm the principles of the Charter of Medina at a major conference;

WHEREAS, this conference was held under the auspices of His Majesty, King Mohammed VI of Morocco, and organized jointly by the Ministry of Endowment and Islamic Affairs in the Kingdom of Morocco and the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies based in the United Arab Emirates;

AND NOTING the gravity of this situation afflicting Muslims as well as peoples of other faiths throughout the world, and after thorough deliberation and discussion, the convened Muslim scholars and intellectuals:

DECLARE HEREBY our firm commitment to the principles articulated in the Charter of Medina, whose provisions contained a number of the principles of constitutional contractual citizenship, such as freedom of movement, property ownership, mutual solidarity and defense, as well as principles of justice and equality before the law; and that,

The objectives of the Charter of Medina provide a suitable framework for national constitutions in countries with Muslim majorities, and the United Nations Charter and related documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are in harmony with the Charter of Medina, including consideration for public order.

NOTING FURTHER that deep reflection upon the various crises afflicting humanity underscores the inevitable and urgent need for cooperation among all religious groups, we

AFFIRM HEREBY that such cooperation must be based on a "Common Word," requiring that such cooperation must go beyond mutual tolerance and respect, to providing full protection for the rights and liberties to all religious groups in a civilized manner that eschews coercion, bias, and arrogance.

BASED ON ALL OF THE ABOVE, we hereby:

Call upon Muslim scholars and intellectuals around the world to develop a jurisprudence of the concept of "citizenship" which is inclusive of diverse groups. Such jurisprudence shall be rooted in Islamic tradition and principles and mindful of global changes.

Urge Muslim educational institutions and authorities to conduct a courageous review of educational curricula that addresses honestly and effectively any material that instigates aggression and extremism, leads to war and chaos, and results in the destruction of our shared societies;

Call upon politicians and decision makers to take the political and legal steps necessary to establish a constitutional contractual relationship among its citizens, and to support all formulations and initiatives that aim to fortify relations and understanding among the various religious groups in the Muslim World;

Call upon the educated, artistic, and creative members of our societies, as well as organizations of civil society, to establish a broad movement for the just treatment of religious minorities in Muslim countries and to raise awareness as to their rights, and to work together to ensure the success of these efforts.

Call upon the various religious groups bound by the same national fabric to address their mutual state of selective amnesia that blocks memories of centuries of joint and shared living on the same land; we call upon them to rebuild the past by reviving this tradition of conviviality, and restoring our shared trust that has been eroded by extremists using acts of terror and aggression;

Call upon representatives of the various religions, sects and denominations to confront all forms of religious bigotry, vilification, and denigration of what people hold sacred, as well as all speech that promote hatred and bigotry; AND FINALLY,

AFFIRM that it is unconscionable to employ religion for the purpose of aggressing upon the rights of religious minorities in Muslim countries.

Marrakesh  
27th January 2016

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## **IHEU's Freedom of Thought Report 2015... "Why should we pamper Saudi Arabia for oil?"**

IHEU (08.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1np3I6G> - The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) produces and publishes the annual [Freedom of Thought Report](#), a flagship survey on the legal status and human rights of humanists, atheists and the non-religious in every country of the world.

As well as press coverage, notably religious media sources (such as [Ecumenical News](#)) and coverage from national press in some of the most severely criticised states (such as Malaysia's [Malay Mail](#)), the Report was "clearly and unambiguously" welcomed by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt.

This year for the first time the Freedom of Thought Report was simultaneously launched in Brussels, Amsterdam and Washington, on International Human Rights Day - 10th December.

### ***European Parliament launch***

At the European Parliament in Brussels, the Report's editor, Bob Churchill, outlined the worsening situation for humanists, atheists and the non-religious in many states as described in the Report.

"Recent hate crimes against atheists include kidnapping in Maldives, state harassment in Malaysia, and of course the horrific string of blogger murders in Bangladesh. We record hate speech against "humanists" and advocates of "secularism" and "liberalism". We record 21 states in the world criminalizing people who change or leave their religion (under "apostasy" laws), and in 13 countries this "crime" in principle carries the death penalty."

Responding to the report, **Dennis de Jong MEP**, chair of the [European Parliamentary Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), said:

"It is unacceptable that not only do states offer insufficient protection against extrajudicial violence, but some states actively engage in the persecution of the non-religious, simply because they express their beliefs, or have adhered to a religious belief in the past."

Mr de Jong expressed frustration with the "tame" response of Europe in relation to human rights abuses in some of the countries awarded the worst ratings by the Report. Rejecting the political arguments for appeasement from economic necessity, he said:

"Why should we pamper Saudi Arabia for oil? We can be too sweet and moderate, and it's time the EU gets tough."

[The case of Raif Badawi](#) was raised. Detained in Saudi Arabia since 2012 for "insulting Islam", Raif was lashed for the first time in 2015, and [his lawyer Waleed Abulkhair](#) was moved to an isolated prison. (On the day after the launch, there were reports that Raif himself was moved to a more isolated prison, and was going on hunger strike.)

In response to the evidence of violations presented in the report, the Intergroup has pledged to:

"...put pressure on the European External Action Service to step up its efforts to promote and protect the rights of the non-religious on the basis of the formally established EU Guidelines."

**UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt**, told the meeting that he "clearly and unambiguously" welcomed the report under his "religion or belief" remit. He also stressed that:

"the term "freedom of religion or belief" is only a kind of short-hand. The full human right [Article 18 of the Universal Declaration] is 'freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief'."

He subsequently told the IHEU:

"In all my reports (country-specific or thematic) I quote General Comment no. 22 which clarifies that article 18 of the ICCPR [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights] protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief.

Formulations such as "religious freedom" obfuscate the scope of this human right which covers the identity-shaping, profound convictions and conviction-based practices of human beings broadly."

**Elizabeth O'Casey**, IHEU's new Director of Advocacy agreed that this 'thought' component to Article 18 must include social and political stances, the protection of individuals who dissent from received wisdom and mainstream belief, and those who advocate new ideas, as is so often the case among humanist and secular thinkers, writers, and activists who are targeted.

**Siddhartha Dhar** is a Bangladeshi blogger who escaped the threat to his life by moving to Europe in 2015. He told delegates that, in the face of a string of murders of humanist bloggers and one secular publisher in 2015, "The Bangladesh government maintains a guilty silence as it clings to its policy of appeasing the extremists."

Remembering in particular his close friend [Ananta Bijoy Das](#) who was killed last May, Siddhartha said that Bangladeshi freethinkers would not lose heart:

"For the secular blogging community of Bangladesh, well-being isn't enough and would become a sordid burden if it was bought at the price of mortification and subordination. We are willing to trade our well-being to attain our goal of establishing fairness, justice and equality. Our resistance has cost us dearly, for so many bright minds lost their lives. Yet the prudent course will be continuing to resist the perpetuating vicious circle of injustice, oppression, degradation and bigotry. Despite all the tragic losses, we are united in our grief and we remain undefeated."

Commenting after the event, **IHEU President, Andrew Copson** said:

"It was very important to bring together the UN Special Rapporteur, an expert in this field, and an elected European representative who has consistently defended the rights of both religious and non-religious, as well as a Bangladeshi blogger who has escaped the demonstrable threat to his life. This event and the overwhelming weight of evidence as presented in our Report shows that many states are continuing to discriminate against humanists and the non-religious generally in law, and many of the states most egregiously violating the rights of the non-religious are getting worse.

"The human rights consensus is firm, the moral case is clear, the victims of outright persecution are real, and each person who is threatened, killed or imprisoned for their beliefs represents many, many more who are simply unable or too afraid, quite

understandably, to speak their minds. I echo Mr de Jong's call to stop putting human rights in second place to diplomatic niceties and supposed economic realities."

### **Amsterdam launch**

**Boris van der Ham**, President of the Dutch Humanist Association, [Humanistisch Verbond](#), presented the Freedom of Thought Report 2015 to the Dutch Human Rights Ambassador, Kees van Baar, and 5 members of parliament on the Committee for Foreign Affairs.

[Several people who have suffered the violation of their freedom of belief also told their stories.](#)

**Fauzia Ilyas** explained how her forced marriage to a man who sexually abused her in the name of Islam made her question religion itself. She founded the [Atheist and Agnostic Alliance of Pakistan](#) (now an IHEU Member Organization), and soon after had to flee the country because her family members threatened her life, and the authorities threatened to arrest her for "blasphemy" and being the leader of an atheist group.

**Two atheist bloggers**, invited by the Dutch Humanist Association for the event, discussed the series of killings of their secular colleagues, urging the Human Rights Ambassador and parliamentarians to lobby the Bangladesh government to protect atheist bloggers.

**Fatima El Mourabit**, a Dutch-Moroccan ex-Muslim, explained that even in a free country like the Netherlands, rated "Free and Equal" by the Report in terms of formal discrimination, ex-Muslims hesitate to express their (dis)beliefs, out of fear of rejection and social exclusion, or worse, the threat of violence.

The Human Rights Ambassador promised to take up the issue in his forthcoming visit to Bangladesh. Members of parliament were also impressed and promised to continue to press for anti-blasphemy laws at the European Parliament and the United Nations. They also pledged to examine discrimination against non-believers in domestic centres for asylum seekers.

In a leading daily newspaper article ([translated here](#)) Boris van der Ham urged religious leaders, politicians and all citizens to express their support for the right to change or leave religion.

### **Washington DC launch**

**Roy Speckhardt**, Executive Director of the [American Humanist Association](#), officially launched the Freedom of Thought Report 2015 in Washington, saying:

"True religious freedom is the freedom to believe and not believe. The sobering findings of this Report should move our elected leaders to stand up for religious freedom in the U.S. and around the world."

The American Humanist Association (AHA) has worked closely with U.S. legislators to raise awareness of the persecution faced by atheists and humanists abroad as well as in the United States. It was work undertaken by the AHA which was developed into the very first edition of the Freedom of Thought Report, and they continue to be a major driving force behind it.

In June, the American Humanist Association hosted a congressional briefing on international religious freedom to raise awareness about threats to the human rights of

atheists and religious minorities. The AHA also supports U.S. House Resolution 290, introduced by U.S. Representative Joseph Pitts, which calls for the U.S. to support the repeal of blasphemy laws.

The American Humanist Association pledged to use the Freedom of Thought Report 2015 to continue its campaigning work, lobbying the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom and members of Congress.

### ***Freedom of Thought: Next steps***

The Report is compiled from extensive research around the world, supported by the IHEU's Member Organizations, and is [free to download](#), especially for use by human rights groups, campaigners, and policy makers. And in the coming year the IHEU will be making the Report even more accessible, with a dedicated webpage for each country maintained with all the latest developments (not only violations but also any signs of progress).

Following the launches, **IHEU Chief Executive, Carl Blackburn**, is urging Member Organizations to use the Freedom of Thought Report 2015 to raise the plight of the non-religious and increase the awareness of the press, policy makers, politicians and general public in their own countries.

"This important Report is the only one of its kind, and highlights the growing discrimination and persecution of non-religious people in many parts of the world. There are still countries where the "crime" of apostasy (changing or rejecting one's religion of birth) is punishable by death, and a great many countries still have blasphemy laws which prevent free speech and seek to stifle free thought.

"This is a balanced and well-researched Report, but its findings are far too important for it to simply adorn the shelves of politicians and diplomats. Instead, it should be a campaigning tool and a rallying cry for everyone who believes in fairness, equality and freedom of thought.

"The IHEU is committed to continue the fight for the rights of humanists, atheists and the non-religious everywhere."

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## **Behind bars for faith in China and Iran**

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

EU Reporter (04.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1NmeLSz> - 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 states: "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 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 favour 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."

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

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## **Our failed religious freedom policy**

First Things (November 2013) - <http://bit.ly/1pcIsBv> - The religious freedom policy mandated by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act has now been in operation for fifteen years. Notwithstanding the hard work of the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom, it would be difficult to name a single country where that policy has reduced persecution or increased freedom. In most of the countries into which the United States has in recent years poured blood and treasure—Iraq, Afghanistan,

Pakistan, Egypt, China, Saudi Arabia, and Russia in particular—freedom is on the decline, persecution on the rise.

The basis of America's support for religious freedom abroad is the assertion that religious freedom is not only a good in itself but one that also advances our national interests. In approximately seventy countries, persecution and restrictions on religion are severe. That list includes virtually all the nations whose internal stability, economic policies, and foreign policies are of substantial concern to the United States, including China, Indonesia, Russia, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Iraq, as well as Egypt, Libya, and most of the nations comprising what was once called "the Arab Spring." In many of these countries, the lack of religious freedom has led to religious conflict and has increased social, economic, and political instability.

The terrible Syrian civil war in large part stems from generations of religious persecution, first of Alawites by Sunnis, and then of Sunnis by the Alawite regime of the Assads. Today the religious dimensions of the conflict have deepened with the entry of Iranian and Lebanese (Hezbollah) Shia terrorists in support of Assad's Alawites, and of al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorists in support of Syrian Sunni insurgents.

With the passage of IRFA, Congress provided several vehicles to advance religious freedom. The centerpiece is the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom, headed by a very senior diplomatic official—an ambassador-at-large—who has authority to represent the United States in implementing American policy. The act also requires the department to issue annual reports on the status of religious freedom in every country abroad, and an annual list of the most severe violators, the "countries of particular concern."

IRFA also created an independent advisory Commission on International Religious Freedom with a mandate to issue its own reports, make recommendations to the president and Congress, and act as a watchdog over American policy. Unlike the State Department office and its ambassador, both of which are by law permanent diplomatic entities, the commission requires periodic reauthorization by Congress.

The "countries of particular concern" list has had virtually no impact. The president is required to take some action against those on the list or explain why no action is warranted. IRFA requires that the list be issued annually, but as of this writing the Obama administration has not done so since 2011. Congress, it seems, takes little notice of this omission, although the commission, under its new chair, Robert George, has publicly and vigorously voiced its concern.

IRFA permits economic sanctions against the nations on this list, but in fifteen years only one country, Eritrea, has ever been sanctioned anew, and religious freedom has declined there. For the most part, the "actions" taken against severe violators (as permitted under IRFA) have been to reaffirm existing sanctions, such as those in place barring the export of crime-control and detection equipment to China. In countries where there are no sanctions in place, such as Saudi Arabia, the president is permitted to waive any action if a waiver will further the purposes of the law or is deemed to be in the "important national interests of the United States."

In other words, nothing has ever really been done, except perhaps to irritate our banker (China) or our erstwhile ally in oil (Saudi Arabia). I know of no evidence that either the listing or the sanctions have improved the status of religious freedom in any country. At one time there was an argument to be made that Vietnam had improved, but that no longer seems to be the case. The commission has recommended that Vietnam, which was removed from the list a few years ago because of improvements in religious freedom, be returned to the list this year.

Religious freedom has played little or no role in diplomatic programs to achieve fundamental American interests. Officials, including presidents and secretaries of state, have done almost nothing to integrate religious freedom into our democratic, economic, and counter-terrorism strategies. Some have spoken publicly about religious freedom, but foreign policy speeches are empty words if they are not followed by strategic planning and policy action.

In June 2009, President Obama traveled to Cairo to give his first major address on Islam and American interests. In that speech, he identified a number of issues, including religious freedom, that were to be part of his new engagement with the Muslim world. Afterward, our foreign policy agencies geared into action, forming interagency working groups to develop strategies on all the issues identified by the president in the Cairo speech except for one. There was no working group on religious freedom. Indeed, it took the administration two and a half years even to get its ambassador for religious freedom in place. Since then, the administration's religious freedom policy has largely been passive and ineffective.

But there is substantial evidence that an increase in religious freedom in the Middle East, China, India, Russia, Nigeria, and elsewhere could enhance American interests by helping to reduce religious violence and religion-based terrorism. Religious freedom plays a necessary role in the consolidation of democracy, in economic development, and in social harmony. Sociologist Brian Grim has written in the *International Journal for Religious Freedom* that "the empirical data are clear [that] religious freedom is part of the 'bundled commodity' of human freedoms that energize participation in civil society by all religious groups, which is conducive to the consolidation of democracy and to socioeconomic progress." And yet American programs to advance and support religious freedom have played little or no role in American strategies to stabilize key struggling democracies such as Iraq or Pakistan, encourage economic growth in places like Egypt or Nigeria, or undermine the religion-related terrorism that is still being incubated in many nations of the broader Middle East.

What is the explanation for this ineffectiveness? There is much to be said here, but let me focus on two problems: first, the anemic, largely rhetorical methodology employed by all three administrations under which IRFA has operated, and second, the decline among our policy makers of the conviction that religious freedom is "the first freedom" and that religious freedom benefits all people, whether they are religious or not.

None of the three administrations responsible for IRFA have adopted a capacious view of the law and the policy it mandates. Each has assumed a narrow, highly rhetorical approach, characterized by reports, speeches, lists of severe persecutors that have little effect on the persecutors' actions, and a State Department activity known as "raising the issue" with governments (an activity that should not be confused with "solving the problem").

IRFA has driven some internal progress at the State Department. For example, in Afghanistan, the American embassy has established a program "to support traditional [Afghan] voices that oppose violent extremism." There is a powerful logic here: Muslims throughout the Middle East who want to make liberal arguments from the Qur'an—for example, that God forbids suicide bombing and stoning, that men and women are equal, or that non-Muslims must be treated with respect—risk criminal prosecution for blasphemy. A few years ago, an Afghan graduate student was sentenced to death for writing a paper arguing that the Qur'an supports the equality of men and women. In 2011, two Pakistani officials, one a Christian and one a Muslim, were murdered for opposing blasphemy laws and supporting religious freedom. Polls showed support for the laws, and for the murderers.

Anti-blasphemy laws and practices ensure that public discourse in these countries is dominated by extremists. The United States should be doing everything it can to convince erstwhile democracies such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Egypt that they will not succeed unless they move toward greater religious freedom. Their failure to do so will not only prevent the emergence of stable democracies but also increase extremist threats to American national security. Unfortunately, American programs designed to address this problem, such as that in Afghanistan, are entirely ad hoc. They are not part of a comprehensive religious freedom strategy.

Indeed, there is no comprehensive American strategy in place to advance religious freedom in the Muslim world or anywhere else. While Congress appropriates millions of dollars annually for democracy and counter-terror programs, little of that money is spent on promoting religious liberty. All three presidents, and all secretaries of state who have presided over the implementation of IRFA (Albright, Powell, Rice, Clinton, and Kerry), have insisted that they support international religious freedom.

But none has made any serious attempt to integrate the advancement of religious freedom into the foreign policy of the United States, even though that is the express purpose of the International Religious Freedom Act. Madeleine Albright admitted as much in her book *The Mighty and the Almighty*. Religion, she wrote, "was above and beyond reason; it evoked the deepest passions; and historically, it was the cause of much bloodshed. [American] diplomats of my era were taught not to invite trouble, and no subject seemed more inherently treacherous than religion."

The State Department's annual report has had some positive effects, and Ambassador-at-Large Suzan Johnson Cook and her staff are to be congratulated for its quality and breadth. It has taught younger American diplomats (who typically provide the initial drafts) to ferret out the status of religious freedom in the countries in which they serve. The report has long been considered the gold standard in showcasing the facts. But illuminating the persecutory acts of governments and others, and the fates of victims, has, at best, limited effects. Rarely does it lead persecutors to change their behavior.

Chinese actions, for example, have no more been affected by these reports than they have by China's perennial appearance on the list of "countries of particular concern." Beijing still imprisons, tortures, and generally terrorizes religious groups that don't conform. It still supports forced sterilizations and abortions and forbids Catholic priests and Protestant ministers from criticizing the "one-child" policy from the pulpit. It continues to brutalize Uighur Muslims in China's northwest province, and to attack the culture and religion of the people of Tibet.

IRFA also mandates training for diplomats, a necessary element of any worldwide foreign policy initiative. The Obama administration has experimented with a potentially useful training program conceived under its predecessor. I have had the opportunity to teach in this program at the Foreign Service Institute, and several scores of foreign service officers have attended the courses offered.

Unfortunately, the program remains voluntary, which ensures that the busy diplomats who run American foreign policy seldom participate. Moreover, the overall curriculum is diffuse and confusing on the meaning and value of religious freedom. Some presenters suggest that a vigorous American policy may transgress the constitutional ban on establishment of religion, or that advancing religious freedom constitutes cultural imperialism (do we really have the right to "impose our values" on others?). Diplomats who attend these courses have the right to wonder whether they are being trained to advance religious freedom or to protest the religious freedom policy mandated by Congress.

The stark reality is that fifteen years after IRFA's passage, our diplomats are not being trained to know what religious freedom is and why it is important, let alone how to advance it. This deficiency reflects a continuing, deep-seated skepticism in our foreign policy establishment. Its members continue to doubt that religious freedom should be considered real foreign policy.

That skepticism also helps explain why all ambassadors-at-large for religious freedom have been isolated within the State Department, and severely under-resourced. Other ambassadors-at-large report directly to the secretary of state (for example, those for global women's issues and for global AIDS coordination). But the religious freedom ambassador and office have been placed many levels below the secretary. The ambassador has reported, and reports today, to a lower-ranking official. It is as if an army general were reporting to an army colonel. The religious freedom ambassador does not attend meetings of other senior State Department officials on a regular basis.

In addition, the ambassador-at-large and the Office of International Religious Freedom are marginalized in a bureau (Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor) that itself has long been marginalized at the State Department, notwithstanding the outstanding people who serve there. Sadly, foreign service officers tend to avoid that bureau in general, and the religious freedom office in particular, as dead ends for their careers, places where real foreign policy is not practiced. Neither the office nor the ambassador have direct control over the modest amounts of funding available that could be marshaled to develop effective strategies abroad.

Given this isolation, it is hardly surprising that neither American diplomats nor foreign governments see religious freedom as a priority for American foreign policy. Many diplomats seem already to believe that a vigorous pursuit-of-religious-freedom policy would be unconstitutional, or would constitute cultural imperialism. Others think it is a policy imposed by Christians and is designed to clear the way for Christian missionaries. Some conservatives are hesitant to support religious freedom for Muslims around the world.

This latter attitude is particularly damaging. Conservatives, for the most part, are defenders of religious freedom in the United States. Given the well-founded fear of Islamist terrorism, the hesitancy of some conservatives to afford the same right to Muslims abroad is perhaps understandable. But their logic rests on the erroneous assumption that religious freedom means clearing the way for extremist versions of Shari'a law or other forms of Islamist extremism. As Richard John Neuhaus was fond of saying, religious freedom carries with it a self-denying ordinance. In a democratic polity, religious liberty does not mean "anything goes." To the contrary, it imposes its own limits, the most important of which is equality under the law.

An Egyptian democracy grounded in religious freedom, to take but one example, would permit Muslim reformers to speak openly about their own religion, criticize the Muslim Brotherhood, and present liberal conceptions of Islamic practice without fearing criminal prosecution for blasphemy. It would broaden and deepen public debates over what stable democracy requires of Islam. To date, that debate has been dominated by the extremists, as it is in most Muslim-majority countries. Equally important, religious freedom would not only provide protections to Coptic Christians. It would also grant them the right to build churches and establish Coptic institutions in civil society, run for political office, and make Christian arguments in debates over Egyptian laws and policies.

False perceptions and destructive attitudes exist among secular liberals and conservative Christians—I personally have encountered each of them. But they do not, in my view, sufficiently explain our diplomatic ineffectiveness. The major problem, it seems to me, is that a significant proportion of our foreign policy officials no longer believe that religious

freedom is the “first freedom” of American history, of the Constitution, and of all people everywhere.

At the State Department, and in the foreign affairs establishment in general, too many have rejected the proposition, central to our founding, that religion is necessary for the survival of democracy. For America’s founding generation, and most generations since, religious freedom constituted the “first freedom” because it was thought necessary for the well-being of individuals and societies. In particular, religion in the public square was considered crucial for the health of democracy. The founders believed that religious freedom entailed not only the right to believe and worship but also the right to act on the basis of religious belief, individually and in concert with others, privately and in civil society and political life—all within broad and equally applied limits. James Madison viewed religious actors in civil society as a critical check on the power of government. In his farewell address, George Washington argued that religion was necessary for the “dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity.”

Many of our political and foreign policy leaders today, however, see religious freedom as a private matter with few legitimate public purposes. Religious liberty is in no sense necessary to individuals and societies. Rather, it is merely one in an ever-growing list of rights claims—in this case, a claim of privilege by religious people. As such it warrants no special protection but must be “balanced” against all other claims. Such views are reflected in positions taken by the Obama administration on the HHS mandate, but also in its international religious freedom policy. In a 2009 speech on the importance of human rights in foreign policy, which remains the clearest explanation of the administration’s human rights priorities to date, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton insisted that “to fulfill their potential, people . . . must be free to worship . . . and to love in the way that they choose.”

Secretary Clinton invokes the freedom to worship, not religious freedom. But “worship” is essentially a private activity, with few if any civic implications. It is certainly easier to balance against other rights claims. Clinton also suggests that a putative “right to love” is a comparable right. Clearly the Obama administration has in its domestic policy weighed religious freedom against other rights claims it believes important, such as the right to contraceptives and abortifacients, or to same-sex “marriage,” and religious freedom has been found to be an inferior right. This helps to explain why, in its foreign policy, the Obama administration has applied far more policy energy in its international pursuit of a “right to love” than in its pursuit of religious freedom.

It is no accident that the first affirmation in our Bill of Rights is that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The Establishment Clause was intended to protect the free exercise of religion, in part by ensuring that no particular religious group was given any privileged position within the country.

Today the threat of “establishment” comes not from any church but rather from a secular ideology quite willing to abridge religious freedoms. For these new ideologues, “error has no rights.” Religious individuals and entities must toe the line on abortion, contraception, and the redefinition of marriage. Recently, the New Mexico “Human Rights” Commission swept aside concerns about religious liberty and fined Elane Photography over \$6,000 for refusing on religious grounds to participate in a same-sex-commitment ceremony. In August, the New Mexico Supreme Court unanimously upheld that ruling. In his decision upholding the Obama administration’s position on same-sex “marriage” ( U.S. v. Windsor ), Justice Anthony Kennedy declared that those who resist this innovation in human affairs—that is, those who continue to support a religious view of marriage as between one man and one woman—are acting with malice, seeking to “disparage and injure,” to “demean” and “humiliate” same-sex couples.

Is it any wonder that this new aggressively secular creed, which privatizes and relativizes religious freedom, undermines our will and our capacity as a country to defend religious freedom abroad?

Europe provides an example of what lies ahead. The official American understanding of religious freedom is in many ways reminiscent of the French ideology of *laïcité*, which relegates religion to an entirely private role in society and politics. Roger Trigg, a philosopher at the University of Oxford, notes that one of the characteristics of the European privatization project is its willful dilution of religious freedom to a right of freedom of "religion and belief." The problem here is that "belief" can mean virtually anything one feels strongly about, from environmentalism to the Manchester soccer club. Religion in Europe has long since lost much of its special status in law, society, and politics and is now routinely treated as merely one human preference among an infinite possible number of preferences.

Thus the problem with the appearance of the following sentence at the beginning of the 2012 State Department annual report, in a section describing why this right is important for the United States: "Freedom of religion and belief and the right to worship as one chooses fulfill a deep and abiding human need." To drive this point home, Secretary of State John Kerry, in his remarks on the release of the report, used the "worship" phrase twice to describe the content of U.S. policy. Regarding his own actions, Kerry said he pressed foreign leaders "to safeguard freedom of belief."

Although the problem is deeply ideological, some concrete steps can be taken to remedy it. Members of Congress should speak out about the value of religious freedom as the first freedom, pay more attention to this issue in our foreign policy, and demand answers from State Department officials in public hearings and private meetings.

In addition, five simple amendments to the International Religious Freedom Act would remove some of the institutional obstacles to a more effective religious freedom policy.

First, require that the ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom report directly to the secretary of state and attend all regular meetings of senior State Department officials. This will ensure that foreign governments and American diplomats alike see that the administration takes religious freedom seriously enough to give it the same priority they do other key issues.

Second, give the ambassador resources to develop and implement new strategies. This need not involve the appropriation of new monies. Funds can be reallocated from existing appropriations for programs such as democracy promotion and counter-terrorism. For example, require 20 percent of congressional appropriations for the promotion of democracy abroad to be allocated to the Office of International Religious Freedom.

Third, make training of American diplomats in religious freedom mandatory at three stages: when they enter the Foreign Service, when they receive "area studies" training prior to departing for post, and when they become deputy chiefs of mission and ambassadors. This training should tell them what religious freedom is, why it is important for individuals and societies, why advancing it is important for America's national interests, its status in the country and region to which they have been assigned, and how to advance it.

Fourth, amend the IRFA to require that the list of particularly severe violators (the "countries of particular concern") be issued annually with the report. Require the State Department to provide a comprehensive analysis of policy tools being applied in each country, including programs that target democratic stability, economic growth, and counter-terrorism.



Fifth and finally, require the State Department to respond in writing to recommendations by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. At the same time, require the commission to report on why the United States is not succeeding in advancing religious freedom, as gauged by objective reports such as those by the Pew Research Center.

Such changes will not transform our policy overnight. But until they are made, America's religious freedom policy will remain a powerful idea that has not yet gelled, one that is not reducing religious persecution, advancing the institutions and habits of religious freedom, or serving the national security of the United States.

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